The Dissenting Art of Willy Fick

By Carson Phillips

> *In the decline of middle-class society, contemplation became a school for asocial behavior; it was countered by distraction as a variant of social conduct. Dadaistic activities actually assured a rather vehement distraction by making works of art the centre of the scandal. One requirement was foremost: to outrage the public. From an alluring appearance or persuasive structure of sound, the work of art of the Dadaists became an instrument of ballistics. It hit the spectator like a bullet, it happened to him, thus acquiring a tactile quality.*[1]

With these words from his landmark 1936 essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", cultural critic Walter Benjamin defined the immense potential for power that art held. Benjamin was writing in exile in France, only three years after the Nazi ascent to power, and a year before the Nazis culminated their attack on modern art forms with the opening of their *Entartete Kunst* (Degenerate Art) exhibition in Munich in 1937. Indeed, it was the potential power of art to encourage questioning, to provoke discussion, to galvanize communities, and to disturb national narratives that made modern art a potent enemy to the National Socialist regime. Benjamin recognized Fascism's drive to aestheticize politics and eerily foreshadowed the outcome of National Socialism in Germany with haunting accuracy when he included in his essay that, "All efforts to render politics aesthetic culminate in one thing: war".[2]

Over a period of time, art in Nazi Germany was re-conceptualized along ideological lines to benefit National Socialism. Artists who stylistic endeavours did not meet with

[1] Walter Benjamin. Illuminations. (New York: Schocken Books, 1969) Hannah Arendt, ed. p. 231
[2] Ibid. p. 234

the approval of the regime found themselves ostracized from exhibitions. Willy Fick, a Cologne artist, was one such individual. His provocative work was most certainly what the Nazis considered degenerate and consequently his career was cut tragically short. After 1933, with the possibilities for exhibitions curtailed, Fick returned to his former job with the City of Cologne.[3] Although he may have continued to produce art privately, his public career ended. A few months before his death in 1967, Willy Fick moved to Whitby, Ontario to be with his nephew Frank Eggert and family.[4] This move established Canada's connection with the artist and set the foundation for the resurgence of interest in his work.

Fick was a victim of the careful re-ordering of the cultural domains during Germany's National Socialist period. It was, however, the domain of art to which Adolf Hitler felt a particular and personal attachment.[5] The twice-failed applicant to the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts oversaw the intertwining of the cultural aesthetics of the German nation with the politics of National Socialism. This blending of art and politics encouraged Hitler's new German *Volk* to adopt a *Kulturgemeinschaft* (a collective cultural identity) over individual expression. Nazi- approved art was a pragmatic visual vehicle that dictated and elucidated the new Aryan aesthetic. Art that the Nazis designated as Aryan art served as a cultural catalyst to unite the new German *Volk* with National Socialism. One might well imagine *eine Kunst* (one art) being part of the popular Nazi propaganda slogan: *Ein Volk, ein Reich, ein Führer – One People, one Empire, one Leader.*

Not surprisingly, the politically left-leaning Fick found himself outside the parameters of this Nazi art world. During the 1920s, he was a member of the Cologne Stupid group, whose Dadaistic art expressed a definitively left-wing socialist sympathy and caused a sensation in the Cologne art scene. Fick's strongly personal style was undoubtedly influenced by his German military service in WWI. Through art, he

[3] Wulf Herzogenrath and Dirk Teuber. *Willy Fick, A Cologne Artist of the 20s Rediscovered* (Cologne: Wienand, 1986) p.85
[4] Ibid. p.90
[5] Alan E. Steinweis. "Antisemitism and the Arts in Nazi Ideology and Policy" in *The Arts in Nazi Germany.* Eds. Jonathan Huener and Francis R. Nicosia. (Vermont: Berghahn Books, 2006.) p.16

expressed pacifist and political leanings. While social commentary and critique were characteristic of his art, such features also caused his banishment by the Nazis from the art scene.

Today, when viewing Fick's surviving artistic representations, his original style propels us to contemplate the meanings in his work. We are moved to probe why his was considered threatening to the National Socialists. The answers to these queries are found in the worldview of National Socialism. For the Nazis, cultural productions were inextricably linked to expressions of race. In their view, only those the Nazis considered Aryans were capable of producing "true" art, thereby preserving "true" German culture. Fick's leftist political leanings disqualified him from being considered truly Aryan. Furthermore, Fick's connection to Dadaism conflicted with Hitler's personal views on this most expressive and provocative art form. Hitler addressed the subject in *Mein Kampf* stating that Cubism and Dadaism were the symptoms of a biological degradation resulting from Bolshevist influences that threatened the collective German *Volk*.[6]

A paramilitary orientation was an integral aspect of the way political culture was recomposed during the Nazi Fascist period.[7] In this context it is not surprising that Fick found himself a cultural outcast. Fick's Dadaist influences and original style could have undermined the very message that National Socialism sought to deliver. As social theorist Paul Gilroy wrote: "The muting power of icons is linked ultimately to prohibitions on what can be spoken, to the silencing of the population, and to a characteristic pressure on language itself that helps to define totalitarian governance via its obligatory investment in circumlocutions, euphemisms, and codes".[8] National Socialism, with its own agenda, icons and imagery, could not afford the messages of dissent that could be delivered through the modern art forms. It could ill afford the art works of Willy Fick.

When we further apply the lens of gender to Fick's works, we discover more conflict. For Fick, masculinity did not equate with the National Socialist vision of the new

[6] Adolf Hitler. Mein Kampf. Translated by Ralph Mannheim. (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2001) p. 258
[7] Paul Gilroy. Against Race. (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2000) p.165
[8] Ibid. p. 163

German male who Hitler characterized as: "slender and supple, swift as a greyhound, tough as leather, and as hard as Krupp steel".[9] Instead, the men of Fick's works were depicted as being open to questioning their role in society and to the conceptualizations of masculinity. At the very least, they appear ambiguous about their role in a commoditized society. The almost brutish form of the male athlete that Fick presented in *Homo Sapiens* (p.24) was certainly not in accord with the Nazi-idealized Aryan male. Fick's boxer gazes awkwardly towards some unidentified point as his defeated opponent lays prostrate in the ring. There seems little joy in either his strength or his victory. Boxing may be interpreted here as a spectacle or as a denigration of humanity which has drawn spectators from both the proletariat and the bourgeoisie – as represented by the workers' caps and the bowler hats. With only one forlorn-looking woman sitting in the stands, we may interpret a masculinity that is both awkward and uncertain.

The Boxer representation is far removed from the aesthetic presented convincingly by Hitler's favourite conceptual artist Leni Riefenstahl. In her body of work glorifying the Aryan principles of masculinity, the new German male is characterized by a muscular, smooth-skinned physique, exuding sensuality and confidence. As Susan Sontag writes: "All four of Riefenstahl's commissioned Nazi films – whether about Party congresses, the *Wehrmacht,* or athletes – celebrate the rebirth of the body and of community, mediated through the worship of an irresistible leader".[10]

Fick's works also question the models of femininity advocated by National Socialism. His haunting work Girl in the Hall is not the dirndl-clad Aryan maiden of a National Socialist vision. Instead, she may be seen as representative of a woman searching for herself and her individual expression in a changing society. A seemingly androgynous, solitary form inhabits a nearly empty room. The cracks creeping up the walls may well be interpreted as the changes unfolding in society as the forlorn and anonymous girl tries to negotiate her place in society. Devoid of hope, the protagonist appears to represent the most marginalized in society. Fick's works disturb the national narratives that National Socialism sought to instill, threatening its standardized models of masculinity and femininity.

Through their dissenting artwork, artists such as Willy Fick remained true to their artistic integrity. His thoughtful probing into societal values is as relevant today as

[9] Frederic Spotts. *Hitler and the Power of Aesthetics*. (New York: The Overlook Press,2004) p.109
[10] Susan Sontag. *Fascinating Fascism*.(New York Review of Books, Feb.6, 1975)

they were in the 1920s and 1930s. Walter Benjamin wrote: "From an alluring appearance or persuasive structure of sound the work of art of the Dadaists became an instrument of ballistics. It hit the spectator like a bullet, it happened to him, thus acquiring a tactile quality".[11] More than 60 years later, Fick's remarkable art continues to function in precisely the manner Benjamin described.

Bibliography:

Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations*. Edited with an Introduction by Hannah Arendt. New York: Schocken Books, 1969.

Gilroy, Paul. *Against Race*. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2000.

Herzogenrath, Wulf and Dirk Tueber. *Willy Fick: A Cologne Artist of the 20s Rediscovered*. Translated by Angie Littlefield. Cologne: Wienand Verlag, 1986.

Hitler, Adolf. Mein Kampf. Translated by Ralph Mannheim. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2001.

Sontag, Susan. "Fascinating Fascism" in *New York Review of Books*, Vol. 22, No.1, (Feb.6, 1975)

Spotts, Frederic. *Hitler and the Power of Aesthetics*. New York: The Overlook Press, 2004.

Steinweis, Alan E., "Antisemitism and the Arts in Nazi Ideology and Policy" in *The Arts in Nazi Germany*. Edited by Jonathan Huener and Francis R. Nicosia. Vermont: Berghahn Books, 2006.

Published in *The Art of Dissent Exhibition Catalogue*. Toronto: Holocaust Centre of Toronto, 2008.

[11] Walter Benjamin. *Illuminations*. (New York: Schocken Books, 1969) Hannah Arendt, ed. p.231