

## Love at Work: Avant-Garde Couples in Expressionism, Dada and Beyond

Debbie Lewer

**Intimate Collaborations: Kandinsky and Münter, Arp and Taeuber by Bibiana K. Obler, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2014, 272 pp., 70 col. and 55 b. & w. illus., £45.00**

**After Dada: Marta Hegemann and the Cologne Avant-Garde by Dorothy C. Rowe, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013, 240 pp., 16 col. and 58 b. & w. illus., £70.00**

The concept of the avant-garde group, circle, community, or 'network' is very familiar in histories of modern art. The gendered dynamics of such communities and their reception have been opened up to scrutiny over several decades. Feminist critiques have enduringly challenged and reframed gendered art-historical narratives that cast modernism and abstraction as masculine endeavours. These broad concerns come into particularly sharp focus in the case of the 'intimate collaboration' represented by the modern artist couple as ideal and as lived reality. The almost simultaneous appearance of two original and persuasive new books focusing on such relationships – including the 'mishaps of conjugal life' – further enriches research into the cultural dynamics of the European avant-garde before, during and after Dada.<sup>1</sup> This review considers both publications' contributions to the field and compares their reappraisals of the image of the artist couple and the wider cultural and gender politics of the modernist era.

Bibiana Obler's *Intimate Collaborations* undertakes a critical reassessment of the practice and reception of two prominent artist couples in the Central European avant-garde. The first half of her book is devoted to Gabriele Münter and Wassily Kandinsky working in Munich's expressionist circles on the eve of war and the second to Sophie Taeuber and Hans Arp in connection with Dada in Zurich during the First World War. Dorothy Rowe's *After Dada* focuses on the period after that conflict, and the fascinating but relatively neglected career of Marta Hegemann and other women

and men of the avant-garde in Cologne during the period of the Weimar Republic. The thread running through this account, too, is Hegemann's negotiation of her identity as a woman, as 'neue Frau' (new woman), as a member of an artistic community and as one half of a *Künstlerehepaar* (artist married couple).

Obler's *Intimate Collaborations* opens with an introductory essay on 'Engendering abstraction'. The author often makes serious points with a lightness of touch and her slightly mischievous inversion of gender stereotypes surfaces right at the start, such as when she describes Taeuber 'schooling her boyfriend Hans Arp ... in the joys of reductive vertical-horizontal geometries' (1). The broad terms for Obler's critical investigation of her two artist-couples can be very generally summarized. Abstraction, figuration and the relative values ascribed to each – including ideas of the 'decorative' – are key in the case of Kandinsky and Münter. For Arp and Taeuber, biomorphic and geometric abstraction, fine art, craft and gender stereotyping of their perceived attributes are critical. But there is much more at stake. One of the most rewarding lines of inquiry in chapter one, on Münter and Kandinsky, is Obler's nuanced interrogation of the artists' complex use and understanding of Kitsch as an aesthetic category. It is very effectively considered in relation to their own self-understanding and to the freighted concept of so-called 'folk art' (*Volkskunst*), prominent also in the context of the seminal *Blaue Reiter* group and almanac. Popular Bavarian *Hinterglasmalerei* (reverse-glass painting), devotional figurines, icons and other objects well known to have played an important part in Münter's and Kandinsky's lives and works are explored here in the context of Alois Riegl's and others' debates around the economy and aesthetics of applied and decorative arts. Obler is rigorous in her tracing of the origins and mutability of concepts of Kitsch. Her careful consideration of primary sources, of the couple's habits of consumption and tourism and her analysis of particular paintings show how tenuous and ambivalent such categories and objects were for Münter in particular. Only some questions remain: Given the prominent place of devotional objects in these artists' homes and work, for example, an aspect touched upon, but one that might have been interrogated further, could have been the theological status of such objects, both in contemporary culture and in terms of the artists' use of them.

Obler's second chapter leads the discussion onto well-trodden terrain: the development around 1910

of Kandinsky's radical abstraction and its contested reception – as 'decorative', as overly 'intellectual', or indeed as 'senseless'. The author uses the philosophy of Henri Bergson, influential at that time, to tease out some of the contradictions in Kandinsky's work and in its reception. The artist's compelling interests in biblical apocalypse, in 'psychic states', in 'folk art' converge in a reading of Kandinsky's work as Bergsonian resistance both to materialism and to the limitations of language. It is perhaps unsurprising that the conclusions reached remain open and rather tentative. More concretely and more persuasively, Obler demonstrates how Münter's very different painting, her still lifes and landscapes, during this period, was persistently posited by her partner, Kandinsky, 'as the complement to his art, great realism to his great abstraction' (95). Here, the gendered discourse of linguistic and artistic communication together with Münter's own relative resistance to abstraction are delineated in many thought-provoking ways, as is her critics' often lazy categorization of the 'pleasing' works she wrestled with. For all the artists' 'valiant attempts to forge new frontiers for women and men negotiating the shoals of companionate marriage and mixed-sex collegiality' (116), a certain futility to efforts fully to recuperate Münter in art-historical terms remains and is acknowledged here. It is noteworthy that the after-effects of the historical, gendered distinction between the two artists' abstract and 'realist' work and critical perceptions of their relationship are still apparent today. The catalogue to MoMA's recent blockbuster *Inventing Abstraction* (2012), tellingly, details extensively Kandinsky's monumental significance for this 'radical idea', whereas Münter is mentioned just once in the entire publication: as 'Kandinsky's companion'.<sup>2</sup>

There are still too many 'forgotten women' in histories of European modernism.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, Obler justifiably notes that in the case of Taeuber, her work (collages, embroideries, sculptural objects and marionettes) has been so positively received and attended to in recent years that 'a focus on the interchange between the two artists is no longer a question of making sure Taeuber receives her due but rather that Arp stays in the picture' (19). The latter two chapters of *Intimate Collaborations* are devoted to the extraordinarily productive partnership of Taeuber and Arp. The couple met in Zurich in 1915 and were both connected with dada as it emerged in that city. The third chapter in particular is a model of the kind of scholarship that is much needed in the field of

dada studies, refusing as it does to accept even the smallest details of received ideas about (in this case) the well-known works that resulted from the couple's collaboration on the so-called 'duo-collages' and grid-like vertical-horizontal embroideries (plate 1). Obler comments that those works' 'indeterminate place between the fine and applied arts, between the public and the private, between identifications with the feminine and the masculine, is central to their meaning' (125). The point summarizes well the premise of her analysis. Particularly fruitful to this section of the book, titled 'Privacy and the politics of the cross stitch' (a development of an earlier, related article by Obler) is the focus on the negotiation of artistic identities in public and in private.<sup>4</sup> The author rightly warns against easy assumptions that the works celebrated in exhibitions and publications today were prominent in the public sphere of dada's operation. In many cases they were not, and very likely had no audience beyond the private (124). Obler's question is therefore pertinent: 'how did these objects function as producers of the movement that they have come to represent?' (125). The decipherability of the collages,

**1 Hans Arp and Sophie Taeuber, *Untitled (Duo-Collage)*, 1918. Collage of coloured paper, 82 x 62 cm. Neuss-Holzheim: Insel Hombroich. Photo: Yale University Press.**



embroideries and other compositions and objects is complicated by this and other tensions Obler pursues – of the ‘fine’ and ‘applied’ arts and of the ‘homey’ and the ‘mechanical’ for example (145).

*Intimate Collaborations* concludes with a final chapter, enigmatically titled ‘Beyond life’, which explores, in a slightly more tentative manner, the significance of Taeuber’s costumed dances for dada. An important section is also devoted to the extraordinary puppets Taeuber created for a performance of *König Hirsch* (King Stag) to mark the opening, in 1918, of Switzerland’s first official marionette theatre, in Zurich. Following her detailed analysis of the marionettes, Obler goes on to show how even the most informed critics conflated the project with the work of Arp. The essay concludes with an exploration of the couple’s ‘duo-objects’ – concise forms in turned, painted wood, notional bowls, boxes, chalices. Here Obler’s argument returns to the ‘radical privacy’ of these vessels – which were not shown in public. She relates them to dadaist and anarchist theories of the family and a critique of the patriarchal economy of the state.

Dorothy Rowe’s book, *After Dada*, is more precisely described by its subtitle: *Marta Hegemann and the Cologne Avant-Garde*. Here too, the research is ordered into an introduction and four substantial chapters. Rowe has taken on an ambitious project. The task of mapping the intricate and tangled networks of the Cologne avant-garde and the distinctive cultural life of the Rhineland beyond the canonical moments and figures (Sonderbund 1912, Werkbund 1914, Max Ernst and August Sander, for example) represent a challenge to any art historian. Rowe’s decision to focus her study on Hegemann and her milieu pays off and provides not only depth of detail and incisive new contributions to research, but also a compelling narrative of a creative life.

Rowe introduces her book by reviewing the feminist scholarship that provides the methodological underpinning for her study. She argues for the concept of the ‘network’ as way of dealing with the institutional and personal interrelations examined. The research is predicated on Rowe’s contention that ‘it is only by exploring the gendered cultural histories of Germany’s regional artistic centres that one can locate the forgotten stories constitutive of the richly patterned networks of artistic exchange that characterise German modernism’ (12). Her account of the cache of suppressed artworks, documents and periodicals relating to Willy Fick and

Angelika Fick-Hoerle’s dada period, ‘hidden in a badly leaking shed’ at the bottom of a garden and uncovered only in 1967, is not the only hair-raising story of neglect and of the ongoing challenges to researchers (13). Rowe’s dedication to seeking out artists’ descendants, estates and family archives and other previously inaccessible sources enormously enriches this study.

Chapter one traces (and corrects misconceptions about) the shifting constituencies of Cologne Dada, the related *Gruppe D* and *Bulletin D* and the coexistence of the short-lived *Gruppe Stupid*. It diverges from many accounts of Cologne Dada by discussing the small rural artists’ colony in nearby Simonskall, known as the *Kalltalgemeinschaft* (Kalltal community), which played a role in many artists’ lives and incorporated a progressive press that produced print portfolios. Rowe looks in some detail at examples such as the powerful *Lebendige* (The Lively Ones) portfolio of 1919, which commemorated several murdered socialist and communist leaders, and Heinrich Hoerle’s *Die Krüppelmappe* (The Cripples Portfolio) of 1919–20. Both represent important attempts, in the revolutionary period, at socially engaged art. Connected to the latter project was the emergence of the *Gruppe Stupid* and their publication, *Stupid 1*. Rowe’s analysis of the political tensions and gendered contradictions between individuals in this milieu engaged in the search for aesthetic integrity frames the development of Hegemann’s unique style of Magic Realism as it is traced in subsequent chapters.

Like Obler, Rowe interrogates her subject through the lens of the public and private spheres. Her second chapter is perhaps the most sustained, rich and – given the dearth of such scholarship on Hegemann – groundbreaking. It makes an analysis of the artist’s oeuvre and its critical reception unprecedented in its detail and nuance. A series of provocative watercolours stage a single anonymous *garçonne* in a range of erotically assertive postures. These and other examples of Hegemann’s distinctive feminine imagery are considered as part of the wider social processes with which Weimar women negotiating domestic, professional, sexual and moral freedoms engaged (plate 2). Proceeding from this, Rowe develops important arguments for the significance of Hegemann’s iconography and her version of Magic Realism in comparison with the ‘distinctly sober’ style of *Neue Sachlichkeit* practised by her husband, Anton Räderscheidt. Rowe’s work on Hegemann ‘between Heaven and Hell’ has many implications for scholars



2 Marta Hegemann, *Landscape with Bridge*, 1927. Watercolour, dimensions unknown. Private Collection. ©MAF and Pascal Räderscheidt.

in the field: the need to reassess Magic Realism's problematic significance for German modernism is

one; the complex relationships of the Cologne avant-garde with the Cologne School of the fifteenth century and indeed with Catholic tradition are others.

The dynamics of artistic coupledness are scrutinized in Rowe's third chapter, which explores Hegemann's

and Räderscheidt's personal lives and friendships as *Künstlerehepaar* in contexts as diverse as carnival, sport and the iconic presence of Charlie Chaplin in Weimar culture. Warning against over-determined readings of Räderscheidt's work as evidence of hostility to his wife or to women in general, Rowe suggests 'it might be more helpful to infer a relationship of balance and tension between them in which both artists were seeking to develop an iconography of freedom within their art but approaching it in very different ways' (133). It is striking that in both Obler's and Rowe's accounts, we meet again and again the idea of a shared quest, in marriage or partnership, for forms of freedom curtailed in public life. Not least in the case of Hegemann and Räderscheidt, this was terrain also negotiated with 'dry humour and subtle irony' (166). No wonder Hegemann said 'we were all Dadaists then' (176).

Rowe's book concludes with a final chapter that returns to dada. She explores, in particular, the many personal connections and the wider reception of Kurt Schwitters in Cologne. Further sections map links between arguably the Rhineland's most celebrated modern artist – Ernst – and the wider avant-garde in Cologne, including Ernst's lesser-known dada collaborator, Angelika Fick-Hoerle. The theme of the perceived relationship between modern and 'old' art in Cologne recurs in an account of the seminal exhibition, in 1926, of *Neue Kunst – Alte Kunst* (New Art – Old Art). The case also instigates Rowe's further argument for the huge importance of Sander in the lives and careers of these artists and for a greater integration of the photographer in connected histories of the Cologne art scene.

Both books reviewed here present fascinating visual material. With respect to their visual qualities as publications, Obler's book is more immediately gratifying. It is illustrated with a wealth of high-quality colour plates, close-up details of works in various media and fascinating contextual imagery. The visual pleasures of Rowe's study are more austere and academic. They should not be underestimated, however. What is lacking in glossy visual quality is made up for by a comparable depth of content, vital archival material and by the very fact that the book presents hitherto scarce or unseen images of Hegemann's work in particular, including pieces long since lost or destroyed. In welcome contrast to Obler's book (which has detailed notes but, sadly, lacks a bibliography), Rowe's also provides a valuable bibliography of primary and secondary sources.

Both *Intimate Collaborations* and *After Dada* make significant and engaging contributions and modifications to the understanding of the avant-garde before, during and after dada – in Munich, Zurich and Cologne, respectively. More than that, both grapple, seriously and without pointless theoretical obfuscation, with the often fraught question of the gender politics of artists' public and private lives and their work together as couples, spouses, partners and as individuals – collaborating, communicating, conflicting and competing – at the cutting edge of modern aesthetics and new modes of living.

#### Notes

- 1 Tristan Tzara, *Dada Manifesto* 1918, quoted in Obler, *Intimate Collaborations*, 154.
- 2 Leah Dickerman, 'Inventing abstraction', in Dickerman, ed., *Inventing Abstraction 1910–1925: How a Radical Idea Changed Modern Art*, New York, 2012, 23.
- 3 See e.g. Julie M. Johnson, *The Memory Factory: The Forgotten Women Artists of Vienna, 1900*, West Lafayette, 2012.
- 4 Bibiana Obler, 'Taeuber, Arp, and the politics of cross-stitch', *The Art Bulletin*, 91: 2, June 2009, 207–9.