

“The title ‘artist’ is an insult,” proclaimed John Heartfield and George Grosz in 1920 in a sharply worded indictment of their chosen vocation. In the wake of World War I, the Russian Revolution, and the fall of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and amid dramatic shifts in industry, technology, and labor, many were asking the same urgent question: What does it mean to be an artist?

Gustav Klutssis described an “artist of an entirely new type”—“a public person, a specialist in political and cultural work with the masses, a constructor who has mastered photography, who can build a composition using entirely new principles.” Hannah Höch spoke of “engineers” putting “works together like fitters.” Others in the interwar period were similarly rethinking their roles. As agitators, advertisers, theorists, publishers, brand managers, and graphic designers, they abandoned easel painting and the privacy of their studios to participate in collective activities, establish new arenas for distribution, and directly engage wide audiences—for political, commercial, or ideological ends. Creating posters, billboards, advertisements, agitational propaganda, magazines, and more, they recalibrated their practices for immediacy and maximum reach. Common to these efforts was a recognition of the unprecedented proliferation of printed images and a commitment to novel strategies, such as abstraction, photomontage, and eye-catching typography.

Surveying Europe and Russia, 1918–39, *Engineer, Agitator, Constructor: The Artist Reinvented* marks MoMA’s recent, transformative acquisition from the Merrill C. Berman Collection. With some three hundred works, this collection bolsters the Museum’s holdings by showcasing the formidable achievements of women artists in this period, mapping communication and collaboration across borders, and demonstrating profound links between radical art and struggles for social change. The endeavors and aspirations seen in this exhibition are paralleled in the work of countless artists today, also facing crisis and turmoil, who have at their disposal new digital tools and immeasurably expansive networks, making this look back especially resonant.

Unless otherwise indicated, all works in this exhibition were recently acquired from the Merrill C. Berman Collection through the generosity of Alice and Tom Tisch, Jo Carole and Ronald S. Lauder, Sue and Edgar Wachenheim III, David Booth, Marlene Hess and James D. Zirin, Marie-Josée and Henry R. Kravis, Jack Shear, the Patricia Bonfield Endowed Acquisition Fund for the Design Collection, Daniel and Jane Och, The Orentreich Family Foundation, Emily Rauh Pulitzer, The Modern Women’s Fund; and by exchange: Gift of Jean Dubuffet in honor of Mr. and Mrs. Ralph Colin, The Judith Rothschild Foundation Contemporary Drawings Collection, and the Richard S. Zeisler Bequest.

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