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Undefined & Indefinable: Androgynous Imagery in the Work of Hannah Höch

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Undefined & Indefinable: 
Androgynous Imagery in the Work of Hannah Höch

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Undefined and Indefinable:
Androgynous Imagery in the Work of Hannah Höch

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# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Approval Page</td>
<td>i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Introduction</strong></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter 1</strong></td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Strong-Armed: Dismantling Normative Masculinity and Prescriptions of Binary Gender</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter 2</strong></td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Splitting the Difference: Third Sex Theory, the Queer Body, and the Early Androgynes</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter 3</strong></td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Undefined and Indefinable: Sensuality and Ambiguity in the Late Weimar Androgynes</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Conclusion</strong></td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Figures</strong></td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Bibliography</strong></td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

Through a career that lasted from the First World War well into the 1970s, the German artist Hannah Höch created works that critiqued mainstream cultural perceptions of gender roles. Despite the length of her career and the diverse techniques she employed over the course of it, art historians have focused primarily on her brief but iconic stint as a member of the Berlin Dada movement in the 1910s and early 1920s. An early pioneer of the signature Dada artform of photomontage, Höch was arguably its most adept practitioner. Her acerbic and cacophonous early photomontages are widely analyzed by scholars for their multilayered critique of social mores, especially those surrounding femininity and female identity. These Dada photomontages rupture the picture plane and overflow with aggressive caricatures and overwhelming detail, and contain a wealth of critique targeting the subject of social prescriptions of femininity in particular. Höch continued to work in photomontage for the rest of her life, long after leaving her Dada beginnings. However, her later Weimar works adopt a more “evocative aesthetic,” with simpler compositions and a much less scathing attitude toward their subjects. Beginning in the mid-1920s, Höch’s photomontages began to include figures that were wholly androgynous rather than embodiments or subversions of male-female stereotypes. The figures that constitute the primary focus of this study integrate male and female parts so thoroughly that the figures’ intended gender is impossible for the viewer to discern.

Existing scholarship has studied these androgynous figures mostly in terms of their implications for an exclusively feminist analysis of Höch’s work, in keeping with

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the trend established by analysis of her Dada-era satirical works on femininity. Though Höch’s critique of female roles was undoubtedly revolutionary, the appearance of androgynous figures in her mid-to-late Weimar works points to a broader awareness of the entire system of binary gender. Höch’s use of androgynous figures yielded a body of work that was no less engaged with the issues of her time than the Dada works preceding them. Her androgynes negotiate the insecurities and pitfalls of the system of binary gender in the Weimar Republic—a system whose underpinning anxieties had been brought to the surface by the social and economic upheaval following World War I. In the following study, I read Höch’s androgynous figures as an attempt to mediate or even break free from the binary gender ideals that were such a source of collective anxiety in the Weimar Republic. My reading expands on existing scholarship that frames Höch’s Weimar oeuvre as a semi-autobiographical negotiation of female roles, and extends Höch’s critique to masculinity, social meanings ascribed to androgyny, and the social inscription of the heteronormative gender binary.

Höch’s photomontages (the Dada term for photographic collages) are, by their very nature, composed of the mass-produced imagery of the culture in which they were created. Acutely aware of this fact, Höch cut and pieced together her photomontages with great attention to the ways the fragments of mass print media imagery—which she referred to as “‘photomatter’”\(^2\)—commented on one another as well as on their cultural context. Beginning with her earliest works, she appropriated the artifacts of mass culture to dismantle the conventional prescriptions of gender, while at the same time expressing skepticism that the progressive counter-culture had anything better to offer. Monolithic

archetypes of machismo and virile masculinity pervaded both mainstream culture and the avant garde, and both cultural spheres constructed womanhood in opposition to the masculine archetype rather than as a coherent identity of its own.

Höch’s Weimar works, in both thematic content and materiality, are heavily immersed in the concerns of their turbulent time. Germany was then reeling from its “emasculcation” during World War I, from the loss of two million of its young men and the permanent physical disability of forty thousand more. The traumatic imbalance of Germany’s population, and the resultant shifts in the roles of men and women in society, made gender roles a pervasive concern in all levels of Weimar culture. Höch’s photomontages show that she was a keen observer of the anxieties surrounding gender in interbellum Germany. In addition to touching on Höch’s dismantling of female stereotypes, I will establish that Höch approached idealized masculine archetypes with the same acutely observed distrust.

The strict boundaries of ideal masculinity and femininity in Weimar culture are consistent with what Michel Foucault identified as “the will to knowledge regarding sex which characterizes the modern Occident.”3 Evidence abounds that the desire for strict classification was especially acute in Weimar German society. The decades preceding World War I saw the birth of sexology in the German-speaking countries, with medical doctors such as Richard von Krafft-Ebing, Sigmund Freud, and Magnus Hirschfeld turning the scientific method toward the study of gender and sexuality. These scholars varied in their methods and in their degree of political sympathy with subjects who had “failed” in either presentation or sexual performance to match the ideals of their

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prescribed gender—but, taken together, the birth of “scientia sexualis”\(^4\) in the German-speaking world laid the groundwork for a cultural preoccupation with classifying and quantifying gender roles. Thus, the urge toward a taxonomy of gender and sexuality existed in German culture before the First World War—as well as its frequent (but not inevitable) result, the creation of hierarchies based on the perceived social values of these classifications. Like so many of the underlying threads of German culture, the general “will to knowledge” was distilled and intensified by the trauma of the war; what resulted in this case was described by cultural historian Helmut Lethen as a “Furor des Rasterns” (classification mania).\(^5\) Furor des Rasterns has been identified as a heightened tendency in Weimar culture toward classification and order, arising in response to the chaos of World War I and the immense social change it left in its wake.

Taken together, the existing discourse of scientific sexology and the rise of “classification mania” may account for why prescriptions of gender in the Weimar Republic—especially those assigned to women—were as rigid as they were multitudinous. New ideal roles for women seemed to be proposed in response to every shift in social conditions after the war. From those valorizing traditional feminine virtues, women were assigned the “special cultural mission” of providing “unflagging moral energies and great faith” to nurture the country—especially its returning soldiers—toward a recovery from the horrors of war.\(^6\) Should a woman stray from her conservative pre-war


prescriptions of *Kinder, Küche, Kirche* and take a job outside the home, she could expect to be glamorized by progressives and vilified by reactionaries—but always to be labeled as a “New Woman,” with all the attendant stereotypes and widespread social scrutiny that category carried with it.

That the *roles* of women in German society had changed seemed to prompt a frantic need to reexamine the *fact* of womanhood itself. If a woman adopted the more “masculinized” fashions and manners typical following periods of great upheaval,⁷ if she participated in political life by exercising her newly-won right to vote or even running for office herself, if she eschewed home and hearth and motherhood in favor of a glamorous working life (or, more realistically, economic survival⁸)—how, then, was she still to be a woman? Reactionaries branded such a woman as an inferior type, while radicals praised her supposed liberation from bourgeois ideals. “The phenomenon of working women in general [was] twisted to meet the needs of a variety of propagandistic goals”⁹—the *Neue Frau*, or “New Woman,” was the subject of constant discussion, and the voices that were loudest and most heeded were rarely those of the so-called New Women themselves. And, whether it manifested in conservative and pious “Gretchens”¹⁰ or in their less conventional sisters moving to the city to find work, womanhood in general was subject

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to perpetual fragmentation, so that different “types” of women could be valued for different political or social-critical ends.

As Weimar Germany struggled with disrupted masculinity and thus the uncertain place of femininity in the wake of the war, Höch began depicting androgynous figures that radically embraced the lack of clarity. These figures that could not be easily resolved as male or female, and thus could not be folded into the binary of masculine and feminine even as failures to live up to an assigned role. The introduction of these androgynous figures corresponds with a tonal change in Höch’s work. She largely abandoned the biting satire she had favored in the Dada years in favor of images that were more ambiguous and contemplative; her earliest androgynes are depicted with gentle and even affectionate humor, making them more difficult to dismiss as caricatures. It would, however, be an oversimplification to frame these early figures as an androgynous rebellion against ideals of binary masculinity and femininity. Mainstream Weimar cultural discourse had its own stereotypes and rationalizing theories surrounding androgyny, and, as I will demonstrate, Höch’s earliest androgynes visually manifest the uncertainty of the place between the sexes that non-normative behaviors and presentations were believed to occupy.

As the third chapter will demonstrate, Höch’s experiments with style and composition ultimately yielded figures that established themselves firmly and unapologetically outside of the gender binary. In her late Weimar works, Höch “almost always chose to use similarly scaled photographic fragments of body parts in her collages… so that any discrepancies of proportion were minimized”¹¹—a shift that is

especially noticeable in her androgynous figures, and that should not be explained solely as an evolution in stylistic preference. Indeed, the changed appearance of her later androgynous figures culminates what their predecessors began: the later figures are comparatively cohesive and self-contained, and impossible to tear down to an analysis of their component parts without losing the effect of the whole. Höch’s late Weimar androgynes began to directly challenge the viewer’s expectations of how an ambiguously-gendered body should be depicted. The later androgynes are self-contained and sensual, greater than the sum of their parts. It is in these late Weimar figures that Höch begins to move past a conception of androgyny as a mediation of the “opposing” forces of *masculine* and *feminine*. Androgyny instead becomes a radical means of unsettling the heteronormative binary opposition, by dissolving the distinctions between the binary genders and by refusing to be classified within the binary at all.

Consequently, this study will argue that the existing scholarship on Höch’s androgynes falls short of acknowledging the queerness of the figures’ gender ambiguity. Within queer theory, as articulated by J. Halberstam and other recent scholars, the word “queer” is a verb as well as an adjective. Queerness is not synonymous with minority sexuality—it is, rather, a state of ambiguity that subverts heteronormative expectations of gender and sexuality, and calls the entire normative system into question. I argue that Höch’s Weimar androgynes are queer in the sense of disrupting the heteronormative conception of “male” and “female” as opposing poles. The figures exist across the boundaries between male and female; they function as a queer rejection of heteronormative expectations, and thereby open a radical new critique of Weimar prescriptions of gender.
CHAPTER 1

Strong-Armed: Dismantling Normative Masculinity and Prescriptions of Binary Gender

In order to argue that Höch’s late Weimar androgynes constitute a wholesale rejection of normative gender, it is first necessary to establish that the entire system of normative gender was a pervasive concern of Höch’s work. Most gender-centric criticism approaches Höch’s photomontages from a feminist perspective, analyzing her work for its lifelong engagement with what she herself termed “‘women’s sufferings’”\(^\text{12}\)—as such, Höch’s work is largely understood for its relevance to women’s issues, and the late Weimar androgynes have previously been studied mostly as negotiations of womanhood rather than the system of binary gender as a whole. As this chapter will establish, however, a purely feminist reading of the gender commentary of Höch’s photomontage—however well-supported—is ultimately incomplete.

Even from the earliest stages, Höch’s critique of gender is not limited strictly to the marginalization of women. In the wake of the collective trauma of World War I, the changing role of women in society was certainly an issue of great public concern in the Weimar Republic, and thus of Höch’s work as well. However, the scrutiny of the role of women would not have been nearly so intense if not for the sense—pervasive beneath the surface of discourse on womanhood—that the rise of the “New Woman” was the direct result of the calamity that had befallen Germany’s men. Postwar prescriptive archetypes of masculinity were pervasive and largely unexamined, even by avant-garde cultural critics. Even from her earliest Dada works, though, Höch dissected normative

\(^{12}\) Hemus, *Dada’s Women*, 116.
prescriptions of masculinity alongside the norms of femininity. The Weimar standard of “‘normal’ femininity [was] a consciously normed femininity,” but archetypal masculinity was similarly normed, and furthermore, prescriptive masculinity was shielded from conscious view by its privileged position. A close analysis of two of Höch’s photomontages (one from the Dada period, one from the late Weimar Republic) establishes that Höch was as aware of the artifice of normative masculinity as she was of femininity. Höch’s critique of heteronormative gender is more complex than a polemic against chauvinism and misogyny, however. Through an examination of her treatment of binary gender, and especially her depiction of heteronormative masculine ideals, I will demonstrate that Höch destabilizes binary gender roles and challenges the system of normative ideals of masculine and feminine. Furthermore, Höch’s depiction of figures which blur the lines between the sexes offered an especially potent means of subverting the system of binary gender norms she critiqued—a system that carried an immense social weight in the Weimar Republic in particular.

In an artist statement dating to her 1929 solo exhibition at the Kunstzall de Bron, Höch wrote “that she was interested in eliminating ‘the firm boundaries that we human beings so self-assuredly are inclined to erect around everything that is accessible to us.’” Her chosen medium of photomontage was uniquely well-suited to this goal, as “by definition… [it] brings together unlike things from disparate worlds and thus transgresses and destabilizes boundaries more naturally than any other medium.” Höch used her chosen medium to the fullest extent of its critical capacity, and nowhere was her

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critique more potent and acerbic than when she used photomontage to highlight the instability of unattainable binary gender ideals. Dada works like 1919’s Bürgerliches Brautpaar (Streit) [fig. 1] establish a visual vocabulary depicting prescriptive binary gender roles as fractured and self-contradictory, functionally impossible for any person to fully embody. By the end of the Weimar period, in such photomontages as Die Starken Männer (1931) [fig. 2], Höch superimposes a fragmented and subverted ideal of masculinity with an “almost coherent”17 androgynous figure that exists across the boundaries of prescriptive masculinity and femininity. In such late Weimar works, Höch privileges androgyny over heteronormative ideals, and positions androgyny as a viable alternative to prescriptive binary gender.

By mainstream standards, Hannah Höch herself would have been labeled as a “New Woman.” She had a professional education in the graphic and applied arts, which led to a design career that supported (and influenced) her work as an artist; she was fond of travel and the outdoors, maintained an unconventional personal life, and even wore her hair in the “Bubikopf” bobbed style that was considered at the time to be radically boyish. In her personal experiences, however, Höch had as little luck negotiating the more progressively-oriented archetype of the New Woman as she had with conservative gender expectations. Her left-leaning male cohorts in Berlin Dada “paid lip service to women’s emancipation” and glamorized the socially and sexually liberated New Woman when they deigned to address women’s issues at all, but they were largely unwilling to treat women as equals in their personal lives.18

The pervasive chauvinism of the Berlin Dada scene made Höch’s role as the only

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17 Hemus, Dada’s Women, 124.
woman a difficult and thankless one. Hans Richter infamously characterized her contribution to the Dada movement as the “‘sandwiches, beer, and coffee she managed somehow to conjure up despite the lack of money,’”19 “tapping” into common conceptions of women performing nurturing, domestic, and supporting roles” rather than valuing her contributions as an artist.20 Perhaps even more telling than this unfortunate characterization is the fact that Richter is comparatively one of Höch’s more sympathetic male contemporaries. John Heartfield and George Grosz, conversely, lobbied to exclude her work from the First International Dada Fair, and were prevented from doing so only when Höch’s then-lover and fellow artist Raoul Hausmann intervened on her behalf.21

The men of the Dada movement nominally supported women’s political emancipation, and dreamed—for ostensibly political reasons—of a future in which the inherently bourgeois institutions of marriage and monogamy had fallen out of favor and “women could experience a full range of sexuality outside the bonds of matrimony.”22 But they also privileged vitality and dynamism as the engines of revolutionary progress—virtues that were also lionized by misogynistic and even fascist artistic movements elsewhere in Europe, most notably the Italian Futurists. These virtues, especially filtered through Nietzsche, were cast by most male radicals as ideally masculine and implicitly embodied by men.23

Even as early as 1919, when Höch’s methodologies and political statements were largely in keeping with the Berlin Dada movement’s communist emphasis on class

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19 Makela, “By Design,” 64.
20 Hemus, Dada’s Women, 92.
21 Ibid.
22 Makela, “By Design,” 64.
critique, her works manifested a profound skepticism toward the normative masculine ideals that most male avant-garde artists continued to lionize without critical examination. In the late Weimar period, Höch’s photomontages critiqued normative gender ideals in general, and masculinity in particular, as a cultural rather than class-based phenomenon.

While Höch was involved in the Dada movement, her images tended to approach the mythic ideals of masculine and feminine primarily as outmoded fetishes of the bourgeoisie. The Brautpaar (“wedding couple”) is an image that recurs throughout Höch’s Weimar paintings and photomontages—and in the montages and paintings of the late 1910s and early 1920s, the wedding couples are frequently labeled specifically as bourgeois. In Bürgerliches Brautpaar (Streit), as in Höch’s other “bourgeois wedding couple” images of the same era, the quarreling couple’s unhappiness is manifested in part by the bombardment of mass-produced domestic products that forms their fractured background. These repurposed advertisements for bourgeois domestic commodities—like the other mass-media photomatter fragments that Höch used for her montages—drew much of their critical power from the fact that “to the contemporary viewer [they] would have been familiar, seen already in newspapers or magazines, and here presenting a challenge to look again.” Höch’s early class-based criticism of gender roles assigned new connotations of discord and bourgeois foolishness to the commercialized accessories to domestic bliss. Bürgerliches Brautpaar (Streit) specifically satirizes a reactionary middle-class fantasy of ideal domestic life: a fantasy in which women, aided by mass-produced modern conveniences, could happily return to children, hearth, and church, and

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25 Hemus, Dada’s Women, 104.
in which the German middle-class family could then return to prewar norms as if the traumas of the war had never happened.\textsuperscript{26}

In the figures themselves, however, Höch established a visual vocabulary for depictions of heteronormative gender roles that laid the groundwork for a broader critique of binary gender expectations in Weimar society as a whole. The figures of the husband and wife are assembled from images clipped from magazines, broken down to disparate body parts that appear ludicrous in combination. Höch’s usual Dada-era “stinging irony”\textsuperscript{27} is most visible in her construction of the wife, though neither figure escapes unscathed. Both are assembled from fragmented images that, in their original contexts, perpetuated the cultural ideals of masculinity and femininity. While these ideals were initially framed as “bourgeois,” the beginnings of a wider critique can already be seen.

In the wife’s case, the elements of idealized femininity are comically out of proportion to one another and, when stitched together into a misshapen human form, they are impossible to reconcile with one another. The wife’s torso belongs to a swimmer, elegant and muscular. The torso is a feminine manifestation of athletic beauty that would have been held as an ideal in the \textit{Körperkultur} (“body culture”)—a post-war German cultural emphasis on ideals of grace, athleticism, and bodily perfection.\textsuperscript{28} Höch places this stately torso on an undersized set of fashion-model legs, which manifest a different and contradictory feminine ideal. The spindly legs, which model knee-high boots, are

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slightly pigeon-toed—a coy, submissive, and markedly girlish pose that cannot help but look out-of-place on the same body as the swimmer’s strong and confidently-posed shoulders. The proportional dissonance between body and legs adds to the sense that the wife’s body cannot constitute a coherent whole—Höch cuts the torso off at the thigh, and it sits gracelessly and heavily on its too-thin legs so that the legs appear almost chicken-like. The wife’s body cannot reconcile the fashionable and girlish feminine ideal with the athletic bodily perfection demanded of women by the ideals of the *Körperkultur*. Höch crowns these irreconcilable ideals with the evocation of a misogynist trope, applied most often to the stereotype of the simple-minded traditional “Gretchen”: the oversized head of a screaming infant is grafted directly onto the swimmer’s shoulders, parodying the archetype of the childish, nagging bourgeois housewife. “Together with the posture and spindly legs, she resembles a child having a tantrum.”²⁹ Here, perhaps, is Höch’s invocation of conservative bourgeois femininity—the one favored for the infantilized “suitable wives” and the fertile mothers who were integral to the reactionary mission of rebuilding the fatherland, and the one most easily recognizable to her male colleagues as a repressive archetype. But it is just one of the normative impositions of feminine identity that are pieced together into the body of the bourgeois wife. As Höch demonstrates in the construction of the bride, fragmentary illusions of womanhood—by turns idealizing or derogatory—do not, and cannot, unify into a coherent whole. The illusions themselves are stereotypical and unrealistic, and they can never combine to become a real human being.

It would seem at first glance that the bourgeois husband fares better—of the two,

he is the more structurally sound, assembled from two body halves of roughly equal proportion. But his legs and upper body meet at a grossly disjointed angle at his waist, belying the appearance of proportionality and unity seen at first glance. Relative to his wife, this painful angle may indicate the unhappy relationship between the two figures: “the man’s legs run in one direction, away from the woman, while the torso, possibly that of a swimmer, stretches towards her, emphasizing a conflicted approach to his wife.”

His posture may also be a parody of ideals of masculine physical vigor, as he bears on his back an oversized cutout of a fashionable hat. The impossibly sharp angle of his body implies that his spine twists and snaps beneath the weight he carries. He struggles manfully beneath it, and the humorous fact that his burden is a hat—a “trapping of respectability or masculinity,” and a sign of bourgeois conspicuous consumption—renders his exercise in masculine vigor comical. The wife’s infantilized immaturity is matched by the husband’s futile machismo, and their status as caricatures of their normative genders is key to the couple’s foolishness. Their manifestation of opposing stereotypes also sets them in conflict with one another, and the pointlessness of their argument is exemplified by the letters “PO” in the background, spelling out a childish German slang word for the buttocks. The husband’s culpability in this tableau is presented with more visual subtlety than the wife’s, but ultimately his ludicrous manliness is afforded as little seriousness and dignity as the wife’s fragmented and incongruous femininity.

It is particularly notable that, unlike his wife, the husband is assembled entirely

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30 Hemus, *Dada’s Women*, 113.
31 Ibid.
from images of athleticism. Where the social prescription of female identity is most accurately described as *feminine ideals* rather than as a singular *ideal*, the prescriptive male identity is more monolithic, drawn from traditional “masculine” virtues of productive vigor, physical strength, and self-discipline. For men in particular, the *Körperkultur* privileged the image of the athlete: whole and able-bodied, brimming with energy, and at the peak of human physical perfection.

Male athletes, such as boxing champion Max Schmeling, were embraced as pillars of masculine virtue by “the cultural and intellectual avant garde”\(^3\) and conservative German culture alike, with differing justifications. For all that the male-dominated avant garde claimed to reject mainstream sexual ideals, they embraced the German prescriptions of masculine virtue on philosophical grounds; “in particular, [they] valorized the pugnacious sport of boxing, viewing it as the athletic counterpart to their own assault on traditional bourgeois culture.”\(^4\) For all that male athleticism was seen by the avant garde as a potent metaphor for revolution, Schmeling and other athletic icons would be vaunted by the Nazis during the Third Reich. While such athletes’ achievements were interpreted by the far right as a patriotic reaffirmation of Germany’s self-perception as “a young and vigorous nation,”\(^5\) the prescriptive masculine virtues being celebrated were virtually identical to those the avant garde identified as progressive. Both reactionary and revolutionary groups built their concepts of virtue from the traits associated with the heteronormative masculine archetype. The virtues of virility


\(^4\) Ibid.

and masculine vigor were taken for granted by all political persuasions. The ideal of explosive vitality was used by radicals to support the destruction of capitalism, but, as Klaus Theweleit demonstrates in his landmark work *Male Fantasies*, the same masculinism and disdain for the feminine underpinned fascist justifications for militarization, nationalism, and war.\(^{36}\)

The glorification of this volatile masculine ideal came at a time when, for a significant and highly visible segment of the male population, prescriptive ideal masculinity had become wholly impossible to attain. In light of the tens of thousands of amputees returning from the war—men who had been violently and irreversibly rendered incapable of attaining normative bodily perfection—the Weimar masculine ideal, with its emphasis on physical vitality and athleticism, was both a response to the nation’s “emascula- tion” and, what is more, a symptom of anxiety. Additionally, as the following chapter will demonstrate, the growing visibility of homosexuality in German culture added to anxieties surrounding heteronormative gender. The perceived failure (or, even more dangerously, refusal) to attain the normative masculine ideal among homosexual men during the Weimar Republic contributed to the pervasive and reactionary fear that Germany had been unsexed.

As early as 1919, Höch was aware of the contradictions of prescriptive machismo, as her appropriation and caricature of athletic imagery in the *Bürgerliches* husband figure makes clear. Her skepticism toward the glamorization of destructive masculine vigor may have increased over the course of the Weimar period, as the physical effects and the lingering psychological trauma of World War I on the male population became more

visible to the general public. Maria Makela theorizes that Höch, like other Germans who had not been at the front lines themselves, would have become “acutely aware of [wartime trauma] after the cosmetic surgery wing of the Charité [Hospital] closed in 1922 [and] the reconstructed yet still grotesquely disfigured war veterans return[ed] to public life following convalescence.” At that moment, there would have been an obvious and violent dissonance between the real, irreparably damaged physical bodies of wounded veterans and the mythic images of wholeness and vigor to which men should aspire. Furthermore, the visibility of wounded veterans could stand as evidence of the dire consequences of the nation’s attempt to assert its youth and masculine vigor on the battlefield. The images of the war’s bodily destruction were certainly treated as potent anti-war arguments by pacifists at the time, as in the sensationaly popular and controversial 1924 book *Krieg dem Krieg!* (War Against War!), which featured twenty-four images of veterans’ disfigured faces as evidence of the brutality of war.

Höch was far more politically aware than she received credit for from male colleagues and critics, declaring that she lived a politically-conscious life and espousing “pacifist, anti-nationalist, and anti-militarist [views] during and following the First World War.” Makela argues persuasively that, especially during and after the 1920s, Höch’s work was deeply interested in the anxieties surrounding the body in the wake of the war. To conclude this chapter, I will examine a specific work by Höch that targeted the mythic norms of masculinity as a pervasive social ideal rather than as a merely bourgeois one.

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38 Ibid.
unattainable and carried the potential for violence, and Höch’s *Die Starken Männer* examines and dismantles the monolithic ideal of masculinity. And, in this work, Höch undermines the prescription of machismo in part by juxtaposing it with an androgynous alternative.

*Die Starken Männer* is a mixed-media collage, integrating photomatter with paper embellished with watercolor. The central figure is constructed over what was then the instantly-recognizable silhouette of Max Schmeling. Taken from a 1926 edition of *Die Querschnitt*, the base image [fig. 3] was a nude photograph of the boxer, with the frame cutting off at the hips. Schmeling flexed one arm in a show of athletic vigor, and the photograph’s dramatic lighting ensured that every contour of his muscled torso was clearly visible. Though the image framed Schmeling’s body as the embodiment of masculine physical perfection, *Die Starken Männer* only appropriates his outline, leaving an abstracted absence where the boxer’s celebrated body used to be. The frame of Schmeling’s silhouette is filled by jagged newsprint fragments borrowed from images of machinery; at the figure’s flexing bicep, three triangular fragments stab downward over the edges of the figure’s body, as if the machinery has overtaken the human form. A mirroring row of conical shapes thrusts upward from the bottom of the image, and the opposing lines of jagged, abstracted triangular shapes evoke a mechanized sharp-toothed mouth. It is ambiguous whether these shapes are a part of the figure’s body—a sign of his machine-like bodily perfection—or, if instead, the machine overtakes and consumes

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41 The image of a mechanical mouth devouring a human body is similar to the machine-god Moloch in Fritz Lang’s 1927 film *Metropolis*. Whether or not the evocation of similar imagery in *Die Starken Männer* is a deliberate allusion on Höch’s part is subject to conjecture.
him. Ultimately, the body achieves ideal masculinity by turning itself into a machine, but the mechanical elements threaten the figure’s body as much as they are part of it.

In the watercolor fragments, Höch contrasts the mechanical shapes with an abstracted allusion to flesh. These pieces incorporate warm colors that blend softly together, in contrast to the muted grays and sharply delineated light and shadow of the mechanical fragments. Where Höch evokes flesh, so too does she remind us of its vulnerability—a vulnerability entirely at odds with the masculine ideal of inviolable strength and vitality. Though Schmeling was photographed from the front in the original image and only from the hips upward, the use of his silhouette without bodily details in *Die Starken Männer* renders the new figure’s position more ambiguous. Höch takes advantage of this ambiguity by extending the figure downward, and on the watercolor base she clearly delineates the figure’s buttocks.42 This detail subverts the physical and sexual impenetrability of the normative masculine ideal, as “the crevice… resembles a feminine sign of availability” and is rendered vulnerable to the line of jagged and potentially phallic conical shapes along the bottom of the image.43 The figure’s machismo does not protect it from mechanized violence or sexual objectification—indeed, the mechanical parts that contribute to its exaggerated masculinity also pose a threat to the figure’s flesh. In *Die Starken Männer*, the very masculinity of the normative male ideal threatens to tear it apart from within. As much as the masculine archetype projected the image of wholeness and stability, in Höch’s work it is fragmented and ultimately fragile.

Works like *Die Starken Männer* make it clear that, far from being solely

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43 Ibid.
concerned with the fractured narratives of womanhood in the Weimar Republic, Höch had a complex interest in archetypes of masculinity as well. Her choice of Schmeling’s image is especially significant, as he was perceived as a paragon of masculine virtue by reactionary mainstream culture and the avant garde alike. Höch’s critique of heteronormative gender no longer solely targeted the bourgeoisie as it had been in her Dada works. Indeed, the monolithic archetype of the masculine ideal pervaded the entirety of German culture, even those sectors that considered themselves more progressive and culturally critical than the mainstream. In Höch’s late Weimar explorations of masculinity, it becomes clear that “progressive” interpretations of binary gender roles, including the masculine ideal, are ultimately just as constricting and unattainable as the interpretations found among bourgeois society. Die Starken Männer in particular frames the cultural masculine archetype as unstable and even dangerous.

Die Starken Männer manifests Höch’s critique of normative binary gender prescriptions as fragmented and destructive, but it also offers an alternative to normative standards. Superimposed over the masculine silhouette is a large composite face, constructed from male and female halves that come together in an ambiguously gendered whole. The older male half dominates the upper face, providing the bi-gendered face with forehead, eyebrows, and nose; the face of a young woman meets the other half at a slight angle, so that the mouth is tilted in a perplexed expression and one eyebrow seems raised in confusion. In Ruth Hemus’s words, the male and female halves “are neatly slotted together… suggesting the inevitable, necessary, or desirable existence of a feminine side to balance masculinity.”

The face integrates male and female parts in equal measure,

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44 Hemus, 124.
and comes together in a whole that cannot be conclusively gendered to one binary gender or the other. The face makes eye contact with the viewer, and its skeptical countenance “seems to puzzle over the boxer’s machismo pose.” The face’s gaze and expression invite the viewer to question the male figure’s show of mechanized, masculine brute force.

If Höch’s subversion of the masculine ideal highlights the fragmentation and destructiveness of the normative male archetype, then the androgynous face provides the viewer with a viable alternative to that archetype. The androgynous face exists outside of the normative ideal, and indeed seems to reject it entirely. Höch appropriates an instantly-recognizable icon of normative masculinity and juxtaposes him with a figure that seems to exist outside the binary. *Die Starken Männer* compares a fractured cultural ideal with a more unified and serene figure that adheres to neither masculinity nor femininity, and the comparison ultimately favors the androgynous figure over the normative one. The androgynous face occupies a position outside of the mainstream system of gender, and, in this image, it is poised to reject heteronormative ideals. If the entire system of binary gender is an ongoing concern of Höch’s work, then the introduction of androgynous imagery begins to fundamentally upset the system.

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CHAPTER 2

Splitting the Difference: Third Sex Theory, the Queer Body, and the Early Androgynes

It would be an oversimplification to position all of Höch’s androgynous figures as defiant rejections of normative gender. When Höch began creating images of androgynes in the mid-1920s, she had recently begun what would be a nine-year relationship with a woman, the Dutch linguist and writer Til Brugman. Höch had previously engaged in what was by all accounts an exclusively heterosexual personal life, most notably a long-standing and troubled relationship with her fellow Berlin Dada artist Raoul Hausmann. Of her relationship with Brugman, she wrote to her sister that “to be closely connected with another woman for me is something totally new.”\(^{46}\) The discovery of a new dimension to her sexual identity coincides with Höch’s introduction of androgynous figures to her photomontages,\(^{47}\) and the change in artistic style and content may indicate a new appreciation for the complications of gender identity for homosexual and bisexual people in the Weimar Republic.

Much as the \textit{scientia sexualis} model had prescribed roles for heterosexual men and women, it had also constructed a means of explaining homosexuality and non-normative gender presentation. Sexologists of the early twentieth century conflated sexual attraction and gender identity; homosexuality was thus framed as a failure to live up to the ideal models of one’s assigned sex. While these sexual scientists held widely varying degrees of sympathy with homosexual people, most sexologists in the German-

\footnotesize{\(^{46}\) Lavin, \textit{Kitchen Knife}, 189.  
\(^{47}\) Makela, “By Design,” 66.}
speaking world—with Sigmund Freud as a notable exception—accepted the theory “that homosexuals comprised a biological category apart from both women and men,” an idea known as the Third Sex theory. Thus, an image of an androgynous figure in the Weimar Republic carried an inevitable implication of homosexuality. In the postwar German social climate, in which prescriptive masculinity and femininity were a matter of immense social importance, the image of an androgyne would also potentially carry a problematic implication of the androgynous body as a failure within the normative gender binary.

Through an analysis of Höch’s androgyne of the mid-1920s, this chapter asserts that Höch's first forays into androgynous imagery prior to Die Starken Männer manifest an ambivalence toward the prevailing theory of homosexuals as a Third Sex. Such early androgyne as those featured in Equilibre (1925) and Vagabunden (1926) are depicted as fragmented and disproportionate, similar in construction to the fractured bride of Bürgerliches Brautpaar (Streit), even as the humor with which Höch addresses them is gentler and less scathing. But these figures also carry the beginnings of what would become, in the late Weimar period, a sophisticated framing of the androgyne as an androgyne and not as a failed male or female body.

Contemporary feminist analyses of Höch’s androgyne generally assume that the figures are intended to be female and that the androgynous couples are to be read as lesbian. But drawing an automatic equivalency between androgyny and lesbianism is hasty and simplistic. Such readings lean too heavily on biography and ultimately rob

48 Lavin, Kitchen Knife, 186.
49 Ibid.
50 Lavin, Kitchen Knife, 189.
51 Ibid.
Höch’s androgynes of much of their critical weight. The analysis of Höch’s early androgynes in this chapter will show that, even as they negotiate the problematic cultural associations of gender ambiguity, the androgynes of the early 1920s begin to position androgyny as a blurring of the boundaries between the sexes rather than a failure to live within those boundaries—precisely because of the impossibility of assigning these figures to a specific gender. As the Weimar era progressed, Höch’s androgynes would move away from the fragmented aesthetic of the earlier figures and toward a formal and proportional cohesion. Höch’s serious and sensual late Weimar androgynes, discussed in the third chapter, would build on the fundamental irresolvability of these early androgynous figures. The androgynes of Equilibre and Vagabunden embody both a negotiation of the Weimar discourse surrounding androgyny and a radical step toward Höch’s ultimate rejection of that discourse.

One reason the Third Sex theory of homosexuality gained such traction in Weimar culture was that it was embraced by prominent homosexual rights advocates, both within the German-speaking world and elsewhere in the West. Chief among them within Germany was Magnus Hirschfeld, a pioneering sexologist and activist for the rights of the so-called Third Sex who founded the Berlin Institut für Sexualwissenschaft (Institute of Sexual Science) in 1919. Hirschfeld did not originate the theory of homosexual behavior as stemming from a generalized aversion to the prescriptions of one’s biological sex; among others, Hirschfeld drew on the research of Richard von Krafft-Ebing, who meticulously charted the “degrees” of the “antipathic sexual instinct” (his term for homosexuality) according to the degrees of “hermaphroditism” and

52 Kaes et al, eds., Weimar Republic Sourcebook, 693.
“inversion” his subjects displayed both in their sexual behavior and in their personal habits and mannerisms.  

Hirschfeld had no argument with the theory that gay men and lesbians were constitutionally different from their heterosexual counterparts, and indeed the *innateness* of this difference was a crucial component of his activism on behalf of sexual minorities. The Third Sex, Hirschfeld argued, was a biological intermediary between the binary sexes as well as a psychical one. An appeal to science is embedded in the very name of the World League for Sexual Reform on a Scientific Basis, an organization that Hirschfeld also founded. Hirschfeld protested Germany’s Paragraph 175 and similar laws throughout the West banning male homosexual intercourse, and he argued that because homosexuality “was a result of nature, not criminality, it should not be punishable by law.”

His reasoning for both the biological basis of homosexuality and the necessity for tolerance is perhaps best summarized in the following excerpt, from an essay Hirschfeld published in 1926:

> The key… is a fact discovered by embryological science in the last century: unisexuality is a later development subsequent to an original bisexuality…. It is therefore a fact that homosexuality is an inborn condition, that is, a matter of constitution…. [Once] the essence of homosexuality has been recognized, it is the obligation of every fair-minded person to speak out for the elimination of an injustice that already produces more victims and claims by the hour.

Hirschfeld’s model of the Third Sex explained homosexuality to a dominant culture that refused to leave any deviation from the norm unexplained. Without such an exculpatory

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54 Kaes et al, eds., *Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, 693.
scientific explanation, Hirschfeld’s ardent activism for the rights of the Third Sex would likely never have had nearly the cultural impact that it did. Indeed, although Hirschfeld’s legal campaigns were unsuccessful, he was still perceived as a threat by reactionaries—enough so that the Nazis shut down his Institute and publicly burned its archives in 1933 the NSDAP came to power.\(^57\)

Whether because they recognized its possible political expediency or because it resonated with their experience, the Third Sex theory was embraced by some homosexual and gender-nonconforming people in the interwar period. Writing in English but drawing heavily from German-language sex theorists such as Krafft-Ebing, the novelist Radclyffe Hall framed the experience of the female “invert” in terms of gender dysphoria at least as strongly as through same-sex attraction. *The Well of Loneliness* (1928), Hall’s plea for tolerance in novel form, features a protagonist whose homosexuality is clearly meant to be read as the result of biological difference. Stephen Gordon is described from birth and repeatedly onward as “narrow-hipped, wide-shouldered,”\(^58\) and physically masculine, with a childhood desire to be biologically male appearing before any mention of an attraction to women. Hall appeals to nature frequently and persistently throughout the novel; when Stephen falls in love with a woman it happens “quite simply and naturally… in accordance with the dictates of her nature,”\(^59\) and Hall’s tract against homophobia is ultimately rooted in the idea of constitutional intersexuals being “as much a part of nature as anyone else.”\(^60\) The persuasive possibilities of such an appeal to nature were not the only reason some sexual minorities embraced the Third Sex model, however. Especially

\(^{57}\) Kaes et al, eds., *Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, 693.


\(^{59}\) Hall, *Well of Loneliness*, 146.

\(^{60}\) Hall, *Well of Loneliness*, 154.
as advocated by Hirschfeld, the theory was in some ways liberating—it not only explained why homosexuals did not conform to heteronormative sexual and behavioral models, but it allowed that, due to their biological difference from heterosexuals, they should not be expected to conform.

The reality of homosexuality and gender-nonconformity was, of course, not a simple continuum in which gender-conforming behaviors correlated perfectly with gender identity and attraction to the so-called “opposite sex.” Hirschfeld himself acknowledged how frequently “those who occupy themselves intensively with sexual varieties and their laws must expect, again and again, new mixtures, new types, when they observe objectively.” For instance, in his prewar study of gender “intermediaries,” Transvestites, his male-born cross-dressing subjects were overwhelmingly attracted to women rather than to (or occasionally in addition to) men. Hirschfeld proposed many possible reasons for why the cases he studied might have presented and behaved in the ways they did, and—activist for tolerance that he was—he scrupulously avoided value judgments. He advocated in Transvestites and elsewhere for the repeal of public decency laws preventing cross-dressers, whatever their sex or motivation, from being able to safely move about in public in their preferred clothing. Ultimately, though, he framed these “intermediary” individuals’ behaviors and sexual inclinations through their correlation to the normative behaviors of either sex. To put on a dress and feel comfortable in it was evidence of an innate female drive, and to fall in love with a woman was evidence of a male one. In a revealing passage, Hirschfeld unwittingly articulated the degree to which his theories were inextricable from normative binary conceptions of

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gender: “there are, besides pure manly or womanly characteristics, such that are neither manly nor womanly, or more correctly stated, not only manly, but also womanly.” No personality trait, no behavior, no mannerism, no sexual preference, could ever be truly gender-neutral under Hirschfeld’s system. If such traits were neither masculine nor feminine, it was because they resulted from an admixture of the male and female drives, and not because they lacked any inherent masculinity or femininity altogether.

That Höch introduced androgynous figures to her photomontages following the beginning of a long-term homosexual relationship is a coincidence that has been observed by multiple scholars, and it stands to reason that this new development prompted her to engage with the contemporary discourse surrounding homosexuality. These earliest androgynous figures also began appearing in Höch’s work at a time when the German popular press was awash with articles and pictorial features that puzzled over the phenomenon of nonconforming gender behavior. Magazines ran popular science articles that scrutinized female androgyny in particular as stemming from a malfunction of the “glands” that made them more masculine than a normatively-presenting woman. In 1928 the Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung even ran a reader contest entitled “Büb oder Mädel?” (“Boy or Girl?”) in which readers were offered prizes to readers who could guess the “correct” gender of six young people in an array of photographs. Whether serious or irreverent, popular media demanded concrete and scientific explanations for any deviation from the norm—a phenomenon that was in keeping with the scientia sexualis discourse that pervaded the West, and especially with the postwar

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62 Hirschfeld, Transvestites, 215 (emphasis mine).
64 Lavin, Kitchen Knife, 198–99.
German desire for “easy resolutions” to uncertainties surrounding gender.\textsuperscript{65} The Third Sex theory conformed to this cultural demand, and with the growing visibility of non-normative gender behaviors in the wake of the war, the popular media was beginning to take it seriously.

For Höch, though, the Third Sex theory had little bearing on her sexuality or her gender. Despite declaring at the beginning of her relationship with Brugman that “the chapter ‘man’ is finished for me,” she resisted attempts to label herself or her relationship as lesbian.\textsuperscript{66} Where her sexual identity remained fluid, her gender identity was firmly female, in defiance of the rigid biological essentialism of dominant theories—she does not seem to have felt any conflict between her personal behavior outside of gender norms and her identity as a woman. Indeed, in letters to her sister, Höch described her shared female identity with Brugman as a key factor in the intimacy and success of their relationship. In her characterization, a romantic relationship with another woman “means being taken by the spirit of my own spirit, confronted by a very close relative.”\textsuperscript{67} Höch seems never to have written on the subject of androgyny or the Third Sex theory in particular, but she edited a satirical story by Brugman called \textit{Warenhaus der Liebe} (“Department Store of Love”) that poked sympathetic but relentless fun at Hirschfeld’s Institute for Sexology.\textsuperscript{68} Based on this collaboration and Höch’s apparently strong identification as a woman whatever her sexual orientation, it is reasonable to assume that she—like many bisexual and homosexual people in the Weimar Republic—“greeted [the

\textsuperscript{65} Lavin, \textit{Kitchen Knife}, 198.  
\textsuperscript{66} Lavin, \textit{Kitchen Knife}, 188–189.  
\textsuperscript{67} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{68} Lavin, \textit{Kitchen Knife}, 190.
Third Sex model] with ambivalence.”

Even without such textual evidence, Höch’s androgynes of the mid-1920s are visually uneasy. One of her earliest images to feature androgynous figures is *Equilibre* (1925), in which two figures engage in a fractured balancing act. These figures are distinct from Dada-era photomontages in which Höch had “crosbred men and women” in order to undermine the masculine authority of the male politicians whose heads she grafted onto the bodies of female dancers or gymnasts—these Dada crossbreeds were thus intended not as androgynes, but as *failed men*. The piecemeal figures in *Equilibre*, by contrast, are too thoroughly blended from male and female components to read as men or women. Lavin describes them generally, and the taller figure particularly, as “audaciously androgynous.”

The smaller figure, one-legged and lopsided, wears an elderly man’s lower face on its boyish infant’s head. Itsbraceleted left arm, cut from an image in which it was no doubt elegant and feminine, bulges comically out from the figure’s shoulder and nearly outweighs the rest of the body; the arm’s heaviness is reinforced by the weighted chain that hangs from the dangling hand. The larger figure props up the smaller, attempting to balance both of them on the tilted surface on which it stands. The hand on which the smaller figure stands seems to spring directly and comically from the large figure’s torso; the tall figure’s long, thin right arm seems flimsy and mismatched, the opposite of the bloated and pendulous left arm of its smaller companion. While the balancing act seems

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70 As Makela notes (“The Interwar Period,” 88), this piece was originally titled *America Balancing Europe*, and the title was later changed for reasons unknown. The original allegorical nature of these figures is intriguing, but incidental to this study.
to be successful for the moment, the awkward tilt of the surface and the lopsided weight of each figure creates a profound visual unease; there is a sense that not only could the figures fall, but that they could fall apart.

*Equilibre* showcases several techniques by Höch to render her male- and female-derived photomatter fragments as androgynous. The taller figure’s male legs and ambiguous torso are joined with a clean curve that suggests wide hips, but the torso is trimmed to remove any indication of whether or not it has breasts. Höch’s androgynization of the figure is particularly clever in the fragment she uses for the tall figure’s mouth. Like the smaller figure’s oversized arm, it is clearly cut from a glamorous commercial image of a feminine woman, but it is scaled, trimmed, and attached to the rest of the face in a manner that suggests longer and more masculine facial proportions—the large lipsticked lips, the epitome of femininity in their original context, become radically ambiguous when they are surrounded by the possibility of a man’s face. Höch’s technique of cutting and reshaping the components to render them as androgynous results in a pair of figures who cannot be easily resolved as male or female, but they are also disproportionate and ungainly. “The couple’s identity is mysterious, fragile, fragmented, and precariously balanced”—the figures are disjointed, out of scale to their own component parts and to one another, at least as fractious as the patched-together bourgeois bride of *Quarrel* discussed in the previous chapter. In *Equilibre*, androgyny is inextricable from visual unease; the same attributes that render the figures androgynous also threaten to cause their collapse.

The fragmentation and compositional discord of works like *Equilibre* manifest the

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uncomfortable cultural position of androgyny in the Weimar Republic. The balancing companions in *Equilibre* are not treated with the scathing humor of Höch’s Dada-era invectives against the normative bourgeoisie; but the figures’ inability to cohere still marks these androgynes as failed bodies. Unable to exist as one sex or another, they split the difference between the two: just as the tug of gravity might bring the figures down at any moment, the irreconcilable roles of *masculine* and *feminine* seem to pull them in opposite directions.

Hirschfeld’s activism on behalf of the “Third Sex” was predicated on the argument that homosexuality and gender dysphoria were natural and thus morally neutral. But, however much Hirschfeld himself may have attempted to avoid value judgments, the Third Sex theory was too thoroughly embedded in the *scientia sexualis* model to avoid an implication of deviation from a privileged norm. As Foucault argues in *The History of Sexuality*, the danger of appealing to nature lies in the fact that nature is “a domain susceptible to pathological processes, and hence one calling for therapeutic or normalizing influences.”⁷⁴ Even in advocacy for tolerance rather than treatment, the Third Sex theory acknowledged the primacy of *pure masculinity* and *pure femininity* as the archetypal ideals for each sex. To be absolutely masculine or feminine was to conform to social expectations of gendered behavior—not only in pursuing and maintaining a heterosexual life, but in manifesting all the “appropriate” personality traits and behaviors of one’s assigned gender. An androgynous person, under the Third Sex formulation, was one who possessed an irreconcilable mix of male and female drives and thus failed to exist comfortably in one sex or the other—and a lesbian, by virtue of her

⁷⁴ Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 68.
“masculine” attractions, was inherently less of a *true woman* than she would have been had she been heterosexual.

The Third Sex theory was rooted in the idea of a social and biological continuum from *masculine* to *feminine*, and the troubling potential of this idea can be found in the conclusions drawn by its originator, Otto Weininger. In his 1903 study *Sex and Character*, Weininger “claimed that every individual is constituted with a fixed ratio between masculinity and femininity, thus allowing him or her to be typed accordingly”—a *scientia sexualis* construction of gender and sexuality if ever there was one, and one to which Hirschfeld’s Third Sex theory was heavily indebted. Where Weininger differed was not in the substance of his theory, but in the social and political conclusions he drew from it. Weininger was a vehement misogynist, and in his formulation, *pure femininity* meant shallowness and weakness. An anti-Semite despite being a Jew by birth himself, Weininger argued that Jewish men possessed an inborn femininity that marked them as inferior to their more ideally masculine Aryan counterparts. More unusually, he also stringently followed his misogyny to its logical conclusion in his evaluation of female worth. Because the feminine drive was a universal negative for Weininger regardless of the individual’s gender, the presence of the masculine drive was a universal positive, and thus a sufficiently masculine woman could transcend the limitations of her sex and become worthy of emancipation. The inherent

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77 Lavin, “Androgyny, Bisexuality, and Oscillation,” 328.
“masculinity” of being a lesbian was, therefore, “simultaneously a sign of the collapse of
gender distinctions and, by implication, of civilized society, and a marker of female
genius.”  

Weininger’s theory was, by design, structurally amenable to privileging particular
gender presentations over others—and whatever the intent of the Weimar theories of
gender that derived from his, they remained vulnerable to similar hierarchization. While
most gender theorists did not adopt Weininger’s stringent misogyny, his continuum of
gender differentiation was widely accepted. Even conservative theorists acknowledged
that “the occurrence of a fully sexually ‘differentiated’ man or woman proved rare, even
impossible,” but the ideal was still held up as the highest success within the
heteronormative binary, and insufficient gender differentiation was thus an implicit
failure. While Hirschfeld protested the “antifeminism” of Weininger and his conservative
adherents, his Third Sex theory left the framework of Weininger’s formulation intact.
Hirschfeld’s appeal to nature—dismissed by Freud as “the supposition that nature in a
freakish mood created a ‘third sex’”—lost the support of many Weimar homosexuals
where it ceded the ground of normalcy and functionality to role-conforming
heterosexuals. The Third Sex theory conflated attraction to women with masculinity, or
attraction to men with femininity, because it still assumed heterosexual behaviors and
attractions as the default. Similarly, it continued to ascribe quantities of gender-
appropriateness to nonsexual as well as sexual behaviors, because Hirschfeld’s model did
not allow for any behavior or trait to be wholly free of prescriptive norms of binary

78 Halberstam, *Queer Art of Failure*, 159.
81 Lavin, “Androgyny, Bisexuality, and Oscillation,” 328 (emphasis mine).
gender.

Höch’s early androgynes, with their piecemeal construction from disjointed male and female parts, function in part as an embodiment of the uncomfortable relationship between homosexuality, androgyny, and the prevailing *scientia sexualis* theories that conflated each in an attempt to explain them. But the androgynous figures cannot be read as mere invective against cultural perceptions of gender and sexuality, in part because their tone does not bear out such a reading. The compositional tension and disarray of *Equilibre* is countered by the figures’ whimsical construction and by the relationship between them—rather than quarreling as the heteronormative bourgeois couples might, these two support one another and cooperate in their attempt to balance.

Such a playful and affectionate tone is also found in *Vagabunden* (1926), which also features an androgynous couple. The titular vagabonds walk together, hand-in-hand, against a landscape background that gives the impression of depth of field—a radical change for Höch, whose Dada works had shattered the traditional picture plane and forced every detail to clamor at once for the viewer’s attention. Appropriately for so-called vagabonds, the figures lack either an origin or a destination—the road veers out of the frame behind them and opens onto an uncertain future. If a vagabond is a marginal figure, *heimatlos* and perpetually traveling without any expectation of a fixed destination, then these two figures seem to have embraced their uncertain place in the world, reveling in their journey together. Indeed, the peaceable mood of *Vagabunden* in contrast to earlier works is striking. One figure smiles, and the other raises its arms in apparent celebration; their joined hands are cut from the same image rather than being grafted together from two separate sources, a rather tender detail that renders their bodies
inseparable. The figures are still comprised of disjointed component parts that meet at odd angles or are comically proportioned, but even as the figures are humorous and structurally fragile, the humor, unlike that of Höch’s Dada-era works, is not without affection.

It has been usual in contemporary analyses of Höch’s work to describe these two figures as lesbians. Maud Lavin describes *Vagabunden* as depicting “two women” and as a likely “double portrait of Höch and Brugman”\(^82\); Maria Makela concurs, characterizing the photomontage as “a testimony to the joys that a lesbian relationship would bring.”\(^83\) This assumption seems to spring both from Höch’s biography and from the relatively greater acceptance of androgynous images of women in the Weimar Republic as opposed to men; Lavin points out that “an image of a feminized man may have appeared to the Weimar viewer as obviously and illegally homosexual, [but] an image of a masculinized woman may not have been so easily categorized.”\(^84\) However, an automatic classification of the figures as women discounts another, radical possibility: that the figures are not insufficiently-differentiated women or men, but that they are simply *androgynous*, with no particular gender at all.

This possible reading of the androgynes as androgynes is supported by the construction of the figures themselves. Both figures in *Vagabunden* incorporate a thorough mix of gendered parts and, as in other images of the period, Höch’s trimming and joining techniques help to neutralize the fragments’ original functions as commercialized depictions of ideal binary gender. The taller of the two vagabonds has an

\(^83\) Makela, “By Design,” 66.
\(^84\) Lavin, “Androgyny, Bisexuality, and Oscillation,” 328–329.
athlete’s torso, trimmed carefully to avoid any hint of feminine curves; the torso joins smoothly to a wide-hipped pair of trousers, which Höch seems to have cut from a larger image, deliberately obscuring whether the clothing advertised was intended for a man or a woman. The smaller figure showcases Höch’s clever manipulation of facial proportions. The upper head, with its crown of braids and heavily made-up eyes, is relieved of its original conventional femininity when it is joined by the larger swell of a man’s lower face; the bridges of the two halves’ noses meet at an almost perfect alignment, unifying the masculine and feminine halves into an oddly-proportioned but relatively seamless whole. The smaller figure’s otherwise masculine torso is joined by a long bare high-heeled leg. The viewer can take inventory of each figure’s component parts—fragmented as they are, they are vulnerable to being visually taken apart and examined—but neither figure’s body can be resolved easily as male or female when they are viewed as whole bodies rather than as assembled fragments.

When Höch’s androgynes of the mid-1920s are understood as fundamentally irresolvable in terms of binary gender, these figures begin to reveal a pathway toward an outright rejection of heteronormative discourse. The coupled figures’ shared gender ambiguity marks them as implicitly homosexual, but if they are impossible to define as male or female, then they function instead as queer—the lack of a singular gender for either figure denies the viewer the ability to fit either figure, or the relationship between them, into a strict classification of gender or sexuality. Understood as androgynes, these fragile, ungainly bodies need not be seen as Third Sex “intermediaries” whose homosexuality and androgyny are a symptom of an inborn deviation from the norms of binary gender. The wholly androgynous body may be fragmented and burdened by the
weight of prescriptive identities and social expectations, but if the androgynous body is not male or female, then it cannot have failed to live up to the norms of masculinity and femininity. This reading of the early androgynes positions them outside heteronormative gender, and begins to show the stirrings of a wholesale rejection of binary gender prescriptions. The early androgynes are still visually discordant and slightly comical, and they are vulnerable to a scientific dissection of their component parts. But, if the whole cannot be conclusively gendered, then the figure of an androgynous body begins to defy the scientific demand for classification. These early androgynous figures lay the groundwork for the self-contained queer androgyny of late Weimar works like *Dompteuse*, which cross over and dissolve gender boundaries and elude classification altogether.
CHAPTER 3

Undefined and Indefinable: Sensuality and Ambiguity in the Late Weimar

Androgynes

Throughout the Weimar era, Hannah Höch’s negotiation of gender in her photomontages was inextricable from themes and images of instability and fragmentation. The connection between gender and instability often manifested in her depiction of fragmented bodies, whether they belonged to normative bourgeois heterosexual figures struggling beneath the weight of contradictory and unattainable gender ideals, or whether they were instead ambiguous androgynes walking an uneasy path outside of the normative gender binary. Additionally, as seen in Equilibre and other similarly-themed photomontages, Höch returned repeatedly to images of precariousness throughout the Weimar period, accompanying her figures with imagery of “balance and aerial suspension” that echoed their unstable identities with spatial tension.85 The pattern of destabilization extends to the relationship between Höch’s works and the viewer. Avoiding a conventional relationship between viewer and image was a concern of Höch’s work from her early days in the Dada movement, a context in which anything too sedate or pictorial would be dismissed by her Dada compatriots as aid and comfort to the bourgeois enemy. In the later Weimar period, however, Höch’s work became more subversive than directly confrontational, and commented on the viewer’s expectations and desires without passively accommodating them.

In the figure of the androgyne, Höch found a particularly potent and radical means of unsettling the viewer’s expectations. A figure who could not be classified as male or

female constituted a wholesale rejection of the viewer’s demand that visual or sexual uncertainty be resolved—and such figures began to offer a means by which the viewer’s own identity and desires could be called into question. It was rare for desire and sensuality to be overtly addressed in Höch’s early Weimar photomontages, and even when they were, the treatment was usually both humorous and internal to the image. Höch’s Coquette series, for instance, featured comical tableaux around heterosexual courtship, with figures that were childish and animalistic in their erotic desire for each other. The androgynous queer couple in Vagabunden are affectionate toward one another, but their own desire is strictly contained within the boundaries of the image; the figures are largely desexualized by their comical proportions and disjointed construction, and the viewer’s own desires and expectations are left unaddressed.

In the late Weimar period, however, Höch’s photomontages began to incorporate sensuality in a new way. The potential was especially strong for an image of an androgynous figure to destabilize its relationship with the viewer by subverting the heteronormative expectations of eroticism. Featuring an androgynous figure radically different from its predecessors of the mid-1920s, Dompteuse (c. 1930) [fig. 8] poses its viewer with an unanswerable conundrum: a figure that refuses to be resolved as male or female, but which insists on being read as sensual. I argue that Dompteuse fundamentally prevents the viewer, regardless of gender, from adopting a definitively “male” or “female” position relative to the figure. The impossibility of gendering Höch’s late Weimar androgynes necessitates that any erotic reading of the figure is inescapably ambiguous. The ambiguity effectively queering the viewer’s gaze, denying the viewer the ability to position himself or herself heterosexually against the figure.
As this chapter will demonstrate, Höch’s late Weimar styles and thematic concerns converge in the androgynous figure at the center of *Dompteuse*. The work is a synthesis of the techniques Höch used to unsettle the strict partitions of heteronormative gender. The work’s compositional differences from Höch’s early Dada photomontages increased visual emphasis on the figure, and Hoch carefully combined gendered component parts to create a radically androgynous and irresolvable gestalt. The fraught sensuality of the figure, and particularly the way this altered its relationship to the viewer, allowed *Dompteuse* to create uncertainty and unsettle the conventional relationship between viewer and artwork. The layered ambiguity of *Dompteuse* and its central figure contributes to the work’s pervasive defiance of the viewer’s expectations—in the refusal of the central figure to submit to passive objecthood and in the work’s destabilization of the viewer’s gendered position as a subject. Lavin, who featured the photomontage on the cover of her essential book on Höch, calls *Dompteuse* “perhaps Höch’s most ambiguous and sophisticated image of androgyny.”86 Through an analysis of the image’s ambiguity and subversion of the gaze, I will demonstrate that it functions as a queer rejection of Weimar prescriptions of binary gender.

*Dompteuse* is one of the most complex negotiations of sensuality and the gendered gaze in Höch’s late Weimar oeuvre, but it is part of a larger pattern in her work of the early 1930s, in which for the first time the artist seriously addressed eroticism. The new theme of sensuality in Höch’s work is especially clear in 1930’s *Platonische Liebe* [fig. 7], a work of the same period and a particularly clear example of Höch’s late Weimar

negotiation of desire—as subject matter within the work itself, and also as an element of the relationship between artwork and viewer. This photomontage, like many of Höch’s collages of the late Weimar period, depicts sensual subject matter while at the same time refusing to yield to the audience’s expectations and desires.

The focal figure of *Platonische Liebe* is a proportional but disparate body that hovers over the landscape—that is, if the assembled parts are intended to create one figure, rather than Lavin’s intriguing interpretation of the figure as the union of two separate entities who “taken together would form one whole body.” Whether one person or two, the figure is comprised of a cohesive, headless nude body, with two hands folded—or, per Lavin, one entity’s hand holding the other’s—over the empty space that gestures toward the figure’s breasts without revealing them. Separate from the body, a disembodied face hangs in the sky, seemingly being lifted upward, with the trails of its shooting star streaking down from the face like long hair. Unlike Höch’s previous photomontages, all parts of the figure are in proportion to one another, and are apparently cut from the same paper.

The solemnity of *Platonische Liebe* in comparison to its earlier Dada counterparts is striking. The simple, careful composition marks Höch’s shift away from fractious, cluttered, visually overwhelming compositions early in the Weimar period in favor of a more subdued and structured simplicity. The unstable and undulating visual plane of works like *Bürgerliches Brautpaar (Streit)* caused each fragment of photomatter to clamor simultaneously for the viewer’s attention; *Platonische Liebe*, by contrast, features a simple composition suggesting pictorial depth, with its few carefully-arranged

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fragments alluding to a naturalistic visual field. The more serene visual style of the later work invites contemplation rather than argument. The calm, almost melancholy mood of Platonische Liebe is established in its color palette, which uses only muted and subdued coloring and forgoes the polychromatic chaos of Höch’s earlier Weimar works. It is thus apparent that the work is not a parody of its subject matter, and it echoes traditional visual invitations to the viewer—for instance in its allusions to landscape and depth—without uncritically recreating the tropes that Höch’s Dada works mocked and rejected altogether.

The suggestion of a naturalistic landscape in Platonische Liebe, an image that is visibly and unabashedly artificial in its construction, establishes a dialectical tension between the acknowledgment of the viewer’s expectations and a refusal to fulfill them. This tension is ubiquitous in Höch’s late Weimar photomontages, and it is especially effective in her negotiation and complication of erotic sensuality. A serenely and pervasively sensual piece, Platonische Liebe quotes the visual idioms of traditional depictions of the female nude, and adopts eroticism as its defining subject matter. At the same time, it subverts traditional expectations of erotic accessibility of the female body in art, and the work ultimately denies the viewer the easy experience of a male-gendered gaze directed at a female object.

If the figure represents one person, the relative cohesiveness of the body allows the figure to echo traditional depictions of the beautiful nude. The ambiguous reading of the figure as the fusion of two people adds an uneasy poignancy to the image’s sensuality, and the interpretation of the figure as two people forming one whole introduces a narrative of emotional and sexual symbiosis. Whether the figure is
comprised of one person or two, the landscape itself echoes its sensuality. The rolling hills of the landscape are cut from photographs featuring gentle curves and soft shadows, abstracted from their original appearance by Höch’s cuts so that their planes of light and shadow resonate with the similar features of the nude. The foremost of the hills even seems to have been cut from a photograph of bare human skin.

The figure in *Platonische Liebe* is undoubtedly erotic, but it refuses to yield to easy objectification by a male-positioned viewing subject. The ethereal dunelike landscape and the figure’s unreal ascent toward the stars are at once compelling and alienating; Höch had by this time likely been exposed to and influenced by Surrealist artwork on her travels to Paris, and *Platonische Liebe* is similarly derationalized and elusive in its refusal to adhere to the pictorial traditions it evokes. The figure is not presented as an object either for rational analysis or for easy delectation. Though undressed, the figure features none of the anatomy that would be present on a conventional female nude. In contrast to *Die Starken Männer*, where Höch deliberately added the contours of the buttocks to a male figure to open it to the erotic gaze, in *Platonische Liebe* she chooses a figure whose bodily details are obscured. Similarly, the face is removed from any original context of jewelry or long hair, and the figure’s arms are crossed over sky, over the space where the model in the original photograph might once have held a drape over her breasts. Where a male-positioned viewing subject might look for entryways to delectation and erotic access to the nude figure, Höch leaves empty spaces open to the stars; the image acknowledges male-positioned desire by leaving absences where that desire might expect to find satisfaction. The foremost hill of the

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landscape presents the mirror of the figure’s dialectical tension—the contours and creases of the skin-like landform hint at anatomy without being identifiable, and are divorced from the context of a figure that might otherwise allow the viewer erotic access.

In *Platonische Liebe*, the primacy of male-positioned desire is subverted by the fact that the image’s eroticism is simultaneously visible and self-contained, existing for the benefit of the figure’s subjectivity rather than the viewer’s. As Judith Butler argues in her discussion of power and the gaze, the stability of the “presumed... heterosexual and masculine” subject position is disrupted by “the unanticipated agency of a female ‘object’ who inexplicably returns the glance [and] reverses the gaze.”90 Indeed, the figure’s body language closes off the image’s eroticism to any intrusions by the viewer—the arms are crossed over the chest, the disembodied face turned away from the viewer rather than acknowledging and welcoming the gaze. Though Lavin identifies “a palpable sensuality established between the female form and [the] smooth, earthly landscape,”91 the fact that this sensuality is rendered inaccessible to the viewer allows the relationship to exist on its own terms rather than as an object of prurience. If we accept Lavin’s reading of the figure as the union of two separate entities, the autonomy of the image’s sensuality is reinforced—the two entities are so wholly sensually engaged with one another that, in their apotheosis, they have folded into a single indissoluble body.

What *Platonische Liebe* reveals is that Höch was acutely aware of the complexities of depicting sensuality, just as she was aware of photomontage’s simultaneous reliance on and criticism toward mainstream commercial culture. Höch

deftly negotiated the critical complexities of eroticism by acknowledging the viewer’s expectations while refusing to yield to them. A normative relationship between viewer and artwork assumed an oppositional relationship of subject/object and active/passive, a relationship that Butler notes was conventionally assumed to be structured as male/female. Höch was aware of the artistic conventions surrounding eroticism that traditionally catered to the male gaze; her incorporation of sensual imagery into her late Weimar photomontages was both a serious engagement with eroticism as subject matter and a means by which she could destabilize the gendered expectations embedded in the relationship between artwork and viewer. *Platonische Liebe* demonstrates how Höch was able to destabilize these expectations even when depicting the traditional “object” of the gaze in the female nude—but in her contemporaneous images of androgynous figures, Höch was able to use sensuality and gender ambiguity together to call the viewer’s very desires and gender positioning into question.

Thus do we arrive at *Dompteuse*, a peculiar and striking androgyne which crystallizes the themes of ambiguity, sensuality, and instability pervasive in Höch’s late Weimar works. The title, translated from the French, is *animal tamer*—the feminine version of the word, but absent the corresponding gendered article. Höch’s history of playing with gendered words in titling her works (as in the pointedly grammatically-neutered Dada piece *Das Schöne Mädchen*) suggests the significance of this choice, especially as she deliberately left her native language to seek out this title. The figure of

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the tamer is comprised of a mix of gendered parts, much as the mid-Weimar androgynes of *Vagabunden* are—but unlike its earlier counterparts, the tamer is assembled from pieces that are proportional to one another and fitted together smoothly to allude to a cohesive body. The figure’s head is taken from a photograph of a mannequin, with long, painted eyes in an elegant face; the mannequin’s thin neck joins smoothly with the broad and muscular bodybuilder’s shoulders, and the arms are folded across the figure’s flat chest. The lower half of the body is clad in a form-fitting pencil skirt, meeting the torso smoothly and thus suggesting the continuity of the figure’s body. The result is a figure for whom any attempts to discern a single, coherent gender are futile—an androgyne that functions as androgyne. Furthermore, the figure’s serious mood, carefully proportional construction, and stance of strength and purposefulness all deny an uneasy viewer the ability to dismiss the figure’s ambiguity as comical. The tamer refuses to be visually dissected for a comfortable resolution of its ambiguity or written off as a figure of ridicule, and this serious and unapologetic ambiguity is in itself a profound shift from Höch’s earlier androgynes.

Where *Dompteuse* becomes radically subversive, though, is in the fact that this irresolvably androgynous figure is depicted in sensual and even erotic terms. The figure integrates photomatter elements that, in their original commercial contexts, denoted the height of masculine and feminine beauty ideals. The well-muscled male arms and the stately, exaggeratedly feminine mannequin’s head represent what were perceived by mainstream culture as opposing poles of normative gender ideals. In one of Höch’s earlier androgynes, these elements might have been used together specifically to clash—but here the head and arms come together in the construction of a proportionate and
stable body, and rather than contradicting one another, the elements are inextricable from the whole they help create. Taken together, the idealized masculine and feminine components cease to read as opposite forces, and instead serve to emphasize both the figure’s beauty and its distance from any binary gender classification. The figure is at once erotic but fundamentally impossible to gender; it alludes to idioms of desirability, is asserted as having desires of its own in its dominant-submissive power play with the seal it is taming, and is presented to the viewer as sensual and beautiful but “inaccessible [and] enclosed within itself.”

The eroticism of Dompteuse is more difficult and confrontational than that of Platonische Liebe. Rather than framing its sensuality as dreamlike or transcendental, Dompteuse creates a complex play of erotic power, both in the relationship between the androgynous tamer and the seal it tames at the lower right of the image, and in the relationship of the viewer to the photomontage itself. True to the title, the tamer presents a dominant figure. It towers over its companion and its body fills the frame of the image. The figure’s arms are crossed, its shoulders tilted as if in a fighting stance; it looks down its long mannequin’s nose at the seal, and the composite body language signals confidence and composure. The androgyne’s power and dominance seem to have been elements that Höch considered important—when transferring the tamer and seal to a new background sometime after 1959, she framed the figure with the image of leather and brass studs, and seems to have slightly rotated the tamer’s orientation, giving it a more

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93 Lavin, “Androgyny, Bisexuality, and Oscillation,” 333.
94 The autobiographical implications of the work are up for debate, but per Makela (“The Interwar Period,” 114), the seal being tamed by the titular Dompteuse possibly represents the artist herself; Höch is known to have used images of seals as coded self-portraits elsewhere in her work.
definitive physical dominance over its companion.95

The tamer itself is inaccessible to the viewer, closed in on itself and refusing attempts at dissection or objectification—but the figure’s relationship to the seal introduces an element of ambiguity to the tamer’s dominance. The seal does not directly acknowledge its tamer’s power. Instead, it peers out at the viewer through the heavy-lidded, mascara-darkened human eyes grafted onto the animal’s head—eyes which are similar in shape to the androgyne’s painted mannequin eyes, introducing an element of cohesiveness and kinship between two otherwise radically different figures. A tiny fragment, almost invisible at first glance, is pasted over the seal’s mouth—the triangular fragment, cut from a picture of a human’s bared teeth, resembles a small and enigmatic smile. The seal is physically and compositionally subordinate, but it looks sidelong at the viewer with a sly, ambiguous smile that calls the totality of the tamer’s serene dominance into question.96 It is unclear whether the seal’s eye contact is inviting the viewer to share in its rebellion, or if in fact the inscrutable joke is at the viewer’s expense. Regardless of what it might mean, the seal’s direct engagement with the viewer is the only invitation into the photomontage, which otherwise closes its internal power play to the viewer’s access.

The eroticism of Dompteuse is centered around, and anchored by, its titular androgyne. Though undeniably a sensual figure, the tamer refuses to be read as the expected female, passive object of desire. The dominant figure claims the photomontage’s eroticism for its own, and its strength and autonomy do not defend its

96 Lavin, “Androgyny, Bisexuality, and Oscillation,” 333.
gender ambiguity from scrutiny, but are *embodied* by the same formal elements that create the tamer’s androgyny. Such a figure cannot be viewed through the comfortably power-structured relationship of a male-positioned subject viewing and desiring a female-positioned object. Indeed, I assert that the image renders impossible the typical heteronormative structuring of viewer desire, destabilizing the gender positions of both viewer and artwork and ultimately forcing a repositioning of the viewer’s gaze and desires as queer.

As Lavin points out, some degree of oscillating identification and desire is typical for a woman who attempts to adopt the coded-male role of actively and subjectively viewing a work of art:

Women in male society, although socialized as feminine, have also generally had to identify with the masculine position as the primary location of action and power. Self-conscious oscillation between the two roles offers women multiple pleasures: first, the possibility or fantasy of occupying both gender positions; second, the perception of both as unfixed or unstable... and third, the destabilization of the [gender] hierarchy.97

Under this framework, it is thus possible and even likely for a female viewer to position herself as a “male” viewing subject. Lavin is primarily concerned with how this oscillation of identification affects the female viewer, but her framework highlights the instability of the heteronormative gendered gaze in general. The desiring gaze identifies itself against the gender of that which it desires—under normative standards, the gaze is gendered male when the object of desire is female, and if a “female gaze” exists at all it is defined by an attraction to the masculine. To borrow a formulation from Judith Butler, gender—in the desiring gaze and in identity—“is achieved and stabilized through heterosexual positioning, and… threats to heterosexuality thus become threats to gender

97 Lavin, “Androgyny, Bisexuality, and Oscillation,” 331.
Each oscillation between gendered positions in a female viewer represents a threat to heteronormative gender. The simultaneous presence, for instance, of a “male desire” for and a “female” identification with the female object of the gaze destabilizes the enforcement of the viewer’s female identity as inherently heterosexual or vice versa. Similarly, a man is both male and heterosexual because “he wants the woman he would never be… he wouldn’t be caught dead being her: therefore he wants her”⁹⁹; to want what isn’t a woman, under the heteronormative paradigm, calls into question whether he is really a man.

The oppositional heterosexual model of desire becomes impossible in the face of such an androgynous figure as the tamer at the center of Dompteuse. The androgyne exists outside the binary concepts of male and female, and as the above analysis demonstrates, it actively resists attempts to place it on a continuum between the two. It defies the viewer’s expectations of being able to read it as a passive object, and it refuses to provide a definitive opposing binary ideal against which the viewer can heterosexually position his or her gaze. Regardless of the viewer’s gender position, the resultant relationship with the figure is ambiguous and fraught with peril because of that ambiguity. Any attempts to reposition one’s gendered gaze relative to the figure will be unsuccessful, forcing oscillation and rendering stabilization of the relationship impossible.

If the androgyne is desirable as well as erotic, then the viewer’s desire cannot help but be queer. The figure cannot be broken down to its gendered parts, some desired and

⁹⁹ Butler, “Melancholy Gender,” 137.
some repudiated, because it is impossible to disassemble; it insists on being read and addressed as a whole entity. A viewer cannot definitively position himself or herself as male or female in opposition to the figure, and thus cannot frame any desire or objectification as heterosexual—but neither can the viewer call the desire homosexual, as this implies a definitive *sameness* rather than a definitive heterosexual opposition. The viewer’s gender position and desire exist in a queer space, less *between* binaries than *across* them. The figure of the tamer in *Dompteuse* resists normative gender classifications of its body and its subjectivity, but—even more radically—it refuses to allow the viewer to adopt a normative gendered position against it. Thus, the androgynous figure of the tamer destabilizes the viewer’s experience of the gendered gaze, desire, and even identity itself.
CONCLUSION

When Hannah Höch’s photomontages began to gain widespread scholarly attention in the 1990s, feminist academics sought to highlight Höch’s unusual role as a woman artist in a male-dominated avant garde. As such, most previous studies of Höch’s work are strongly focused on her critiques of the New Woman and Weimar female identity. Such studies have been vital in raising Höch’s critical profile as a driving force in Berlin Dada, and her work has been a potent vector for scholarly dissections of the myths and realities of womanhood in Weimar Germany. However, too narrow a focus on the theme of womanhood leaves some of Höch’s most nuanced and complex images comparatively unexamined. The majority of the previous scholarship on Höch’s use of androgynous imagery in her photomontages has approached the subject from either a biographical or feminist perspective, and the androgynes have typically been interpreted as gender-nonconforming women rather than as figures of ambiguous or plural gender. Even Dompteuse is described by some scholars as a “‘new woman’ figure,”¹⁰⁰ a reading that limits the figure’s radical androgyny solely to its implications in a critique of womanhood.

With the recent rise of queer theory scholarship and, even more recently, of masculinity studies, the time has come to revisit Höch’s critiques of gender, in terms of heteronormativity and the prescriptive gender binary as well as in terms of Höch’s concern with women’s sufferings.¹⁰¹ As the previous chapters have demonstrated, Höch was a keen observer of a wide range of gender archetypes, and of the insecurities attached to nonconforming behaviors. Höch’s Weimar photomontages—particularly those

¹⁰⁰ Hemus, Dada’s Women, 124.
¹⁰¹ Hemus, Dada’s Women, 116.
featuring androgynous figures—demonstrate a restless awareness of both the artificiality of the system of heteronormative gender archetypes, and of the overwhelming social power those archetypes wielded.

The Weimar cultural milieu in which Höch created these images was pervaded by insecurities regarding binary gender, but, far from being an isolated and exceptional tinderbox of social tensions, the system of normative gender in the Weimar Republic was simply an especially visible and volatile manifestation of the insecurities underpinning binary gender archetypes throughout the West. Furthermore, the archetypes Höch examined and critiqued are not historical artifacts—monolithic archetypes of masculine strength and vigor, and self-contradictory and untenable prescriptions of feminine behavior, are familiar to this day, and they carry with them the same insecure heteronormativity and cultural reinforcement. To highlight Höch’s critique of the wider system of gender archetypes is to highlight the continued critical relevance of Höch’s photomontages. While the photomontages were by definition comprised of the material culture of a specific time and place, the aspects of Höch’s work that have gone unexamined by previous scholarship are the same aspects that reach beyond their historical moment and assert their relevance to contemporary Western culture. This study has focused on Höch’s androgynes in part because of their relevance to their particular historical moment, but also because even eight decades after the creation of Dompteuse, imagery of androgyny still retains its ability to unsettle heteronormative conceptions of gender. Consider for instance the use of androgyny in contemporary fashion, in which (much like in Weimar fashion photography\textsuperscript{102}) masculine clothing on a female body is

\textsuperscript{102} Lavin, \textit{Kitchen Knife}, 198.
deployed for titillation and paradoxically to heighten the model’s femininity—but in which male-bodied models modeling feminine clothing are considered either humorous or transgressive and shocking.

This study has sought to directly address the androgyny of the figures featured in Höch’s mid-to-late Weimar photomontages, beyond previous studies’ interpretations of the androgynes as a commentary on New Womanhood or female homosexuality. In a queer reading of these images, androgyny is a disruption of the oppositional gender binary rather than an intermediary position within it. The preceding chapters have sought to open the door to an understanding of Höch’s Weimar photomontages as addressing the entire system of heteronormative binary gender, and to highlight the ability of her androgynous imagery to function as a queer disruption of that system. Höch’s engagement with tropes of normative masculinity in particular is a site for possible future exploration, especially in the context of Weimar Germany’s vitally important and at the time largely unspoken insecurities surrounding masculinity. Höch’s androgynes, however, are utterly crucial to an understanding of her navigation of heteronormative gender in the Weimar-era photomontages. In their irresolvability as one binary gender or the other, and eventually in their immunity to the burdens of normative gender expectations, the androgynes subvert heteronormative gender roles and ultimately entirely upend them.

The culture in which Höch’s Weimar photomontages were created was rife with insecure heteronormativity. As demonstrated in the first chapter, Höch was acutely aware of both the archetypes of ideal masculinity and of the latently dangerous insecurities that originated them. Höch’s images of heteronormative masculinity were sophisticated and
subversive, highlighting the fault-lines in the mythic masculine ideal. As Makela begins to argue, Höch counters normative masculinity with the possibility of rejecting gender norms through an androgynous blurring of the lines between the binary genders. But Höch’s androgynous figures were often compositionally delicate and unstable. These images had to contend with cultural expectations and scientific narratives imposed on androgyny—with discourses that positioned homosexuality and nonconforming gender presentation as a Third Sex, a failed intermediary position splitting the difference between the dominant and opposing two sexes. However, these figures are constructed as wholly androgynous rather than as male or female, and thus they avoid being categorized definitively as “failed” women or men. Such a fundamental ambiguity of gender renders even the early androgynes’ bodies and couplings as queer, and the figures cannot be absorbed by scientific and cultural discourses that demanded the definitive classification of non-normative appearances and behaviors.

It is in this irresolvable ambiguity that, I have argued, Höch’s androgynes of the late Weimar period in particular have drawn much of their lingering power. *Dompteuse* is a work of multifaceted and immediate ambiguity, with the central figure’s androgyny as the key to its destabilizing effect overall. *Dompteuse* creates an uneasy relationship with the viewer that denies easy gender positioning. Through its concerted ambiguities, the work insists on being read as queer—a demonstration of both the ability of an androgynous image to destabilize binary conceptions of gender rather than residing uncomfortably in the middle, and of a radical use of the gendered gaze to call the viewer’s own desires into question.

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Höch’s earliest images of androgyny depicted disruptively ambiguous queer bodies in a cultural context that was reluctant to acknowledge the existence of queer bodies without rigorous scientific explanation, which was revolutionary in itself. Höch’s creation in the late Weimar period of androgynes who were inescapably androgynous, sensual, and resistant to objectification allowed her photomontages to extend their revolutionary ambiguity past the edge of the frame, and even past the Weimar historical context—to destabilize, if only for a moment, the viewer’s own existence within the bounds of normative gender. Höch’s androgynes retain their disruptive power in our contemporary West, which still glamorizes physical power as the height of masculinity and positions male and female as an irreconcilable oppositional hierarchy. To suggest a plurality of gender rather than a binary opposition, and to destabilize the viewer’s expectation of easy resolutions, is as revolutionary now as it ever was.
figure 1: Bürgerliches Brautpaar – Streit (Bourgeois Wedding Couple – Quarrel)
Hannah Höch, photomontage, 1919
figure 2: *Die Starken Männer* (The Strong Men)  
Hannah Höch, photomontage and watercolor, 1931

figure 3: Max Schmeling  
*Die Querschnitt* 6, no. 12 (Dec. 1926)
figure 4: *Equilibre [Balance]*
Hannah Höch, photomontage and watercolor, 1925
figure 5: *Vagabunden* (Vagabonds)
Hannah Höch, photomontage, 1926

figure 6: “Büb oder Mädel?” ("Boy or Girl?")
*Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung* 37, no. 21 (May 20, 1928)
figure 7: *Platonische Liebe* (Platonic Love)
Hannah Höch, photomontage, 1930
figure 8: *Dompteuse* (Animal Tamer)
Hannah Höch, photomontage, c. 1930
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