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## Art on the Weimar Periphery: Contextualizing Lotte Reiniger with Contemporary Women

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# Art on the Weimar Periphery

## Contextualizing Lotte Reiniger with Contemporary Women

Despite her long and illustrious career, animator Lotte Reiniger describes herself humbly, likening her art to that of a “caveman,” and signing some of her letters as Lotte, your “old fart” (or perhaps “tart” as Lotte’s handwriting obscures the letters).<sup>1</sup> Interviewers and friends often found her self-deprecating humor endearing while also believing that Reiniger was far more talented, in a number of fields, than she gave herself credit for.<sup>2</sup>

Reiniger’s humility, to the point of low confidence, was not unique amongst female artists from the Weimar era. Sculptor Käthe Kollwitz, a generation older than Reiniger, expresses similar doubts about her own talents in her journals, though with less of Reiniger’s biting humor.<sup>3</sup> Different in tone they may be, both Reiniger and Kollwitz’s expressions of modesty support an understanding of the masculine as normative for great artists. Reiniger and other female artists like Kollwitz and Gunta Stölzl were outside of the norm. They worked in

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<sup>1</sup> This particular letter was from Reiniger to Basil Wright, written in the mid-1960’s. Large collections of her correspondence with Wright and other individuals are located at the British Film Institute (BFI) National Archive in Berkhamsted. I studied the letters in person on June 20, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Gelder interviewed Reiniger in the 1960s/70s for newspaper article after her work was screened at the BFI Purcell Room. Having only been able to read a clipping (now stored at the BFI Archive) that Reiniger kept, I cannot give more than the latter half of the article’s title, which was “Black and White Show.” In the article, Gelder comments on Reiniger’s humble humor, where she calls herself “a well-upholstered old trooper,” and informs him that she has “constructed” her own English. Puppeteer Ronnie Le Drew similarly recounted when I interviewed him (via phone, July 9, 2019) that Lotte had a lovely sense of humor and a wonderful character, though she was prone to dismissing the quality of her work.

<sup>3</sup> In an article that will be cited later, “Between Minor Sculpture and Promethean Creativity,” author Ute Seiderer cites sizable chunks of Kollwitz’s personal diaries. In 1927 she wrote: “I have been working for almost a year on my self-portrait now—I cannot describe the constant frustration, the way it often gets better and is never good, this incredible and unrewarded wasting of time on this project that practically any old sculptor could make a better job of it than I can.” (Kollwitz, 1989, p. 628). Eight years earlier, 10 March 1919, she wrote of a teaching opportunity: “with my complete lack of self-confidence at the moment there’s no way I could. I would be an utter failure” (ibid., p. 410).

peripheral areas of their artistic fields, relegated by choice or by the pressures of men to mediums considered to be ‘feminine’—Reiniger to her silhouettes, Kollwitz to small sculptures primarily focused on themes surrounding motherhood, and Stölzl to her weaving.

As a result, both in their time and into today, it is difficult to define or contextualize their work. These women occupied unique positions both affected by and separate from the artistic trends of their time. The feminine nature of their craft-focused work made it too easy to overlook their work as women’s craft and not high-art. Modesty, after all, was categorized as a “feminine virtue” in the discourse of Weimar Germany.<sup>4</sup> The myth that women were incapable of the same level of art as men was rampant. By expressing modesty in self-deprecating commentaries or emotional journal entries as mentioned above, Reiniger and Kollwitz’s legacies have become tied to misogynistic myths of masculine superiority in the arts.

Regardless of whether their modesty was meant to be gendered, Reiniger and Kollwitz’s open admittance of insecurities can be read in a gendered interpretation, where their humility supports ideas that women were less suited to the high arts, or more subject to emotional turmoil, lacking masculine confidence. These women may have expressed such modesty because of their sex, as they would have been subject to societal pressures to conform to traditional feminine images and therefore more likely to feel the pangs of self-doubt. Or perhaps as women, they were more open to expressing universal doubts that artists have regardless of sex.

In reading the words of Reiniger, Kollwitz and their contemporary female artists, historians run into the persistent question of how much emphasis to place on gender when analyzing the

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<sup>4</sup> Consider how Julius Meier-Graefe asserts that female sculptors like Renée Sintenis created “authentic” and “womanly” work because in their modesty, their “did not take [themselves] and [their] art seriously.” Discussed page 92 of Seiderer, Ute. "Between Minor Sculpture and Promethean Creativity: Käthe Kollwitz and Berlin's Women Sculptors in the Discourse on Intellectual Motherhood and the Myth of Masculinity." In *Practicing Modernity: Female Creativity in the Weimar Republic*, edited by Christiane Schönfeld, 89-119. Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2006.

artist. In Weimar Germany and beyond, female artists were judged with terms and on scales entirely different to how male artists were judged, even when the works produced were similar.<sup>5</sup> Critics would describe the art made by women as “maternal” and “primal” while similar pieces crafted by men were “socially minded” and showed “superior simplification,” giving the impression that men could demonstrate ideological, political thinking in a piece where a woman would only demonstrate the expression of a base instinct.<sup>6</sup> Such a gendered division served to only further pigeonhole and devalue art crafted by women, but even today, that division must still be acknowledged because women have historically had a different experience than men. Reiniger and Kollwitz for example, would likely not have created the same art if they were not women. The challenge of modern historians is to discuss how societal position may impact an artist’s voice while maintaining the integrity of the artist: though influenced by their status or gender, Reiniger and Kollwitz were motivated and defined by more than their gender.

Reiniger as an artist is particularly challenging to evaluate because she experienced a level of success and acceptance within male circles not common for female artists of her time.<sup>7</sup> In many ways, Reiniger’s silhouette cuts became the symbol for her entire career as her medium both gave her freedom and limited her. Her methods distinguished her films from other

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<sup>5</sup> “art produced by women was seen differently from equivalent works by men” In: Seiderer, Ute. “Between Minor Sculpture and Promethean Creativity,” 98.

<sup>6</sup> The quoted language is taken from Alfred Kuhn’s discussion of Emy Roeders, compared to Karl Scheffler’s discussion of Ernst Barlach’s similar sculptures. Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Reiniger’s numerous associations with male filmmakers is known, and she expressed gratitude that she was respected and did not encounter personal discrimination. She never proclaimed herself a feminist, though her work carries many feminist motifs, and it is within Reiniger’s character to be intentionally apolitical. She notably refrained from commentary on the Weimar Republic, avoided politics in her films (despite criticism from her friends and collaborators) and would give only limited responses when asked why she and her husband fled Germany after Hitler’s 1933 rise to power. In evaluating Reiniger and discussing her as a feminist, it is important to respect Reiniger’s own restraint from using the term. I discussed this challenge to understand Reiniger within feminism with Dr. Caroline Ruddell on June 24, 2019, and she writes more on the topic in Ruddell, Caroline. “Contextualizing Lotte Reiniger’s Fantasy Fairy Tales.” In *Fantasy/Animation: Connections Between Media, Mediums and Genres*, edited by Christopher Holliday and Alexander Sergeant, 1st ed., 109–25. New York, NY: Routledge, 2018.

fairytale, and she led several exhibitions and workshops throughout the twentieth century to teach her techniques, securing her a place within film history as distinctly talented in craft. But ‘craft’ is a gendered term, and to have her work categorized as an accomplishment of craft severely limited how Reiniger’s films would be interpreted.<sup>8</sup> Feminine works of craft were not considered to be of the same quality or importance as ‘higher’ forms of art. By discussing Reiniger’s handmade silhouettes as “maternal” and “crafty,” critics often—intentionally or unintentionally—downplayed the technical prowess of her films.<sup>9</sup>

Reiniger was inevitably seen as a female artist who worked in her distinctive brand of feminine, homemade filmmaking, thus safely pigeonholing her. Seen as craft, Reiniger’s work could be easily enjoyed and accepted by men, without threatening the established order of a male-dominated film industry. Because of this unique view of respecting Reiniger as a craftswoman rather than an artist, she was honored internationally as the first film artist to curate an exhibit at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London,<sup>10</sup> and yet still neglected in her home country and her work devalued in film studies. Critics like Siegfried Kracauer discounted her work as being done “in her own little corner” and irrelevant to the larger movements within

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<sup>8</sup> Tashi Petter summarizes quite brilliantly how being described as ‘craft’ damages an artist’s reputation. She writes, the “tendency to disregard handicraft or decorative works [stems] from an age-old hierarchy of ‘high’ versus ‘low’ art that devalues such ‘women’s work’ specifically because it was associated with the domestic and the ‘feminine.’” Via Petter, Tashi. “Animationstudies 2.0.” *Animationstudies 2.0* (blog). animationstudies 2.0, October 9, 2017. <https://blog.animationstudies.org/?p=2166>.

<sup>9</sup> Interview with Dr. Caroline Ruddell, conducted June 24, 2019. The mentioned adjectives are from a contemporary Trade Press article that Dr. Ruddell brought to my attention, but other critics treated Reiniger as a more dangerous character, using adjectives like “deceptive” and comparing her to a “sorceress” rather than other trickfilm makers.

<sup>10</sup> I discussed Reiniger’s exhibition at the V&A in an interview with Tashi Petter on June 22, 2019. Reiniger also created a number of promotional materials for this particular exhibition that I viewed at the BFI National Archives on June 20, 2019.

Weimar cinema.<sup>11</sup> Like many others who were distracted by her unique style, Kracauer failed to analyze how Reiniger's style served the narrative and thematic goals of her filmmaking.<sup>12</sup>

Reiniger settled into this identity of a silhouette animator and used it to her power.<sup>13</sup> As silhouette animator, she had the license to adapt the stories that interested her, animate to the music she loved, and work in the medium of film that had inspired her since childhood. Whether critics interpreted her work as feminine or 'craft-focused' due to its roots in folk art had little importance to Reiniger. Later in life, Reiniger told a newspaper interviewer that she and her husband "did not belong to the industry."<sup>14</sup> This was true in more than just medium: she and Carl Koch made films unlike the others of her time. They told stories in different ways, and Reiniger was very intentional about how she adapted fairytale plots and developed characters.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Siegfried, Kracauer, (1947) *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film*. Rev. and exp. ed./edited and introduced by Leonardo Quaresima, Princeton, N.J.; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004.

<sup>12</sup> Kracauer's analyses of other films with inventive visual styles has similarly been critiqued for "not only [being] shortsighted in itself, but...also [obstructing] a meaningful discussion of the function of the film's expressionist style." In Scheunemann, Dietrich. "The Double, the Décor, and the Framing Device: Once More on Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*." In *Expressionist Film: New Perspectives*, edited by Dietrich Scheunemann, 126-156. Rochester, NY: Boydell and Brewer, 2003.

<sup>13</sup> Lotte discusses in her writings, along with her silhouette style, her refusal to join the various artistic movements with which she was affiliated (expressionism, the avant-garde, absolute film, etc). "I never bothered with it, I always did what I wanted to do at the time. They always say, if you were more modern! I am not modern, I am...I do it like this." Reiniger's connections to other film movements and her choice to remain unique are discussed more in Knop, Matthias. "Between Expressionism and Avant-garde: Lotte Reiniger — Film Poet of the World of Shadows." In *Animation and Avant-Garde: Lotte Reiniger and Absolute Film*, edited by Evamarie Blattner, Bernd Desinger, Matthias Knop, and Wiebke Ratzeburg, 34–9. University of Tübingen, City Museum of Tübingen and Film Museum of Düsseldorf, 2015.

<sup>14</sup> This quote is taken from the same clipping described in footnote 2. Paul Gelder conducted the interview and the clipping is stored with the Reiniger Special Collection at the BFI Archives, where I viewed it on June 20, 2019.

<sup>15</sup> Consider for example, how Reiniger adapted a tale from *1001 Arabian Nights* for *The Adventures of Prince Achmed*. She created a female witch whose power was necessary to help the heroes and secularized the story so that the characters demonstrated power over their own futures. More details about Reiniger's literary adaptation for *Achmed* in: Schönfeld, Christiane. "Lotte Reiniger and the Art of Animation." In *Practicing Modernity*, 171-190.

Dr. Caroline Ruddell also touches on how Reiniger's increased focus on giving the characters agency—especially the female witch—in *The Adventures of Prince Achmed* works to subvert the patriarchal and phallogocentric history of many fairytales. See Ruddell, Caroline. "Contextualizing Lotte Reiniger's Fantasy Fairy Tales." 121-22.

Other films where Reiniger gives power to female characters include *Harlekin* 1931 (also known as *Harlequin*) and *Snow White and Rose Red* 1954.

Reiniger's silhouettes served as both the liberating force that allowed her to express her fascination with the arts of film, music and visual design, and the limiting constraint that defined her work. She had begun exploring her chosen medium, silhouette puppetry, in her childhood<sup>16</sup> but would not have the means to adapt the craft to film until her mentor Paul Wegener promoted her involvement with experimental film artists at the Berlin Institute for Cultural Research.<sup>17</sup> Described by Lotte, it was her silhouette-cutting that caught Wegener's eye and induced him to support her film career. Silhouette fairytales provided the originality that initiated Reiniger's career, while also allowing Reiniger, as a female filmmaker, to package her subversive and forward-thinking themes into more widely enjoyable films in the early twentieth century.

The pattern of being liberated and constrained by a feminine medium was experienced by several other female Weimar artists in various disciplines. Gunta Stölzl for example, experienced both respect and derision working in her chosen medium of weaving. As a woman in the Bauhaus school, Stölzl was deemed not capable of the masculine, "abstract conceptual thought" necessary for more esteemed "three-dimensional tasks" like architecture and was therefore relegated to more craft-based, earthy art like weaving.<sup>18</sup> But working within her discipline, Stölzl was able to collaborate with a number of male artists, weaving custom upholstery for their

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<sup>16</sup> Schönfeld, Christiane. "Lotte Reiniger and the Art of Animation." In *Practicing Modernity*, 173. In her teen years before exploring film, Reiniger hosted fairytale theater shows and cut silhouettes. At 16, she attended a lecture on film by Wegener, which inspired her to join the Max Reinhardt School of Acting. Via Knop, Matthias. "Between Expressionism and Avant-garde."

<sup>17</sup> Reiniger had been cutting silhouettes of the actors during her time at the Max Reinhardt School, and with what she described as "youthful impudence," she caught Wegener's attention and eventually his support. When introducing her to the Berlin Institute for Cultural Research, she describes him as saying, "Here, if you're making experimental films, for God's sake take this crazy silhouette girl...let her make a film." Found in: Happ, Alfred. "Paul Wegener — Mentor of Film Artist Lotte Reiniger." In *Animation and Avant-Garde*, 132–34.

<sup>18</sup> Elsaesser, Thomas. "The Camera in the Kitchen: Grete Schütte-Lihotsky and Domestic Modernity." In *Practicing Modernity*, 27-49. Quote from page 32.

furniture designs, and becoming master of the weaving workshop.<sup>19</sup> Stölzl's work with the Jacquard looms demonstrates a creative interest in color and visual musicality while maintaining a focus on reproducibility, due to Stölzl's impressive understanding of the technological limitations of the loom. Her 1928 wall hanging, *5 Choirs*, arguably demonstrates the very 'abstract thinking' that women were supposedly incapable of, as the design mirrors the process by which it was produced, and reflects its own condition as a created object.<sup>20</sup>

Consider as an alternative to the characters of Lotte Reiniger, Käthe Kollwitz and Gunta Stölzl, the person of Hannah Höch. Höch was the only female member of the Berlin "Dada Club," a small circle of artists engaged in the Dada artistic movement to represent "the concrete and chaotic" as they criticized the hypocrisy of the Weimar republic's limited attempt at socialism, advocated for a radical Soviet-style revolution, and adapted mass-media culture to art while also satirizing it.<sup>21</sup> Where Reiniger, Kollwitz and Stölzl remained within more feminine spheres or in isolation, Höch created her artwork in the hotbed of a male-dominated artistic movement. She faced more consistent instances of forced marginalization, and crafted work that was more overtly concerned with gender roles and the identity of the 'New Woman.'<sup>22</sup>

Höch also lived a life that was in more direct opposition to traditional societal roles. While Reiniger and Kollwitz both lived in stable marriages, Höch was unmarried and often openly

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<sup>19</sup> Bergdoll, Barry and Leah Dickerman. *Bauhaus 1919-1933: Workshops for Modernity*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2009.

<sup>20</sup> For a more detailed analysis of Stölzl's work, see: Smith, T'AI. "Gunta Stölzl: 5 Choirs. 1928." In *Bauhaus 1919-1933: Workshops for Modernity*, edited by Barry Bergdoll and Leah Dickinson. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2009.

<sup>21</sup> Lavin, Maud. *Cut With the Kitchen Knife: The Weimar Photomontages of Hannah Höch*, 14-17. New Haven, CT/London: Yale University Press, 1993.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

involved in relationships with women and men, some of whom were already married.<sup>23</sup> Wedlock gave Reiniger and Kollwitz respectable reputations of traditional femininity that Höch not only never had, but intentionally challenged. Höch embodied the character of the ‘New Woman’—a sexually and politically liberated 1920’s individual, the New Woman was athletic, free from the burdensome costumes and expectations of old and able to go about town as she pleased, making her own money working in the city.<sup>24</sup> The symbolic figure of the New Woman was often synonymous with modernity in German discourse and especially in mass media. A ubiquitous and complex figure, the New Woman was shown in advertisements and displays as both indicative of social progress and a sign of moral depravity, a consumer to be pleased and a commodity to be attained.<sup>25</sup>

Cutting fragments from various advertisements and photographic portraits, Höch created photomontages that explore and dismantle ideas of femininity and society. Her work often praises the female form, using figures of women dancing, performing athletics and otherwise enjoying themselves to symbolize the forces of modernity and progress, but she also disfigures her female figures to critique beauty standards, and many of her pieces weave in motifs of violence and anger, recognizing the perpetuation of violence against women and the objectification of women. Höch’s work has a political and controversial flair not seen in the work of Reiniger, Kollwitz or Stölzl. Her work is decidedly modernist and clear about the revolutions she wants to see in politics and regarding the status of women. She can easily be labeled as a feminist artist who rejected traditional stereotypes and sought to dismantle the marginalization of women.

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<sup>23</sup> Weitz, Eric D. *Weimar Germany: Promise and Tragedy*, 286. Princeton, NJ/Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2007.

<sup>24</sup> Weitz, Eric D. *Weimar Germany: Promise and Tragedy*, 286, 298, 305-307.

<sup>25</sup> Lavin, Maud. *Cut With the Kitchen Knife*. Several of Höch’s photomontages are reproduced in this text.

Höch can even be cited as a figure whose art was influential enough to impact the work of her male contemporaries: she is credited, with her former partner Raoul Hausmann, for inventing the medium of avant-garde photomontage.<sup>26</sup>

Reiniger, like Kollwitz and Stölzl, does not fit the New Woman archetype. She was married, far more private in her personal life, and very intentional about not sharing overtly political statements. Yet Reiniger was also not purely conservative; she displayed a number of modernist attitudes in her life—pursuing her own career in theater arts and film before and after meeting her husband Koch, serving as the major breadwinner for herself and Koch,<sup>27</sup> and when cutting silhouette self-portraits, Reiniger would even caricature herself wearing a flapper dress with a cigarette holder dangling from her hands.<sup>28</sup> Yet despite Reiniger’s modern tendencies, her films were largely interpreted as traditional, due to their silhouette medium and fairytale stories. Reiniger’s work was not ‘modern enough’ to be categorized as revolutionary, and so many of her innovations were neglected. She did not have any notable imitators of her work until decades later in her career.<sup>29</sup> The works of Kollwitz and Stölzl have suffered similar neglect in regard to their innovation.

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<sup>26</sup> Lavin, Maud. *Cut With the Kitchen Knife: The Weimar Photomontages of Hannah Höch*, 17. New Haven, CT/London: Yale University Press, 1993.

<sup>27</sup> When Reiniger and Koch moved to London after World War II, Koch was unable to obtain clearance from the British Film Society to work as a foreign film director. Only Reiniger was granted this ability, perhaps because her silhouette fairytales seemed less threatening as a foreign influence, or because her productions were on a smaller scale than Koch’s would have been. For the rest of his days, Koch continued to work as Reiniger’s right-hand man for her filmic pursuits, having abandoned his own career. Reiniger and Koch discuss the details of their finances in their personal correspondence with Basil Wright.

<sup>28</sup> The silhouette cut of Reiniger with Koch being described was crafted in 1927, is stored at the BFI National Archive. I viewed it on June 20, 2019. Much of Reiniger’s work is also stored in the archives of the City Museum of Tübingen, where she donated her estate.

<sup>29</sup> Reiniger mentored Peter King for the creation of his 1955 film, “13 Cantos of Hell.” She also went on to host workshops through the Canadian Film Board in the 1970’s, and work with puppeteer Ronnie Le Drew. King’s film can be viewed via the BFI Mediatheque service.

By some modern standards, Reiniger, Kollwitz and Stölzl may appear rather conservative. They worked in traditionally feminine mediums, and were often described as either modest or crafty—both terms used to belittle women’s art. But the fact that they made such elaborate, resonant and impactful pieces of work within traditional definitions of feminine mediums is significant. Stölzl made abstract patterns in her textiles that symbolized the process of weaving itself, Kollwitz sculptures that were passionately emotive despite their often diminutive size, and Reiniger flat fables that reinvented how fairytales were told. While working within gendered mediums, these women challenged the medium itself so as to break the limits imposed upon them. Some female artists, like Hannah Höch, worked in male-dominated spaces to express the needs and thoughts of women. Others, like Reiniger, Kollwitz and Stölzl allowed themselves to be relegated to feminine spaces. By working in marginalized spaces, the quality and depth of their work reestablished the importance of even the margins. By using the periphery to their own advantage, and disproving stereotypes about ‘women’s work,’ they started the long process of changing the hierarchy of art so that feminine mediums might not forever be looked down upon.

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**Note:** I have cited the sources in *Animation and Avant Garde* in my previous works because the publication is highly esteemed and often referred to amongst Reiniger scholars. Though the citations remain the same, my readings of the anthology has become more nuanced in the past year as I have met some of the authors and discussed with other researchers.

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<sup>i</sup> After my time with archival collections in Europe, Professor Drummond introduced me to LMU's Department of Archives and Special Collections. Since I cannot easily return to the Reiniger Collections in Europe, I have spent an extensive amount of time with LMU's Max Thalmann Collection to better acquaint myself with the practice of sorting through and interpreting the hundreds of pieces of artwork and other materials often preserved in a collection. My bibliography cites this collection and a conversation with Cynthia Becht for helping me come to better understand how collections typically come into the hands of a museum for preservation, and how the organization and content of a collection can be understood and critiqued.