

the mid-nineteenth century to the end of the Weimar Republic. Her work dramatically expands our understanding of the role of culture in class politics during this period, and does so from the revelatory perspective of the history of emotions. Hake explores how words, performance, and visual culture alike became enlisted in efforts to rally worker identification with socialist and communist revolutionary agendas. These efforts included appeals to feelings—of class humiliation, vengeance, hope, and solidarity.

The implications of Hake's work go well beyond Weimar studies. Her account sensitizes us to how images (and words) operate on subtle and unsubtle registers to manipulate and foster identifications, sometimes for positive ends, and sometimes not. As authoritarianism is on the rise across Europe, the United States, and elsewhere around the globe, many commentators have looked back to the Weimar Republic as a haunting example of democracy ultimately undone by dictatorship. The studies treated in this essay remind us of how much more there is to know, appreciate, and take heed of in the lesson of Weimar Germany and its powerfully resonant visual culture.

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Delight in *Sachlichkeit*: The Object as Subject in German Art, Architecture, and Design

In 1936, historian of architecture and design Nikolaus Pevsner wrote that “the untranslatable word *sachlich*, meaning at the same time pertinent, matter-of-fact, and objective, became the catchword of the growing Modern Movement” (22). Despite its resistance to translation, *Sachlichkeit* was a pivotal concept for modern culture in Germany from the 1890s through the 1920s. While the term remains key to the history and theory of German design, architecture, and art of the modern period, neither its complex meanings, nor its implications for connections among various branches of material and visual culture have been fully understood. *Sachlichkeit*'s typical English translations—objectivity, sobriety, and austerity—as well as its frequent reduction to architectural “functionalism,” obscure the delight in *Sachlichkeit* that characterized multiple aesthetic discourses in Wilhelmine and Weimar Germany.

Sachlichkeit is perhaps best known for its role in “Neue Sachlichkeit” (or “New Objectivity”), the title that Mannheim Kunsthalle director Gustav Friedrich Hartlaub gave to new work by a group of painters exhibiting at his gallery in 1925. In reaction to the Expressionism that preceded them, the *Neue Sachlichkeit* paintings by artists including Max Beckmann and Otto Dix¹² represented for Hartlaub “a positively tangible reality” (492). Dix further solidified Hartlaub's

¹² <https://www.moma.org/artists/429>; <https://www.moma.org/artists/1559>.

sense of a tangible reality in 1927 by arguing that the “object”—the painting’s physical, material subject—was the primary concern in his painting. “For me,” Dix wrote, “the object is primary and determines the form. I have therefore always felt it vital to get as close as possible to the thing I see. ‘What’ matters more to me than ‘How.’ ‘How’ arises from ‘what’” (408).

This potentially myopic focus on the object extended the designation of *Neue Sachlichkeit* to the work of contemporary photographers such as Albert Renger-Patzsch, whose close-cropped, crisp-focused, unmanipulated image of a rationally ordered troop of everyday “Flatirons for Shoe Manufacture” (1928)¹³ appears to offer the viewer these things themselves—no more, no less. *Neue Sachlichkeit* portrait photographer August Sander took a similar approach in his treatment of the human figure, capturing his subjects at their most identifiable, either with a few key signifiers of their occupation—the 1926 “Master Mason,” poised between two piles of bricks, brick trowel in his left hand, finishing trowel in his right¹⁴—or, like the 1927 portrait of architect-designer Richard Riemerschmid, isolated within the borders of the frame in straightforward, matter-of-fact poses.¹⁵ But just as Riemerschmid’s weary eyes, his drooping shoulders, his worn hands, and slightly rumpled clothes communicate a poignancy that exceeds the objectivity of his deadpan pose, so the luminous, larger-than-life quality of Renger-Patzsch’s flatirons, the “self” of the thing—the “what,” in Dix’s terms—extends beyond the physical parameters of the material object. Max Beckmann had already articulated this liminal capacity of *Neue Sachlichkeit* in 1920, when he described the goal of his paintings as “transcendental objectivity” (487). *Neue Sachlichkeit* paintings and photographs could convey an almost eerie hyper-realism, a magical sense of an object’s full-bodied presence within the viewer’s visual world. For historian, photographer, and critic Franz Roh, these “post-expressionist” works appeared to “crystallize” raw matter into resonant objects, prompting him to give the movement its alternate name of “Magical Realism.”

Coextensive with its reference to this new type of painting, the term “Sachlichkeit” was being used to refer to an idea that seemed fundamentally unmagical. During the 1920s, progressive architects and designers developed the concept of *Sachlichkeit* into a principle of straightforwardness that has since been equated with the English word “functionalism.” Like Dix, architects of the Neues Bauen believed that the “how” of construction should arise from the “what” of the project’s immediate circumstances. One of the most publicized examples of the application of *Sachlichkeit* in Neues Bauen architecture, interiors, and furniture, was “Die Wohnung,” the Deutscher Werkbund’s 1927 exhibition of new types of apartments, single-family houses, and their interiors, featuring the Weissenhof Siedlung, a modern housing settlement designed by a group of international architects and built in Stuttgart.¹⁶ Berlin architect and critic Adolf Behne developed

¹³ <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/albert-renger-patzsch-flat-irons-for-shoe-manufacture-fagus-factory-i-bugeleisen-fur-schuhfabrikation-fagus-werk-alfeld>.

¹⁴ <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/193748>.

¹⁵ <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/194041>.

¹⁶ <https://www.open-iba.de/en/geschichte/1927-weissenhofsiedlung-stuttgart/>.

a nuanced theory of *Sachlichkeit* during the 1920s. In his *Neues Wohnen – Neues Bauen* of 1927, Behne refutes the assumption that *Sachlichkeit* implies dry, sober, or strictly mathematical architecture. *Sachlichkeit*, he explains, simply means that the architectural solution develops in response to the *Sache*—the matter at hand: “Each *Sache* is a nodal point, a crossing point of relations between human being and human being [...]. To work *sachlich* means therefore to work socially in each discipline. To build *sachlich* means to build socially” (53).

When *Sachlichkeit* first appeared in German architectural discourse in the 1890s, its usage was far more practical than theoretical. Just as its modest name implied, “sachliche” architecture could be immediately recognized and intuitively comprehended by average Germans. “Sachlichkeit” was initially employed as a vernacular variant of Austrian architect Otto Wagner’s “realism”: a rational approach to construction focused on need and purpose—opposed to the artificial parade of historical styles popular in Wagner’s day—which he discussed in *Moderne Architektur* of 1895. In 1896, Munich architect Richard Streiter championed an equally “realistic” modern architecture based on existing living conditions, specific locality, locally available materials and technologies, and utilitarian purpose. Using the vernacular-inspired buildings and interiors of his Munich colleague, Gabriel von Seidl as an example, Streiter characterized this regional realism as “die weitgehendste Berücksichtigung der realen Werdebedingungen eines Bauwerks, die möglichst vollkommene Erfüllung der Forderungen der Zweckmäßigkeit, Bequemlichkeit, Gesundheitsförderlichkeit, mit einem Wort: die Sachlichkeit” (249). At the same time, Alfred Lichtwark, director of the Hamburg Kunsthalle, also identified indigenous German architecture as a model for modern middleclass dwellings, arguing in “Der praktische Zweck,” for the replacement of excessive draperies and elaborate decoration in the domestic interior with simply constructed, comfortable, and easy-to-clean furniture.

But for the German built environment, *Sachlichkeit* signified far more than pragmatism. Streiter writes that a construction derives its “character” not simply from its ability to meet practical needs, but that:

Wie der Realismus der Dichtung als eine seiner Hauptaufgaben es betrachtet, den Zusammenhang der Charaktere mit ihrem Milieu scharf in's Auge zu fassen, so sieht die verwandte Richtung in der Architektur ein vor allem erstrebenswertes Ziel künstlerischer Wahrhaftigkeit darin, den Charakter des Bauwerks nicht aus seiner Zweckbestimmung allein, sondern auch aus dem Milieu, aus der Eigenart der jeweilig vorhandenen Baustoffe, aus der landschaftlich und geschichtlich bedingten Stimmung der Örtlichkeit heraus zu entwickeln. (249)

Both Streiter and Lichtwark understood *sachliche* form, despite its foundation on the actual and temporal, as a “poetic realism” that was by nature expressive and symbolic: an approach to the outer, visible surface of the object that communicates, without words, not only what but also how that object really is.

Pevsner identified the Berlin architect, design reformer, and influential Werkbund member Hermann Muthesius as the leader of a “new tendency towards

Sachlichkeit” in German design at the turn of the twentieth century (22). In his 1902 *Stilarchitektur und Baukunst*, Muthesius distinguished between the strict or “pure” *Sachlichkeit* of industrial constructions like machines, vehicles, scientific instruments, and iron bridges, and the warmer, more expressive “sachliche Kunst” appropriate for domestic architecture and design. Indeed, Muthesius’s description of a stoneware “beer service” by Riemerschmid in a 1904 review of the designer’s work reveals a familial relation of form and function: “The little baby tankards offer themselves to the loving embrace of the empty hand, while the large jug seems, in his already half-tipping motion, to be just waiting for the moment when he will be next called upon to perform his accommodating service with drink” (Hartzell 266).¹⁷ Muthesius’s fantastic narrative conveys a transcendental, even transgressive objectivity far predating Neue Sachlichkeit’s “magical realism.” His animated image proposes a fundamentally social interpretation of *Sachlichkeit*—a flexible, organic vision of subject-object relations upon which later theorists, like Behne, could draw. *Sachlichkeit*, whether old or new, made room not just for “relations between human being and human being,” but also between humans and their things.

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On (Homo)Sexuality in Weimar Visual Culture

For male and female homosexuals Germany’s first liberal democracy—the Weimar Republic (1919–1933)—represented a period of hopes and frustrations. I use the term “Homosexuality” deliberately here as it was a positive term of self-identification during the 1920s, and it was a term also used in Sexual Science. Homosexual emancipation was a conflicted and uneven process, and so too was the acceptance of texts and images that engaged with the subject. The opening of Magnus Hirschfeld’s Institute for Sexual Science (Sexology) in 1919 in Berlin served as important legitimization. It became a contentious public *Schauplatz* in which sexuality was tried and tested, explored and questioned. Yet despite tireless campaigning for the repeal of Paragraph 175 of the German *Strafgesetzbuch*, which made sodomy punishable with imprisonment of up to five years, the German law remained unchanged. There was no equivalent law for women.

Studying sexuality during this period opens up histories of identity, space, and the law. Visual culture plays a vital role in shaping these historical narratives and has much to offer. It brings to the fore entangled histories of the marginalized or forgotten and is therefore crucial to histories of inclusivity. It also moves away

¹⁷ https://www.bgc.bard.edu/storage/uploads/A_Ghost_in_the_Machine_Age_The_Westerwald_Stoneware_Industry_and_German_Design_Reform_1900_1914.pdf.