Artists and Radicalism in Germany, 1890-1933: Reform, Politics and the Paradoxes of the Avant-Garde

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Declaration

I, Nikos Pegioudis, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.
Abstract

This thesis seeks to lay the foundations for a socio-historical analysis of German radicalism and the avant-garde. Following first the development of the German applied arts movement from 1890, and then the debates over the role of painting from within and beyond the avant-garde in the interwar period, it addresses the ways the reform of artistic and technical-vocational education was intertwined with the questions of the ‘art proletariat’ and the nature of intellectual labour in capitalist economy. It argues that the history of what was widely conceived as the ‘avant-garde’ in the interwar period was still responding to the same set of concerns addressed in the context of the applied arts movement. The concept of functional, ‘useful’ artistic labour as opposed to the ‘useless’ fine arts, a concept connecting the prewar reform movement with the interwar avant-garde, is translated here into a new model of professional politics serving the radical or vanguard artist.

‘Radicalism’ is discussed here neither in terms of political positions per se nor with regard to artistic innovation, but instead as a distinct historical phenomenon of professional politics. The question is not what makes an artwork or an idea radical, but how artistic radicalism itself was shaped. The secession of the applied artist from the traditional art institutions is seen as a decisive moment in this process. Precisely this outsider position – beyond fine arts and traditional crafts – determined the increasingly exclusionary policies of the avant-garde movement. Thus this thesis ultimately proposes a new interpretation of the conflict between the advocates and enemies of modern art as a whole. It was the artists’ own professional politics which shaped this conflict and determined affiliations with specific political parties, and not the opposite. The relation of artistic developments to larger political issues must, I argue, be read through the specific professional politics emerging out of the polarity between the vanguard artist-reformer and the so-called ‘art proletariat’.
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Introduction

There is an extended literature on the culture of the Weimar Republic, yet the resulting image remains disjointed. The myth of the ‘Golden Twenties’, established with such standard studies as Peter Gay’s *Weimar Culture*, Walter Laqueur’s *Weimar: A Cultural History*, John Willett’s *The New Sobriety* or the 1977 monumental exhibition *Tendenzen der zwanziger Jahre*, has largely determined the narrative of the cultural history of the period.¹ What unites those accounts of interwar German art is a teleological assessment of cultural and artistic phenomena, which, focusing on aesthetic innovations and experimentations overemphasizes modernist and avant-garde currents, excluding trends that do not fit into this canon. The prevalence of this tendency accounts for the overabundance of studies on Expressionism, Dada, Constructivism and the ‘Neue Sachlichkeit’, which are usually interpreted as part of a modern and radical culture ‘cut short’ by the Nazi dictatorship.²

Already by the late 1970s, projects like the exhibition *Wem gehört die Welt* and publications such as Jost Hermand and Frank Trommler’s *Die Kultur der Weimarer Republik* sought to question this approach, examining the period through the lens of contemporary political and social developments and presenting a more complex account of Weimar culture.³ During the same period, there was also a great surge of interest in the cultural and artistic tradition of the working-class movement. Naturally, the latter was central to the cultural policies of the DDR, with art historians struggling to assimilate it into the official historical narrative of their country.⁴ The 1978 East Berlin exhibition *Revolution und

Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.


Realismus, organized as a response to both Tendenzen der zwanziger Jahre and Wem gehört die Welt, serves as a monument of the confrontation between the two Germanies over the cultural legacy of the Weimar Republic.5

As the majority of literature on Weimar art and culture was published during the Cold War period, ideological biases largely shaped historical narrative. While there was a general consensus on the radical character of Weimar culture, the approach to artistic radicalism differed. West German and Anglo-American scholars equated this radicalism with a break with tradition, a heroic spirit of experimentation, and visual and technical innovation, a tendency that detached art producers from the historical context of their time to assimilate Weimar culture into the broader tradition of a radical, democratic and international (in reality Western) modernism. Artistic innovation was taken to be synonymous with free expression and was opposed to the state-controlled, stiff academic style of the fascist or socialist regimes. For East German historians, on the other hand, the yardstick of Weimar-era artistic radicalism was Parteilichkeit (partisanship) or anti-fascist resistance. At best, they attempted to write a more inclusive history of German radical art by introducing a term broader than that of socialist realism: ‘proletarian-revolutionary art’. This was a way to loosen the grip of Parteilichkeit on art historical narrative, as under the latter term art historians included almost every work that took a critical stance against bourgeois society, thus incorporating into the official history a broader spectrum of artists and stylistic tendencies.6

Despite the excellent scholarship that could take place within these parameters, this polarization produced a simplistic account of artistic radicalism, setting artificial divisions which impeded the clarification of the different positions but also points of convergence across the cultural field of the Weimar period.

In the last two decades, scholarship has challenged the myth of the ‘Golden Twenties’, significantly expanding our knowledge of the Weimar period and its political and artistic culture.7 Yet since the terms ‘radical art’ or ‘avant-garde’ are

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6On the ‘proletarian-revolutionary art’ as an international phenomenon overlapping with and critical of the bourgeois Modern Movement, see Harald Olbrich Proletarische Kunst im Werden (Berlin: Dietz, 1986).

7See the discussion of the relevant literature in Jochen Hung, ‘Beyond Glitter and Doom: The
often used interchangeably, the notion of artistic radicalism has remained an undefined and shifting trope in studies of the work of left-wing or avant-garde artists without being a specifically examined object of contemporary art historical narrative. As a result, old biases and misconceptions surrounding it remain largely intact. Artistic radicalism as a phenomenon needs to be further historicized.

**Geistige Arbeit, artistic radicalism and the applied arts movement**

With the present study I want to lay the foundations for an historical contextualization of artistic radicalism. Contrary to the (much-needed) monographic studies on key artistic figures or on specific stylistic tendencies, the aim here is to elucidate the larger economic/cultural context in which both the traditional avant-garde groupings and the radical artists worked, in a way that will make possible to think about how they are related. To this end, I want to shift attention from the artists’ radical experiments in visual form to questions concerning the social and professional identity of art producers themselves, questions which still remain marginal in art historiography.

My central argument is that artistic radicalism – both political and aesthetic radicalism, in complex and interwoven ways – 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. More specifically, I will follow the transformations of the professional and social identity of the visual artists, which were part of a response to a common concern of the German intelligentsia and the educated bourgeoisie: the crisis of *geistige Arbeit* (intellectual labour) in modernity. *geistige Arbeit* constitutes a very useful methodological category for the exploration not only of artistic radicalism but of the extremely complex constellation of artistic, cultural and political projects of the period. Intellectual labour was associated with the free professions and it was particularly the transformation of the latter in a technologically advanced society

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and a capitalist economy that preoccupied an untold number of intellectuals, painters, architects and craftsmen from the mid-nineteenth century through the Weimar period.

The richness of the relative debate owes much to the ambivalence around its two central terms, namely Beruf and geistige Arbeit: Beruf can be translated as ‘calling’, ‘vocation’, ‘occupation’ or ‘profession’, whilst geistige Arbeit can mean ‘spiritual’ or ‘intellectual’ labour. And if in the course of the Weimar years Beruf was increasingly used to denote a ‘profession’ rather than a ‘calling’, the term geistige Arbeit retained its ambivalence. Given the centrality of the crisis of geistige Arbeit for the German intelligentsia, its omission or marginalization in art historiography is indeed surprising.

Though this study focuses on Weimar-era artistic radicalism, my chronological framework is set by the debate on the crisis of intellectual labour from the 1890s to 1933. The First World War and the Great Depression may have changed its discourse but its basic parameters remained the same. Contemporaries perceived the distress of intellectual workers as the result of long-term developments taking place in the second half of the nineteenth century such as the rationalization of social life, the industrialization of production and the expansion of the free market. Thus, following this uninterrupted discussion on the role of the intellectual worker in a drastically changed socio-economic setting, Weimar culture can be explored on a more concrete historical basis.

The crisis of geistige Arbeit was interpreted as a symptom of what Max Weber famously termed ‘the disenchantment of the world’, the effects of rationalization and capitalist economy on traditional cultural values. In fact, Weber’s famous texts ‘Science as a Vocation’ and ‘Politics as a Vocation’ were part of a series of lectures under the general title ‘Geistige Arbeit als Beruf’, organized by the Bavarian branch of the Free Student League (Freistudentische Bund). The first was delivered on 7 November 1917 in Munich. Two more lectures, ‘Education as a Vocation’, to be delivered by pedagogue Georg Kerschensteiner and ‘Art as a Vocation’, for which art historians Wilhelm Hausenstein and Heinrich Wölfflin

9 For a discussion of ‘the German concept of profession’, see Konrad H. Jarausch, The Unfree Professions: German Lawyers, Teachers, and Engineers, 1900-1950 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 4-8. Depending on the context, the German word Geist can be translated as mind, spirit or intellect (also spectre or ghost).
10 I was not able to trace a single art historical study dedicated to or extensively dealing with the issue.
were approached, were apparently never delivered. The central question in all of them was the fate of intellectual workers in modern capitalism: To which degree could intellectual workers secure their independence in a labour market determined by capitalist relations of exchange and production?

The transformation of intellectual workers into wage labourers caused anxiety over their proletarianization. For the German intelligentsia, the precarious position of intellectual workers indicated that an autonomous position for art or, more generally, for cultural production was practically unattainable in a capitalist economy. But those who did not share Marx’s resolution of the problem set out to explore ways for the accommodation of artists and intellectuals under the present circumstances. To this direction, the Verein für Sozialpolitik (Social Policy Association), a professional association of economists and sociologists, opposed to both free market economy and Marxism, dedicated its fiftieth anniversary annual convention (1922) to the subject. The keynote address was delivered by sociologist Alfred Weber (Max Weber’s brother), bearing the telling title ‘Die Not der geistigen Arbeiter’ (The plight of intellectual workers). Weber argued that due to the catastrophe of the war and the resultant economic inflation, entirely independent intellectual work was no longer viable. A new type of intellectual was emerging, the ‘worker intellectual’ (Arbeitsintellektuelle), whose livelihood would depend on the combination of his intellectual creativity and the practical application of his knowledge. To better illuminate his point, Weber drew the picture of the artist of the future, who would be closely connected to the crafts, particularly the most profitable among them. Other typical representatives of this future stratum of intellectuals, according to Weber, were those ‘higher officials, lawyers, doctors, engineers, technicians,’ whose labour was intellectual, marketable and had direct social applications.

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13Alfred Weber, ‘Die Not der geistigen Arbeiter’, in Die Zukunft der Sozialpolitik: Die Not der geistigen Arbeiter – Jubiläumstagung des Vereins für Sozialpolitik in Eisenach 1922 (Munich: Duncker & Humblot, 1923), 165-84 (pp. 181, 183). For a fine discussion of Weber’s address in English, see Bernd Widdig, Culture and Inflation in Weimar Germany (Berkeley: University of
Alfred Weber’s new type of intellectual worker remarkably overlaps with the programme of the turn-of-the-century German Kunstgewerbebewegung (applied arts movement). This connection is not coincidental. Frederic J. Schwartz has sharply illustrated the significance of the contacts between the Verein für Sozialpolitik and the most important pre-war forum for the promotion of the applied arts reform, the Deutscher Werkbund.\(^{14}\) Schwartz’s skillful analysis of the complicated legal, political and economic issues involved in the foundation of the Werkbund has been an important inspiration to my discussion of the Kunstgewerbebewegung. However, the question I pose is different. My concern is not the relation of visual form to economy.\(^ {15}\) Instead, I want to call attention to the ways applied arts reformers perceived and promoted design theory as a new model of intellectual labour which they found better corresponding to the demands of the modern age. Through this investigation I wish to show how this new model of artistic practice was translated into a very specific professional strategy – a politics of practice – designed to serve the interests of a small elite representing a new type of professional artist, the designer. Designers and modern architects, I will argue, the leading artistic figures of the art reform movement, asserted a privileged, avant-garde role partly through a combined reorganization of crafts production and of the education of artists and craftsmen, and partly by seceding from and bypassing both the guild-like organizations of craftsmen and the traditional interest-promoting associations of fine artists.

This shift of focus is crucial for a different appreciation of the politics of the arts and crafts reform. John V. Maciuika has illuminated the complex interplay that transformed private initiatives (often of a business character) into a much broader state educational reform campaign, which in its turn legitimized and popularized the ideas and practices of the applied arts movement.\(^ {16}\) However, his top-down approach to the reform tends to conflate state concerns with the artists’


professional politics. If, for the Prussian government, the applied arts reform was indeed a means to prevent the proletarianization and radicalization of the old *Mittelstand* (largely consisting of craftsmen), which stood as a bulwark against the constantly rising socialist movement (as Maciuika and other scholars have rightly stressed), the artists involved in the reform had different objectives. In other words, though the identification of the reform as an instrument of *Mittelstandspolitik* tells much about the cultural and social policies of the German state, it fails to explain what prompted artists to participate in the movement and to follow the unintended consequences of these policies. Only by focusing on the actual concerns of artists one can fully grasp the *raison d'être* of the *Kunstgewerbebewegung*.

It was precisely the leading role asserted by the designers and modern architects after 1890 that enables a better understanding of what I will describe as the second wave of the applied arts movement. The distinction between an early period, beginning in the 1860s, shortly before the unification of Germany, characterized by the predominance of historicist design and a hostile or, at best, ambivalent attitude of craftsmen towards mechanized production, and a second period starting in the 1890s, marked by the flourishing of the *Jugendstil* style and culminating in the foundation of the Werkbund, is standard in scholarship. The emphasis on visual form and the succession of styles, however, has overshadowed the changed position of artists within the movement in the course of those years. My argument is that the second wave of the movement is conditioned by the secession of artists from the traditional arts or crafts institutions of their time and the foundation of new – markedly elitist – organizations for the promotion of the interests of a new type of professional artist. And it was precisely a radical reworking of the notion of *geistige Arbeit*, drastically undermining the notion (cultivated in the academies) of the autonomy of art that stimulated this secession.

It is crucial to note that the leading figures of the second wave of the applied arts reform, such as Bruno Paul, Peter Behrens, Richard Riemerschmid, Bernhard Pankok and Henry van de Velde, were all outsiders in this field; they were

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academically trained painters, who had left their studio to turn to the crafts workshop. As outsiders in a new field of practice, those artists-reformers reworked the notion of geistige Arbeit so as to promote a radical restructuring of the production relations and hierarchies in craftsmanship – a redistribution of power that would safeguard their own leading position. This leading position, I argue, depended on the self-stylization of the designer as an intellectual. The legitimation of the double identity of the designer/educator largely depended on the accumulation of the cultural capital of this new type of professional. As designers they claimed an expanded field of practice to surmount the divisions and traditional corporatist restrictions of specialized crafts production, whilst as educators they sought to reorganize the training of craftsmen and, in effect, to control the latter’s professional qualification. The exploration of the politics of the designer as a new type of professional artist (a total artist/Gesamtkünstler) and its repercussions, a pivotal yet neglected aspect of the applied arts movement, forms the general framework of this thesis.

I am borrowing the notion ‘cultural capital’ from the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu sees the artistic field as ‘a field of forces, but […] also a field of struggles’ tending to transform or conserve this field of forces.”18 The former constitutes a ‘space of artistic positions,’ defined by the possession of a specific degree of symbolic capital (recognition in the art world) as well as by the position of the various social agents (individuals, groups or institutions) in the hierarchy of the system through which this capital is distributed. The field of struggles, on the other hand, is a ‘space of artistic position-takings,’ encompassing the means through which artistic identity expresses itself and claims a legitimate place in the art establishment, i.e. through artistic works, political acts, manifestoes, etc.19 Of course, the two spaces are complementary and inseparable.

Bourdieu’s analytical model has been particularly useful to navigate through the rapidly changing cultural field in turn-of-the-century, but also in post-war Germany. What is lacking from the French sociologist’s concept, however, is a convincing historical contextualization. Bourdieu’s model becomes too mechanistic, seeing ‘the structure of the field’ as nothing more than ‘the structure

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19 Ibid.
of the distribution of the capital of specific properties which governs success in
the field and the winning of external or specific profits […] which are at stake in
the field.²⁰ Seeing the cultural field too narrowly as a field of struggles for
recognition and power, Bourdieu fails to explain its genesis. How was this field
conditioned? Can it be translated merely as an endless remoulding of power
relations?

The motivations for the shift of professional artistic career taking place in
1890s Germany were more complex. To understand them I have greatly benefited
from the work of another sociologist, Alvin W. Gouldner.²¹ Though revolving
around a different context, his analysis can also shed light on the historical
background of the second wave of the Kunstgewerbebewegung. In a fascinating
way, Gouldner associates the crisis in craftsmanship and the Humanities with
political radicalism. He does not only point to the leading role of craftsmen and
intellectuals in the 1848 Revolution but, more importantly, he explores the
tensions leading radical intellectuals (such as Marx) to dissociate themselves from
crafts-based workers’ associations. This latter tension has been instrumental for
my own account of the designer-reformer’s secession from the established
institutions of artists and craftsmen.

Thus, I want to underline the centrality of two points, which a close application
of Bourdieu’s model would marginalize. First, that the applied arts movement was
a response to a very tangible crisis of traditional art institutions in capitalism
(especially of the Humanities, with art educational institutions being part of this
tradition). Naturally, professional interests, issues of prestige, symbolic and
cultural capital were central in this response. But the reconfiguration of geistige
Arbeit should not be viewed exclusively as a struggle for position-takings. It was
also a response to a very tangible, urgent cultural problem, reflecting the unease of
intellectual workers in a rapidly changing social environment. To put it differently,
the transformation of the art world should not be exclusively seen as a struggle for
power; for thousands of artists, craftsmen and intellectuals, the crisis of
intellectual labour was experienced as a problem of subsistence.

Second, applied artists saw the solution of the problem in the integration of art
into everyday praxis. This solution, however, resulted in a radical split of the

²¹Alvin W. Gouldner, Against Fragmentation: The Origins of Marxism and the Sociology of
traditional art world. For the leading artistic figures of the second wave of the applied arts movement did not claim a legitimate place in the art establishment, as Bourdieu would put it; instead, they set out to colonize a field outside the jurisdiction of the official art establishment and – by creating new institutions – to expand the field for the production, dissemination and consumption of art. In effect, they tried to organize – and ideally control – an entirely new field for professional visual artists. The central and unexplored paradox in this union of arts and (industrially produced) crafts was that it divided fine from applied artists and the latter from craftsmen as professionals. But the division of the three fields was less clear in practice than in discourse, and art producers often oscillated from the one to the other. Artistic radicalism was a product of this tension between different models for artistic practice and the actual potentials for their materialization.

From this point of view, I examine the applied arts movement as the source of two radicalisms. First, as the product of a secession from and attack on the fine arts academies and the traditional crafts associations, the theories and practices of the applied artists were deliberately radical not only to distinguish their position in the cultural field, but also to legitimate their intervention in a new field of practice. Their self-conception as an avant-garde, their radical opposition to the traditional ‘backward’ crafts producers was determined by their outsider position to the field of crafts. Their conflict with both fine artists and craftsmen further radicalized the applied artists’ discourse and practice. Characteristically, by the late 1920s, the most active promoters of the applied arts reform were identified and denounced by their enemies as ‘radical modernists’. Second, it was precisely the uncompromising radicalism and the exclusionary politics of this avant-garde that radicalized its opposition. From this point of view, I propose a reconsideration of the political nature of the latter. I would like to distance myself from a scholarship which resorts to party-politics to interpret the artistic positions and oppositions, dividing the advocates and enemies of modern art according to party affiliations. My point is that it was the artists’ own professional politics and strategies which shaped the confrontation around modern art and determined affiliations with specific political parties, and not the reverse.
Avant-garde

As I have tried to make clear, the leading artistic figures of the second wave of the applied arts movement conceived a model of artistic practice promoting an entirely novel conception of the artist’s social and professional identity. This model was at odds with the training (and professional qualification) provided by both the academies of fine arts and the traditional crafts institutions, which channeled students and apprentices in a narrow field of specialized practice, for example in easel painting, drawing, sculpture, wood carving, joinery or decorative painting. The artist-designers of the applied arts movement attacked precisely this restriction of the professional artist’s activity, claiming expertise in the vast field of practice promised by the union first of arts and crafts and, secondly, of artistic with industrial production. Distinguishing themselves from academic fine artists and specialized craftsmen on the basis of a radically new concept of geistige Arbeit, they claimed a new status as intellectual workers, identifying themselves as the avant-garde of a broader cultural and life reform movement.22

The historical contextualization of the applied arts movement points to the reformist roots of the avant-garde, a connection disregarded in the standard accounts of the Modern Movement. Remarkably, the German applied arts movement, especially the Werkbund, subsumes all the basic characteristics that Peter Bürger attributes to the avant-garde to denote its revolutionary break from modernism.23 For Bürger ‘the historical avant-garde movements negate those determinations that are essential in autonomous art: the disjunction of art and the praxis of life, individual production, and individual reception as distinct from the former.’24 However, he recognizes only in Dadaism, Constructivism and Surrealism a consistent questioning of the autonomy of art as an institution. There are two main reasons for this unjustified limitation. First, Bürger does not examine how the anti-institutional critique of those movements worked in practice (the position of the artist as a producer within the institution of art).

24Ibid., p. 53.
Overemphasizing the importance of the negative element in the statement of intentions of the avant-garde paradigms he distinguishes, he transforms it into the constitutive characteristic of avant-garde at large. In this way, he overlooks the significant contradictions that are repressed through this radical negation. Thus when Bürger discards as ‘a false sublation of autonomous art’ any attempt to integrate the latter into the praxis of life in bourgeois society,\(^25\) he ends up reproducing the same line of argumentation used by his avant-garde paradigms to underscore their revolutionary self-assertion.

My second point of critique is that Bürger’s narrow conception of the avant-garde is founded precisely on the detachment of Dadaism, Constructivism and Surrealism from the larger historical context that conditioned their development. It is the historical contextualization of the debates on the nature of artistic labour in capitalist economy as well as the various artistic projects that proposed new ways for adjusting art to the demands of modern life that can provide a more accurate image of the historical avant-garde.

In a more recent text, Bürger explains what the avant-gardists’ integration of art into life praxis signified. ‘The unification of art and life intended by the avant-garde,’ he writes, ‘can only be achieved if it succeeds in liberating aesthetic potential from the institutional constraints which block its social effectiveness. In other words: the attack on the institution of art is the condition for the possible realization of a utopia in which art and life are united.’\(^26\) The question is whether the project to which this utopia was tied was necessarily a revolutionary one. As I have argued, the same circumventing of institutional constraints was pivotal for a reformist movement, the Kunstgewerbebewegung – a movement conceived by the disenfranchised bourgeoisie of the Wilhelmine period and not by revolutionary radicals, thereby not intent on radical social change. Bürger continues: ‘By renouncing the idea of autonomy, the artist also gives up his special social position and thereby his claim to genius.’\(^27\) Here autonomy is conflated with individualism. The case of the designer-reformer, however, indicates that the questioning of autonomy might also enhance individualism. The transformation of the academically trained painter into a modern designer presupposed, as we have


\(^{27}\) Ibid.
seen, the abandonment of ‘free’ arts, whose special status was waning, for a new professional activity attuned to the demands of the modern age. In no way, however, was this new type of professional artist willing to give up his status as an intellectual worker. As I will show, the designer had renounced the idea of autonomy only to retain his status as a genius.

Additionally, while the ‘paradox of the failure of the avant-gardes’ (their success in the institution they challenged) may apply to Bürger’s chosen paradigms, this is not the case with the avant-garde of the design reform movement. The greatest problem for the radical designer and architect, I shall suggest, was that his attack on easel painting and traditional craftsmanship was so radical that it curtailed its chances for broad support; instead of promoting a union of arts and crafts, the radical reformers caused an irreversible rupture within the art world, dividing arts and crafts professionals into an untold number of interest-groups. The extent of the radical modernists’ success in the crafts sector, especially in the interwar period, must also be questioned.

As a model of practice for a new type of intellectual worker-genius, the Kunstgewerbebewegung represents an elitist movement. Its goal was not the democratization of art institutions but the creation of a new profession accessible only to the exceptionally talented. My approach to the avant-garde, then, is closer to Robert Jensen’s, who describes it as ‘not a distinct species of art but a subset within the frame of modernism. The avant-garde defines itself in opposition to modernism, yet it is unthinkable without it. Avant-gardism’s chief characteristic, both artistic and social, is its elitism, an elitism born out of the struggle among artists for an audience […] The struggle over markets was […] a revolt inside the profession of art.’ Though I agree with Jensen’s approach to avant-gardism and with the pivotal role commercial galleries played in its emergence, it is crucial to note that the German avant-garde of the Weimar period, born out of the prewar arts and crafts movement (thus extending beyond the field of the traditional fine arts), marks an attempt to bypass (among other things) precisely this gallery system and to use larger public and private institutions to establish its own position within the public sphere. In other words, the applied arts avant-gardists wished to maintain their independence by circumventing the regulations of crafts

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associations and, at the same time, by reforming the art market. Thus on closer
examination, the arts and crafts movement often represented the attempt of the
modern artist to return to the security of the commission system. In a drastically
changed art trade system, the artist sought in industry, cooperatives, trade unions
and the state a new patron which could provide relative security in a free
economy, commissioning large art projects as was the case in the recent past with
the wealthy individual patrons of the nobility. What the avant-garde artist wanted
to secure was a durable connection with a modern institution to avoid selling his
products as piece work for a faceless free market.

But the avant-gardist designers and architects of the applied arts movement did
not just want to reform the art market. Their cultural projects were part of a
broader movement for the reform of life. And it is this ‘demand that art move
from representing to transforming the world’, which constitutes the ‘basic spirit’
of the historical avant-garde, as Boris Groys rightly points out.30 I fully
acknowledge Boris Groys’s provocative thesis on the integral connection between
the Soviet avant-garde and socialist realism. To this, I shall add what I see as a
clear transfer of ideas from the German applied arts and life reform movement to
such post-war revolutionary projects as the Soviet Proletkult and constructivism.
Thus, the historical contextualization I propose aims to expose the heroic self-
image of the avant-gardist which intentionally suppresses the continuity of ideas
to enhance the profile of the modern artist as a pioneer.

This kinship of reformist and revolutionary artistic projects is crucial because it
reveals an ambivalent relationship towards the notion of the autonomy of art. It is
a reconsideration of the artist’s relationship with modern technology and means of
production which fuels his ‘return to life praxis’ and the critique of the autonomy
of art. But what the artist essentially renounces is the autonomy of the work of art
and its non-application to life not the independent status of the artist as a
producer whose cultural mission supposedly differentiates him from the worker,
the businessman and the merchant. Crucially, this silent affirmation of the
autonomous position of the applied artist in production is shared by both reformist
and revolutionary radicals.

I must make clear, however, that I am not interested in providing a new

30Boris Groys, The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond,
definition of the avant-garde. Instead, I wish to explore its mechanism as a professional strategy which diverted attention from the artist as a producer to the form and function of his product. The avant-garde, I want to argue, constitutes a very specific model of radical professional politics for a new type of artist, the total artist who wanted to bypass the restrictions of the traditional art institutions. The desire of the total artist to seek new patrons in institutions heretofore foreign to the production of art such as industry, political parties or trade unions added to the radical character of his new projects.

**A new approach to artistic radicalism**

To sum up: radical or avant-garde artistic projects represent moments of the self-awareness of artists, the realization of their position in a period of shifting class relations. New models of practice are conceived to demarcate new professional positions in a fluid social landscape. From this point of view, one can get a better picture of the intentions behind those projects, their dynamics, inner contradictions and shortcomings while avoiding generalizations. By exploring the connection between artistic practice, intellectual labour and professional identity it is possible to recover the centrality of social questions inscribed in the radical visual culture of the Weimar Republic and at the same time gain a less fragmented picture of its various practices.

My purpose is to explore artistic radicalism as a phenomenon, not to trace its symptoms in the work or ideas of isolated figures. The reconnection of the history of the applied arts reform with the history of artistic radicalism provides a more solid historical basis on which to understand both, a way to overcome artificial divisions and to relate diverse cultural and artistic projects within a larger context. The *Kunstgewerbebewegung* thus emerges as a key link between pre-World War I and Weimar-era artistic developments, as it was within its context that the effects of modern capitalism on the cultural sphere were for the first time systematically discussed in Germany.\(^{31}\)

Part of my argument is that artistic and political radicalism do not always converge. In fact, the identification of the two often fails in explaining broader

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\(^{31}\)Julius Posener has called attention to this pivotal aspect of the German applied arts movement in his fascinating study *Berlin auf dem Wege zu einer neuen Architektur: Das Zeitalter Wilhelms II.* (Munich: Prestel, 1979).
cultural phenomena or the origins of specific stylistic tendencies.\textsuperscript{32} Artistic training, I shall maintain, provides the framework for a more productive approach to Weimar-era radical art.\textsuperscript{33} An examination of the biographical data of artists involved in interwar radical artistic projects reveals that most of them had either graduated from applied arts and technical-vocational schools, or they had at least been influenced by the reform ideas of the applied arts movement. An interesting new question emerges to be tested: Could the political radicalism of these artists be partly explained as a product of the education and training they received in the new educational institutions established by the German applied arts movement? Furthermore, to which extent training in applied arts schools shaped the forms of Weimar-era artistic radicalism?

Starting from this question I also wish to challenge the customary binary opposition that arbitrarily divides the cultural field into a progressive avant-garde movement and its conservative enemies. This opposition, still prevalent in scholarship, is reproduced even in studies that aim to cast light on the interrelationship between cultural production and class identities. In her recent \textit{Topographies of Class}, for example, Sabine Hake investigates the interplay between modern architecture and mass society to discuss ‘the power of aesthetic practices in making meaning through their simultaneous opening towards and containing of otherness and difference, including the kind of differences associated with class.’\textsuperscript{34} Surprisingly, the author does not pay attention to the changing professional identity of the architect or the art producer. As a result, the protagonist of her narrative remains a ‘radicalized new generation of architects’ whose ‘frank acknowledgment of the close connection between modern architecture and mass society was one of the main reasons for […] the virulent

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{32}This is the case in two standard studies on the work of one of the most famous radical visual artists of the Weimar period. See Beth Irwin Lewis, \textit{George Grosz: Art and Politics in the Weimar Republic}, 2nd edn (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991); Barbara McCloskey, \textit{George Grosz and the Communist Party: Art and Radicalism in Crisis, 1918 to 1936} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).
\end{footnotesize}
attacks on its social and artistic vision by conservative critics, and the popular perception of modern architecture [...] as both elitist and communist in large parts of the educated middle class. But this opposition was part and parcel of the radical modernists' own self-stylization, more precisely of their quite specific professional strategies. Moreover, as I shall show, radicalization was inherently connected with the tension around those professional strategies, their formulation and implementation and the reaction to them by not necessarily anti-modernist artists and architects.

One finds this binary opposition in one of the most important and influential studies on Weimar-era artistic radicalism, Joan Weinstein’s *The End of Expressionism*. Weinstein sees ‘the revolutionary artists of 1918’ as ‘part and parcel of [the] politicized art world’ of the pre-war period, an art world divided between Wilhelmine academic art and its enemies. She presents a fascinating account of the ways the various state and private art institutions (government agencies, the academy, artists’ groups, the art press and the art market) influenced the ‘production and reception of art’ in the year following the revolution of November 1918. However, she reads the radical artists’ programmes for the transformation of the art world and the union of art with the people as responses to or outcomes of the November revolution. Choosing a narrow chronological frame and interpreting artistic radicalism in exclusively political terms, she considers expressionism ‘the first avant-garde challenge to both imperial and bourgeois culture in Germany.’ This is a simplification based on an uncritical division between progressives and conservatives. However, the various cultural projects of the Wilhelmine period characteristically lack a uniform ideologico-political basis. As Mark Jarzombek rightly argues, ‘The political amorphousness of Wilhelmine cultural aesthetics was in some sense the trademark of the period. It was conservative but even when used by a reactionary it could hold onto the promise of cultural harmony; it was pro-industrial but criticized capitalist excesses; it was not overtly political, but held out the promise of a meta-political purification. [...] these ambiguities could be easily rehearsed as a legitimate theory of reform in

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35 Hake, *Topographies of Class*, p. 100.  
37 Ibid., p. 8.
anticipation of a utopian outcome.'³⁸ Jarzombek also calls attention to the polar positions occupied by the reformers of the Werkbund, on the one side, and the expressionists of the Sturm-circle on the other—³⁹ an opposition, I should add, also reflected in the reverse paths crossed by the leading artistic figures of the Werkbund (from painting to design and architecture) and the founders of Die Brücke (from architecture to painting). Thus when in her broad category of avant-garde expressionism Weinstein includes groups that emerged from the pre-war applied arts movement, such as the Arbeitsrat für Kunst (Working Council for Art), she disregards both a complex prehistory and a very interesting development enabling a post-war collaboration of expressionists and applied artists in new radical artistic projects.

If scholarly studies on artistic radicalism often disregard the issue of professionalization, studies on the latter, usually pay little attention to artistic radicalism. This is the case, for example, with regard to Charles E. MacClelland’s history of artists from the viewpoint of professionalization.⁴⁰ The broad chronological scope of his study does not allow its author to delve into the tensions and contradictions within and between the institutions regulating or striving to reform artistic practice. In short, it lacks a systematic methodological analysis clarifying the position of the various agents in the cultural field. Consequently, the resulting image is too uncomplicated.

Employing Bourdieu’s concept of ‘habitus’ to investigate how the idea of the ‘modern’ and of creative individuality served the professional and social differentiation of artists, Wolfang Ruppert has provided a more detailed picture of the transformation of the artistic vocation from the nineteenth to the early twentieth century.⁴¹ Ruppert argues that in a period of rationalization the modern artist promotes himself in the public sphere as a guardian and reformer of the intellectual/spiritual sphere. Focusing on the institutional changes of the Munich art world, he rightly detects a ‘break in the cultural awareness’ taking place between the foundation of the Secession in 1892 and that of the Vereinigte

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³⁹Ibid., pp. 15-18.
⁴⁰See Charles E. MacClelland, Prophets, Paupers, or Professionals? A Social History of Everyday Visual Artists in Modern Germany, 1850-Present (Bern: Peter Lang, 2003).
Werkstätten für Kunst im Handwerk (United Workshops for Art in Craftwork) in 1898. However, Ruppert is more interested in the discourse used by fine and applied artists to legitimate and establish a new type of artistic habitus based on a new notion of creative individuality. Focusing on the discursive construction of artistic habitus, Ruppert, much like Bourdieu, disregards the actual professional politics of the competing agents within the restructured cultural field. The notions of habitus, the cultural field, cultural and symbolic capital can be useful tools for the illumination of certain aspects of the structure and strategies of art institutions, but as general methodological categories they have significant shortcomings. Above all, they tend to abstract and schematize actual relationships between social agents; they map a field of oppositions, but they overlook internal contradictions, ambivalences and position fluctuations. This schematization ultimately simplifies complex cultural phenomena, dividing agents into fixed positions.

But positions were not yet fixed; it is to this fluidity of professional identities and of radical artistic culture at large that I want to turn the reader’s attention. To this end, the first chapter is an attempt to present the interconnectedness between educational reform and radicalism in all its complexity, i.e. as a question where crucial questions pertaining intellectual labour and vocational interests, professional and amateur artistic practice, social reform and radicalism, intersect. At stake is an all-round approach to the applied arts movement, focused not on its accomplishments but on the tensions it generated. My starting point is a question which, though central in all major art reform projects, has not been explored in scholarship: the problem of the Kunstproletariat (art proletariat). Art reformers defined the art proletarian as the average student of the academies, who lacked talent to accomplish true artistic work and practical skills to follow a useful trade. The art proletariat was socially unproductive; hence it had to be reformed. Thus, educational reform can be translated as a programme for the rationalization of vocational orientation and training. Its main objective was the control and re-distribution of skills. The rationale of the reform was that only technical training could be transmitted; artistic talent was something innate, hence non-teachable. The division was clear; the designer-reformer (a new embodiment of the old artist-genius) appointed himself the leader in a thorough reform of a field where

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42See Ruppert, Der Künstler, p. 538. Ruppert mistakenly dates the foundation of the Werkstätten in 1897.
he was an outsider (crafts). Though I take into account the new discourse those reformers invoked to legitimate and secure a privileged position in the restructured crafts hierarchy, I am equally interested in their practices. In this respect, I also turn to the organizations of craftsmen and draftsmen to throw light on the resistances the reform met. Finally, I try to explain the rapid spread of the applied arts movement in the early twentieth century on the basis of the politico-ideological convergence of bourgeois reformism and revisionist Marxism. Based on the politically disenfranchised position of both parties, this convergence materialized in their collaboration, particularly in cultural reform projects. And it was precisely through its non-uniformity that the educational reform movement gained a broad support in the public sphere.

In the second chapter, I propose that the early post-war historical avant-garde advertized itself not only with manifestoes but also with silence. What the avant-gardists conscientiously obscured were the sources of their artistic programmes. My main thesis is that the ‘art into life’ agenda of most early Weimar-era avant-garde groups had been inspired by the turn-of-the-century applied arts movement. Projects like the Arbeitsrat für Kunst (Working Council for Art) and the Bauhaus emerged directly from the Werkbund. This connection, however, was intentionally repressed. Promoting themselves as radical modernists, members of the youngest generation of the pre-war applied arts movement preferred to associate their projects with revolutionary art theories coming from the Soviet Union. As the example of the Soviet Proletkult movement indicates, however, some of those revolutionary ideas had been heavily influenced by the pre-war German life reform movement. Through these continuities, I want to stress the evolutionary – rather than revolutionary – nature of the avant-garde.

By the end of the 1920s, a positivist, rational and functional notion of artistic labour closely associated with the radical programmes for art reform came to dominate the public sphere in the great urban centers of Germany. This radical reformism was criticized by many contemporaries. In the third chapter, I examine this neglected but significant controversy over modern art. What I want to question is the customary simplistic opposition between a politically progressive avant-garde (democratic or left-liberal) and its conservative enemies (advocates of a right- or left-wing extremism). If we translate this same confrontation as an intra-vocational clash, I suggest, we get a more complicated and accurate picture.
For such heterogeneous figures as authors Alfred Döblin and Hermann Bloch, the Austrian architect Josef Frank, art critics Adolf Behne and Ernst Kállai, and painters Oscar Nerlinger and Arthur Segal, the avant-garde had come to represent a dogmatic ultra-radical position which had turned against the ‘free’ arts, particularly easel painting. To this intolerant radical modernism was juxtaposed a centrist or moderate modernism based on a democratic symbiosis of art. Centrism should not be interpreted in strictly political terms; this position had been determined by the actual experiences of artists as professionals. Squeezed between the radicalism of the avant-garde and the reactionaries, this centrist position was largely ignored in its time.

In the fourth chapter, I turn to the interplay between political and artistic radicalism. I use the concept of the outsider to highlight the tension between the leading artists of the bourgeois applied arts reform and its working-class discontents. More specifically, I juxtapose the artistically inclined artisan of a proletarian background (the object of the reform) and the militant communist artist, two types of outsiders to the official art world, with the leading applied arts reformer, who began as an outsider in the field of crafts but whose position was established by the late 1920s. Studying the case of a communist group of artists active between 1928 and 1933, the Association of Revolutionary Visual Artists of Germany (Assoziation revolutionärer bildender Künstler Deutschlands or ASSO), I show that the concept for a revolutionary art applied to the practical needs of political propaganda was directly influenced by the educational reform of the applied arts movement. For the majority of ASSO artists began as crafts apprentices and received – an often inconclusive – training in art in the reformed trade and applied arts schools. Thus they constituted the specialized workers necessary for the career of the total artist-reformer. But they had to remain in crafts production as assisting personnel to the latter. From this point of view, their transformation into revolutionary artists was a revolt against the logic of the educational reform. But, as I will show, it also reproduced the hierarchical structure of the latter. The chapter concludes with a discussion of a different type of outsider, the institutionally unattached intellectual, conceived by the German philosopher Walter Benjamin as a reply to Karl Mannheim’s notion of the ‘free floating intelligentsia’. Benjamin’s notion of outsider, I argue, represented an alternative proposal for a truly independent and vanguard intellectual worker, free
from the restrictions of capitalist and party institutions. The collapse of the Republic and the rise of Fascism in Europe, however, frustrated Benjamin’s hopes for an activist outsider intellectual. He now arrived to a decisive anti-intellectual position: technological progress could lead to a general deskilling of artistic labour, abolishing the mediation of the politically suspect bourgeois intellectual/cultural expert. But the neutralization of the role of the intellectual would automatically lead to the end of the avant-garde. If everyone could master intellectual labour, its crisis would be overcome. This is a surprising and disappointing answer from a figure so closely tied to our notion of the avant-garde. But the disappointment is his, for in the end he rejected the avant-garde entirely. Perhaps his long and sustained meditation on culture and media need to be filtered through the notion of geistige Arbeit for us to understand why.
Chapter 1: Form and Reform: Intellectuals, Artists and the Hands of Production

In April 1925, the photographs of four prominent German intellectuals appeared in the pages of *Uhu*, one of the most popular lifestyle magazines of the Weimar era published by *Ullstein Verlag*. Under the heading ‘Hands as a mirror of the genius: the right hand of the poet, the thinker, the painter’, the hands of dramatist and poet Gerhart Hauptmann, scientist Albert Einstein, and Secession painters Max Liebermann and Lovis Corinth were exhibited as reflections of exceptional intellectual accomplishment (fig. 1).

Four years later, a richly illustrated study of hands was published, which not only commented on the basic traits of the hands of German intellectuals, politicians, scientists and artists, but also sought to explore how this part of the human body reflected social and class background.¹ The photographs were divided into six sections: hands of the dead, the living, children, foreign people, hands as means of expression and motion, and hands in the works of the great masters of art. Whilst the first section contained only photos of named individuals (such as psychologist Wilhelm Wundt, painters Lovis Corinth and Ferdinand Hodler), the hands of the living were basically arranged in social types, for example ‘aristocrat’, ‘diplomat’, ‘politician’, and so on; in the cases where there was also a name, it always followed in brackets. Each photograph was catalogued and annotated at the end of the book. Among the most interesting photos was one with the title ‘Heavy worker’ (fig. 2). It was commented as follows:

Next to the normal-sized, broadly arranged hand of a twenty-five-year-old artist lays the markedly elementary worker’s hand of a forty-five-year-old cooper of an unusual dimension. One observes the broad back of the hand, the strong, short thumbs and the thick, broad-ended fingers with the short, flat nails.²

Rather than taking the hand as a reflection of each individual’s work, it was the traces of the latter that were sought in each pair of hands. Hence, work rather than

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² Ibid., p. 17.
the hands was actually projected as the real mirror of the depicted. A miner’s hands, for instance, were ‘strongly modelled’ (fig. 3); a female worker had ‘sturdy fingers’ (fig. 4); a draftswoman’s hands were ‘extraordinarily slender,’ and had she been depicted with a pen, the latter would appear as ‘an organic appendix’ to them (fig. 5); a female graphic artist, who was ‘devoted to art, but she knows that she must earn her living from her work,’ had both ‘soft,’ and ‘a bit fleshy’ hands (a combination implying both sides of her work, the intellectual and the manual) (fig. 6); similarly, the hands of a painter (Max Liebermann) were also ‘slender,’ whilst those of a sculptor (Georg Kolbe or Stephan Sinding) were necessarily ‘sturdy,’ because he had to conquer his material with his physical strength (figs. 7-9).  

Finally, in that same year, a set of three photographs together with a small text wrapped with the laconic title ‘Hands!’ appeared in the communist illustrated magazine Der rote Stern. Contrary to the two abovementioned cases, these hands were captured in action; they were hands of working people: two children making Christmas tree decorations, a mother preparing a cake for her family and a father manufacturing handcrafted Christmas presents. The close arrangement of the photos of those seemingly unrelated individuals suggested a bigger picture: that of a proletarian family (fig. 10).

In a typical Marxist fashion, hands, for the anonymous author of the short text, represented the ‘most valuable possession’ of the proletarian. To mark the transformation of the proletarian from an exploited object in the service of capitalist production to a self-conscious Communist activist, the author invoked two strikingly different symbolic images of hands: the amputated hands of workers-victims of industrial accidents, and the workers’ fists (‘aware of their own real value!’). Had certain campaigns of the time required entrepreneurs to hang in the walls of their workshops accident prevention pictures (Unfallverhütungsbilder), which, for instance, warned the workers to mind their hands when operating specific machines – a quite passive depiction of hands (fig. 11) – the Roter Stern article sought to present an energetic, heroic image of workers’ hands, which corresponds to another famous picture of the time, John

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3Hände, pp. 17-19, 15, 23.
4‘Hände!’, Der rote Stern, December 1929 [n. p.].
Heartfield’s 1928 ‘Five Fingers Has the Hand’ (fig. 12).  

Placed in a materialist framework, hands were used to exemplify strength equally magnificent to that implied in *Uhu*, but, at the same time, distinctly different. What was exalted here was not individual genius, but the collective power of the proletariat; a power based on its class-awareness. Nor, as in the second publication, were those hands conceived as eternally bound to the occupation of their bearer; they were, instead, the very means of their liberation.

*Uhu*’s four raised open palms, depicted in a detached way to create an auratic atmosphere around the individual genius, the man who is above the average, above the masses, stand in opposition to the pairs of working hands, exalted in *Der rote Stern* as representations of the oppressed yet mighty proletariat. However, by the time *Uhu* was focusing on the right hand of those four figures to pay a small homage to the German intelligentsia, a plethora of German artists had been long since forced to combine both hands in occupations like those depicted in *Der rote Stern* in order to earn their living. Thus, the juxtaposition of those photographs can be seen from yet a different point of view, illustrating the transformation of artistic labour in capitalist economy, a transformation that turned its subject into a wage labourer facing everyday problems that were quite similar with those of the proletariat.

This general concern of intellectual workers and artists over their transformation into wage labourers, I shall argue, is at the core of the turn-of-the-century German applied arts movement (*Kunstgewerbebewegung*). The movement is usually discussed in scholarship in relation to questions concerning the national economy and the competitiveness of German industry or to debates on visual form. There is, however, another issue which has been treated as subsidiary despite its centrality in all major programmes for the reform of artistic and technical training: the amelioration of the problem of the *Kunstproletariat*. In this chapter, I shall show how this issue is linked with the transformation of professional artistic identity as was promoted in theory and practice by the leading figures of the movement.

For the cultural and applied arts reformers, the problem of the art proletariat had quite specific roots: the German art education system. Academic training was

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5 For a keen discussion of Heartfield’s photomontage and the semiotics of hand in communist and national socialist propaganda, see Sherwin Simmons, “Hand to the Friend, Fist to the Foe”: the Struggle of Signs in the Weimar Republic”, *Journal of Design History*, 13 (2000), 329-35.
customarily targeted as inappropriate, nurturing the ambitions of each student for a socially prestigious and lucrative career that in reality was reserved only for the exceptional, the ‘naturally talented’. This is why all crafts reformers insisted on the thesis that art could not be taught. Hence, the young student had to abandon the dream of a career in the arts and follow a more pragmatic path: the dreamer had to face reality and return to the discipline of production. Characteristic is Wilhelm von Bode’s approach to the matter. For the German art historian and museum official, the academies and art schools were ‘leading to art a wholly excessive number of young people,’ whose great majority would end up work as ‘photographic retouchers or photographers, draftsmen or lithographers for numerous illustrated papers and for every sort of advertising, notices on advertising columns, for dressmakers’ ‘academies’ and corset manufactories [...] provided that they do not entirely founder.’

Thus for Bode and contemporary applied arts reformers, the new applied arts schools (Kunstgewerbeschulen) were expected to rationalize vocational training by absorbing this mass of ‘failed’ artists, improving their occupational performance and direct them to a useful trade. The far-reaching goal of the educational reform was to harmonize the necessities of the modern art producer or technical worker with those of the industry and the capitalist market.

Naturally, the applied arts movement comprised a wide network of projects involving not only artists, but also politicians, businessmen, scientists, art critics and publishers, who shared some common concerns and aims, but not necessarily interests. I must make clear from the start that I am not interested in writing a history of the movement. My object of enquiry is the roots of artistic radicalism and the politics of visual artists. This is why I will intentionally narrow my attention to the artists’ role in and expectations from the movement. For the applied artists, I will argue, the movement was translated into a vehicle for professional politics, and it is in these politics that one can trace the roots of artistic radicalism.

This chapter begins with a discussion of the development of the movement, particularly of its second wave, which began around 1890 and culminated in the foundation of the Deutscher Werkbund. It is the leading role asserted by a new

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6Wilhelm Bode, ‘Von der Weltausstellung in Chicago (1893)’, in Wilhelm Bode, Kunst und Kunstgewerbe am Ende des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts (Berlin: Bruno and Paul Cassirer, 1901), 3-50 (pp. 40, 43).
type of artist, the designer, which characterizes this phase of the movement. The designer presents himself as both a guarantor of the future prosperity of the *Mittelstand* (with crafts producers and manufacturers holding a key position in this social class) and a leader in the cultural regeneration of Germany. Anti-academic and pro-industrial, the designer’s model of practice was oppositional to traditional arts and crafts institutions. However, this chapter will not study design theory per se; instead, it proposes to translate the theory and practice of the radical applied artist into a specific model of professional politics. Reconsidering the issue of artistic training in the newly founded workshops of the designers and the applied arts schools as a battle over professional qualification and skills distribution, it draws attention to a central and unexplored paradox of the reform: that the proclaimed union of arts and crafts was in fact based on the division between artists and craftsmen as professionals.

The last section of the chapter examines the political-ideological basis of the turn-of-the-century social reform movement. Its diverse cultural projects, it is argued, were a meeting point particularly for the disenfranchised bourgeois and socialist intellectuals (especially the revisionist Marxist faction of the SPD). It was on the basis of their common concerns as intellectual workers that those reformers collaborated in new cultural institutions, overcoming, for a short period, party-political divisions. The fluid political identity of the reform movement also accounted for its rapid popularization as it attracted a diverse array of supporters. Part of this larger reform movement was the *Kunstgewerbebewegung*. But by leaving the division of labour and social hierarchy intact, and hence impeding any meaningful democratization of cultural production, the applied arts movement failed to deal with the problem of the art proletariat or to function as an effective *Mittelstandspolitik*. This failure prepared the ground for its radical critique after the First World War. Thus, to a considerable extent, the development of post-war radical and proletarian-revolutionary art can be interpreted as a revolt against the Werkbund spirit. This chapter is an attempt to follow and signpost this course.

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1.1 The German Kunstgewerbebewegung and the Werkbund

The German applied arts movement (Kunstgewerbebewegung) began as an organized effort to improve German commercial products both aesthetically and technically, after the bad reviews the latter had received in the World Fairs of 1851, 1867 and 1873 compared to the industrially more advanced and appealing English and French merchandise.\(^8\) An overall reorganization of the arts and trades education and training system was deemed necessary in order to raise the quality of German products. Voices demanding this pedagogic reform multiplied in the 1860s, just a few years before the unification of Germany. I will call this the first wave of the Kunstgewerbebewegung; the second wave, I shall argue, was the movement which began around the early 1890s, culminated in the foundation of the Werkbund in 1907, and ended with the outbreak of the First World War.\(^9\) It goes without saying that the two movements were interconnected, and indeed they shared a common concern over the improvement of the quality of German commodities as well as of the Handwerker’s (craftsman/artisan’s) working performance. Both also attacked academic education on the basis of not merely aesthetic concerns (the bad quality of works by academically trained students) but also socio-economic ones, intrinsically related to the problem of the art proletariat.

Indeed, it is hard to find a cultural-applied arts reformer who did not make this connection. Delivering a speech in the Volkswirtschaftlichen Gesellschaft in Berlin with the telling title ‘Applied Arts as a Vocation’, Julius Lessing, the first director of the Kunstgewerbemuseum in Berlin, was quite explicit in this matter. He clearly saw arts and crafts production as a field which could profitably utilize those who ‘vainly struggled to accomplish the great tasks of painting and sculpture,’ adding that ‘instead of a proletariat of redundant [beschäftigunglosen] artists, one may expect a crowd of efficient, artistically trained craftsmen eager to

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\(^9\)Werner Sombart situates this change of direction in the Kunstgewerbebewegung in the mid-1890s; see Werner Sombart, Kunstgewerbe und Kultur (Berlin: Marquardt, 1908), p. 50.
But the benefits of this reform were not just socio-economic; they were also political. Lessing stressed the significance of a thorough reorganization of applied arts production aiming to preserve the ‘honour’ of the craftsmen’s work, i.e. exalting the singularity of objects executed – at least partly – by the craftsman’s ‘creative’ hand as opposed to industrial, mass-produced products. The ultimate objective was the protection of the social status of craftsmen, who, satisfied with their vocation (berufsfreudig), were expected to ‘build a protective dam against the stormy waves of Social Democracy.’

There is, however, an essential element sharply distinguishing the first and the second Kunstgewerbe movements, which, though quite clear to the reformers of the period, has not been adequately emphasized in scholarship: the key position of academically trained artists in the second wave and their clash with the traditional small master-craftsmen. The encroachment of this type of professional artist in the field of crafts production is of the utmost importance. A look at the profiles of some of the leading figures of the second Kunstgewerbebewegung, for example Bruno Paul (1874-1968), Peter Behrens (1868-1940), Richard Riemerschmid (1868-1957), Henry van de Velde (1863-1957) and Bernhard Pankok (1872-1943) is illuminating: they had all initially studied painting in an Academy (Paul in Dresden, Behrens in Karlsruhe, Riemerschmid in Munich, van de Velde in Antwerp and Pankok in Düsseldorf and Berlin) before turning to design and architecture. Coming from a different background, they introduced a new professional profile in the traditional system of the handicrafts sector; they

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11Ibid.

12It should be noted, however, that from its very beginning the applied arts reform aimed at a loosening of the old guild-like organization of the crafts – a necessary step to adjust this sector to the demands of free trade; see Mundt, *Kunstgewerbemuseum*, p. 27.

promoted the idea of a new type of designer-intellectual, theorizing crafts production, using a discourse which must have been unheard of in the artisanal world (masters and journeymen could never conceive of their work in terms of a similar cultural rhetoric); finally, the new artist-designer clearly saw that it was futile to resist the mechanization of production and sought to control the manufacture of crafts through a closer collaboration with modern industry. Therefore, it is pivotal to proceed by having in mind those qualitative differences between the two otherwise overlapping movements for the reform of applied arts.

In short, the second wave is characterized by a drastic change of pattern of vocational performance. The professional identity of the designers is constituted through a secession from and attack on the institution they left, the Academy, where they had received their education, and the institution they entered, crafts manufacture, which they saw representing a better career potential. What they particularly opposed was the centrality of the historical styles in theory (in academic curricula) and in practice (traditional crafts production).

The Academies, noted an 1858 critic, ‘offer one-sided training, unconnected with the life of the German people,’ and they ‘preserve and groom above all artistic mediocrity and through this an art proletariat, whose position is quite often more desperate than that of the factory worker.’ The anonymous author – most likely the editor of the journal, painter and politician Friedrich Baudri (1808-1874) – concluded his series of ten articles with a call for a thorough reform of artistic training based on the instruction of students in workshops under the direction of masters-specialists in their fields of practice. This turn away from academic training would ameliorate the problem of overcrowding in art schools, and set the foundation for a better regulation of each artistic vocation. The author suggested that the workshops should be allowed to undertake commissions ‘of all

14Lessing argued that ‘for the youth seeking for a vocation, nothing whatsoever appears more promising than to devote themselves to the blossoming applied art.’; Lessing, Kunstgewerbe als Beruf, p. 5.
kinds of decorative painting, designs for embroidery, weaving mills and printing houses, illustrated address books, title pages, coat of arms, signs, etc." Through this system, the artist would influence the manufacturer and gain his independence from the latter’s taste or lack of it; the ‘ingenious’ master would ‘consecrate’ everyday commodities and safeguard his social status by establishing a connection between arts and industry, abandoning his academic isolation for a new role, that of an arts and crafts master who wins his recognition and reward as a useful member of society. This criticism, exceptional for its time, foreshadows the reform spirit of the second Kunstgewerbewegung. That anti-academicism chose as its main weapon the emphasis on workshop-based training was not coincidental. For the establishment and expansion of academic programmes had succeeded only through ‘the abolition of guilds and trade-companies, and concurrently of a great deal of regulated workshop training.’ By attacking academicism, applied arts reformers sought to institute a novel type of workshop training functioning according to new rules.

To better understand how the two waves of the movement differ from each other it is useful to focus on specific important Kunstgewerbe exhibitions. The first one, the Deutsche Kunst- und Kunstindustrie-Ausstellung (German Art and Art Industry Exhibition), was organized in Munich in 1876 by the local arts and crafts association (Bayerischer Kunstgewerbeverein). John Heskett offers a vivid account of the predominance of historical styles in the exhibition.

Being the first of its kind, the exhibition had a definitive pedagogical character; consequently, historical styles were projected as models for artists and manufactures to work upon. The first initiative for the renaissance of German arts and crafts did not go much further than the Renaissance itself, which was the predominant style in the historical section of the exhibition. Generally, museum staff and academics set the tone in the first wave of the movement; the fact that the foundation of applied arts museums antedates the spread of applied arts

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17 Akademie oder Werkstätte? IX. Meister, und nicht Professoren der Kunst’, Organ für christliche Kunst, 8 (1858), 267-270 (p. 268).
associations attests to this.

The second important applied arts exhibition of a similar scale was the Deutsch-Nationale Kunstgewerbe-Ausstellung (German National Applied Arts Exhibition) which took place again in Munich in 1888 (fig. 13). Though this exhibition has been discussed in scholarship, little has been said on the tensions between fine and applied artists and their respective institutions which surfaced during its preparation. But it is precisely these tensions that merit one’s attention.

The problem for the Kunstgewerbeverein of Munich, which undertook the organization of the exhibition, was one of space. The applied arts exhibition coincided with the Third International Art Exhibition, hosted by the Artists’ Society of Munich (Künstlergenossenschaft) which had already reserved for this purpose the standard exhibition space of the city, the Glaspalast. In a report from a general meeting of the Kunstgewerbeverein’s membership, we learn that the association approached the Künstlergenossenschaft proposing to hold a joint exhibition. However, Ferdinand von Miller, honorary member of the Kunstgewerbeverein’s committee, reported that certain members of the Society did not welcome this prospect and that they were planning to pass a non-confidence vote (Mißtrauensvotum) in the Society’s committee.\(^1\)\(^2\) He assumed that this reaction was fuelled by scepticism over the artistic value of crafts work. Speaking on behalf of the Artists’ Society, painter Hans Eduard von Berlepsch, who was soon to play a leading role in the promotion of the modern applied arts movement in Munich, reassured the Kunstgewerbeverein that the Society generally sympathized with its activities and that the only issue raised concerned the terms of the cooperation between the two groups.\(^1\)\(^2\)

However, when the members of the Künstlergenossenschaft assembled to discuss those terms, they only made concessions which the Kunstgewerbeverein found unsuitable for its own interests, and so the two organizations parted ways.\(^2\)\(^3\) Despite the fact that the Kunstgewerbeverein handled the issue carefully, using a conciliatory tone in its journal, there is a sense of antagonism between the two groups, exemplified in the failure to come to an agreement over the sharing of the

\(^2\)Ibid.
\(^3\)Deutsch-nationale Kunstgewerbe-Ausstellung zu München’, Zeitschrift des Bayerischen Kunstgewerbe-Vereins zu München, 1 (1887), 21-22.
space: the *Genossenschaft* did not want to give too much and the *Verein* would not accept less than half of it. Moreover, the latter clarified from the beginning that the exhibition would only publicly appear joint as its ‘inner organism would remain separate.’

But the preparations of the exhibition revealed something equally significant: the hostility of the *Kunstgewerbeverein* towards big industry. This was clear when Ferdinand von Miller contrasted the exhibition in Munich with the Paris World’s Fair. Those who know the latter, he said, ‘will admit that our project is far more ideal [weitaus idealeres] than the exhibition of Paris, where one must be uplifted to see the products of art among the clatter of steam engines and the smell of machine oil.’ This was confirmed in the final plan for the exhibition which proclaimed that its goal was to embrace all branches of arts and crafts, stressing, however, that ‘mass-produced industrial products, likewise those of a predominantly commercial nature, may be confined to a moderate amount or perhaps altogether excluded.’ Here as well as in the meeting of the exhibition’s General Committee, the handicraft-artistic character of products was set as the primary selection criterion.

The German-National Applied Arts Exhibition, which finally opened its gates in May 1888, was to be the last great exhibition of its kind; it constituted the breaking point of the predominance of historical styles (now Baroque and Rococo superseded Renaissance), and it also represented a final, desperate attempt to resist industrial mass-production. A new generation of artists would soon embark on an endeavour to radically reform crafts on the basis of a re-evaluation of the relationship between crafts and machine production.

This radical turn took place again in Munich in the context of the Seventh International Art Exhibition (*VII. Internationale Kunst-Ausstellung*) of 1897, an exhibition organized by the Artists’ Society and the Munich Secession. A tiny section of the exhibition (which according to Leopold Gmelin amounted to less than the 1/150 of the Glaspalast), organized by a committee including architects Theodor Fischer (1862-1938) and Martin Dülfer (1859-1942), painters Richard

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25Ibid.
Riemerschmid and Hans Eduard von Berlepsch (1849-1921), and sculptor Hermann Obrist (1862-1927), was dedicated to modern-style Kleinkunst (craftwork). The members of this committee proclaimed that the aim of their special exhibit was to show that the time had come ‘for artists to attend to the matter [arts and crafts production], in their own accord and disregarding the hitherto customary, for the most part manually performed (handwerksmäßig) imitation of old styles and forms.’

The exhibition and the promotion of the committee’s ideas underscoring the leading role of artists in crafts production resulted in a severe crisis within the Bavarian Applied Arts Society. Richard Riemerschmid, a member of the editorial board of the Society’s journal (Kunst und Handwerk) sought to conform it to the new ideas of his circle, emphasizing the production of modern, mass-produced objects designed by professional artists as opposed to small-scale handcrafted production by craftsmen. To appease the angry reactions of the Society’s old guard to this change of course, Leopold Gmelin, the editor of the journal, intervened and removed Riemerschmid from the board, who, in response, soon resigned from the Bayerische Kunstgewerbeverein.

Now Riemerschmid and the people involved in the organization of the Kleinkunst section of the 1897 International Exhibition, formed a new committee for the promotion of art in craftwork (Ausschuß für Kunst im Handwerk – a name emphasizing the union of arts and crafts as opposed to the Kunstgewerbeverein’s journal title Kunst und Handwerk which suggested a distance between the two fields of practice). Their goals were a) the purchase and exemplary execution of artistic designs; b) the distribution of those designs ‘under the most possible favourable conditions’ for the artists but also under a commitment towards the

28 Quoted in a letter sent by Wilhelm Rohlf (another member of the committee) to the Royal State Minister for Internal Affairs; see Wüllenkemper, Richard Riemerschmid, pp. 66-67. For Gmelin’s review of the Kleinkunst section, see Leopold Gmelin, ‘Die Kleinkunst auf der Kunstaustellung zu München 1897’, Kunst und Handwerk, 47 (1897), 17-28 (first part), and 50-58 (second part); see also Wilhelm von Bode, ‘Künstler im Handwerk II. Die Abteilung der Kleinkunst in den Internationalen Ausstellungen zu München und Dresden 1897’, Pan 3 (1897), 112-20. Bode argued that this section was most successful in specific individual artistic pieces executed in most cases by artists working in Munich; Bode, 112-20 (p. 112). For a detailed discussion of the exhibition, see Sabine Wieber, ‘The German Interior at the End of the Nineteenth Century’, in Penny Sparke and others (eds.), Designing the Modern Interior: From the Victorians to Today (Oxford: Berg, 2009), pp. 53-64. Soon the artists involved in the Kleinkunst section of the exhibition began publicizing their own work. See, for example, Hans Eduard von Berlepsch, ‘Endlich ein Umschwung!’, Deutsche Kunst und Dekoration, 1 (1897), 1-12.

29 Wüllenkemper, Richard Riemerschmid, p. 67.
purchaser as regards the artistic value of the designs, and c) ‘the fostering of artistic energies in craft techniques’.\(^{30}\) The most active members of the committee were Richard Riemerschmid, Peter Behrens, Bruno Paul, Hermann Obrist, and Bernhard Pankok. The Committee proceeded to the foundation of a new institution for the promotion of its ideas and interests (*Münchner Vereinigung für angewandte Kunst*/Munich Association for Applied Arts, 1897), and soon afterwards of its own private business selling its members’ works (*Vereinigte Werkstätten für Kunst im Handwerk*/United Workshops for Art in Craftwork, 1898).\(^{31}\)

The goal of those new initiatives was quite clear: to promote a new type of artistic vocation, to introduce a new – more secure – career model to the modern art world. To accomplish this, the new association of artists adopted a business-like character (it was very soon registered as a public limited liability company – *Aktiengesellschaft*) which clearly distinguished it from the typical artists’ societies of the past: the main concern of the new designers was to copyright their work, attract commissions and work as closely as possible with modern craft manufactures. The closest model to this new kind of association was the *Kunstverein* of the first half of the nineteenth century, but in the latter the bourgeois shareholders and not the artists were in command. By reconsidering and expanding their own field of practice (from oil painting to designs for posters, furniture, commodities packaging and, ultimately, buildings), the artists could appeal to an expanded clientele (not just the traditional bourgeois ‘high art’ lovers). In addition, working as freelancers they could safeguard their independence – so they expected – and, based on their cultural capital, even put themselves in charge of modern arts and crafts production.

But the decisive moment for the new movement was the Third German Arts and Crafts Exhibition (Dresden, 1906). The exhibition had a clearly propagandistic character, favouring modern manufacture workshop-production of articles of trade designed by artists. It was organized so as to exclude traditional

draftsmen and manufacturers (especially those still working in the historical styles). Modern manufacturers and academically trained artists involved in the *Werkstättenbewegung* (workshop movement) which had spread across Germany following the model of the *Vereinigte* and the *Dresdener Werkstätten* (founded in 1898 by Karl Schmidt, who would play a key role in the foundation of the Werkbund) united in Dresden to measure their strength against traditional craft producers.

Traditional craft shops were usually still managed by master-craftsmen, their production was predominantly handcrafted and ‘they could not afford the artists, their rights, and their product […] they were forced to produce within an older legal paradigm in which design was not cultural and designers were not artists.’  

These draftsmen were trained in copying and modifying the historical styles, and the product of their labour was automatically a possession of their employer, ‘who was, in the eyes of the law, the author of all these products.’  

So, the 1906 Dresden exhibition was a well calculated attack on the traditional crafts sector and, indirectly, on its main interest-protection organ, the *Fachverband für die wirtschaftlichen Interessen des Kunstgewerbes* (Association for the economic interests of Arts and Crafts).  

A few months later, the organizers of the exhibition would found the Werkbund.

As I hope I have already made clear with this discussion of the major pre-Werkbund arts and crafts exhibitions, the attack on the crafts associations was led by visual artists, former members of fine arts institutions, and manufacturers who were embracing the mechanization of crafts production. In a symbolic act, the Werkbund was founded in October 1907 by twelve such manufacturers and twelve visual artists and architects. But in what terms was the – also newly founded – *Fachverband* rejected?  

Paradoxically, despite its business character, the Werkbund attacked the *Fachverband* on economic terms. More specifically, the umbrella organization of craftsmen was dismissed as a narrowly profit-interested institution which was completely indifferent or incompetent to judge the aesthetic and cultural value of crafts production. Characteristically, Karl Scheffler, a

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33Ibid.

34For a detailed analysis of the Dresden exhibition and its significance, see Maciuika, *Before the Bauhaus*, pp. 137-70.

35The *Fachverband* was created in 1902.
prominent art critic of the time, editor of Kunst und Künstler and early supporter of the Werkbund, discredited the Kunstgewerbevereine as instruments of the greedy manufacturers. ‘In these associations,’ he writes, ‘there is talk only of retail price and the retailer’s profit, never of professional ethics.’ Scheffler’s article is fully in line with the spirit of the Werkbund. For the latter supposedly gathered all progressive, economically disinterested artists, who shared the dedication to an ethical mission: the ‘ennoblement’ of craftsmanship, the control of the manufacturer’s lust for profit and the reconciliation of culture and industry. The reform of the new movement, proclaimed Scheffler, would transform draftsmen from ‘employees and subordinates’ of the manufacturer into his associates; a ‘new power [based on] common ethical activity’ would abolish the exploitation characterizing the present relations in crafts production.

The question now is whether the Werkbund designers and the traditional draftsmen of the crafts industry would be equal in the restructured crafts hierarchy. In other words, what kind of production relations did the Werkbund envision? The old crafts production system was in no respect democratic, nor did the new bloc of artists and manufacturers summoned in Dresden represent an attempt to democratize it. Indeed, one might argue that draftsmen were threatened on both sides, i.e. their old masters and the artists who aspired to replace them. If the copyright law signed by Wilhelm II in January 1907 recognized for the first time applied arts articles as works of visual arts and, in effect, ‘turned the industrialist’s hired hand into a potential artist,’ the designers and businessmen collaborating in the Vereinigte and the Dresdener Werkstätten and later in the Werkbund certainly did not welcome this potential. Craftsmen had to remain in their place.

The distinctive characteristic of the modern designer was his new professional status as a total artist, undertaking the responsibility for a number of occupations previously performed by a number of specialized craftsmen. This total artist

36 Karl Scheffler, ‘Der Fabrikant’, Dekorative Kunst, 12 (1904), 399-407 (p. 406). Political economist and socialist politician Heinrich Waentig distinguished the modern applied arts movement (represented by the Werkbund) and the old crafts world (represented by the Fachverband) on the same terms; see Heinrich Waentig, Wirtschaft und Kunst: Eine Untersuchung über Geschichte und Theorie der modernen Kunstgewerbebewegung (Jena: Gustav Fischer, 1909), pp. 284-97.
presented himself as an improved, ‘modern’ draftsman. The crucial thing is that the designer did not wish to fully supplant the draftsman; he simply wanted to undertake the creative part of the latter’s work; he claimed the intellectual copyright of the initial idea, leaving its practical materialization to the specialized draftsmen and craftsmen, his assisting personnel. In short, the designer wanted to upstage the draftsman by highlighting his status as an intellectual worker. He entered crafts as an expert in artistic and cultural matters who would educate the ignorant agents of the traditional crafts (draftsmen, craftsmen, manufacturers). In his mind, the positions in the restructured hierarchy of crafts production had been clearly divided. The academically trained designer-intellectual, a member of the educated bourgeoisie, certainly shared Werner Sombart’s view of the draftsman as

A man with undeveloped artistic disposition superficially educated, but skilled in the execution of drawings, which he would copy from pattern sheets and modify with his own horrible additions. A specialist [Routinier], in the worst sense, leaning his ear only towards the entrepreneur, lacking basic artistic conscience, concerned only about his own position therefore creeping up anxiously towards the capitalist’s intentions.39

This is a quite crude description indeed of the Zeichner and his role in crafts production. Significantly, the above passage opens Sombart’s discussion of ‘the struggle of the artist against the worst enemy of applied arts,’ namely the capitalist manufacturer.40 The distinction is clear: the artist is the active subject, the initiator of reform, while the draftsman is its passive object; all the draftsman has to do is to ‘lean his ear’ towards the artist – a simple substitution of master.

Shortly before the passing of the new copyright law, Alexander Koch’s Deutsche Kunst und Dekoration announced a design competition aimed at the legal safeguarding of the participants’ original ideas. The results were published after the approval of the new legislation, along with a discussion of the answers to the question ‘What are the means of the artist designing for the applied arts, so that he can increase the sales of his drawings and protect himself from economic

40Sombart, Kunstgewerbe und Kultur, p. 53.
losses? The article welcomed the new legislation but also advised that the best copyright protection was the wide publication and circulation of designs; inevitably this entailed a high risk, but publicity was the only way to proceed. The general advice was that the ‘designing artist’ (entwerfende Künstler) should stop ‘feeling as if he is a draftsman’ for even a craftsman and a small manufacturer who can draw had advantage over a ‘mere draftsman’. But how could the ‘designing artist’ distinguish himself from the ‘mere draftsman’? The answer was simple: he ought to see the design of a product and its execution as a unified process; therefore, he had to be in closer contact with and understand the practicalities and demands of modern industrial production. An alternative title for the competition could have been: ‘How to succeed in modern crafts-business’. The designer did not outstrip draftsmen only in terms of artistic performance; he was also better in promoting his products. He was a better businessman.

In sum, the point is that the designer sought a leading position in the field of crafts production by excluding the traditional draftsman from the privileges associated with its social status. Speaking at the Dresden exhibition, one of the organizers, national liberal politician and Werkbund founding member Friedrich Naumann, defined the difference between the Gestalter (designer) and the Zeichner ( draftsman) in the following way:

Artists are freelancers in the field of design. They are not only associated to joinery, like the old craftsmen; instead, they embrace the entire spectrum of those arts that embellish everyday life […] The architect, the joiner, the decorator, the easel and decorative painter coalesce, and a new type of artist emerges blending all these elements. Thereby the ground will be clear for the emergence of stronger, creative individuality.

Clearly, the new artist-designer, the Gestalter, emerged as a total artist (a Gesamtkünstler), an expert in a broad, ever-expanding gamut of media. Consequently, he was the most appropriate person to accomplish the total work of

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42] Ibid., p. 457.  
43] Ibid., p. 466.  
art and to thoroughly regenerate modern culture.

Notably, this ‘total’ artist entered a field where the division of labour had multiplied the number of specialists. This was the situation especially in the profession of the draftsman, one of the most precarious in crafts production, precisely due to overspecialization. According to a 1907 survey conducted by the Deutscher Zeichnerverband (German Association of Draftsmen), there were at least twenty-eight different sectors in the profession (furniture designer, pattern designer for fabrics, wallpaper designer, etc.). As a contemporary commentator observed, this fragmentation gravely hindered the organizational effectiveness of the profession. Although draftsmen had a central organization (the Deutsche Zeichnerverband), their interests were so diverse that a collective campaign for the protection of their financial interests and the social status of the vocation as a whole was almost impossible. Despite their rapid transformation into wage labourers, draftsmen resisted their designation as workers, preferring to be called salaried employees (Privatbeamte, an older term for Angestellte). Evidently, they struggled to maintain their waning social status.

To summarize, the new artist-designer supported a reform of crafts that would redistribute roles to his advantage; he envisioned a leading role, that of the supervisor of production next to the manufacturer, the owner of the means of

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45 Hugo Hillig, ‘Der Kunstgewerbliche Arbeiter: III. Der Zeichnerberuf’, Kunstgewerbeblatt, 21 (1910), 93-97 (p. 93). Hugo Hillig’s series of articles on ‘The Applied Arts Worker’ constitutes one of the first systematic attempts to examine arts and crafts from the point of view of its producer. For this reason, it is worth summarizing the author’s general observations as exposed in the first, introductory part of his articles. His starting point is that by taking up not just specific crafts occupations but entire vocational categories, industrialization was increasingly turning applied arts assistants (Kunstgewerbe-Gehilfe) into workers. But intellectual workers (geistige Arbeiter) shared the same fate, Hillig noted, and in this unprecedented social fluidity they struggled to understand their position in a changed social stratification. ‘Artists working in crafts,’ Hillig argued, were responding belatedly to the situation compared to other groups of free professionals (such as technicians, doctors or actors). Notably, he considered the 1906 Dresden Exhibition the catalytic event for the distribution of roles in the applied arts professions. Hillig concluded that ‘the arts and crafts prosperity of the last years has not at all reached the workers; the social position of the carpenter, turner, wood-carver, printer, the worker in the graphic arts and the draftsman remained unaffected by this general prosperity; in most cases they cannot afford the commodities they themselves produce – a fact of the deepest social-psychological importance’; Hugo Hillig, ‘Der kunstgewerbliche Arbeiter I’, Kunstgewerbeblatt, 20 (1909), 163-65 (p. 165).

46 Hillig, ‘Der Zeichnerberuf’, p. 93.

47 Ibid., p. 94. It seems that this distinction was also adopted by the Social Democratic Party. For instance, in the 1906 Party Conference in Mannheim, Heinrich Schulz described the engineers, draftsmen, modelers, masters and foremen working in large concerns as ‘workers, who are actually no longer workers’; see Protokoll über die Verhandlungen des Parteitages der Sozialdemokratischen Partei Deutschlands abgehalten zu Mannheim vom 23. bis 29. September 1906 (Berlin: Vorwärts, 1906), p. 333.
production; crafts- and draftsmen were to occupy the lowest position in this hierarchy as auxiliary personnel. Jacques Rancière’s observation about the 1867 World Fair in Paris can be properly applied in the context of our own discussion. The French philosopher notes that the Paris Universal Exhibition offered ‘a spectacle of dispossession: the machines, capital’s new avatar, belonged to the employers; by intensifying the division of labour, mechanisation of production was eliminating the need for skills, and workers were becoming increasingly deprived of the practical means of exercising their right of access to the product of their own labour.’\textsuperscript{48} Similarly, the Dresden 1906 exhibition was a manifestation of the alliance between the new artist-designer and the big capital that owned the machines.\textsuperscript{49} It signified the modern artist’s attempt to exploit the career potentials opened through the clash of craftsmanship with industrialization.

It is evident that, in the field of artistic production, the antagonism between modern industrial and traditional handcrafted production was translated into a battle between the artist-designer, the draftsman and craftsman over skills. To quote Rancière again: ‘the skills provided by apprenticeships raised a trade to the level of an art and constituted the main asset of the working class. The first effect of mechanisation was to demolish this working-class patrimony by overturning the structures of the work process.’\textsuperscript{50} As I will discuss below, the insistence of artist-designers on quality work reveals precisely this tension over skills. The work of traditional draftsmen was disqualified in a twofold manner: aesthetically and economically. On the one hand, as a pure imitation of past historical styles, it was considered non-artistic, non-creative; on the other, handcrafted skill was declared irrelevant in a rapidly mechanized production process whose inevitability was constantly stressed. At the same time, however, this same process of technological advancement required a new kind of administration based on intellectual, creative skill. Hence, the disqualification of manual skill signified, at the same time, an overvaluation of intellectual skill, and it is in this way that designers attempted to secure a new artistic status, i.e. by depriving craftsmen of their skills and appropriating them for themselves.

\textsuperscript{49}Schwartz, \textit{Werkbund}, p. 115.
\textsuperscript{50}Rancière and Vauday, ‘Going to the Expo’, p. 25.
1.2 The crisis of intellectual labour and the re-distribution of skills

But the motives for this change of pattern of artistic labour, this transformation of the academically trained painter into a new type of intellectual worker, remain unclear. For it would be wrong to claim that this transformation was merely economically motivated. As I would like to argue, it was also a response to a quite specific cultural problem: the crisis of intellectual labour and the free professions in a capitalist economy. To explore the responses of intellectuals to this crisis, I find especially useful a short chronological deviation.

In his remarkable, yet undeservedly neglected, study of the sociological foundations of Marxism, Alvin W. Gouldner dedicates a lengthy chapter to the role of artisans and intellectuals in the revolution of 1848. Gouldner points to the fact that artisans and students of the Humanities were among the social groups most affected by industrialization and capitalist economy. But he is not interested plainly on the shared interests of the two groups and their convergence in radical politics. What has been most inspiring for the purposes of the present study is his examination of the tensions emerging in the relations of radical intellectuals with craftsmen. Gouldner’s concern is to show how the hostility of organized craftsmen towards intellectuals fuelled Marx’s renouncement of the artisanal guild socialism and shaped his new revolutionary theory, whose historical agent was the proletariat as a universal class. Our story of the second wave of the applied arts movement follows the same pattern, but with different protagonists. For similarly to the radical socialist intellectuals and workers, the applied arts reformers seceded from the traditional corporatist institutions of craftsmen to work on novel forms of organization, which would respond more effectively to the demands of industrial capitalism. In this respect, Gouldner’s study merits particular attention.

As is generally acknowledged by historians of the period, artisans and intellectuals played a leading role in the revolution of 1848. This phenomenon

may have many different causes, but there is a factor that played a major role in
the participation of both sides in the revolutionary events of the spring and
summer of 1848. As Gouldner points out: ‘Just as the disaffection of artisans had
been partly fostered by their oversupply relative to market opportunities, a similar
excess of educated manpower had also occurred at the time.’ This is particularly
relevant to my discussion here, since the excess of intellectual workers was a
central issue for discussion in the meetings and conferences of artists and
draftsmen throughout the century and was always in the foreground of their
associations’ programmes. The cry against the overcrowding in these professions
was directly, and often explicitly, associated with an anxiety over the prospect of
proletarianization – a prospect causing unease not only for financial, but equally
(as we saw above in the case of draftsmen) for reasons of social status.

But the two social groups were also linked from another, essential point of
view:

Artisans and intellectuals alike had conceptions of themselves as possessing
skills that required long and specialized training. Their skills were a center
of their selfhood on which they based claims to personal worthiness and
community honor. Artisans and educated elites were alike, too, in their
membership in ancient and honorable institutions that monitored their work
and protected their careers – the guilds and universities. Both these pre-
modern institutions upheld traditions that did not endorse a merely
competitive egoism or possessive individualism but encouraged a measure
of responsibility to the larger community and a concern for the latter’s
needs. By reason of their collectivity-responsive and their skill
commitments, both artisans and intellectuals made claims to independence
in the conduct of their work and in the management of their corporate
groups and these expectations, when violated, would further alienate both
groups.54

However, their relationship was far from being harmonious: ‘often enough […]
artisans saw the educated as class enemies and as hired ideologues for the free
trade movement that, together with the factory system, was ruining them.’55
Gouldner discusses at length the preponderance of artisans in the working-class
movement around 1848, the exclusionary politics of artisanal organizations, and

53Gouldner, Against Fragmentation, p. 106.
54Ibid., p. 112.
55Ibid., p. 111.
how Marx’s encounter with them shaped scientific Marxism.

But not all artisans and intellectuals were radicalized before and during the 1848 events. In each social group there were two sub-groups particularly affected by the expansion of the free market and industrial production: the journeymen and the scholars and students in the Humanities. Shulamit Volkov has shown how the gap between masters and journeymen widened precisely around this period, as the politically heated atmosphere increased the tension in their relationship and led the journeymen to openly confront their masters.\textsuperscript{56} Volkov makes two important observations. First, with ever growing segments of the German population facing the prospect of proletarianization, the distinction between those within and those outside ‘respectable society’ acquired greater significance, with the small master artisans themselves being among those emphatically stressing this distinction. Second, both liberals and the Prussian bureaucracy wished to use the small masters as a ‘bulwark against workers’ organizations and their radical demands,’ and to this end ‘state legislation since the reform era had worked towards obliterating the barriers between guild and non-guild masters, while increasingly binding handicraft journeymen and factory workers together, in opposition to their employers.’\textsuperscript{57}

On the other side, not all intellectuals were equally affected by the ‘overproduction of educated manpower’. Those hit worst were educated in the humanities, while occupations directly associated with the industrial private sector and the expanding state bureaucracies, namely technological and scientific occupations, were hardly affected.\textsuperscript{58} As Gouldner concludes, ‘Humanistic intellectuals continued to be alienated […] for much the same reasons that artisans in the first half of the nineteenth century were, for the intellectuals were in part artisans protecting their elite positions from threatening encroachments. Intellectuals, especially humanistic intellectuals and academicians, are the last of the artisans.’\textsuperscript{59}

It is from this point of view that the shift of career paths, from the ‘high’

\textsuperscript{58}Gouldner, \textit{Against Fragmentation}, pp. 108-109.
\textsuperscript{59}Ibid., p. 113.
academic to the ‘everyday’ applied arts makes more sense. We can now better understand not only why, but also in which terms, academically trained painters like Behrens, Paul and Riemerschmid chose to make this turn. A principal reason was the chronic overcrowding in the field of the fine arts. This is underlined in a great number of contemporary publications. Sombart, for example clearly states that the decisive factor turning the new artists-designers to crafts was precisely the mass production of paintings and sculpture and the concomitant decrease of their value.\(^6^0\)

I shall argue, however, that those painters and sculptors did not enter this new field merely as artists. They entered first as intellectuals – an identity differentiating them from both the masters and the journeymen/draftsmen. They were distinct via their cultural capital and social background. Most specifically, their cultural capital was pivotal for their self-presentation as social reformers, and it was only through this new complex identity of the artist-intellectual-social reformer that they could break the exclusionary organization of the traditional crafts system and secure a new professional position as outsiders. The legitimation of their role in the field of arts and crafts necessitated a new theory of art – a modern theory favouring technological progress and industrial form but conserving traditional cultural values (the artist as genius, holding an independent position as producer but also being socially responsible through his practice).

Fine arts were part of the educational tradition of the humanities, and, as we saw, this was the intellectual field most affected in a rapidly changing economy and labour market from the second half of the nineteenth century onwards. The situation raised a vital question: what can an artist do to avoid his or her degradation to the status of a wage labourer? The first step would be to adapt artistic work to the tempo and necessities of modern life. This necessitated a thorough reconfiguration of the function of artistic form: the form was studied anew in order to be applied in all possible fields of modern life. Design not only opens an expanded field of practice for the modern artist, it also refreshes the profile of the artist as genius as opposed to the ‘outdated’ practice of easel painting.

Caroline Jones has discussed this moment of transition from the studio to the workshop. Particularly interesting is her observation on the way ‘paint

\(^6^0\)Sombart, *Kunstgewerbe und Kultur*, p. 51.
participated in the topos of the studio and helped establish its distinction from the workshop: ‘[The ideology of the spontaneous brushstroke] is the style of the gifted individual who might rise above the anxious need for a certifying artisanal professionalism, beyond the dogged labor required to ‘finish’ the piece.’ It can be argued, then, that the reversal of artistic course by the artist-designer (from the studio to the workshop), which occurred around the turn of the century in a period of advanced industrialization, signified a reconsideration of the value of the ‘finished’ work. Paint, which was synonymous with the work of the isolated (academic) artist working in his studio, was now abandoned for design, capable to reconnect artistic practice with social life. Moreover, designs were produced in workshops and were projected as the result of a scientific study of form where nothing could be left to chance as opposed to the painter’s ‘spontaneous brushstroke’ or his ‘futile’ academic ‘fini’. But scientific form requires contemplation and study; it requires a new kind of expert, an artist-engineer who will deliver his concept first to the draftsman to execute it and then to the worker for its final transformation into a commodity. Thus the new designers sided with technology and science, the last seemingly safe resort of the intellectual worker in modernity. Their self-representation as experts, as bearers of a scientific knowledge, which would sweep away and replace the old historical styles with a modern functional design, updated the traditional notion of the artist as genius. Repressing the manual aspect of artistic labour and at the same time accentuating its direct practical applications to the social life, the practice of the designer represented a new model of intellectual labour promising a more secure professional and social status in a capitalist economy.

This is not something I have read between the lines. In fact, the central position of those concerns is quite clear in texts of the period, such as Sombart’s Kunstgewerbe und Kultur to which I will now return. The political economist and sociologist, then a Marxist revisionist and advocate of social and art reform (he would also be a Werkbund member for a short period), provides an insider’s look at the ideas and structure of the Vereinigte Werkstätten. This invaluable insight deserves our full attention.

Sombart clearly discerned the ambition of the designer to become a new kind of master. However, the modern artists were not willing to ‘work in their workshops like the great masters of previous centuries,’ as this would radically challenge their status as intellectuals: ‘the value of intellectual, ‘leading’ (führende) work has been increased to such extent that a manual occupation will by no means recognized as equal.’ Intellectual workers, he continued, had developed such a strong consciousness of their social status (Standesbewußtsein) that it made difficult their engagement in ‘mechanic-executive’ work; they saw the nature of their work as purely ‘intellectual-creative,’ contrary to that of the old masters. Similarly to Friedrich Naumann, Sombart also describes this new type of master as a Gesamtkünstler—an artist claiming a drastically expanded sphere of intellectual activity: ‘the artist of today would feel confined, if he had to work within the narrow bounds of a single craft business. He wants to have a wider sphere of activity for his ideas.’ In addition, on the basis of the intellectual quality of his work, he claims a higher wage than that paid to a skilled craftsman.

But, Sombart asked, how could the modern artist-craftsman control all the economic and organizational functions of craftsmanship without being a master in the traditional sense? This goal could only be attained through cooperation with big industries which were equipped with all modern means of production. The danger here, he noted, was that in such an environment artistic individuality might be at risk, but nevertheless the young generation of applied artists was already moving towards this direction.

The Vereinigte Werkstätten was a typical example of this tendency. Sombart’s description of its organization is crucial to understand the relationship between the artist-designer and the draftsman-executor. The leading position of the artist in this new type of business is first of all manifested in the fact that his working space, the design offices, are situated in the headquarters of the business, i.e. its administrative centre—a quite symbolic sharing of space. Like the business manager, the artist conceives a plan (in this case a sketch) and commands its

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62 Sombart, Kunstgewerbe und Kultur, pp. 96-97.
63 Ibid., p. 98.
64 Though they did not use this term, I find that it fittingly summarizes the concept of this new type of professional artist.
65 Sombart, Kunstgewerbe und Kultur, p. 98.
66 Ibid., pp. 98-100.
67 Ibid., pp. 104-106.
execution. The process goes as follows:

The sketch will be now executed by experienced draftsmen (Zeichnern) and it will be finished in the appropriate scale, ready to be used as work pattern. If possible, each draftsman is specialized to [serve the needs of] a different artist. So, there are draftsmen-specialists working for Pankok, Obrist and so on, who are immersed in the artists’ intentions, knowing exactly how to interpret each scroll, each shading of the original sketch, and who themselves stay in constant personal contact with the artist during the transfer of the sketch into the larger pattern. Then the artist decides on the material: the colour of the wood, the threads, etc. 68

The designer, the creator of a sketch, fully depends on the work of the draftsman, yet by way of his signature, the copyright of his intellectual labour, he claims and acquires the authorship of the product’s form. This is a central paradox of the Kunstgewerbebewegung: it attempted to re-connect art with social life, questioning the autonomy of art as a system of production, but, at the same time, it sought to safeguard the autonomy of the artist as a genius/intellectual producer. For a contemporary socialist critic contesting the legitimacy of the term ‘intellectual property’, the problem in Sombart’s logic was that ‘a work can be an artwork, can be the expression of an artist’s individual creation, even though it is not the work of the artist! Printed poetry conveys an artwork to us, though it constitutes the result of a production process where inartistic producers are involved.’ 69

And if the author perhaps inadvertently accepts a qualitative difference between the artistic work of a poet and the inartistic nature of his printers’ labour, the situation gets more perplexed in the ambiguous distinction between a designer and a draftsman where the object and means of labour are common.

So, the designer and his supporter (in this case Sombart) need to widen their distance from draftsmen by any means. A way to do so is by separating the process of the materialization of the final design from the domain of artistic work. Sombart describes this process as ‘a slavish transfer of the pattern into matter,’

68 Sombart, Kunstgewerbe und Kultur, p. 108.
where any further addition must by all means be avoided. The execution of this minute work is assigned to highly specialized ‘quality workers,’ each of them trained to answer the needs of a specific artist or performance – for instance, a wood inlay specialist for Pankok.70

This model of crafts production must also be the basis of the reform of technical and artistic education. The task of the reformed Trade and Applied Arts Schools is to provide skilled workers for the industrial production of commodities designed by artists. Sombart described these schools as ‘research institutes’ (Versuchsanstalten), the ‘nurseries of artistic ideas,’ the spaces for the execution and testing of the artist’s designs. These, he concluded, were the leading ideas of the people who founded the Vereinigte Werkstätten.71

So far, the distinction has been made in the following terms: the designer is not a specialist in a restricted field of practice but a ‘total’ artist; moreover, he undertakes only the intellectual conception of crafts work, he is not implicated in the ‘slavish’ process of the materialization of his designs. This distinction becomes even more explicit when the discussion turns to the modern applied artist’s means of production. Sombart writes: ‘As the Renaissance artist used wood plane, stylus (Griffel) or hammer as means for the realization of his ideas, so the modern artist has in his disposal an elaborate system of specialized workers.’72 A crude but explicit statement: the means of the designer’s work is an animated, humanized material. The designer works on the craftsman. He also works on the art proletarian, the redundant student of the overcrowded art schools, who has to be directed to the reformed technical and trade schools.

Now this reform programme was very dubious not only due to the artists’ overambitious desire to control the market; the pro-industrial, pro-machine rhetoric of its advocates cannot conceal its traditionalist substance. It is a programme which seeks to preserve an old-style division of labour, privileging the value of skill at the expense of unskilled labour. In this way, mechanized

71Sombart, Kunstgewerbe und Kultur, p. 110.
72Ibid., p. 111.
production is stripped of a basic, potentially radical element: deskilling of labour and abolition of what Marx describes as ‘artificially produced distinctions between the specialized workers.’

This emphasis on skilled, ‘quality’ labour, on the artist’s control of the commodity form was also incompatible with the course of industrial capitalist production (mechanization and deskilling), since the creation and execution of artistic designs was both capital- and time-consuming. This meant that the expected union of art with industry on the artist’s own terms was hardly attainable. Thus, the supposed distance between the designer and his assistant is shortened, since every failure of the former to establish a firm relation with industry will move him back into a field of practice considerably limited in relation to his initial expectations: the graphic arts. In this way, the ‘total’ artist becomes another specialist and not a cultural expert.

Nevertheless, the designer would experience more painfully this lapse in the Weimar years. For the moment, we will remain in this period of optimism about the potential of the new profession.

To summarize: the success of the new artistic profession depended on a general crafts reform which sought to implement a modern system of organization that was, nevertheless, based on an hierarchy stricter than the previous one, since the artist asserted unprecedented authority over craftsmanship. What was at stake here can be described in the words of Marx: ‘Although […] from a technical point of view, the old system of division of labour is thrown overboard by machinery, it hangs on in the factory, as a tradition handed down from manufacture, and is then systematically reproduced and fixed in a more hideous form by capital, as a means of exploiting labour-power.’

The designer-total artist, asserting the role of the manufacturer’s associate and distinguishing himself from the ‘mere draftsman’ wants to fix precisely this division of labour on the basis of his intellectual superiority. He sides with the capital to secure his status as a new kind of expert. What kind of master is he? A master:

74‘If in a porcelain manufacture,’ notes J. German, ‘every single figurine is to be modelled after an artist’s sketch, this would impede the complete automatization of the production process’; German, ‘Politische Ökonomie von Wissenschaft und Kunst’, p. 277.
75Marx, Capital I p. 547.
in whose mind the machinery and his monopoly of it are inseparably united [who] contemptuously tells his ‘hands,’ whenever he comes into conflict with them: ‘The factory operatives should keep in wholesome remembrance the fact that theirs is really a low species of skilled labour; and that there is none which is more easily acquired, or of its quality more amply remunerated, or which by a short training of the least expert can be more quickly, as well as abundantly, acquired.’

The designer is self-interpreted as indispensable; the mass of draftsmen are expendable.

1.3 Discourse as a way of restructuring crafts hierarchy

A radical reconfiguration of the notion of artistic labour necessitated the establishment of a new terminology since, as we saw above, the modern designer actually claimed fields of practice that significantly overlapped with certain branches of craftsmanship. This could be done in two ways: either by introducing new terms advocating the leading role of the artist-designer in arts and crafts production, or by imbuing old terms with new connotations. A first crucial distinction was that between Handwerk and Kunsthandwerk. Stefan Muthesius notes:

Handwerk can be seen in opposition to the products of ‘industry’, i.e. it is perceived to possess values which are different from, and better than those of industry […] like crafts, Handwerk can, furthermore, be understood in opposition to design, although, because of the vagueness of the term design, the juxtaposition of Handwerk with Design is often nebulous, too […] On a basic level, Handwerk can also be opposed to Kunst.

In Germany of the 1890s, namely in a period of advanced industrialization, Handwerk (and in extension craftsmen as professionals) was an easy target for the

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76Marx, *Capital I*, p. 549.
cultural reformers of the Werkbund. Through its opposition to industry, Handwerk could be easily denigrated as anti-modern and obsolete and its proponents denounced as reactionaries; in addition, it could be labelled inartistic. Thus, modern artists distinguished their own practice – design – from that of the craftsmen on the basis of artistic merit.

The reformers of the Werkbund circle saw only two possibilities for Handwerk: to reform (naturally in their own way) or to vanish. The adaptability of crafts producers in industrial production would be tested by a new expert, the Werkbund reformer himself. Karl Gross, artist, art pedagogue and Werkbund member, for example, argued for a rational division of craftsmen according to their talent. The technically skilled could work in industry, those with a talent in business could administrate crafts manufactures, and the artistically inclined could work in the art trades; for the untalented there was no future. Of course, talent was defined, determined and assessed by the Werkbund expert.

A newly formed broad network consisting of art critics, manufacturers and their press popularized the self-image of the Werkbund designer and reformer as a new type of crafts expert. This network provided free advertising and attracted wealthy patrons. Stefan Muthesius correctly traces in it the origins of the Werkbund, which from this point of view was nothing more than an attempt to organize all disparate local initiatives under an umbrella organization of a national character.

Ambiguity in discourse and exclusionary policies were the central characteristics of this network. Marcel Franciscoo observes that

the modern movement in Germany had increasingly tended to blur the older, nineteenth-century formal distinctions between the work and product of the hand and that of the machine, and to recognize no essential difference

79Volkov notes that not all artisans were hit by industrialization in fin de siècle Germany. Nevertheless, the sectors affected the most were those associated with artistic work such as textile industries, printing and pottery. Many of them sought to adapt to the new situation dividing production between small handicraft shops and large factories, with the master craftsmen undertaking the elaboration of quality products; Volkov, Rise of Popular Antimodernism, p. 55. It was precisely this role that was claimed by the Werkbund designers.  
80Muthesius, ‘Handwerk/Kunsthandwerk’, p. 88; Muthesius characterizes the art journals of this network as ‘the platform of a heightened art world in which the artist was the designated chief agent’, ibid. See also, Stefan Muthesius, ‘Communications between Traders, Users and Artists: the Growth of German Language Serial Publications on Domestic Interior Decoration in the Later Nineteenth Century’, Journal of Design History, 18 (2005), 7-20.
between the training required for each. This occurred in two ways: technically, by coming to look upon *Handwerk* [...] as above all a matter of *Gestaltung*, of formal conception, in respect to which the distinctive values imparted by the touch of the craftsman’s hand in execution were of secondary consequence; formally, by including machine-inspired form within the canon of art and by applying a standard of *Sachlichkeit*, that is, of sober, minimally ornamented design – itself partly inspired by the machine – to purely handicraft objects as well.81

The employment of such terms as *Gestaltung* and *Sachlichkeit*, which would have been hardly understood by an artisan, is indicative of something more: it adds an extra quality to the new type of artist – intellectual excellence.82 The Werkbund *Gestalter* was modern because he could *understand* the importance of industrial progress and the political economy of the time. Moreover, he could *discern* the immanent qualities of form which remained secret for the insufficiently trained *Zeichner*. This ability to ‘discern’ the hidden qualities of artistic form was monopolized by the Werkbund artist-reformers, who insisted in their writings and speeches that it was a natural gift – it could not be transmitted through education.83 Only on the basis of this ‘knowledge’ (a purely intellectual quality), these artists could undertake the role of the reformer-educator of craftsmen; and indeed, the most eminent among them were soon appointed directors of Applied Arts Schools, not coincidentally in the most prestigious cultural centres of the country: Peter Behrens in Dusseldorf (1903), Hans Poelzig in Breslau (1903), Henry van de Velde in Weimar (1905), Bruno Paul in Berlin (1906), Richard Riemerschmid in Munich (1913), and, of course, after the war, Walter Gropius again in Weimar. Central aspects of the curricula of the reformed crafts schools were the artistic education of the charismatic student (and the number of this type

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82 Poor education was one of the main factors which sharply curtailed the chances of the artisans for upward mobility in the social hierarchy in late nineteenth-century Germany; see Volkov, *Rise of Popular Antimodernism*, pp. 25, 58.
83 See Franciscono, *Walter Gropius*, pp. 130-31. Walter Gropius was explicit on this point: ‘the artist has been misled by the fatal and arrogant fallacy, fostered by the state, that art is a profession which can be mastered by study. Schooling alone can never produce art! Whether the finished product is an exercise in ingenuity or a work of art depends on the talent of the individual who creates it. This quality cannot be taught and cannot be learned. On the other hand, manual dexterity and the thorough knowledge which is a necessary foundation for all creative effort, whether the workman’s or the artist’s, can be taught and learned’; Walter Gropius, ‘The Theory and Organization of the Bauhaus (1923)’, in Herbert Bayer, Walter Gropius, and Ise Gropius (eds.), *Bauhaus 1919-1928* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1938), 20-29 (p. 21).
would by definition remain limited) and the technical-practical training of the average one.

But as I have already mentioned, the Werkbund members did not just introduce new terms to distinguish themselves from artisans; they also endowed old terms with new, subtle and equivocal meanings. ‘Quality’ falls in this category. Quality work and workshop training were interwoven and permeated with a strikingly elitist and paternalistic tone.\(^84\) Joseph August Lux’s approach to the matter was typical: the masses always lack quality; only the ‘cultivated’, the ‘developed’ personality can decide about quality and cultural matters in general. In times of ‘true’ culture which cannot be separated from quality, the spirit dominates over the masses.\(^85\) Sadly, Lux remarked, in the present period the situation was reversed: the masses ruled. For Lux, this reversion was unethical. By stressing the material aspect of work, the unions of the modern working-class movement had perverted its ethical value. Work, Lux insisted, could cultivate people and transmit high moral values – indeed, for him, but also for the majority of social and cultural reformers, work was culture.\(^86\) Quality work, then, was a pivotal notion not only for the Werkbund, but for the bourgeois Lebensreform movement at large.

We need, however, a more concrete example showing the tensions produced around the notion of ‘quality work’. The crucial question for designers was of course who decides about, or better, who sets the standards for quality. This caused antagonism between the Werkbund Gestalter and the traditional Zeichner of the arts and crafts production.\(^87\) The latter had founded in 1908 a union for the protection of their professional interests, the Verband der Kunstgewerbezeichner.


\(^85\) Joseph August Lux, ‘Das Qualitätsproblem in der neuen Zeit’, *Innendekoration*, 30 (1919), 289 (emphasis in original). The Austrian cultural critic was one of the most active propagandists of the applied arts movement and an early Werkbund supporter.

\(^86\) Lux, ‘Das Qualitätsproblem’, p. 289.

\(^87\) John Heskett quotes Oskar Mothes’s 1876 report on the Royal Saxon Applied Arts School of Dresden according to which there was a distinction between the education of dessinateure and Zeichner; Mothes ‘supposed the former was a designer (Entwurfer) and the latter a mere copyist’; Heskett, *German Design*, p. 17.
(VdK, Association of Applied Arts Designers), which published its own organ, Der Kunstgewerbezeichner. This organization was the result of the fusion of two pre-existing interest groups, the Verband deutscher Musterzeichner (1892) and the stronger and more radical Deutscher Zeichnerverband (1896), and by 1913 it already numbered approximately 2,500 members. The organization had also joined the Arbeitsgemeinschaft der gewerkschaftlichen Angestellten-Verbände (Working Group of Unionized Salaried-Employee Associations) which unsuccessfully struggled for the establishment of a unified employment code for salaried employees. In a manner typical for all artists’ unions of the era, the VdK repeatedly complained of the ‘overcrowding’ of the Zeichner’s profession. They asked the government to constrain the number of the private art schools which filled the profession with insufficiently and badly trained draughtsmen. In effect, the VdK proclaimed itself the legitimate guarantor of quality work in industrial design.

In January 1913, the organization set as its principal task the training of draftsmen for high quality work. It announced the promotion of this goal through the inauguration of a special section in its newspaper aimed at ‘fighting through advice and clarification excessively spread trash production.’ As the socialist cultural critic Lu Märten pointed out in her study on the economic position of the visual artists, such ‘corporative solidarity measures by the artists over the quality value of artistic work and also over the quality and protection of their labour’ were means for controlling the market.

This attempt to control the market is evident in VdK’s proposals for the reform of the Applied Arts Schools, which of course paid particular attention to the

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88 For the history of the organization, see ‘Fünf Jahre V.d.K.’, Der Kunstgewerbezeichner, 6 (1 July 1913), 149-52.
90 ‘Die Überfüllung des Zeichnerberufes’, Der Kunstgewerbezeichner, 6 (1 July 1913), 154-55. Complaints about ‘Überfüllung’ were repeatedly expressed from all artists’ unions. After the First World War, the union of the professional graphic designers, the Bund Deutscher Gebrauchsgraphiker, would go as far as demanding the prevention of the foundation of new art schools and above all of the creation of any new graphic arts courses. The organization explained that graphic arts courses had ‘a right of existence’ only in places with a highly developed print industry; see Walter Riemer, ‘Vom siebenten Bundestag des B.D.G.’, Gebrauchsgraphik, 5 (July 1928), 73-79 (p. 77).
92 Lu Märten, Die wirtschaftliche Lage der Künstler (München: Georg Müller, 1914), p. 29. For Märten, quality work was part of the struggle to preserve the ‘esteem for artistic work,’ which was in steady decline, ibid., p. 61.
protection of draftsmen’s interests. Its three main points were a) the improvement of technical and artistic training (in consideration of industry’s needs); b) the restriction of admissions in drawing classes; and c) the strict supervision of private schools. The organization evidently struggled to adapt to the new demands of industrial production, and its conception of the ‘task and objective of the modern applied school’ overlapped with that of the Werkbund’s (the improvement of industrial and commercial production through the training of qualified workers). These tasks were to be achieved ‘through the closest adjustment to modern economic development,’ and an ‘interaction between school and working practice’; an education based on a combination of teaching and workshop practice was decisive in this respect.93

The seemingly amicable relations between the VdK and the Werkbund are also confirmed by the former’s decision to organize its third annual meeting in the summer of 1914 in Cologne, in the context of the latter’s first exhibition. Following Werkbund’s suggestion, the main theme of discussion was the cooperation between the two organizations. The Werkbund was represented by a reformist Social Democrat, Robert Breuer, who delivered a speech titled ‘Quality work as a social progress’. Breuer described the role of the Kunstgewerbezeichner as that of a Qualitätshelfer (quality assistant) and assured his audience that the improvement of the draftsman’s position both financially and culturally and the ‘realization of the Werkbund’s ideas’ were inextricably connected.94

Again the roles are strictly divided: draftsmen are just assistants, executors of the will of the Werkbund’s designer. Breuer rushed to remove any doubts about it: people needs a Führer, he said, but the leader also needs his assistants. Quality work, he added, is a social factor; the ‘creative work’, the inventiveness of the individual artist as it had been demonstrated in the exhibitions of 1901 and 1906 in Darmstadt and Dresden respectively, needed to be properly understood by the mass of draftsmen-assistants. Under the artist-designer’s guidance, the latter would contribute to the transformation of the style of the individual into the product of a whole nation.95 Of course, the individual artist would always remain a creative authority (schöpferische Macht), but through the work of the assistant

95Ibid.
his achievements would become common property (*Allgemeingut*).

The way the *Kunstgewerbeblatt* covered the VdK’s meeting was quite peculiar; the draftsman-assistant’s response to the call of the Führer/Werkbund is entirely omitted; after all, the journal was a staunch supporter of the Werkbund, with its editor, Fritz Hellwag, being an active member of the organization.

Were the relations of the two institutions as harmonious as it appears at first sight? Was there any tension produced by the division between leading, prominent designers and anonymous, assisting draftsmen? One has to consult VdK’s own organ to investigate any signs of discontent. And indeed there is information confirming such suspicions. For apart from its annual meeting, the draftsmen association intended to hold its own collective exhibition in Cologne, a plan that was shattered because the Werkbund organizers, who as a rule exhibited ‘completed works’, allowed VdK members to show only ‘drawings’. As a result, the latter decided to withdraw their exhibition plan. For the Werkbund artists, the draftsmen could only properly sketch, they could not create complete artistic works, and on this basis their position was clearly subordinate.

Marx’s analysis of the division of labour in manufacture can be used to illuminate the Cologne incident:

> What [...] characterizes the division of labour in manufacture? The fact that the specialized worker produces no commodities. It is only the common product of all the specialized workers that becomes a commodity. The division of labour within society is mediated through the purchase and sale of the products of different branches of industry, while the connection between the various partial operations in a workshop is mediated through the sale of the labour-power of several workers to one capitalist, who applies it as combined labour-power. The division of labour within manufacture presupposes a concentration of the means of production in the hands of one capitalist; the division of labour within society presupposes a dispersal of those means among many independent producers of commodities.  

Hence, if the big capitalist was claiming the control of production through the appropriation of its means (the machines), the artist-designer was claiming the supervision of production, the final word on the form of the commodity as a

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96 Verbandsnachrichten: Zeichnertag 1914 in Köln’, *Der Kunstgewerbezeichner*, 7 (1 March 1914), 58.
97 Karl Marx, *Capital* I, pp. 475-76.
whole; the way to achieve this was the concentration of all the dispersed crafts activities under his own command. Sombart’s comment on the Vereinigte Werkstätten is also valid for the Werkbund: the working material of the new designer was crafts- and draftsmen themselves.

1.4 The designer’s workshop and the clash with small craftsmen

It should be clear already that the new artist-designer basically attempted to expand his studio into a crafts workshop regulated according to the rules of modern manufacture. We should add that the new Trade and Applied Arts Schools followed the same pattern, hence a model first tested within the bounds of private businesses (such as the Vereinigte Werkstätten) served as the model of the reform of state schools. Indeed, on 15 December 1904, a Lehrwerkstättenerlass (Training Workshop Decree) was signed by the Prussian Minister of Commerce Theodor Möller. The passing of the decree was rightly described in its time as ‘the first fruit’ of Hermann Muthesius’s appointment as Commerce Ministry privy councilor.98 This decree served as the teaching basis for thirty five Applied Arts and Trade Schools in Prussia. The idea of the modern crafts workshop was of course imported from the English arts and crafts movement, but it was significantly revised by the German reformers. Hugo Hillig highlighted this difference, noting how Walter Crane’s motto ‘we must turn our artists into craftsmen and our craftsmen into artists,’ was reversed in the context of the preparations for the 1912 Bavarian Trade Fair (Bayerische Gewerbeschau); a year earlier, the directorate of the exhibition officially announced that ‘the times when craftsmen were artists and artists were craftsmen are over.’99

The restructured applied arts workshop was the place for the selection of the right person for the right job, a selection decisive to achieve the basic goal of the whole reform: quality work. As political economist and Werkbund supporter Bruno Rauecker remarked, for the applied arts reformers, it was not the vocation

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in itself that gave value to work, but work performance. This new vocational training system was heavily influenced by the reform ideas of a Munich pedagogue and educational administrator, Georg Kerschensteiner (another Werkbund founding member). Kerschensteiner sought to complement the education of apprentices, and for this reason he instituted instructional workshops in vocational schools. Naturally, Kerschensteiner’s educational reform constituted a direct interference in the work of small master craftsmen. Apprentices would attend the evening or Sunday classes of the reformed schools, where they would be familiarized to a modern training system (for example in machines lacking from small crafts businesses), which would often lead to confrontations with their masters back in their workplace. Werkbund propagandists like Rauecker juxtaposed Kerschensteiner’s ‘non-party, objective and all-embracing,’ reform programme with the masters’ ‘one-sided politics of self-interest’.

Hence, a principal target of the art educational reform was the people who traditionally administered crafts industry and the qualification of skilled work: the masters of the old crafts workshops. It should be noted that in 1897 the government passed the Handicraft Protection Law (Handwerksgesetz) which established a system of compulsory handicap chambers (Handwerkskammern) regulating apprentice training. The compulsory character of this training system designated Handwerkskammern as the only institution that could legally certify craft skills. Large industries fiercely reacted against this law, responding with the foundation of their own in-plant training workshops, whose official recognition they tried to ensure. From this period on and throughout the Weimar years, a war on skill formation was waged between Handwerkskammern, big industries and trade unions.

101 Kerschensteiner’s basic educational ideas are collected in Georg Kerschensteiner, Grundfragen der Schulorganisation: Eine Sammlung von Reden, Aufsätzen und Organisationsbeispielen, 3rd edn (Leipzig: B. G. Teubner, 1912).
102 Rauecker, ‘Münchner Kunstgewerbe’, 27. The training of apprentices in vocational schools constituted one of the main issues of discord between the principal organization of the small master-craftsmen, the Fachverband für die wirtschaftlichen Interessen des Kunstgewerbes and the Werkbund; see Fritz Hellwag, ‘Der Kampf um die Fortbildungsschule’, Kunstgewerbeblatt, 20 (1909), 175-78.
103 Rauecker, ‘Münchner Kunstgewerbe’, 27.
104 See Kathleen Thelen, How Institutions Evolve: The Political Economy of Skills in Germany, Britain, the United States, and Japan (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,
The instructional workshops promoted by the applied arts movement constituted the laboratories for the selection of the skilled from the unskilled, a selection under new criteria, in spaces independent from the influence of the traditional master-craftsmen and the *Handwerkskammern*. In a nutshell, the workshops were seen as the means for securing a ‘quasi-self-sufficient system of production that would guarantee the rights of artists by putting them in charge of the execution of their own designs.’

The esteem for artistic work, the social status of the visual artist could be only preserved by making artistic work socially relevant or, in typical Werkbund parlance, by bringing art back to everyday life. Werkbund members untiringly projected themselves as the leaders of this pedagogical reform, both before and after the First World War. The socialist discourse of the early Bauhaus should not mislead us. The workshops of the new institution originated straight from the pre-war workshop movement and hence they reproduced the same hierarchies and inequalities.

But the importance of the new workshops was not exhausted in the elevation of the artist-designer-architect to the status of an expert in quality work. The issue of the art proletariat was again pivotal here. As the Austrian cultural critic Joseph August Lux put it, workshops represented ‘the transition to a better economy of talents.’

Proletarianization could lead to radicalization and to a further strengthening of the Social Democratic Party, and the new arts and crafts workshops could help prevent this course. This function of the new institutions was clearly seen by a reformist Social Democrat of the time, who on the one hand welcomed the potential to minimize the ‘overproduction of skilled workers’ through the abolishment of the traditional apprenticeship system, but on the other hand he recognized that its reform through state legislation could easily turn against the socialist trade unions.

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107 Ludwig Quessel, ‘Meisterlehre oder Lehrwerkstätten?’, *Sozialistische Monatshefte*, 11 (October 1907), 861-68 (pp. 867-68).
The bourgeois reformers of the Werkbund circle hoped to rationalize arts and crafts production through a more consistent provision of vocational orientation to aspiring artists or to the masses of crafts producers. They asserted that they could discern each student’s talent and direct him or her to the proper field of production, putting an end to what they saw as a dangerous waste of talent fuelled by the ‘unqualified’ traditional master-craftsman.\footnote{This was also the essence of Bruno Paul’s plan for the reform of the state art schools. Paul insisted that artists should receive a workshop-based vocational education. Again, the objective was the distinction between artistic talents and untalented craftsmen. Students would be tested in the workshops and would have the right to change workshop to find their proper path. Those who had artistic talent would eventually follow a proper education in an art department under the supervision of a Master-Artist; in any case, Paul stressed, it was important from a socio-economic point of view to keep their number limited; see Bruno Paul, ‘Erziehung der Künstler an Staatlichen Schulen’, \textit{Deutsche Kunst und Dekoration}, 45 (December 1919), 193-96 (p. 196). Crucial to the success of this reform were the centralization of education through the amalgamation of schools and the constitution of a unified curriculum. Needless to say, the unquestioned leaders of this reform movement would be the new master-artists like Paul himself.}

This selection principle persisted throughout the entire Weimar period. In its seventh Congress in March 1928, for example, the \textit{Bund Deutscher Gebrauchsgraphiker} (League of German Commercial Artists) made the following proposal with regard to the future of students in the art schools: students with no artistic talent should be sent to trade schools and re-directed to practical vocations. The Bund made a distinction between ‘handwerkliche’ and ‘selbstschöpferische’ (independently creative) performance: craftsmen fell to the former and artists to the latter category.\footnote{Riemer, ‘Vom siebenten Bundestag des B.D.G.’, p. 77. This crude division between creative artists and practical assistants was incessantly reiterated by all arts and crafts experts. See also Jakob Erbar, ‘Die Ausbildung des Nachwuchses für das Buchgewerbe an den Kunstgewerbeschulen’, \textit{Gebrauchsgraphik}, 5 (August 1928), 74-77. Erbar characterized this selection ‘healthy’ and ‘natural’; ibid., 75.} Those who lacked talent could always be useful as manual workers executing the plans of intellectual workers. This was the full meaning of Lux’s ‘economy of talent’. To save the \textit{Mittelstand} at large, the old masters had to be sacrificed and artists had openly declared war to them – a war over social status and skills formation.

\section*{1.5 The Werkbund, Marxism and socialist revisionism}

The Werkbund circle certainly shared Marx’s welcoming of the machine, realizing that there was no way back to an artisanal past. Muthesius’s disapproval of
Ruskin’s and Morris’s conception of the arts and crafts revival and the overall differentiation of the German movement from its English model on the basis of the relationship with industrial production, testifies to this. Marx’s recognition of the ‘revolutionary aspect of the automatic workshop,’ which ‘wipes out specialists and craft-idiocy’ and tends ‘towards an integral development of the individual,’ his refusal to go ‘back to the journeyman or, at most, to the master craftsman of the Middle Ages,’ corresponds to a great extent with Werkbund’s intention to ‘work with industry not against it.’\footnote{Marx, 

Paradoxically, however, in the professional strategies of the Werkbund members or, to put it differently, in their politics as professionals, one can still detect an organic connection with Marxist theory and socialist politics. It is around the issue of the role of intellectual workers in modern capitalist economy, I shall argue, that this connection can be established. The politics of the intellectual worker, his supposed economic disinterestedness and ‘higher’ cultural mission, his aspiration to transform machine technology from a means of profit making for the capitalist into a vehicle for the cultural regeneration of society are elements that enabled a close collaboration between bourgeois cultural reformers and socialist activists.

I will first discuss how these issues are implicated in Marxian theory and then I will examine their gradual turn to a more central position in the agenda of the SPD through the influence of the party’s revisionist faction at the beginning of the twentieth century. The rapid popularization and partial institutionalization of the reform agenda, I shall argue, was the outcome of the ideological convergence between bourgeois reformists and Marxist revisionists. And it was these common cultural projects that bred the idea of the cultural and artistic avant-garde.

The faith in mechanization and industry as forces capable of taming free enterprise or to take advantage of the ‘mechanization’ against the ‘quantification’
of the world,\textsuperscript{111} constitutes a paradoxical attempt to turn one side of modernity against the other. I find it especially productive to examine this paradox in relation to what Alvin Gouldner characterizes as Marx’s ‘binary fission of popular materialism’, that is Marx’s division of the popular materialism of his day into a healthy or productive part (idealization of work and productivity) and a pathological or venal part (condemnation of commerce and money).\textsuperscript{112}

To support his thesis, Gouldner draws attention to what Marx sees as the starting point of capitalist production, the historical moment marking the transition from the guild system to capitalist manufacture.\textsuperscript{113} The logical conclusion of this interpretation of capitalism is that ‘capitalism starts when the same process of production is subjected to the control of commercial capital, of money,’ and that ‘the sheer difference in the social organization of the work group is not seen as an element of rationality contributed by the commercial capitalist, even though Marx recognizes that this reorganization does heighten productivity.’\textsuperscript{114} Thus, Gouldner continues, ‘Marx sees huckstering – the quest for private gain by buying and selling – as a central part of the infrastructure of capitalism, as the essence of modern capitalism.’\textsuperscript{115}

We arrive here at this critical moment when Marx attempts to use mechanization or modern technology and science to remedy society from quantification, from commercialism. The problem with capitalism is that it produces efficiency only as a means for profitability, thus ‘Marx wants the system to hew to its own logic […] so that the forces of production can live by the logic of efficiency alone, rather than being subjected to an alien logic […] It is essentially in this way […] that Marxism produces itself as a Scientific Marxism.’\textsuperscript{116}

It has been already pointed out that Scientific Marxism was partly shaped through Marx’s confrontation with the artisanal spirit, more precisely with the hierarchical structure of their organizations, their overvaluation of skill-based professional qualification. Jacques Rancière correctly indicates what kind of

worker-movement tradition was threatened by Marxism: ‘the world of the 
cooperatives and the mutual-aid societies, unionist factions influenced by 
positivism, institutions of popular education, and the ‘experimental’ tradition of 
utopian socialism’. However, the relationship between Scientific Marxism and 
Utopian Socialism is more perplexed, for Scientific Marxism sought to 
differentiate itself from the socialist tradition of the past by emphasizing a 
fundamental idea of this tradition: the faith in modern science and industry as 
instrumens for a radical transformation of society. Admittedly, Scientific 
Marxism recognized this common ground, and it struggled to prove that it 
represented a ‘true’ science as opposed to the pseudo-science of its predecessors. 
But the crucial point here is the overvaluation of science and industry as means 
for the fulfilment of a socialist society. My point is that, contrary to the 
expectations of Marx and Engels, their new ‘science’ retained part of the legacy of 
Utopian Socialism’s ‘pseudo-science’; in this way, it inadvertently facilitated the 
proliferation of reformism in the turn-of-the-century socialist movement.

Utopian and Scientific Socialism share a confidence in the revolutionary 
potential of science and industry and in the central role of scientists and 
intellectuals to unlock this potential. Thus, the two theories converge in the vital 
role they ascribe precisely to the social stratum affected the most in modernity: 
intellectual workers. It is the scientist and the artist who will either reform society 
or help the proletariat realize its position in production relations and accomplish 
its historical role. Of course, in the first case intellectual workers are openly 
proclaimed as the avant-garde of the social reform, whilst in Marxism their 
historical role is muffled, obscured through the significance assigned to the 
proletariat. But it is precisely this repression of the role of the intelligentsia in 
Marxism that constitutes one of its structural antinomies. This antinomy is fuelled 
by Marxism’s ambiguous relationship to science and philosophy.

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History’, *International Labor and Working Class History*, 24 (September 1983), 1-16 (p. 12). 
See also the replies to Rancière by historians William S. Sewell and Christopher H. Johnson 
published in the same issue, 17-26. The debate continued in the next volume of the journal with 
the responses by Edgar Leon Newman and Nicholas Papayanis and Rancière’s own final reply; 
see *International Labor and Working Class History*, 25 (March 1984), 37-46.

118Perhaps this is most evident in the affinities between Saint-Simonian thought and Marxism; 
see Frank Edward Manuel, *The New World of Henri Saint-Simon* (Notre Dame: University of 
Notre Dame Press, 1963); Keith Taylor (ed. and trans.), *Henri Saint-Simon (1760-1825): 
Selected Writings on Science, Industry and Social Organisation* (London: Croom Helm, 1975); 
Gouldner has convincingly argued that this ambivalence is a result of Marx’s effort to distinguish his theory from Utopian Socialism, and that it led to another division, that between Scientific and Critical Marxism. He writes:

[Marx] cannot relinquish science without capitulating to a moralistic view of socialism and he cannot renounce philosophy and the grounding it provides critique without surrendering to the present. For Marx’s double-pronged project – to know and to change the world – philosophy was insufficient to know the world, science insufficient to criticize it. Marx cannot therefore embrace critique without science and science without critique.119

But precisely Marx’s oscillation between philosophy and science, conditioned the oscillation of the socialist movement at large between reform and revolution. For, on the one hand, Marx’s scientific analysis of the laws of production relations ascribed to the proletariat the leading position in the socialist revolution, but at the same time it limited the significance of ‘will’ in political action ‘requiring that they, too, surrender to necessity, and remember that before a socialist revolution can succeed there must first have been established, by capitalism, an advanced industrial economy.’120 On the other hand, philosophy as a critique was the domain of the intelligentsia, whose concealed role was to raise the proletariat’s consciousness, since without the proletariat the intelligentsia could only design and engage itself in reform projects.

It is precisely the role of intellectual workers as bearers of scientific and technological knowledge that we see accentuated on the Lebensreform movement in turn-of-the-century Germany but also in the camp of revisionist Marxists. And it is not coincidental, for instance, that one of the main organs of revisionist Marxism, the political and cultural journal Sozialistische Monatshefte, was founded by a group of students at the University of Berlin known as ‘socialist academics’.121 Nor is it coincidental that it critically supported the various non-

120 Ibid., p. 69.
121 Der Sozialistische Akademiker was also the initial title of the journal for its first two volumes. For this early phase of the journal, see Stanley Pierson’s fascinating study Marxist Intellectuals and the Working-class Mentality in Germany, 1887-1912 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), pp. 103-11. The editorial of the first issue called on intellectuals to join the struggle for socialism, explaining that ‘Socialism was the only form of modern struggle for freedom which ‘rests on a scientific foundation’; Pierson, Marxist...
Marxist social reform projects of its time, including the applied arts reform.

To sum up my argument: the confidence in the revolutionary power of science and industry, the attempt to use mechanization against the quantification of the world and the repression of the vanguard position of the intellectual are structural antinomies in Marxist ideology, antinomies which accounted for the persistence of a spirit of liberal reform within the socialist movement. The crux of the matter, then, is that the connection between industry, science and culture is fundamental in both reformist and revolutionary ideologies, and that this congruence resulted in the formation of a broad ideological basis sustaining and facilitating the positive reception of the turn-of-the-century arts and crafts movement in Germany.

It should be noted that the 1890s, and thus the moment which we have described as the second wave of the Kunstgewerbebewegung, is also the period of the surge of the reform movement in Germany; in fact, the former is inextricably connected with the latter. It is during this period (especially after Engels’s death in 1895) when bourgeois-liberal reformism crosses paths with a rising reformist tendency within the Socialist Democratic Party. In a recently unified country with a developing free market, a growing industrial sector and a rising urban population, in other words, in an environment of rapid social transformation the reorganization of life significantly gained momentum, and it is indeed around the middle of the 1890s when the term Lebensreform seems to be employed for the first time. In sum, the history of the Lebensreform movement is a product of and reaction to modernity; it exemplifies an attempt to control and channel the social effects of advanced capitalism or, in its most radical expression, to divert the latter’s course.


Naturally, the life reform movement comprised a mass of cultural and political projects initiated by the disenfranchised bourgeoisie, and as such it lacked ideological uniformity, encompassing not only reformist but also reactionary tendencies.\textsuperscript{124} If I deliberately focus on its reformist side, it is because I find it crucial to examine how it overlapped with the revisionist faction of German socialism as it is this connection that can shed light on the complex issue of the genesis of the artistic avant-garde.

As a response to the crisis of culture, the Lebensreformbewegung reflects the uneasiness of intellectual workers in a radically transformed society. Thus, the various reform groups can also be seen as models for the organization of intellectuals and artists in novel types of associations. In contrast to the strict regulation and hierarchy of the old guilds, the cultural projects of the reform movement were loosely connected free associations of individuals, and this novel organizational form was ideal for those artists who aspired to abolish the separation of arts and reunite them under Gestaltung and architecture. Thus the Lebensreform and the new organizations of artists shared an experimental character in the most literal sense, that is in testing their ideas and forces in an environment (geographical, social, economic, and political) which was in a state of flux. The experimental nature of both projects accounts for the short-lived nature of the majority of such associations, as well as for their constantly changing constituencies; individuals were often members of several groups, and the concept of reform often functioned as a meeting point at the margins of antagonistic political movements.

Wolfgang Krabbe observes that the efforts of Social Democrats and bourgeois reformers to organize the proletariat and the Mittelstand often converged in projects such as the Bodenreform and the Gartenstadt movement.\textsuperscript{125} The Kampffmeyer brothers, for example, Hans, Paul and Bernhard, leading figures of the Garden City Movement, all belonged to the SPD’s revisionist faction.\textsuperscript{126} Paul

\textsuperscript{124}The diversity of the movement is explored in Kai Buchholz and others (eds.), \textit{Die Lebensreform: Entwürfe zur Neugestaltung von Leben und Kunst um 1900} (2 vols.) (Darmstadt: Häusser, 2001).
\textsuperscript{126}Krabbe, \textit{Gesellschaftsveränderung}, p. 152. For an account of Paul Kampffmeyer’s role in the revision of German orthodox Marxism, see Pierson, \textit{Marxist Intellectuals}, pp. 41-46, 124-127. Pierson observes that ‘the gradualist ideology of Kampffmeyer and [Conrad] Schmidt was, in part at least, a reflection of the rapid growth of the trade unions which, during the second half
Kampffmeyer was in the editorial board of the *Sozialistische Monatshefte*, the first German socialist journal which systematically discussed and supported the arts and crafts movement, life- and pedagogical reform (a study of its *Rundschau* section is quite revealing in this respect). It was also one of the few socialist journals not outright hostile towards anarchism, allowing such voices as Gustav Landauer and Erich Mühsam to present their ideas in its pages. Uniting a plethora of unorthodox and not easily classified (from a strictly ideological point of view) voices (socialist dissidents, liberals and anarchists) both before and after the First World War, *Sozialistische Monatshefte* seems to have played a neglected yet pivotal role as a forum for the discussion of cultural ideas and movements. Within the socialist movement, the *Sozialistische Monatshefte* seems to represent the first significant platform for the communication between party-affiliated and unattached intellectuals.127

A frequent collaborator of the *Sozialistische Monatshefte* was the ‘Father of Marxist Revisionism’ himself, Eduard Bernstein.128 Bernstein’s revision of Marxism, especially his critique of ‘scientific socialism’, is crucial to understand the relationship between socialism and the German applied arts movement; both reform movements were constructed around a similar notion of ‘application’: applying socialist theory or artistic designs and ideas to society. Examining the relationship between socialism and science, Bernstein framed his critique in the distinction between ‘pure’ and ‘applied’ scientific theories.129

Bernstein employed this distinction as a critical weapon against the SPD’s...
orthodox faction. He used it to fight the basic thesis of the Party’s 1891 Erfurt Programme on the inevitability of the socialist revolution, which he discarded as ‘unscientific’ and dogmatic, threatening ‘the ‘critical’ heritage of the socialist (and liberal!) enterprise’.\(^\text{130}\) He declared that ‘any socialism based on ‘science’ had to remain open to new theoretical propositions and empirical developments derived from actual political and social practice.’\(^\text{131}\)

I want to call attention not to Bernstein’s theory per se, but instead on the possible appeal of his revisionism, i.e. his emphasis on science as practice and not as theory – a model of practice to be immediately adopted by the trade unions and the various branches of the social and cultural reform movement, hence precisely the loci where the two agents of liberalism and socialism, the proletariat and the \textit{Mittelstand}, crossed paths.

This was the same landscape crossed by the protagonists of the applied arts movement: the academically trained bourgeois artist (such as Peter Behrens and Bruno Paul), the \textit{Künstlerproletariat}, and the small craftsmen. Especially for the first two categories, the application of artistic design in everyday life represented another, different but equally promising challenging of dogmatism: that of academic art. And to question the latter’s authority would in most cases lead to a rejection of the autonomy of art, an abandonment of theory for the practical application of artistic knowledge.

Therefore, bourgeois and social democratic reform projects share some traits which are essential to understand the origins of artistic radicalism or of the avant-garde in Germany. Those affinities become more evident in the way bourgeois and socialist reformers diagnosed the crisis of culture as the loss of a unified world view, a unity presumably provided in the past by powerful ideological systems and their institutions (such as religion).\(^\text{132}\) Bourgeois reformers and Social Democrats reacted against this historically specific – capitalist – crisis by attempting to synthesize a novel world view. This project, initiated by academically trained intellectuals, was characteristically interdisciplinary, but there were certain disciplines that assumed the role of ‘leading sciences’ such as

\(^{130}\)Steger, \textit{Evolutionary Socialism}, p. 100.

\(^{131}\)Ibid.

political economy.\textsuperscript{133}

Marx and Engels, the ‘younger’ German historical school of economics – especially the \textit{Kathedersozialisten} in and around the \textit{Verein für Sozialpolitik}\textsuperscript{134} – and Marxist revisionists like Bernstein, Kampffmeyer and the \textit{Sozialistische Monatshefte} circle, explored different potentials for a way out of capitalism’s crisis on the basis of a scientific study of modernity. The more interdisciplinary this project, the more all-embracing, hence reliable and appealing to a mass public was. Interdisciplinarity, integration, unity and world view were key concepts for many pre- and post-war cultural projects such as the various educational-reform movements (\textit{Reformpädagogik}),\textsuperscript{135} Monism,\textsuperscript{136} the Soviet Proletkult, the Bauhaus and the Vienna Circle, to name but a few. Vital for all those projects was the question of the ‘mediation of cultural artefacts and ideal cultural values in the age of mass societies,’\textsuperscript{137} as well as that of the relationship between culture and technology.\textsuperscript{138} But, if ‘the discussion of every social conflict as a ‘cultural question’’ is indeed an ‘indicator of an anti-pluralist conception of society and with it an indicator of a longing for a more harmonious community,’\textsuperscript{139} then it should be stressed that this was not a Marxian but a reformist (liberal or socialist) equation and as such it was a central point of contention between the two movements.

Notably, the foundation of the Werkbund coincides with the so-called Bülow Bloc (after Reich’s chancellor Bernhard von Bülow; in government between 1907 and mid-1909), ‘an alliance of Progressives, National Liberals, and Conservatives which closed off all possibility for Social Democracy to pursue a reformist tactic in the Reichstag.’\textsuperscript{140} Schorske describes this interval as a period when ‘political

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\textsuperscript{133}My synopsis here relies on the excellent analysis by vom Bruch, Graf and Hübinger, \textit{‘Kulturbegriff’}, pp. 16-18.
\textsuperscript{134}On the influence of this circle on the Werkbund, see Schwartz, \textit{Werkbund}, pp. 75ff.
\textsuperscript{135}For the commonalities (and differences) in the educational agendas of the bourgeois-reform and the socialist movement, see Christa Uhlig, \textit{Reformpädagogik: Rezeption und Kritik in der Arbeiterbewegung, I: Quellenauswahl aus den Zeitschriften Die Neue Zeit (1883-1918) und Sozialistische Monatshefte (1895/97-1918)} (Frankfurt a.M.: Peter Lang, 2006).
\textsuperscript{136}The reception of Monism by the socialist revisionist press was more ambiguous, if not generally negative; see Wilhelm Hausenstein, ‘Schulreform’, \textit{Sozialistische Monatshefte}, 16 (June 1912), 760-62. Hausenstein attacked the dogmatic rationalist educational proposals of chemist Wilhelm Ostwald (the Nobel laureate and chairman of the German League of Monists) which, in his view, fully excluded talent as something irrational; ibid., 761.
\textsuperscript{137}Vom Bruch, Graf and Hübinger, \textit{‘Kulturbegriff’}, p. 18.
\textsuperscript{138}Ibid., p. 19.
\textsuperscript{139}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{140}Schorske, \textit{German Social Democracy}, p. 89.
\end{flushright}

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radicalism was dormant’; it was a critical period for the future of the SPD as the reformists established their dominant position within the party through the development of a bureaucratic mechanism and ‘the extension of trade-union power over the party,’ which ‘neutralized’ the radical institutions within the latter.\(^{141}\)

But if trade unions were a point of contention between the reform movement and socialists, *Konsumgenossenschaften* (Consumer cooperatives) another institution that thrived during this period often united adherents of the two political blocs. The cooperatives were also particularly important for the *Kunstgewerbebewegung* – a relation which is not adequately examined in art historiography. Indeed, the period between 1890 and 1914 is seen as the second wave of the German cooperative movement.\(^{142}\) This coincides with what I have described as the second wave of the *Kunstgewerbebewegung*. Besides the massification of both movements, another common characteristic is their increasing politicization: consumer self-help and arts and crafts ideas were paradoxically radicalized through their inclusion into a general social reform movement; in other words, it is only through their connection with a campaign to intervene in and reform every aspect of quotidian life that the applied arts and consumer cooperatives acquire a radical political character.

Cooperatives constituted another institution nurturing the collaboration between bourgeois liberals and reformist socialists; they appealed to both sides because they were founded on two divergent ideas: free market economy and unionism.\(^{143}\) Thus the *Konsumgenossenschaften* movement was another space for those who stood critically against certain aspects of capitalist economy, but did not reject the system in its entirety and were at odds with the radical positions of social democratic orthodoxy. The Werkbund itself, an association of entrepreneurs and artists/intellectuals, can be seen as a collaborative attempt based on a similar political agreement. At the same time, the idea of cooperation could be easily confused or deliberately pass as tautological with that of the collective, even with

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141 Schorske, *German Social Democracy*, p. 90.  
socialism; this seems to be the case in Weimar Germany, specifically in the social housing projects in great urban centres such as Berlin and Frankfurt, which resulted from the cooperation between social democratic town councils, consumer cooperatives and radical architects.

In an important essay, Brett Fairbairn stresses another crucial aspect of the cooperative movement in Germany: as a result of the belated industrialization of the country, German intellectuals borrowed this model from other western countries ‘before any large, organized working class had emerged in Germany. Cooperative models were therefore defined first and fundamentally for artisans, peasants, and small business.’\(^{144}\) This had initially caused the suspicion of the Social Democrats towards cooperatives.\(^{145}\) However, with the strengthening and eventual domination of the reformist faction within the party, cooperatives turned into a crucial part of the socialist movement.

The victory of the reformist Social Democratic faction accounts for the blurring of previous dividing lines: reformism and radicalism, trade union and cooperative, Mittelstand and the proletariat (notably, Eduard Bernstein and the Sozialistische Monatshefte circle were among the main supporters of the consumer cooperative movement and Rosa Luxemburg among its opponents). The development of the consumer cooperatives parallels that of the trade unions. Shortly before the First World War, the two institutions had largely turned into pivotal instruments for the political struggle of the three main antagonistic movements: Liberalism, political Catholicism and Social Democracy.\(^{146}\)

With their principal advantages being ‘large-scale buying, large-scale advertising and marketing, integration on regional and national levels,’\(^{147}\) cooperatives constituted an important new patron for artistic work, especially as regards the developing branches of graphic design and advertising; this was

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\(^{145}\)For a dismissive, orthodox Marxist view of cooperatives, see Karl Kautsky, *Consumvereine und Arbeiterbewegung* (Vienna: Brand, 1897).


\(^{147}\)Fairbairn, ‘Rise and Fall’, p. 290.
especially the case after cooperatives began manufacturing their own products in
their factories or production units. One of the first important commissions
undertaken by the Bauhaus printing workshop, for example, was the advertising
work for the Konsumgenossenschaft Weimar in 1922-23. The list of graphic
designers and architects working in cooperative-commissioned works is too long
to be cited or examined in more detail here.

1.6 Applied Arts Reform and its Discontents

I have tried to make clear that, within the Kunstgewerbe context, ‘quality work’ is
intermingled with a conception of the division of labour which favoured a new
type of professional visual artist, the designer, setting him at the top of a redefined
hierarchy within the sphere of arts and crafts production, where draftsmen and
apprentices remained subordinated. Within this system, the latter’s prospects of
moving upwards and establishing an artistic career was sharply curtailed.
Moreover, there was a growing tendency within the Werkbund itself which
seemed to threaten what the organization was supposed to protect: the interests
and social status of the modern professional artist. I also mentioned that the
Werkbund’s emphasis on quality work, on the artist’s control on the commodity
form clashed with the course that industrial production was taking. This impeded
the collaboration of the Werkbund with big industry. For Hermann Muthesius and
other Werkbund prominent members, Typisierung could possibly overcome this
problem. However, as Frederic Schwartz has pointed, Typisierung would
significantly narrow the field of practice of the modern artist.

To sum up, the Kunstgewerbebewegung generated two different categories of
discontents. First, those young students who saw their artistic training in
Kunstgewerbeschulen as an opportunity to change career and transcend their
proletarian identity, but whose artistic aspirations contradicted the logic of the
reform which promoted their restriction to industrial production. The second
category comprised those artists who had enthusiastically joined the Werkbund,

148 For the cooperative production businesses, see Prinz, Brot und Dividende, pp. 264-67.
149 See Klaus-Jürgen Winkler (ed.), Bauhaus-Alben: Bauhausausstellung 1923, Haus am Horn,
Architektur, Bühnenwerkstatt, Druckerei IV (Weimar: Bauhaus-Universität, 2009), pp. 258-59.
150 See Schwartz’s fine discussion in, Werkbund, pp. 121ff.
seeing in it the chance for a regeneration of intellectual-artistic work in modernity, but who had gradually realized that Werkbund itself was predominantly serving the interests of industry and commerce and not of artists. My argument, then, is that those two groups shared a common experience of frustration grounded in the shortcomings of the applied arts reform, which, in combination with the disaster of the First World War, set the ground for the development of interwar artistic radicalism. It is to this period that I will turn in the following chapter.
Chapter 2: Reformist Radicalism: The Eloquent Silence of the Avant-Garde in Early Weimar Germany

2.1 The Avant-garde and its history of silence

The Arbeitsrat für Kunst (Working Council for Art, hereafter AfK) is commonly referred to as one of the first radical associations of artists (together with the Novembergruppe) emerging from the ashes of the defeated German Reich and predating the ratification of the country’s first democratic constitution in Weimar in July 1919. Eberhard Steneberg correctly describes the group as a ‘loose affiliation’ of architects (who dominated the new, short-lived institution), art historians, painters and sculptors, illustrators and craftsmen.\(^1\) This short description, I shall argue, characterizes the form of the organization of the interwar European avant-garde. Avant-garde groupings are formed on the basis of this novel form of organization which is emphatically opposed to the traditional, strictly regulated guild-like organization representing the interests of a single trade. In marked contrast to the latter, based on a reconfigured perception of the nature of artistic practice in modernity and its relation to modern industrial production, the free associations of the avant-garde represented the interests of a wide array of different vocations (architects, painters, sculptors, craftsmen, industrialists, art critics). Moreover, since the avant-garde’s endeavour was not just to reform art but the world itself (‘art into life’), the architect’s leading role in this project came to be almost self-evident. Finally, as a process of self-reflection – the artist contemplating her or his role in society – the avant-garde marks a pivotal stage in the theorization of artistic practice; consequently, the art theorist (often the artist as a theorist) asserts a position equally privileged with that of the architect’s. This last feature is reflected in the organization of the AfK: its chairmen were the architect Walter Gropius and, after 1919, the art historian Adolf Behne.

But to what extent were AfK ideas original? At a closer glance, the AfK’s radical agenda does not substantially differ from contemporaneous proposals for a reform of art education, which were suggested as rational and pragmatic measures

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rather than radical operations. I shall maintain that the AfK illustrates another basic trait of the German interwar avant-garde: the attempt to promote its own interests, to advertise itself – to paraphrase T. S. Eliot – not only with a bang (manifestoes and the like), but also with silence, a silence concerning its own roots in the old world it sought to shatter. And the silence of the AfK was quite specific: it concerned the kinship of its concept of art reform and of the general social function of art in the modern age with that of an older institution, the Werkbund.

This act of omission seems to be standard in radical artistic circles across Europe in the interwar period – each time for different, historically specific causes. The case of the Soviet artistic group October, for instance, is particularly revealing. As Hiltrud Ebert notes, there is a careful attempt in the group’s publications to conceal its ‘intellectual origins’ in order to avoid its stigmatization as another left-wing ‘opportunistic’ group.\(^2\) To understand this, we should take into account that the group, which functioned as the last resort of constructivists and production artists, was founded at the outset of the First Five-Year Plan in 1928, after the abandonment of Lenin’s New Economic Policy (NEP). This significant period in Soviet history is marked by a fierce attack on ‘bourgeois expertise’ and a careful (that is controlled) encouragement of proletarian initiatives, a period known in historiography as the ‘cultural revolution’.\(^3\) In this political setting, the artists of October found a new opportunity to settle their accounts with their colleagues of AkhRR (Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia), who were predominantly working in the ‘bourgeois’ medium of easel painting. In contrast, October artists promoted the ‘spatial arts’ allegedly put in the service of the proletariat and – not surprisingly – they published the group’s founding manifesto on the Soviet architectural journal Sovremennaia arkhitektura.

In 1929, a famous member of October as well as of the Lef (Left Front of the Arts), Sergei Tretyakov, published a text reflecting the internal clashes of the latter over the issue of ‘professionalism’ in art, which resulted to the end of the second phase of the Lef (New Lef, 1928-29). This short article was an attack on ‘bourgeois


expertise’, on the isolated professional artist. The Soviet avant-gardist now advocated the collectivization of artistic work modelled on a presumed concurrent collectivization of general production: ‘We believe that the production of books can be planned in advance just like that of textiles and ferrous metal.’ But who will take the position of the planner? How can ‘proletarian expertise’ be achieved? The answer is found in this same – published, thus publicly announced – declaration. Referring to the new type of proletarian artist, the ‘factist,’ the amateur photographer, reporter and worker-correspondent, Tretyakov concludes:

We only have to give them more expertise, and they will become more valuable for the genuine socialization of art than any of the highly qualified masters from the ranks of artists and belletrist who, having ‘seen the light’ and ‘repented,’ disavow their past and adopt new forms of work […] Let our triumphalist enemies proclaim to each other that ‘Lef is dead!’ But you celebrate too early. To be continued – through Lef to the factist. The river will not retreat from the ocean.

This is an amazing declaration, considering that the author himself represents exactly this ‘repentant’ intelligentsia. Moreover, he holds to his position as an expert transmitting his knowledge to the proletariat; he still embodies the avant-garde ‘hero’, the mediator-educator of the proletariat. But the accomplishment of this cultural endeavour can only pass through the self-sacrifice of the intellectual, who will finally join the ocean of the masses only by giving up his or her profession. This, however, remains a distant dream which corresponds to the dream of the dictatorship of the proletariat, a dictatorship promising its self-abolition for the sake of a classless society – another flow to the unexplored ocean.

Another exponent of the interwar avant-garde, the Czech graphic artist and theorist Karel Teige – who was in close contact with the Bauhaus during its direction by Hannes Meyer – sought to deal with the problem of the silence of the avant-garde towards its own past in a more productive way. In his article ‘New proletarian art’, written in 1922, he identified bourgeois and proletarian art as two

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4 Sergei Tretyakov, ‘To Be Continued’, trans. Devin Fore, October 118 (2006), 51-56 (p. 54). I thank the author for calling this text to my attention.

distinct poles. However, their relationship was not that of a strict dichotomy; the two poles were interdependent. Teige emphasized a dialectic symbiosis of two seemingly strictly opposed currents: ‘the reactive revolutionary outset of a new epoch,’ and a simultaneous, ‘almost incorruptible continuity of development’ or tradition. As a result, ‘the era of the proletarian art is actually not the higher stage of art, which is based as a whole on the bourgeois era, but it is instead its opposing pole, which lies on the same plane.’ Therefore, in dialectic terms, proletarian art adopts an antithetical position to bourgeois art. Most precisely, the new proletarian art transcends the ‘subjectivism and romanticism’ of cubism and futurism – which Teige sees as cultural phenomena marking both the high point and decline of the pre-war bourgeois art – and develops its antithesis around two essential features: tendentiousness and collectivism. Equally important is the different position the new art takes towards ‘civilization’: it is pessimistic and not optimistic; it is a reaction against the pre-war cultural atmosphere characterized by American commercialism and the glorification of the machine, which was the spirit of an ‘art for the American engineer and manufacturer’. The new art perceives the machine not as a ‘spectacle’ to be glorified but as a device ‘to be used’.

But the whole argument is wrapped up in a selective survey of the development of bourgeois art. For, as we have seen, bourgeois applied arts reform had already articulated the same critique of modern, non-utilitarian art before the socialist and communist advocates of proletarian art. Thus, to formulate a clear-cut antithesis to the emerging proletarian art, one has to select that aspect of bourgeois art that is most alien to the former; the fewer the commonalities, the most emphatic the antithesis. It is all a matter of perspective. Teige’s incomplete image of bourgeois art, then, focused on its non-utilitarian, ‘free’ aspect, with cubism and futurism marking its peak, stands as another moment of silencing. The disregard of the functional, applied side of bourgeois art obfuscates its commonalities with its proletarian opposite.

The above examples set the frame of this chapter. In what follows, I will focus

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7Ibid., pp. 11-12.
8Ibid., pp. 25-27.
9Ibid., p. 28.
on three avant-garde projects of the early post-war period (1918-1923) – the Arbeitsrat für Kunst, the Soviet Proletkult and the early Bauhaus in Weimar – highlighting the ways they intermingle. I shall examine the centrality of this process of silencing for the translation of artistic into political projects in a period of shifting class positions and rapidly changing social and economic conditions. For it is precisely this silencing that constitutes an intrinsic trait of artistic radicalism, a gesture of differentiation through the suppression of continuities. United by the demand to bring art into life, these avant-garde projects stressed the utilitarian aspect of their practice and theory and attacked ‘useless’, ‘decorative’ and bourgeois artistic practices such as easel painting. But what they all silenced was their common origin: the broad, politically inconsistent (hence potentially suspect as a reference point) arts and crafts reform that was examined in the previous chapter. This eloquent silence of artistic radicalism will be explored to cast light on the development of those projects, their complexity, the insights and limitations of the conceptual tools of their organizers and, most importantly, the building blocks available for people to make interventions. For in the final analysis, what was suppressed through this often dogmatic delimitation of artistic and political positions was the potential for a symbiosis of those different projects, a ‘middle road’ for modern art, free from the excesses of ultra-radical and reactionary ideas, a prospect which is hinted at towards the end of this chapter and will be further explored in the following one.

2.2 An inconclusive secession from the Werkbund

The story of the Arbeitsrat für Kunst was not written in the land of a victorious socialist revolution but in a country where both the old empire and the revolutionary socialist movement had been defeated. This was also a period in which the politically disenfranchised bourgeoisie of the Wilhelmine period had finally ascended to a position of unprecedented authority. In addition, some of the advocates of the second wave of the arts and crafts movement had also been appointed to key administrative positions, most notably Edwin Redslob, a Werkbund member, who was appointed the Republic’s federal arts commissioner (Reichskunstwart). Thus, the arts and crafts ideas entered a decisive period of institutionalization, which was part of the general institutional restructuring in the
country – the result of the collapse of the imperial system and the pressures of armed insurrections, new political powers (among them the Workers’ and Soldiers’ Councils) for a radical reform of the country’s political system. In this general social and political mobility, the competition among the numerous exponents of the *Kunstgewerbebewegung* for an administrative position in the new art institutions, reached a new, unprecedented level.

This contest is reflected in the clash between the Werkbund and the AfK, two institutions whose membership overlapped to a considerable degree. Despite all revolutionary rhetoric, a closer view on the names of some of the signatories of the organization’s programme indicates its political orientation towards bourgeois reformism or Marxist revisionism.\(^\text{11}\)

The Werkbund and the AfK can indeed be seen as two opposed but interdependent poles. Examining their relationship one can discern both a significant continuity and a rupture.\(^\text{12}\) Both institutions shared a perception of art as a constructive force working against capitalist fragmentation and towards the creation of a new culture. The main propagator of this project in pre-war Germany was the Werkbund, despite the considerable disagreement of its members over the exact nature of this culture as well as the allocation of roles among artists, craftsmen and manufacturers. This disagreement had dictated the tone of the debate on *Typisierung* at the 1914 Werkbund exhibition in Cologne. It is precisely the reaction of a faction of artists (most notably Walter Gropius, Bruno Taut, Henry van de Velde and Hermann Obrist), their defence of the artist’s ‘creative individualism’ against the programme of *Typisierung* that signifies a fissure within the Werkbund – a fissure widened by the experience of the war.\(^\text{13}\) Thus, to stress its difference from the Werkbund, the AfK underscored the leading position of the

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\(^{11}\) Among the signatories were Joseph Bloch, editor of *Sozialistische Monatshefte*; Theo von Brockhusen, president of the Berlin Free Secession; art dealer Alfred Flechtheim; Gustav Friedrich Hartlaub, director of the Kunsthalle in Mannheim and Werkbund-member; Fritz Hellwag, secretary of the Werkbund; John Schikowski, editor of the SPD’s organ *Vorwärts*.

\(^{12}\) Reviewing the programmes of several radical artists’ associations, Fritz Hellwag observed ‘a close kinship with the Werkbund’s original programme’; Hellwag, ‘Die Revolutionsprogramme der Künstler’, *Mitteilungen des Deutschen Werkbundes*, 2 (1919), 33-41 (p. 40). For Hellwag, the general agreement on the need of an art reform based on crafts training sufficed to unite different generations of artists (Werkbund and the ‘young radicals’) in a common cause. He saw too much unnecessary fuss created by a ‘wistful exuberance of verbal expression,’ fostered by the political climate of the period, a radicalism obstructing the materialization of ‘the second wave of the Werkbund’s ideal’, itself dependent on the creative enthusiasm of the new generation of artists; Hellwag, Revolutionsprogramme, p. 41.

\(^{13}\) For an excellent analysis of the debate on *Typisierung*, see Schwartz, *Werkbund*, pp. 147ff.
artist, an artist envisioned as a kind of dictator over aesthetic matters. This is why architects Bruno Taut and Heinrich Finsterlin replied to the question of reform in artistic training with a call for an ‘aristocracy of sentiment’ and a ‘foundation of artistic dynasties.’ But this spirit was also explicit in the group’s manifesto, which declared that only the artist was able to shape the perceptions of the people.

In an AfK publication collecting some of its members’ ideas on art reform (*Ja! Stimmen des Arbeitsrates für Kunst in Berlin*), there is a unanimous agreement on the necessity to re-organize artistic training on the principle of craftsmanship; there is a consensus on the view that art, or more precisely artistic talent, cannot be taught, and that only the technical side, for instance the working of the material and the various techniques for its elaboration, can be explored and transmitted. As we have seen in the previous chapter, this was an idea already familiar among artists, containing a prescription for the solution of a specific socio-economic problem: the *Künstlerproletariat*. So, the reform ideas of the AfK are not as radical as they appear at first glance. They rather constitute a reiteration of the Werkbund’s theses on the matter, narrowed towards a position which privileged the artist-pedagogue and was disguised by radical rhetoric.

Where, then, can we trace the rupture separating the two organizations? The division is most evident around the issue of the artist’s relationship with capitalist industry and the market. It is precisely around the issue of artistic individualism that the artists-pedagogues of the AfK construct their own antithesis, adopting a more radical position: the defence of the artist’s authority/social status and mobility in a radically changed landscape. The crucial point here is that artists assert primacy in the reform; they want to control those forces (industry and the market), whose importance they perceive as secondary, a means to a higher end (cultural regeneration), but which had gradually dominated the Werkbund. In short, they see the applied arts reform as their own business, a kind of self-interest politics. But, as we have seen, this reform was the battleground of much broader political and economic interests. The radical *Gestalter* dominated the reform only in the imaginary; in reality, his position in crafts production was inverted, he was the industrialist’s subordinate, not his associate.

Nevertheless, the only way for the artist to assert a leading role is by presenting

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himself as a mediator between the state and the art proletariat, the state and craftsmen. Consequently, the emphasis on craftsmanship is vital. The reformers of the AfK want to fulfill the cultural mission of the Werkbund. Significantly, their agenda is imbued with the same elitist spirit. The organization poses the question of crafts reform in the following manner:

Exodus of the artist to the crafts: How can it be achieved, that the masses of the art proletariat will be picked for crafts, escaping their demise by the impending economic disaster? What kind of demands must be addressed to the state, so that the youth receives from the outset education on a purely technical basis?\textsuperscript{15}

The artist here is the avant-garde of cultural reform, but his exodus to the crafts is different from Tretyakov’s flow of the river into the ocean. The artist remains intact, he does not vanish into the sea of craftsmanship – he is there to control the flow. But even this did not satisfy everyone. Adolf Behne, for example, replied that the artist should immediately take matters into his own hands, without making any demands to the state.\textsuperscript{16} Gropius, on the other hand, began his own reply by defining the artist as an ‘improved craftsman’ (\textit{Der Künstler ist eine Steigerung des Handwerkers}), calling at the same time for the formation of a new type of crafts guilds without the class divisions which ‘build a haughty wall between craftsmen and artists’.\textsuperscript{17} The relationship between the artist and the craftsman remains hierarchical, despite the call for the democratization of the crafts sector. The distance from here to the old-fashioned paternalism expressed through the words of an expert is short. In his reply to the AfK’s questionnaire, for example, Erwin Haß, a painter, director of the Arts and Crafts School in Halle and Werkbund supporter, described the proletarian in the arts as

the subaltern spirit in all art practicing vocations. His talent misleads him, his small mind [\textit{kleiner Geist}] hinders him […] His ideal was the Academy with its successes […] For him our efforts would be nothing more than ‘charitable deeds’. So, what do we have to offer him? - Preliminary, only renunciations. He would lack the strength for this new for him ideal and we would have an enemy behind. The artist who remained poor from conviction, who revolutionized art with his canvas, his studio sculpture and

\textsuperscript{15}\textit{Ja! Stimmen des Arbeitsrates}, p. 14.
\textsuperscript{16}Ibid., p. 20.
\textsuperscript{17}Ibid., p. 31.
the drawing in his portfolio, this is our man […] A generous curriculum, full of discipline, directed against the grain, will drag this art proletariat into our apparatus. They will constitute the mass which is necessary to legitimate ideas.\textsuperscript{18}

The last phrase reveals that the theory of the reform has been formulated without the art proletariat’s assent. The vanguard of this artistic revolution is the academically trained fine artist (like Haß himself). The legitimation of this avant-garde, the success of its professional politics depends on the adaptation of the art proletariat to the revolutionary artist’s ideas. The political situation may have been changed, but the professional politics of the radical art reformer follow the same pre-war pattern. The objective of these politics is the safeguarding of the reformer’s role in the new state, a role legitimized through the invocation of the masses, the service not of self-interests but of the common good. Thus, to the question on the role of artists in the socialist state, Haß replies: ‘The mass never conceives ideas in present tense, it conceives in imperfect […] therefore every idea must educate the masses […] Through the grace of his talent (knowledge) the artist is obliged to spread the idea […] Our space shall no longer be the studio, but the state.’\textsuperscript{19}

The roles are also clearly distinct for the painter César Klein, member of the AfK, the Novembergruppe and the Werkbund. Theoretical education ought to be undertaken by ‘proficient academic forces (Secessionists)’ – like Klein himself; note that the anti-academicians usually came from an academic background. Practical-technical training, on the other hand, would be a business primarily of ‘the forces of craftsmanship’.\textsuperscript{20} How does this system of practical training work? Production takes place in workshops under the supervision of a group of masters, which acts as the executive-leading force of the workshop. Everything is executed according to the master’s designs. The master’s collaborator is the mature assistant, who gradually ascends to the position of the master himself, then, the former master is appointed to the Academy or to a teaching position in another state institution.\textsuperscript{21} The logic of the pre-war instructional workshops is reproduced.

Another respondent, Heinrich Campendonk (also member of the

\textsuperscript{18}Ja! Stimmen des Arbeitsrates, p. 34 (emphasis added). \hfill \textsuperscript{19}Ibid., pp. 34-35 (emphasis added). \hfill \textsuperscript{20}Ibid., p. 39. \hfill \textsuperscript{21}Ibid., p. 40.
Novembergruppe and the Werkbund), was more straightforward, proposing ‘a temporary dictatorship of artists’ – naturally AfK artists – commanding every artistic activity (education, organization of exhibitions and museum collections, housing, etc.).

It was precisely this reform spirit that provoked the polemical reply of another radical artist, Otto Freundlich (former member of the Novembergruppe and the AfK), a reply with the telling title ‘Refusal: A final reckoning with three institutions: Deutscher Werkbund, Arbeitsrat für Kunst in Berlin, Novembergruppe’ published in 1919. Significantly, for Freundlich, the three institutions express the same ‘dictatorial impudence’ and ‘pride of the well-to-do and the know-it-all.’

This triplet, according to the author, was ‘conceived in the bed of bureaucracy, baptized with the water of the bourgeois church, saturated in the spirit of snobbism, of ambition and of the entire mercantile infection’.

We should note that Freundlich’s association of the three institutions is not arbitrary. Not only they were united through a confluence of membership, but they also joined forces, especially when they addressed the state. In 1920, for example, in an act of self-promotion, they (together with the Association of German Architects) sent a letter to the Ministry for Science, Art and Education to express their satisfaction with the Ministry’s decision to democratize the annual Great Art Exhibition of Berlin. Of course, they spoke as the vanguard of the modern movement, designating themselves the ‘agents of the young, regenerated art’.

But there were also other personalities, more decisive for the future of the AfK, who noticed the affinity of the new group with the Werkbund. Turning down the AfK’s request for financial support, industrialist Robert Bosch explained that he had recently offered ‘a substantial allowance’ to the Werkbund, which ‘pursues

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22 *Ja! Stimmen des Arbeitsrates*, p. 25. Compare Victor Shklovsky’s reply (in a 1978 interview) to Serena Vitale’s question on the meaning of the October revolution for the young Soviet avant-gardists: ‘we thought: there will be the dictatorship of the Academy of Sciences […] or rather, the dictatorship of art. The freedom of art […] there was a train headed for the future and we were pushing and shoving one another to get on’; Serena Vitale, *Shklovsky: Witness to an Era* (Champaign: Dalkey Archive Press, 2012), p. 125.


24 Ibid.

25 Nachlaß Gropius, Bauhaus-Archiv, Papers II (123), 10/25. This part of Gropius’s Nachlaß contains the *Arbeitsrat für Kunst* papers (this source will be hereafter quoted as NG followed by the number of the document and the folder).
aims similar to yours’.  

The AfK was also closely connected with the Novembergruppe. In fact, a proposal for the amalgamation of the two associations was discussed in a meeting of the AfK’s executive and artistic committee on November 18, 1919. César Klein, Walter Gropius and Otto Bartning, all agreed that such an act would be convenient since both institutions shared not only several active members, but also common values. This is remarkable as the Novembergruppe’s measured rhetoric sharply deviated from the AfK’s radical style; its manifesto, for example, opened with a call for a ‘moral reconstruction of the young free Germany,’ which approximated the ethical, national-conservative (politically to the centre-right) discourse of the Werkbund, the same that supposedly repelled the young radical architects. Klein suggested a compromising solution, a blend that would not blur the roles of the two groups: the AfK would have a ‘leading’ position (presumably in theoretical matters), while the Novembergruppe would retain its independence with regard to its exhibition policies.

Gropius also proposed the amalgamation of the AfK and the Werkbund, but this met considerable resistance, despite his assurance that the recent election of himself, Bruno Taut, César Klein, Hans Poelzig and Karl Ernst Osthaus to the latter’s committee would guarantee the protection of the artist’s interests, and minimize the role of Ernst Jäckh (managing director of the Werkbund) in the organization. Gropius was against a decisive rupture with the Werkbund because its ‘power has grown and many things can be achieved with it under a safer leadership’. Naturally, this power consisted of the wide network of Werkbund supporters (crafts organizations, the press, connections with the German bureaucracy as well as with the industrial sector), which guaranteed a financial support that the AfK entirely lacked.

It is from the same point of view that architect Otto Bartning, writing to

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26 See the letter of Robert Bosch’s private secretary to the AfK (20 March 1919); NG 10/224, Papers II (123).
27 The Novembergruppe had been previously invited to collectively join the AfK, an invitation negatively received in the former’s first meeting; see Helga Kliemann, Die Novembergruppe (Berlin: Mann, 1969), p. 55. A few weeks later, Behne announced in a Novembergruppe publication that the two groups had ‘merged into a close working team’. Kliemann, Novembergruppe, p. 60.
28 Kliemann, Novembergruppe, p. 56.
29 NG 10/44, Papers II (123).
30 NG 10/44, 10/45 Papers II (123).
31 NG 10/45, Papers II (123).
Gropius on 27 May 1921, expressed his dissatisfaction with the Werkbund, but also his unwillingness to ‘cede entirely to the others’ the organization’s ‘useful power’. In his reply to Bartning, after announcing the dissolution of the AfK, Gropius noted that in the group’s last meeting there was ‘an interesting debate’ on the Werkbund. He explained that he had decided to resign from the latter’s committee because the organization was transforming into a ‘shapeless pulp with which one should not mingle any longer’. He concluded that people like Jäckh and Baur (executive secretary of the Werkbund) were just too foolish to notice how the wind blows, and since his hope that under Poelzig’s chairmanship the Werkbund would entrust its power to the ‘youth’ had been frustrated, he henceforth considered inevitable a ‘sharp division between the two irreconcilable parts’.

Gropius had already expressed these views earlier, in a session of Werkbund’s executive committee taking place in June 1919. There he accused the organizations’s directorate of authoritarianism and of promoting an ‘imperialism of taste’. The only way for the organization, he stressed, was to exclude all art-related issues from its programme, to direct its energies to the production of ‘good quality commodities,’ and to wholly abstain from publishing any instructive textbook; he saw its task in ‘leading the unskilled worker to crafts and ameliorating the condition of the art proletariat’. Gropius’s mistrust was directed towards the Werkbund’s attempts to outline and promote through its state connections policies seeking to regulate artistic practice (of course this is another reverberation of the 1914 debate on ‘types’). Art could not be taught; it was a natural gift, hence the artist should evade strict control and retain his creative independence: ‘we should not just spread knowledge, but also education of the heart’. Of course, this education would necessarily produce its collateral damages. In the new transitory schools (the goal was their dissolution into workshops), the artist-teacher would provide designs, the engineer and the businessman would consult on production-related difficulties, and craftsmanship

32 Otto Bartning letter to Walter Gropius (27 May 1921), NG 10/127, Papers II (123).
33 See the letter of Walter Gropius to Bartning (2 June 1921), NG 10/124, Papers II (123).
34 See ‘Bericht über die Vorstands-Sitzung des DWB am 30. Juni 1919’, Karl-Ernst-Osthaus-Archiv, Werkbund-Archiv, 1/270, p. 6. This source will be hereafter quoted as KEO/DWB-Archiv followed by the number of the document.
would absorb the now ‘redundant draftsman’. The Werkbund’s failure to reconsider and reorganize its programme along this line would inevitably lead to a split between the old generation and the radical youth.

Peter Behrens’s response is particularly interesting, as it shows that at stake was the means of the intervention in the sphere of culture and not its character per se. To put it differently, both factions seem to have conceived their role as that of an ‘enlightened avant-garde,’ and the conflict only revolved around the relationship of art with the state. Behrens insisted that the Werkbund should keep on trying to use politics in order to influence not just craftsmen but the ‘entire art world’ against the specialization of arts.

Bruno Taut, on the other hand, elucidated the position of the Werkbund’s radical faction: ‘As it stands now, the young artists feel that it would be best to let the Werkbund fall asleep. To be sure, the Werkbund idea is always new, it just depends on the way it will be disclosed.’ Taut argued for the necessity to ‘rejuvenate’ the Werkbund, whose prestige appeared ‘repulsive’ to the young artists, and he suggested to bring closer the organization’s executive committee and branch office by electing a chairman to preside over both bodies, and to complement them by appointing a ‘council which must consist of radical and only radical artists’ directing all artistic matters.

Annoyed with the generational division between a radical youth and a backward old guard, Behrens proposed ‘a noble competition’ to judge ‘who among us is really progressive’. He clearly objected to the attempt of the AfK members to monopolize the status of the radical-progressive artist exclusively on the basis of their age. For, in purely theoretical terms, most specifically on the concept of artistic labour in capitalist economy, the two organizations did not essentially differ, and this is why the young radicals so passionately evoked the generational gap. And precisely because Behrens considered insignificant those theoretical differences, he invited the artists of the Arbeitsrat für Kunst to promote their goals through the Werkbund. Karl Bertisch, another member of the organization’s executive committee, sided with Behrens, calling for the formation

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37 Ibid.
39 Ibid.
of a group of ‘young artists within the Werkbund’ as a chance to see what the radicals had to offer besides rhetoric. Finally, Poelzig made a more concrete offer, inviting the AfK to join the Werkbund and obtain half of the executive committee’s chairs, a committee presided by an artist, with the AfK allowed to nominate its own candidates for this position of chairmanship.

Taut replied that the AfK could only join on the condition that the Werkbund would adopt a clear-cut and solid programme, which would naturally conform to the interests of the ‘radical youth’. He also suggested a list of candidates for the committee that included, among others, Otto Freundlich, César Klein, Walter Gropius, Heinrich Campendonk and himself.

However, the primary issue revolved around the Werkbund’s relationship with commercial interests, industrialists and the political arena. Taut defined art as a purely creative process which should be protected from commercialism. This approach generated the reaction of several Werkbund members (Karl Bertsch, Bernhard Stadler, Peter Bruckmann, and Peter Jessen), who criticized Taut for reverting back to the concept of the Kunstvereinigung, i.e. an organization exclusively dedicated to the advancement of artists’ interests. Ernst Jäckh summarized those reactions, noting that Taut showed that he had misunderstood the whole Werkbund idea: the Werkbund was not a Künstlerbund, but a union of artists and industrialists, businessmen and craftsmen. Its goal was the communication and collaboration of all those elements. For Jäckh, the Werkbund could never be ‘rejuvenated’ in the way Taut wished, namely through ‘the suppression of non-artists’. An organization directed exclusively by artists would be just another artists’ association – therefore, the end of the Werkbund idea.

It is evident that at play was also a generational conflict. Gropius referred to the ‘youth’ as the symbol of a new artistic avant-garde, which was at odds with the conservative bourgeois moralists of the old guard, notably those supporting the interests of industry and commerce. This clash of generations is also reflected in Gropius’s and Taut’s successful campaign against Karl Scheffler’s participation.

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41 Ibid.
42 KEO/DWB-Archiv, 1/270, p. 11.
43 KEO-DWB-Archiv, 1/270, p. 16.
44 The word ‘radical’ was also used as a synonym of the ‘youth’, or the ‘New Man’ in the Novembergruppe as its founding member Karl Jacob Hirsch later recalled; see Kliemann, Die Novembergruppe, p. 9.
in the Werkbund’s Stuttgart Convention (6-9 September 1919), the first after the war. Scheffler had announced his intention to present a new ethical-economical programme propagating the manufacture of commodities made by German raw materials, a project conceived to give impetus to the German productive forces, and he wanted Werkbund to play a central role in this campaign.

Fearing an irredeemable split, the committee of the Werkbund gave in to Gropius’s and Taut’s demands and withdrew Scheffler’s programmatic lecture. Scheffler himself published his programme in his own periodical, Kunst und Künstler, suggesting the organization’s future direction. Predictably, he opposed Gropius’s and Taut’s idea of organizations with limited membership, arguing that the Werkbund was still a medium-sized institution, which should choose to move along an expansive line in order to more effectively influence not only producers but also consumers — exactly the kind of Geschmacksimperialismus that Taut and Gropius opposed.

Was this emphasis on the limited, flexible and straightforward form of artistic organization the product of a theoretical concern or simply of necessity? Were not the ideas of the AfK about the ideal form of an avant-garde association conditioned by its failure to attract wider support, especially from the industry (as Robert Bosch’s denial of financial support indicates) and to take up the Werkbund’s leadership?

We can glimpse the self-stylization of the AfK as an avant-garde on another occasion, Gropius’s reply to an architect from Leipzig, Otto Paul Burghardt, who had complained about the elitist character of the group’s programmatic text, Bruno Taut’s ‘A Programme for Architecture’. Gropius reacted by pointing out that only ‘a small minority which pursues clear ideas in the most definite way,’ can compile such programmatic texts. He rejected as unrealistic and utterly unproductive Burghardt’s proposal to make a call on all German architects and

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46 And indeed, when Scheffler published his programme he argued for the necessity to subjugate all life to a ‘moral dictatorship’; Scheffler, ‘Arbeitsprogramm’, p. 47.  
47 Otto Paul Burghardt letter to AfK (8 February 1919), NG 10/232, NG 10/232x, Papers II (123).
draft a new all-inclusive programme, arguing that a discussion with all professional architects would ‘immediately turn strong ideas into watered-down compromises’. The AfK, continued Gropius, was fighting precisely against those masses of architects united ‘long ago in large associations, such as the Association of German Architects, but which never brought to light artistic ideas en bloc. The masses can indeed team up around economic issues attempting to carry them through, but never around artistic ideas’.48

He repeated the same idea a month later, in a letter to the painter Ewald Dülberg: ‘large associations of artists are an absurdity, as experience always shows; they can offer nothing more than small committees’.49 Evidently inspired by the Workers’ and Soldiers’ Councils, which though rapidly wiped out by the Socialist Democratic government were still active in the country (and to which the name of the group itself pointed), Gropius suggested the creation of artistic committees across Germany on the condition that they should first seek ‘inner stability,’ and then attempt an ‘external cohesion’. Thus, he proposed the gradual formation of a loosely associated network of self-managed artists’ committees modelled on the AfK and sharing certain principal ideas. What he wanted to avoid was a bureaucratization similar to that experienced within the ranks of the Werkbund.

Hence, for Gropius, artists could not productively collaborate in institutions modelled on the organizations of the modern working-class movement such as trade unions. He rejects these organizations as exclusively economically motivated, in the same way that the Werkbund denounced the Fachverband für die wirtschaftlichen Interessen des Kunstgewerbes before the war. We can summarize his thesis as follows: Art proceeds only through the effort of a few talented individuals; it is the strength of their ideas that generates movements and not vice versa, as is the case in politics or in the economy. Of course, this was at odds with the role of the Workers’ Councils which sought a grassroots representation of workers. Consequently, Gropius’s conception of the AfK is practically an inversion of the Workers’ Councils idea: an elite organization which works upon the community, hence establishing the very distance (between the leading and the executive force) that the Workers’ Councils attempted to

48See the letter of Gropius to Burghardt (6 March 1919), NG 10/231, Papers II (123).
49See the letter of Gropius to Dülberg (14 April 1919), GN 10/238. In 1926 Dülberg was employed at the Bauhaus where he mainly worked as a stage designer.
eliminate. This elitism is bound to favour the eminent artists at the expense of the undistinguished. This is why the avant-garde was to remain selective in its associations. This is also evident in the way bourgeois arts and crafts reformers saw the anonymous drafts- and craftsmen. The exclusionary policies of the avant-garde, then, reproduce the old hierarchies of cultural production.

To sum up: the self-stylization of the AfK as a group of the ‘radical youth’ sought to mark a distinction between itself and the Werkbund. However, a closer look at its programme reveals that its ‘new’ ideas were but a radical rephrasing of crafts reform proposals that had been already formulated by Werkbund supporters (or the second wave of the Kunstdrwerbebewegung) before the war. The basic ideas of the reform (the technical training of craftsmen in workshops supervised by the artist-designer, the function of those workshops as sites for ‘a new economy of talent’, the subordinate position of draftsmen in relation to the ‘total’ artist) are preserved in the programme of the AfK. But the discussions in the Werkbund’s meetings during the first two years after the war reveal the essential difference between the two organizations. The members of the AfK wished to promote themselves to a leading administrative position that would enable them to more effectively control the market. This reflects their disapproval of the ways the old Werkbund dealt with both industry and the market, which restricted the artist’s bargaining power towards these forces. And this antagonism between the old and young generation of applied arts reformers was highlighted in a period of a general reorganization of the state’s cultural institutions. However, the radical rhetoric of the AfK did not suffice to conceal its structural and theoretical affinity with the old guard it sought to substitute; to put it simply, its programme did not convince those who were familiar with the pre-war crafts reform ideas. Thus, its attempt to mark its distance from the past and to present itself as a new type of avant-garde group by silencing its kinship with its main antagonist, the Werkbund, failed.

50 The idea of an elite of artists with potentially dictatorial authority on Germany’s culture is also explicit in Otto Bartning’s proposals for a thorough reform in arts and crafts education drafted on behalf of the AfK at the end of 1918. Bartning suggested that a ‘chosen supervisory council’ would be ‘guarding’ the quality of designs in the field of the applied arts, an artistic council ‘which would have the power to grant or withhold the right to train apprentices (Lehrrecht) to any artist, craftsman, or institution in the country’; see Franciscono, Walter Gropius, p. 132.
Excursus: Organizing radicalism

In the confrontation between the AfK and the Werkbund we noticed how the former’s conception of artistic avant-garde, that of a small-scale, elitist group exclusively consisting of radical artists and architects, was rejected by the Werkbund’s old guard as a reactionary retreat to the organizational form of a *Kunstvereinigung* or *Künstlerbund*. This is not a mere game of terms, for the various similar sounding names of the countless groups of artists emerging in Germany from the 1890s onwards are full of nuances disguising the complex set of structural shifts of the epoch.

To further explore this tension over the relationship of artistic groups with tradition and modernity, we need to go back to the prewar period and discuss an older confrontation: that between the *Allgemeine Deutsche Kunstgenossenschaft* (General German Art Association; founded in 1856), the umbrella organization of the nineteenth-century German Art Societies (*Kunstvereine*), and the Secessionists, united in 1903 in a new institution, the *Deutscher Künstlerbund* (German Artists League).51 This is crucial to understand the conditions under which certain groups of artists and critics conceived of themselves as the avant-garde of an artistic movement and, most importantly, what the socio-political repercussions of this model of artistic organization were. Through this prism we can also better grasp why the issue of the Werkbund’s future form (a mass organization or an elite group of the best talents) was so central in the dispute between the Werkbund and the AfK.

The *Kunstgenossenschaft*, as Peter Paret notes, ‘would have preferred its local

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51 I fully agree with Robert Jensen’s formulation of the Secession movement’s historical significance: ‘Although customarily the Secessions are viewed as institutional expressions of modernism, it is more useful to see them as products of a far wider crisis in the organizational effectiveness of the traditional educational and exhibition societies of the nineteenth-century art world’; Jensen, *Marketing Modernism in Fin-de-siècle Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), p. 167. Jensen observes that ‘the actual politics of Secessionism is best considered as reformist;’ ibid, p. 168; though he uses this argument to differentiate Secessions from ‘avant-garde movements’, it is precisely this element that unites them. I argue that it is on this basis that Secessionism is exposed as the first manifestation of avant-gardism in the fine arts, and the continuity of this line is underlined by the role secessionists played in the *Jugendstil* movement and the significance of the latter for the radical revision of arts and crafts ideas that culminated in the Werkbund. Hans-Ulrich Simon has convincingly argued about the vital relationship between *Jugendstil* and German avant-gardism in his study *Sezessionismus: Kunstgewerbe in literarischer und bildender Kunst* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1976), pp. 173-86, 201-14, and 227-35.
chapters to limit membership and function as guilds; instead they were compelled to take on many of the characteristics of trade unions in a free economy, which could not afford to be too exclusive.'

As a result, both the Kunstgenossenschaft and the Verein Berliner Künstler (which in Berlin constituted the local chapter of the Kunstgenossenschaft) had to be sensitive to the demands of their broad membership, especially to their desire to participate in the official Salon. As a professional and welfare organization for artists, the Kunstgenossenschaft chose to cope with an increasingly competitive market by strengthening its alliance with state institutions (the Salon and the Academy), notwithstanding their already apparent ineffectiveness before the free market as well as before the issue of the Kunstproletariat. In her path breaking study of the Munich Secession, Maria Makela has shown that the motives for the creation of the first Secession of the German-speaking world were primarily economic. The Secession emerged precisely as a reaction against the decision of the Kunstgenossenschaft’s majority for a return to the democratic principles of the association, which had been violated in the international exhibitions of 1889, 1890, and 1891. Which was this democratic tradition opposed by the seceding artists? Makela describes the Kunstgenossenschaft of Munich as the principal organization of the art proletariat, whose pressure on the organization’s board dictated its peculiar democratic policies:

Several exhibition policies, for instance, were designed to ensure equitable treatment for all artists, regardless of reputation or position. Primary among these was a regulation that prohibited artists whose works had previously been honored in any of the international exhibitions from again receiving recognition, regardless of their talent or the quality of their submitted pieces. Although the Genossenschaft admitted their work jury-free to future salons, it preferred to commend those artists who had not yet been granted awards.

53Peter Paret, *The Berlin Secession: Modernism and Its Enemies in Imperial Germany* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1980), p. 31. However, in one of his earliest speeches, Feodor Dietz, the Kunstgenossenschaft’s first chairman interpreted the new organization as an indication that the artists had grasped one of the fundamental laws of the time: ‘the law of association!’; quoted in Heinrich Deiters, *Geschichte der Allgemeinen Deutschen Kunstgenossenschaft von ihrer Entstehung im Jahre 1856 bis auf die Gegenwart* (Dusseldorf: August Bagel, 1903), p. 10. Dietz pointed out that ‘wherever we look in the world that surrounds us, we notice associations appearing and substituting in their own way the outdated patterns of the medieval fraternities and guilds’; ibid.

The creation of the *Künstlerbund* itself marked the secession of Germany’s eminent and self-consciously ‘modern’ artists from their traditional professional organization, the *Kunstgenossenschaft*. The way those modern artists framed their rupture is particularly interesting. In a programmatic text, Harry Graf Kessler, the *Künstlerbund*’s patron, explained that the task of the new institution was to safeguard the artists’ freedom that had been suppressed by the traditional art institutions of the Reich (including the government and the Ministry of Culture). According to Kessler, the government, the *Kunstgenossenschaft* and the *Verein Berliner Künstler* did not oppose a specific artistic tendency but rather the artist’s individuality (*Eigenart*); this was why they equally rejected artists representing different tendencies.\(^5^4\) The talented artist, the creative personality, had no place in a mass association ruled by the mediocre and the dilettante. Kessler argued that the Kunstgenossenschaft stood ‘for a different principle’: ‘its organization is based on the general right to vote, hence anyone who somehow makes something like art can join it. Therefore, those who have their say in its resolutions and actions are the great many, which, by nature, are hostile to the individual.’\(^5^5\)

For Kessler, the Secessions had tackled one of the central problems caused by this kind of art politics that was unfavourable to the individual talent. How? - By organizing ‘exhibitions that take up only the individual, not the mass of the ‘respectable’ but impersonal painted commodified pictures (*Bildware*).\(^5^6\) The programmatic task of the *Künstlerbund* was to coordinate the actions of the various Secessions of the German-speaking world, most specifically to organize a single great annual exhibition of all the Secessions (a modern anti-Salon). But this centralized initiative meant nothing less than the circumvention of the official, state-sponsored art trade and the fostering of a better organized network in support of the Secession movement – in effect the creation and control of a market for the ‘modern’ artists of the Secession. In Kessler’s own words:

> The *Künstlerbund* will also be more successful than the Secessions in achieving the material purpose of elite exhibitions: the conquest of the market by the talent. For the splintering of the market through the three or

\(^5^5\)Ibid., p. 193.
\(^5^6\)Ibid.
four concurrent Secession exhibitions created unfavourable conditions for the achievement of this goal. [...] The Künstlerbund will draw the attention of all Germany to a single exhibition. And as this exhibition will move from the north to the south and from there to central Germany, so an equally wide or even wider circle will come into contact with it. The market will become at the same time broader and more uniform.\(^5\)

Thus, the turn-of-the-century confrontation between the \textit{Kunstgenossenschaft} and the Secessionists reflects wider structural changes within the German art world or, to put it differently, it is symptomatic of a general mobility within German art institutions with different interest groups clashing for the redistribution of positions (or the conquest of new positions, taking advantage of newly emerging prospects), occurring in an environment drastically changed by a gradually expanding free market, bourgeois social reforms and the effects of industrialization and urbanization in the field of production.

The responses of the art world towards these groundbreaking societal transformations were inevitably of an experimental character, and this may account for the oscillation between democratic principles and exclusionary politics noticeable across stylistic tendencies amongst both modernists and their enemies. In the nineteenth century, this is evident in the exclusionary exhibition politics of both, on the one hand, the ‘conservatives’ of the Academy and the (allegedly democratic) \textit{Kunstgenossenschaft} and, on the other hand, the ‘progressives’ of the Secession: the former resorted to nationalism, using national identity to regulate the art world; the latter to an elitism evident not only in discourse but also in practice, by posing the subjective, and hence arbitrary, criterion of artistic excellence as a way to narrow the membership of their own institutions. The Secessions’ organizations were closer to private clubs than associations, and this strict selection surrounded their members with the aura of the chosen few, embodying a new artistic elite.

By promoting aesthetic innovation and quality as a way to distance themselves from the older generation, the Secessionists intentionally excluded the mass of unrecognized young artists (in their discourse, the ‘mediocre’ and the ‘dilettantes’), thus decisively turning their back on the issue of the \textit{Kunstproletariat}. The secessionists’ elitism reveals an aristocratic conception of

artistic production and distribution of cultural capital that was at odds with the concurrent efforts of the Kunstgenossenschaft to embrace democratic forms of organization (abandoning the model of the guild and approximating that of the modern association and the trade union). The paradox here lay in the fact that the old mass organizations of artists, the ‘conservatives’, tended to adapt the progressive means of modern political representation, whilst the ‘progressives’ promoted modern art by resorting to non-democratic, elitist (hence politically conservative) means of organization.

Correspondingly, the vanguard of the German arts and crafts movement (such as the Werkbund) sought to establish its position in the cultural field by employing the same strategy already tested by the Secession movement. As we have seen, its decisive break with the official institutions of crafts producers was first manifested in an elite exhibition: the 1906 Third German Applied Arts Exhibition of Dresden, which favoured the artist-designer at the expense of traditional crafts producers. From the exhibition of Dresden to Muthesius’s 1907 lectures at the Berlin Handelshochschule, and from there to the formation of the Werkbund, the applied arts reformers follow the secessionist pattern. Nevertheless, the latter was considerably amended to accommodate to the necessities of not just a new profession, but of a field of practice that involved a significantly expanded set of interests compared to the traditional field of artistic production.

It is precisely because the Werkbund served an entirely new type of artist that it could not accept its relegation into a Kunstvereinigung. For contrary to the Secessionists, the Werkbund designers no longer perceived themselves as ‘mere’ artists, but as intellectual workers producing art. They wanted to have their own say not only in the production but also in the reproduction (mass distribution) of their creations. They had left the studio to enter the workshop; they had bypassed the art dealer to reach the businessman. This explains why the Werkbund insisted on the importance of its mass membership (proudly demonstrated in the last pages of its annual yearbooks): the latter was necessary for the success of a reform touching a broad and varied set of interests (of artists, businessmen, draftsmen, etc.), as well as for the infiltration of the respective state institutions with its supporters. The AfK’s demand for the artist’s full control of the organization would generate a grave conflict of interests that would threaten the Werkbund’s own existence.
2.3 A second moment of silence: Proletarian Culture and the German applied arts movement

I now propose to leave Germany and embark on a short voyage to revolutionary Russia, a voyage off the beaten path. The purpose of this journey is the documentation of a neglected encounter that is part of the avant-gardist’s professional politics: the encounter between German reform ideas and Russian revolutionary art theory. But the point is not to study how the latter influenced the early Weimar avant-garde groupings; instead, I shall argue that the new revolutionary theory was itself rooted in the intellectual legacy of the German movement for cultural reform. Focusing on the relationship between the German applied arts movement and the Proletkult, I want to stress the paradox that, in the period between 1918 and 1923, the vanguard of the former often invoked the latter’s theory to highlight its revolutionary profile, a theory, however, intimately connected with pre-war bourgeois reformism. The study of this paradoxical relationship can add to our understanding of the politics of the avant-gardist as a distinct type of professional. For these politics were based on the avant-gardist’s defiance of what he perceived as antiquated restrictions on artistic practices (imposed by traditional artists’ and craftsmen’ unions) and on his supposed economic disinterestedness. And the repression of the reformist roots of the ‘new’ revolutionary conception of artistic practice served precisely the affirmation of this heroic self-image of the avant-gardist.

The movement for Proletarian Culture (Proletkult) was the outcome of a long and intense debate within the Russian Social Democratic Party (transferred after 1903 to its seceded radical faction, the Bolsheviks) on the relationship of the intelligentsia to the workers’ movement and the revolution. It has been personified by historiography as an intra-party confrontation between Lenin and Alexander Bogdanov (1873-1928) (fig. 14). Proletkult was established nationwide as an institutional network of relatively autonomous cultural associations in 1917, reaching its peak around 1920 and ending its autonomous existence in 1932. It has been rightly perceived as the seed of the early Soviet artistic avant-garde, formulating ideas that were later elaborated within the constructivist and production-art circles. It is from this point of view that I shall attempt to illuminate a few commonalities with the radical artists of the early Weimar period,
especially those associated with the Arbeitsrat für Kunst and the Bauhaus. My argument is that the Proletkult provides an essential link with that very specific faction of the German avant-garde, which was developed within the Kunstgewerbebewegung. One can thus understand the former by studying the latter and vice versa.

Both the German applied arts and the Russian Proletkult movements strove for the emergence of a new culture, albeit of an essentially different kind. In the first case – especially during the Wilhelmine period – it was perceived as the fulfilment of an unfinished bourgeois revolution, whilst the second, the proletarian culture, represented an unparalleled, radically novel idea. Nevertheless, the two projects interweave in their ambitious intentions to reshape life. In other words, both projects had the same shape, the same structure, but different class contents. They both perceived capitalism as a force engendering a profound cultural crisis which demanded a full reform of life. Consequently, in both cases intellectual workers would play a pivotal role in the regeneration of culture. It was on the type of the intellectual that the two movements fundamentally differed. The German applied arts movement designated a leading role to a new kind of intellectual worker, working not in isolation, indifferent to practical concerns, but concentrated on the practical application of his ideas. As we have seen, his was a reform from above, addressed to the producers, but conceiving them as useful performers of his ideas. It was a hierarchical model of reform based on the discipline of the workers. In contrast, the Proletkult movement aspired to eliminate bourgeois mediation by raising the workers to the level of the intellectual/cultural expert, hence unifying theory and praxis. But the crucial question was: who would help the workers to accomplish this mission? Perhaps, a non-proletarian intellectual?

The two movements were also partly grounded in common theoretical origins. Alexander Bogdanov, the key theoretician of the Proletkult, had a significant link with the German Lebensreform movement: his ‘empiriomonist’ theory drew inspiration from German Monism (a philosophical system arguing against dualism and pluralism and for a unified system describing reality), particularly from the ideas of Ernst Mach, Ernst Haeckel, Richard Avenarius and Wilhelm Ostwald.58

58Monists were closely associated to the Gartenstadtgesellschaft, in which many Werkbund members also participated. For a draft of the statutes of the Monist Housing-Estates Society (Monistischen Siedlungsgesellschaft), an organization directly related to the German Garden City movement, see ‘Mitteilungen der Monistischen Siedelungs-Gesellschaft’, in Mitteilungen
Bogdanov attempted a multilayered, eclectic and complex synthesis of ideas, more precisely between Mach’s Empirio-Criticism and Haeckel’s Monism, Ostwald’s Energeticism and Marx’s Dialectic Materialism. The title of his three-volume magnum opus, Tektology: The Universal Organizational Science, is indicative of his endeavour to connect all scientific branches into an all-encompassing science able to reshape the world. Bogdanov propagandized the ‘socialization of science,’ its direction back to its source, the class of producers, the proletariat. To this end, he suggested the foundation of a ‘proletarian university’. In a nutshell, the universalization of science could only be achieved by and for the benefit of the single universal social class – the proletariat.

Misapplying Marx, Bogdanov interpreted two supposed achievements of modern industrial production, the unification of certain elements of physical and mental labour and a tendency towards collectivism, as signs of the development of ‘the methods of proletarian labor towards the direction of Monism and of conscious collectivism’. Those signs were supposedly fundamental in the main

des Deutschen Monistenbundes, 3 (1 March 1918), 43-47. In 1911, Wilhelm Ostwald, then president of the League of German Monists (Deutscher Monistenbund or DMB), founded the Brücke, an organization dedicated to international academic exchange. Between the latter, the DMB and the Werkbund there was a strong institutional affiliation and an overlapping of membership; among the figures active in all three institutions were pedagogue Max Hermann Baege, Peter Behrens, Fritz Hellweg (editor of the column ‘Die deutsche Werkbundbewegung’ in DMB’s organ Das Monistische Jahrbuch), Ernst Jäckh (executive secretary of the Werkbund), Hermann Muthesius, Karl Schmidt (director of the Deutsche Werkstätten), and philosopher Bruno Wille, a socialist and founding member of Berlin’s Freie Volksbühne. From 1912 onward Ostwald was also director of the independent Werkbund group for the scientific research into colour in art and had developed a colour wheel for the Werkbund, which was strongly criticized and renounced by the latter after the First World War; see Das Werk: Mitteilungen des DWB Farben-Sonderheft (October 1920), a special issue on the question ‘Are there mandatory laws of colour selection for artists?’. The periodical was edited by the Freien Gruppe für Farbkunst (Free Groups for Colour-Art) which repudiated Oswald’s theory. Among the latter’s members were Adolf Behne, Peter Behrens, G. F. Hartlaub, Fritz Hellweg, Adolf Hölzel, Alexei von Jawlenski, Paul Klee, Alexander Koch, Karl Ernst Osthaus, Max Pechstein, Hans Poelzig, Edwind Redslob, Richard Riemerschmid, Bruno Taut and Wilhelm Waetzold.


60Interestingly, Tektology derives from the Greek word tekon which means builder (whilst architekton is the chief, leading builder) thus we can trace here another terminological affinity with the applied arts reform theory.


62Alexander Bogdanov, ‘Wege des proletarischen Schaffens. Thesen (1920)’, in Proletkult 2, 47-51 (pp. 48-49).
institutions of the organized modern working-class movement: the Party, the trade union and the co-operative. Proletkult theory, then, shares certain quite distinct traits of the German Lebensreform movement, synthesizing liberal-bourgeois and socialist-reformist ideas and, at the same time, attempting to supersede them.

Bogdanov’s contact with Monist ideas occurred in a period of the latter’s influence on members of the revisionist faction of German Social Democrats. Significantly, an important forum for the (usually critical) discussion of these new ideas from a socialist point of view was the Sozialistische Monatshefte. Both the revisionists of the Sozialistische Monatshefte circle and Bogdanov sought to circumvent what they saw as a teleological tendency in Marxism derived by the adaptation of Hegel’s dialectical system – though this common revisionist attempt drove the two parts towards different directions: reformism and ultra-radicalism respectively. In particular, Bogdanov and the German Marxist revisionists shared a common uneasiness towards the unsatisfactory orthodox Marxist position on culture (the suppression of the question of culture in the base-superstructure equation). In Bogdanov’s position on proletarian culture as ‘the spirit of socialism already apparent in embryonic form within capitalist society and expressed

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63Bogdanov, ‘Wege des proletarischen Schaffens’, p. 49.
65See Erich Paul Jacobsen, From Cosmology to Ecology: The Monist World-View in Germany from 1770 to 1930 (Bern: Peter Lang, 2005), pp. 172-82. Notably, to celebrate Ernst Mach’s seventieth birthday, the social-democratic journal Die neue Zeit published a translation of Bogdanov’s preface to the Russian edition of the philosopher’s Analyse der Empfindungen (Analysis of Sensations); see A. Bogdanov, ‘Ernst Mach und die Revolution’, Die neue Zeit, 26 (1908), 695-700. The purpose of Bogdanov’s preface was, in his own words, ‘to make clear in what way Mach’s philosophy is necessary and useful to the consciously struggling proletariat and to the – from a different class descending – intelligentsia; to what extent it is not only generally necessary and helpful, but also directly sub specie revolutionis [under the aspect of revolution]’; Bogdanov, ‘Ernst Mach und die Revolution’, p. 696 (emphasis in original). He described Marxism as ‘nothing else but a scientific philosophy of social life’; Bogdanov, ‘Ernst Mach und die Revolution’, p. 698 (emphasis in original).
through the proletariat’s comradely collective working habits and organizational structures, one cannot miss a certain affinity with Eduard Bernstein’s concept of ‘evolutionary socialism’.

I do not argue here that Bogdanov was reformist; on the contrary, he fiercely rejected any possibility for a viable proletarian culture within the capitalist status quo. Nevertheless, his system partly overlapped with Bernstein’s critique of orthodox Marxism, and he also shared Bernstein’s optimism on the potential of the centralized modern institutions of the working class to transform social relations.

Nevertheless, the different ways same institutions – the trade unions – affected the two cultural movements in Germany and Russia is notable. As I have already briefly commented, the German trade union movement functioned to a great degree both as a platform for the discussion and dissemination of bourgeois reform ideas and as a significant factor for the appeasement of socialist radicalism. In contrast, Russian syndicalism radicalized ideas on social and cultural reform, altering the direction of the debate within Bolshevik circles ‘from the religious through the political to the cultural, or from ‘god-building’ […] to the idea of a proletarian culture’.

But what was the Monist lesson as regards artistic production? First, it highlighted the importance of objective scientific method, a method mystified in the past via its attribution to ‘inspiration’; second, it promoted the idea that every kind of labour (manual and intellectual) shared the same principle of method, an idea fostering interdisciplinarity: ‘Monism was expressed in the endeavour to blend art with the working life, to turn art into an instrument of the active aesthetic transformation of life’. Thus its spirit confronted ‘narrow guild-like specialization’. This all-encompassing science demanded a centralized organization. For Bogdanov, production should be brought under a common, general plan, and to illustrate this point he used the example of architecture, in which the carpenter, the builder, all people required, worked in unison for the

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realization of a common goal.\textsuperscript{70} The principle of Monism dictated that all methods of praxis and science can find a direct or indirect application in art and vice versa.\textsuperscript{71} All this is remarkably close to the Werkbund model of artistic labour. The emphasis on artistic practice based on scientific research and not just in ‘intuition’, the life-transforming mission of art, the total artist-designer embodying interdisciplinary praxis, and the delimitation of this new professional identity through an attack on surviving guild restrictions are the elements of Monist theory that attracted Werkbund artists. Paradoxically, then, two diametrically opposed attitudes towards the capitalist status quo are informed by a substantially similar concept of intellectual labour.

Of course, the revolutionary theorist strives to distance his project from its bourgeois model. For the Proletkult intellectuals only socialism could bring art into life, since in capitalism art could only exist either in separation from everyday life as ‘illusionistic contemplation’ (for example easel painting), or as a superficial, external ‘superimposition’ upon the everyday (crafts, decoration).\textsuperscript{72} A true socialist art, therefore, ought to substitute ‘the fetishized principle of l’art pour l’art with the principle of social and technical functionality,’ abolish the division between ‘high’ and ‘low’ art, and ‘raise the artistic technique of craftsmanship and primitive cottage industry to the highest forms of technology’:

Art must become an indivisible part of everyday life in its active representative forms (poster, advertising, agitprop, theatre, cinema) as well as in its material-organizing forms (psycho-physical culture, organization of mass games, festivities, processions and demonstrations, material equipment of everyday life, construction of objects.\textsuperscript{73}

But Proletkult opposes only an aspect of bourgeois art, the same one targeted by the applied arts movement. The distinction of the revolutionary theory from the latter cannot be established in these terms.

The radical bourgeois reformer and the worker-intellectual are also bound by their common concern with the professionalization of their models of practice. The

\textsuperscript{70}A. Bogdanow, \textit{Die Wissenschaft und die Arbeiterklasse} (Berlin: Die Aktion, 1920), p. 22.
\textsuperscript{71}Bogdanov, ‘Wege des proletarischen Schaffens’, p. 50.
\textsuperscript{73}Ibid., pp. 52-53.
issue of ‘professionalization’ held a central position in the Proletkult, when, after
the October Revolution, it attempted to set its ideas in practice. Reporting on the
second Moscow Proletkult Convention (20-25 March 1919), for instance, Valerian
Fedorovic Pletnev (1886-1942), chairman of the working committee of the
organization’s branch in Moscow, referred to the complaint of the supporters of
professionalization that long working hours inhibited Proletkult members from
their full dedication to their artistic work. Those promoting professionalization
suggested the establishment of a curriculum encompassing all artistic fields. Its
success would depend on a selection of the most talented students in Proletkult
workshops, who, exempted from their work in factories and funded by state
scholarships, would devote their time and creative talent exclusively to artistic
work. Those students would be guided by specially trained, professional artists
towards the organization of a new proletarian culture, the product of a critical
reception of the old culture and new scientific training in a variety of modern
artistic techniques. The adherents of this position stressed the importance of
technical education, the ‘arming of the proletariat with the masters’ knowledge.’
This would gradually enable young workers to master the technical knowledge of
bourgeois artists, transmit it to the non-specialized workers, and thus help create
an unmediated, truly autonomous proletarian culture.

The response of those rejecting the idea of professional proletarian artists is
equally interesting. They argued that a proletarian pulled away from production
would be deprived of his work-related technical experience; the new proletarian
artist would thus lose contact with the production process in a moment when he
most needed a ‘pronounced class-psychology’. The danger here was twofold: the
alienation of the worker from his class and his susceptibility to bourgeois
influences. Notably, the supporters of professionalization were even derogatorily
identified with the German revisionists of the SPD, the ‘traitors of the working
class, the professionals of the political and economical movement, the Noskes,

74 Valerian Fedorovic Pletnev, ‘Über den Professionalismus’ trans. Uwe Brügmann, in
Proletkult 2, 35-43 (p. 35). Also see Mally, Culture of the Future, pp. 152-59.
75 Pletnev, ‘Über den Professionalismus’, p. 36.
76 Ibid.
77 Ibid., p. 41. The worker-intellectual Fedor Kalinin (1882-1920) criticized this standpoint as a
‘fetishization of physical labor’; he argued that working-class ideology is not determined by
physical labour, but by the general mode of production and from the position of the working
class within it; Fedor Kalinin, ‘Über den Professionalismus der Arbeiter in der Kunst’,
Proletkult 2, 44-47 (p. 45).
Eberts, Scheidemmans, Legiens’. 78

The second main argument against professionalization concerned the indefinite time-limits of artistic development itself. Since artistic training was an infinite process, there was no sense in offering workers time off their regular jobs, to extract them from production in order to cultivate their artistic dexterities and then send them back to industry. The proposal of the anti-professionalism bloc was to abolish the division between arts and crafts, ‘to transform the entire production into a workshop,’ to create a single ‘art of working’. This demanded a radical reconfiguration of artistic practice itself: the artist should be transformed from a mere copyist into a ‘designer of a new, bright life’. 79 Thus, both theses converged on a radical demand to bring art into life, into production. Only the method, the prescription for the desired outcome – proletarian culture – differed. And it is this discussion about professionalization, ultimately a discussion about the appropriate technical training of workers, which sheds light on the interconnection between the Proletkult and the German applied arts movement.

A comment on the background of some key Proletkult members is necessary to underscore how both movements, though aiming at different goals, faced the same problems, particularly that of agency. Pletnev worked as a joiner for nineteen years before joining the Proletkult, first as director of Moscow’s ‘Workers’ Theatre’ and from 1920 until 1932 as the chairman of Proletkult’s All-Russian Council; Kalinin, the son of a weaver, ‘began factory work at an early age’; he then studied in Bogdanov’s ‘proletarian university’ in Capri to become a key theorist of the early movement; Vladimir Kirilov was a shoemaker’s apprentice; Aleksei Mashirov, a metalworker, and so forth. Aleksandr Mgebrov of Petrograd’s theatre department offers a vivid image of Proletkult students in his 1933 autobiography:

Who wasn’t drawn to our little light – children, young girls, youth from the barricades, greybeards in homespun coats and baste shoes from the countryside, poets no one had ever heard of, who previously had scratched out their verses in a scrawl in cellars, under the eaves of stone houses, at their workbench, or behind a plow. Until then I had never seen such characters and costumes in my life as those appeared in the Proletkult. 80

78Kalnin, ‘Über den Professionalismus der Arbeiter in der Kunst’, p. 44.
80See Mally, Culture of the Future, p. 88. For the professional background of Proletkult
What we encounter here – similarly to those craftsmen joining the Handwerker- and Kunstgewerbeschulen in Germany – are ‘laborers secretly in love with useless things’, labourers whom the opponents of professionalization, perhaps inadvertently, ‘reconciled’ to their state. It is this constant tension in the reform of arts and crafts, a tension between those workers wishing to escape the drudgery of specialized material production for a broader and intellectually more enticing occupation producing not necessarily ‘useful’ products, and their professional reformer-educator, who also happens to assert for himself the role of an all-rounder, not a specialist. In contrast to this expert, for workers and craftsmen, the abandonment of the workshop was a symbolical identity transgression, from the status of the anonymous producer to that of the artist.

Thus, the artisans and the industrial workers with artistic aspirations that were enmeshed in the arts and crafts reform in Germany or in the cultural revolution of the Proletkult, the producers who perhaps sought to produce ‘useless’ things and who lacked the time for doing so, seem indeed to ‘seek to appropriate for themselves the night of those who can stay awake, the language of those who do not have to beg, and the image of those who do not need to be flattered,’ namely that of the respectable bourgeois artist-intellectual. In fact, German arts and crafts reformers seeking to separate the wheat from the chaff, or the artistically inclined craftsman from the ‘untalented’, who was to be directed back to his trade or to industry, and the Proletkult functionaries against ‘professionalism’ disturbed with the prospect of a threatened class-consciousness, blocked in similar ways the aspirations of those workers. For the interests of the artistically inclined individual had to be sacrificed in favour of the general production, be it national or socialist.

A look at Proletkult’s pedagogical practice reveals this tension. We know that the ‘Central Proletkult Club of Moscow F. I. Kalinin’ organized a Department of Visual Arts (IZO), where education was divided into a theoretical and a practical side. The theoretical part included courses on abstract art, easel painting, ‘engineer and construction art’; the technical part instructed students in textile and

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wood-processing industry, graphic and decorative arts.\textsuperscript{83}

In spring 1922, Boris Arvatov reformed the curriculum of IZO. His major change was the elimination of the workshops for easel painting and their direction exclusively towards assignments directly related to production.\textsuperscript{84} The works were of a propagandistic character: banners, book covers, designs for broadsheets, insignia, trademarks, posters.

Arvatov’s initial aim was to connect art directly with the demands of industry and working-class institutions such as trade unions. However, reality frustrated his hopes, and the workshops soon focused on the production of propaganda material. But even his initial call for ‘production art’ approximated to a great extent the attempts of the Werkbund’s vanguard towards this objective. In both cases, the ambition to connect art with modern life could only materialize through the support of industry. The pathway of art in modernity had to pass through industrial production. The unwillingness of industry to cooperate, then, inevitably relegated the artist from the envisioned position of an active Lebensgestalter to the passivity of propagandizing visions of a new world or culture – a superficial decoration of the everyday, not an active penetration of reality.

Taking the above into account, I cannot agree with the following thesis:

Historically, the Productivists were the first to practically challenge the modern concept of artistic labour within the system of industrialized production. The Arts and Crafts Movement, the Deutscher Werkbund and the Bauhaus, as major examples of collective attempts to re-organize the theory and practice of artistic labour, all approximated engineerist, and in some cases even productivist practices, but they did not fundamentally question artistic labour in relation to the system of reproduction of which they were part. Their challenge was fundamentally one to art, not one of labour. This fundamental understanding of Entkunstung from the characteristics of artistic labour was intrinsic to what became translated as Productivism, and it was possible only within the state of revolution, within a collective social attempt at a fundamental reformulation of the terms of labour. As part of a project to achieve a socialist society, Entkunstung differs sharply from its contemporary and also its subsequent counterparts in the

\textsuperscript{83}Der Zentrale Klub F. I. Kalinin des Moskauer Proletkult’, \textit{Proletkult} 2, 86-92 (p. 90). There was also a course on German Expressionism, another indication of the contacts between Russian and German artists.

capitalist West.\textsuperscript{85}

My objection is not so much about whether or not the Werkbund’s or the Bauhaus’s challenge of the concept of artistic labour was narrowly circumscribed within the aesthetic field, though, as I have argued, their projects clearly exceeded it. My concern has more to do with a problematic acceptance of the avant-garde’s self-presentation based on the overestimation of its intentions and a neglect of its practice. To put it differently, there is indeed a marked difference in the theory and rhetoric of Soviet Productivism and the Werkbund or the Bauhaus, but the success of all those endeavours did depend on a restructuring of production and a reform (or complete transformation) of the market which never materialized. And it is precisely the failure of this plan – to bring art into production on the artists’ own terms – that reveals the limits and conceptional affinities of both projects. Thus the avant-garde’s self-stylization must be challenged: one must move from statements of intention founded on expectations or miscalculations of real conditions (such as the organization of Soviet economy on a genuinely collectivist basis) to the hard facts.

Boris Arvatov, a key Productivist theorist, seems to have been well aware of both the \textit{Kunstgewerbebewegung} and the Werkbund, and the way he handles and contrasts them with the Soviet ‘art into production’ project is indicative of the avant-garde’s process of silencing that I discuss here. To begin with, Arvatov outlines the central problem of modern art in a way quite similar to those in the Werkbund circle: he detects a grave contradiction between the capitalist ‘technology of mass production (industry, radio, transport, newspaper, scientific laboratory)’ and the backward ‘handicraft’ state of bourgeois art.\textsuperscript{86} He then argues that bourgeois individualism will always impede a fundamental fusion between mechanical technique and scientific research, on the one hand, and art on the other, foregrounding precisely the engineerist spirit as ‘the official goal of the

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\textsuperscript{86}Boris Arvatov, ‘Die Kunst im System der proletarischen Kultur’, in Hans Günther and Karla Hielscher (eds. and trans.), \textit{Kunst und Produktion} (Munich: Carl Hanser, 1972), 11-36 (p. 11). The text was published in Russian in 1926.
\end{footnotesize}
proletarian praxis of the present. The essence of this spirit is ‘functionality,’ and it is this term that urges the Soviet thinker to concede that ‘naturally, bourgeois culture also came to the idea of functionality’. He immediately adds, though, that ‘the concept was applied here in purely aesthetic terms’. Overgeneralizing things to draw a distinct line separating bourgeois reformism from the proletarian experiment, Arvatov contends that for the bourgeois aesthetes ‘functional’ means ‘beautiful’ and ‘beautiful’ is what influences the consumer. Therefore, proletarian art is distinguished from bourgeois art in its aim to establish a universal functionality, which unites the technical, social and ideological functionality and contains the handling of the material (constructivity, economy, consideration of its qualities etc.) as well as formal organization (renunciation of external ornamentation, stylization after the model of past stylistic forms, of illusionism and traditional patterns) and modernity, and it is applied to the demands of everyday life.

But this is an artificial distinction. Arvatov’s notion of ‘universal functionality’ could have easily found its place in the programme of the Arbeitsrat für Kunst or in a Bauhaus publication. Art as an instrument for a creative re-shaping of life (Lebensgestaltung), a plan with distinct liberal-bourgeois origins is baptized revolutionary due to an expectation of a future, fully socialist economy (and remember we are still in the years of Lenin’s New Economic Policy, which tolerated a degree of free trade).

Yet Arvatov’s critique of the capitalist art reform in the West is apposite with regard to the relationship between the professional designer and the craftsman. He rightly stresses the professional artists’ attachment to Geist, their unwillingness to really give up art for production, their attachment to a sense of social status which prevents them from concentrating on production and drives them from the factory back to their studios and to artistic assignments. He notes that the capitalist cannot rely on this oscillation of the professional artist between the purely aesthetic and the utilitarian, and it is for this reason that he seeks artistically trained personnel in a steadier and closer relationship to production – personnel

88Ibid., p. 15.
89Ibid.
90Ibid., p. 18.
91Boris Arvatov, ‘Kunst und Produktion in der Geschichte der Arbeiterbewegung’, in Kunst und Produktion, 37-51 (p. 39). This essay was also published in 1926.
that can only be recruited from the ranks of the proletariat. To this end, the bourgeoisie had established special institutions for training in industrial art. Arvatov underlines the hierarchical, class-dividing character of this system (the bourgeoisie organizes production and education, and the proletariat is just an instrument serving the former’s interests), and it is in this context that he mentions the Werkbund. He outlines the task of the Werkbund as ‘the aesthetic qualification of work and the planned organization of German production’. After the war and the revolution, he continues, the idea of a productivist art reemerged, and its ‘initiator was as before the bourgeois intelligentsia, revolutionized by the social catastrophe’; however the idea was again diluted, moving towards the direction of ‘applied arts’.

Interestingly, Arvatov mentions at this point that when the workers formed their own ‘production-art organization’, the Werkbund invited them to join its ranks but the workers rejected this proposal. Arvatov does not name this ‘production-art organization’ nor does he specify when its contact with the Werkbund occurred; moreover, he mentions that the workers’ organization disagreed with the Werkbund’s concept of the production of ‘expensive and rare commodities,’ turning instead itself towards the manufacture of ‘simpler, more economical and cheaper furniture that corresponded to the needs of the proletariat’s everyday life’ – an endeavour which did not materialize because Stinnes’s Germany did not enable the connection with industry necessary for the mass production of such commodities. It is hard to be completely certain from this description, but it seems very probable that with the ‘workers’ production-art organization,’ Arvatov actually means the Arbeitsrat für Kunst, and that he is also informed about the rejection of the Werkbund’s proposal for amalgamation. To my knowledge, there was no other similar organization, and we know that the AfK had contacts with Soviet artists through the German painter Ludwig Baehr, an ex-officer of the German army, who was in Russia at the end of the First World War and acted as a mediator between Russian and German artists.

93Ibid., p. 40.
94Ibid.
95Ibid.
96See AfK letter to Moscow’s Kollegium der bildenden Künstler (26 January 1919) NG 10/93; Ludwig Baehr’s letter to Gropius, 9 February 1919, NG 10/210 on the circulation of the AfK’s manifesto to Soviet artists, expected to be published in the Kollegium’s weekly paper; Walter
If this is indeed the case, then we have another misjudgement or falsification of the story, as the AfK was far from being a ‘workers’ organization’, stemming from the same bourgeois-reformist milieu as the Werkbund. Thus, Arvatov again attempts to solve the riddle of the perplexed relationship between bourgeois and proletarian productivism by cutting the Gordian knot, i.e. producing a clear but arbitrary division which highlights and benefits the ‘proletarian’ avant-garde position. Arvatov differentiates Russian productivism on the ground of the latter’s ‘conscious’ functionalism, its challenging of bourgeois aestheticism/autonomy of art as well as its battle against ornamentation, historicism and the technical backwardness of the ‘applied arts’, adding that the ‘proletarian’ reconfiguration of artistic labour is to be based on a drastic reform of arts and crafts education and training – a ‘polytechnic’ turn which will ‘organically’ attach art to production, producing a ‘new, organic style’.97

The similarities with the Kunstgewerbebewegung are again striking. Walter Gropius, for example, would often criticize the previous generations of academicians, craftsmen and draftsmen for building a wall between themselves and ‘the world of crafts and industrial production’ through their organization behind the concept of the ‘artistic vocation,’ at a time when they felt that the rest of the world did not take care of the artist. Contrary to this tendency, industry sought to win back ‘creative forces (Deutscher Werkbund but also better), who would develop the forms of its products.’98 Gropius set as the Bauhaus’s aim, on the one hand, to fight the misconceived ambition of the ‘entire architecture and Kunstgewerbe of the last generations [...] to make art,’ and, on the other, to foster

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Gropius, letter to Ludwig Baehr, 27 January 1919, NG 10/214, where he pointed to the coincidence and agreement between the programme of the AfK and that of the ‘Russian visual artists’ in all but one point: ‘the unification of all arts under the wings of a great architecture’; he asked from Baehr to communicate to the Russian artists that ‘this is a crucial attribute of our movement,’ and he designated the ‘unification of arts’ as ‘the problem of modern art,’ making clear that the group’s educational programme was also grounded in the same concept, ‘recognizing that art cannot be taught, the entire artistic activity (crafts, architecture, painting, sculpture) must be founded on this same basis and everyone must learn a craft in training workshops established by the state nationwide’; finally, he suggested a theoretical supplement: ‘to incorporate all sciences driving in the field of arts into a faculty of high architecture in the universities.’ See also Walter Gropius letter to Baehr, 4 February 1919, NG 10/211. Those contacts were further developed during the Bauhaus years; it should be noted that among the visitors to the Bauhaus’s first public exhibition in 1923 were Osip Brik and Vladimir Mayakovsky; see ‘Bericht der Allgemeinen Thüringischen Landeszeitung Deutschland vom 18. August 1923’, in Volker Wahl (ed.), Das Staatliche Bauhaus in Weimar: Dokumente zur Geschichte des Instituts 1919-1926 (Cologne: Böhlau, 2009), 303-05 (p. 304).

an engineerist spirit which would transcend ‘aesthetic and historical hindrances’, being able to ‘arrive to clear organic forms.’

2.4 Bauhaus radicalism: an educational revolution or evolution?

Monism provides an essential link between the Russian and the German artistic vanguard of the early 1920s: it is evoked in Arvatov’s quoted essays and it is also implied in Gropius’s early Bauhaus texts. In the second case, the idea of an ‘organic style,’ clearly defined and founded on the transgression of the division of labour and its re-unification (Einheitsarbeit) ‘which perceives the creative form-shaping process as an indivisible whole,’ is directly linked to the work of some ‘leading figures’ who give the tempo and direct the whole project. Gropius and Arvatov point to the same targets: l’art pour l’art, academicism, a retrogressive craftsmanship, the division of labour; their main difference lies in the fact that Gropius is not speaking on behalf of the proletariat, he does not believe in the creative potential of the proletariat’s collective work.

Gropius’s discourse manifests his and the Bauhaus’s self-stylization as an artistic avant-garde, or better, another avant-garde producing its own history. The question here is whether Bauhaus was revolutionary or evolutionary, whether it represented a break with all previous art reform programmes in Germany or their logical continuation and development. I shall agree with Walter Dexel’s characterization of the ‘Bauhaus-style’ as a ‘myth, an impermissible simplification and an unjust silencing of the many important forces which worked for the style of those times.’ We arrive, then, at a third crucial incident where history is

100 Ibid., p. 158.
101 Also see Kerstin Eckstein, ‘Inszenierung einer Utopie: Zur Selbstdarstellung des Bauhauses in den zwanziger Jahren’, in Christina Biundo and others (eds.), Bauhaus-Ideen 1919-1994: Bibliographie und Beiträge zur Rezeption des Bauhausgedankens (Berlin: Reimer, 1994), pp. 15-29. Eckstein argues that the Bauhaus’s successful appeal was owed to the fact that it presented a harmonized image to its publics, which suppressed any internal tensions caused by the uneasy symbiosis of different and often contradictory notions of artistic practice; instead Bauhaus consciously promoted itself as a ‘community’; ibid., p. 17.
written through silence, where generalizations blur interrelationships.

Perhaps one can discern a personal embitterment in Dexel’s passionate criticism. However, it seems that his was a view shared by many contemporaries who had supported or contributed to the arts and crafts pedagogical reform. Taking some of these voices into account, I shall maintain that the Bauhaus did actually represent an attempt, albeit a failed one, at a compromise between Germany’s different pre- and post-war radical artistic ideas.

To put it differently, the new institution advocated an ambitious reconciliation of *Geist* as intellect (or the Gestalter’s scientifically based form-shaping abilities) and *Geist* as spirit (the *true* artist’s inspiration, spontaneity and innate – non-teachable – talent). This was especially promoted by those Werkbund members who had objected to *Typisierung* as an attack on the artist’s individuality. Gropius’s critique of the Werkbund (which he sensed failed to serve the vocational interests of the modern artist) prompted him to seek for an alternative in smaller-scale alliances, whose limited membership could guarantee ideological coherence and more successful propaganda for the cause of art reform. Necessarily, this new kind of union could only be comprised of the most eminent or promising (talented) artists – an artistic elite, an avant-garde. Gropius made all this clear in his speech on the occasion of the first exhibition of works by Bauhaus students in June 1919:

Before the war, we put the cart before the horse and wanted to bring art to the community through a reversed organization. We designed ashtrays and beer mugs in an artistic way, wishing to gradually reach to the great building. All through cold organization. This was an exorbitant arrogance, upon which we were wrecked and now things will be reversed. No great spiritual organizations will arise, but small, secret, self-contained associations, lodges, huts (*Hütten*), conspiracies (*Verschwörung*), which want to nurse a secret, the kernel of a faith, and to design artistically, until a general, great, sustaining, spiritual-religious idea solidifies, which must ultimately find its crystal-clear expression in a great total work of art […] I firmly believe that, the forerunners and first instruments of such a new world-view […] [the artist] stands alone, and at best only a few friends understand him, but not the general public.103


103 Rede von Walter Gropius zur ersten Ausstellung von Schülerarbeiten am Staatlichen
A subtle yet unmistakable critique of the Werkbund which still resonates in Oskar Schlemmer’s ‘Manifesto’ for the Bauhaus’s 1923 exhibition, where after interpreting post-war ‘romantic anti-materialism’ as a reaction against ‘the triumph of industry and technology before the war,’ he outlined the Bauhaus’s mission as ‘the synthesis, synopsis, improvement and aggregation of everything positive into a powerful midpoint,’ adding that ‘the idea of the midpoint, far off from half measure and weakness, understood as a scale and balance, will turn into the idea of the German art.’

It is interesting that in his letter to Richard Riemerschmid of May 23, 1921, Walter Gropius defines the avant-garde artist in sharply different terms from Schlemmer’s, as precisely the artist who deviates from a compromising halfway. Gropius expresses his irritation with regards to an ‘extraordinarily skillful, but […] in terms of content really dangerous,’ speech delivered by Walter Riezler (art historian and director of the Stettin Museum) at a recent Werkbund meeting, a speech that was positively received by the majority of the members present. Riezler had criticized both extremes: reactionaries and radicals, neoclassicism and expressionism; both parties, he argued, ‘misunderstood life’. And it is this conciliatory distance from the two extremes that Gropius targets as ‘a hymn to the juste milieu [breite Mitte], to a culture of taste [Geschmackskultur]’ or a ‘half-goal’:

The strong, the guiding, the real artists are always in the true sense ‘radicals’ […] they are always in the minority, always exposed shock troops, in conflict with the juste milieu. I believe this was also the case once in the Werkbund. But now there is exhaustion among Werkbund artists, and that’s why its expansion energy flows in different channels.

The question here is how far from this ‘juste milieu’ was actually Gropius’s reform programme? If we compare it, for example, with Wilhelm Waetzoldt’s (Privy Councilor to the Ministry of Culture) Thoughts on the Reform of Art Schools, written in October 1920, we notice a remarkable concurrence of their

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basic principles. And the problem lies not just in the similarities between an avant-garde and a state-bureaucratic text; things are further perplexed by the fact that Waetzoldt defines his programme as a third, middle way, an alternative to the American and the Soviet system of arts administration. But it is exactly this wider political perspective that makes the Bauhaus lapse from the radical extreme back into the liberal-reformist midpoint.

The first basic principle of Waetzoldt’s programme was the abolishment of the academies of art, particularly of their ‘ill-fated scientification’. Waetzoldt justifies the tirades of the ‘youth’ against the academies, but he interprets the latter’s emphasis on intuition and the irrational in art as products of the academic fixation with ‘naturalism and intellectualism’. In a manner somewhat similar to Riezler’s which had so alarmed Gropius, he takes a distance from the youth’s revolutionary pathos which can be easily turned into a new dogma, and he defends a centrist position as a guarantee for the symbiosis of different aesthetic tendencies in the art schools of the future.

Workshop-training in crafts was the second principle of the reform, its ‘imperative foundation’. The motto was ‘Back to craftsmanship!’ A dual benefit was expected from this return to crafts. First, the amelioration of the problem of the Künstlerproletariat – the ill-trained graduates of the academies, failures as fine artists: ‘a talent which does not “suffice” for monumental sculpture could still achieve something good as a craftsman.’ Second, the requirement of a proof of crafts mastery as the prerequisite for admittance to art schools would limit the number of students and impose a stricter selection of talents, opening the gates of the school ‘only for those who can carry out a publicly-oriented, useful work.’ Crafts-training is conceived as a ‘uniform educational ideal,’ a praxis-oriented ideal based on the working of the material, its full knowledge, which is inextricable from form-creation and can bridge the cleft between manual and

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107 Ibid., p. 8. With the term ‘academic scientification’ Waetzoldt means the ‘pseudo-scientific,’ one-sided technical training of students in anatomy, perspective, shadowing, etc., which was exclusively directed to painting and drawing ‘from nature’.
108 Ibid., pp. 8-9.
109 Ibid., pp. 9-11.
110 Ibid., p. 12.
111 Ibid.
112 Ibid., p. 13. For this reason, the establishment of a ‘probationary period’ for the admitted students was also necessary (a kind of a Vor kurs); ibid., pp. 18-19. Waetzoldt notes that the young artists ‘form Weimar to Moscow’ agree on this reform of the art school curriculum.
intellectual labour.

All this is delineated by Waetzoldt not as a ‘radical’, but a pragmatic way as opposed to the ‘romantic, unworldly demand’ that ‘every future artist must pass through a proper Meisterschule (School for Master-craftsmen).’ Waetzoldt clearly discerns a tendency to misunderstand the actual objective of the arts and crafts reform which he wants to correct: its object was not the artist per se; it was not outlined to provide a better training to artists; its goal was the reorganization and modernization of the crafts sector: at stake was the future of the craftsman, not the artist, the benefit of the national economy at large, not the satisfaction of the interests of professional artists. Artists and craftsmen ought to follow convergent yet different paths.

Thus, despite a tension around the administration of the reform, programmatically there is still a convergence of ideas with the so-called art proletariat in its epicentre. This is again evident in Gropius’s concept of the Bauhaus. For instance, in a letter dated June 26, 1920, Gropius clearly stated that his criteria for selecting the Bauhaus’s personnel was not the needs of the candidates but the ‘exceptional value’ of their work. The Bauhaus is not conceived to nurture future artists but artistically inclined craftsmen; the objective is the application of the latter’s talent to his specialized trade, the improvement of crafts production and not a promotion of a new artistic style.

The third vital point of Waetzoldt’s reform plan is the transformation of the art schools into Schulmanufakturen, i.e. the execution of productive work in the school’s workshops. The workshops would accept contracts from businesses, which would be executed by the most talented students organized in working-groups under the guidance of a prominent artist. However, this reorientation of education would necessarily require a more intense discipline, and the students could not attend or skip courses at will; the student who ‘does not enjoy the strict service to art,’ warned Waetzoldt, ‘can join the dilettantes.’ Again, this resembles Bauhaus’s own organization of workshops, or better, perhaps not the actual, but the ideal function of its workshop production.

114 See the letter of Gropius to Behne (26 June 1920), NG 10/173, Papers II (123). Similarly, Waetzoldt writes: ‘Art schools are not general schools for everyone; they are special educational institutions for the talented”; Waetzoldt, Gedanken zur Kunstschulreform, p. 18.
115 Ibid., p. 20.
116 Ibid., p. 33.
I do not claim that Waetzoldt was as progressive as Gropius. His markedly patronizing tone towards the ‘youth’ reveals that he represented an older generation of ‘ethical idealists’. Waetzoldt’s ‘middle way’ was not just that between the American and the Soviet system of administration, but also between an older generation of artists and the young radicals, who, at the time of the publication of his programme, were confronting each other within the Werkbund. This generational clash is also reflected in the literature that Waetzoldt quotes in the end of his text. The reader encounters the names of Karl Scheffler, Theodor Fischer, Kurt Kluge, Fritz Schumacher, Wilhelm von Bode, Bruno Paul, Peter Behrens, August Endell, Georg Malkowsky, Wilhelm von Debschitz, Adolf Hölzel, Anatoli Lunatscharsky, Heinrich Sachs, Max Kutschmann, Franz Seeck and Max Slevogt, but Walter Gropius’s name is – without doubt deliberately – omitted.

Why this omission? The answer is to a great degree connected with the radical rhetoric of the younger generation of architects and artists who felt entitled to a position of a dictatorial authority over the organization of the reform. And their radical theses, as we shall see in more detail in the next chapter, were propagated so systematically and with such fierceness that they effectively subverted the plans for a middle way, a more inclusive concept of modern visual culture. That is, by repressing the theoretical commonalities between the young and the old generation of art reformers, this radical rhetoric prevented the formation of a broader front working for an essential democratization of artistic institutions.

There is, then, a common denominator in all reform projects of the period: their eclectic nature. As we see in Waetzoldt’s and Gropius’s programmes, eclecticism was put in use in a way that purposefully concealed or accentuated associations with other movements or personalities. In fact, Gropius’s aversion to the Werkbund was never translated into an abandonment of the creative re-shaping of the world; his idea of the artist not just as *Gestalter* but as *Lebensgestalter* was always the basis of his conception of a truly modern form-shaping art. And if the Werkbund had been stigmatized by the young radicals due to its political machinations and increasing commercialization, the importation of Proletkult and constructivist ideas offered a new, progressive cloak to the old project of the artist-*Lebensgestalter* and the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. 
Moving from the programmatic to the institutional level, however, one
observes an unmistakable general consensus on the basic principles of the art
educational reform. If the foundation of the Bauhaus marks the first merger of a
fine and an applied arts school on a crafts-training basis in early Weimar
Germany, this event should only be seen as an instance of a broader, state-induced
project for the establishment of similar schools, whose success depended on the
interaction of different national and local institutions (political parties and trade
unions, state parliaments and the press, museums and cultural authorities, arts
sponsors and crafts corporations, etc.). And as the discussions of the Prussian
assembly (*Preußische Landesversammlung*) on the question of art education show,
the Werkbund was still recognized as an ‘exemplary initiative for the artistic
education of the people’.*117*

Further, in a transcript from 1922 filed in the archive of Berlin’s
*Unterrichtsanstalt des königlichen Kunstgewerbe-Museums* (Educational
Institution of the Royal Museum of Applied Arts), we find an interesting
compilation of excerpts from: i) a report from the Academy of Arts in Berlin (11
November 1921); ii) a resolution ‘unanimously approved’ by representatives of
the Munich Academy, the town’s Vocational Schools and trade associations of
architects, painters and sculptors, the Bavarian Arts and Crafts Association, the
*Münchener Bund* (the Munich branch of the Werkbund) and the New Secession;
iii) a ‘guiding principle’ from the conference of arts consultants to the German
federal states (January 1921); iv) a resolution of a meeting of artists in the
Prussian House of Lords (30 January 1921); v) a resolution of the convention of
the German Arts and Crafts Associations (June 1922). The common denominator
of all those texts is the recognition of crafts skills as the foundation of artistic
training.*118*

In Prussia, the Ministry of Culture promoted this reform through the
circulation of new guidelines and decrees in 1921 and 1922. Thus, Wilhelm
Nentwig, head of the Ministry of Culture’s Art Department (*Kunstabteilung U IV*),
in his letter to the director of the *Akademische Hochschule für die bildenden*

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*117* See Wolfgang A. Reiss, *Die Kunsterziehung in der Weimarer Republik: Geschichte und Ideologie* (Weinheim: Beltz, 1981), pp. 37-38. Reiss’s excellent study offers an all-round image of the interrelating and often antagonistic institutions promoting art educational reform in Weimar Germany.

*118* Universität der Künste-Archiv (hereafter UdK-Archiv), 6/176, p. 28.
Künste made explicit that ‘the proof of a sufficient training in crafts’ (next to ‘sufficient artistic talent and preparatory training in drawing’) was to be the basis of the new policy concerning the admission of students to the educational institutions under his jurisdiction.\(^{119}\) Nentwig aimed at the old problem of the Kunstproletariat, which he wanted to handle through the rationalization of training – putting each student to his or her own place or, in the traditional paternalistic discourse of a state official, ‘to save the art students from subsequent bitter frustrations and from economic derailment after graduation from the School of Arts.’\(^{120}\) Bureaucrats and radical artists use, at times, the same language.

This new policy was at the forefront of a circular decree issued on February 10, 1923 which was apparently based on Waetzoldt’s *Gedanken zur Kunstschulreform*. The decree clarified that a training certificate in crafts corresponding to the vocation each student wanted to follow (for instance future architects should have previously attended a Building Trades School) was to be a prerequisite for admission, except for those schools equipped with their own workshops, which could guarantee ‘an appropriate training in artistic craftsmanship.’\(^{121}\) However, this was only a criterion for the admission to the Art Schools (only applicants with extraordinary talent did not require a proof of previous training in a craft); the final selection would be made after a probational course (*Probekursus*) common for architects, painters, sculptors and graphic artists of a maximum duration of four semesters (note the analogy with the Bauhaus’s *Vorkurs*).

But also the concept of the bisection of workshop training into an ‘artistic’ and a ‘technical’ part taught by an artist and a master craftsman respectively, had been already initiated in 1904’s Prussian ‘Instructional Workshops Decree’ (*Lehrwerkstätten Erlass*).\(^{122}\) The decree had also placed emphasis on the interdependence of class instruction and workshop practice in the art schools ‘in the interest of an education as versatile as possible’.\(^{123}\) Therefore, fine and applied artists, architects and craftsmen should continuously interact and/or collaborate.

In addition, already before the war, Bruno Paul, director of the

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\(^{119}\) Nentwig letter to Arthur Kampf (24.7.1922); UdK-Archiv, 6/176, p. 29.

\(^{120}\) Ibid.

\(^{121}\) Runderlass U IV 26581 (10.2.1923), UdK-Archiv, 6/176.

\(^{122}\) On this decree, see Maciuika, ‘Sachlicher, wirtschaftslicher, zweckmässiger’, 120-31.

\(^{123}\) Runderlass U IV 26581 (10.2.1923), UdK-Archiv, 6/176.
Unterrichtsanstalt in Berlin since 1904, had begun to restructure the school along these same lines.\textsuperscript{124} Bruno Paul was among the artists-reformers who had been invited by Gropius to join the AfK, but he never replied to the invitation.\textsuperscript{125} The two men agreed in many basic principles of the reform, but the ways they sought to apply them differed. This is evident in Paul’s organizational outline for the Vereinigte Staatsschulen für freie und angewandte Kunst (United State Schools for Fine and Applied Arts), i.e. the amalgamation of the Unterrichtsanstalt and the Akademische Hochschule für die Bildenden Künste (Academic College for the Visual Arts). Paul insisted on a ‘vertical division’ of the school in three main fields: architecture, fine arts, and applied arts, with all fields freely overlapping. A committee from each respective department would represent their special interests and also guarantee their harmonious collaboration. The members of each committee (advanced students who worked in the school’s studios were also eligible) would be elected by the respective department for a maximum period of three years. The committees would consult the director on technical matters and submit proposals for the improvement of the courses or requests for their fields of practice.\textsuperscript{126} As for the council of the teaching staff, Paul suggested the term ‘Lehrerrat’ instead of ‘Meisterrat’ (teachers’ instead of masters’ council). He rejected the latter on two grounds: first because it could cause confusion between the artists-instructors and the directors of the workshops, and second because it ‘sounds a bit like the “Sängerkrieg auf der Wartburg” [a reference to Wagner’s Tannhäuser], the Master [die Meistär] or similar to tata tati tatatā-ta or state Bauhaus-tätā tätā – all this sounds to me a bit emotive in an old-fashioned way.’\textsuperscript{127}

Yet Paul concludes that the question of naming an institution or a body of an institution is in the end trivial. We have seen, however, that names and adjectives (such as radical) were not just trivial matters – they were in the frontline of an intra-vocational battle between different generations of architects and designers. And had the selection of names and adjectives set the tone of these polemics in manifestoes, intra-organizational confrontations (as those taking place within the Werkbund) or even in the correspondence between reformers, ideas and their

\textsuperscript{125}Ibid., p. 250.
\textsuperscript{126}Bruno Paul letter to Wilhelm Waetzoldt (14 June 1924), UdK-Archiv, 7/21.
bearers were often conflated.

The reason for this was that the constituency of this self-styled avant-garde was in fact quite limited. Thus, it is not surprising that the ‘youth’ of the Arbeitsrat für Kunst could as easily put its services under the supervision of the ‘conservative’ Bruno Paul or the ‘radical’ Walter Gropius. The case of sculptor Gerhard Marcks, member of the Werkbund and the AfK, teacher of decorative plastic arts in the Unterrichtsanstalt in 1918 for a few months before joining the Bauhaus in 1919, is characteristic. Another case in point is that of the Novembergruppe, AfK and Werkbund member César Klein, who had been selected by Paul to undertake the teaching of decorative painting. In the letter sent to the Minister of Culture by Wilhelm von Bode on behalf of Bruno Paul, Klein was described as the ideal candidate for a position demanding ‘experience in developing modern solutions for practical tasks,’ and as one of the ‘most qualified members of the Novembergruppe, in close contact with the youth’.128 Perhaps the reference to the youth is an allusion to Klein’s unmentioned participation to the AfK. At any rate, this is an indication that artists and their groups were interpreted at will: for Gropius and Behne, who wanted to strengthen the AfK through a potential merger with the Novembergruppe, the latter was conveniently ‘radical’; for the cultural administration of a government which wished to dissociate itself from the Wilhelmine past, the same group was handily ‘modern’ – and the same game with adjectives is observed with regard to César Klein’s case.129

In 1926, most contracts of Paul’s teaching staff had been or were about to expire and, in line with the Ministry’s regulations, the director of the Vereinigte Staatsschulen had to suggest at least two alternative names for each position. His proposals are indicative of the limited number of choices available to the new type of art institutions (amalgamated fine and applied arts schools). Max Pechstein and Bernard Pankok were nominated as Klein’s successors (Studio for Theatrical Decoration and Decorative Painting), Willy Jaeckel was suggested for Karl Hofer’s position (Studio for Painting), Klee and Campendonk for Ernst Böhm’s

128 See the letter of Wilhelm von Bode to the Ministry of Sciences and Culture (14 July 1919), UdK-Archiv, 7/5.
129 The leading role of the Novembergruppe in the reformed Great Art Exhibition of Berlin was projected by the Ministry of Culture as a sign for the democratization of the new state’s art institutions. On the reform of the exhibition system, see Kristina Kratz-Kessemeier, Kunst für die Republik: Die Kunstpolitik des preußischen Kultusministeriums 1918 bis 1932 (Berlin: Akademie, 2007), pp. 146-63.
position (Class and Studio for General Decoration) or, alternatively, for the Department of Fine Arts; Paul Renner, Otto Arpke, or Oskar Schlemmer for O. H. W. Hadank’s position (Class for Graphic Art and Design); again Schlemmer for Bruno Ernst Scherz’s position (Class for General Decoration), and Heinrich Tessenow and Mies van der Rohe for Eugen Schmohl’s position (Class for Architectural Rendering). In the end, after Paul’s suggestion, most contracts were renewed for a provisional period of one to two years. Paul’s distance from the ‘radical youth’ represented and supported by Gropius is evident. His suggestions manifest his preference for more moderate artists even in the case of those names associated with the Bauhaus. His concept is closer to Waentig’s and Schlemmer’s juste milieu, which Gropius so much detested (or the Werkbund’s old guard and the most moderate voices of the new avant-garde).

Once again, then, we must insist on the eclectic nature of all the educational reform programmes. This is crucial, because it is an element that enables us to grasp how different strategies of similar movements functioned. These silences over the demands of the other, especially over the shared roots and branches of the reform tree, illuminate the uses of radicalism. And there was always a voice silenced.

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130 See the letter of Bruno Paul to the Ministry of Science and Culture (9 April 1926), UdK-Archiv, 7/5; also, Harrod, ‘Vereinigte Staatsschulen’, pp. 252, 254-55; Harrod also sees this ‘exchange of faculty members’ between the Vereinigte Staatsschulen and the Bauhaus as a sign of convergence of educational objectives that is not surprising, ‘given their respective origins in the Werkbund’; ibid., p. 254.
Chapter 3: The Death of Painting?

Khlebnikov [...]: ‘In your opinion, what are the standards of our time?’ Filonov replies: ‘Look, I did a painting and I want it to stay on the wall by itself, without nails.’ [...] Khlebnikov asks intrigued: ‘And how did that go?’ ‘For the time being, I’ve stopped eating.’ ‘And the painting?’ ‘It keeps falling down. I spend the day looking at it, staring at it, talking to it, I say: you stupid wall, what else do you want from me? You want Heaven to come and take me? Hold up the painting!’

The Russian painter Pavel Filonov used the above story to draw an image of the artist ahead of his time, the artist doomed to find recognition only a posteriori. We can conceive this anecdote, however, as a parable for an untold number of easel painters active during the interwar period in Germany, especially in Berlin. Of course, our painters were willing to use any means available for their works to stay on the walls, but now it seemed that there were no walls to hold them up: modern architects, as we shall see, wanted to keep the walls of their buildings empty; the traditional great art exhibitions (like the Great Berlin Art Exhibition) had long since become overcrowded and discredited by the press; the commercial gallery system had become accessible only to a severely restricted number of artists. In short, in the big urban centres of interwar Germany there seemed to be a regression of painting from the public sphere, a regression that for certain contemporary cultural critics signalled the death of painting. This was the case especially for the avant-garde of the second wave of the German arts and crafts movement that preached a cultural rebirth through a new union of arts, which itself presupposed a kind of cleansing within the art world, an uprooting of the old. Easel painting was to be sacrificed for the sake of this radical reorganization of artistic production. But the more those radical modernists lamented the fragmentation of culture in modernity, the more they furthered the fragmentation of the art world itself.

Be that as it may, the target of the radical art reformers was not the framed picture per se, but rather easel painting as a vocation. Painting was too subjective,

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1 Vitale, Shklovsky, p. 104.
unproductive and non-functional, thus it could not conform to modern capitalist production and economy. It was especially the painters, as I will show, that found it difficult to adapt to this system. As we have already seen in the previous two chapters, the applied arts reform was characterized by an organizational schism: its self-styled avant-garde was grouped either in small, elitist associations or in organizations like the Werkbund. Though the Werkbund had a mass membership, it was not modelled on the producers’ unions and often openly confronted them; at the same time, the latter model was adopted by the mass organizations serving the interests of the unrecognized fine artists, draftsmen and craftsmen. This was also the case with regard to the interest group of German professional visual artists, the Reichsverband bildender Künstler Deutschlands (Reich Association of Visual Artists of Germany, hereafter RVbK).²

I have already described this as a paradox of the avant-garde of the applied arts movement, whose aesthetically modern position disguised the non-democratic form of its organization. The denigration of the ‘conservative’ easel painters, ‘redundant draftsmen’ and ‘backward’ craftsmen served to legitimize the colonization of crafts and industry by the radical reformer – thus it was an integral part of the latter’s professional politics. But this rhetoric concealed the fact that the mass of those ‘backward’ art producers was usually organized in more democratic associations, associations representing the interests of artists on a grassroots basis. The crux of the matter, then, is that it was these secessionist and elitist professional politics of the radical reformer, upon which the politics of the interwar avant-garde was modelled, that accelerated the fragmentation of the field of cultural production. The questioning of painting’s reason for existing was part and parcel of this exclusionary radical professional politics.

The accommodation of painters to the free economy of the first German Republic encountered grave obstacles that could not be overcome within this system. Already in 1922, the Ministry of Culture declared that it could financially support only artists with exceptional talent (by way of commissions or scholarships), advising the rest to seek their fortune in the private sector.³ By

³In a meeting on the predicament of German art taking place at the Reich Interior Ministry on 28 May 1922, Wilhelm Waetzold argued that the goal of any state-sponsored relief project for artists should be to support German art and not artists in general; cited in Kratz-Kessecmeier,
1924, the state relief programmes for artists were already bankrupt; in 1931 and 1932 some Social Democrat functionaries discussed the possibility of their revival, but to no avail.\textsuperscript{4} By 1925, the financial department of the Ministry admitted that it was impossible for the government to support the approximately 10,000 German visual artists with means other than purchasing artworks from exhibitions or organizing art competitions.\textsuperscript{5} Thus, the artists’ livelihood was officially entrusted to the goodwill of the private sector. Carl Heinrich Becker, then Minister of Culture, returned to this issue in a speech opening the 1928 exhibition of the Berlin Secession, when he urged the affluent classes to invest in contemporary German art rather than in works by the Old Masters or by foreign artists.\textsuperscript{6}

The RVbK could not provide any substantial economic help to its members; it functioned more as a pressure group, whilst through its organ, \textit{Kunst und Wirtschaft}, it advertised artistic competitions and art supply stores that offered a discount to its members – in short, its activities were mainly restricted in informing its membership about the opportunities and dangers of the art trade. Last but not least, the bargaining power of an economic association of artists was almost insignificant in the trade of easel paintings; producers here had to deal with art dealers, collectors and gallerists, not with industries and businessmen.

The only field where painters could intervene somewhat more meaningfully was that of the (state-supported) art exhibitions. One of the most ambitious steps in this direction was the foundation of the \textit{Kartell der Vereinigten Verbände bildender Künstler Berlins}. The choice of the word ‘cartel’ indicates a will to follow the current trends in industrial capitalism; the avoidance of the usual alternatives such as ‘Assoziation’ or ‘Verband’ is telling, as those designations entailed a distinct political/trade unionist flavour. The cartel, founded in Berlin in 1927, undertook the organization of the annual \textit{Große Berliner Kunstausstellung}
This was one of the few democratic in spirit initiatives (each group of artists had its own jury responsible for the selection of the works to be exhibited).

From the very beginning, however, the reception of the Kartell-run GBK exhibitions was negative. Especially revealing about the discourse and the tone of the reception of the reformed GBK show is a review published in Ferdinand Avenarius’s *Kunstwart* (a periodical that had promoted the applied arts reform and exemplified an elitist view of art favouring the exceptionally gifted, the old and new masters and not the mass organizations of the unrecognized dilettante).

According to its author, the main problem of the 1928 GBK show was a disharmony caused precisely by the fact that there were too many juries promoting different aesthetic values. This aesthetic heterogeneity, difference in quality, ‘repetition’ and ‘banality’ was interpreted as a symptom of the artists’ ‘party politics’. The critic’s verdict was clear: ‘With this exhibition the cartel has condemned itself.’ As a temporary solution he suggested to appoint a single authority, a ‘dictator’ fighting ‘dilettantism’ and restoring harmony by setting stricter and – above all – uniform criteria of selection. The *Kartell* is denounced as an institution indifferent to ‘true’ art and exclusively preoccupied with ‘party politics’, namely the narrow (economic) interests of each of its constituent groups.

In contrast, the solution of the ‘dictator’ is presented as politically-disinterested; the ‘dictator’ will act for the sake of art and nothing else. The expert-dictator and his supporter are always selfless and their politics are always translated into cultural terms.

All this is too familiar. Remember the confrontation discussed in the previous

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7 Before 1927, the GBK was organized by the Verein Berliner Künstler. The Kartell comprised the following artists’ organizations: Allgemeine Deutsche Kunstgenossenschaft; Architektenvereinigung ‘Der Ring’; Berliner Sezession; Die Abstrakten; Freie Vereinigung der Graphiker zu Berlin; Künstlervereinigung Berliner Bildhauer; Die Novembergruppe; Verein Berliner Künstler; Verein der Künstlerinnen zu Berlin; Frauenkunstverband; there was also an elected representative for those artists that did not belong to any of the above groups. See *Grosse Berliner Kunstausstellung 1927 veranstaltet vom Kartell der Vereinigten Verbände bildender Künstler Berlins E. V.*, exh. cat. (Berlin: G. E. Diehl, 1927), p. 7.

8 W[alther] Unus, ‘Akademie und Große Ausstellung in Berlin’, *Der Kunstwart*, 8 (May 1928), 188-89 (p. 188). In his review of the same exhibition, Paul Westheim, one of the most influential left-liberal art critics of the time, also objected to the juries’ leniency: ‘A dozen exhibitions in one house, without selection, without plan, without meaning, without a standard. In the opening, the chairman said that there are 2,000 artists in Berlin and they all wanted to exhibit sometime. This is undoubtedly correct and not to begrudge anyone. But the question is whether there are also people who want to see all that […] for the visitor, this mess is senseless. […] For this we already have the jury-free shows [Juryfreie Kunstschau Berlin] which, through skilled grouping, avoid such a chaos’; Paul Westheim, ‘Umschau: Akademie-Ausstellung Berlin’, *Das Kunstblatt*, 12 (June 1928), 186-87 (p. 187).
chapter between the Allgemeine Deutsche Kunstgenossenschaft and the organization of German Secessions, the Deutscher Künstlerbund. From Wilhelmine to Weimar Germany, these exclusionary tactics, this derision of the organizations promoting the interests of painting as a vocation and not the ‘exceptionally talented’, is pivotal for the self-conception of the avant-garde. The distance between the Kunstwart’s critique of the second GBK show organized by the Kartell (1928) and the avant-garde’s exhibition strategies is not as great as one may think. In an interview on the occasion of the 1930 Werkbund exhibition in Paris (the first in the country), its curator, Walter Gropius, confessed that he could only realize the show’s ambitious central idea ‘thanks to the Werkbund’s principle to appoint all responsibility and all authority to a single person, as if to a kind of a dictator. In this case, Gropius’s dictatorial power enabled him to pass his own Bauhaus concept (and not Hannes Meyer’s) not just as representative of a much larger and more influential institution (the Werkbund), but, further, of contemporary German design in general. Gropius sought to win the French public by presenting his show as an anti-Salon whose programmatic character was underscored precisely through a careful arrangement, which excluded every contradiction and dissonance (the dictator restoring harmony).

To return to our starting point: the radical reformers advocating a general cleansing in the art world were wholly conscious of the desperate situation of the traditional fine arts (especially easel painting) within modern capitalist economy. Moreover, they were conscious that they could not promote their position playing the game by the rules of a democratic representation within mass unions (following the will of majority and the like). As we saw in the previous chapter, avant-garde groupings were loosely organized unions of preeminent individuals. Hence these associations were intentionally distinguished from the model of artists’ organizations such as the Verein Berliner Künstler, the Kunstgenossenschaft or the Reichsverband bildender Künstler; they were closer to the organizational model of the Secessions. But still there was a pivotal difference: they were not

\[9\] Efstratios Tériade, ‘Au Salon des Arts décoratifs. La section allemande. Avec Walter Gropius’, L’intransigeant, 21 May 1930, p. 8; I thank my colleague Poppy Sfakianaki, an expert on the Greek art critic Tériade, for drawing to my attention this interview. On the Paris Werkbund exhibition, see Isabelle Ewig, Thomas W. Gaehgens and Matthias Noell (eds.), Das Bauhaus und Frankreich / Le Bauhaus et la France 1919-1940 (Berlin: Akademie, 2002), in which Gropius’s interview to Tériade is also reprinted; see Matthias Noell, ‘Zwischen Krankenhaus und Mönchszele: ‘Le nouveau visage de l’ Allemagne’ – Die Werkbund-Ausstellung 1930 im Spiegel der französischen Tagespresse’, 313-46 (pp. 332-33).
conceived purely as artists’ associations; their members did not just wish to reform the art world (exhibition policies, the Academy or other art institutions); they wanted to reform life and in order to accomplish this grandiose project they were willing to bypass the state and its (democratic) governments when necessary, and play by very different rules: those of the free market; in short, they wanted to make business with those who could grant them enough power to achieve a radical reform.

Thus, a fundamental contradiction of the avant-garde is that its attack upon the isolation of the academic painter is the product of an artist self-styled as an outstanding expert, who asserts his autonomy precisely by setting his own rules of distinction. In other words, behind the avant-garde’s denigration of the isolated bourgeois painter or l’art pour l’art, one glimpses the avant-gardist’s effort to safeguard for himself a new kind of artistic autonomy. Therefore, the avant-garde’s concept of a ‘socially responsible’ art should be questioned.

In this respect, the paradigm of the Arbeitsrat für Kunst as examined in the previous chapter is particularly revealing. For it is the case of an avant-garde paying the price of its own ambivalence – an ambivalence concerning its very identity and the means to achieve the programme it had proclaimed. Even the choice of its name was misguided, since it implied a connection with the revolutionary socialist movement of the times, which was not only unfounded, but also harmful for a group that initially sought authorization from the very state that suppressed the workers’ councils. Following the attempt to win the support of the government, the group tried to take control of the Werkbund, a plan aborted due to its ambivalent position on the issue of the collaboration with industry and the market, which generated the protest of the Werkbund’s old guard, who claimed that the organization was not a ‘society of artists’ but an alliance between artists, craftsmen, merchants and industry.

But around 1923/24, the avant-garde began to show that it was learning from its own mistakes. We see this in the case of the Bauhaus, its effort to approach industry and attract commissions, an effort canalized through the restructuring of its production department so as to conform to the dictates of modern marketing (Bauhaus GmbH).10 The period of the ‘relative stabilization’ (1924-28) of the

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Weimar economy coincides with the attempt of the German avant-garde to stabilize its own position within it. Extending their activities beyond the narrow sphere of the fine arts market and adopting a more scientific, utilitarian, hence ‘socially responsible’ profile, the avant-gardists appeared to be more flexible in moving across the cultural and economic landscape of Weimar Germany. As Frederic J. Schwartz has pointed, it was the extension of the modern architects’ field of jurisdiction through the adoption of a ‘positivist discourse,’ a ‘language of planned economies, of statistical matters of living standards and physical requirements,’ that ‘served as the public [...] terms of architecture’ and helped legitimize and professionalize the avant-garde.11

The present chapter, however, will concentrate on a period of overall crisis, the last years of Weimar Republic, when economic depression and the undermining of democratic institutions (1930 marks the activation of Article 48, which allowed the president of the Republic to govern by ‘emergency decrees’, bypassing legislative authorization by the parliament) accentuated the polemical tone of the applied arts reform discontents – the fine artists. Nevertheless, my intention is not just to cast light on the contest and strife between painters and sculptors on the one side, architects and designers on the other. Next to open questions, such as the validity of the idea of progress in art, the validity of irrationalism in a technocratic society, the relation between art and science, to name but a few, there is a series of indirect ones entangled in the discussion about the ‘death of painting’ or the future of visual arts after painting: questions about the identities, the self-images of cultural producers.

As a starting point for the discussion of the debate on the ‘death of painting’ I will use Alfred Döblin’s 1931 opening address at the Berlin Secession which stands as both an affirmation and a subtle critique of the Modern Movement. However, in its time it was interpreted by contemporary painters as a complete rejection of the social significance of their practice. The ensuing debate on the ‘end of painting’ revealed a great schism within the cultural field; recognizing that the ‘fusion of arts’ signified the subordination of every form of artistic labour to the control of the architect and designer, the voices demanding a divorce between

the applied and the fine arts multiplied at precisely this period. I will then proceed to clarify the multifaceted critique of the technocratic/functionalist notion of art promoted by the radical applied arts reformers. As I have tried to show in the previous chapter, though the applied arts movement was far from homogeneous, its theory presents a programmatic congruence uniting seemingly opposed endeavours (for example the Werkbund and the Bauhaus) and personalities (such as Bruno Paul and Walter Gropius). By the late 1920s, the Modern Movement appeared in the public sphere as a unified bloc. In contrast, its critics were scattered. It is crucial to stress that a significant part of them were not reactionaries or sworn enemies of modernism, but instead advocates of a non-dogmatic, more democratic modernism. As I will show, modern architects like Josef Frank, authors like Alfred Döblin and Hermann Broch, critics like Adolf Behne and Ernst Kállai and painters belonging to such early-Weimar avant-garde groups as the Novembregruppe and Die Abstrakten, such as Arthur Segal and Oskar Nerlinger, were all part of this pro-modernist critique of the avant-garde. They attempted to juxtapose a new notion of juste milieu to the reformist radicalism of the Modern Movement. However, this juste milieu lacked a coherent platform; its adherents arrived at a sharp and, at times, fascinating criticism of artistic radicalism, but they failed to formulate definitive answers to the questions faced by modern art producers or to come to a new model of artistic practice.

3.1 Men of the Past: A crisis of painting or a crisis of reform?

On 11 April 1931, Alfred Döblin delivered a speech which opened the 64th exhibition of the Berlin Secession (fig. 15). Though this speech is long since forgotten, it caused a great sensation in its day as it scandalized not only the painters who had gathered in the exhibition halls, but also a much larger audience listening to its live radio transmission. And it seems certain that Döblin, resting on the great popular success of his recently published novel Berlin Alexanderplatz, was deliberately provocative (most possibly the exhibition’s committee also wished to capitalize on the writer’s stature to attract more visitors).\(^\text{12}\)

The members of the Secession, established artists, many of them also members

\(^{12}\)Döblin had also been elected a member of the Prussian Academy of Arts in 1928.
of the Academy and/or Professors in prestigious art education institutions were probably caught unaware when Döblin attacked the backwardness of their artistic practice as well as their own self-image as artists. Beginning with the admission that he was no expert in painting, Döblin attempted to explain why the visitors of the exhibition plainly rushed through its halls, why the paintings failed to draw their attention, whereas at the same time modern buildings like Bruno Taut’s *Hufeisensiedlung* in Berlin-Britz, Eugen Schmohl’s *Ullsteinhaus* in Tempelhof and Peter Behrens’s *Berolinahaus* in Alexanderplatz (fig. 16) ‘spoke’ to the modern man. Why? The answer was simple: ‘Painting stands somehow out of today. *You are not entirely people of today* […] *you are banished from architecture. You know, we no longer think of pictures on our walls*’.14

For a modern architect, however, a leading member of the Austrian Werkbund, the radical leaders of the Modern Movement were equally ‘men of the past’. More specifically, on 25 June 1930, Josef Frank stepped up to the podium of the German Werkbund’s Congress in Vienna attacking precisely the kind of distinction between ‘modern’ and ‘backward’ made by Döblin in his Secession address. Significantly, he blamed the German arts and crafts movement (from 1890s onwards) for having nurtured this fanatic modernist zeal. Underscoring that the notion ‘modern’ was in fact relative, he objected to the monopolization of modernism by the avant-garde of the German applied arts movement. The logic of the latter, he provocatively proclaimed, was the product of a system of values rooted in the 1890s:

the system as such is outdated, even if those who think in an old-fashioned way (and here I mean those who are radical modernists) cannot break away from it. Uniformity has its pathos and can be assured of its success. The notion of a world structured in a unified way will always be fashionable, whether that is for shorter or longer periods of time depends on many


circumstances. […] It is thus of little use to differentiate between individual systems; they are not what they appear. Let them be based on any abstract presupposition that restricts us and takes away our freedom: they all have one thing in common – they belong to the spirit of a past age – but modern they are not.\(^\text{15}\)

If I juxtapose Döblin’s and Frank’s speeches, it is because they help us relativize the concept ‘modern’, which handily divided the art world into two main blocks: ‘conservatives’ and ‘progressives’. Combining these two critical voices, we may discern certain exhaustion in both camps. In short, the problem did not only concern the ‘outdated’ easel painting; the crisis was endemic across the entire artistic field, from its ‘rear’- to its ‘avant’-garde.

But another important question arises here. If the debate on the crisis of culture had descended into a confrontation between friends and foes of progress, how much space was left for those critical voices challenging the value judgement associated with customarily opposed binary notions such as ‘progressive’ and ‘conservative’, ‘individual’ and ‘collective’, ‘modern’ and ‘antiquated’? Indeed, it seems that both Döblin’s and Frank’s points were almost completely missed in their time; this was because, as I will show, they represented a middle-position inconvenient in an increasingly polarized cultural landscape.

Döblin’s position had been interpreted by his contemporaries as a declaration of the death of painting. However, his speech was in fact notably ambivalent. The German author indeed argued that both the framed picture and the novel constituted an outdated means of artistic expression, in his words an ‘antiquated matter’.

Those familiar with the author’s work could not have been surprised by his approach to the matter; approximately twenty years earlier, Döblin had discussed novel as a literary genre in quite the same terms: ‘Art is preserved, but the method


\(^{16}\)The Stuttgarter Nachrichten transcript mistakenly quotes the word ‘überarbeitete’ something that Andrea Melcher, after listening to the recording of the address corrects into the original ‘überalterte’; see Andrea Melcher, Vom Schriftsteller zum Sprachsteller?: Alfred Döblins Auseinandersetzung mit Film und Rundfunk (1909-1932) (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1996), n. 90, p. 173. Döblin, however, found drawing better corresponding to the modern age: ‘Painting can adapt [to the times]. There is no reason to paint only to make pictures. One can also be here and now with artistic things, one can draw, one can confront time. I think of my friend George Grosz, how he confronts it. This is life; this is a lively confrontation with the present. Here one is not driven to the wall’; Döblin, ‘Mißgeburt der Natur’, p. 19.
of work alters like the surface of the earth through the centuries.’\textsuperscript{17} The target of Döblin’s short article, published in Herwarth Walden’s periodical \textit{Der Sturm}, was the nineteenth-century realist/psychological novel, to which he counterpoised a new, non-narrative, epic form (a ‘cinematic style’ of writing) that would break down ‘the author’s hegemony’.\textsuperscript{18}

If Döblin wanted to question the authoritative presence of the author-narrator by relativizing and minimizing his command of the meaning of the work – hence leaving more space to the reader’s own interpretation – Frank similarly questioned the authority of the architect or the designer of a dwelling over its inhabitant, arguing that the latter should have the final say on the arrangement of his or her living space. For Frank, ‘Living spaces are not artworks, nor are they well-tuned harmonies in colour and form, whose individual elements (wallpaper, carpets, furniture, pictures) constitute a completed whole’.\textsuperscript{19} The architect ought to ‘offer nothing more than a skeleton or a framework for a dwelling’; since his relation with the space he designed was short-termed, he had no right to dictate to the dweller ‘how to hang or place some picture or vase so that it has a \textit{lively} effect,’ for the latter ‘sees them and lives with them every day’.\textsuperscript{20} He concluded that ‘The living room is never unfinished and never finished; \textit{it lives with the people who live in it}.’\textsuperscript{21} Hence, Frank and Döblin argued for a democratization of literature and architecture, a regeneration of art, through the relativization of the creative subject’s (or the expert’s) control on his work – a work that would remain unfinished, \textit{constantly open} to its holder. Both critiques converge on a questioning of the professional artist’s expertise and a call for the abolition of the barrier between him and his public, one which would involve the latter’s active determination of the character of a cultural product.

Returning to Döblin’s Sezession speech, one could object that his argument on the

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\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{18}Ibid., pp. 121-22.
\item \textsuperscript{20}Frank, ‘Die Einrichtung des Wohnzimmers’, p. 417 (emphasis in original).
\item \textsuperscript{21}Ibid. (emphasis in original).
\end{itemize}
backwardness of easel painting and the novel was not especially original, being part of a much older debate about the nature of art in modernity. Moreover, his comparison between neues Bauen buildings and the predominantly impressionist and naturalist works of the Secession seems to be rather off-target. As critic Ferdinand Eckhardt pointedly argued: ‘The driving forces of contemporary art stand beyond the Secession […] Whether Döblin has right or wrong might be an interesting question ten years ago. Today these paintings are wrong.’

The theme of the specific exhibition was ‘artists amongst themselves’ (Künstler unter sich) and it largely consisted of pictures by Secession members portraying themselves or other artists. What certain art critics – including Döblin – found particularly annoying was precisely this sense of an in-joke, this ‘Künstler unter sich’ atmosphere. Art critic Max Osborn of the liberal newspaper Vossische Zeitung was among the very few people that praised the show’s theme as a fresh idea, asking for ‘even more generous guild-intimacies (Zunftintimitäten) of the kind’.

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‘We have enough!’ angrily replied Adolf Behne in the Weltbühne, attacking the solipsistic character of the exhibition, after quoting Osborn’s aforementioned words, to conclude:

No one expected from this Secession that it tackle the social issues of the day, such as collectivism. [...] But the way a ‘cheerful artistic lot’ takes up with an esteemed clientele, this is embarrassing and unworthy of its past. Nevertheless, Max Osborn will praise with the same enthusiasm tomorrow Käthe Kollwitz and the new architecture and the Spittel colonnades [Carl von Gontard’s 1776 colonnades originally surrounding the Spittelmarkt in Berlin] and the Bauhaus.  

Though Döblin would probably back Behne’s attack on Osborn, his rejection of the Secession’s portraits was in no way based on their indifference towards ‘the social issues of the day, such as collectivism’. In fact, Döblin greeted portraiture as an ‘unconscious defence’ of the private sphere in an era that ‘does not really tolerate individuals, abominating the private.’ Furthermore, he provocatively claimed that the collective and collectivism was an equally ‘antiquated matter’. Thus, Behne’s ‘social issue of the day’ is already ‘antiquated’ for Döblin. Though the author found easel painting backward as a mode of artistic labour, he nevertheless defended portraiture as a genre because it enables introspection, a contemplation of the self and its relation with the other, a process endangered in the accelerated tempo of modern quotidian life. What provoked his hostility

26 Ibid.
27 The troubled relationship between the alienated individual and its social environment (also the collective) is the central motif of Berlin Alexanderplatz; for an excellent analysis of this relationship, see Günther Anders, ‘Der verwüstete Mensch: Über Welt- und Sprachlosigkeit in Döblins Berlin Alexanderplatz’, in Frank Benseler (ed.), Festschrift zum achtzigsten Geburtstag von Georg Lukács (Neuwied: Luchterhand, 1965), 420-42. For a short outline of the relationship between the individual and the collective by Döblin himself, see ‘Was mir in dieser Zeit als Wichtigstes am Herzen liegt. Alfred Döblin: daß der Einzelne unter dem Einfluß der Masse nicht verkrüppelt’, Uhu, 8 (1932), 7-8; for an English translation of this text, see Alfred Döblin, ‘May the Individual Not Be Stunted by the Masses’, in Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, Edward Dimenber (eds.), The Weimar Republic Sourcebook (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), pp. 386-87. The following excerpt is particularly interesting as it is close to Frank’s critique of the way the modern architect-interior designer sought to impose his plans to the dweller: ‘Have you ever heard of a house that demands of you that you should and must live in it and must conform and subordinate yourself to it? You would say no. If you do not like a house, you move out, and, if you prefer, you do not live in any house at all. Have you ever heard of someone giving you clothes and telling you to put them on then, if they do not fit, to get fat or thin so they do fit? Organizations and the collective are just such houses and clothes. They have already been produced and you call it an honor to change yourself accordingly’; Döblin, ‘May the Individual Not Be Stunted by the Masses’, p. 386.
against the specific exhibition, then, was the persistence of those painters on the notion of the artist’s extraordinary nature and social status, underlined by the show’s self-flattering theme. For Döblin, this idea of the artist was completely incompatible with modern life: ‘The artist is no longer a figure that one can paint as something beautiful and marvellous […] the artist is rather a miscarriage of nature.’

To sum up Döblin’s thesis: painters (or novelists) cannot compete with technologically more advanced media of expression; they cannot excite the uninitiated, the non-expert as, for example, modern buildings do; they belong to the past, but still as such they can provide something that is missing from the present: the individual’s self-reflection. The collective has sense, stresses Döblin, only through ‘solidarity between individuals’ – individuals that are self-assured and independent. From this point of view, though antiquated, easel painting and fiction are still valuable as means for an ‘intensive preoccupation with the individual,’ or a recess of the individual that endows its self-understanding as well as the understanding of the other. In other words, Döblin did not reject easel painting per se, but rather its Secession version; oil painting ought to be preserved as a mode of practice but in new forms, freed from the bourgeois conventions attached to the image of the painter. Finally, by declaring the idea of the collective equally ‘antiquated’, Döblin also attacked the (bourgeois and communist) radical modernists of the day; from this standpoint, his speech represents a strong critique of both the bourgeois notion of art (exemplified by the Secession painters) and the radical calls for its reform.

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29Döblin argued that: ‘collectivism and collective will not be formed, will not be achieved through an attack on foundations, but primarily through the educational formation of individuals and through solidarity between individuals’; Döblin, ‘Mißgeburt der Natur’, p. 19. In another speech, delivered on the occasion of his appointment at the Academy of Arts in 1928, Döblin had argued that due to the dramatic change of the material conditions (he probably meant the changes inflicted by the First World War), the writer had lost his traditional connection with his audience; in modern society, ruled by great political and economic coalitions and collectives, the author remained an individualist and as such: ‘the author of today is an anachronism but his poverty is no anachronism’; see Döblin, ‘Der Bau des epischen Werks’, in Schriften zu Ästhetik, Poetik und Literatur, 215-44 (p. 230).
30Döblin’s ‘community’ can also be glimpsed in his answer to a questionnaire addressed by an important literary journal of the times to several contemporary German writers, titled ‘The land, where I would like to live’. Döblin closed his piece with the following: ‘[This land] could not be Germany, nor a crisis-free America, neither Russia. - It should be a land where people do not expect anything from any ‘evolution’, any progress and also they do not need to expect anything concerning their tolerably counterbalanced relationships; instead it should be a place where life is valid’; Alfred Döblin, ‘Das Land, in dem ich leben möchte’, Die literarische Welt, 8 (29 April 1932), 3 (original emphasis).
As such it constitutes a centrist (juste milieu) position advocating a symbiosis of old and modern forms of artistic practice, instead of a fusion of arts, which demanded the elimination of old forms or modes of artistic production (as the radical modernist architects of the day did). In the final analysis, this symbiosis also represents a reaction to an increasingly dogmatic avant-gardism whose rhetoric was distinctly positivist and which sought to legitimize itself by constantly evoking the benefit of the collective, the ‘common good’ at the expense of the individual. Functionalism, suggested Döblin and Frank, relied to an idea of the ‘collective’ to such an extent that it had lost track of the individual as both a recipient and producer of art.31

Nevertheless, contemporary art critics did not discuss this aspect of Döblin’s speech, expatiating instead on its spectacular, scandalous aspect. The German author was dubbed ‘a denier of all values of painting,’32 a ‘storm-maker,’33 an ‘enemy of painting’34 and so on. Döblin’s speech reverberated for months throughout the German art world. The German writer found another chance to elaborate his views on the topic in a special radio discussion with Osborn and Behne which is unfortunately lost.

However, another prominent cultural commentator of the time, who listened to the radio show, Ernst Kállai, found that it ‘left painting severely wounded,’ and that it was too much ‘to shoot someone who was already falling’.35 Kállai's critique of the idea of community and Frank’s questioning of modernist radicalism can be paralleled to the contemporary critique of social radicalism by philosopher and sociologist Helmuth Plessner in his 1924 Grenzen der Gemeinschaft. See Helmuth Plessner, The Limits of Community: A Critique of Social Radicals, trans. Andrew Wallace (Amherst: Humanity Books, 1999). Plessner had delivered a lecture on the occasion of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Werkbund in 1932. For this incident and for the relevance of his ideas to architecture, see Volker M. Welter, ‘The Limits of Community – The Possibilities of Society: On Modern Architecture in Weimar Germany’, Oxford Art Journal, 33 (2010), 63-80. Plessner’s pro-modern, anti-radical ideas represent another centrist position.

33Hellwag, ‘Rund um Döblin’, p. 29.
34Alfred Gold, ‘Hat die Malerei noch eine kulturelle Bedeutung?’, 6. The Austrian art critic and dealer Alfred Gold (1874-1958), who had also participated in the discussion evening/protest organized by the Secession members after Döblin’s speech, counted the author among the ‘progress-fanatics,’ who aspired the end of capitalism and the private sector, and hence the death of art ‘and especially of painting as the most individualistic of all arts’. Of course Gold completely missed Döblin’s point, when he attacked him as a representative of those who believed that ‘there shall be no more place for the quiet and ‘private’ occupation of the painter, for easel painting’; ibid, 6. In fact, as we have seen, this attention to the private was one of the qualities of painting (if not the only quality) cherished by Döblin. Gold’s Secession speech must have been in the same tone as B. F. Dolbin’s report indicates, see Dolbin, ‘Künstler unter sich’, 7.
35Ernst Kállai, ‘Malerei und Film’, Die Weltbühne, 27 (2 June 1931), 805-08 (p. 805).
suggested a more productive and fair approach to the matter founded on ‘a clear knowledge of the endangered and the forlorn [which] can help discovering new creative possibilities.” In order to shed light on the nature of the crisis of painting, he proceeded to its comparison with film.

Prefiguring to a certain extent Walter Benjamin’s famous ‘Artwork’ essay, Kállai argued that ‘the photographic mechanization of representation’ makes personal experience less compound or deep than it used to be; nonetheless, what is lost in this respect, it is won through the participation of the individual in a new ‘enormously broad mass experience’. Kállai speaks of a ‘democracy of the eye [Augendemokratie],’ achieved through the ‘emotionally neutral photomechanics of the film’ which ‘leaves open to everyone the road to empathy with the subject of the image’. If the ‘inner laws’ of a painting are revealed after long and deep contemplation and ‘only to the eyes of a tiny minority of art lovers and experts,’ the movie public ‘is prefixed to receive with a minimum of mental activity of the eye the maximum amount of optical objects of the most varied kind’. In this way, the film satisfies the modern public’s ‘desire to experience the greatest and easiest distraction possible.’

Thus Kállai was closer to Döblin than he thought on the mission of painting in modernity. Much like the German author’s ‘cinematic style’ of writing, Kállai acknowledged the revolutionary potential of film with regard to the issue of agency; the openness of film as a form of art enabled a more active role on behalf of the public; the film’s inconclusiveness conditioned the preference of the modern viewer for the filmic rather than the painted image. But like Döblin, Kállai also underlined the importance of painting for the alienated individual of the modern metropolis, since painting ‘strove to preserve a faith in the most frigid isolation.’ From this persistent isolation, this turning one’s back on a suspect collective – because it was the result of ‘capitalist anarchy,’ a symptom of ‘a  

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36Kállai, ‘Malerei und Film’, 805
37Ibid., p. 806 (for all quotations in this paragraph).
38This concept of the openness of the modern work should be seen as another elemental characteristic of the centrist position I am exploring here. It can also be linked with Plessner’s abovementioned 1932 speech for the Werkbund, where he advocated an ‘open form’ for modern architecture free from the conventions of the radical avant-garde – an open system that can also be linked with Frank’s 1930 critique of the Werkbund and Hermann Broch’s anti-kitsch position, which will be examined later in this chapter. On Plessner’s ‘open Form’, see Peter Bernhard, ‘Plessners Konzept der offenen Form im Kontext der Avant-garde der 1920er Jahre’, _ARHE_, 4 (2007), 237-52.
39Kállai, ‘Malerei und Film’, 808.
chaotic disorganization of our entire life’, Kállai expected the emergence of a new community which indeed assimilates Döblin’s collective of ‘individuals in solidarity’.

Apart from the discussion on the ‘cultural meaning of painting’ taking place immediately after Döblin’s inaugural address, Fritz Hellwag reported on a more private debate taking place in the house of the modernist architect Harry Rosenthal, who had invited ‘a small circle of prominent painters and authors,’ to exchange views on ‘The function of art in our time’. Hellwag offered a joint résumé of the two discussion evenings. Speaking on the first occasion, the painter Arthur Segal dubbed Döblin’s pessimism an ‘antiquated popular tune,’ since ‘hunger was always part of the artist’s programme; the hope for the architects, who themselves had nothing to bite, had been proved treacherous; moreover, cubist and constructivist painters themselves had indeed put the ‘cuckoo’s egg’ in the architect’s nest’.

What seems to have caused the irritation of a great number of painters was precisely the fact that Döblin was not a specialist on the matter, that he had purportedly denied the painters’ ‘right to exist’, disregarding their actual material conditions as well as the nature of their work. Indeed, Döblin was probably not aware that, at approximately the same period, the issue of the ‘empty walls’ of neues Bauen buildings held a central position in the programme of the Reichsverband bildender Künstler Deutschlands (RVbK), the union of professional visual artists. In fact, just a few months before the Secession address, the RVbK had petitioned to the Ministry of Culture against the planned exclusion of visual arts from the Deutsche Bauaustellung 1931 – one of the most advertised and prestigious architectural shows of the Weimar period. As a result, the Ministry had indeed approved a special section titled ‘Kunst im Bauwerk’ (Art in Building) as part of the greater show. The proposals of the RVbK for this small exhibit had

40Kállai, ‘Malerei und Film’, 807.
41See note 23 above.
42Hellwag, ‘Rund um Döblin’, p. 29. Segal also published a reply to Döblin in the cultural journal Das Tagebuch where he characterized Döblin’s address unoriginal, ‘reproducing something already expressed by painters themselves more than fifteen years ago and which in the meantime had proven a fallacy’; Arthur Segal, ‘Antwort an Döblin’, Das Tagebuch, 12 (18 April 1931), 628-29 (p. 628). Further, he rejected the argument about the backwardness of painting, stressing its contribution to modern culture, especially modern architecture and ‘advertising, political propaganda, interior design, the furniture industry, theatre, cinema, shopwindows, fashion, music, dance and literature’; Segal, ‘Antwort an Döblin’, 628.
been drafted by the architect Alfred Gellhorn, and they were focused on the propagation of the various applications of visual arts in exterior and interior architecture of every type (monumental architecture, public buildings, business offices, housing estates). The programme made clear that the idea was not so much ‘about a purely external decoration [of buildings or rooms] with works of visual arts,’ as about advertising the whole gamut of possible applications for a ‘complete shaping of a space […] for the installation or hanging of works of the pure visual arts [fine arts].’

The hopes of the RVbK for the representation of a satisfactory number of its members in ‘Kunst im Bauwerk’ evaporated when its representative in the negotiations with the Ministry of Culture, Alfred Gellhorn, was shunted in favour of Bruno Paul, who undertook the direction of the exhibit. As the RVbK reported, the director of the Vereinigte Staatsschulen of Berlin had already formed a committee largely consisting of staff members from the School. The RVbK attacked Paul’s decision to ignore free submissions altogether and to list participants only after invitations/proposals, a decision that inevitably excluded ‘the great mass of artists, as indeed only a restricted number of artists will be eligible.’ In addition, the organization protested against ‘the entrusting of the [exhibition’s] management to artists with the status of civil servants [beamtete Künstler].’

Bruno Paul replied to the RVbK with an article titled ‘The Empty Walls’, originally published in the liberal newspaper Vossische Zeitung and reprinted in the association’s organ. He opened his text with a clear distinction between the art exhibited in the annual Great Berlin Exhibition and the demands of the neues Bauen pertaining to ‘different media, different working methods, different dimensions of space and greatly altered lifestyle habits of the dweller,’ issues that would almost exclusively concern the Bauaustellung. Paul, who had long ago abandoned painting for interior decoration and architecture, was sure that painting and sculpture had a future, only that this future was to be determined by the needs of architecture and the good will of the architect: ‘Architecture advances, the

45 Ibid.
sister-arts [Schwesterkünste] are about to follow. He declared that the special exhibition of the Bauaustellung (now renamed Bildende und Baukunst/Art of form-shaping and construction) would support only those ‘real’ artists who were ‘willing to follow the leadership of the architects.’ Further, he assured that the only criterion for the selection of a work for the exhibition (stressing that only works of mural painting and architectural sculpture would be considered) would be ‘its artistic and technical qualification,’ and not the artist’s status. He closed his article with an attempt to put RVbK in its proper place, arguing that aesthetic judgements were beyond the jurisdiction of ‘a purely economic association’.

This last remark is particularly interesting. The underscoring of the economic nature of the RVbK serves a degradation of those non-artists (not ‘real’ artists as Paul underlined) who never grasped the essence of modern art, remaining attached to an academic notion of it, and were thus stubbornly defending a medium (easel painting) that was fading away. This is fully in line with the attack on those craftsmen who were hesitant about accepting mechanization, thus conforming to the demands of modern production and, more generally, of the modern age. The aversion of the modern artist to the organizations representing broad-based interests, which we also detected in the Kunstgenossenschaft-Secessions clash or the derision of the Kartell’s GBK exhibitions, resurfaces here. Significantly, the vanguard designer/architect struggles to differentiate himself from the masses of the art proletariat by highlighting his economic disinterestedness.

But how does this economic disinterestedness conform to the applied artist’s model of artistic practice? Was not the latter interwoven with business interests? Were Bruno Paul and the artists ‘willing to follow the architect’s commands’ not equally economically motivated? Did they not in fact compete for state and private commissions that were unimaginable for the average member of the RVbK? And why was the RVbK, which in the final analysis was an association of artists, not equally authorized to judge artistic matters? My point is not that Paul’s argumentation alone was inconsistent; this applies to the avant-garde’s attack on autonomy in general. For the applied and the fine artist faced the same problem: capitalist economy had long since encroached upon the aesthetic field; artistic and

\[48\] Ibid.
\[49\] Ibid., p. 52.
\[50\] Ibid.
economic considerations were inextricable. 51

In the short introductory text of the exhibit, most probably written by Paul himself, we encounter the standard motifs of the Werkbund discourse: the present is seen as a time of transition, a time of confrontation between progressive and regressive forces; naturally, those who can properly diagnose the times are automatically positioned in the side of progress. This logic was inherently bound with what is dubbed in the text as a ‘cleansing process’, which would sweep out anything plainly decorative, opening the way for a ‘union of painting, sculpture and building’.52 Clearly, for fine artists, particularly easel painters, there was no future.

The issue was also taken up in Rudolf Bosselt’s first editorial as the RVbK’s new general secretary. Bosselt vividly portrayed the precarious condition of painters, citing as examples the exhibition of the Deutscher Künstlerbund in Essen, where there was not a single purchase of work from the private sector, and the commercial fiasco of an exhibition in the German Museum of Munich organized to compensate the painters whose works had been destroyed in the fire of the town’s traditional exhibition space, the Glaspalast.53 To make a bad situation worse, the widespread idea that painting and plastic arts had a right to exist only in relationship with architecture was further limiting the sources of income for painters and sculptors.54 Bosselt saw the RVbK’s own mission in the safeguarding of the ‘free floating’ arts which he contrasted with those immediately related with the economy (applied arts). We thus observe that the one side (Bruno Paul and the RVbK) tried to project the other as economically motivated. The relationship between ‘free’ and applied arts is perceived in a non-dialectic manner.

51The arbitrary character of Paul’s division between economic and artistic interests was the starting point of Otto Marcus’s (the chairman of the RVbK) short reply; see Otto Marcus, ‘Reichsverband bildender Künstler und Bauausstellung’, Kunst und Wirtschaft, 12 (16 February 1931), 53. Marcus’s reply was also originally published in the Vossische Zeitung.
53Rudolf Bosselt, untitled editorial, Kunst und Wirtschaft, 12 (1 October 1931), 211. The Glaspalast had been destroyed in a fire in June 1931.
54Ironically referring to Bruno Paul’s ‘empty walls’ Bosselt remarked: ‘What good fortune for the poets and authors that architects still allow the bookcase, this piece of furniture that destroys the impression of the bare beauty of the space, as it is clear, that otherwise the publication of books would have come to an end’; Bosselt, untitled editorial, p. 212. Bosselt was among the staunchest supporters of the pre-war applied arts reform and an early Werkbund member.
This was not the case, however, with Josef Frank’s 1930 Werkbund address. It is useful to return to it to grasp the way the avant-garde of the German applied arts movement came to a position that excluded easel painting as an artistic practice. For Frank’s main objection against the radical art reformers is entangled precisely with their tendency to come up to ‘a single correct system’, something that he characterized as ‘the opposite of modern’.\(^5\) His critique aimed at a disqualification of the avant-garde’s functionalist system, the relativization of its dogma.

Radical reformers, argued Frank, in their quest for a modern, single, unified system, tend to downplay any emotive/symbolic aspect of their work, deliberately accentuating its functional side, its application to the necessities of modern life, which supposedly constitutes the sole factor determining form. Frank questioned the validity of this doctrinaire position by using the example of the flat roof, which, in his view, above all constituted a gesture, a symbolic declaration on behalf of modern architecture, being not always the most appropriate solution for a building.\(^6\)

But who is to be identified as this dogmatic radical reformer? Frank explicitly refers to a tendency originating approximately forty years before his speech (that is, in 1890, the date I have identified with the emergence of the second wave of the applied arts reform). Frank directly associates this movement with the search of the modern artist for a new, collective form of patronage adapted to the demands of an expanded art market (industry).\(^7\) Certain modern architects and designers, he argues, sought to enter industrial production not as artists but as technicians or engineers. This transformation is rejected, because ‘a collaboration of the engineer and the architect is [...] futile, for the two think differently, and the architect will never find a form that is inclined towards typification: his essence is

\(^6\) Ibid., p. 411.
\(^7\) Ibid., p. 413. Frank had already associated the functionalist dogma of the ‘radical modernists’ with the search for a new type of artistic career in modernity in the text accompanying his contribution to the Werkbund’s 1927 Weissenhofsiedlung project: ‘Today, we pretend to search for the thing as such; the chair as such, the carpet as such, the lamp as such, things that already exist to some extent. As a matter of fact, we are actually looking for the occupational possibilities which arise from them’; quoted in Eve Blau, ‘Isotype and Architecture in Red Vienna: The Modern Projects of Otto Neurath and Josef Frank’, Austrian Studies, 14 (2006), 227-59 (p. 242).
to think individually.’\(^{58}\)

Frank essentially restates Adolf Loos’s critique of the Werkbund.\(^{59}\) Loos’s critique, however, was untimely. In his two anti-Werkbund articles (‘Die Überflüssigen’ and ‘Kulturentartung’), the artists of the German organization are still treated as exponents of the Jugendstil who dilute artisanal craftsmanship with artistic ornamentation. But the leading members of the Werkbund were also adopting a critical, if not openly hostile, attitude towards ornamentation. Frank, however, reformulates Loos’s critique at a moment when the Werkbund and the *neues Bauen* movement are perceived as almost synonymous. His attempt to distinct the artist from the architect and to unmask the radical modern architect, the rationalist transformer of the world as an old-time idealist is timelier now that the former secessionist, the former *Jugendstil* exponent has been developed into an adherent of rationalization and functionalism.

Frank’s attack was directed towards very specific institutions: the German Werkbund, the Bauhaus and the CIAM (Congrès International d’Architecture Moderne).\(^{60}\) His rejection of the rigidity of the radical modernist’s agenda, his call for a more open aesthetic system was combined with an attempt to restore what this system excluded. One such thing was ornament which, the Austrian architect maintained, was not superfluous. Or rather, it might be superfluous for the radical reformer, who demanded ‘the abolition of sentimentality’ because the nature of his work (intellectual work) satisfied his need for sentimentality, but it was necessary for the industrial worker, since it offered him a valuable distraction after all the tension experienced in his workplace.\(^{61}\)

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\(^{58}\)Frank, ‘What is modern’, p. 417.

\(^{59}\)See Adolf Loos’s texts ‘Die Überflüssigen (Deutscher Werkbund) (1908)’; ‘Kulturentartung (1908)’; ‘Architektur (1909)’; ‘Hands Off! (1917)’, in Loos, *Trotzdem 1900-1930* (Innsbruck: Brenner, 1931), pp. 70-73, 74-78, 93-111, 145-51. Listen for example how Loos distinguishes between the artist’s and the architect’s work: ‘The work of art is a private affair for the artist. The house is not. The work of art is begotten without there being a need for it. The house serves a need. The work of art is not responsible to anyone, the house is to everyone. The work of art wants to tear people away from their comfort. The house must serve comfort. The work of art is revolutionary, the house conservative. The work of art shows humanity new paths and thinks of the future. The house thinks of the present’; Loos, ‘Architektur’, p. 107.


But this rehabilitation of ornament also allowed the return of the painted picture to the walls of the modern buildings on whose emptiness radical architects seemingly insisted. It also unmasked the architect’s concealed artistic ambitions. But if the radical architects and art reformers were nothing but romantic aesthetes, then their rejection of ‘non-modern’, ‘non-functional’ artistic practices like easel painting was artificial. It was not, to use another Austrian art historian’s terms (also close to Frank’s circle), a clash between a ‘non-’ and an ‘over-art’ (Unkunst/Überkunst), i.e. between applied art and l’art pour l’art. It rather constituted a division of the same subject: the artist oscillating between, on the one hand, a practice useful to and recognizable by the public, a practice with a better prospect of earning one’s livelihood, which nevertheless involved a relegation to the status of the ‘mere’ worker-producer; and, on the other hand, a practice associated with an illustrious past and a precarious present, a practice for a declining minority surrounded, however, by the aura of the artist. It was, in short, a clash conditioned by the tension ascribed to that unlikely synthesis: the ‘worker-intellectual’, the artist and the technician.

This is not to say that Frank defended easel painting and its advocates; my argument is rather that by revealing the artist under the mask of the ‘non-artist’ (the expert, the scientist), he helps ‘de-radicalize’ the radicals’ positions, or perhaps counterbalancing ‘non-’ with ‘over-artists’. In the final analysis, what Frank pursued was another just-milieu position. He made that clear in his Architecture as Symbol, a more expanded version of his critique of radical art reform ideas. ‘It is unrealistic to believe,’ he wrote, ‘that our ideal should be an extreme and not […] simply a middle ground between two extreme phenomena’. But where exactly was this middle ground between the radical architects’ demands for ‘empty walls’ and the painters’ struggle to hold on their practice, or, as Frank put it, ‘the dispute over the house as functional object which, as is well known, it is not, and the house as a work of art, which it also is not’?

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3.2 The defence of painting

Though Döblin’s critique of the collective and Frank’s attack on functional, sachlich architecture challenge the radical art reformers’ excesses, they do not directly defend easel painting, as they both show a preference for applied visual arts. Moreover, in those debates unfolding between 1930 and 1931, the effects of the Great Depression on the German society do not play a predominant role in the argumentation of the artists and critics that we have thus far examined. In fact, the positions of all those cultural commentators seem to have been consolidated a few years earlier, at the peak of the reform movement, when applied arts dominated the ‘surface’ of Weimar Germany’s great urban centres, especially Berlin’s. For some, like Ernst Kállai (1890-1954) and Arthur Segal (1875-1944), the confrontation with what they saw as an increasingly and dangerously totalitarian visual culture, the defence of what this culture deemed ‘superfluous’ acquired the character of a life’s mission. What brings those two figures closer is not just their direct involvement in some avant-gardist projects of the Weimar period (Kállai’s in the Bauhaus and Segal’s in the Novembergruppe and Die Abstrakten), but also their almost simultaneous disillusionment with them. In addition, their concern for the future of easel painting was not just aesthetic; it was also a concern for the painter’s livelihood.

It was this concern that generated both Kállai’s and Segal’s reply to two different yet converging questions posed in two German periodicals in 1926: ‘What is the predicament of the artists?’ and ‘Art: the most overcrowded profession’.

The first question was posed by the German art historian Adolf Behne in the Sozialistische Monatshefte. Comparing the success of an automobile exhibition in Berlin with the empty rooms of the annual Great Art Exhibition of Berlin, Behne, much like Döblin in 1931, noted the public’s indifference towards painting. According to Behne, the reason lay in the modern public’s readiness to react to manifestations of modern life of ‘the most powerful vitality’ such as

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66Adolf Behne, ‘Worin besteht die Not der Künstler?’, Sozialistische Monatshefte, 32 (January 1926), 36-38.
sports or the war.\textsuperscript{67} But the situation for painters was not hopeless, Behne argued; all they had to do was to orient themselves towards the centre of ‘the most powerful vitality’ in the field of visual culture, namely architecture, typography, advertising, industrial design, and film. Instead of ‘a Sunday’s marginal position’, an individualistic, self-satisfying occupation, visual artists should aspire to ‘objectivity’.\textsuperscript{68} This is the same path leading to Bruno Paul’s and Alfred Döblin’s ‘empty walls’. Modern painters had only to comply with the architect’s command and give up their ‘hopeless defensive actions’.\textsuperscript{69}

In his reply to Behne, Kállai agreed that in modern life visual perception had changed to such a degree that it was impossible for painting to compete against photography and film\textsuperscript{70} – an argument he would reiterate in his notice on the Döblin-Behne-Osborn radio discussion. Painting, be it academic or modern, could not adopt to the demands of modern time. Even constructivism, argued Kállai, which with its emphatic affirmation of modern production process represented ‘an artistic apotheosis of technique and intellect, economy and organization’, could no more attract the public’s interest than ‘the Neue Sachlichkeit painters and the epigones of \textit{plein air} painting’; for the latter ‘at least paint in a representative manner, hence they bid for the curiosity of the public, which above all asks for the content of a picture, after all for something worth seeing’.\textsuperscript{71} So, the problem was not stylistic but concerned painting as an artistic practice. Any attempt by painters to compete against mechanically produced and reproduced images would be to no avail. However, Kállai stressed that this did not mean the end of painting; he rather called for its deliberate regression. Painting could provide a counterweight to the excessive tempo of modern life, delineating a meeting point for ‘all justified resistances against the mechanistic gearing of a technical-intellectual, capitalistic, utility-obsessed civilization’.\textsuperscript{72} In other words, the mission of painting was to alleviate the symptoms of modernity, to help people find an inner peace necessary to regain what seemed as a lost balance between the inner and the external world – a view remarkably close to that expressed by Döblin in his 1931 \textit{Sezession}
Kállai’s critique of Behne’s article obscures the fact that by that time the latter was also advocating a centrist position; he also criticized the dogmatic, almost dictatorial functionalism of the radical modernist architects, who sought to impose their ideas by any means, disregarding the actual needs of the dweller, and he promoted the idea of a revised, ‘positive Sachlichkeit’ clear from the negative excesses associated to the concept. Kállai’s and Behne’s positions primarily differ in the evaluation of the relationship between the individual and the collective. Kállai is critical of all forms of art that are addressed to the collective, whilst Behne is still exploring ways of making an ‘art for the collective’ function.

Kállai would elaborate his thesis on the necessity of the regression of painting (a position indicating how his centrist position differs from Behne’s) through the remaining years of the Weimar Republic. In an article published again in Sozialistische Monatshefte in 1931, he claimed that this regression, this resistance against the victorious course of ‘rationalism, materialism, utilitarianism’, had been already manifested in and inspired the work of such diverse artists as Paul Gauguin, Vincent van Gogh, James Ensor, Edvard Munch, Emil Nolde, Oskar Kállai attacked Behne on another occasion, after reading the latter’s article ‘Kunstausstellung Berlin’ in the neues Bauen periodical Das neue Berlin (1929). He replied with a fictional dialogue between himself and Behne, who was depicted as a fanatical adherent of technological progress and of applied, commercial arts. Behne has supposedly forgotten his past as a member of the Arbeitsrat für Kunst (when he is reminded of it, he rejects it as a ‘confused feverish dream’; see Ernst Kállai, ‘Kunst liegt auf Strasse, lächelt Dr. Behne an. Das neue Berlin, happy-end, keep smiling’ (Kunstblatt, 1929), repr. in Ernst Kállai, Gesammelte Werke 4, 147-48 (p. 148). For Behne’s infuriated reply to Kállai, see Adolf Behne, ‘Zeitraffer Kallai’, Das Kunstblatt, 14 (January 1930), 20. Kállai’s irony was unjustified. In fact, a few years later, in 1931, Behne himself would indirectly return to his Arbeitsrat für Kunst days in his contribution to a debate opened by Paul Westheim in the Kunstblatt concerning the ‘mining’ of culture in Germany. As a way out of the bleak situation for artists, Behne proposed a meeting of eight to ten people who would examine the prospect of founding a new Arbeitsrat für Kunst. The aim of this new organization would be to summon all the ‘positive people […], to help bringing an end to the miserable separation of our intellectuals. It shall make clear to every individual that he is nothing as long as he is just an ‘eminent’ in ‘his circle’, and that the thing that first and foremost matters for us all is ‘the circle of art’. Behne continued (and this is where the attentive reader could detect a self-criticism as regards the old Arbeitsrat): ‘We wish to reform nothing at all, we are not pretending to represent any power, nor do we need money. We need knowledge of each other, a mutual amendment and replenishment […], and the courage for collective work. Here shall be smashed all biases, all tendencies, all slogans and every princeplet […] if there is a common ground between Gropius and Nolde, then we shall become aware of it and work fruitfully from this basis. But the division in Nolde and Gropius fans is but an absurd sport for the ‘good society’. If we fail to work all together for a common cause, no one will go along […] neither the architect, nor the painter or the sculptor’; see Behne, ‘Gegen den Abbau des Geistes’, Das Kunstblatt, 15 (May 1931), 72. As it is evident, Behne’s piece constitutes another contribution in search of a juste-milieu between two equally intolerant positions represented by the avant-garde and the proponents of the traditional fine arts. On Behne’s critical modernist position see also Frederic J. Schwartz, ‘Form Follows Fetish: Adolf Behne and the Problem of Sachlichkeit’, Oxford Art Journal, 21 (1998), 45-77.

73Kállai attacked Behne on another occasion, after reading the latter’s article ‘Kunstausstellung Berlin’ in the neues Bauen periodical Das neue Berlin (1929). He replied with a fictional dialogue between himself and Behne, who was depicted as a fanatical adherent of technological progress and of applied, commercial arts. Behne has supposedly forgotten his past as a member of the Arbeitsrat für Kunst (when he is reminded of it, he rejects it as a ‘confused feverish dream’; see Ernst Kállai, ‘Kunst liegt auf Strasse, lächelt Dr. Behne an. Das neue Berlin, happy-end, keep smiling’ (Kunstblatt, 1929), repr. in Ernst Kállai, Gesammelte Werke 4, 147-48 (p. 148). For Behne’s infuriated reply to Kállai, see Adolf Behne, ‘Zeitraffer Kallai’, Das Kunstblatt, 14 (January 1930), 20. Kállai’s irony was unjustified. In fact, a few years later, in 1931, Behne himself would indirectly return to his Arbeitsrat für Kunst days in his contribution to a debate opened by Paul Westheim in the Kunstblatt concerning the ‘mining’ of culture in Germany. As a way out of the bleak situation for artists, Behne proposed a meeting of eight to ten people who would examine the prospect of founding a new Arbeitsrat für Kunst. The aim of this new organization would be to summon all the ‘positive people […] to help bringing an end to the miserable separation of our intellectuals. It shall make clear to every individual that he is nothing as long as he is just an ‘eminent’ in ‘his circle’, and that the thing that first and foremost matters for us all is ‘the circle of art’. Behne continued (and this is where the attentive reader could detect a self-criticism as regards the old Arbeitsrat): ‘We wish to reform nothing at all, we are not pretending to represent any power, nor do we need money. We need knowledge of each other, a mutual amendment and replenishment […] and the courage for collective work. Here shall be smashed all biases, all tendencies, all slogans and every princeplet […] if there is a common ground between Gropius and Nolde, then we shall become aware of it and work fruitfully from this basis. But the division in Nolde and Gropius fans is but an absurd sport for the ‘good society’. If we fail to work all together for a common cause, no one will go along […] neither the architect, nor the painter or the sculptor’; see Behne, ‘Gegen den Abbau des Geistes’, Das Kunstblatt, 15 (May 1931), 72. As it is evident, Behne’s piece constitutes another contribution in search of a juste-milieu between two equally intolerant positions represented by the avant-garde and the proponents of the traditional fine arts. On Behne’s critical modernist position see also Frederic J. Schwartz, ‘Form Follows Fetish: Adolf Behne and the Problem of Sachlichkeit’, Oxford Art Journal, 21 (1998), 45-77.
Kokoschka, Marc Chagall, Franz Marc, Lyonel Feininger, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Wassily Kandinsky, and Paul Klee. All those artists, according to Kállai, had developed a dialectic relationship with the above mentioned triptych.

What Kállai attempted in this article was to highlight precisely a ‘secret centre’ (geheime Mitte) situated between the extreme affirmation and equally extreme negation of modernity. And he strove to show that all modern painting up to his time (Post-Impressionism, Expressionism, Cubism, Dadaism, and Surrealism) was a manifestation of the struggle for a balance between the rational and the irrational aiming at the recovery of the individual’s relationship with the world (inner and external/natural). From this point of view, painting was conservative in a literal way, as it aimed at preserving everything that was vital in this relationship. Kállai argued for the necessity of a non-doctrinaire aesthetic position produced by the interaction of two opposed poles: Constructivism and Surrealism (the one affirming, the other negating rationalization); the cross-fertilization of the two antithetical tendencies was possible, according to Kállai, because, essentially, they both responded to and explored the same phenomenon.

Much like Josef Frank, Kállai tried to define an aesthetic midpoint by compiling the values rejected by radical modernists: sentimentality, fantasy, irrationalism, intuition, uselessness, ornament, and the non-mechanized, manual aspect of artistic creation. He indicated that some of those elements can also be

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75Kállai, ‘Kunst und Technik’, 1099. Kállai’s article was the outcome of an exhibition he co-organized in Ferdinand Möller’s gallery in Berlin in September 1930. Its title was ‘Vision und Formgesetz’ (Vision and the Law of Form); in a letter to the exhibiting artist Friedrich Vordemberge-Gildewart, Kállai explained the show’s conception: ‘It will consist of two reciprocally counterbalanced halves. On one side people like Fritz Winter, Fritz Kuhr, Coester, etc. (therefore Expressionism-Surrealism), on the other you, Nerlinger, Baumeister, Schlemmer, Hoerle and Seiwert. Therefore pictorial architecture’; cited in Monika Wucher, ‘Gesammelte Mitte’, in Julia Friedrich, Nina Gülicher and Lynette Roth (eds.), Form & Gesellschaft: Symposium zur Ausstellung ‘köln progressiv 1920-33’ (Cologne: Museum Ludwig, 2008), 9-18 (p. 15). Wucher correctly describes this project as a ‘gathered midpoint’ or ‘a third way between ideologies, conflicts and hardened standpoints’, ibid. p. 18.
77In his 1932 article ‘Back to Ornament’, Kállai advocated a new ornamental vision ‘requiring a maximum of visionary suspense and a minimum of representational outlook’; this was rejected by the radicals as ornamental, decorative and kunstgewerblich. This non-objective figurative art, useless for both radical political and commercial propaganda (as it failed attracting the masses of consumers or voters), occupied another centrist position; see Ernst Kállai, ‘Zurück zum Ornament’, Sozialistische Monatshefte, 38 (July 1932), 612-17 (pp. 613-14). For Kállai, this new ornamental perception of space was represented by artists as versatile as Picasso, Braque, Léger, Mondrian, Doesburg, Malevich, Klucis, Lissitzky, Moholy-Nagy, Schwitters, Seiwert, and Klee.
traced even in the – purportedly purely functional – applied arts, particularly in what he called a ‘technoid’ (*technoide*) tendency in visual arts, namely ‘an aesthetic paraphrase of machines and apparatuses, speed and oscillation’. He detected this trend in what he saw as the two main directions of Constructivism: a strictly functional (De Stijl or Bauhaus) and a politically tendentious (represented by Oscar Nerlinger or Franz Wilhelm Seiwert). It is not only function, writes Kállai, but also fantasy and lyricism that characterize the organization of the pictorial space of this ‘technoid art’. The last hope for modern painting was the cultivation of this middle ground.

But Kállai, it must be noted, espoused the *raison d'être* of painting from a crucially different standpoint than that of the RVbK, Bruno Paul or Josef Frank; for he was convinced that painting and sculpture should progress following their own path, independent from modern architecture. In this respect, he questioned not just the leading cultural position of architecture but the whole viability of the project for a unity of all arts under the latter’s wings. This signified a decisive rejection of the Werkbund/Bauhaus programme and a drastic reconfiguration of modern art reform, now re-directed towards a *symbiosis* instead of a *fusion* of all artistic practices. In other words, he proposed a horizontal, non-hierarchical reform programme. This was the lesson of his Bauhaus experience and his own way to conceive the clash that took place inside the institution between architecture/design and fine arts. Resigning from Bauhaus, he declared: ‘the *neues Bauen* and the new art must necessarily go separate ways. The more radical the separation, the better for both parts’.

Concurrent with Kállai’s reply to Behne’s account of the crisis of painting was the reaction of a painter, Arthur Segal, to an article in the popular Ullstein magazine *Uhu*, which portrayed art as the most overcrowded profession. The article was introduced by a short notice stating that there was ‘far too much’ painted work, calculating that only in Berlin there was an annual production of approximately 80,000 square meters painted canvas, and consequently not enough ‘purchasing power’ or exhibition space to support this production. Next, three

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79Ibid., p. 1102.
‘experts’ were called to pronounce upon the situation: Karl Scheffler on painting, Arthur Eloesser on literature and Adolf Weißmann on music.

Karl Scheffler restated the standard position of radical art reformers on the art proletariat. He argued that artistic talent was extremely rare – in his view, in a Germany of approximately 60 million inhabitants, only a handful of artists could be considered genuinely talented – but nevertheless the social and cultural status associated with artistic merit, the ‘self-deceit of talent’ drove too many young people to the art schools. In a discourse typical of the old generation of crafts and social reformers, Scheffler concluded that ‘national labour’ should be reorganized in order to save those ‘self-deceived’ artists from the ‘art plague of the time’, redirecting them to the trades that would fit their skills. In his words:

the state [...] will relinquish from its schools the lie about a wrongly understood idealism that encourages and cultivates an unfortunate art proletariat. Who is more productive today: the worker, who stands for eight hours by the machine and helps creating values, or the painter of picture number 2,474 in the Great [Berlin] Art Exhibition? (figs. 17-18)

Segal responded to Scheffler with an article published in RVbK’s Kunst und Wirtschaft. The Romanian-born painter was well-known in the Berlin art world as a member of the Novembergruppe (he joined the group in 1920 and he had been a member of its committee). Segal also had his own small private art school and he was particularly active in artists’ welfare issues. One of his most original ideas for the alleviation of the painters’ plight and the encouragement of the public’s interest in modern painting was the ‘art rental’, a network for the loan and purchasing of modern works of visual arts. Around 1926-1927, his attitude towards his contemporary avant-garde changed significantly, and this transformation affected both his work (he turned to an extreme naturalist style) and his ideas on art. It is in this context that one should see his reply to Scheffler.

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83 Ibid., p. 30.
84 Ibid., p. 32.
86 The bibliography on Segal is extremely limited. The most detailed study of his work is Wulf Herzogenrath and Pavel Liska (eds.), Arthur Segal: 1875-1944, exh. cat. (Berlin: Argon, 1987).
87 See Horst Dietze, ‘Arthu Segal und der Kunstverleih’, in Arthur Segal, exh. cat., pp. 169-73. The initiative was naturally supported by the Berlin section of the RVbK.
For Segal, the view that someone had to protect the youth from the ‘art plague’ and direct them to more secure professions (hence the very essence of the applied arts reform spirit) was profoundly philistine. He generally found Scheffler’s article too superficial, a plain restatement of stereotypes. From his standpoint, if someone was to be blamed for the aura surrounding the artist as a personality and, more generally, art as a practice, it was not artists themselves, but instead those who ‘through newspaper articles, biographies, honours, had hallmarked them as exceptional members of the society,’ while at the same time no scholar had ever written the biography of a worker – hence those belonging to Scheffler’s métier. Similarly, what Scheffler claimed with regard to the artistic profession, for example about the ‘rule of mediocrity’, was equally valid for every other profession.

3.3 Kitsch, or Avant-garde and its double

Segal’s defence of painting can be linked to Josef Frank’s critique of functionalism. This is more evident in his surprising vindication of kitsch, first appearing in passing in his reply to Scheffler, and further elaborated in a 1932 speech. For Segal, kitsch is not a ‘superfluous matter’, and this is why the centuries-long struggle against it had never produced any results. In fact, the opponents of kitsch, he argues, fight not the phenomenon itself but one’s disposition to it; as such, the struggle against kitsch is revealed as a struggle for the domination of a specific aesthetic position.

But for Segal kitsch is

a necessary bacillus whose complete lack makes impossible life and progress, but whose prevalence destroys life. It must exist to a certain extent, when something new is to emerge and in another degree, when what

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88 Or ‘conventional lies’ as he would dub the stereotypical catchphrases circulating across the contemporary art world in a 1931 speech on behalf of the RVbK. See Arthur Segal, ‘Konventionelle Lügen in der bildenden Kunst’, to be found online in Arthur Segal Collection 1903-1987, Leo Baeck Institute Archives (hereafter: ASC/LBIA, 1903-1987) <http://www.archive.org/stream/arthursegal_06_reel06#page/n656/mode/1up> (accessed 9 September 2014). I thank Frederic J. Schwartz for pointing out that the title of Segal’s article is a reference to Max Nordau’s Die konventionellen Lügen der Kulturmenschenheit which was first published in 1883.
89 Segal, ‘Offener Brief’, 192.
has been created is to die. In the creation-process it helps to preserve and build up, in the process of decay it helps to destroy and dissolve [...] the real problem is the correct dosage.90

This argument constitutes a subtle critique of the excesses of artistic radicalism; it is a defence of tradition (also the naturalist tradition to which Segal himself had turned), which as every tradition looked kitschy. Since the ‘bacillus of kitsch’ was inherent in every artistic tendency (and Segal argued that this was the case from Impressionism to Constructivism) there could – and in fact there should – be a symbiosis of art. Thus, the problem of the right dosage had to do with the avant-garde’s persistence of effecting a cleansing in the art world, seeking to eliminate every ‘superfluous’, ‘antiquated’ and ‘kitschy’ art tendency.

Segal’s analysis of kitsch is among the first, to my knowledge, that attempts a dialectical investigation of the matter. It predates by only a few months Hermann Broch’s classic essay on kitsch as the ‘Evil in the Value-System of Art’ (Das Böse im Wertsystem der Kunst, 1933). Segal’s and Broch’s views on kitsch, I shall argue, can be also read as a critique of the avant-garde’s claims for a monopoly on ‘true’ aesthetic values. Both figures seem to have arrived at a discussion of kitsch in their search for an aesthetic centrist position bridging innovation with tradition, something also reflected in their personal work.91 To put it differently, kitsch, a term usually applied by the radical reformers as a reference to either ‘trashy’ products of popular culture or to ‘outdated’ artistic styles, is now used by Segal and Broch against radical modernism itself. Much like Josef Frank attempted to do with the concept of ‘modern’, kitsch is also relativized; as Broch and Segal stress, it does not exclusively denote the ‘non-modern’, it can also characterize modernism and the avant-garde.

To begin with, it is significant that Broch sees the prevalence of kitsch as a result of the lack of average values (Mittelwerte). ‘The style of an era,’ he writes,
is usually associated with the work of the genius, but, in reality, it is carried by
the average work." Since Romanticism, however, ‘every lapse from the degree
of genius amounted to a lapse from cosmos straight to kitsch.’ In other words,
part of the romantics’ legacy was an extreme intolerance of artistic mediocrity, an
intolerance that, I think, we could identify as the root of the radical aesthetic
position of the German applied arts reformers that culminated in the total rejection
of easel painting.

Broch continues by asserting that Romanticism cleared the way for the
domination of kitsch through a groundbreaking reconfiguration of aesthetic
values. He explains this transformation through a discussion of the difference
between a closed and an open system of values. Much like scientific knowledge,
he argues, art is ‘an infinitely evolving logical system’. Whereas in science the
system’s ‘infinitely floating goal’ is truth, in art it is beauty; in both systems ‘the
goal is the platonic idea’. Broch describes those systems as ‘open’ since their
absolute objectives are elusive. What the romantics attempted, then, was a
decisive reversal of the system’s flow; by perceiving beauty as an ‘immediate,
palpable goal of each artwork,’ they tended to ‘close’ the system, to transpose its
absolute value to a here and now. The finality of the system ‘forms the essential
precondition of all kitsch; at the same time, however, Romanticism’s specific

\[\text{92} \quad \text{Hermann Broch, ‘Einige Bemerkungen zum Problem des Kitsches. Ein Vortrag’, in Hannah
Arendt (ed.), Dichten und Erkennen. Essays 1 (Zurich: Rhein, 1955), 295-309 (p. 297). This is
a lecture given by Broch to the students of the faculty of German at Yale University in 1950.}
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\[\text{93} \quad \text{Ibid.}
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\[\text{94} \quad \text{In an undated text by Arthur Segal (most possibly written between 1930 and 1932), one finds
a position that is significantly close to Broch’s. Segal distinguishes two kinds of crises as
responsible for the plight of modern artists: a financial and an ethical. Significantly, he found
the latter deeper, and for this reason, more difficult for artists to overcome it. For its primary
cause was precisely the shattering of the platonic idea which in the past sustained both the
artist’s and society’s faith in art, a faith that transformed artistic work into an ideal task and art
in general into necessity. Similarly to Broch, Segal maintained that by working for alien goals,
and not just for art as an ideal, the modern artist lost the ethical foundations that supported his
faith on art (detectable in slogans such as ‘Art is dead!’ , ‘Painting is dead!’ etc.). Significantly,
Segal also argued that the destruction of the ethical basis of art had been effected by artists
themselves; in Broch’s terms we could read this as an ‘anti-system’ (the source of the ‘radical
evil’) dialectically developed in art’s own system. But Segal’s analysis also approximates
Döblin’s position, since he conceived the development of painting (and art in general) as a
course to de-individuation; the individual, the personality was extirpated through the demands
for a new applied, collective, technical-rational art; the radicalness of this new aesthetic
position left no ground for artistic creation and its fiercelessness was owed to the aesthetic position
that initially fought l’art pour l’art; a dogma which was now replaced, according Segal, by ‘but
pour but’ (goal for goal), hence from ‘art as an end in itself to end as an end in itself’; see
Arthur Segal, ‘Moralische und wirtschaftliche Haltlosigkeit des Künstlers’, in ASC/LBIA,
(accessed 9 September 2014).}
structure, namely the rise of the material to the eternal [...] means that Romanticism, without being itself kitsch, it is its mother, and there are moments when the child looks exactly like his mother’.  

Kitsch, then, rather than being ‘bad art,’ is an ‘anti-system’ within the system of art. Broch emphasizes that each system dialectically develops its own anti-system. The danger arises when a ‘closed’ passes for an ‘open’ system. But how can one tell the difference between the two? For Broch, an open system is always ethical, while a closed system inevitably deteriorates; for example, art as a closed system is merely an aggregation of regulations, a pattern of imitation. Kitsch is ‘evil’ because is non-ethical, it signifies merely an imitative system in art.

Broch had elaborated on this issue in his first encounter with the problem of kitsch, his 1933 ‘Evil in the Value-System of Art’ essay, in which he identified this ‘evil’ with the inherent dogmatism of each closed system. Though this is not explicit in Broch’s text his analysis of kitsch amounts to an articulate negative assessment of interwar artistic radicalism. As such it is particularly useful to frame our discussion about the death of painting and the backwardness of its practitioners in the industrial age. For instance, Josef Frank’s argument that the project of the German radical modernists to reform art by establishing an ‘all-encompassing’ system, can indeed be interpreted, in Broch’s terms, as a romantic attempt to ‘close’ the infinite system of art by resetting the rules of the game. And perhaps the avant-garde in its time achieved exactly this: to present itself as the open system that was not, or to present itself as an ethical system, whilst in reality it remained constrained within aesthetic limits. The avant-garde’s self-proclaimed transgression of the aesthetic was conditioned on the basis of a willful violation of the autonomy of art. Adopting values from extra-aesthetic fields such as political economy (‘ennoblement of work’), modern modes of production and business management (rationalization), science (research against intuition) and technique (functionality), the avant-garde sought to conceal its persistent and primarily aesthetic objectives.

Just as Döblin, Frank, Kállai and Segal, Broch argued that ‘the intense polarity of paired opposites that characterizes our age and gives it its specifically extremist nature, this compulsion for people to incorporate into their lives both the highest

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95Broch, ‘Einige Bemerkungen zum Problem des Kitsches’, p. 305 (for all quotations in the paragraph).
ethical needs and an often incomprehensibly frightful reality, so that life can be lived at all – all that gives direction to the intellectual strivings of the age’.\textsuperscript{96} Broch defends the autonomy of art from a paradoxical standpoint. Art, he argues, must pose and strive to answer ethical/philosophical questions, since the highest value-goal of a system is always ethical. But ‘the larger the system, the more difficult is to define it rationally. Its rationality is visible only in its esthetic result [...] the value-goal of large systems remains indefinable and irrational, since it is infinite, and remains infinitely removed, be it called ‘God,’ ‘the people,’ ‘beauty,’ or ‘justice.’\textsuperscript{97} Thus, the penetration of an alien system into the system of art (such as commerce, science, etc.) can result in a deterioration of its values, or, better, the substitution of its high and irrational value-goal by a set of rational, practical and partial values (for example profit). The paradox in Broch’s thesis, then, is that only by defending its autonomy art can safeguard its infiniteness as a value-system.

Finally:

For every ‘unclosed’ value-system – for example, the system of science – the esthetic concretization of its ethical efforts is already outdated and overtaken at the very moment of occurrence. Any given state of science is usually made obsolete at the very moment it is reached, becoming at that moment the object of re-forming again; one could even say that what has already been formed takes on once again the character of the unformed.\textsuperscript{98}

One can argue, then, that the plans for the reform of art needed to be re-formed. This seems to be the central idea in Frank’s 1930 Werkbund speech, in which the Austrian architect insisted that the applied arts reform was based on a set of values which were already ‘outdated’. In a final analysis, Broch, Frank and the latter’s teacher, Loos,\textsuperscript{99} all defended the openness of the value-system of art, which was threatened by the attack of the radicals on the autonomy of both artistic practice and the individual artwork. This attack represented an endeavour for a complete


\textsuperscript{97}Ibid., pp. 14-15.

\textsuperscript{98}Ibid., p. 21.

\textsuperscript{99}Loos’s designation of the Werkbund’s applied artists as ‘redundant’ was based precisely in his belief that art should be separated from crafts; see Adolf Loos, ‘Die Überflüssigen (Deutscher Werkbund) (1908)’, in \textit{Trotzdem}, 70-73 (esp. pp. 71-72). It is clear that for Loos arts and crafts stand as two different value-systems.
rationalization of artistic labour conformed to a set of strict rules borrowed from alien value-systems (industry, commerce, engineering). For Broch, the endeavour to rationalize artistic labour (an endeavour discarded by Frank as an ‘absurdity’\(^{100}\) was transforming the ‘esthetic demand [...] into a demand for ‘effect’ [...] ‘Wealth’ for the merchant, ‘beauty’ for artists, this entirely irrational thing, is now elevated to a rational goal, and this is what defines the true essence of an imitation system, that is seemingly no longer distinct at all from the original value-system, but in fact stands in strict opposition to it.\(^{101}\)

For Broch, Kitsch is such an imitative system. But artistic radicalism and the avant-garde fall into the same category as they tend to translate every infinite goal connected with artistic practice into finite; artistic practice is relegated into an application for the satisfaction of practical everyday needs; the side-effect becomes the ultimate goal.

Further, for the Austrian author, the ‘radical aesthete’ is relegated into a producer of kitsch when his ‘partial-value area’ blinds him to the actual relations and problems of his surrounding environment. This returns us to Frank’s critique of the German applied arts reformers’ fanatical dogmatism. The radical reformer, the literati of the movement and their rigid theoretical system is the target in both cases. Functionalism is rejected as a closed system which has actually returned to the position of l’art pour l’art (or, as Segal put it, its modern transformation into ‘but pour but’); its motto could be: *fiat ars – pereat mundus*.

A reformulation is necessary at this point to dispel misunderstanding. My argument is not that the avant-garde can be entirely identified with kitsch; I rather take kitsch as the avant-garde’s ‘anti-system’ or its double, its caricature. It can be argued that the avant-garde’s rigidity against what was alien to its aesthetic, to the rules it sought to impose, facilitated the appropriation and imitation of those very rules by the system of kitsch. Josef Frank’s discussion of the flat roof as mainly a symbol (and not always the most appropriate practical solution) of modern architecture can serve as an example of the degradation of avant-garde aesthetics into kitsch.\(^{102}\) For Frank, the avant-garde’s system was so strict that it could never be modern and, consequently, could easily lapse into kitsch. As he argued in his 1930 Werkbund speech, in all its guises (*Kunstgewerbe, Zweckkunst,*)

\(^{100}\)Frank, ‘What is Modern’, p. 423.
\(^{102}\)Hermann Broch was Frank’s schoolmate; see Christopher Long, *Josef Frank*, p. 5.
Geschmacksindustrie, or Neue Gestaltung) radical aesthetics tended towards the absolute, the unification of everything into a closed system. And he found absurd the modernist mania, ‘for in everything that is modern there has to be a place for all that our time encompasses, and our time encompasses so much and so fully that we cannot bring it into anything approaching a unified form.’ Indeed, this is another very eloquent demonstration of the difference between an open and a closed aesthetic system.

This middle-of-the-road we have traced so far should not be confused with a kind of conservative juste milieu; it does not stand as a rejection of aesthetic modernism or the conquests of the avant-garde; it rather constitutes an attempt to save modern art from the aggressive dogmatism, the dictatorial pretensions of this avant-garde, from the way it sought to impose its theory by excluding and eliminating not just ideas that did not conform to its programme, but entire modes of artistic production and, in extension, their practitioners. It is conceived as a defence against the avant-gardists’ professional politics.

It was precisely this rigidity of the avant-garde position in the late 1920s that for some incisive critics was transforming it into a kitsch style. Listen, for example, how Kállai assesses an institution synonymous with the avant-garde:

The [Bauhaus] products which were to be expedient and functional, technical and constructive, and economically necessary were for the most part conceived out of a taste-oriented arbitrariness decked out in new clothes, and out of a bel-esprit propensity for elementary geometric configurations and for the formal characteristics of technical contrivances. Art and technology, the new unity – this is what was theoretically called and accordingly practiced – interested in technology, but art-directed. This is a critical ‘but.’ Priority was given to the art-directedness. There was the new formalistic wilfulness, the desire to create a style at all costs, and technology had to yield to this conviction. This is the way those Bauhaus products originated: houses, furniture, and lamps which wrested attention primarily by their obtrusively impressive form and which, as a logical result of this characteristic, were accepted or rejected by the public and the press as being the products of a new style, namely the Bauhaus style […] Yet a few years of practice were already enough even for the eyes of the younger Bauhaus generation to recognize that these products were outdated handicraft. This

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may be less florid than customary handicraft. But it is instead inhibited, prejudiced by a doctrinaire mock asceticism, stiff, without charm, and yet pretentious to the point of arrogance.\textsuperscript{104}

As Broch would put it, the problem with the Bauhaus production was that ‘the esthetic concretization of its ethical efforts [were] already outdated and overtaken at the very moment of occurrence’. Hence, the Bauhaus style degenerated into kitsch not just via its cheap imitators but due to the logic of the Bauhaus itself. It is the same logic – attacked by Frank and Segal – of an artistically orientated (aesthetic) system, which pretended to be technical-scientific and collective (hence ethically tinged). And it is not surprising that Kállai connects this issue with the situation of painting within the institution. For the conjuring away of Bauhaus-style and the danger of its relegation into kitsch, passes through the path of the divorce between a modern architecture pretending to be strictly functional and a ‘useless’ painting. For Kállai, the Bauhaus exponents of a strictly utilitarian art are described as ‘semi-artists and semi-technicians’, who ‘present themselves as superior to the painters with respect to their usefulness and their powers of reasoning’. In reality, he argues, this hostility is a repression of the ‘artistic drives’ of the radical functionalist himself, a repression engendered by the one-sided connection of intellectual creativity with technology. ‘Bad conscience with respect to the demands of form,’ he concludes, ‘is thus anesthetized’.\textsuperscript{105}

True, anesthetics were an integral part of the avant-garde’s professional politics. In other words, anesthetics were the defence mechanism of avant-garde’s aesthetics. An unethical attitude is suggested in this diagnosis, and though Kállai does not go as far as Broch to characterize it as a ‘radical evil’ in the system of art, the distance is a short one.

But we can trace the avant-garde’s simultaneous murderous (as regards free arts) and suicidal tendencies in another text of the 1930s that was an apologia for the avant-garde and at the same time a condemnation of kitsch: Clement


\textsuperscript{105}Kállai, ‘Ten Years of Bauhaus’, p. 639.
Greenberg’s 1939 ‘Avant-Garde and Kitsch’. Greenberg speaks of a ‘motionless Alexandrianism, an academicism’ which suppressed ‘all larger questions’, relegating artistic creation into a matter of imitation, of copying what has been handed by the Old Masters. The avant-garde represents an effort to overcome this Alexandrianism. But Greenberg’s arguments in the support of the avant-garde paradoxically confirm its denigration by Broch and Segal. Hence, when he examines the development of avant-garde ideas from l’art pour l’art to abstract and non-objective art, he concedes that

the avant-garde poet or artist tries [...] to imitate God by creating something valid solely on its own terms [...] something given, increate, independent of meanings, similars, or originals. Content is to be dissolved so completely into form that the work of art or literature cannot be reduced in whole or in part to anything not itself.”

This corresponds exactly to Broch’s delineation of a closed system or to Segal’s tirade against the overwhelming ‘subjective freedom of the artist’, as is expressed in his ‘Neue Naturalismus’ manifesto.

Indeed, the central point in Segal’s critique of the avant-garde is the denunciation of the artist’s self-infatuation in favour of a return to the study of natural laws. This should be also associated with Segal’s interest in art education. In sharp contrast with the views of the applied arts reformers on the matter, the painter, who between 1920 and 1933 was running a small private school in Berlin-Charlottenburg, believed that painting was teachable, that much like language, it had its own inherent laws, its own ‘grammar’ which could be transmitted to students. Pavel Liska incisively observes that it is precisely the rejection of the idea of the artist as the sole legislator of art – the nucleus of the modern artist’s self-conception – that marks Segal’s final break from modern art.

But Greenberg himself also discerns the self-deception of the radical modernist in his search for the absolute. ‘The very values in the name of which he invokes the absolute,’ he writes, ‘are relative values, the values of aesthetics. And so he

107Ibid., p. 35.
108Ibid., p. 36 (emphasis in original).
110Arthur Segal, exh. cat., p. 65.
turns out to be imitating [...] the disciplines and processes of art and literature themselves. This is the genesis of the ‘abstract.’ In turning his attention away from subject-matter or common experience, the poet or artist turns it in upon the medium of his own craft.\textsuperscript{111} Thus, abstract art (and in this context Greenberg mentions the Bauhaus teachers Kandinsky and Klee) becomes the ‘imitation of imitating’\textsuperscript{112} The question now is: Does not, in this way, the ‘collectivist’ avant-garde return to the position of its supposed foe – l’art pour l’art? Or, as Kállai put it in his critique of the Bauhaus, what else did the supposed unity between art and technique come to represent than a formalism that only pretended to be corresponding to the practical necessities of modern life and denounced every manifestation of purpose-free art?\textsuperscript{113} Greenberg, thus, provides a peculiar, paradoxical or perhaps just too fair apology of the avant-garde (in the sense that he does not overlook its foundational antinomy). Is there a clearer proof of that than the following lines?

That avant-garde culture is the imitation of imitating – the fact itself – calls for neither approval nor disapproval. It is true that this culture contains within itself some of the very Alexandrianism it seeks to overcome [...] and in a sense this imitation of imitating is a superior sort of Alexandrianism. But there is one most important difference: the avant-garde moves, while Alexandrianism stands still. And this, precisely, is what justifies the avant-garde’s methods and makes them necessary. The necessity lies in the fact that by no other means is it possible today to create art and literature of a high order. To quarrel with necessity by throwing about terms like ‘formalism,’ ‘purism,’ ‘ivory tower’ and so forth is either dull or dishonest. This is not to say, however, that it is to the social advantage of the avant-garde that it is what it is. Quite the opposite.\textsuperscript{114}

Avant-garde aesthetics as a lesser evil compared to academicism? Greenberg seems to be maintaining precisely this, and perhaps this position may be better

\textsuperscript{111}Greenberg, ‘Avant-Garde and Kitsch’, p. 36.
\textsuperscript{112}Ibid., p. 37.
\textsuperscript{113}It is this antinomy that generates Kállai’s call for a final divorce between architecture and painting: ‘Is it a case of not knowing that architecture and art are going separate ways, as husband and wife do in a modern compassionate marriage? Antiseptically clean separations are basically very well liked at the Bauhaus. One separates painting from representation. The painting has to be abstract. In Kandinsky’s paintings a tree or a face may not even accidentally sneak in. They are immediately contorted past recognition or are expunged altogether and assigned to photography. Everything representational belongs to the realm of photography. Violators of this principle are making punishable reversions into an epoch of art that has been discredited’; see Kállai, ‘Ten Years of Bauhaus’, p. 640.
understood taking into account the avant-garde’s roots in the American culture of the period. But if we go back from 1939 America to 1929 Germany, the context changes dramatically: the avant-garde’s attack on kitsch included everything (from academicism to easel painting and from representational art to Tendenzkunst) except its very own Alexandrianism, its inner, imitative ‘anti-system’ of kitsch. Moreover, the frustration of reformist politics after the Great Depression brought to the surface the first clear indications suggesting that the avant-garde was actually coming to a standstill just as Alexandrianism. And its critics attributed this standstill to the narrowness, the closure of its system and its dogmatism. This is how one can explain Segal’s evaluation of kitsch as a ‘necessary bacillus’. For by infecting the avant-garde, kitsch would enable the softening of its position, it would help setting in motion a new, more tolerant aesthetic system founded on the achievements of both tradition and modernism.

In 1931 Segal’s confrontation with the ‘radical modernists’ will reach its peak. It is the year that he published his ‘Neue Naturalismus’ manifesto (just a week before his reply to Döblin’s Sezession speech, and in the same periodical), an aesthetic turn that caused his expulsion from the Novembergruppe, when the latter’s hanging committee refused to exhibit his naturalist works.115 It is also the year that marks the beginning of the artist’s collaboration with an artistic organization which was also gradually abandoning formalism, moving towards a politically motivated figurative art: Die Abstrakten (The Abstracts).

We see, then, how disillusionment with radical modernism or the avant-garde leads the artist towards a traditional, mundane style but also a more radical political position, or rather from the ‘apolitical’ modernism of the Novembergruppe (fig. 19) to the political modernist revisionism of the Abstrakten – a group to which I will now turn. Though Segal sought to convince his public that his ‘New Naturalism’ did not signify retrogression but a natural development in art that was taking into account all recent developments, his centrist position was appealing only in theory. In practice, the new style was quite conventional; sadly, there was nothing new in this naturalism (figs. 20-21). Consequently, it was not well received in the circles of artists and art critics, since the first efforts towards this direction had been ‘contemptuously labelled and dismissed as

3.4 From canvas to poster and back again: the art proletariat between avant-garde and kitsch

The question arising here is how political radicals on the left perceived the crisis of visual arts. More specifically: did communist cultural organizations provide any viable alternative potential for professional easel painters? How did they deal with the peculiar issue of a different kind of proletariat, the art proletariat?

Arthur Segal’s involvement with the Abstrakten sets the context for a short discussion of this issue. The Abstrakten had been founded in 1919 as the Internationale Vereinigung der Expressionisten, Kubisten und Futuristen by avant-garde artists involved in the activities of Herwarth Walden’s Sturm-circle. Among its founding members were Heinrich Campendonk, Georg Muche, Kurt Schwitters, Arnold Topp, Nell Walden, Herwarth Walden and William Wauer, with the latter functioning as the group’s first chairman. In 1926 its name was changed into Die Abstrakten: Internationale Vereinigung der Expressionisten, Futuristen, Kubisten und Konstruktivisten, under which they participated in that year’s Great Berlin Art Exhibition. Up to this point, the Abstrakten constituted a meeting point of eminent ‘radical’ artists and as such it was also typical of the avant-gardists’ model of loosely organized associations discussed in the previous chapter. It is indicative that between its foundation in 1919 and 1928, only three general meetings took place, with the first occasioned after the group’s secretary request for the dissolution of the group due to inactivity.117

Given the almost non-existent activity of the group until 1928, one can question whether it had ever functioned as anything more than a brand name, another publicity outlet for eminent or aspiring avant-garde artists. In any case, in

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1928 some of its Berlin-based members decided to reanimate what by then seemed to be a lost case. Among the artists who played a pivotal role in this reactivation were Oskar Nerlinger (1893-1969), Paul Fuhrmann (1893-1952), Alice Lex-Nerlinger (1893-1975) and Ernst Oskar Albrecht (1895-1953). Except for Alice Lex-Nerlinger, the rest had also been members of the Arbeitsgemeinschaft der Expressionisten (Agde), a group founded in 1925 aiming to facilitate those among the Abstrakten who sought to expand their practice in the realm of commercial advertising. And it is significant that the Agde members were not ‘advertising specialists or experienced commercial artists but fine artists’.

It is crucial to make clear that those artists abandoned Reklamekunst only to dedicate themselves to Propaganda. This turn helps to better understand their rupture with the avant-garde of the applied arts movement and their gradual embrace of an aesthetically more conventional Tendenzkunst. My argument here is that the aesthetic conversion of those artists cannot be explained by taking into account solely the actual political, social and financial crisis characterizing the last years of the Weimar Republic. Instead, the increasingly confined position of professional fine artists should be connected with the exclusionary professional politics of the time, in this case the professional politics of advertising experts towards graphic artists.

As we have seen, the task of the applied arts reform was to create a type of artist, better corresponding to the demands of free economy and the market. The Promised Land for the proletarianized visual artists seemed to be the significantly expanded field of Gebrauchskunst, the training of the artistically inclined youth to decorative painting, the design of commercial posters, mass-produced commodities, book illustrations and the like, and indeed those practices held a central position in the curricula of the reformed Kunstgewerbeschulen. Students at those schools were taught that design quality was inextricably connected with its practical application, and it was this idea that contributed to a radical reconfiguration of the role of visual arts in modern society. Thus, the profession of the graphic designer acquired a greater appeal for young visual artists because, on the one hand, it promised a safer career, and, on the other hand, it was ‘modern’,

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more suitable to the spirit of the age, since it acknowledged the needs of a mass public.\[19\]

Art was leaving private collections and museums to conquer the streets and shop windows. As Sherwin Simmons notes, it was particularly illustrators who ‘pursued careers that often crossed professional boundaries’.\[120\] For the illustrator-advertiser, the quality of his work was judged by his effectiveness in attracting a specific target group. The issue was how to produce successful propaganda, and students at the departments of design and advertising at the applied arts schools were taught precisely this art.

At this point, a short etymological investigation is vital to elucidate the relation between Reklamekunst and Propaganda. The term ‘propaganda’ was not always confined in its currently dominant political-ideological content but, at least in Germany, it was often used to denote the strategies of the rapidly developing sector of advertising, irrespective of the latter’s nature (commercial or political). Thus in Meyers Großes Konversations-Lexikon we read:

Propaganda [...] in general an institution, which seeks to spread views [...] The expression propaganda has recently also passed into commercial discourse and it signifies here all the necessary means (notifications, advertising [Reklame] for the dissemination of products (commodities, writings) – To make propaganda as a way to win supporters for something (figs. 22-24).\[121\]

Theodor Geiger, a German sociologist working in the trade statistics department of the Statistischer Reichsamt from 1924 to 1933, offers an interesting differentiation between Reklame and Propaganda; decisive here is the way he defines the latter:

Propaganda works, if not against, at least around the critical reason; it is not informative, but suggestive publicity and it is directed to fantasy and the

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\[19\] For an account of the emergence and development of the graphic designer’s profession in Germany during the first half of the twentieth century, see Jeremy Aynsley, Graphic Design in Germany: 1890-1945 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).


emotional life […] Propaganda is suggestion because it does not wish to stimulate critical-logical judgements but to stir and to beguile.\textsuperscript{122}

Another advertising expert, Gerhard Schultze Pfaelzer, provides a slightly different (yet similar to Geiger’s) definition of propaganda, together with a useful distinction between it and agitation:

Propaganda aims at harmony, at the spiritual overcoming of the clutter of opinions through the ideal victory of a spiritual idea […] advertising process mostly fulfils itself without a particular external racket, without sensational attendant circumstances, there the cooler atmosphere of objectivity [\textit{Sachlichkeit}] also restrains emotions […] Agitation is, as already the origins of the word indicate, an aggressive advertising […] The agitator speculates on the general spiritual phenomenon that one agrees easier to negative than to positive judgements.\textsuperscript{123}

I have delved into the etymology and the application of the notions \textit{Reklame}, \textit{Propaganda} and \textit{Agitation} in order to draw attention to what I would like to argue was a pivotal factor for the political radicalization of German painters, particularly those who were somehow involved (before the Great Depression) in the applied arts reform projects of the so-called avant-garde. My point here is that the turn of artists – as the paradigm of the post-1928 Berlin \textit{Abstrakten} indicates – to Communist \textit{Agitprop} is fully consonant with a rising anti-\textit{Sachlichkeit} position in arts that summons the discontents of social reform, part of which was also the applied arts reform. In other words, the turn of visual artists to a tendentious art should not be examined as a transparent reflection of party-political positions; instead, it was largely determined by the professional politics of the various cultural producers.

In this respect, the dissolution of \textit{Agde} in 1929 signifies a symbolic break with avant-garde \textit{Propaganda}, or better, a specific sort of artistic advertising advocated by the applied arts avant-garde that was based on a cool objectivity and a


\textsuperscript{123}Gerhard Schultze Pfaelzer, \textit{Propaganda, Agitation, Reklame: Eine Theorie des gesamten Werbewesens} (Berlin: Georg Stilke, 1923), pp. 56, 59 (emphasis in original). Schultze Pfaelzer (1891-1952) was a close collaborator of Paul von Hindenburg, who shortly before the end of the Weimar Republic joined the National Socialist Party. On the other hand, Theodor Geiger (1891-1952) was a Socialist Democrat, who went into exile in Denmark during the Nazi dictatorship.
maximum economy of form. This rupture is another manifestation of the same disillusionment with the *sachlich*, commercial culture fostered by the radical applied arts reformers. It is another attempt to reintroduce the emotional element into modern art, an element that seemed heavily suppressed by the dogma of an objective, purely functional art. It corresponds with, though is substantially different from, the projects promoted by Josef Frank and Ernst Kállai, because it seeks its fulfilment by recourse to a radical stimulation of emotions, in this case by means of Agitprop. It is also a more radical project than that of Kállai’s, because, though it initially seeks to restore emotion after the emotional anaesthetics of abstract or functional art, it ultimately arrives to a complete rejection of constructivist or abstract form, in favour of socially engaged representation.

I shall argue that the return of disillusioned applied artists to a kitschy *Tendenzkunst* – notably Segal’s speech on kitsch was delivered in the context of a discussion evening organized by the *Abstrakten* – was perhaps induced not so much by the effects of the Great Depression on the advertising sector,\(^\text{124}\) than by the relentlessness of the advertising experts against fine artists. Advertising experts tended to exclude the latter from their field of practice on the same basis that radical architects and designers proclaimed the end of easel painting; in both cases, fine artists were attacked as serving no useful purpose and obstructing the progress of modern art.

This attitude is apparent in the various publications of the time by the experts of the field. In a study contemporary to the reactivation of the *Abstrakten*, Hans Domizlaff, one of the most renowned German practitioners and theoreticians of advertising, paid special attention to the issue of the relationship between artists working in the field and the *Reklamefachmann*. Just like in theatre, he wrote, the director is always overshadowed by the performance of the actors, so in advertising, artists always claim the lion’s share for themselves driven by their

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\(^{124}\)Schröder-Kehler is right when she stresses that the Great Depression did not just contribute to a ‘rapid sinking of the contracts for commercial artists, but it also undermined the notion of advertising as a social art’; Schröder-Kehler, *Vom abstrakten zum politischen Konstruktivismus*, p. 146. Indeed, from 1930 onwards, with unemployment rates constantly surging, the reminiscence of such an optimistic motto as that of the 1929 International Advertising Congress ‘Advertising, the key to the world’s prosperity’ (*Reklame der Schlüssel zum Wohlstand der Welt*) might seem completely out of time. For the Congress, see Alfred Knapp, *Reklame Propaganda Werbung: Ihre Weltorganisation* (Berlin: Verlag für Presse und Politik, 1929).
own artistic ‘vanity’. As a result, they tended to disregard the expert’s directions. The problem, according to Domizlaff, was that the artist was a dilettante in the field of advertising and this dilettantism set him ‘against his director’. The solution lay in a rational division of responsibilities, a clear separation of the purely technical aspect of propaganda and its artistic, form-shaping side.

Thus, Domizlaff advocated an economy of talents much like the arts and crafts reformers in the 1890s did. This time it is advertising and not crafts that must be reformed. His undisciplined ‘dilettante’ artist corresponds to the reformers’ art proletariat, the young student of art schools, who, ‘driven by their artistic vanity’, would disdain more practical assignments. The artist working in advertising is treated the same way by the sector’s expert: he needs to be disciplined, to abandon his artistic ambitions and learn the practicalities of the job from his master. The artist working in advertising has not a free hand; the rhythm of the work is dictated by the experts.

The necessity of a more systematic organization of educational institutions for the training of a new, better equipped generation of advertising experts was also stressed during that same year by Alfred Knapp in the context of the International Advertising Congress organized in Berlin. Knapp argued that this measure was necessary for a clearer ‘distinction of advertising as a chief occupation’, which demanded a specialized knowledge. It is clear that dilettante advertisers, such as visual artists graduating from art schools and not from the new, emerging specialized advertising institutions, increasingly found themselves under pressure from the experts of the field.

It is in this period that artists like Nerlinger and Fuhrmann, following their failure in making a career in the field of commercial advertising, decided to reactivate the Abstrakten. And this decision also concurred with their active involvement in such

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126 Ibid., p. 73.
institutions as the *Kartell der Vereinigten Verbände bildender Künstler Berlins* (with Nerlinger functioning as its second chairman from 1928 onwards), which, as we saw early in this chapter, strove for the reorganization of the Great Berlin Art Exhibition, and the Berlin branch of the *Reichsverband bildender Künstler*. Thus, their decision is directly connected with their concern for the professional painter’s position in a free market, which was increasingly hostile towards ‘useless’ painting.

The *Abstrakten* sought to regenerate easel painting through a renewal of subject matter and the use of technologically advanced artistic means. This is evident in Oskar Nerlinger’s experimentation with airbrush technique (*Spritztechnik*), initially developed for his work as a commercial artist (the artist published a short article explaining the benefits of this technique in Werkbund’s journal *Die Form*) and then applied to promote a new type of modern, mass-produced, politically engaged painting (*Serienmalerei*).

It is particularly interesting that during this period Nerlinger himself wrote about this endeavour at a significant occasion: in the context of a discussion about new painting, following a review of Ernst Kállai’s exhibition *Vision und Formgesetz* in the pages of the *neues Bauen* periodical *Das Neue Frankfurt*. Nerlinger (who had participated in the exhibition) intervened to counter the view of the *Neue Frankfurt*’s editor (the Swiss art historian Joseph Gantner) on abstract painting. Gantner, an important publicist from the circle around Siegfried Giedion, was sceptical towards Kállai’s effort to bridge abstraction and representation, and to support his objection, he referred to two works (illustrated in the same page) which had been exhibited at the Möller Gallery show – *Cats* by Egon Engelen and *The Working Day* (fig. 25) by Nerlinger – as examples of a half-way modern painting. He argued that the ‘bath of steel’ (*Stahlbad*) of abstraction was necessary to liberate painting from all aestheticism and atavism, concluding that ‘pictures which lack this [abstraction] can be wonderful, but they will never again really touch us.’

Gantner’s position constitutes a rejection of the centrist modernism sought by

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128 See Oscar Nerlinger, ‘Das Spritzverfahren in der Werbegraphik’,*Die Form*, 3 (1928), 375-77; for more on Nerlinger’s airbrush technique, see Schröder-Kehler, *Vom abstrakten zum politischen Konstruktivismus*, pp. 195-204.

Kálai, Nerlinger, and the revamped Abstrakten. And it is precisely to support the viability of this ‘half-way modern painting’, this marriage of abstraction and representation, that Nerlinger intervened replying to Gantner. He maintained that the vital element activating a dialectic relationship between those two poles was an ‘incursion of social ideas’ in the realm of painting, enabling the further development of the new means for artistic expression that had been gained through abstract art, in the direction of a new, more concrete form and content.¹³⁰

Nonetheless, Nerlinger’s thesis did not convince Gantner, who used three more reproductions of works by the artist (To work, Tennis, and Early morning procession) to illustrate the shortcomings of the aesthetic compromise of this modern ‘social art’ (figs. 26-27). Gantner concluded that ‘the mere depiction of scenes and situations from the life of the worker by no means represents a ‘social’ art.’¹³¹

In the same vein is Werner Goldschmidt’s important critique of the 1931 Abstrakten thematic exhibition (part of the same year’s GBK) ‘Between Iron and Cement’.¹³² The critic begins by noting that the group has moved towards a style which is no longer compatible to its name. Nevertheless, it has retained the name ‘Die Abstrakten’ as a ‘signboard, an inherited band identity [GmbH.-Mantel]’. The company’s shareholders and products are no longer the same, yet the name is maintained for advertising-technical and commercial reasons.¹³³ These ‘pseudo-Abstrakten,’ continues Goldschmidt, ‘now wish to make use of Bolshevism’s prestige for themselves and to present themselves as exponents of radical art […] but even their technique is not ‘proletarian’ but ‘bourgeois-capricious’; in the final analysis the group offered nothing more than ‘aesthetic games on easel’.¹³⁴

However, Goldschmidt missed the point of their technical experimentations – at least Nerlinger’s. He quoted the artist’s analysis of his ‘serial-painting’ (Serienmalerei) technique which allowed to challenge an original’s value via its

¹³⁰ Diskussion um neue Malerei, Das neue Frankfurt, 5 (February 1931), 35.
¹³² Nerlinger’s work An die Arbeit (To Work) was exhibited in this show.
¹³⁴ Ibid.
multiplication, only to jump to an undialectical conclusion, i.e. that ‘the criterion of all social art, of all art in general, is not technique, neither a serial-production of originals through the use of standard models, but the quality of work.’ Nevertheless, his argument was not entirely misleading. Goldschmidt was reacting against an attempt to standardize painting, to produce paintings through a cold ‘technical calculation’ at the expense of ‘artistic intuition’ against a technique that inevitably produced ‘lifeless, numbed, artificial’ images.

Goldschmidt was not downright opposed to the formation of a new artistic language which sought to wed the conquests of abstract painting with the demands of the class struggle. He argued, though, that in the pseudo-Abstrakten ‘there simply was neither an idea nor – above all – an artistic synthesis’. The artistic was replaced by the purely artificial. In his view, ‘there was no question of a further development derived from abstract painting (there was no confrontation with colour), but unfortunately just a reduction of things to simplified forms, of the kind possessed today by every poster painter.

The mechanization of the creative process, he noted, corresponded to the meaningless content of the group’s work. The images showed no artistic ‘volition’ (as an example of this volition he cites Van Gogh), but instead plainly ‘a condition, namely the worker oppressed by the machine. The song of the machine, however, is a completely mendacious, petty-bourgeois romanticism, to which no modern man, much less a ‘Marxist’ believes.

Goldschmidt’s critique is to the point. Nerlinger’s effort to construct a modern ‘social art’ founded on the formal achievements of abstract art quickly fell short of his public’s expectations. We can better grasp this failed project in Greenberg’s terms, for what Nerlinger attempted was precisely to break with avant-garde’s ‘imitation of imitating’, i.e. the absolute concentration on the medium the artist worked with. Nerlinger wished to move beyond the ‘pure preoccupation with the invention and arrangement of spaces, surfaces, shapes, colors, etc., to the exclusion of whatever is not necessarily implicated in these factors.’ He tried to achieve this through a reunification of abstraction and representation. What is

136 Ibid.
137 Ibid.
138 Ibid.
peculiar in this project lies in the fact that Nerlinger seems to draw his inspiration for this new representational style from neues Sehen photography and montage technique. In this sense, he attempted to rejuvenate easel painting, to break abstract painting’s self-referentiality through loans from different media as well as through the use of new techniques such as airbrush.

Nerlinger’s borrowings from neues Sehen are particularly evident in his painting ‘To work’ (An die Arbeit), where his use of perspective, the overall dynamic composition as well as the reference to the motif of the factory smokestack, a symbol of industry, recalls photographs by Albert Renger-Patzsch and Arvid Gutschow. Nerlinger’s painterly imitation of the photographic vision, however, did not suffice to overcome the avant-garde’s formalist ‘imitation of imitating’; nor was the patch of the Lilliput workers on their way to the temples of modern production (symbolized by the gigantic smokestacks, the bridge and the neues Bauen building) enough to transform the work into a piece of social art. For without this small detail, the work could have been easily be adapted to the necessities of commercial art, as was the case with the artist’s Radio tower and elevated railway, which illustrated the cover of the magazine Der deutsche Rundfunk (The German Radio; fig. 2).

Equally ambivalent was the artist’s handling of the issue of industrial production, which oscillated between ‘the song of the machine’ or a sense of awe before the sites of industry and a feeling that all workers were equal but also powerless. Thus, it was no doubt specifically Nerlinger’s ‘To work’ that had inspired Goldschmidt’s incisive critique of the centrist modernism promoted by Die Abstrakten.

But there was another serious problem undermining Nerlinger’s (and Die Abstrakten’s) attempt for a modern, abstract-figurative, socially engaged painting: there was a very limited space for ‘useless’ fine arts within communist (KPD-controlled) cultural institutions. For, in the final analysis, KPD-cultural politics demanded a Propaganda that, in its function, did not differ from the demands set upon the young graphic artists by industrial and commercial companies. Effective

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propaganda, be it political or commercial, needed to be rationally organized. It was for this reason that, in 1929, the KPD created an umbrella-organization summoning all its cultural associations: the IFA (Interessengemeinschaft für Arbeiterkultur; Interest Group for Workers’ Culture). The goal of the IFA was clearly the centralization of the KPD’s cultural activities or, as one of its publications put it, ‘the rationalization of [cultural] events’. Though the IFA seemed to end up as a fiasco, especially in Berlin, we should take seriously the Communist Party’s attempt to control and coordinate its various organizations, to impose a uniform line to them which would supposedly boost the effectiveness of its propaganda.

In this respect, it would be no exaggeration to state that by conceiving artistic work exclusively as a field of propaganda, the Communist Party tended to function (with regard to its cultural policies) as an alternative advertising agency. Founded on this conception of art as political propaganda, the relationship between Die Abstrakten (or, as we shall see in the next chapter, ASSO) and the

141This was also the case for Social-Democratic propaganda; see, for example, a special issue of the Kulturwille on ‘Propaganda der Masse’; Kulturwille, no. 5 (May 1928). Especially important is Erich Winkler’s text on the organization of socialist propaganda. Winkler argued that workers’ organizations had to learn from the structure of the bourgeois institutions they were fighting against; therefore, they had to follow a bureaucratic form of organization as the only one that guaranteed a ‘sachlich and objective’ concentration of each member to the ‘duties and tasks’ defined by the institution’s statutes; see Erich Winkler, ‘Organisation’, Kulturwille, no. 5 (1928), 88-89. In the same issue, Walther Victor underlined the need for the formation of Social-Democratic Kulturkartellen; see Walther Victor, ‘Proletarische Festgestaltung’, op. cit., 182-83. The cover of this Kulturwille issue was designed by the Bauhaus student Hermann Trinkaus. Winkler further elaborated his ideas in his Organisations- und Werbetechnik in der Arbeiterbewegung: Die Politik und ihre Gesetze (Jena: Karl Zwing, 1930).

142The IFA consisted of the following associations: Verband proletarischer Freidenker; Kampfgemeinschaft gegen Kulturreaktion; Arbeiter-Theater-Bund Deutschlands; Piscator-Kollektiv; Opposition der Volksbühne; Volksfilm-Verband; Bund proletarisch-revolutionärer Schriftsteller; Assoziation revolutionärer bildender Künstler Deutschlands [ASSO]; Marxistische Arbeiterkolonie; Sozialistischer Schulerbund; Proletarische Eltern-Beiräte; Arbeitervereinigung für marxistische Pädagogik; Freier Radio-Bund; Vereinigung der Arbeiter-Fotografen Deutschlands; Opposition im Deutschen Arbeiter-Sängerbund; Opposition im Arbeiter-Mandolinisten-Bund; Internationale Arbeiter-Ido-Bund. For IFA, see the files in SAPMO (Stiftung Archiv der Parteien und Massenorganisationen der DDR im Bundesarchiv [Berlin]; Bestand: Rev. Massenorganisationen; Interessengemeinschaft für Arbeiterkultur, RY/1/I 4/13-4.


144This is deduced by Sándor Ék’s (a Hungarian artist working in Berlin and a member of ASSO’s committee) testimony, who made clear that ‘this aggregation [of cultural organizations] was certainly more nominal than actual and it remained so until the fascist overthrow’; Alex Keil (Sándor Ék), ‘5 Jahre Kampf um die revolutionäre bildende Kunst in Deutschland (1933)’, in Diether Schmidt (ed.), Manifeste Manifeste 1905-1933: Schriften deutscher Künstler des zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts (Dresden: Fundus, 1965), 414-29 (p. 417).

145From this standpoint, my analysis of the Abstrakten and their relationship to communist propaganda is completely different from that by the historian Vernon L. Lidtke, who narrows
KPD was inevitably the usual employer-employee relationship dictated by the demands of an antagonistic, free economy; for in the field of advertising, irrespectively of its character, the same regulations of capitalist economy dominated.

Naturally, communist advertising initially demanded almost exclusively ‘useful’ works of art such as banners, posters, satirical drawings in communist newspapers and periodicals, photomontages, etc.\textsuperscript{146} Thus, easel painting was deemed either ‘bourgeois’ or just too slow to correspond to the necessities of propaganda and to reach the masses. But with the avant-garde’s fall from grace in the Soviet Union by the completion of the First Five Year Plan, the German Communist Party also sought to re-evaluate its cultural politics.

This is evident in Alfred Kemény’s (the editor of the arts pages in \textit{Die Rote Fahne}’s feuilleton) about-face in the beginning of 1932. Kemény, who between 1929 and 1931 had in several occasions shared the view about the bankruptcy of painting,\textsuperscript{147} now condemned that ‘erroneous iconoclastic ‘radicalism’’, which declared that easel painting had been played out because of its ‘handicraft’ nature.\textsuperscript{148} In the next issue of the same periodical, Kemény would further elaborate this position: ‘It would be false, non-Marxist, to regard only what is useful for everyday practical needs as the ground for the proletarian-revolutionary art. In the field of visual arts, as well, we should aim to bestow a long-lasting effect \textit{[Dauerwirkung]} on our revolutionary propaganda.’\textsuperscript{149} Kemény asked for the inclusion of more paintings in exhibitions of proletarian art with emphasis on the political character of the content but also on colour as ‘a forceful element of design’ which can allow intensification and deepening of propaganda’s effect.\textsuperscript{150}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item[146] For some communist functionaries, even workers’ demonstrations had to be carefully planned in order to give the impression of ‘moving images’; see Arthur Pieck, ‘Arbeiterschauspieler demonstrieren!’, \textit{Arbeiterbühne}, no. 1 (January 1930), 6-7.
\item[147] See, for example, Durus [Alfred Kemény], ‘Kunst jenseits und diesseits der Barrikade: Von der Akademie bis zur Assoziation revolutionärer Künstler’, \textit{Die Rote Fahne}, no. 128, 19 July 1929.
\item[150] Ibid.
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Thus, in an unexpected way, Kemény arrived at the same point which had fuelled Goldschmidt’s critique of the Abstrakten’s works, i.e. the absence of a ‘synthesis between the elementary colours and the motivating strength of the idea’. Modern form and a strong political idea would suffice, according to Kemény, to safeguard ‘revolutionary’ visual arts ‘against the guild spirit of craftsmanship, which is the foundation of the profession of painter’.¹⁵¹

Nonetheless, abstraction or Constructivism could not be at the same time ‘liquidated and saved’¹⁵² by incorporating bits referring to social reality (a reintroduction of figuration). And the gradual overemphasis on the content led to the formal degradation of the Abstrakten’s works and to their relegation to the status of kitsch. For the achievement of the Abstrakten was – in Broch’s terms – simply the transformation of ‘the infinite goal of socialism into a finite one’, and in this way the closure of the system and the perversion of ‘its ethos into rationalistic moralizing’.¹⁵³ And though Broch did not necessarily find all Tendenzkunst to be kitsch, he thought that this was the case for an art which is exclusively concentrated on its effect.¹⁵⁴ This is where the plan of the politicized Abstrakten was shattered: they overcame the abstract artist’s exclusive concentration on its medium and its formal questions, only to fall into another trap, this time dictated by the political content and the pressure of political advertising on both form and content. But this failure also showed the limitations of the centrist position that was to restore painting after its permanent separation from modern architecture and the industrial applied arts.

¹⁵¹Kemény, ‘Revolutionäre Malerei im Graphischen Block’.
¹⁵²Quoted in Kracauer’s important review of an 1932 exhibition by four members of Die Abstrakten (Albrecht, Fuhrmann, Lex, and Nerlinger), ‘Revolutionäre Bildmontage’, Frankfurter Zeitung, 24 February 1932. In this exhibition the four artists distributed a questionnaire to the public asking them, inter alia, ‘To what extent the artists have already resolved the dialectic transition from constructivism to proletarian art?’
¹⁵⁴Ibid., p. 33.
Chapter 4: A struggle of outsiders: Intellectual labour and artistic radicalism in late Weimar Germany

What were the possibilities for those visual artists willing to abandon the dream of a career in the ‘free’, ‘useless’ arts or, to put it differently, to exchange the ‘vanity’ ascribed to the profession of the painter for a career in graphic arts? This was the other side of the debate on the death of painting. The question here does not revolve around the pressure upon painters and their defense, but around the prospects promised by their move to the field of *Gebrauchskunst*. And this debate was intertwined with another, that on the crisis of intellectual labour in modernity. It is in this context that the paths of the ‘modern radicals’ promoting the applied arts reform – the aesthetic avant-garde – and the radicals of the German Communist Party (KPD), the political avant-garde of the proletariat, cross. Thus, the interwar debate on the crisis of intellectual labour is pivotal for the comprehension of the commonalities and differences between political and artistic radicalism.

An exploration of this debate also casts light on the inherent connection between artistic proletarianization and radicalization; for proletarianization threatened not only those who insisted on producing ‘free’ art, but also those who wanted to play a more decorative role by lending their artistic talent to the service of primarily non-artistic interests such as those of a commercial company or a political party. To understand the relationship between the *Künstlerproletariat* and artistic radicalism, I suggest the examination of another vital link, that between the outsider (*Außenseiter*) intellectual worker, reform, and proletarianization.

I distinguish three main types or models of outsiders. The first is the outsider-reformer, the person who, emerging from a different background, enters an institution in order to reform it. In the realm of arts this type of outsider is a product of modernity. The endeavour to unite art and industry, a response to the general industrialization of production – the principal incentive generating the applied arts reform – not only shook up established notions of art and the social position of its practitioners, it also opened new fields for the occupation of professional artists. The ambiguity over the nature of intellectual/artistic labour, itself the result of the softening of the division between free and commercial arts, tested the limits of old cultural institutions and favoured the emergence of
outsiders, newcomers in unexplored areas, who sought to establish not only new aesthetic categories, but also new artistic vocations.

We have already noted that some key figures in the applied arts reform began their career as painters before turning to crafts and architecture. The question arising here is what prompted those reformers to cross boundaries and place themselves in the position of the outsider. The answer is once again intermingled with the issue of the *Künstlerproletariat*, for the applied arts reform was a way to establish a distinction – in a period when commercialization and industrialization relativized previous distinctive criteria – between ‘true’ artists and non-artists, professionals and amateurs, creators and manufacturers, designers and executors, intellectual and manual workers. Aiming at a reorganization of craftsmanship which would eventually ‘save’ the *Künstlerproletariat* (the self-deceived youth who should wake up from the dream of the artist’s freedom and return to the reality of a career in the crafts), the avant-gardists of the German arts and crafts movement wanted to distinguish themselves, the ‘naturally gifted’ artists from both the art proletariat and craftsmen. If there were no stable criteria to judge what art was and what was not, to recognize who was a ‘real’ artist and who was not, then perhaps it might have been easier to recognize

the artist’s other, the one who by not having a name he does not need to be re-named, the proletarian, the worker […] the one whom nature has [...] dedicated to the painting of signboards or shoemaking […] For the recognition of the artist as an ‘art lover’ necessitates this negative, the bad nature of the painter of signboards. At the moment when the emergence of the market and competition posit again the question of the identity of the artist, the latter can only be established as a separation from the other workers, but also from the ‘bad’ workers of art.¹

Thus, for those outsider-reformers, the reconfiguration of artistic identity, the abandonment of ‘backward’ painting (whose practitioners increasingly faced the danger of proletarianization) and the devotion to crafts and architecture also entailed the safeguarding of the status of the artist-creator. By placing themselves in the position of the reformer and the educator, by propagandizing the new unity between art and technology, those former painters automatically distinguished

themselves from the lot of the Künstlerproletariat and the Handwerker. They published articles on the matter, they organized plans for the education of the art proletariat and craftsmen, but they were not part of them, they were just speaking for them, and in this way they sought to distinguish themselves from them.

As Jacques Rancière keenly observes:

The positivizing of artisanal virtue is accompanied by a game of tit for tat [prêté et rendu] in which the inspired artist attributes to the popular ethos a genius, a daïmon, that the people immediately cede back to him, thereby consecrating the artist of the people, worker and knight, in his difference from the mechanical imitator. This consecration of the artist is then proposed in turn as a model for the politician and expert […] offering the guardians and those inspired by the modern age a new legitimacy based on the only powers that now are said to matter, the ones from below.²

Precisely this was at stake in the reformist politics of the applied arts reform. In the era of associations and unions of every kind where ‘the ones from below’ claimed their status, usually on the basis of a specific skill, those outsider reformists sought to separate themselves from both the masses and its various organizations and the constraint of a single skill. Instead of defending a skill through a professional organization, they outlined reform programmes that sought to redistribute skills, reserving for themselves the role of the total artist: painter, designer, architect, educator, etc. In this way they sought to bypass the organizations of the ‘mechanical imitators’, but at the same time to retain the profile of the socially responsible artist, whose creations have both a pedagogical value and are useful for the modern consumer.

To what extent did this new artistic identity convince its public? After all, were not precisely those architects and designers in the forefront of the applied arts reform the first to deny their artistic identity, arguing that their work was the result of scientific research and not intuition, that they had sacrificed everything irrational to maximum function, artistic fantasy to the application of design on the specific demands of practical life? As we saw in the previous chapter, Josef Frank, Ernst Kállai and other advocates of a symbiosis, instead of an evaporation of arts into technology, were clearly not convinced about this transformation. Behind the

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mask of an aseptic functionalism they could still recognize a fanatical aesthete.

The question becomes more complex in the case of a different kind of outsider, the proletarian or artisan with artistic ambitions, hence precisely the person whom radical reformers wanted to ‘protect’ from the ‘deceit’ of art, or in Karl Scheffler’s words, the ‘art plague’. Things become perplexed because we deal with a type of outsider who enters the world of arts to escape the confines of the identity of ‘worker’ or ‘proletarian’, and whose failure to earn his own livelihood as an artist will lead him back to the world he struggled to leave behind. Yet, even in this case, the unrecognized and commercially failed artist would return to the proletariat from a new, privileged position: that of the ‘artist-educator’ or the ‘worker-intellectual’, a position distinguished from that of the party-intellectual, the functionary who shapes the general line of the Party. Thus, the type of outsider artist that I describe here is an outsider in three fields: in the art world where he has failed to make his name; in the Party within which he remains a worker subordinated to the line dictated by the party-intellectual, and in the proletariat which he wants to instruct, therefore he sees himself above it. In other words, this type of outsider-artist is not fully adapted to any of these fields.

A radical group of artists, the Association of Revolutionary Visual Artists of Germany (Assoziation revolutionärer bildender Künstler Deutschlands, abbreviated to ARBKD or ASSO), is, I shall argue, paradigmatic of this type of the outsider-militant artist. ASSO, active between 1928 and 1933, was a group of painters, illustrators and draftsmen affiliated to the KPD and completely unknown today outside a limited circle of specialists on German radical art and culture. The stimulus for the foundation of the group was provided by a letter sent by a communist functionary, Rosi Wolfstein,³ to the artist and trade unionist Franz

³By 1927 Rosi Wolfstein belonged to the opposition of the Party as a member of the Brandler faction, which in 1929 seceded to found the Kommunistische Partei-Opposition (KPD-Opposition). For the history of the latter, see Theodor Bergmann, ‘Gegen den Strom’: Die Geschichte der KPD (Opposition) (Hamburg: VSA, 2001); K. H. Tjaden, Struktur und Funktion der ‘KPD-Opposition’ (KPO): Eine organisationsoziologische Untersuchung zur ‘Rechts’-Opposition im deutschen Kommunismus zur Zeit der Weimarer Republik (Meisenheim/Glan: Anton Hain, 1964). Wolfstein also worked as an editor for Wieland Herzfelde’s Malik-Verlag. As Michael Krejza has shown, Wieland Herzfelde and his brother, John Heartfield, were also close to the Brandler faction; see Michael Krejza, ‘Wo ist John Heartfield?’, in Günter Feist, Eckhart Gillen and Beatrice Vierneisel (eds.), Kunstdokumentation SBZ/DDR 1945-1990: Aufsätze-Berichte-Materialien (Cologne: DuMont, 1996), pp. 110-26. Another sympathiser of the KPD-Opposition was Heinrich Vogeler, who for this reason was expelled from both the KPD and the Rote Hilfe (Red Aid) in 1929; see David Erlay, Vogeler: Ein Maler und seine Zeit (Fischerhude: Atelier im Bauernhaus, 1981), pp. 244, 246-49. These contacts suggest that the way for the foundation of ASSO may have been
Edwin Gehrig-Targis, asking him to bring into the discussion agenda of the association of German professional visual artists (Reichsverband bildender Künstler Deutschlands or RVbK) the issue of the destruction of Heinrich Vogeler’s murals at Barkenhoff by state authorities. It seems, though, that this letter was seen by Gehrig-Targis as an excellent and presumably long-awaited opportunity to advance his own artistic interests. For the task assigned to the unrecognized artist required a closer contact with both unknown artists who struggled to make their name in the art world – like the majority of RVbK’s membership – as well as with eminent artists like Vogeler. It was this contact that set the framework for the formation, first, of a communist faction within the RVbK (Kommunistische Fraktion im Reichsverband bildender Künstler Deutschlands) in the summer of 1927, followed, a few months afterwards, by that of ASSO.

By examining the scarce biographical data of its members as well as of some more eminent radical artists of the period (such as John Heartfield and George Grosz), it is evident that most of them had either graduated from Kunstgewerbeschulen, or they had at least been influenced by Kunstgewerbebewegung ideas. 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? Its answer presupposes the connection of the two types of outsiders described above: the outsider-reformer and the outsider-agitprop artist.

There is, however, an essential difference between the two types. For the applied arts reformers who began their career in this new field as outsiders around prepared by dissident, not orthodox members of the Party.

*Rosi Wolfstein, letter to F. E. Gehrig-Targis ([January?] 1927), Akademie der Künste, Berlin, Franz Edwin Gehrig-Targis-Archiv. 10/28. Gehrig-Targis replied to Wolfstein that ‘as this case [Vogeler’s] has shown again, it would be very important to form a faction in RWVBKD [RVbK]’. He added that this faction of communist artists could be an important forum for the discussion of ‘current political events, exhibition opportunities, etc’; Gehrig-Targis, letter to Rosi Wolfstein (13 February 1927), Gehrig-Targis-Archiv, 10/29 (my emphasis). Heinrich Vogeler had turned part of his homestead (Barkenhoff) in the artistic colony in Worpswede into a home and school for children of communist political prisoners (as part of a Rote Hilfe programme). He had decorated this space with a series of murals which were destroyed by the authorities, who judged that the works were propagandistic and as such dangerous for the children. For a detailed account of the incident, see Diethart Kerbs (ed.), Gegen Kind und Kunst: Eine Dokumentation aus dem Jahr 1927, mit Kinderzeichnungen und Fotos der zerstörten Barkenhoff-Fresken von Heinrich Vogeler (Fernwald: Anabas, 1974).
1900 had established their position in the German art world by the 1920s. The standard ASSO member, on the other hand, was on the fringe of the bourgeois art world and its institutions. John Willett has rightly stressed the working-class origins of ASSO members.\(^5\) A closer look on the biographies of the most active members of the Berlin branch confirms this assertion. Alfred Beier-Red (1902-2001) initially trained and worked as a printer (between 1917 and 1923). He only visited evening classes of the *Handwerk- und Kunstgewerbeschule* in Berlin (in Friedrichshain) to study graphic arts from 1927 until 1930 – thus completing his artistic training after the foundation of ASSO.\(^6\) Peter Paul Eickmeier (1890-1962), an assistant mechanic and electrical fitter, also attended evening art classes at the *Handwerkerschule* in Berlin in 1918 for an indefinite period.\(^7\) Max Keilson (1900-1953), a trained decorative painter, studied graphic arts at the more prestigious *Kunstgewerbeschule* of Berlin from 1920 until 1924; he was a member of the KPD since 1920. At the end of 1926 he undertook the direction of the Party’s Graphic Arts Atelier, which was housed in the headquarters of the party (the Karl-Liebknecht-Haus).\(^8\) Sándor Ék (1902-1975, a Hungarian artist who worked in Germany under the pseudonym Alex Keil) worked from the age of thirteen in a mechanical workshop and started studying art in Budapest during the short-lived

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\(^6\)The biographical data come from the Central Archive of the State Museums in Berlin, SMB-PK, ZA-903747/B30; Künstlerdokumentation-Alfred Beier-Red; see also Alfred Beier-Red, *Ins Schwarze getroffen: Politische Karikaturen* (Berlin: Eulenspiegel, 1970). The *Handwerkerschule* of Berlin was founded in 1892 and in 1932 it was renamed *Höhere Graphische Fachschule Berlin*. As it is clear from a 1905 report, as a rule, the goal of the special classes in the evening schools was not the breeding of young artists: ‘The classes of the evening schools cannot pursue the goal of instructing the student to freehand drawing. It would be indeed mistaken to put this idea into the head of the student. They [the classes] are, however, admittedly in the position to impart to the more technical vocations a measure of technical knowledge and proficiency in drawing which are to the utmost advantage of the students with regard to their profession. For the more artistic vocations can at least accomplish a certain education of the taste, which save the future house painter, plasterer, goldsmith, lithographer, chiseler from indulging in insipidity, the superficial fashions and a literature on arts and crafts of the lowest rank which is on their service and is so zealously spread in Germany today’; see I. *Verwaltungsbericht des königlich preussischen Landesgewerbeamts 1905* (Berlin: Carl Heymann, 1905), p. 112. As we have seen this was the standard view of the arts and crafts reformers on the training of the art proletariat.

\(^7\)SMB-PK, ZA-903747/B107; Künstlerdokumentation-Peter Paul Eickmeier.

\(^8\)SMB-PK, ZA-903747/B251; Künstlerdokumentation-Max Keilson. There is an almost complete lack of information on the graphic arts atelier of the KPD. However, Max Gebhard, whose recollections of the time are always accurate, has described the Atelier as the main party agency commissioning work for communist visual artists; see Hans Stern, ‘Max Gebhard’, *Form und Zweck*, no. 2 (1981), 4-5 (p. 4).
Hungarian Republic of Councils in 1919. Alois Erbach (1888-1972, pseudonym Aleus) trained as a fitter and surveying technician, enrolled the Applied Arts School of Munich in 1908, where he met John Heartfield. Finally, Max Gebhard (1906-1990, pseudonym gebs), a Bauhaus student who joined and actively worked for ASSO, describes his financial situation upon his application to study in the Bauhaus: ‘To my query about how much study for a rather destitute person would cost, Walter Gropius replied to me in a very friendly letter in the fall of 1926: ‘Come to Dessau. Until the summer term begins you could work in the mural painting [workshop] under Hinnerk Scheper and earn some money!’

The Handwerker- and Kunstgewerbeschulen represented a more pragmatic choice for those coming from a proletarian or lower-middle class background. They promised a materially more secure future, admission to them was easier than in the more prestigious academies and art schools, the costs of the studies more affordable and accessible to the worker, who could attend evening or Sunday classes. In addition, by their very nature, certain crafts, especially decorative painting, offered to the students better chances for entering the bourgeois world of high culture and perhaps gaining greater material independence.

If these were the institutions where the average ASSO member had been trained, then it can be argued that those artists also attempted a transgression, a change of profession and status. Significantly, they did not comply with the direction dictated by the outsider-reformers; they wanted to leave crafts for arts. As we shall see, this also signified a struggle for their personal recognition as artists, a struggle that turned them against not only the eminent bourgeois artists of their time, but also their ‘comrades’, the eminent ‘revolutionary’ visual artists. Thus, the case of ASSO is particularly useful for the examination of different aspects of the complex relations between the applied arts reform and the Künstlerproletariat, the artistic and the political avant-garde, the prominent and

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9Max Gebhard, ‘Kommunistische Ideen im Bauhaus’, in bauhaus 3: Katalog 9 der Galerie am Sachsenplatz Leipzig (Leipzig: Galerie am Sachsenplatz, 1978), 10-12 (p. 10). According to Gebhard, other Bauhaus students who joined ASSO-Berlin were: Gerhard Moser (who seems to be the main contact between the Bauhaus and ASSO), Otto Köhler (pseudonym Theo Balden), Erich Krantz, Peter Walter Schulz (pseudonym Pewas), Albert Mentzel-Flocon, Kurt Stolp, Grete Krebs and Willi Jungmittag, ibid., p. 11. To my knowledge, most active in ASSO were Gebhard, Pewas and Mentzel-Flocon. Gebhard stayed studied at the Bauhaus only for three terms and he moved to Berlin in mid-1928, where he also worked in Moholy-Nagy’s studio and in the Berlin branch of the American advertising company Studio Dorland, whose artistic director was his former teacher Herbert Bayer. Gebhard, Mentzel and the photographer Ethel Mittag also founded an advertising collective named ‘ko-prop’ (Kommunistische Propaganda) which despite its name also undertook bourgeois commissions; ibid., p. 12.
the unrecognized artists, as well as broader issues of mediation and agency.

In the second part of this chapter, I shall point to the connection of ASSO with a contemporary debate on the political role of modern intelligentsia. I will particularly focus on certain texts by Walter Benjamin, aiming to show their direct connection with the reform of polytechnic education and the precarious position of intellectual workers in modernity. In my view, Benjamin’s critique presents certain fundamental similarities with that developed by Ernst Kállai and Josef Frank, as was discussed in the previous chapter. They all converge in their attack on the self-proclaimed *sachlich* reformer, particularly highlighting his failure to transform cultural production into a collective process. I have chosen Walter Benjamin’s contribution to this debate for two main reasons. First, because his critique outlines the profile of a third type of outsider, the outsider-intellectual, suggested by Benjamin as a model for independent and truly revolutionary intellectual labour, a concept in contradistinction to both Alfred Weber’s ‘worker-intellectual’ and the KPD’s committed agitator. Second, because Benjamin, failing to pursue an academic career, speaks himself from the position of the outsider.

This institutional exclusion suggests a paradoxical association between ASSO and Walter Benjamin, and it returns us to the debate on the crisis of intellectual labour. It was the failure of pre-Weimar ideas for social and cultural reform, I shall argue, that to a great extent conditioned both ASSO’s and Benjamin’s radicalism. But Benjamin’s decision to work as an unattached intellectual (unlike ASSO artists) led his radical critique of pseudo-revolutionary intellectuals and reformers to its extreme: from his Paris exile, he would reconsider the role intellectuals played during the Weimar Republic, and he would arrive at a decisively anti-intellectualist thesis. This position, though it has passed unnoticed in scholarship, it is evident in two standard texts by Benjamin, ‘The Author as Producer’ and ‘The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility’. The revolutionizing of artistic production through the application of technology and the potential for the mastery of the latter by the average worker is applauded by Benjamin precisely because it prepares the ground for a complete bypassing of intellectual mediation. But the end of the intelligentsia as a distinct social class would have another repercussion: the death of the avant-garde, be it political or artistic.
4.1 Intellectual labour, artistic prominence and applied arts radicalism

The issue of the predicament of intellectual workers (Die Not der geistigen Arbeiter) was usually discussed in Germany in relation to the development of the free professions in capitalism. The free professions were traditionally associated with the educated bourgeoisie (Bildungsbürgertum), which largely consisted of members from the middle- or upper-middle classes. A combination of crucial events taking place in less than fifty years (from the 1880s to the 1920s) such as the drastic reorganization of the labour market, the First World War and the postwar social upheaval and inflated German economy, had caused a deep professional transformation. In the first years of the Weimar Republic, a great number of cultural critics, journalists and politicians were alarmed by the changing social status of the intellectual workers – their proletarianization – and their economic hardships. Moving from the right to the left of the political spectrum, one could summarize the debate on Die Not der geistigen Arbeiter in three main positions: a) a neo-corporatist recourse to the idea of a strong state that would regulate the market and restore the status of intellectual labour; b) a liberal appeal to a just settlement of the issue of the wage of intellectual workers within a free economy; c) a radical call on intellectuals and artists to join forces with the proletariat in the struggle for a future socialist society that would benefit both sides.

The political and social uncertainty of the early postwar years (1918-1923) gave impetus to the discussion about the social role of the intelligentsia. Artistic radicalism, I shall argue, was a product of the intellectual’s identity crisis, which reached its peak in Germany during the Weimar period. A common denominator in the programmes of the various early-Weimar cultural organizations was the leading role of the intellectual in the radical reform of the German society. Kurt Hiller’s Rat geistiger Arbeiter (Council of Intellectual Workers) and the first associations of radical artists, the Arbeitsrat für Kunst and the Novembergruppe

shared this conception of the intellectual as the avant-garde of political and social reform – a peaceful continuation of the November Revolution. However, the demand of those artists and intellectuals to be granted absolute authority to implement a total reform of the various cultural institutions was ignored by the new state.

In the introduction of his seminal study *The Decline of the German Mandarins*, Fritz Ringer offers a useful description of the historic origins of the intellectuals, their educational background and social position in order to explain their reaction to the crisis of culture in modernity. Ringer stresses the pivotal role intellectuals played in the establishment of the administrative system of the modern German state and their elevation to an elite status achieved through educational credentials. This intelligentsia questioned the arbitrariness of absolute authority, arguing for a rational state administration whose regulations and cultural values would be determined by its own members. In this respect, Hiller’s conception of the literati as ‘achievers, prophets, and leaders,’ the AfK’s characterization of the artist as a ‘shaper of the sensibilities of the people,’ and the Novembergruppe’s wish to ‘devote our best energies to the moral cultivation of a young, free Germany’ do not move far from the traditional self-stylization of the intellectual.

But how was the plight of intellectuals and artists discussed in communist circles? Communist critics stressed the necessity for the organization of a common front between German intellectual workers and the masses of producers. It must be noted that this common front was also a slogan in the manifestoes of both the AfK and the Novembergruppe. Reading the declarations of the two

12 See ‘Nietzschean Politics: Kurt Hiller and the Philosophy of Goal’, the third chapter in Seth Taylor’s *Left-Wing Nietzscheans: The Politics of German Expressionism* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1990), pp. 60-88. The AfK aimed to ‘collect all scattered and splintered forces committed to moving beyond the preservation of one-sided occupational interests, in order to cooperate in rebuilding our entire art world’; quoted in Rose-Carol Washton Long (ed.), *German Expressionism: Documents from the End of the Wilhelmine Empire to the Rise of National Socialism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), p. 193. On the other hand, the Novembergruppe represented more restricted professional interests, mainly those of painters and sculptors.

13 For an account of the AfK’s complete failure to win the support of the provisional government in order to promote its agenda, see Joan Weinstein, *The End of Expressionism: Art and the November Revolution in Germany, 1918-1919* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), pp. 38-39.


groups, however, it is evident that its members did not conceive of themselves as equals of the workers. The artist turned to the proletarian from above, as its educator, the transmitter of cultural values.

The way artists oscillated between contradictory positions, from educators to entertainers of the bourgeois public or to allies of the proletariat, was analyzed in an important essay by the communist publisher Wieland Herzfelde titled ‘Gesellschaft, Künstler und Kommunismus’ (Society, Artists and Communism), which was published serially in the leftist cultural periodical Der Gegner (The Adversary) in 1920 and 1921. Herzfelde underscored a convergence of interests between artists and the proletariat deriving from their shared experience as ‘objects of exploitation by the capital’. He argued, though, that the exploitation of the artist differed from that of the worker: the artist constituted a peculiar category of modern labourer because he was not as alienated from the product of his labour as the rest of modern producers.\(^\text{16}\)

In addition, the economic conditions that determined the relationship of the artist with the market were in most cases drawing him closer to a petty-bourgeois existence, as he was forced to work for profit and to execute only sporadically his labour at will. This economic dependence accounted for the usually apolitical standpoint of artists: since the art trade had turned art works into market commodities, the artist was forced to make certain concessions that would increase the profitability of his business, so that works with direct political connotations could easily reduce the number of potential buyers.\(^\text{17}\)

In sum, Herzfelde demonstrated how advanced capitalism undermined the economic and social foundations of the livelihood of modern artists, separated them from society and determined their aesthetic choices (in the struggle for public recognition). This outsider position was experienced perhaps more intensely by those artists who had realized their subservient position within capitalist economy and had been convinced that only a socialist society could guarantee truly independent artistic work. Those politically conscious artists were in danger of losing any institutional support necessary to exercise their practice: they could not work for the bourgeoisie nor they could be financially supported by the proletariat. They could only hope that the Communist Party would finally


\(^\text{17}\)Ibid.
offer them vital institutional support. To Herzfelde’s disappointment, this was not yet the case in Germany because the culturally conservative functionaries of the Communist Party were either suspicious or openly hostile towards radical German artists.¹⁸

Thus, Herzfelde’s essay is also crucial as an insight into the outsider position of the young radical artists dedicated to the communist cause. To overcome this outsider position, Herzfelde argued, communist artists had to either join already existing professional associations, forming a ‘communist opposition’ within them, or to create an independent ‘red’ professional organization for all revolutionary artists.¹⁹ Herzfelde prefigures the path followed by different generations of radical artists during the Weimar years. This was also the case with ASSO, the association that began as a ‘red opposition’ within the RVbK and which aimed, as we shall see, to explore new artistic forms and means adjusted to the needs of political propaganda.

In 1924, the issue of the relationship between intellectuals, artists and the Communist Party was presented to the delegates of the Fifth Congress of the Communist International by the German communist Clara Zetkin. Zetkin proposed that communist-affiliated cultural organizations such as the

¹⁸Herzfelde, ‘Gesellschaft, Künstler und Kommunismus. II: Der Weg des Künstlers zum Kommunismus’, Der Gegner, 2 (March 1921), 194-97 (pp. 196-97). Herlzfelde’s criticism must be seen in relation to the recent ‘Kunstlump’ (Art Scoundrel) debate. Under this title, George Grosz and John Heartfield (Herzfelde’s brother) had published a polemical article – in a previous issue of the same periodical – attacking Kokoschka’s appeal for the protection of cultural heritage. More specifically, on 15 March 1920 a work by Rubens in Dresden’s Zwinger Gallery was damaged during civil unrest in reaction to the attempted Kapp putsch. Kokoschka, who had been recently appointed professor in the Academy of Dresden, reacted with an appeal asking for ceasefire around culturally significant spaces. This caused Grosz’s and Heartfield’s infuriated response directed not only against Kokoschka but against bourgeois culture in general. Gertrud Alexander, the editor of the cultural pages of the official organ of the KPD (Die Rote Fahne), condemned the ‘nihilism’ of the two artists arguing for the necessity of preserving bourgeois culture for the benefit of the proletariat. For the ‘Kunstlump’ debate, see Walter Fähnders and Martin Rector, Linksradikalismus und Literatur: Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der sozialistischen Literatur in der Weimarer Republik I (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1974), pp. 100-07. The ‘Kunstlump’ affair, however, seems to have been only a pretext for Herzfelde’s own attack which apparently was ultimately directed against the longstanding influence of Franz Mehring’s ideas within the German socialist movement (Gertrud Alexander was Mehring’s disciple). In his 1896 article ‘Kunst und Proletariat’, Mehring argued that ‘art can expect its regeneration only from the economic and political victory of the proletariat; it can play little part in the actual emancipatory struggle of that class’; see Rob Burns ‘Theory and Organization of Revolutionary Working-Class Literature in the Weimar Republic’, in Culture and Society in the Weimar Republic, ed. Keith Bullivant (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1977), 122-49 (pp. 125-26).

Internationale Arbeiterhilfe (International Workers’ Relief, or IAH) or the Internationale Rote Hilfe (International Red Aid) could offer the institutional framework for a productive collaboration between the radical intelligentsia and the working-class movement. This was perceived as a way to engage fellow-travelers, circumventing the issue of party membership. Zetkin’s analysis is significant because she directly connected the question of the intellectuals with the crisis of intellectual labour.\textsuperscript{20} As such, it could only be resolved in a classless communist society. Her proposal was approved and adopted by the German Communist Party.\textsuperscript{21}

The formation of the first exclusively communist artistic organization, the Rote Gruppe (Red Group), preceded Clara Zetkin’s speech only for a few weeks (June 1924).\textsuperscript{22} Its members belonged to the circle of Herzfelde’s Malik-Verlag and were also very close to the IAH. It was also during the same year that Alfréd Kemény (pseudonym Durus) replaced Gertrud Alexander in the editorship of the arts pages of the Rote Fahne’s feuilleton. These developments represent the first systematic attempt of the party to outline its cultural policy. My argument is that the needs of politically progressive artists to secure their livelihood and the needs of the KPD to intensify its political propaganda resulted in the formation of institutional structures that would, ideally, serve both.

The question that immediately emerged was how to solidify these structures, how to create long-term communist cultural associations. What obstructed these initiatives was not just the distrust of the party over the style and content of the works produced by collaborating artists or the censorship and confiscation of ultra-leftist or communist works of art that was characteristic throughout the entire Weimar period.

Indeed, only a year after the foundation of the Rote Gruppe, the Communist Party severely criticized the periodical Der Knüppel (The Truncheon) that was published by the party and edited by the founding members of the group (Grosz and Heartfield). Most specifically, at the tenth conference of the KPD in 1925, the periodical was reprimanded for neglecting agitation in favour of what the party

\textsuperscript{21}Zetkin presided at the Internationale Rote Hilfe from 1921 until her death in 1933.
\textsuperscript{22}Its chairman was George Grosz and its secretary John Heartfield. Several future ASSO members also joined the group.
clearly saw as aesthetic concerns serving neither its interests nor those of the proletariat. Its illustrations were rejected as ideologically suspicious. A resolution voted by the delegates designated three basic measures to bring *Der Knüppel* closer to the expectations of the party: stronger control by the Central Committee over its content; admission into its ranks of a wider range of professional illustrators; and, finally, collaboration with amateur, worker-illustrators. W. L. Guttsman comments that ‘The KPD officers were anxious not to offend the eminent artists who contributed so extensively to the magazine, and no action seems to have been taken to support the resolution.’ Perhaps Guttsman arrives at this conclusion because the eminent artists of the *Knüppel* indeed did not comply with the party’s directives with regard to the form and content of their own work. But the decisive point here is that they apparently did agree to widen the circle of the magazine’s collaborators with both professional and amateur communist artists, such as Boris Angeluschew (1902-1966, pseudonym Fuck) and Sándor Ék (fig. 29). Significantly, these artists were founding members of the organization that succeeded the *Rote Gruppe* after its dissolution in 1927: ASSO.

In an artistic field that had been transformed into a field of competition fully accommodated to the laws of capitalist economy, the KPD capitalized on the central issue of contention among artists: the strife over *Prominenz* (preeminence). Therefore, it is essential to explore the nature of artistic labour and identity as conceived by different agents who functioned in different degrees within a left-radical cultural milieu. To this end, we should take into account the antagonism between those agents over the accumulation of symbolic artistic capital and their position in the structure of the distribution system of this capital. In the field of visual arts, the debates between liberal, social-democratic and communist art

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25*Der Knüppel* ceased publication in 1927. A year later it was substituted by a new communist satirical periodical, *Eulenspiegel*. Commenting on this transition, Guttsman notes that it signified an important change from an artistic point of view: ‘Independent artists, who worked in a variety of media, were now replaced largely by professional graphic artists, mainly from the newly founded graphic atelier of the KPD’; Guttsman, *Art for the Workers*, p. 104. It should be added, though, that not all *Eulenspiegel* artists were professional; in fact, many of them were former workers, who had sporadically attended evening art classes and they were now trying to make their name as artists through the communist press. As I have already stressed, this was the case for the average ASSO member.
critics and intellectuals on the relationship between art and radicalism marks a constant struggle for the evaluation of specific artworks, hence a struggle for the legitimation of different artistic cultures. Within the left-radical artistic field, one can recognize in ASSO precisely a challenge by the unrecognized artists against their eminent colleagues such as George Grosz, Otto Dix, Rudolf Schlichter and Otto Nagel. This confrontation was the manifestation of both a generational conflict and a professional antagonism between the two sides.

A reading of the correspondence between Franz Edwin Gehrig-Targis and Heinrich Vogeler concerning the preparation of the communist faction within the Reichsverband bildender Künstler Deutschlands (RVbK) shows that they initially welcomed the participation of prominent left artists such as Rudolf Schlichter and Otto Nagel in their initiative. However, their invitations were turned down by both artists. After almost six months of preparation, during which no prominent left artist showed interest in participating to the new group, Gehrig-Targis sent a report to the KPD Office for Trade Union Administration. In it we read:

I would like to dispute the validity of the view that in a ‘Red Group of Artists’ belong only those who have been already publicly established as so-called eminent and not also unknown comrades. The proletarian artist has to be assessed from a different point of view than the bourgeois. As far as the artistic contribution to the class struggle is concerned, the recent art exhibitions, for example, were organized by always the same artists such as Grosz, Dix, Schlichter, Kollwitz, Baluschek, Zille with no unrecognized artist [...] being admitted, whereas the latter always had the opportunity to join bourgeois groups and participate in exhibitions through submission of works and membership to juries. A good, broad and firm organization is essential for a proletarian united front which must not shut off artists, as the desirable goal of such an organization remains the gathering of all forces, without lapsing into a personality cult.

In this passage, one can discern a decisive fissure in the left-radical field of cultural production separating two main camps: the eminents and the outsiders.

26Gehrig Targis, letter to Otto Nagel (17 March 1927); Heinrich Vogeler, letter to Gehrig-Targis (27 June 1927), AdK-Berlin, Gehrig-Targis-Archiv, 10/31, 10/39.
27Gehrig-Targis, letter to the Sekretariat der Betriebs- und Gewerkschaftsleitung der KPD (10 August 1927), AdK-Berlin, Gehrig-Targis-Archiv, 10/40. Indeed, Gehrig-Targis had exhibited works to such bourgeois exhibitions as the 1926 Juryfreie Kunstschau Berlin and the 1927 show of the Deutsche Kunstgemeinschaft Berlin, two institutions founded for the support of unrecognized and distressed artists. He had also participated in exhibitions organized by the Allgemeine Deutsche Kunstgenossenschaft and the Verein Berliner Künstler (no year is provided); see Adk-Berlin, Gehrig-Targis-Archiv, 137/19.
The vital point with regard to Weimar-era artistic radicalism is not what scholarship has repeatedly stressed, i.e. the distrust of eminent left-wing artists towards cultural projects under the auspices of the Communist Party. Instead, the focus must be shifted to the quite palpable yet overlooked discontent of the unrecognized artists over the elitism of their renowned colleagues, and to the indication that in the new communist cultural organizations the exclusion of the former might have been greater compared to the traditional bourgeois artists associations.\(^{28}\) This last element also suggests that the appeal to artistic quality was a basic criterion for the admission of artists to clubs like the Red Group.\(^{29}\)

The attacks of ASSO members against the prominent artists can also be interpreted as a criticism of the gradual embourgeoisement of the latter at around the same time, marked by their acceptance to such prestigious exhibitions as G. F. Hartlaub’s 1925 *Neue Sachlichkeit* show in Mannheim, their appointment in academic positions (for example Otto Dix’s 1927 appointment to the Dresden Art Academy) and their profitable contracts with well known art dealers (as were the contracts of Grosz with Alfred Flechtheim and Dix with Karl Nierendorf) (fig. 30).

Dennis Crockett has suggested that politically engaged prints and drawings thrived during the first highly unstable period of the Weimar economy (1918-1924).\(^{30}\) Art dealers preferred to invest in cheaper and rapidly produced artistic media to minimize their losses in the market. They would encourage artists to

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\(^{28}\) The issue of the relationship of ASSO with the eminent leftist artists was discussed in its general assembly of 27 October 1928. Significantly, the subject was raised by Erich Arnold Bischof (1899-1990), a visual artist who had attended drawing courses in *Volkshochschule Groß-Berlin* (next to Baluschek) and continued his studies at the *Kunstgewerbe- und Handwerkerschule Berlin*, hence an artist who had been trained in no prestigious art institutions but in vocational schools for workers. Max Keilson replied that although all eminent artists had been informed about the foundation of ASSO, none of them had showed any interest; see AdK-Berlin, Gehrig-Targis-Archiv, 10/41.

\(^{29}\) Indeed, the editors of *Der Knüppel* saw quality as the most important criterion for the selection of illustrations. In a letter to Kurt Tucholsky (6 January 1925), Grosz complained: ‘it’s damned difficult to create a paper within a party that still has satiric wit, in short, a paper of quality. Don’t forget that all those who possess talent and intelligence don’t come to us anymore. Either people are now anxious not to compromise themselves in the period of regenerating capitalism, or they don’t earn what bourgeois papers pay. And to seek out so-called idealists who struggle with heart and mind, for that you need a rather strong magnifying glass’; quoted in McCloskey, *George Grosz*, p. 119. An allusion to the low quality work of worker-artists can also be found in the fourth point of the Red Group’s manifesto, which called for artistic educational work in working-class districts and for ‘support of the still dilettantish efforts of Party members to proclaim the revolutionary will by word and image’; McCloskey, *George Grosz*, pp. 109-10.

produce print portfolios whose sometimes scandalous political content would draw further attention, rendering them more profitable. Moreover, in a period of extreme financial distress, one might assume that it would also be more convenient for the artists to turn to the production of drawings and watercolors instead of oils which were more expensive.

From 1924 on, however, with the beginning of the relative stabilization of capitalism in Germany, the radical artists, who had somehow made their name in the market by attracting the attention of art dealers and the press, returned to the production of easel paintings with a more harmless message. This was certainly the case with the leading figures of the Red Group. It seems that the activities of the group quickly came to a standstill, mostly due to the preoccupation of its prominent members (such as George Grosz and Rudolf Schlichter) with their personal careers, which now depended on the production of oil paintings. At the same time, the younger generation of radical communist artists, who had joined the group and contributed illustrations to Der Knüppel, artists who remained outsiders in the art world and were in a more precarious position, kept producing prints, drawings and political cartoons for the KPD press. To find a place in better publicized exhibitions of the time, they might turn to their old comrades but, as Gehrig-Targis’s letter testifies, to no avail. On the other hand, the careers of the eminent leftist artists increasingly depended upon institutions alien to the working-class movement.

But we can also explain ASSO’s critique of the eminent left-wing artists as a symptom of a generational conflict. The most active members of the association were born towards the beginning of the twentieth century, thus they were around their thirties. Taking into account their rather incomplete training in arts (in most cases received in vocational schools for young workers and not in proper art or applied arts schools) as well as the general social, political and economic situation in post-war Germany, one can deduce that their career prospects in the artistic field were rather bleak. This can explain their antagonism towards prominent socialist artists of the older generation (such as Baluschek, Kollwitz and Zille) or radical artists who had managed to make their name in the cultural field, despite

31Ironically, Herzfelde’s above discussed analysis on the de-politicization of artistic work as a means to make it more attractive to the public and to minimize the art dealer’s risk can be used to explain the about face of the radical artists of the Malik-circle themselves (with the exception of John Heartfield).
the adversities of the times (for example George Grosz and Otto Dix). On the one hand, ASSO artists sought the collaboration of eminent artists, which would enhance the group’s visibility (one should not exclude the possibility of a genuine admiration of their works or even their professional success). On the other, however, they were attacking what they judged as a lack of radicalism and a false conception of the artist’s social function.

This was apparent in many instances: in Gehrig-Targis’s aforementioned report to the Communist Party, in discussions taking place in the membership meetings of the group as well as in various texts associated with it. In the founding meeting of ASSO’s precursor, the Arbeitsgemeinschaft kommunistischer Künstler Deutschlands (Working Group of German Communist Artists), Gehrig-Targis expressed the view that the eminent artists supported the new project. However, this was not the case. The truth was that Otto Nagel, Rudolf Schlichter and George Grosz had only provided their signatures, avoiding at the same time any active engagement. From the old Rote Gruppe/Knüppel circle only John Heartfield was present in that first meeting and approved of the new initiative. It seems, then, that Gehrig-Targis deliberately exaggerated the degree of the eminent artists’ involvement to tackle the reservations of the unrecognized artists attending the meeting, who doubted the feasibility of another club of communist artists.

In the general meeting of 27 October 1928, the issue of the relationship with eminent artists was discussed within the general context of the membership requirements. Two Soviet artists were also invited, Georgy Ryazhsky and Fedor Bogorodksy, both members of AkhRR (Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia). They objected to the insistence of their German colleagues on admitting to the group only those artists ‘who stand on the ground of the revolutionary class struggle,’ and asked for a revision of this condition to attract fellow-travellers and

32For the debates between ASSO members on the position of the group towards the eminent leftist artists, see Protokoll der I. Versammlung (Gründungsversammlung) der Arbeitsgemeinschaft kommunistischer Künstler Deutschlands (30 January 1928), and Protokoll der Vollversammlung der ASSO vom 27. Oktober 1928, AdK-Berlin, Gehrig-Targis-Archiv, 10/62-65, 10/91-101.
33See Protokoll der I. Versammlung, p. 62. Alex Keil found ‘entirely pointless’ the attempt to bring into existence a new communist organization of artists ‘after the unsuccessful attempts of the ‘Rote Gruppe’’. He also noted the insufficient support of the KPD to such endeavours; Protokoll der I. Versammlung, p. 63. Note that Keil belonged to those artists (together with Jolán Szilágyi, Max Keilson, Heinz Tichauer and Günther Wagner), who came to ASSO via the Graphic Arts Atelier of the KPD. As Gehrig-Targis comments, from the ten artists who showed up in the meeting only Jolán Szilágyi and John Heartfield defended the necessity of the Arbeitsgemeinschaft; see Protokoll der I. Versammlung, pp. 64-65.
broaden membership. To this proposal, the sculptor Heinz Tichauer (1901-1939) replied that the Soviet artists had ‘confused Germany with Russia. In Russia the dictatorship of the proletariat allows for the gathering of experts for the benefit of artistic organizations. Tichauer argued that though it might be possible in Russia to collaborate with an artistic personality of, for example, Max Liebermann’s stature, the same thing would be impossible in Germany, adding:

we will never forget people like Dix, we will approach them, but at the same time we will not forget what ASSO wants, wherein we differ from bourgeois and leftist groups. We have a collective ideology. In ASSO there is no God. We cannot run fifteen times to the eminent artists and we have already an artistic strength of our own here in ASSO. When the eminent artists see our exhibitions, they will voluntarily come to us. If not, so be it. The time will come when we will say to them: instruct ARBKD-students, or make your own living by selling matches. In the same discussion, Haacker stressed that ‘we should not have as a priority to go to the eminent artists and beg them, but we should care for and bring in the proletarian and revolutionary forces. What we want will be achieved only through these elements. Tichauer specified that the difference between ASSO and non-ASSO artists lay in the conception of artistic quality: for the latter, quality was just a means to grow their reputation, whilst ASSO members saw quality work as a way to sharpen and make more effective the proletarian class-struggle.

In ASSO’s first elaborate programme, published in the Rote Fahne in February 1930, there is a final reckoning of the issue. In the opening paragraph, the group stresses its differences from preceding radical groups. ASSO, it is claimed, does not represent an attempt to gather all ‘revolutionary minded artists,’ as the Rote Gruppe was; nor does it wish to occupy a position next to the existing ‘petty-bourgeois artistic groups [as a] new pseudo-revolutionary society […] perhaps to the left of the November-Gruppe’. Moreover, it does not constitute an attempt ‘following the example of previous small proletarian art exhibitions, to found an exhibition-society which will move from the one department store to the other

34Protokoll der Vollversammlung der ASSO vom 27.Okt.1928, p. 92. ASSO had declared itself a sister organization of AKhRR.
35Ibid., p. 93.
36Ibid.
37Ibid.
38Ibid., pp. 96-97.
with more or less proletarian-revolutionary pictures’ (fig. 31).

One can clearly discern here a twofold challenge to both the liberal-bourgeois and the left-wing exponents of the German avant-garde of the 1920s, who were accumulating enough symbolical capital to establish their position in the field of ‘high’ culture. The reference to an attempt to occupy a place ‘to the left of the November-Gruppe’ hinted at the prominent artists of the *Rote Gruppe*, who back in 1921 had decried the leadership of the first post-war radical group of artists. This confrontation had been prompted by the assent of the Novembergruppe’s committee on the removal of two works by Rudolf Schlichter and Otto Dix (both members of the group) from the 1921 *Große Berliner Kunstaustellung* after pressures by the director of the exhibition. A radical faction within the Novembergruppe, consisting among others of Otto Dix, George Grosz and Rudolf Schlichter, reacted by addressing an open letter to its leadership. The preeminent artists of the group were accused of abandoning their initial radical positions to accommodate themselves with bourgeois art institutions. The then young radicals reminded its leadership that the ‘November Group was founded ostensibly by...’

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39. *Bildende Kunst und revolutionäre Arbeiterchaft: Programm und Arbeit der Assoziation der revolutionärer bildender Künstler Deutschlands*, *Die Rote Fahne*, no. 49, 27 February 1930. The last point is a direct reference to the art exhibitions organized by Otto Nagel in the Wertheim department store in Alexanderplatz (1924) and two years later in the Stein department store in Wedding, Wertheim in Neukölln and Lindemann in Spandau; see Guttsman, *Art for the Workers*, pp. 121-123. Reviewing the Stein department store show Behne argued that proletarian subject matter did not suffice to produce truly revolutionary art, and that the exploration of new formal possibilities should be in the forefront of the latter; see Adolf Behne, ‘Tempelhofer Feld und Wedding’, *Die Weltbühne*, 22 (1926), 346-48. A reply to Behne written by John Heartfield at the behest of the *Rote Gruppe* defended Nagel’s exhibition, most precisely the revolutionary character of its members who had contributed to the show such as George Grosz, Rudolf Schlichter, László Grieffel and Paul Eickmeier (who later joined ASSO). It was such works, argued Heartfield, that had caused the outrage of politically conservative circles and not the dead ‘artistic achievements in red, green, or purple of our constructivists [to be found] on the exterior or interior of [the bourgeoisie’s] villas [and] companies’; see John Heartfield, ‘Grün oder – Rot?’, *Die Weltbühne*, 22 (1926), 434-35 (p. 434). Heartfield agreed upon the necessity of aesthetic innovation which, however, saw inextricably connected with revolutionary content. To eschew content, as Behne suggested, would inevitably lead to the production of purely decorative, hence harmless crafts; ‘Grün oder – Rot?’, 435. The self-stylization of the Rote Gruppe as the representative of the true revolutionary artists – as opposed to such eminent artists as Max Pechstein, Wassily Kandinsky, Oskar Schlemmer and Paul Klee (all mentioned by Heartfield) – can be read as another manifestation of a conflict over Prominenz. Both sides sought legitimation as the genuine avant-garde movement. For Behne’s reply to the *Rote Gruppe*, see Adolf Behne, ‘An den Verein kommunistischer Kunstmalen’, *Die Weltbühne*, 22 (1926), 460-61. It must be stressed that, contrary to the *Rote Gruppe*, ASSO now renounced Nagel’s exhibition project.

40. *Offener Brief an die Novembergruppe*, *Der Gegner*, 2 (June 1921), 297-301. The rest of the signatories were Max Dungert, Raoul Hausmann, Hanna Höch, Errsnt Krantz, Franz Mutzenbecher, Thomas Ring, Georg Scholz and Willy Zierath. Notably, the letter was immediately followed by the second part of Herzfelde’s ‘Gesellschaft, Künstler und Kommunismus’. 

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artists who wanted to realize a revolutionary desire for a new ideal community and for cooperation with the working people, free from the machinations of elitist art clubs and dealer’s speculation. Instead:

Not for a moment did any of the leading members seriously confront the problem of hierarchy common to all other bourgeois artists’ groups […] all they did was to confuse the issue with their slippery rhetoric, so that they could foster their own egos in the old sordid way of artists, by having the largest possible membership […] Those at the top realized that […] a certain section of the membership did not wish to be artists in the bourgeois-cultural sense, because they saw the way to fulfill themselves not in promoting an apparently revolutionary aesthetic […] and because they did not want to appear to be superior, conceited experts, dismissing in a high-handed way any attempts for a better way of working, condemning on the basis of values borrowed from a bourgeois aesthetic.

This is a critique of personality cult as a means for success in the cultural field, supplemented by a call for a collective mode of artistic work – an invitation to the eminent artists to break the traditional limits of their professional practice. It is precisely the same critique that ASSO artists would direct against all eminent artists – bourgeois and leftist – approximately seven years later.

It is important to stress the course of this radical critique of bourgeois cultural values: a radical faction within the Novembergruppe attacks its prominent members for pseudo-radicalism and embourgeoisement, it secedes from the organization and forms the Rote Gruppe; the latter attracts a new generation of radical artists, dissatisfied with their eminent colleagues’ relative success in the art establishment (which is interpreted again as a sign of embourgeoisement) and they form a new radical artists’ association, ASSO. In each case, it was artists

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42Ibid.
43The exhibition strategies and a certain degree of exclusionary elitism, which characterized pre-war Secessionism, can be observed in the case of the Novembergruppe (which included a great number of artists who formerly belonged to the Berlin or the Free Secession). The Novembergruppe was trying to secure the support of a network of state or private institutions in order to form a niche for contemporary art within the art market, where its members would hold a privileged position. But one could also trace a paradoxical affinity between the Rote Gruppe and the Secessions in their tactic to restrict their membership on the basis of quality as the principal criterion for the selection of works. Those excluded by this tactic were some of the future ASSO members. For the Berlin Secession, see Paret, The Berlin Secession; Teeuwisse, Vom Salon zur Secession; Rudolf Pfefferkorn, Die Berliner Secession: Eine Epoche deutscher Kunstgeschichte (Berlin: Haude und Spenerische Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1971).
occupying an outsider position in the art world who acted as critics of their eminent colleagues. Thus their emphasis on breaking established institutional barriers was pivotal for the redefinition of their own professional identity.

But what exactly made ASSO ‘revolutionary’ and the remaining artistic groups ‘opportunist’? ASSO attempted to establish this distinction around two main points: first, the emphasis on a genuinely practical art attuned to ‘revolutionary agitation’ (in the form of political caricature and illustrations for the communist press, designs for propagandistic posters and covers for books and brochures) (figs. 32-34); second, the ‘educational activities’ of the group. I shall argue that ASSO artists asserted the role of the applied artist par excellence, the artist practically corresponding to the needs of the masses, instead of serving economic and industrial elites in the name of the masses, as they saw bourgeois avant-garde reformers doing.44 From the production of propaganda material to the design of stage sets for workers’ theatrical productions, ASSO artists wanted to shape the image of the proletarian sphere in all its aspects, despite the fact that they lacked the necessary financial resources and technological means to implement such a large-scale project (figs. 36-36).

The second central point of the programme, ASSO’s ‘educational activities’, was a reference to the artistic instruction of workers that was taking place in the Marxist Workers’ Schools (Marxistische Arbeitorschule or MASCH) by some of the group’s members. The programme specified that ‘in contrast to the drawing courses at bourgeois and official state schools that are occupied with nude study and other ‘purely artistic’ themes, we practically engage our students in the design of posters and mastheads [and] drawings for broadsheets’.45 Similarly to the

44This was also stressed in a text by Alfred ‘Durus’ Kemény accompanying ASSO’s programme, in which the communist art critic claimed that ASSO had ‘lifted the contradiction between theory and praxis’; see Durus, ‘Ifa-Schau 4: Der Künstler als Politiker. Die Koje der Assoziation revolutionärer bildender Künstler’, Die Rote Fahne, no. 49, 27 February 1930. Though, in his various art-critical texts for the Rote Fahne, Kemény routinely rejected avant-garde art on the basis of its dissociation from actual social relations, he nevertheless acknowledged the significance of its theoretical accomplishments; the problem concerned its practice. An example is his review of Jan Tschichold’s widely acclaimed study on the new typography which he found ‘quite outstanding,’ but also imbued with a ‘primitive technical romanticism’ that left untouched the ‘actual ideological, i.e. political issues of the present. Thereby, a coherent account of typography is given, but exclusively in its function as an advertising medium of industry, neglecting the problems and enormous possibilities of typography as a means of political propaganda’; See Durus, ‘Jan Tschichold: Die neue Typographie’, Die Rote Fahne, no. 296, 16 December 1928.
45Bildende Kunst und revolutionäre Arbeisterschaft’, Die Rote Fahne, 27 February 1930. The
training in technical-vocational schools, the emphasis was on the application of drawing and design to specific practical necessities, in this case to everyday political advertising (propaganda).

MASCH was founded in the winter of 1925-26, and it was directed by the communist sociologist and political economist Johann-Lorenz Schmidt (1900-1978). For 1929-1930, ASSO organized the following drawing courses (all in the central MASCH department): a) Figure drawing. Teachers: Beier, Eickmeier, Keil, Vogeler (twenty courses, ten for every semester); b) Type design. Teachers: Keilson, Pewas, Günther Wagner (same number of courses); c) Linocut. Teacher: Heysig (ten courses, five for each semester).

But what was ASSO’s educational aim according to its own programme? Quite simply to turn ‘utterly uneducated male and female workers […] the majority of whom at the beginning of the course can barely draw a line […] into good assistants for drawings for factory and social housing newspapers, and for the production of banners’.46 This had been already emphatically stated in ASSO’s October 1928 membership meeting by Haacker, who had made clear that ASSO did not wish to ‘breed an art proletariat […] The young proletarian is supposed to remain in the workshop and carry on with his ideological work.’47

Thus, only the worker bound to his workplace was useful to the KPD. A full transgression, a transformation from worker into professional artist, was

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47 Protokoll der Vollversammlung der ASSO vom 27 Oktober 1928, p. 98 (emphasis added).
unwelcome. There is more evidence supporting this claim: the artistically inclined worker was dubbed *Arbeiterzeichner*, and he was to receive a basic training in arts by his comrade the *revolutionärer Künstler* (a resurfacing of the confrontation between the *Gestalter* and the *Zeichner* discussed in the first chapter is tangible here). The vanguard role of the artist was distinguished from the executive role of the worker instructed to arts. In the announcement of the affiliation of *Arbeiterzeichner* to ASSO in 1931, a clear division is manifested between the ‘revolutionary professional artists’ of ASSO and the ‘non-professional *Arbeiterzeichner*’. If artistic training was offered to the latter, this was not to encourage and support an interest in the arts that they might have developed during their free time; political schooling was the basis of the communist artistic training, so the dilettante worker-artist had to be ‘gradually convinced through practical collaboration and discussions that for a *class-conscious* *Arbeiterzeichner*, drawing and painting comes into question mainly as revolutionary agitation and propaganda!’ The path from the workshop to the atelier, followed by many ASSO members themselves, was blocked for the *Arbeiterzeichner*. Art education could at best be a collateral effect of ideological schooling; all the worker was permitted to glimpse from the kingdom of art was a basic knowledge of drawing and composing a picture (fig. 37). ASSO artists did not wish to restore the art dilettante to an equal position next to the professional artist. The dilettante worker-artist was just conceived as an instrument for the improvement of agitprop. Like the *Zeichner* for the avant-garde designer of the *Kunstgewerbebewegung*, the *Arbeiterzeichner* was rather just another material to be moulded by the revolutionary artist.

Thus, contrary to ASSO’s statement of intentions, its two principal programmatic points that would signify a rupture with the bourgeois art world were drawing the group closer to the logic of the bourgeois arts and crafts reform. Only the repression of the points of convergence between the bourgeois art and the new revolutionary model of artistic practice could produce a ‘revolutionary’ position highlighting the futility of bourgeois art altogether. For the commonalities arise in the realms of both practice and theory. They diverge only through a

49Ibid.
different political-ideological framing, which, however, in both cases tends to exclude the impractical (easel painting) for the functional (applied arts, advertisement, agitprop). In both systems, the worker was to be held in an auxiliary position; he was not supposed to leave the workshop and enter the artist’s studio. The worker, defined as either an artisan or a ‘revolutionary’ proletarian, had to forget non-productive aesthetic diversions. The new world envisaged by the artist-educator – be it ‘bourgeois’ or ‘revolutionary’ – was not egalitarian but clearly hierarchical.

4.2 ASSO’s artistic paradigms

We have already seen that ASSO initially sought its artistic paradigm in AKhRR, a group mainly consisting of easel painters promoting a quite mundane realist and naturalist style (figs. 38-39). The contact between the latter and German communist artists occurred in 1927, when Heinz Tichauer was invited to Moscow to discuss the possibility of the foundation of a German organization affiliated with AKhRR.\textsuperscript{50} However, ASSO artists, most probably under the influence of Alfred Kemény, broke ties with AKhRR and promoted the idea of the artist as agitator whose task was not to describe but to intervene in social reality. Naturally, this model of artistic practice was inextricably related with applied arts and, as such, with the training that ASSO members had received in the \textit{Handwerker-} and \textit{Kunstgewerbeschulen}.

Kemény concretized the concept of the artist as agitator in his 1929 article ‘Visual Arts in the USSR’, in which he praised the group \textit{October} as the most consistent exponent of a new tendency towards an ‘organizational aggregation of spatial arts’.\textsuperscript{51} Kemény stressed that the new spatial arts, especially posters and agitprop drawings, rightfully occupied an equal position next to the magnificent accomplishments of Soviet films such as Eisenstein’s ‘Potemkin’ and Pudovkin’s ‘The mother’ (next to which, by contrast, even the best examples of AKhRR’s easel paintings did not stand a chance).\textsuperscript{52}


\textsuperscript{51}Durus [Alfred Kemény], ‘Bildende Kunst in der UdSSR’, \textit{Die Front}, 2 (January 1929), 53-56 (pp. 53-54).

\textsuperscript{52}Ibid., p. 55.
Like ASSO, October was founded in 1928 at the beginning of the First Five-Year Plan, a period of crucial political and economic changes in the Soviet Union. The country had just entered a period of rapid industrialization and forced collectivization of land – a programme supported through a fierce anti-bourgeois campaign that attacked bourgeois ‘experts’ and whose side-effect was a revival of interest in proletarian culture. Sheila Fitzpatrick has described this ‘political confrontation of ‘proletarian’ Communists and the ‘bourgeois’ intelligentsia, in which the Communists sought to overthrow the cultural authorities inherited from the old regime,’ as a ‘cultural revolution’.53 It seems that the central ideas of this phenomenon were imported to Weimar Germany, and it is also through this path that the communist critique of the left-bourgeois intelligentsia escalated during the last years of the Republic. In this respect, the formation of ASSO in March 1928 can also be seen as a symptom of this communist campaign against bourgeois culture.

Corresponding to the socio-political climate in the Soviet Union, the first declaration of October opened in a polemical tone:

At the present time all art forms must define their positions at the front of the Socialist cultural revolution. We are profoundly convinced that the spatial arts (architecture, painting, sculpture, graphics, the industrial arts, photography, cinematography, etc.) can escape their current crisis only when they are subordinated to the task of serving the concrete needs of the proletariat [...] the spatial arts must serve the proletariat and the working masses in two interconnected fields: in the field of ideological propaganda (by means of pictures, frescoes, printing, sculpture, photography, cinematography, etc.); in the field of production and direct organization of the collective way of life (by means of architecture, the industrial arts, the designing of mass festivities, etc.).54

The leading October members, who had previously been involved in the development of constructivist, proletkult and production art ideas, argued that the main task of their organization was to raise the cultural level of ‘the backward strata of the working class [...] to that of the avant-garde, revolutionary industrial

proletariat, which is consciously building the Socialist economy and culture on the bases of organization, planning and highly developed industrial technology.\textsuperscript{55} They observed that ‘only art remained behind in this respect, because of the narrow, professional artisan traditions it has preserved,’ adding that only a new conception of art based on ‘rational and constructive approaches to artistic creation […] and [on] the methods of mechanical and laboratory scientific technology’ could accomplish the synchronization of art with its surrounding socioeconomic development.\textsuperscript{56}

There are three elements of decisive importance for our discussion in this declaration. First, the proximity of its main artistic idea (a form-shaping art intrinsically bound to the industrial production and economy) to the agenda of the modern German applied arts movement (of course the Soviet artists were committed to a different economical system, but the affinity I am suggesting here is aesthetic).\textsuperscript{57} Second, the emphasis on artistic education, most precisely in the active involvement of artistically untrained workers in the creation of this new art (a point that was also central in ASSO’s programme). And third, the attack on easel painting, which, according to the October artists, ‘replaces any serious effort to formulate a revolutionary world view and world perception with a simplified interpretation of a hurriedly invented revolutionary subject.’\textsuperscript{58}

The ideas of the Soviet group had been transmitted to ASSO through Alfred Kurella (a German communist who belonged to the team of October theorists) and Alfréd ‘Durus’ Kemény. Kurella lived in Moscow from 1926 until 1929 (when he returned to Berlin), working first as a deputy director for Komintern’s Agitprop department and, from 1927 until 1929, as the director of the Central Office for Fine Arts and Literature (Glaviskusstvo) at the Commissariat of Enlightenment (Narkompros). Most probably, he belonged to the team of authors who wrote the declaration of October.\textsuperscript{59}

\textsuperscript{55}October-Association of Artistic Labor Declaration, 1928’, p. 276.
\textsuperscript{56}Ibid. On the October group, see also Matthew Cullerne Bown, Socialist Realist Painting (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), pp. 114-23. Some of the group’s most renowned members were Gustav Klutsis, El Lissitzky, Sergei Eisenstein and Aleksandr Rodchenko.
\textsuperscript{57}On this affinity, see Chapter 2 of this dissertation.
\textsuperscript{58}October-Association of Artistic Labor Declaration, 1928’, p. 278. Though the group was not named in the text, this attack was principally directed against AKhRR.
\textsuperscript{59}See Goeschen, Vom socialistischen Realismus, p. 18. Kurella had abandoned a career in the arts for a more secure one in politics; he had studied in the Applied Arts School of Munich before becoming a communist functionary, ibid., p. 17. He was also a friend of Alice Lex and Oskar Nerlinger, ibid., p. 18.
Kemény, on the other hand, was one of the few foreigners who had participated in the discussions around the formation of the ‘First Working Group of Constructivists’ at INKhUK (Institute of Artistic Culture). On 18 March 1921, he attended the ‘Second Spring Exhibition’ of the OBMOKhU (Society of Young Artists), and shortly after he held a lecture about it at INKhUK. It should be noted that two more Hungarian émigré artists, Jolán Szilágyi and Sándor Ék, who would later play an active role in ASSO, were in Moscow at that time studying at VKhUTEMAS (Higher Art and Technical Studios) under El Lissitzky and Béla Uitz. When Kemény returned to Berlin from Moscow, he became involved in the publication of the new series of Egység (Unity), an art journal edited by émigré Hungarian artists. Kemény announced his participation in the journal in a declaration also signed by Ernst Kállai, László Moholy-Nagy and László Péri (another future ASSO member). With this background, it is not surprising that Kemény was among the main advocates of the notion of artistic practice promoted by October.

The tension between ‘revolutionary’ agitprop applied arts and bourgeois idealistic easel painting was at the epicenter of the reception of an exhibition of Soviet painting organized by the Gesellschaft der Freunde des neuen Rußlands (Society of Friends of New Russia) in Berlin in July 1930. The exhibition mainly included works by members of the group OST (Society of Easel Artists). In his review of the show, Kemény argued that ‘the emphatic artisanal technique of easel painting, in particular that of oil paintings, is more ponderous, bound up in tradition, less timely than the technique of film, poster, photography and journalistic drawing.’ The exhibition showed that ‘a part of Russian painters are still dependent on the bourgeois painting tradition of France.’

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60 Oliver A. I. Botar, ‘From the Avant-garde to ‘Proletarian Art’: The Émigré Hungarian Journals Egység and Akasztott Ember, 1922-23’, Art Journal, 52 (Spring 1993), 34-45 (p. 34).
61 Ibid.
63 On this group, see ‘OST [Society of Easel Artists] Platform, 1929’, in Russian Art of the Avant-garde, pp. 279-81. Bowlt writes that ‘although OST supported easel painting as opposed to industrial design […] it did not reject the achievements of the old avant-garde’; ibid., p. 279. As such it may be seen as another representative of the centrist position discussed in the previous chapter.
64 Durus, ‘Sowjetische Malerei: Ausstellung der ‘Gesellschaft der Freunde des neuen Rußland’’, Die Rote Fahne, no. 158, 10 July 1930.
65 Ibid. The exhibition’s reception was also generally negative in the bourgeois press.
A few weeks later, Kemény reported on a discussion evening organized by ASSO, in which Alfred Kurella had lectured on the topic ‘Visual Art in the Land of the Proletarian Dictatorship’. Kurella argued that the exhibition presented an incomplete, hence false image of contemporary artistic developments in the Soviet Union. Its main mistake was its focus on easel painting, instead of the achievements of Soviet artists in the field of spatial arts (especially the October members).⁶⁶ According to Kurella, this was the artistic practice that represented the latest stage in the development of Soviet art; its principal characteristic was the transformation of the revolutionary proletariat ‘from a consumer into a producer of art’.⁶⁷ Kemény finished his report passing the information that the members of ASSO ‘unanimously recognized the flawed ideological line of the exhibition and planned to organize an ideologically more consequent, unambiguous exhibition of proletarian-revolutionary Soviet art in Berlin.’⁶⁸

Indeed, in October 1930 ASSO organized in Berlin an exhibition titled ‘An der Front des Fünfjahrrans. Ausstellung der Produktionsvereinigung Oktober’ (On the Front of the Five-Year Plan: Exhibition of the Production-Association October) (figs. 40-44).⁶⁹ After Berlin, the exhibition continued in Krefeld, Düsseldorf and Cologne. In the short text of the exhibition catalogue, the ‘revolutionary’ Soviet applied arts are again juxtaposed to the ‘bourgeois’ easel painting. We read:

In the epoch of the industrialization of the land and the corresponding modification of human nature, art is compelled to serve the socialist economy and contribute to the shaping [Gestaltung] of the lifestyle and the awareness of the working class. In our epoch of the socialist construction and the Five-Year Plan, architecture and the applied arts [angewandten Künste] (typography, textile, furniture, ceramics, etc.) have the leading role in the field of the visual arts. […] The easel painting, the visual arts of a dying off period, is deliberately excluded. We do not want to illustrate the ‘good old times’ with works of painting, like a recent exhibition of ‘Soviet painters’ taken place in the Secession did; we want to let rest the painterly remnants of a faded away idyll. We do not want to preserve untouched from

⁶⁷Ibid.
⁶⁸Ibid.
⁶⁹This was only the second exhibition of the group, after its first show in Moscow in June 1930.
technology our great grandfathers’ ‘quiescence’; we want to push forward keenly to the future, as well in the field of visual arts.\textsuperscript{70}

This programme was also adopted by ASSO members: ‘This exhibition shall simultaneously exemplify ARBKD’s aims in the field of art […] not petty-bourgeois, so-called ‘pure’ (abstract, idyllic), but consciously political, revolutionary-proletarian art, revolutionary propaganda through art.’\textsuperscript{71}

On the occasion of the same exhibition, Kemény published an interview with two October members, who claimed that in Soviet Union art had finally broken with artisanal tradition and was coordinated with the ‘economic, political, technical and psychological bases of socialized industry.’\textsuperscript{72} The commissioner of the artist was no longer the individual patron, but industry. The two interviewees stated that October saw only two paths worthy to be followed by the Soviet artists: either a full integration of artistic work into industrial production or agitprop work. They proclaimed: ‘An art which does not challenge any class enemy, which does not aim at the transformation of the way of life (as an ideological and industrial-collectivistic method of production), is a useless, a socially futile art’.\textsuperscript{73}

For October, the Five-Year Plan itself was a work of art. In other words, the transformation of the Soviet land through accelerated industrialization, and the visual propaganda on behalf of this plan, were the only legitimate form of art. But in Germany, an active participation of ‘revolutionary’ artists in industrial production aimed at the transformation of social relations was out of the question. Their only alternative was propaganda or their determination ‘to serve the revolutionary movement not only through their works, but rather through their full commitment.’\textsuperscript{74}

The variety of techniques, styles and media, the downplay of aesthetic concerns, the attempt to bind art and everyday life, the interest in the


\textsuperscript{71}Ibid., p. 3 (emphasis in original).

\textsuperscript{72}Durus, ‘Zur bevorstehenden sowjetrussischen Ausstellung der Gruppe Oktober: Der Künstler wird Industriearbeiter. Gespräch mit zwei Mitgliedern der Oktobergruppe – Ein neuer Typus des Künstlers aus den Ateliers in die Betriebe’, Die Rote Fahne, no. 219, 19 September 1930. The two October members were Gutnov and Tahirov.

\textsuperscript{73}Ibid. (emphasis in original).

\textsuperscript{74}Durus, ‘Die Arbeit der ARBKD’, Die Rote Fahne, no. 52, 3 March 1931.
propagandistic value of a work and the prevalence of its use instead of its commodity value are elements shared by both ASSO and October artists. Furthermore, their production was of a rather ephemeral (or expendable) character: contrary to the bourgeois artists’ intention to create ‘eternal masterpieces’, ‘proletarian-revolutionary’ artworks completely depended on the specific context and necessities of the occasions for which they were created (demonstrations, workers’ clubs and unions, street festivities, etc.) (fig. 45).

This concept of artistic practice was inextricably bound with the notion of Tendenzkunst. Sándor Ék summed up ASSO’s position on the matter as follows:

*there is only ‘Tendenzkunst’ [...] If the Association emphasizes its tendentiousness, naturally it does not underestimate the importance of formal composition. [...] The association combats, however, the unjustified, arbitrary juxtaposition of ‘old’ and ‘new’ forms. A preference of one form to the disadvantage of the others, the designation of one form as exclusively revolutionary to the disadvantage of the others only means to transfer the problem to a false level; it only means to deliberately seek to constrain the revolutionary effectiveness of an artwork. From this standpoint, BRB-known leaves the question of formal composition open. It poses, nevertheless, the obligatory condition that for the artistic production with regard to both form and content the single yardstick of practical application and utility is the agitational and propagandistic value.*

The decisive point here is the emphasis on the technical-practical aspect of art. Tendentious art is not presented as the opposite of ‘pure’ or ‘abstract’ art, but rather as its negative. It represents the sublation of fine arts through a strictly politically orientated conception of applied arts. We can perhaps perceive the relation between bourgeois art, applied arts and proletarian-revolutionary art as follows: ‘a negation may imply that an affirmation [...] and its contrary [...] are both irrelevant, and that X is *neither*; it may focus X on an altogether different dimension, say, on a ‘potency’ rather than an ‘evaluative’ dimension. A negation, then, leaves open the question of what is being *affirmed* and thus has an inherent

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75 Alex Keil (Sándor Ék), ‘5 Jahre Kampf um die revolutionäre bildende Kunst in Deutschland’, repr. in *Manifeste Manifeste 1905-1933: Schriften deutscher Künstler des zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts* (Dresden: Fundus, 1965), pp. 422-23. This text was first published in 1933. In the fall of 1931 the ARBKD was renamed *Bund revolutionärer bildender Künstler Deutschlands* (BRBKD).
ambiguity. If we take X as Ék’s ‘proletarian revolutionary art’, then we see that it is privileged as opposed to bourgeois pure art precisely on the basis of its potency, not its evaluative dimension; Tendenzkunst is not better than pure art, it is simply more capable of transforming reality. The ambiguity of this judgment arises, however, if we complicate the distinction between bourgeois and revolutionary art by widening the scope of the former; Ék deliberately narrows bourgeois art to its ‘purposeless’, pure dimension, excluding any reference to the bourgeois applied arts reform that would point to an interconnection between the latter and Tendenzkunst. His negation of bourgeois art, then, ‘leaves open the question of what is being affirmed’, and this is manifested in ASSO’s ambiguity on the issue of form, which, as Ék writes, it is left open.

Therefore, though ASSO as a communist affiliated organization sought to convince its public that its practice was exclusively modelled on the example of contemporary Soviet artistic groups, my argument is that the reception of Soviet constructivist/production art ideas by ASSO members was not only facilitated by, but perhaps even made possible through, their own training in German applied arts schools. For the applied arts ideas leading to the foundation of these schools were significantly close to those advocated by the October artists. Both programmes converged on a logic that acclaimed the value of useful arts, that is, spatial arts and architecture, and opposed ‘free-floating’ easel painting. In both programmes, art was attuned to the demands of economy and industry, and despite the reference to different systems for the organization of these sectors (capitalism vs. socialism) in each case the role of the artist remained the same. For in both theories, the artist manifestly saw himself as part of an avant-garde that had grasped the spirit of the age and was to play a decisive role in the transformation of everyday life; he would be the designer-educator, whilst the Kunstproletariat in Germany or the ‘revolutionary proletariat’ in the Soviet Union, despite the populist rhetoric of both avant-gardes, was clearly destined to occupy the position of the executive force. In sum, the structural affinities of the two theories were disguised through the use of different discourses.

We should note, then, that ASSO members were implicated in a twofold repression. On the one hand, they had to actively suppress the kinship of the two

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applied arts models. To do so, they overemphasized the Soviet example, but in this way, they automatically devalued their own role as artists; living in a capitalist economy they could not transform everyday life, all they could do was to propagandize this transformation. But by willfully deciding to limit their work to the production of *Tendenzkunst*, which in those last years of the Weimar Republic was often censored and excluded from the art market, they undermined their own career prospects as artists. Moreover, lacking an organic connection with industrial production, hence the potential to contribute to a radical transformation of reality, they faced the same danger with the Soviet and bourgeois German applied artists: the lapse of their production from the functional back to the decorative, or that widening of the gap between theory and praxis that communist critics so vehemently attacked.

4.3 Outsider, ‘free-floating’ and ‘operative’ intellectuals

I have pointed above to the interconnectedness of the debate on the predicament of intellectual workers and that on the need for a drastic reconfiguration of vocational identities. I shall now turn to certain works by well-known intellectuals such as Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer, to show how they both signal the centrality of the two issues in the period between 1930 and 1933, but also radically reformulate them. At the same time, I shall stress not only the departure of these positions from the norm, but also their intersection with the theses expressed by other intellectuals and artists of the left-radical milieu, including ASSO members. By this, I do not mean to suggest that Walter Benjamin and ASSO artists arrived at the same conclusions; my argument is quite simply that their positions constitute responses to the same questions. An often neglected issue must recover its centrality: the way these responses were fundamentally determined by the outsider position of these intellectuals and artists within their respective fields of practice.

By reframing ASSO’s artistic practice through the writing of Walter Benjamin,

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77On two occasions, the 1931 *Photomontage* exhibition in the former Kunstgewerbeuseum in Berlin and the 1932 GBK exhibition, works by ASSO members were removed by the authorities due to their propagandistic character. Also, in the 1931 GBK exhibition, works by members of *Die Abstrakten*-Berlin, which by then was affiliated with ASSO, were censored.
I shall point out that radical critique of art and culture in late Weimar Germany represented a reaction to the pseudo-objectivity (*Sachlichkeit*) and pseudoradicalism of the avant-garde’s conception of utilitarian art. This reaction originated in the pre-Weimar discussion of the reconfiguration of artistic and intellectual labour in modernity. ASSO 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, 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 ASSO in 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 to the working masses. If radical cultural critique initially aimed at a reconfiguration of the role of the intellectual worker, 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.

I will begin with a well-known review written by Walter Benjamin in 1930 and published in 1931 by the social-democratic periodical *Die Gesellschaft*. This review, titled ‘Linke Melancholie: Zu Erich Kästners neuem Gedichtbuch’ (Left-Wing Melancholy: On Erich Kästner’s new book of poems), was originally destined for *Frankfurter Zeitung*, but it was rejected by the newspaper’s editors due to its highly polemical tone. Indeed, as Benjamin’s title implies, his text was not plainly a literary review: it was an attack on left-wing exponents of the then fashionable Neue Sachlichkeit.

Benjamin’s text appeared in a period when *sachlich* art was predominantly promoted not by artistic associations, as was the case in the immediate post-war years, but through art institutions (schools, official exhibitions, big publishing houses and not small independent presses) and the market, thus in a period when
most artists’ associations had either been rendered insignificant or dissolved.

If this institutional accommodation paralleled the end of Expressionism as a movement,78 Neue Sachlichkeit was supposed to represent a Post-Expressionist artistic trend, related, as its designation implied, not with spirit but with the material world, the object. However, for many left-radicals, New Objectivity remained markedly non-objective. Characteristic is Alfréd Kemény’s 1929 critique of Neue Sachlichkeit, which is dubbed the ‘typical ‘art’ of the relative stabilization [of capitalism].’79 After reporting on its expansion to almost all important exhibition spaces in Berlin, the communist critic juxtaposes it to the works of ASSO artists, whose style is described as revolutionäre Sachlichkeit (revolutionary objectivity). For Kemény, the latter was genuinely objective because it revealed the real face of social reality as opposed to the ‘bourgeois lies about a ‘new objectivity standing above the classes” 80

A clarification is necessary here. Neue Sachlichkeit was never a homogeneous artistic trend; depending on its context – literature, the visual arts, and architecture – it had different meanings and was expressed in different forms. Moreover, Kemény and – as we shall see – Benjamin do not use the term to refer to the functional, applied arts. In my view, however, their critique of Neue Sachlichkeit extends to the critique of spirit and the demand for a useful art which was interwoven with that for a sachlich art and in this way it intermingles with the programme of the applied arts reform. In other words, the left-wing critique of the Neue Sachlichkeit aimed at the revision of the idea of sachlich art. It constituted another way to raise the issue of the social role of intellectuals and artists in an economy which transformed works of art into market commodities.

Much like Kemény, then, in his ‘Left-wing melancholy’ Benjamin presents New Objectivity as an opportunist bourgeois trend. His critique, however, is much more elaborate than Kemény’s. Whilst the latter’s devotion to the party line resulted to a mechanistic division of artists into politically suspect non-communists and revolutionary communists, Benjamin’s independent, non-affiliated position permitted him to proceed to a decisive shift of focus. The

79Durus [Alfred Kemény], ‘Zwischen ‘neuer’ und revolutionärer Sachlichkeit’, Die Rote Fahne, no. 1, 1 January 1929.
80Ibid.
crucial point for Benjamin lies not in partisanship, but in the very position occupied by the left-wing intellectuals in the institutions which determined the production and dissemination of cultural work. For Benjamin, instead of challenging the terms settling this position, they were exhausting their revolutionary ambitions in spectacular, thus harmless attacks on the bourgeoisie. And as simple aesthetic games, the bourgeoisie could easily turn those literary attacks into objects of aesthetic pleasure, into commodified cultural fashions.

‘Left radical publicists of the stamp of Kästner, Mehring, and Tucholsky,’ Benjamin asserts, ‘are the decayed bourgeoisie’s mimicry of the proletariat. Their function is to give rise, politically speaking, not to parties but to cliques; literarily speaking, not to schools but to fashions; economically speaking, not to producers but to agents.’\(^{81}\) This kind of art fails to challenge the status quo because it only aims at the promotion of the narrow interests of its producers. To Kästner’s politically ineffective satire, Benjamin juxtaposes Brecht’s poems. He traces 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.’\(^{82}\) For Benjamin, Kästner represents the establishment of this identity of professional and private life, the delimitations of intellectual activity within a restricted professional field. In the political isolation of left-wing intellectuals, Benjamin detects the affirmation of the traditional thesis on the autonomy of art. 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 proletariat, means that would radically transform their relationship with their 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 *Die Angestellten*. This was again published in *Die Gesellschaft* under the title ‘Politicization of the Intelligentsia’ (a title chosen by the editors of the journal

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\(^{82}\)Ibid., p. 426.
Despite Benjamin’s objection, here he claimed that on the basis of educational privilege, the ties of the intellectuals with the bourgeoisie were historically so strong that even in the current process of proletarianization they remained unshaken. Through their education, intellectuals remained in solidarity with the bourgeoisie:

This solidarity may become blurred superficially, or even undermined, but it almost always remains powerful enough to exclude the intellectual from the constant state of alert, the sense of living your life at the front, which is a characteristic of the true proletarian. Kracauer has taken this insight absolutely seriously. This is why his book is a milestone on the road towards the politicization of the intelligentsia, in sharp contrast to the fashionable radicalism of the writings of the latest school.

Benjamin’s attack is mainly directed against ‘modern Berlin radicalism and the New Objectivity – both of which acted as godparents to reportage’. He attempts to expose reportage not only as incapable of penetrating social relations, but also as a masking of the actual distance between, on the one hand, a left-radical intelligentsia entrenched in a bourgeois aloofness grounded in its education and, on the other hand, the working classes, whose life reportage supposed to depict.

ASSO artists voiced a similar critique of their prominent colleagues. See, for instance, how one of its members, Harry Rothziegel, uses a rejection of reportage-style depiction as an occasion to attack the painter Otto Nagel, an artist whose proletarian origins were routinely stressed in both the bourgeois and leftist press (fig. 46):

I hear about Otto Nagel. Do you know how he replied to our invitation [to join ASSO]? [...] ‘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’ [...] yes right! We painters and draftsmen can and must actively stand next to the

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85 Ibid., p. 306.
workers in their struggle against the present social order.\textsuperscript{86}

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 ASSO), a mere depiction of the life of the proletariat 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 ‘he has even left his Doctor of Sociology cap at home.’\textsuperscript{87} Kracauer, then, stands out as another intellectual (along with Brecht) attempting to create a tension between professional and private life.

Kracauer himself had pointed to the ineffectiveness of reportage to capture everyday existence with a sharp formulation: ‘A hundred reports from a factory do not add up to the reality of the factory, but remain for all eternity a hundred views of the factory’\textsuperscript{88} – a remark adopted by Brecht in his \textit{Threepenny Lawsuit}. Of course Kracauer’s, Benjamin’s and Brecht’s attacks are directed against \textit{Neue Sachlichkeit} authors and photographers and their celebrated reportage technique. But Rothziegel follows the same path when he writes that the proletariat is not interested in a mere depiction or reproduction of its miserable conditions. It is also significant that his criticism is turned against Otto Nagel, who was on good terms with painters associated with the \textit{Neue Sachlichkeit} such as George Grosz and Otto Dix.\textsuperscript{89}

‘An outsider makes his mark’, Benjamin’s suggested title for his Kracauer review, surely better reflects the essence of the text. Benjamin, himself an outsider to German academia, highlights the type of the outsider as an effective model for

\textsuperscript{86}Harry Rothziegel, ‘Sagen Sie mal: ASSO!’, \textit{Die Front}, 2 (March 1929), 154-56 (p. 155).
\textsuperscript{87}Benjamin, ‘An Outsider Makes His Mark’, p. 305.
\textsuperscript{89}In 1924 Nagel joined the Rote Gruppe and organized two important exhibitions of contemporary German art in Berlin (at Wertheim’s department store) and in the Soviet Union (Moscow, Leningrad and Saratov). Among the many works exhibited in these shows were paintings by George Grosz, Rudolf Schlichter (both members of the Rote Gruppe), Otto Dix, Otto Griebel, Wilhelm Lachnit and Georg Schrimpf, artists related with the \textit{Neue Sachlichkeit}; see Erhard Frommhold, \textit{Otto Nagel: Zeit-Leben-Werk} (Berlin: Henschel, 1974), pp. 97-104.
radical political intervention. It is crucial to note that Benjamin first elaborated this notion of the active outsider-intellectual during his Moscow sojourn, when he reflected on the possibility of joining the KPD. In a diary entry dated January 8 1927, he writes:

there are and there remain external considerations which force me to ask myself if I couldn’t, through intensive work, concretely and economically consolidate a position as a left-wing outsider which could continue to grant me the possibility of producing extensively in what has so far been my sphere of work.\textsuperscript{90}

He returns to the issue the next day:

The seductiveness of the role of outrider – were it not for the existence of colleagues whose actions demonstrate to you at every occasion how dubious this position is. Within the Party: the enormous advantage of being able to project your own thoughts into something like a preestablished field of force. The admissibility of remaining outside the Party is in the final analysis determined by the question of whether or not one can adopt a marginal position to one’s own tangible objective advantage without thereby going over to the side of the bourgeoisie or adversely affecting one’s own work. […] Whether or not my illegal incognito among bourgeois authors makes any sense. And whether, for the sake of my work, I should avoid certain extremes of ‘materialism’ or seek to work out my disagreements with them within the Party.\textsuperscript{91}

Thus, the type of the institutionally unattached intellectual, the outsider, also manifests Benjamin’s own decision to keep distance from the political institution to which – at this period – he felt closer. The point at which this idea appears in his Kracauer review is also decisive. For it is entangled with what Benjamin sees as one of the undeniable merits of Kracauer’s book, its critique of the organization, of the trade unions. Benjamin stresses that the organization is ‘the medium in which […] the reification of human relations actually take place […] the only medium, incidentally in which reification could be overcome’. In other words, it embodies the consolidation of the distance of those whose ‘relations to the production process’ are more indirect (as was the case with the subject of

\textsuperscript{91}Ibid., p. 73.
Kracauer’s study, the white-collar workers). And here is precisely how he evaluates Kracauer’s critique of the trade unions:

This critique is not carried out in terms of party politics or wage policy […] Kracauer is not concerned with what the union achieves for its members. Instead he asks: How does it educate them? What does it do to liberate them from the spell of the ideologies that hold them in thrall? His consistent outsider status greatly helps him in formulating answers to such questions. He has no commitments that might allow authorities to trump his assertions and force him to hold his tongue. No commitment to the idea of community, for example. He unmask this idea as a variant of economic opportunism.

Hence, it is only an outsider position that guarantees not only the freedom of expression of the radical intellectual, but also his dialectical penetration of reality. All his examples of the politicized intellectual share this outsider quality: Brecht, Kracauer and, later, Sergei Tretyakov. What is pivotal for the outsider intellectual, Benjamin suggests, is his freedom of movement between different institutions, his non-fixed position which not only allows him to keep a clear, as possible unmediated, judgment, but also to recast institutional structures, to reactivate stagnant, bureaucratic organizations. Kracauer, for instance, ‘forces a dialectical entry into the lives of office workers not because he is an orthodox Marxist, even less a practical agitator’.

Consequently, the nature of the opposition between liberalism and radicalism is revealed as a clash between the former’s idealist conception of social reform (and reportage originated in bourgeois reformist campaigns) with the latter’s dialectical materialist affirmation of the class struggle. But this affirmation is fundamentally different from that proclaimed by communist organizations. Essentially, Benjamin touches on the same problem discussed in the circles of Soviet and German party intellectuals and artists, i.e. that an active intellectual had only two choices, either to entirely give up art and immerse himself in material production, or to continue making art, but exclusively for the purposes of agitation and propaganda.

93Ibid., pp. 306-07 (italics added).
94Interestingly, Ringer notes on the distinction between what he terms a ‘mandarin orthodoxy’ and the radical intelligentsia that ‘the radical was typically an outsider in some way. Very often, he had contacts in the world of the nonacademic, unofficial, and unconnected intelligentsia, with artists, journalists, and writers’; Ringer, Decline, p. 239 (my emphasis).
Benjamin questions this forced dilemma. If in Germany the radical intellectual or artist clearly cannot submerge himself in a capitalist production, this does not mean that agitation is the only alternative (a fate that ASSO artists accepted). There is a third option: to approach reality from the absolute non-opportunist position, that of the outsider.

Kracauer is certainly in agreement with this third way, as is apparent in his own critique of the young, communist intelligentsia, which

is usually roused only by extreme cases – war, crude miscarriages of justice, the May riots, etc. – without appreciating the imperceptible dreadfulness of normal existence. It is driven to the gesture of revolt not by the construction of this existence itself, but solely by its most visible emissions. Thus, it does not really impinge on the core of given conditions, but confines itself to the symptoms; it castigates obvious deformations and forgets about the sequence of small events of which our normal social life consists [...] The radicalism of these radicals would have more weight if it really penetrated the structure of reality, instead of issuing its decrees from on high. How is everyday life to change, if even those whose vocation is to stir it up pay it no attention?96

This passage is from a section of Kracauer’s book, which is titled ‘Seen from above’. This top-down approach was, as we have seen, characteristic of the bourgeois reformer’s mentality. The intellectual who mixes himself with his material, just like Kracauer, or, in Benjamin’s view, Tretyakov did, embodies its opposite. It is clear, however, that Kracauer considers the whole left-radical spectrum, from left liberals (the exponents of Neue Sachlichkeit reportage-style literature) to communists agitators and propagandists, contaminated by the reformist top-down approach of social problems. He suggests that radicalism must follow a different path: its emphasis must be transposed from the self-evidence of the extreme cases to the ordinary, unnoticed aspects of everyday existence; from the symptoms of social phenomena to the structural causes of these symptoms. Kracauer’s methodology for the study of the salaried masses aimed at this shift of focus, an element praised by Benjamin.

Not only intellectuals, however, but also radical artists persisted in projecting almost exclusively those extreme cases whose self-evidence is stressed by

Kracauer. This was the case in numerous works by ASSO artists. ASSO’s exhibitions were thematically arranged, and the content of the works was usually tied to specific political campaigns (for instance, the campaign against paragraph 218 which penalized abortion), events (such as the May 1929 riots), or symptoms of social inequality (for example cases of *Klassenjustiz*) (figs. 47-49). This emphasis was certainly conditioned by the institutional affiliation of ASSO artists to the KPD. For the full commitment of their practice to communist agitprop may have placed these artists in an outsider position with regard to the official art world of their time, but also deprived them of all those advantages related to the position of the unattached intellectual.

It should be added that Benjamin’s review of the *The Salaried Masses* was published in the context of the sensation caused by the publication of Karl Mannheim’s 1929 study *Ideology and Utopia*. Though Benjamin argues that the intellectual must take the side of the proletariat, his notion of the outsider is remarkably close to Mannheim’s concept of the free-floating intellectual (a term that the sociologist borrowed from Alfred Weber). In the final analysis, they both share a faith in the potency of the unattached intellectual to acquire a functional political role. Mannheim is not that far from Benjamin and Kracauer when he observes: ‘Only he who really has the choice has an interest in seeing the whole of the social and political structure […] The formation of a decision is truly possible

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only under conditions of freedom based on the possibility of choice which continues to exist even after the decision has been made.\textsuperscript{98} But this is precisely the advantage that Benjamin ascribes to the outsider-intellectual, the person who protects himself from autonomy-impairing institutional structures.

A last detail attesting to the congruence of the two notions: Benjamin never names Mannheim, he chooses as his target \textit{Neue Sachlichkeit} and the communist agitators and not the Hungarian sociologist; in this respect, his concept of the outsider represents more an addition or a correction of the latter’s idea, rather than a critique. Finally, it should be stressed that, at that time, Benjamin still sought to elaborate a model of a truly avant-garde intelligentsia, the subject of ‘true consciousness’ par excellence that grasps the essence of social relations. Therefore, the position of the outsider-intellectual is conceived as a \textit{leading} position.

In all texts examined above, intellectual and vocational crisis were inherently bound. For contemporary intellectuals, as we have seen throughout this thesis, the study of vocational reorganization in modernity was essential to understand the shifting class identities – a result of a social mobility manifested in the proletarianization of the middle classes. A valuable contribution to this direction was the publication, in 1930, of a collective study titled \textit{Deutsche Berufskunde}, whose central idea was that ‘with the dissolution of estates into which one is born and the shifting class relations […] vocation remains the only power which forms masses and by which the masses can be categorized.’\textsuperscript{99} In a period during which Benjamin was occupied with the examination of intellectual labour and with the critique of the blindness of the intellectuals towards the radical changes that capitalist production had inflicted upon their own field, it is not surprising that \textit{Deutsche Berufskunde} became the epicenter of one of his radio talks, transmitted by \textit{Südwestdeutsche Rundfunk} on 29 December 1930.

In this talk, characteristically titled ‘Carousel of Professions’, Benjamin argues that in modern society the labour market is organized in such a way that young persons are not able to come to a vocational selection without external consultation. Performance as the main criterion for employment becomes

\textsuperscript{98}Mannheim, \textit{Ideology and Utopia}, p. 143.

\textsuperscript{99}Quoted in Frederic J. Schwartz, \textit{Blind Spots}, pp. 95-96.
gradually irrelevant as the choice of a profession is increasingly related with matters of stability and security. For Benjamin, the motto ‘the right man in the right place’ corresponds to a more ‘idyllic period of working life’; in present conditions, the best working position is simply the one that can be held for the longest period possible.  

Symptomatic of this situation is the emergence of a new science of labour (Arbeitswissenschaft), which, on the one hand, aims to direct the right people to the right place, but on the other it explores not just the worker’s performance per se, but how its execution affects the worker and his milieu. Benjamin sees Deutsche Berufskunde as a product of this new science and a valuable contribution in understanding the transformed nature of modern professions.

From the whole volume, however, Benjamin cited only one essay concerning a peculiar type of professional, a ‘type of man who had to invent certain professions, when they did not yet exist’. This was Peter Suhrkamp’s essay ‘Der Journalist’, from which Benjamin chose to quote at length a story about a shoemaker from Suhrkamp’s village, who was a journalist before journalism appeared in his province. This shoemaker was a jack-of-all-trades: utilizing the experience he had gained from empirical observations, he would travel around undertaking a whole array of occupations that were irrelevant to his actual job (fixing machines, repairing clocks, treating sick men and animals). Suhrkamp writes: ‘If he [the shoemaker] ever was to write something, that would certainly not be a chronicle of his place, but views on machines and men, especially contemplations on the great events of the time […] stories, anecdotes and projects […] He was a journalist without a newspaper.’ The crucial characteristic of this peculiar shoemaker-journalist was that his life and action were organically connected with the life of his community. Benjamin quoted 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). This is

101 Ibid., pp. 668-69.
102 Ibid., p. 671.
precisely the point where we can situate the essence of the predicament of the intellectual workers in modernity. If in the past, intellectual work was perceived as a kind of social service, where the organic relationship between Lebensmittel and Lebenszweck was supposedly maintained, in modern society this harmony had been broken: intellectual workers were forced to deal predominantly with the material aspect of their occupation. Thus, for Benjamin, the radicalization of intellectual labour was possible only by restoring this harmonious relationship, but only on the basis of dialectical materialism. A romantic return to the past is, therefore, dismissed.

There is yet another important passage in Suhrkamp’s text on journalism: his comparison of journalists with artists. For Suhrkamp, both observe the relationships between the human and the material world that constitute reality and they understand them often in a better way than ‘experts’. However, there are two basic differences between authors and journalists. First, journalists work at a faster tempo; their work is dependent upon a specific moment, its characteristic is spontaneity. Second, ‘the journalist never creates something, as the author does, but he rather endeavors to change something that can be changed, and in his view it is only the earthly and not the transcendental aspect of life that can be changed.’ So, journalistic work, Suhrkamp suggests, can be seen as demystified intellectual work that exposes everyday reality (again the crux of the matter here lies in the opposition between idealism and materialism).

What Benjamin, Kracauer, Brecht and Suhrkamp emphasized at this period is the significance of cultural mediation, the ways cultural institutions channel intellectual labour. It must be underlined that this concern was collectively explored by those intellectuals and culminated in their common plan (from the autumn of 1930 to the spring of 1931) to found a new cultural-political journal which was to be fittingly named Krise und Kritik. This circle reflected on the structures of cultural institutions and the position of intellectuals within them in aiming at an effective politicization of intellectuals as a class which would

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106 Ibid., p. 385.
107 The most detailed account of this never materialized project is to be found in Erdmut Wizisla’s fascinating study Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht: the Story of A Friendship, trans. Christine Shuttleworth (London: Libris, 2009), pp. 66-97. Alfred Kurella, whose central role in the October group has already been mentioned, was to be an active contributor to this plan.
overcome narrow professional self-interests. To come to this political self-awareness, however, intellectual workers had to explore new means of practice that could undermine their isolated position and facilitate the communication first with each other and then with the masses. Brecht’s epic theatre was paradigmatic of this transgression of institutional limits or, in Benjamin’s words, the attempt to fundamentally change ‘the functional relationships between stage and public, text and performance, producer and actors’.

Suhrkamp’s description of the journalist as an artist along with his story of the shoemaker-journalist served as another case in point.

Approximately a month after Benjamin’s ‘Carousel of Professions’, on 21 January 1931, a Soviet visitor, member of the October group, emphasized the pivotal importance of a radical reframing of artistic vocational practice in a sensational lecture delivered in Berlin. The guest was Sergei Tretyakov, who lectured on ‘The author and the socialist village’. Tretyakov’s ideas (as is oft-quoted) decisively shaped Benjamin’s most famous attack on the German left-radical intelligentsia, namely his ‘Author as Producer’ essay. What, to my knowledge, has not been noted in scholarship is the remarkable correspondence between Suhrkamp’s text on journalism and Tretyakov’s speech, manifested in the way Suhrkamp’s paradigm of the shoemaker-journalist parallels the new type of the Soviet author-journalist exemplified by Tretyakov.

Tretyakov suggested that an author should be organically connected with his subject matter. 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. He termed this new type of writer the ‘operative writer’. The latter would not work in isolation on the production of masterpieces. The new tempo of life was dictating a new form of literature, and the medium that could best serve the work of the operative writer was the newspaper (fig. 50).

The connection of artistic with journalistic work, the emphasis on the need for accelerating the tempo of intellectual work and on the demand for a radical transgression of traditional institutional boundaries prescribed by technological

109 Sergej Tretjakoff, ‘Der Schriftsteller und das sozialistische Dorf’, Das Neue Russland, 7 (March 1931), 39-42.
advancement, are in the forefront of Tretyakov’s, Suhrkamp’s, Brecht’s, Benjamin’s and Kracauer’s concerns in the period between 1929-1931. However, their critique was not exhausted in an unmasking of the inoperative position of the left-bourgeois intelligentsia: it also suggested a reframing or perhaps even the dissipation of the limits outlining the field of intellectual work. From this standpoint, art acquired a key position in a larger endeavour: abolishing the capitalist division of labour.

4.4 The visual artist as producer

The conception of art as a collective experience and practice, organically bound with everyday production and free from aesthetic restrictions and of artistic practice as the application of every available technique, is the common ground of Tretyakov’s, Benjamin’s and Brecht’s critique of bourgeois culture. For all those intellectuals, the liquidation of the boundaries between artistic and general material production, the effect of a ‘tension between professional and private life’ or the ‘outsider’, the ‘operative writer’ with their resulting de-professionalization were just different expressions of the same idea: the break with bourgeois culture and the active cooperation with the proletariat on the basis of common interests.

Since capitalism had created a crisis affecting the entire field of labour, the only way to overcome it would be the formation of a common front of producers – intellectual and manual – striving to organize production on a collective, socialist basis.

Contrary to the ASSO artists, however, Benjamin’s object of criticism was not just an idealist conception of the social function of art; 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 ‘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’.\(^{110}\)

Benjamin calls attention to what he perceives as a neglected aspect of the matter: the way production relations affect artistic labour. He reformulates the question:

Instead of asking, ‘What is the attitude of a work to the relations of production of its time?’ […] I would like to propose another […] ‘What is its position in them?’ This question directly concerns the function the work has within the literary relations of production of its time. It is concerned, in other words, directly with the literary technique of works.\(^{111}\)

Thus, for Benjamin, artistic technique determines the radical or conservative character of an artwork. Artistic technique in its turn cannot be separated from production relations within the institutions that circumscribe the production of art. Most importantly, it can function as the vehicle for the transgression of restricted institutional limits, an issue which, as we have seen, was central in Benjamin’s work since at least 1929.

It is in this context that Benjamin points to Sergei Tretyakov and to the latter’s notion of the ‘operative writer’ as an ‘example of the functional interdependence […] between the correct political tendency and progressive literary technique.’\(^{112}\) Tretyakov’s case is paradigmatic precisely because he attempted to break down the restrictions of his institution (literature). His work (published in German by the Malik-Verlag in 1931 under the title Feld-Herren: Der Kampf um eine Kollektivwirtschaft) was the result of a combination of techniques (literary and journalistic) and of his direct involvement in everyday production in a Soviet collective. In other words, Tretyakov’s work signified a contribution to the direction of the diffusion of artistic practice into socialist production by utilizing every available technique that could enhance its effectiveness (a transgression of the institutional limits of literature on whose basis a new notion of aesthetic quality was to be formed). If, as Benjamin had commented on his ‘Karussell der Berufe’, Suhrkamp’s shoemaker-journalist was a ‘type of man, who had to invent...


\(^{111}\)Benjamin, ‘The Author as Producer’, p. 770.

\(^{112}\)Ibid.
certain professions, when they did not yet exist,’ Tretyakov had to invent a new radical model of artistic practice which did not previously exist. For Benjamin, Tretyakov represents just an example in what he perceived as ‘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’.

To become politically effective, artists had to actively take part in the struggle for changing the relations produced under the capitalist organization of labour by inventing a technique (conditioned by the use of the appropriate medium) that would promote collective and not individual interests. Tretyakov’s literary technique was innovative both aesthetically and politically. Not only it redefined the entire function of the institution of literature, it also enabled a radical rearrangement of the artist-public relationship, being the outcome of the author’s direct mix with his material-subject matter. Benjamin’s argument is that the expansion of the institutional barriers of literature by way of journalistic devices facilitates the transformation of the reader into a writer, hence producing an expansion of the category of possible writers. The author-journalist dismisses the notion of the ‘masterpiece’ as a bourgeois luxury because its creation was time-consuming and demanded work under conditions of isolation.

But this does not pertain only to literature. We return here to the question of the death of easel painting, a belief, as we have seen, also shared by ASSO artists. Had bourgeois applied arts reformers denigrated easel painting as a backward, non-functional, purely ornamental means of artistic expression, ASSO artists also attacked it as a process of individual creation, demanding special skills and extended production time and, finally, inaccessible to the working masses. Instead, ASSO artists promoted the elaboration of new technical media for the rapid production of utilitarian works, media in whose application workers could be easily trained. For this step to be taken, a thorough redefinition of art as a vocation was necessary.

Yet there is a significant difference between Benjamin’s and ASSO’s point: Benjamin also turns against the Communist Party; its functionaries have not dialectically grasped the issue of radical artistic practice, and therefore the Party is not an appropriate institution for the promotion of this endeavour. Despite ASSO’s self-proclaimed independence from the KPD, the group never turned its critique

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against it, perhaps because of its general agreement with its political programme or because (especially after the 1929 Depression) their livelihood depended to a certain extent on its institutional support (the party-affiliated communist organizations like IAH, the vast network of communist press where those artists could submit their illustrations, etc.).

Nevertheless, they were also convergences. ASSO’s involvement in the Marxistische Arbeiterorschule bears significant similarities with Tretyakov’s experiment in the Soviet commune. And if Benjamin praised this example, it is because he recognized there the potential for a radical relativization of educational privilege, which he had analyzed as the traditional means of the intellectual’s social distinction and of his identification with the bourgeoisie. He welcomes Tretyakov’s new model of active, ‘operative’ literature precisely because it is ‘no longer founded on specialized training but is now based on polytechnic education, and thus becomes public property.’ Benjamin suggests that as technology had effected a deskilling of labour and enabled the occupation of masses of workers in recently unattainable positions, so a respective deskilling of artistic labour would unlock the restricted field of artistic practice (and thus of art as a vocation) 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 already from the early Weimar years. Dadaist attacks on the bourgeois conception 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’. Deskilling of artistic labour was also part of the programme of the Proletkult movement, which had influenced the Malik circle

114 Benjamin, ‘The Author as Producer’, p. 772.
115 In a diary entry, Benjamin noted that his intention in the ‘Author as Producer’ was to ‘develop the theory that a decisive criterion of a revolutionary function of literature lies in the extent to which technical advances lead to a transformation of artistic forms and hence of intellectual means of production’; see ‘Notes from Svendborg, Summer 1934’, in Selected Writings 2.2, trans. Rodney Livingstone, 783-91 (p. 783).
and the communist Dadaists Grosz and Heartield.\textsuperscript{117} The Proletkult’s emphasis on amateur artistic practice performed by artistically untrained workers can be traced in the manifestoes of both the Rote Gruppe and ASSO.

Deskilling was also important for the \textit{Abstrakten}, a group that, as I have mentioned in the previous chapter, joined ASSO. This is especially the case with Oskar Nerlinger’s work. Nerlinger privileges the technique of cameral-less photography (photogram), precisely because of its purported accessibility to the uninitiated, the non-expert. It is telling that, in December 1929, he published a short article in the lifestyle magazine \textit{Die neue Linie}, in which he instructed the readers in using the photogram technique for the production of decorative Christmas figures (fig. 51).\textsuperscript{118} Moreover, Nerlinger presented his airbrush technique (\textit{Spritztechnik}) as a means to effectively challenge the authority of a painted work. He argued that through the use of multiple stencils, his \textit{Spritztechnik} enabled the reproduction of the image in many copies. This, he added, would abolish the distinction between the original image and its copies; by using the same stencils the successive images would all be equally original.\textsuperscript{119} He described this kind of painting as \textit{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

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\textsuperscript{117} Deskilling of artistic labour is indeed the central idea in Wieland Herzfelde’s introduction for the catalogue of the First Dada Fair. This is evident in the following passage: ‘On the one side a clique of so-called experts and talents that, in part through decades of training, in part through patronage and doggedness, in part through inherited specialized abilities, has monopolized all matters of valuation in art; while on the other side, the mass of human beings with their modest and naïve need to represent, communicate, and constructively transform the idea within themselves and the goings-on in the world around them, has been suppressed by the clique of trendsetters. Today the young person, unless he is willing to forego all training and broadening of his native abilities, must submit to the thoroughly authoritarian system of art education and of the public judgement of art. The Dadaists, by contrast, are saying that making pictures is not important, but that when it happens at least no position of power should thereby be established; the professional arrogance of haughty guild should not spoil the pleasure of the broad masses in constructive, creative activity. [...] The Dadaists consider it a service to be the vanguard of dilettantism; for the art dilettante is nothing but the victim of a prejudicial, supercilious, and aristocratic worldview’; see Wieland Herzfelde, ‘Introduction to the First International Dada Fair’, trans. and introduced by Brigid Doherty, \textit{October}, 105 (Summer 2003), 93-104 (pp. 101-02).
\textsuperscript{119} See ‘Diskussion um neue Malerei’, \textit{Das Neue Frankfurt}, 5 (February 1931), 35.
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communication. For ASSO artists, in particular, training workers in artistic means for agitprop purposes was always a central issue. As we have already noted, soon after ASSO’s foundation, some of its members participated in Berlin’s *Marxistische Arbeierschule*. We saw in some detail, however, how the potential for this democratization of artistic production was undermined through the instrumentalization of this educational project to a narrow conception of *Tendenzkunst* that denied a truly active role for the worker as an artist.

### 4.5 From the outsider to the redundant intellectual

I shall now conclude by arguing that, for Benjamin, the idea of the deskilling of artistic labour marks a decisive turn of stance towards the issue of the relationship between the radical intelligentsia and the proletariat. Most specifically, it is an idea that reflects Benjamin’s growing mistrust towards the avant-garde position of the intellectual. As such, it constitutes an abandonment of his notion of the outsider-intellectual and represents an attack on both the bourgeois radical intellectual and the communist agitator or tendentious artist. If Benjamin’s reference to Tretyakov as another paradigm of a truly radical, active intellectual still foregrounds the vanguard role of the intelligentsia for the transformation of the world in his ‘Author as Producer’, in the ‘Artwork’ essay the revolutionary potential is rendered impersonal as it is ascribed to the new technological means instead of an ‘enlightened’ individual. Consequently, it is a thesis that represents a distinct – though overlooked in scholarship – anti-intellectual position.

It is tempting to see the ‘Artwork’ essay as a twofold critique of intellectual authority embedded in a traditional notion of both the role of the intellectual, 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 political radicalization of intellectuals. The rise of fascism to power had proved that the hopes for a radical transformation of

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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 intellectual’s contribution. If cultural expertise could be radically expanded to a broad public thanks to technological advancement, then the traditional role of the intellectual would gradually lose its meaning.

The process of the deskilling of artistic 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 unmediated mass communication, which could enhance the quality and effectiveness of Tendenzkunst. In the anonymous camera user Benjamin identifies the emergence of a new type of operative artist.

It is from this point of view that we can interpret 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 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, insisting that an intellectual should not 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.121

Here Adorno clearly discerns and immediately rejects Benjamin’s radically anti-intellectual position. But Adorno was mistaken: Benjamin’s essay did not

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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 inability of intellectuals to break away from bourgeois institutions – a precondition for a constructive collaboration with the proletariat. Additionally, by stressing once again Benjamin’s dependence on ‘Brechtian motifs’, he reduced the originality of Benjamin’s provocative thesis.

Again it must be emphasized that the basis of Benjamin’s anti-intellectual position is the potential of polytechnic education to bypass institutional mediation in the cultural field, in other words, to neutralize the role of the professional expert as an educator of the uninitiated populace. Benjamin proposes a synthesis based on a constructive appropriation of the applied arts reform assets (transformation of the modern public’s sensory system through the introduction of modern technological means in the realm of cultural production, deskilling of artistic labour) for the promotion of a non-exclusive cultural agenda, which abolishes the distinction between the outstanding expert (the bourgeois social reformer-educator or the revolutionary artist-agitator) and the working masses as his auxiliary personnel.

It is as if technological knowledge itself gradually becomes ‘free-floating’, with the effect that its use can be mastered by all those excluded by official, hierarchically structured institutions. For, in reality, the outsider was not the individual, unattached intellectual but rather the masses of workers left outside those institutions. But by turning the fruits of science and the applied arts reform into public property, a very specific position becomes redundant: that of the avant-garde. Questioning the expert’s exclusive rights in intellectual property, the avant-garde loses its right of existence. Indeed, a radical way to interrupt the seemingly infinite reproduction of the division between eminent and unrecognized cultural producers.
Conclusion

As early as 1856 the issue of the ‘art proletariat’ had come to the foreground of contemporary debates on art. In a cultural paper published that year and addressed to the educated bourgeoisie, this question functions as the starting point for a fictional discussion between an art historian, an artist and an amateur (Laie). After visiting an art exhibition at Dresden’s Academy of Arts, the three friends exchange views on the contemporary production, exhibition and dissemination of painting. Significantly, it is the art historian who starts the discussion blaming the Academy for opening its doors to:

Young people who are not good for studies and who cannot make up their minds and choose a trade, and at the slightest hint they run up to the art professions of the academies, where there are no deterrent exams and through which one hopes for an independent, indeed often a bright future. Then they cannot graduate nor they can find their way in a simple bourgeois occupation, and thus a dreadful art proletariat is bred, against whom one must make provision through prohibitive laws.\(^1\)

This is one of the earliest definitions of the *Kunstproletariat*, an issue that from that period on and until at least 1933 would be at the core of every plan to reform art institutions. Most importantly, all reformers, irrespective of their political orientation, would agree with our fictional art historian on both the causes and the solution of the problem.

In fact, the art proletariat had become such a commonplace that no one seems to have posited an obvious question: what caused this coincidence of views around the problem? The answer is simple. This general consensus was the product of the widespread acceptance of another idea: art could not be taught; in every generation there were only a handful of exceptionally talented persons, who could accomplish true artistic work. This is why all reformers insisted on the direction of the masses of young students to the crafts and the admission of a very limited number of outstanding talents to art schools as the most effective ways to ameliorate the plight of the art proletariat. Thus, the central paradox of the arts

\(^1\)B[erthold] A[uerbach], ‘Ein Sommermittagsgespräch auf der Brühlischen Terrasse’, *Morgenblatt für gebildete Leser*, no. 40 (5 October 1856), 937-41 (p. 938). The art proletariat, then, consisted of young people who avoided crafts (i.e. practical tasks), seeking in the fine (‘free’) arts an escape from the drudgery of productive work.
and crafts reform was that it proclaimed a union of arts and crafts only to impose a 
strict division between artists as intellectual workers and craftsmen as specialized producers.

Owing perhaps to the fact that the issue of the *Kunstproletariat* moved to the 
background of the debates on art during the second half of the twentieth century, 
the above paradox has remained unexplored in art historiography. Consequently, 
the unresolved tension between the reformers and the reformed, the artist-
pedagogue and his proletariat which was embedded in the above paradox was 
sarcely examined. Nor was its association with the issue of artistic radicalism 
grasped. For the latter was usually sought in its manifestations or symptoms (the 
formal composition of a work of art, an artistic manifesto or an artist’s aesthetic 
and political views).

In contrast, what I have suggested in this thesis is a shift of focus from the 
symptoms of artistic radicalism to artistic radicalism itself as a symptom of a 
general socio-economic and cultural crisis, which in its turn determined a very 
specific form of professional politics. To this end, I have attempted to reinsert the 
reform of artistic training into a broad theoretical and chronological setting, 
interpreting it as a response of art producers to the crisis, the reconfiguration and 
the potential of artistic and intellectual labour in modernity as discussed in the 
social reform circles of the turn-of-the-century Germany and developed until the 
end of the Weimar Republic.

In a period of shifting class and professional identities, arts and crafts 
education and its reform was instrumental for the formation, legitimation and 
establishment of new such identities through the control and redistribution of 
skills. The breadth of the *Kunstgewerbebewegung* indicates that at stake were the 
interests of different social groups: professional artists, craftsmen, 
businesspersons, small and big capital, politicians and so on. Naturally, in the 
context of the present thesis the scope was limited in the role and the aspirations 
of visual artists.

The new professional identities claimed by the artist-reformer were of an elite 
character; they reflected his desire to cling to the status of the ‘exceptional’ 
individual, the genius intellectual worker in a period when mass social movements 
and their organizations questioned this status. The very conception of the artist as 
a reformer of crafts was an elite identity; it served to elevate the individual artist-
pedagogue above the masses of the art proletariat and craftsmen. Correspondingly, the *Gestalter* as a total artist, an expert on art’s diverse applications to everyday life sought to differentiate himself, to keep a distance from the masses of specialized workers and their interest associations.

Thus, contrary to the various crafts and artists’ associations, and despite the constant emphasis on its general socio-economic benefits, the arts and crafts reform did not serve the interests of professional artists at large; it was a model of artistic practice for an elite of eminent professionals. In a way, as I have argued, this elitism was a continuation of Secessionism, but the crucial difference is that this model of organization, attitude towards the interest unions of artists, and discursive style was now serving a new type of artist, who claimed expertise in an extended field of practice: the *Gestalter*. Naturally, this elitist reform plan generated tensions with those collectively organized artists and craftsmen that it sought to reform, especially easel painters and draftsmen.

By highlighting the role of the disenfranchised intellectual in social reform, the ‘enlightened’ personality capable of educating the masses and revamping culture, the *Kunstgewerbebewegung* fostered the self-representation of this type of intellectual as an avant-garde. Representing the interests of a politically and socially heterogeneous social class (the intellectual workers), the idea of the vanguard role of the intellectual gained a widespread acceptance by reactionaries and conservatives, liberals and socialists, anarchists and communists. Thus, it provided the basis for a coexistence and often collaboration of figures involved in politically antagonistic movements – an overcoming of ideological divisions. This idea was constitutive for what was widely conceived as the ‘avant-garde’ in the interwar period. Therefore, the avant-garde’s roots lay in early twentieth-century reformism.

But by situating the roots of the artistic avant-garde in bourgeois reformism, I also wanted to relativize the distance between Western bourgeois and Soviet revolutionary applied arts programmes. Though, after the 1917 Revolution, left-wing artists routinely underlined the revolutionary character of their work in reference to Soviet models of practice, I have suggested that the hotbed of these ideas was bourgeois reformism. Moreover, I have argued that it was usually the German artists’ own educational experience in applied arts schools that facilitated the reception of Soviet constructivist or production-art ideas.
Both versions of the artistic avant-garde share, to use Boris Groys’s words, ‘a direct connection between the will to power and the artistic will to master the material and organize it according to laws dictated by the artists themselves’. In the case of the bourgeois artist-reformer, the masses of the modern specialized workers, particularly draftsmen, also served as his working material; however, though in a more subtle and less paternalistic way, the revolutionary artists (as we saw in the artistic training of *Arbeiterzeichner* by ASSO artists and in the Proletkult debate on professionalism) equally depended on the proletariat as assisting personnel for the materialization of their plans. The tension between the intellectual as a reformer-pedagogue and the masses remained unresolved.

The problem with the model of artistic training offered to the art- or the revolutionary proletariat was that it did not take into account the fact that many apprentices wanted to follow the exact opposite direction: from crafts to arts. And it is this tension over a constant mobility of workers from the one field to the other, their capability in learning different skills for diverse occupations, their resistance or failure to settle to a definite professional identity, and finally over the arbitrary notion of artistic talent, that fuelled a radical reaction against the logic of the reform. For we must stress that the crafts and industrial production, the market and society at large was in a state of flux and in reality professional identities and skills could not be divided in the strict and uncomplicated manner that characterizes the programmatic texts of the reformers.

Thus, perhaps the other side of the total artist claiming a leading position in production hierarchy was not so much the specialized worker but the precarious art producer, the young artistically inclined worker, who had been initially trained in a certain craft to ensure his livelihood and whose artistic aspirations generated an oscillation between crafts and arts. To this proletarian jack-of-all-trades, who sometimes even ‘invented certain professions when they did not exist’ (to recall Walter Benjamin’s characterization of Peter Suhrkamp’s shoemaker-‘journalist’) corresponds the *Gestalter* as a type of total artist. The fundamental difference is that, in the first case, the professional mobility was a product of need, of the precarious position of workers in capitalist economy, a position at the bottom of production hierarchy. In the second case, this precarious professional fluctuation

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was transformed into a positive, distinctive value for the avant-garde *Gestalter*. Essentially, the artist-designer projected his irreplaceability in production, his non-disposable role. This was done in two basic ways: first, by highlighting his intellectual superiority, claiming expertise over different sections of production; second, by limiting his practice to the conception of an idea, the design of patterns and assigning its execution to his specialized assisting personnel which would be trained in the arts and crafts schools. This strict division of intellectual from manual labour distinguishes the designer from the worker and introduces him as an associate rather than a subordinate of the businessman. It is only as an associate that he can move freely and take responsibility for different fields of production, and this free movement is the opposite pole of the worker’s forced mobility between different trades. This is the inner logic of the applied arts school as an ‘economy of talents’.

Karl Marx can help us shed more light on this logic. Listen how he comments on the division between the totally developed and the specialized worker:

large-scale industry, through its very catastrophes, makes the recognition of variation of labour and hence of the fitness of the worker for the maximum number of different kinds of labour into a question of life and death. This possibility of varying labour must become a general law of social production, and the existing relations must be adapted to permit its realization in practice. That monstrosity, the disposable working population held in reserve, in misery, for the changing requirements of capitalist exploitation, must be replaced by the individual man who is absolutely available for the different kinds of labour required of him; the partially developed individual, who is merely the bearer of one specialized social function, must be replaced by the totally developed individual, for whom the different social functions are different modes of activity he takes up in turn.³

Marx argues that technology can transform every worker into a ‘totally developed individual’, capable of undertaking every kind of labour. In contrast, the artist-reformer claimed this ‘variation of labour’ as an exclusive privilege appointed to him because of his outstanding intellectual excellence. To this end, he designed a training system that separated the fit from the unfit, selected a limited number of talents and relegated the majority of the students to the disposable working position of the specialized worker, the total artist’s assistant. From this point of

³Karl Marx, *Capital I*, p. 618.
view, Walter Benjamin’s ‘Artwork’ essay with its attack on the cultural capital of the intelligentsia and his emphasis on the potential of modern technology to transform the worker into an expert abolishing the intellectual’s mediation is fully in line with Marx’s critique of capitalist production.

But the free floating designer-reformer also distinguished himself from a type of artist whose field of practice was increasingly restrained: the easel painter. If crafts could and should be reformed through mechanization, easel painting was altogether perceived as unmodern, obsolete – hence it should perish. Following a positivist line of argumentation the avant-garde elite of designers and architects monopolized the idea of modern art; modern was only the applied, socially useful work. The only viable alternative for painters was to follow the lead of the designer-architect and work as another specialized worker, for example as a decorative painter. The same reform model (the return of the artist to a useful trade) had now taken a substantially radical turn: the paternalistic profile of the ‘rescue’ of the ‘failed’ fine artist from proletarianization had now developed into an attack on an entire artistic vocation; painting was proclaimed dead, so painters, failed or successful, ought to adapt to the demands of modern life and change profession.

But, as I have already suggested, reformist and communist cultural policies converged in the affirmation of applied arts and the rejection of ‘unproductive’ easel painting. We should not forget, though, that the German communists had seceded from the German Social Democratic Party reacting precisely against the latter’s reformist politics and revision of Marxism. This anti-reformist stance determined the shaping of the communist conception of artistic labour: if capitalism could not be reformed, then within its context the revolutionary artist could only apply art as a means for propaganda.

From this point of view, ASSO members were useful for the party not as professional artists but rather as propaganda experts. But the relationship of the ‘revolutionary’ artist of ASSO with the proletariat reproduced the relationship between the master-designer and his student in the workshops of the applied arts schools. The proletarian, the worker-draftsman was the party’s and the revolutionary artist’s animated working material.\textsuperscript{4} The party and its artists did not

\textsuperscript{4}A look at the communist press reveals an uncountable number of propaganda competitions addressed to the readers of communist periodicals or cultural clubs, offering prizes for the most
welcome the complete transformation of the craftsman-specialized worker into a professional artist. In Marxian terms, the artistic training of the proletarian was not conceived as an instrument for his or her all-round development. Its sole aim was the improvement of propaganda and the worker was the most convenient assistant to this end, since he was expected to put in practice his little artistic knowledge for free. The proletarian is thus the party’s disposable working material. Reformist and communist artistic training of young workers were equally undemocratic; the possibility for a totally developed individual was blocked by both the bourgeois-liberal and the communist intellectual.

However, the possibility of varying labour was still manifest. Young workers often showed that they were fit for every trade, resisting in practice the theories of the reformist and the revolutionary. In addition, they were often capable of applying their art to produce the most unexpected works of art, which could not only improve life conditions (as the reformers aimed to do) but save or change a life.

This thesis will end with the stories of some working-class artists (all ASSO members) illustrating their resistance against the fate prescribed to them by both the arts and crafts reform and the party. I begin with the story of the sculptor and painter Otto Koelher (1904-1995). Koelher showed a talent in drawing at an early age and in 1918 he was admitted and trained as a technical draftsman in the Maschinenfabrik Ludwig Loewe & Co. (Ludwig Loewe Engineering Works). In 1922 he met the communist author Klaus Neukrantz who helped the young draftsman enroll at the Bauhaus in Weimar the next year. Unable to grasp László Moholy-Nagy’s preliminary course (Vorkurs), Koelher only stayed at the Bauhaus for two or three terms and in 1924 he moved back to Berlin where he took music courses, but due to financial reasons he also dropped them and turned again to crafts to earn his living, this time as a jeweler. Though he never studied art again, he began working as a sculptor. In 1928, he participated in Paul Westheim’s exhibition of young talents, as both an exhibitor and a member of its jury (together with painters Ilse Mode and Otto Villwock). He joined the KPD the same year and, in 1929, ASSO. He had been in contact with communist artists

original ways to attract new subscribers or members. Thus, every reader, every sympathizer, was a possible propaganda agent.

already by 1926 through his friend, painter and caricaturist Günther Wagner (pseudonym gü), one of the founding members of ASSO.⁶

Though Koelher stayed at the Bauhaus for a short period of time, we can say that he failed finding his calling as a Bauhaus student; he was not oriented to a specific area of artistic work; he could draw and paint, sculpt and construct but he left the school as neither craftsman nor artist.

One could object that this is an isolated example. But another ASSO member, Albert Mentzel-Flocon has a similar story to say. He entered Bauhaus in the winter semester of 1927-1928 with the dream of becoming an architect. He attended Josef Albers’s Vorkurs but upon its completion he decided to abandon architecture, choosing instead to enroll at the institution’s theatre workshop. In the summer of 1930, after two and a half years at the Bauhaus, he was expelled from the school due to his participation in the communist faction of students. He returned to Berlin describing himself in his autobiography as a ‘young man without a particular qualification’.⁷ Since he had also been instructed in drawing he turned to graphic arts, trying to earn his living in advertising. With the help of Max Gebhard, another friend from the Bauhaus, who at the time worked with Herbert Bayer at Studio Dorland, he undertook some minor commissions which did not suffice to cover the cost of living in the city.⁸ The two friends also tried to set up their own small advertising agency, working at the same time for the KPD as designers of propaganda material (posters, covers for brochures and books, mastheads for workers’ newspapers, etc.). Mentzel-Flocon also assisted John Heartfield in the stage decoration for Erwin Piscator’s 1931 adaptation of Friedrich Wolf’s play Tai Yang erwacht. Towards the end of 1932 he moved to Frankfurt where he worked as a designer of catalogues for commercial businesses, a job which also did not pay much; this was his last job in Germany, before his

⁶The biographical data are from Ursula Feist, Theo Balden (Dresden: VEB Verlag der Kunst, 1983), pp. 36-40.
⁸Ibid., p. 282. Gebhard had been trained as a shop window decorator in Hagen, before enrolling at Bauhaus thanks to a small stipend granted by his hometown after the recommendation of Walter Gropius. After three semesters in the school studying typography and design, Gropius resigned and Gebhard lost his stipendium and left the school. He went to Berlin in the spring of 1928 to find work in the graphic arts atelier of the Ullstein Verlag, but ‘the unusual work pace and the extremely commercial atmosphere disturbed me. I still had the ‘Bauhaus’ experience in mind’; see Max Gebhard, ‘Erinnerungen des Bauhäuslers Max Gebhard an Moholy-Nagy’, in Irene-Charlotte Lusk (ed.), Montagen ins Blaue: Laszlo Moholy-Nagy Fotomontagen und -collagen 1922-1943 (Gießen: Anabas, 1980), 181-82 (p. 181). Gebhard resigned and went to find his former teacher Moholy-Nagy, who immediately hired him as a technical assistant.
exile in Paris, where he was to spend the rest of his life.9

The two stories – and I could quote a number of similar cases – show how the simplified logic of the applied arts schools as an ‘economy of talents’ handily dividing the fit from the unfit clashed with the young student’s inclination for diverse occupations and, most significantly, with the actual market and production relations. In the final analysis, it was the social background of the student and the opportunities for occupation in a free market that determined not only the choice of a profession but also the duration of his or her education.

We can now return to Otto Koelher’s story to conclude it. The young sculptor, who was only twenty five years old when he joined ASSO, produced only a few works in the remaining three years of the Republic. By the time the Nazis assumed authority he was sharing a flat with another ASSO-member and Bauhaus graduate, the graphic artist and film director Peter Walter Schulz (pseudonym Pewas). Koelher, Pewas and Wagner joined a resistance group and they worked producing anti-fascist leaflets, printing texts and making propagandistic drawings in the form of stencils.

In January 1934, the Gestapo arrested Otto Koelher. After nine months of detention he was released but he was obliged to report to the police every day. He immediately prepared his flight from the country. To this end, he needed a passport with a false name and his own picture. In a period when all democratic art institutions had collapsed, in a state of illegality, Peter Pewas used his training as an applied artist to accomplish this work. In the spring of 1935, a certain Otto Koelher reported to the police in Berlin and a few hours later, holding Peter Pewas’s fake passport in his hands, a certain Theo Balden crossed the German-Czech borders.10 But Theo Balden had not just left a country; he had also left forever behind his past as Otto Koelher the jack-of-all-trades craftsman; with his new name he would soon embark on a long career as a professional artist.

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9Flocon, Points de fuite I, p. 318.
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Die Arbeiter V. erhitzen hars sprüh in der Maschinenhalle A, einen Müllbehälter. Beim Aufnehmen des Transformatorenkerns wurde bei der Anlage eines Händertrommels... "Der Arbeiter B. wurde gestern in der Firma abgeschossen..." Vor der Unzulänglichkeit bei der Übertragung eines Mündungsstücke der Hand noch eine Hand erneut amputiert werden..." Neben dem Schlossarbeiter kann ein weiteres England nicht verstorben... denn sie haben keine Stunden zu ändern... Die augenmerkwürdigen 'Tränen der Geschäftstochter' haben jedoch andere Hände als die, die man nicht spüren werden... Andere der Proletarien - ob Männ oder Frau... Kein wahrhafter Mensch wird seit der Rechtsabänderung... ohne dass er zu erzählen... die ihm an einem Dienstag... geht es in dieses Leben... die mit dieser 'Hände' verbringen möchten..."... lernen sie gebrauchen, um das kärgliche Einkommen der Familie zu steigern... wenn andere in ihren Älteren sich zum Spielen gebrauchen... Arbeiterkleine sind es, ohne die eine Wirtschaft nicht-existieren kann... Arbeiterkleine werden es aber auch sein, die - ihrem wahren Wurzeln bewusst... den Grundzustand der kapitalistischen Gesellschaft errichten und den Bau des Sozialismus aufmalen... stark und willig und rob.
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