

**cut
with
the
kitchen
knife**

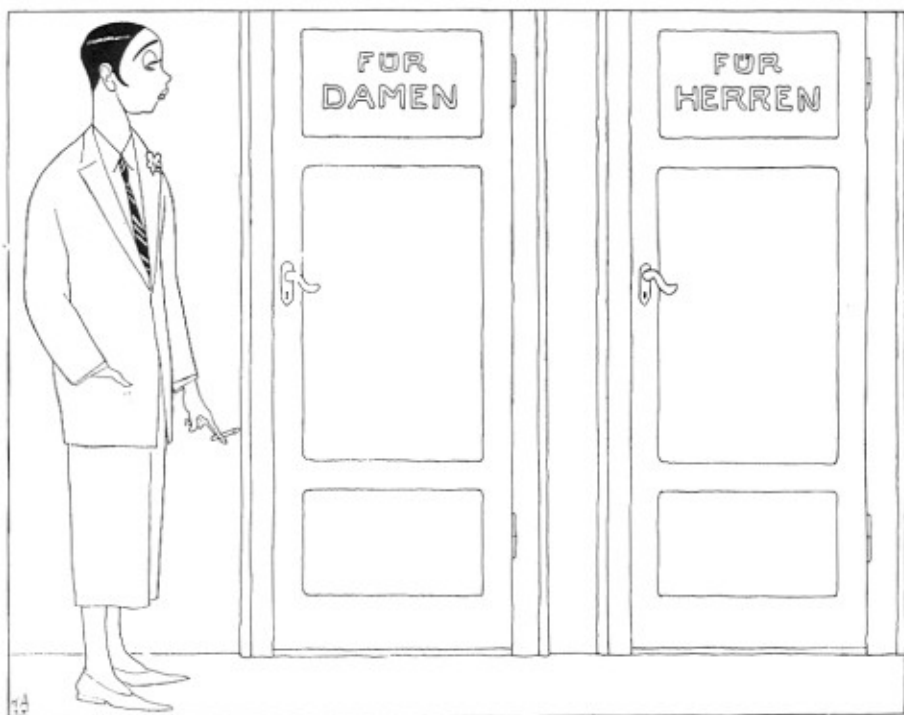
the weimar photomontages of hannah höch

**maud
lavin**

**yale university press
new haven & london**

Lotte am Scheidewege

(Karl Arnold)



1 Karl Arnold, *Lotte am Scheidewege* (Lotte at the Crossroads), *Simplicissimus* 5, 1925. New York Public Library

representing the new woman

In a 1925 issue of the German journal *Simplicissimus*, caricaturist Karl Arnold drew his image of the New Woman and her dilemma (fig. 1). A stylish young woman stands in front of two doors. Her hair is short and sleek, her face a girlish mask of urban aplomb. She holds a cigarette and wears a man's shirt, tie, and jacket, – adorned with a flower – over her skirt. The joke is that she cannot decide which door to enter, "Für Damen" or "Für Herren." Titled *Lotte am Scheidewege* (Lotte at the Crossroads), the cartoon suggests that the modern woman does not know whether she is female, male, or perhaps a newly acknowledged third gender – and neither does the viewer.

In Germany in the 1920s, the transition of young women to modern roles was an uneven process. Although German mass culture constantly referred to the newly modern woman, her representation was by no means fixed. In fact, it is the multiple uses of the term New Woman that are significant today, suggesting how important this ambiguous paradigm was for the cultural conflicts of a newly modernized Weimar Germany. During the Weimar Republic (1918–33), two key developments in the larger history of industry, rationalization, and consumerism occurred almost simultaneously: first, a rapid growth in the mass print media and, second, a dramatic redefinition of the social roles of women.¹ These social phenomena have generally been regarded separately, but they are connected by the ubiquity of New Woman images produced for the new mass media consumers. In newspapers, films, magazines, and fine art, a radically new societal role for women was projected – and no sooner created than distorted. Wholly new images of women were presented:

working on the assembly line, typing at secretarial jobs, using modern household appliances, or posing like mannequins in advertisements. At the same time, there was an explosive growth in media formats and styles aimed specifically at women, like films with female protagonists or advertisements for household goods and beauty products. As a result, mass culture became a site for the expression of anxieties, desires, fears, and hopes about women's rapidly transforming identities.

Stereotypes of the New Woman generated by the media could be complex and contradictory: messages of female empowerment and liberation were mixed with others of dependence, and the new consumer culture positioned women as both commodities and customers. In the postwar years, for example, there was a noticeable rise in the number of media representations of female politicians and artistic performers. As German women had gained the right to vote in late 1918 and first run for office in January 1919, there was a fascination with female politicians, and the numerous portraits published in *Berliner Illustrierte* [sic] *Zeitung* (*BIZ*) and other *Illustrierte* (illustrated newspapers or photoweeklies) were, in effect, documents of a triumphant if problematic accession to power within a male political structure. A typical example is the March 9, 1919, cover of *BIZ* (fig. 2), portraying two female members of the National Assembly. Both women wear severe businesswomen's coats and hats and carry briefcases. Seeming insecure in this masculine attire, they stand hunched, looking out nervously. This is a photograph of contradictory messages: the newly empowered women demonstrate authority and timidity, confidence and its absence.

By contrast, the May 4, 1919, cover of *BIZ* (fig. 3) shows an actress confidently portraying the New Woman. Outfitted for aviation, buoyant and energetic, she seems like a living advertisement for the ideal of the modern bourgeois female. Her smile announces the ease with which the New Woman bears both goggles and flowers, helmet and curls, flight wear and femininity. In this type of idealized photographic image, the contradictions of daily life are glossed over, the female spectator is shielded from perceiving her own complex identity and material needs. And yet these two photographs of the aviatrix and the politicians cannot be simplistically and judgmentally divided into such opposing categories as healthy versus unhealthy, empowering versus ornamental. For each image is full of ambiguity, particularly for viewers at the time; many roles were expected of Germany's New Woman and representations of her served many functions.

Recently the New Woman has been the subject of great debate among scholars of German women's history. While emphasizing the fluidity of the term and its wide-ranging applications in German culture of the 1920s, these scholars have focused primarily on the sharp disparity between the material lives of Weimar women and the contemporaneous myths of the New Woman.³ But in considering the representation of the New Woman, it may not be so easy to differentiate between the experience of material life and its cultural myths. Weimar Germany produced a composite of varying interpretations rooted in material reality and determined by the historically specific context of the image's production and reception.



2 Zwei Schwestern, Abgeordnete der Nationalversammlung (Two sisters, representatives to the National Assembly), *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung* 28, no. 10 (March 9, 1919): cover. New York Public Library



3 Margarete Christians (vom Deutschen Theater in Berlin) vor Antritt einer Reise im Flugzeug (Margarete Christians from the German Theater in Berlin Before Beginning an Airplane Trip), *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung* 28, no. 18 (May 4, 1919): cover. New York Public Library

The New Woman was, as historian Atina Grossmann explains, "a much abused and conflated image of the flapper, young stenotypist, and working mother," a symbol of actual social and demographic changes in Germany during and after World War I.³ Intense discussion of this phenomena in the media and the legislatures of the period centered on two significant trends: a gradual increase in the number of women working (35 percent of the female population was employed by 1925) and a declining birth rate (despite the illegality of publicizing contraception and performing abortions).⁴ Although these statistical shifts were not limited to a particular class, most of the popular print media, such as *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung*, a newspaper that included magazine-style features, and *Die Dame*, a German equivalent of *Vogue*, were restricted to candid or idealized photographs of specifically bourgeois women. (Later the *Arbeiter Illustrierte Zeitung* and other communist print media offered a different subject and type of idealization, making heroic the female worker in a photoreportage style.) Any attempt to derive a uniform definition of the New Woman, therefore, results in a disjointed composition of ill-fitting representational fragments. And, in fact, to consider the New Woman as a montage, a juxtaposition of allegorical fragments, is to capture perfectly the uneasy alliance of women with modernity in twenties Germany.

For my purposes, the New Woman is best considered as a cumulative perception of female stereotypes, collected over time by women newly self-conscious of their modern status – and by their observers. Changes in women's status during the Weimar Republic were dramatic, especially compared with the years of Kaiser Wilhelm II's rule (1888–1918). In the years following World War I, the numbers of women working for wages slowly increased, and rationalization in factories and offices opened up new employment possibilities. It was acceptable for young women to live and work on their own in the city, and urban attitudes toward sexual behavior became more permissive than before. More marriages occurred and more married women worked for wages. But at the same time, illegal abortion was a widespread phenomenon, and there was a continual decline in the birth rate.⁵

Despite this social upheaval, the economic situation of most women did not improve. As historian Claudia Koonz has written, "About a third of all wage earners [in Weimar Germany] were women, as compared to about 15 percent in the U.S., [yet] by far the majority of women's jobs remained in heavy agricultural work, textiles, food-processing, and assembly-line production, all exhausting, low-paid occupations."⁶ Similarly, despite women's active participation in politics, their legal status as individuals continued to be subordinate to that of men. According to Grossmann, "The constitutional guarantees of sexual equality were mocked by the persistence of the Reich's criminal code of 1871 which criminalized abortion and the publicizing of contraception; and the civil code of 1900 which directly contradicted the promise of equality in marriage by stating that the husband had the right to make all decisions in married life including [those regarding] a wife's work."⁷

Thus the much-vaunted "modern" status of Weimar women was not monolithic. There was much about women's lives that remained rooted in traditional hierarchies

and ways of life. This mix of old and new suggests another form of montage, a perception of time that the cultural critic Ernst Bloch referred to as “nonsynchronous” (*ungleichzeitig*). By this he meant the presence in contemporary German culture of fragmentary forms and contents of the past, particularly pre-capitalist components, which coexisted with modern elements. Writing in 1932, he gave as examples the resurgence of interest in folkways and the irrational.⁸

The particular relevance of Bloch’s term for Weimar women is striking: it was a time when women were working on farms as well as in offices, when women had sexual freedom but no access to legalized abortion, when women did unpaid housecleaning as well as wage work.⁹ Yet, these contrasts should not be viewed merely with cynicism. Many aspects of the modern woman’s life were experienced, or fantasized about, with considerable excitement – mobility in the city, flexibility in modern dress, sexual freedom. The predominance of liberating or utopian images of the New Woman in films and the *Illustrierte* of the times suggests that these representations served not only the purposes of the producers of mass culture, but their women viewers as well.

Within this framework of the mass cultural representation of the New Woman, the avant-garde artist Hannah Höch, generally known for her ties to the Berlin Dada group, created a remarkable group of photomontages during 1918–1933, the Weimar years. These photomontages offer a clear indication of the responses of a reader and consumer of mass media images to the shifting representation of the New Woman. Selecting photographs of women from the *Illustrierte*, Höch juxtaposed them with photographic fragments of scenes from Weimar and German colonial society. The resulting images are violent and enthusiastic, shocking and ironic, whimsical and witty; and they raise challenging questions about the representation of women. Producing over eighty photomontages during the Weimar years (in addition to drawings, watercolors, paintings, and collages), Höch exhibited these in art exhibitions, but the close ties of her montages to the mass media posed questions for viewers about both avant-garde and mass culture stereotypes of women.¹⁰

During the Weimar period, Höch shifted from use of mass media photographs of the New Woman as celebratory allegories – as in her well-known Dada photomontage of 1919–20, *Cut with the Kitchen Knife* – to a more ambiguous treatment of such images as in the painting *Roma*, 1925, or even the more critical photomontages directly challenging gender stereotypes such as *Deutsches Mädchen*, 1930, and the Ethnographic Museum series of the mid-twenties to early thirties. Yet, at the same time, Höch never relinquished the pleasure of representing mass media photographs of women, as is evident throughout her Weimar work from the 1919 *Cut with the Kitchen Knife* to the *Dancer* series begun in 1926. On multiple levels, Höch both criticized and reproduced the media’s representation of women in her day.

As a member of Berlin Dada, Höch had by the 1920s evolved an aesthetic that incorporated the pleasure of viewing the new mass media. The unprecedented proliferation of photography in newspapers and magazines at that time offered new pleasures to film or theatergoers, who could suddenly see innumerable images of

their favorite actresses and dancers. For female readers in particular, the mass media offered liberating fantasies to women in transition, in part by suggestively linking women with modernity. And yet the expanded availability of such "star" photographs may have contributed to an idealization of media icons and increased the negative potential for the viewer to develop narcissistic or masochistic identifications. In Höch's work, these responses were disrupted both literally and metaphorically; the highly controlled or posed photographic portraits were cut up, reassembled, and recombined with other photo fragments to form unsettling new representations, pleasurable but in a different way than the original.

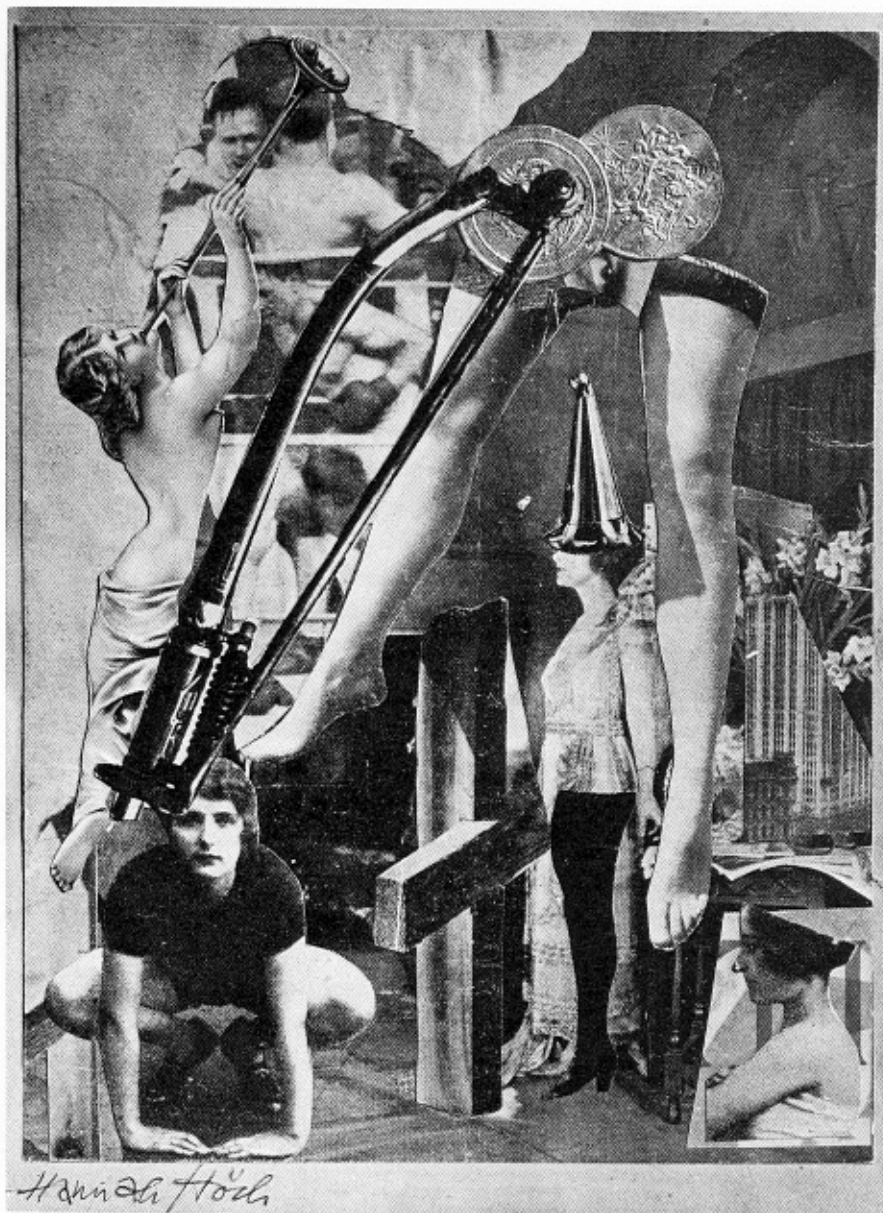
Among the photomontages Höch produced during the Berlin Dada years, the 1920–21 work entitled *Dada-Ernst* shows most clearly the sort of conflicts Weimar women faced in relation to modernity. This work is worth considering at length here as it suggests the complexity of Höch's allegorical use of montage to represent the New Woman. At first glance, *Dada-Ernst* (fig. 4) seems like a celebration of the New Woman in an array of popular guises. But on closer examination, this work raises questions about the representation of the female body and allegories of pleasure and anger.

Dominating the composition are two gigantic truncated female legs, which straddle the right half of the image. A man's eye, pasted at an angle, is superimposed over the area where the legs are joined – where the pubic region would have been. Overlapping the eye are two gold coins, the brightest and most colorful emblems in the montage. Here the formal violence of cutting and superimposing images implicit in all photomontage is made explicit. Objects ripped out of context and roughly conjoined connote a violence that is underlined, none too subtly, by the resemblance of a large bowl-like machine part to a saw and the severing of the female legs from the body.

The violent juxtaposition of metal with flesh, combined with the commodity status of the disembodied signs of femininity provide an additive and allusive reading producing anger in the viewer. With this interpretation, the kaleidoscopic, centrifugal, and seemingly celebrational nature of the montage composition is seen anew; more disruptive and violent aspects are apparent, not only in content but in form – in the disorienting variety in perspective, the disjunctive variations in scale, the interruptions of contours, and the visibility of seams. (Höch's working method was to clip images from the print media and to insert them directly into her montages. She did not re-photograph the montages; thus the edges are visible to the viewer).¹¹

The other images of women in *Dada-Ernst* must be read in conjunction with the male eye and the money positioned at the woman's torsoless crotch. These interpretations are encouraged by the proximity of the fragmented images: the oversized, severed legs are positioned as if straddling the woman in the ball gown, and the machine part links the money at the crotch with the gymnast's head.

Female pleasure is represented in *Dada-Ernst* through the image of the female gymnast, crouching as if ready to spring forward. She is a point of identification, the only figure to look directly out at the viewer. Her hair short, her chin up, her



4 Hannah Höch, *Dada-Ernst*, 1920–21, 18.6 × 16.6 cm., photomontage. Vera and Arturo Schwarz Collection, Milan

gaze steady, her posture symmetrical, and her figure lithe, she is a model of health, fashion, and energy. Directly above her is a more conventional allegorical figure – a cut-out of a half-draped nude, arching upward, blowing a trumpet. Cut from a gaudy Victorian chromolithograph, the woman is draped in bright pink, her golden hair tied decorously with a blue ribbon. Given the art world context suggested by the title *Dada-Ernst* (it can be read literally as “Serious Dada” or as a punning reference to the Cologne-based Dadaist Max Ernst), the woman could connote a female muse.¹² Two other female figures appear in profile, one New Woman bare-shouldered with bobbed hair, the other in a fashionable ball gown wearing a tall, metallic party hat shaped like a dunce cap. These women are linked to a constellation of signs of modernity: a boxing match (connoting a modern masculine type much admired by the Dadaists),¹³ a skyscraper, and a large, bowlike machine part. The boxing match is shown in sequential photographs, a sign of the new visual possibilities offered by *Illustrierte* photography. For a viewer of the twenties, these signs – the new city, a female gymnast, bobbed hair, boxing, sequential photography – would have been optimistic, even thrilling images evocative of the utopian potential of modern life.

In the most general sense, all of Hannah Höch’s Berlin Dada photomontages can be read as cuts through the contemporary scene, a filmic cataloguing and recombining of signs of modernism. When juxtaposed, these fragments offer allegorical interpretations. Thus symbolically, the money at the crotch alludes to prostitution, but allegorically, it functions within the montage to link positive images of the modern woman with the more threatening one of female sexuality commodified for men and the male gaze.

Viewing *Dada-Ernst* in its historical context emphasizes the critical functions of the montage. In Germany after the war, there was runaway inflation and great fear of poverty. For women of many classes, selling oneself sexually in various guises was a real possibility, and a fearful one. Consider as an illustration the later film *Die freudlose Gasse* (Joyless Street), 1925, where Greta Garbo and Asta Nielsen played women from the petit bourgeois and working classes respectively. The two female characters were faced with a series of options to sell themselves – none of them outright street prostitution – in order to help support their impoverished families: performing almost naked for a male audience, becoming the mistress of a wealthy man, having sex with the butcher to obtain meat, and even marrying an American.¹⁴ *Dada-Ernst* is no moral narrative warning of dangers for the New Woman but a montage addressing fears and hopes, new possibilities and dislocations for the modern woman. The juxtaposition of images connoting violence with others suggesting pleasure is precisely what makes this image such a strong and dialectically utopian one. A representation that simply celebrated the New Woman would present a reified utopia, papering over the contradictions of the present and promising an idealized and unattainable future.

Looking closer at *Dada-Ernst*, we see clusters of allegorical fragments suggesting violence, alienation, and anger. These prompt more general questions concerning the representation of the female body. Does this image align the modern woman with

signs of pleasure or of violence? Is this a utopian or dystopian representation? What are the dynamics in this montage between pleasure and anger, celebration and critique, desire and fear? Depending on the viewer, representations of violence toward women can elicit feelings of anger or fear. By linking this anger and fear to alternative images of hope, the artist might offer the female viewer a deeply felt motivation for change, a desire to reconfigure the relationship between pleasure and reality. In *Dada-Ernst*, the female body is the site of this dialectical process and, as a result, several women are represented with startling ambiguity. Superimposed on the skirt of the woman wearing the party dress is a silhouette of a leg severed at the upper thigh. Of course, this could be a witty reference to the new vision enabled by technology and the current fascination with x-ray photography. On another level, though, this image suggests a prosthesis and echoes the violently truncated legs above and their association with the male gaze and female prostitution. As with so many of her works, in *Dada-Ernst* Höch sustains a multiplicity of ambiguous readings through her sophisticated use of montage.

The concept of montage is central to this book, particularly in considering feminine representation and its ambiguities. As a formal term “montage” has specific meanings. Thus two definitions of montage will be operative throughout this study: first, the single-image montage, that is, an individual work composed of a juxtaposition of fragments (for example, a John Heartfield photomontage cover for the *Arbeiter Illustrierte Zeitung*); and second, montage as an organizational system, which refers to those media or forms whose signification is *dependent on* the juxtaposition of parts (these would include virtually all films, newspapers, and magazines, as well as some forms of modern experience such as working in a factory or riding public, urban transportation). Within this dual concept of montage, my object is to explore the connection between the production of avant-garde photomontage and the fractured experience of everyday life in Weimar Germany.

In Weimar film, theater, and photography, the connection between avant-garde and mass culture was a two-way street. There was a condition of mutual influence and fascination marked by the pervasive use of montage (in Bertolt Brecht’s epic theater and in *BIZ* photo layouts, to take just two examples) and by explorations of modernity. Höch’s simultaneous involvement with avant-garde and mass cultural spheres was typical of the mixed allegiances of many German artists in the 1920s. In the mid and late twenties, many of Höch’s close friends like Kurt Schwitters and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy worked in commercial advertising, and, from 1916 to 1926, Höch herself worked for Ullstein Verlag, the publishing house that produced *BIZ*. For many in the avant-garde, the interest in mass media was not pejorative or hierarchical. In Höch’s case, for example, the mass media served not only as an archive and resource fueling her avant-garde production, but the *Illustrierte* also offered her a panoply of images that were tremendously exciting. In a larger sense, it seems probable that the Weimar avant-garde’s experimentation with photomontage and film montage directly influenced newspaper and magazine layout in the most popular publications.

Höch recalled in 1966 that for the Dadaists, alienation (*Verfremdung*) or distancing – making the familiar unfamiliar – had been a key strategy in transforming photographs into new creations, photomontages.¹⁵ Therefore it is the interaction between defamiliarization and pleasure that bears scrutiny in Höch's aesthetic. But perhaps defamiliarization is too general a term, suggesting an emotional remove from subject matter that is not evident in Höch's photomontages. Höch's use of irony, caricature, the grotesque, and other critical strategies point to an underlying anger that, coupled with the pleasure of repeating some mass media images, opens up for the viewer emotional tensions between anger and pleasure in exploring questions of identity and femininity.

Höch's own life to a large degree formed around the new issues of sexuality, morality, friendship, and politics confronting the typical New Woman in Weimar Berlin. But her photomontages do not simply reflect Höch's autobiographical experiences. Rather, they show her as an avid reader of *Illustrierte* stereotypes and an astute observer of women's roles in mass culture. Höch collected and recomposed images from the media self-consciously, constructing an active critique of the forms of representation and the meaning of new definitions of femininity. At the same time, Höch was affiliated with Berlin Dada in the early Weimar years and shared an interest with colleagues Raoul Hausmann, Johannes Baader, Richard Huelsenbeck, John Heartfield, and George Grosz in using montage for societal critique. The Berlin Dadaists emphasized the dialectical tendency of photomontage as well as its anarchic potential both to affirm and negate.¹⁶

Höch (1889–1978) was raised in a small-town bourgeois milieu (fig. 5); her father was a supervisor at an insurance company. When she was fifteen, she was taken out of the *Höhere Töchterschule* (high school for girls) to care for her youngest sister, Marianne, and it was not until she was twenty-two that she was able to leave home, with her family's support, to pursue an artist's education. Arriving in Berlin in 1912, Höch studied applied arts, first at the Kunstgewerbeschule in Berlin-Charlottenburg for two years, until 1914. Then, after a brief interruption due to the outbreak of the war, Höch enrolled with Emil Orlik at the Staatliche Kunstgewerbemuseum in Berlin in 1915. While studying art, Höch supported herself by working part-time at Berlin's major newspaper and magazine publisher, Ullstein Verlag. From 1916–26 Höch was employed as an *Entwurfzeichnerin* (pattern designer) in the handicrafts department, which produced individual brochures on knitting, crocheting, and embroidering, and which also contributed to a bi-monthly two-page spread on women's handicrafts to the tony women's magazine *Die Dame*.

Although this book will not deal extensively with Hannah Höch's biography, it is important as one context among many that contributed meaning to her works. Hers is a unique story, as well as an exemplary narrative about a Weimar professional woman searching for and living out new feminine identities.

The book oscillates between asking large questions about the photographic representation of women in Weimar and the experience of spectatorship, and looking at the production of one particular woman, Hannah Höch. And my characterization



5 Hannah Höch with her siblings, c. 1908

of Höch shifts between her definition as an avant-garde artist and her more ordinary position as a fan of Weimar mass media. Both of these roles in turn are colored by the fact that Höch worked part-time at Ullstein for ten years. My intention is not to simplify any of these questions or characterizations, but rather the opposite, to outline them and keep them circulating and intersecting for the reader of this study, to look at Höch and her work as both unique and not unique, and to use this complexity to return continually to general questions about the relationship of Weimar women to modernity and the representation of the New Woman.

One of the strengths of art history, as the field is presently evolving, is that it offers the analytical tools to delve into an individual's cultural experience and artistic production in order to examine sociological issues related to representation, rather than simply propagating myths of artistic genius or hyperindividualism.

Any writing of history is informed by the writer's own time and concerns. I am motivated to study Weimar culture and Höch's representations of women because they pertain to contemporary issues of gender identity, particularly whether or not one individual or group can make a difference in the mass cultural representation of women. Clearly, the two historical contexts are quite different and lessons from one cannot simply be mapped onto the other. But the writing of history is also an act of displacement, a process whereby a different point of view or context can help clarify issues close to home. For me, one fundamental question is how women's reading of conventional media representations and other visual images contributes to our experience of feminine identity. Another is whether or not, by producing new

or reconfigured images of women, it is possible to intervene and transform existing cultural conventions.

Höch's photomontages offer provocative answers to both of these questions. Yet her work is not presented here as an ideal, the totalized production of a creative "genius" like that of the mythologized Picasso. Rather, it serves as an example, critical for the questions it raises and for the political strategies it employs. Of particular interest to me is Höch's exploration of the radical potential of feminine pleasure. This study investigates how, in Hannah Höch's photomontages, strategies of pleasure are coupled with the representation of anger to generate ideas of liberating, transformative utopias. The intriguing tension between anger and pleasure in her works, often manifested through an ironic humor, also raises questions about the interaction of critiques of present-day and utopian desires for the future in representation. Particularly in her Berlin Dada photomontages, Höch offered disruptive views of the present and involved viewers in utopian fantasies that have the potential to form an allegorical link between individual aspiration and societal transformation.¹⁷