



**WOLFSONIAN**

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### 'AGITATED IMAGES: JOHN HEARTFIELD & GERMAN PHOTOMONTAGE, 1920–1938'



*Voice of Freedom in the German Night,  
on Radio Wave 29.8*

John Heartfield (German, 1891–1968)  
*Volks Illustrierte* 16 (April 21, 1937)  
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New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

Miami Beach, FL (March 26, 2007)—*Agitated Images: John Heartfield & German Photomontage, 1920–1938* explores the wide impact of John Heartfield's politically charged works. John Heartfield (German, born Helmut Herzfeld, 1891–1968) was a pioneer of modern photomontage and one of the most significant practitioners of the technique. A member of Berlin Dada, Heartfield developed a unique method of appropriating and reusing photographs to disclose what he saw as the “truth” obscured by fascist propaganda and the mainstream press. Working in Germany and Czechoslovakia in the chaotic period between the two world wars, he had a deep understanding of an image's power. His ability to assemble visual statements that spoke louder than words transformed photomontage from a vehicle of advertising and avant-garde art into a broadly significant mode of mass communication.

Organized by the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles and curated by Andrés Mario Zervigón, assistant professor of art history at Rutgers University, *Agitated Images* concentrates on the interwar world of publishing in which Heartfield's images appeared. The exhibition will be on view at The Wolfsonian from September 21, 2007 through February 10, 2008.

Heartfield envisioned his photomontages as a crucial way to reveal what he saw as a distortion between reality and appearance in messages carried by the mainstream media during a time of increasing uncertainty. He concentrated on using published photographs that had already played a role in shaping public perception, choosing recognizable press pictures of politicians or events, and juxtaposed these images to radically alter their meaning. “*Agitated Images* is a natural fit with the Wolfsonian's mission to offer insights about design's active role in shaping everyday experiences,” notes Marianne Lamonaca, chief curator and associate director for curatorial affairs and education. “Heartfield captured the disjunctive experiences of modernity through his clever appropriation of imagery, and gave visual form

to his social and political convictions.” In a piece for the independent leftist publication *AIZ* (*Die Arbeiter-Illustrierte Zeitung* or *Workers Illustrated Magazine*), Heartfield overlaid a photograph of Hitler delivering a speech with a chest X-ray, adding the caption “Adolf, the superman, swallows gold and spouts tin.”

Heartfield’s image reveals the contradictions between Hitler’s financial support from wealthy industrialists and his working-man rhetoric as a “National Socialist.” When this photomontage was reproduced as a political poster in 1932, Communists and Nazis brawled on the street as the former sought to preserve the posters and the latter struggled to rip them down. Heartfield’s images, however, were not always critical. When praising his political allies, he often did not convert a photograph’s meaning but, instead, simply presented or amplified that meaning uncritically through existing associations.

The exhibition includes a large number of Heartfield’s book cover designs, his only complete book design project, *Deutschland, Deutschland über alles* (*Germany, Germany above All Else*), and many of his best-known works for the magazine *Die Arbeiter-Illustrierte Zeitung* (*The Workers’ Illustrated Magazine* or *AIZ*). Also featured are original press photographs used by Heartfield and examples of the 19th-century satire on which Heartfield based many of his images. To provide context for his photomontages, the magazine articles Heartfield illustrated are also included.

Trained in advertising, Heartfield found his political voice soon after he was drafted into World War I. He anglicized his name in protest and began sending subversive photomontaged postcards to the front that mocked the pro-war culture of the national leadership. After the war in 1918, Heartfield joined Germany’s new Communist Party, the KPD, and began using his art to agitate for their cause through bold poster designs that used a spare set of symbols or faces to create a strong impact. Equally arresting were his book jacket designs using dramatic photographs, unusual spatial compositions, and dynamic typesetting to call attention to obscure or foreign left-wing titles. The German translation of California author Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle* (*Der Sumpf*) was noted for the extended scale of its cover image, spreading over the front, back, and spine of the book, and for its integration of text and image.

Heartfield was most prolific in newsprint. He began contributing photomontages to publications such as the KPD newspaper *Die Rote Fahne* (*The Red Flag*) and its satirical magazine *Der Knüppel* (*The Cudgel*) in the 1920s, and later to the *AIZ*. The *AIZ*’s high print quality gave Heartfield the opportunity to cultivate subtle visual details in his photomontages. From the intimate act of reading the magazine, Heartfield’s powerful full-page images could nearly overwhelm the reader with a visual encounter that turned the news into an agitating experience.

#### About The Wolfsonian—Florida International University

The Wolfsonian is a museum, library, and research center that uses objects to illustrate the persuasive power of art and design, to explore what it means to be modern, and to tell the story of social, historical, and technological changes that have transformed our world. The collections comprise approximately 120,000 objects from the period of 1885 to 1945—the height of the Industrial Revolution to the end of the Second World War—in a variety of media including furniture; industrial-design objects; works in glass, ceramics, and metal; rare books; periodicals; ephemera; works on paper; paintings; textiles; and medals.

The Wolfsonian is located at 1001 Washington Avenue, Miami Beach, Fla. Admission is \$7 adults; \$5 seniors, students, and children six-12; free for Wolfsonian members, State University System of Florida staff and students with ID, children under six, and Miami Beach residents with ID. The museum is open Monday, Tuesday, Saturday and Sunday from noon-6pm; Thursday and Friday from noon-9pm; and is closed on Wednesday. Contact us at 305.531.1001 or visit us online at [www.wolfsonian.org](http://www.wolfsonian.org).

The Wolfsonian receives ongoing support from the State of Florida, Department of State, Division of Cultural Affairs, the Florida Arts Council and the National Endowment for the Arts; Miami-Dade County Department of Cultural Affairs and the Cultural Affairs Council, the Miami-Dade County Mayor and Board of County Commissioners; City of Miami Beach, Cultural Affairs Program, Cultural Arts Council; Crispin Porter + Bogusky; Continental Airlines, the preferred airline of The Wolfsonian; the Arthur F. and Alice E. Adams Foundation; and Karla Conceptual Event Experiences.

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