

Otto Dix: Bodily Negotiations of Trauma in Weimar Germany

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B.A., Grand Valley State University, 2012

THESIS

Submitted as partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts in Museum and Exhibition Studies
in the Graduate College of the
University of Illinois at Chicago, 2015

Chicago, Illinois

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For Zeke, who makes me determined
to work for a more just and inclusive world.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

<u>CHAPTER</u>	<u>PAGE</u>
1. INTRODUCTION: DISABILITY, AESTHETICS, AND THE ART MUSEUM.....	1
2. RE-EMBODYING THE MEMORY OF WORLD WAR I.....	10
3. A SOCIAL ART HISTORY OF PROSTHESES IN OTTO DIX'S <i>PRAGUE STREET</i>	24
4. THE VETERAN'S BODY AS MIXED MEDIA.....	37
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	48
VITA.....	51

LIST OF FIGURES

<u>FIGURE</u>	<u>PAGE</u>
1. Otto Dix, <i>Prague Street</i>	9
2. <i>Skat Players</i>	21
3. <i>45% Fit for Employment</i>	22
4. First International Dada Fair.....	23
5. Man on knuckle board.....	34
6. “Anglesey” leg.....	35
7. “Carnes” arms.....	35
8. Siemens-Schuckert work arm.....	36
9. The Berlin Secession.....	47

INTRODUCTION: DISABILITY, AESTHETICS, AND THE ART MUSEUM

Disability is everywhere in history, once you begin looking for it, but conspicuously absent in the histories we write. – Douglas C. Baynton¹

Arguably no other cultural institution has wielded greater influence on the formation of aesthetics than the art museum. Museum scholarship has helped to shape both the canon of art history and publicly accepted notions of beauty. Disability has never been absent from this process; in fact, aesthetics and representations of the human body in all its diversity have long been intertwined. People with disabilities, however, have rarely been recognized as subjects on their own terms. Instead, irregular bodies in art history have usually been interpreted as symbolic or moralizing figures—the victim, the heroic underdog, the pitied beggar, the disfigured villain. These reductive archetypes both demarcate normativity and erase difference by treating disability as allegory or spectacle. Lack of recognition for the disabled subject has also created false narratives about bodies of the past as being whole, fit, and able. As historian Katherine Ott states, “The ideal that we imagine in history or project into historic spaces is unquestionably able-bodied, despite knowledge that disability was certainly a powerful influence on everyday life (as it is today).”² In truth, all bodies are non-normative to some degree. History is populated by imperfect bodies marked by age, labor, and disease; having scarred faces, missing limbs, stooped backs, limping gaits, and any number of abnormalities. Yet aesthetic standards of beauty across cultures continue to privilege the able-bodied and stigmatize difference.

¹ Douglas C. Baynton, “Disability and the Justification of Inequality in American History” in *The New Disability History: American Perspectives*, ed. Paul K. Longmore and Lauri Uschansky (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 33.

² Katherine Ott, “Disability and the Practice of Public History: An Introduction,” *The Public Historian* 27, no. 2 (2005): 13.

Dare to imagine, however, if museums and cultural institutions leveraged their influence toward working for a more just and inclusive history of art, one that embraced the enriching and operative presence of physical, cognitive, and sensory difference. As aesthetic gatekeepers, museums are “an ideal location where visitors can be prodded to reframe what they know using a disability consciousness.”³ Disability has never been absent from the history of art, but rather its centrality has been chronically understudied. The works of many twentieth century artists, in particular, reverberate with radical human forms that transgress the boundaries of corporeal acceptability. Thus what is needed in art historical scholarship is not simply “compensation history” or “heritage hunting,” but an intentional rereading of the canon with the resolve to privilege marginalized themes and figures connected to the experience of disability.⁴ Owning a field of study in which affect plays an important role, art historians, curators, and museum professionals have an opportunity to use their praxis to inspire a greater understanding of the lives of people with disabilities. Disability theorist Tobin Siebers intimates this when he states, “Since aesthetic feelings of pleasure and disgust are difficult to separate from political feelings of acceptance and rejection... objects representing disability tell us about the ideals of political community underlying works of art.”⁵ By reexamining the aesthetic investments and anxieties surrounding anomalous bodies in art history, we can open dialogue around histories of

³ Katherine Ott, “Collective Bodies: What Museums Do for Disability Studies,” in *Re-presenting Disability*, ed. Richard Sandell, Jocelyn Dodd, and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (New York: Routledge, 2013), 271.

⁴ Paul K. Longmore and Lauri Umansky, “Introduction: Disability History: From the Margins to the Mainstream” in *The New Disability History: American Perspectives* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 15.

⁵ Tobin Siebers, *Disability Aesthetics* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: The University of Michigan Press, 2010), 2.

oppression, challenge ableist structures and attitudes in society, and advocate for a world where corporeal diversity is no longer treated as stigma.

This project, which focuses on the work of German artist Otto Dix through the lens of a disability history of World War I, is intended to provoke further research into the intersection between art history and disability studies in order to assert a place for the disabled body as subject. It should serve as an example of what a disability art history would be like. War, more than nearly any other historical topic, brings disability to the forefront. In the case of World War I, the material legacy of irreparable wounds and altered bodies influenced the trajectory of modern art, particularly in Germany. A part of both the Dada and Neue Sachlichkeit (New Objectivity) art movements, Dix drew inspiration from the form and visuality of veterans' non-normative bodies and was empathetic toward their individual and collective socio-political circumstances. Using *Prague Street*, 1920, as a case study, I argue that Dix embraced the alterity of postwar bodies in a way that resisted either pitying or vilifying difference (Fig. 1). Through his attentiveness to the effects of corporeal trauma on modern ontology, Dix created an unflinching critique of social prejudices and ableist investments in the body in Weimar culture. By focusing on this aspect of his work, I desire both to intervene in Dix scholarship and to address the absence of disability concerns in discussions of German Dada.

My argument for the necessity of a disability art history is influenced by the social model of disability, which locates the cause of disablement and the need for corrective action not with individuals but with society and the restrictive barriers it constructs. In a manner similar to contemporary society, Germany under the Weimar Republic viewed aberrant bodies as inherently disabled and sought to improve their adequacy and productivity by fixing impairments. The medical field privileged able and normative bodies as the standard to conform

to, as it continues to do today. In their introduction to the anthology *The New Disability History*, Paul K. Longmore and Lauri Umansky explain that from this perspective, “physiological impairments produce personal limitations in performing the ‘major life activities’ ordinarily ‘expected’ of people in particular age groups.”⁶ The social model of disability instead recognizes that “disability... is a socially and culturally constructed identity” and shifts the onus to governments and institutions that produce disabling environments.⁷ Oppressive barriers take many forms, from government policies to built environments to cultural attitudes and assumptions about quality of life. People with disabilities have historically been denied equal education, employment, and housing, access to healthcare, legal protection, voting sites, public transportation, and other basic services. The contemporary disability rights movement seeks to redress these social injustices. Dix and the other German Dadaists were aware of them in their own time. Because disability is culturally constructed, a disability art history would trace how that identity has changed across time and space and how artists have been involved in the history of oppression and resistance.

Many twenty-first century activists have begun the work of disability justice in the arts. Among them are Richard Sandell, Jocelyn Dodd, and Rosemarie Garland Thomson, whose anthology *Re-presenting Disability* addresses the fraught history of disability within exhibition practice and presents case studies for inclusion and reciprocity within museums and cultural spaces. The language and theories of other activist-scholars have also guided this project. In considering the social implications of *Prague Street*, theories drawn from black studies framed my understanding of affect, sociality, pathological bodies, and fungibility. Saidiya Hartman’s

⁶ Paul K. Longmore and Lauri Umansky, “Introduction: Disability History: From the Margins to the Mainstream,” 7.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 19.

exploration of violence inscribed upon the flesh and her concept of phobogenic ontology also influenced my reading of Dix's disabled subjects. Considering the lines of convergence and departure between disability studies and the positions of other traditionally disadvantaged groups has allowed to me think broadly about ontologies of oppression.

Within the field of disability studies, the work of several historians has informed my research; among them David Gerber, Professor of History at the University of Buffalo; Katherine Ott, Curator at the Smithsonian National Museum of American History; Heather Perry, Assistant Professor of History at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte; and Carol Poore, Professor of German studies at Brown University. In their writing, these scholars stress the materiality of their subjects. Disability history, as a discipline, contains an insistent emphasis on corporeality that I seek to emulate and apply to the visual field. In considering the wounding and rehabilitation of veteran bodies, I lean heavily on disability historians' example of allowing for contextual nuance and their care not to collapse individual identities into a reductive or monolithic definition of disability.

I have also depended more broadly on a few historians that are outside the field of disability studies but whose approaches to reinterpreting World War I and the following decades proved instructive. George Mosse's work on masculinity in postwar Germany, as well as his explanation of the history of eugenics, informed my understanding of ableism during the Weimar Republic. Emily Mayhew's book *Wounded* reworks the account of the war from the perspective of medics, ambulance drivers, and injured soldiers. Although her history focuses on France, I drew inspiration from her method of considering personal vignettes rather than state narratives and her thoughts on the contrast between individual and official memory. Similarly, Adam Hochschild's *To End All Wars: A Story of Love and Rebellion, 1914-1918*, frames the conflict

from an alternate perspective— that of those who opposed the war. Although Dix was not strictly a pacifist, Hochschild’s account of anti-war protests parallels Dix’s disillusionment at the senseless carnage of industrial warfare.

The work of other disability scholars, most notably Tobin Siebers, has been instrumental in my attempt to cross between disciplines and apply disability history to works of art. Siebers’ books *Disability Theory* and *Disability Aesthetics* both delve into the role of affect in contemporary interactions between able-bodied and disabled people. According to Siebers, aesthetics inherently concerns corporeality because it “tracks the sensations that some bodies feel in the presence of other bodies.”⁸ In *Disability Aesthetics*, he theorizes that the disabled body is not only present in the history of modern art but was a significant and defining source behind the aesthetic choices of modern painters including Picasso, Chagall, Klee, Modigliani, and many more. He argues that modern art reflects a disability aesthetic, which “posits the human body and its affective relation to other bodies as foundational to the appearance of the beautiful.”⁹ For Siebers:

To argue that disability has a rich but hidden role in the history of art is not to say that disability has been excluded. It is rather the case that disability is rarely recognized as such, even though it often serves as the very factor that establishes works as superior examples of aesthetic beauty. To what concept, other than the idea of disability, might be referred modern art’s love affair with misshapen and twisted bodies, stunning variety of human forms, intense representation of traumatic injury and psychological alienation, and unyielding preoccupation with wounds and tormented flesh? Disability intercedes in the modern period to make the difference between good and bad art—and not as one would initially expect. That is, good art incorporates disability.¹⁰

⁸ Tobin Siebers, *Disability Aesthetics*, 1.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., 4.

This argument, along with Siebers' analysis of the aura of damaged artworks, greatly informs my exploration of *Prague Street*. Ato Quayson's book *Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation*, although written with a literary focus, also concerns the intertwined relationship between disability representation and affect theory. Quayson brings an added layer of understanding from diasporic studies to the discussion of disability representation. He posits that the anxiety that able-bodies feel in the presence of people with physical disabilities is a learned cultural response, stimulated on the one hand by voyeurism—the urge to stare at corporeal difference—and on the other an unease about one's own corporeality.¹¹

Lastly, this project draws on the art historical analyses of several scholars who have written about the work of Otto Dix and about Dada in Germany, among them Matthew Biro, Brigid Doherty, Paul Fox, Susan Laikin Funkenstein, William H. Robinson, and Ada Vlajić. The breadth of their arguments and varied methods allows me to reconstruct Dix's practice and determine my own position on the content and meaning of his images. In addition, Amy Lyford's article on the materiality of the male body in Surrealism helped me to frame ideas about the enfleshment of artistic practice. Matthew Biro, whose theories on the Dada cyborg draw connection between collage and reconstituted bodies, also validated my reading of embodiment in Dix's work and is a key source for my analysis of *Prague Street*. Both Fox and Doherty explore the legacy of psychological trauma in Dada montage, and their arguments strongly directed my approach to thinking about mixed-media and fragmentation in Dix's work. Doherty views post-traumatic stress as the origin of collage and photomontage; I argue that the disabled body, torn and sundered, was equally influential to Dada aesthetics and interconnected to the psychological trauma of the war. The intervention I aspire to make in Dix scholarship is to

¹¹ Ato Quayson, *Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 7.

emphasize the materiality of trauma his work contains and to argue that it was grounded in the lived experience of disability, not only an abstract tool for revolutionary art. Throughout my analysis, I strive not to reduce Dix's subjects to metaphor but instead to consider them as corporeal agents with interiority, specificity, and broader art historical implications. In *Prague Street*, Dix's representation of the prevalence and multivalence of corporeal disability in Weimar Germany necessitates a layered interpretation.

The model for a disability art history I propose, then, is assembled from multiple disciplines. As Ana Carden-Coyne states in her chapter for Longmore and Umansky's *Re-presenting Disability*:

Museums and curators will need to be creative and daring in the future if they wish to tackle the significantly omitted subject of the relationship between war and disability. Museums will need a greater commitment to comprehending disability as a politics of war and its aftermath, thoughtfully engaging with the legacies of violence without turning disabled people into exemplary victims or heroic bodies redeemed in narratives of false uplift.¹²

Exploring the influence of social, economic, and political conditions on veterans' lived experiences and negotiations of their war-induced physical disabilities in Weimar Germany, this project lays the groundwork for understanding representations of disability in art history through a contextual lens. Altered and aberrant bodies were generative to both the work of Otto Dix and the Dada movement as a whole. By privileging this facet of World War I and its aftermath, long overshadowed by ableist narratives, I hope to incite other students and scholars to pursue a more inclusive history of art until disability is no longer viewed as an abject condition but rather an expected and acknowledged part of art and society.

¹² Ana Carden Coyne, "Ghosts in the War Museum" in *Re-presenting Disability*, ed. Richard Sandell, Jocelyn Dodd, and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (New York: Routledge, 2013), 76.



Figure 1: Otto Dix, *Prague Street (Devoted to My Contemporaries)*, 1920
oil and collage on canvas, 101 x 81 cm

RE-EMBODYING THE MEMORY OF WORLD WAR I

The history of World War I is a history of bodies. Some of those bodies lay strewn on the battlefield in 1918, others fell into mass graves, and still others returned home by way of military hospitals with amputated limbs, disfigured faces, scarring from shrapnel and burns, and countless other physical manifestations of combat trauma. Over the course of just four years and three months, 9.5 million soldiers died and 20 million more were wounded.¹³ Of those injured, 80,000 German soldiers lost a limb.¹⁴ As historian Emily Mayhew has said, “no one survived the Great War unscathed.”¹⁵ But the undeniable importance of corporeality to the history of World War I has received relatively little scholarly attention. Conventional accounts of the war and its aftermath, particularly in the field of art history, have focused on its rupture to the modern psyche.¹⁶ The senselessness and unprecedented scale of death and suffering brought about by industrial warfare raised existential questions about the world and its propensity for evil that influenced the trajectory of art, politics, and philosophy for the remainder of the century. Battlefield trauma, however, ruptured bodies as well as spirits. The overwhelming and enduring

¹³ Deborah Cohen, “Will to Work: Disabled Veterans in Britain and Germany after the First World War,” in *Disabled Veterans in History* ed. David Gerber (Ann Arbor, Mich.: The University of Michigan Press, 2012), 295.

¹⁴ Emily Mayhew, *Wounded: A New History of the Western Front in World War I* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2013), 295.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 212.

¹⁶ See Brigid Doherty, “See: We Are All Neurasthenics ‘I’ or, the Trauma of Dada Montage,” *Critical inquiry* 24, no. 1 (1997): 82-132; Paul Fox, “Confronting Postwar Shame in Weimar Germany: Trauma, Heroism and the War Art of Otto Dix,” *Oxford Art Journal* 29, no. 2(2006): 247-267; Susan Laikin Funkenstein, “A Man’s Place in a Woman’s World: Otto Dix, Social Dancing, and Constructions of Masculinity in Weimar Germany,” *Women in German Yearbook* 21 (2005): 163-191; William H. Robinson, “Otto Dix’s ‘Portrait of Joseph May,’” *The Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art* 74, no. 8 (1987): 306-331; Mark Seltzer, “Wound Culture: Trauma in the Pathological Public Sphere,” *October* 80 (1997): 3-26.

shock of the trenches was not exclusively metaphysical, but also tactile; as millions of bullets, grenades, and pieces of shrapnel ripped through human flesh. At the centennial anniversary of the Great War, it is past time to reconsider its forgotten materiality.

This is not to suggest that the psychological effects of the war were unimportant. On the contrary, psychic trauma is felt and remembered in bodies and the two are inextricably linked. *Prague Street* calls attention to the wounds that occurred within individual bodies and psyches and their complicated relationship to the nation-state and society at large. It is necessary, then, to reconsider the memory of the war through a “plural and authentic” perspective, one that includes the history of the disablement of individual bodies.¹⁷ Disability history is central to any account of ruptured, opened, and altered bodies. Yet the lived experiences of people with disabilities have consistently been written out of mainstream military history. Historian Ana Carden-Coyne has called this “the social amnesia of war disablement.”¹⁸ In Germany, the embodied effects of battle were rendered largely absent from official memory after World War I because they were considered a reminder of national shame and defeat.¹⁹ The legacy of violence was complex in Germany, as it included not only the initial wound but the ongoing trauma of institutionalized medicine, of navigating oppressive socio-economic conditions, of ideological tensions encompassing one’s body, and of erasure from public belonging. Perhaps German reluctance to address the corporeal history of the war stemmed from the difficulty of contextualizing trauma given the perpetual nature of war wounds.

¹⁷ Paul K. Longmore and Lauri Umansky, “Introduction: Disability History: From the Margins to the Mainstream,” 16.

¹⁸ Ana Carden Coyne, “Ghosts in the War Museum,” 70.

¹⁹ Paul Fox, “Confronting Postwar Shame in Weimar Germany: Trauma, Heroism and the War Art of Otto Dix,” 255.

Scholars often speak of the trauma of industrial warfare as an elusive force; but violence is never without an agent. The trauma of World War I was not passive but orchestrated on bodies by nation-states, by militaries, and by opposing bodies in combat. For many, trauma continued off the battlefield in military hospitals, where the bodies of wounded and shell-shocked soldiers became sites for experimentation and abuse. Although world war caused disability to affect more people than ever before, it was more misunderstood than ever before. Dix and several of the other Dadaists witnessed this firsthand while staying in hospital. The supposedly progressive German medical field pathologized difference and segmented human anatomy into diagnosable impairments in order to rehabilitate soldiers. Severely disfigured men often endured years of operations attempting to reconstruct their facial features, and some were never released.²⁰ Those who could not return to the front due to post-traumatic stress endured electroshock therapy and other experimental treatments, and an estimated 70,000 veterans died from starvation in German psychiatric facilities long before the Nazis implemented their murderous T4 program, which legalized the euthanasia of people with disabilities.²¹ The medical establishment's classification of the disabled body as abject and the widespread abuse of physically and psychologically wounded soldiers points to the prevailing ethos of social Darwinism and eugenics among Germany's scientific community.

Historian George Mosse explains that eugenics— a pseudo-science that originated in the United States prior to World War I— thrived in post-war Germany.²² Eugenicists taught that

²⁰ Emily Mayhew, *Wounded: A New History of the Western Front in World War I*, 214.

²¹ Ada Vlajić, "Invalidity and Deformity in the Art of Weimar Republic," *History of Medicine* 71, no. 4 (2014): 417.

²² George Mosse, "Shell-Shock as a Social Disease," *Journal of Contemporary History* 35, no. 1 (2000): 105.

certain bodies were predisposed to crime or lack of intelligence and promoted racial hygiene, striving to improve the features of society by eliminating physically and intellectually inferior genes through hereditary selection, forced sterilization, and— when unchecked— euthanasia. Combined with social Darwinist typology, which constructed racial hierarchies based on the concept of survival of the fittest, eugenics led to the belief that corporeal irregularity and weakness should be eradicated. Prior to World War I, disability was private and shameful in Germany— usually hidden away in homes or institutions— while ability was public and celebrated. With the onset of the war, this situation was accentuated as national pride became tied to the body of the male soldier, who represented the ideal Aryan frame, and the disabled body began to be viewed as a metaphor for defeat.²³ As art historian Paul Fox states:

Heroism was traditionally articulated through epic narratives... exemplifying the valorous deed, not its affective consequences, and the meaning of such deeds was grounded in... the triumphal return, or of a glorious death at the moment of victory. Whatever the outcome, the deeds of heroes, not their psychological reactions to combat, were commemorated by a grateful nation.²⁴

The national powers that had manufactured psychological and physical disabilities on a massive scale through their war disavowed them in their memorials. Ableist narratives of battlefield courage flourished in wartime propaganda, as authorities desired the official account of battles to reflect the virility of the German race. With manhood inextricably linked to performance in battle, maimed bodies returning from the front were a source of personal and national shame. Physically and psychologically disabled veterans were treated with ambivalence and at times even contempt. Among memorials to the heroic dead, Germany had no idea what to do with those who had failed to either make the ultimate sacrifice for the nation or return from the front

²³ Ibid., 105.

²⁴ Paul Fox, "Confronting Postwar Shame in Weimar Germany: Trauma, Heroism and the War Art of Otto Dix," 261.

unscathed; and the fact that Germany had lost the war made government officials even more reluctant to dwell on the painful realities of its cost.

Wiped clean of the complex and chaotic reality of injured and traumatized bodies, war memorials maintained distance from the trauma of battle and instead focused on bravery and patriotic virtue.²⁵ Meanwhile, veterans were told to hide their impairments. In 1917, the War Ministry in Berlin issued an order instructing all physically maimed soldiers to refrain from populating the streets, lest they frighten the public and provoke panic.²⁶ Thus, in addition to being excluded from the national recollection of the war, those whose bodies were noticeably altered by their war injuries were excluded from belonging in postwar society. In her essay “Invalidity and Deformity in the Art of Weimar Germany,” Ada Vlajić explains that many disfigured veterans lived as recluses, while others formed small alternative communities and still others appeared in circuses and sideshows.²⁷ Dix explored this world of isolated sociality with *Skat Players*, 1920, in which he depicts three severely disfigured veterans playing *skat*, a card game that was popular in the trenches, in a dank café (Fig. 2). The state’s relegation of corporeal difference to the shadows reveals that official memory was not neutral but selective. Political leaders had a stake in determining whose post-war ontology was sanctioned and remembered, and concealing corporeal trauma allowed them to negate the state’s culpability for the disablement of thousands of conscripted soldiers. By provocatively bringing into view in *Prague*

²⁵ Amy Lyford, “The Aesthetics of Dismemberment: Surrealism and the Musée du Val-de-Grâce in 1917,” *Cultural Critique*, no. 46 (2000): 56.

²⁶ Erich Kuttner, “Vergessen! Die Kriegszermalnten in Berliner Lazaretten [Forgotten! The War-Crushed in Berlin Hospitals],” *Vorwärts* (1920), quoted in Bernd Ulrich and Benjamin Ziemann, *German Soldiers in the Great War: Letters and Eyewitness Accounts*, trans. Christine Brocks (Barnsley, UK: Pen and Sword, 2011), 81-82.

²⁷ Ada Vlajić, “Invalidity and Deformity in the Art of Weimar Republic,” 417.

Street bodies that had been shunned, Otto Dix “intervened in the discourse about the legacy of the war” and resisted the erasure of corporeal trauma from public consciousness.²⁸

The works Dix created in the years immediately following the war’s end also reflect ongoing embodied trauma in German society. In 1920, the country was in the midst of financial crisis and political upheaval. The massive reparations imposed on Germany by the Treaty of Versailles had exacerbated inflation and caused mounting unemployment—devastating effects to an economy that was already struggling due to the cost of extended military action.²⁹ The German Revolution of 1918-19 brought about an end to imperial rule with Kaiser Wilhelm II’s abdication, but not an end to internal conflict. Conservative nationalist forces resented the new Social Democratic government, believing that revolutionaries had betrayed the German military and were responsible for the loss of the war. The development of left and right wing paramilitaries led to social unrest and ubiquitous violence in Berlin, Dresden, and other urban centers. This volatile situation came to a crisis in March of 1920 with the Kapp-Putsch, an attempted government coup by a pro-monarchy group who wished to overthrow the nascent Weimar Republic. Amid these political and economic tensions, veterans became controversial figures. As the economy plummeted, the civilian population grew resentful of state aid for disabled veterans and mandatory preferential hiring laws. By the end of the decade, twenty percent of the Weimar government’s budget was allocated to military pensions.³⁰ The broader

²⁸ Paul Fox, “Confronting Postwar Shame in Weimar Germany: Trauma, Heroism and the War Art of Otto Dix,” 251.

²⁹ William H. Robinson, “Otto Dix’s ‘Portrait of Joseph May,’” *The Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art* 74, no. 8 (1987): 310.

³⁰ Deborah Cohen, “Will to Work: Disabled Veterans in Britain and Germany after the First World War,” 296-297.

public became indignant at veterans' seeming monopoly of scarce resources; meaning that those with physical disabilities were often alienated from society in state care.

Dix himself had experienced corporeal trauma on the battlefield and sided with fellow veterans, specifically those of the working class. Volunteering at the beginning of the war, he served nearly four years as a machine gunner and was wounded multiple times. Little is known of the exact circumstances of his war injuries, except that he insistently returned to the front lines after each one. He was first wounded during a campaign near Riems in autumn of 1915. Then in July of 1916, he suffered acute injuries while attempting to hold the German line at the Battle of the Somme, one of the bloodiest offensives of the entire war. In the fall of 1917, Dix was transferred to the eastern front, but returned to France by the spring of 1918 and was stationed at Flanders. There, he received a nearly-fatal shrapnel wound to the neck and was hospitalized for over a month. As a result of this final injury, Dix was awarded the Iron Cross of merit—a medal that appears in several of his paintings including *Skat Players* and *45% Fit for Employment* (Fig. 3). After his release from the hospital, Dix began training to become a pilot but was interrupted by the war's end in November of 1918.

During the war, Dix kept a scrupulous diary and made thousands of sketches, some of which he reworked and published in his 1924 series *The War*. As both a participant in and a prolific observer of trench life, Dix became profoundly alert to the materiality of trauma and war's devastation to bodies. People fell beside him every day. His own wounds and scars only heightened this understanding. In addition to experiencing physical trauma, it is likely that Dix went through shell-shock, what today is known as post-traumatic stress. In an interview in 1963, Dix stated: "For years, at least ten years, I kept having these dreams in which I would have to crawl through demolished houses, through corridors that barely permitted me to pass. The ruins

were constantly in my dreams.”³¹ Brigid Doherty asserts in her article “See: We Are All Neurasthenics ‘!’ or, the Trauma of Dada Montage” that the effects of psychological trauma precipitated repetition and an insistent return to the event of the wound— qualities that are evident in Dix’s work. Speaking of Dada collage and photomontage, Doherty states that “the repetition of dismemberment... figures the human body as a sign of psychic mutilation, as traumatic experience incarnate.”³² Dix pictures the torn and fragmented body throughout his oeuvre as evidence of specific corporeal violence that lingered in his memory and influenced his perception of the post-war world. His paintings include incessant returns to depictions of battle such as *The Trench*, 1921-1923, as well as explorations of ruptured and abject bodies as a way of coping with his memories. Dix himself once wrote that “art is exorcism.”³³

After armistice, Dix studied at Dresden Art Academy, where he would later teach, and he gained a reputation as an aggressive painter. In 1919, he met George Grosz and the other members of the Berlin Dada movement. In Dada, Dix found a community that shared his anger at the repression of wartime atrocities and his desire to rehearse trauma as a form of protest. The Dadaists were among the first to outspokenly criticize the German military and to point to social problems in Weimar society. As Biro states:

Among the enemies targeted by the Dada representations were the Wilhelmine government and the institution of the army as run by the Army High Command, which destroyed an entire generation through its conduct of an unnecessary war; the German medical establishment, which attempted to cure traumatized soldiers through coercion; German business and industry, which profited from the carnage and even commodified patriotism and the exchange of war-time sentiments; the church, which sanctified

³¹ Otto Dix, quoted in Matthew Biro, *Dada Cyborg: Visions of the New Human in Weimar Berlin* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 179.

³² Brigid Doherty, “See: We Are All Neurasthenics ‘!’ or, the Trauma of Dada Montage,” 132.

³³ Otto Dix, quoted in Matthew Biro, *Dada Cyborg: Visions of the New Human in Weimar Berlin*, 26.

barbarism and dressed it in a cloak of moral superiority; and the bourgeoisie, whose repressive lifestyle and values helped stifle dissent and demonized difference.³⁴

Rudolf Schlicter, Raoul Hausmann, and several other members of the group were sued for “crimes against the German military” because of works they displayed at the *First International Dada Fair* in Berlin in 1920, which included an effigy of a military officer with a pig’s head.³⁵ Even the exhibition’s display methods evoked protest, collectively challenging artistic ownership with paintings layered over top each other and hanging from the ceiling (Fig. 8). At the *First International Dada Fair*, Dix’s first exhibition with the Dada group, he displayed *45% Fit for Employment*, also known as *War Cripples* and visible at left. The work includes a parade of wounded veterans and reveals the beginnings of Dix’s intense questioning of how disabled soldiers negotiated knowing and being in the world in altered bodies.

Dix maintained a slightly different style and tone than other German Dadaists, and his work transgresses art historical categories. He has been called “the dominant personality of Neue Sachlichkeit in German painting.”³⁶ Neue Sachlichkeit, or New objectivity, was a verist style unique to Germany that “responded by recording the actual conditions of life in postwar society with a new sense of sober, unsentimental detachment... cold, bitter, dry realism.”³⁷ While many of the Dadaists constructed fantastical versions of the human form, such as Hannah Hoch’s photomontages, Dix’s work is shockingly truthful to the appearance of postwar bodies. He sought to represent aberrant corporeality as the new reality, rather than as cause for pity; as a result, his work is often read as caustic and unfeeling. Dix’s bitterness was not, however,

³⁴ Matthew Biro, *Dada Cyborg: Visions of the New Human in Weimar Berlin*, 159.

³⁵ Ibid., 160.

³⁶ William H. Robinson, “Otto Dix’s ‘Portrait of Joseph May,’” 306.

³⁷ Ibid., 310.

directed toward his subjects but toward the ambivalent postwar society that met returning veterans with apathy. Of his own intent, Dix said later in life: “People were already beginning to forget what horrible suffering the war had brought them. I did not want to cause fear and panic, but to let people know how dreadful war is and so to stimulate people's powers of resistance.”³⁸ Facing corporeal trauma squarely, Dix called attention not only to the need for reform in state policies for veterans’ care in 1920 but also to the need to resist future war. Allowing the figures in *Prague Street* to linger at the stage of brokenness and pathology, Dix countered the utopian mission of rebuilding the individual and national body; recognizing that virile nationalism had precipitated world war in the first place. His brand of artistic demonstration uniquely blends Dada’s political provocativeness with the dispassion and verism of *Neue Sachlichkeit* to present a piercing account of the political and social issues of postwar Germany.

By bringing the memory of the war’s corporeal consequences to the forefront, Dix helped to provoke what art historian Mark Seltzer describes as “a collective gathering around shock, trauma, and the wound.”³⁹ His transgressive emphasis on wounded and non-normative bodies composed a visual history of disabled veterans as subjects who insist on being seen as material presence, distinct from concepts of psychic and metaphysical rupture but nevertheless touched by these broader feelings and by national investments in corporeality. In its representation of war-altered bodies, *Prague Street* dwells on the memory of physical wounds and loss and reasserts the reality of corporeal violence that was being suppressed in Weimar society. Dix did not eclipse the painful experiences of individuals but rather drew public attention to the array of corporeal ontologies the war produced. Reading his work through the lens of disability reveals

³⁸ Otto Dix, quoted in *Neues Deutschland*, 1964.

³⁹ Mark Seltzer, “Wound Culture: Trauma in the Pathological Public Sphere,” *October* 80 (1997): 3-4.

that trauma was tied to specific bodies and provides an opening to reconsider the forgotten materiality of World War I.



Figure 2: Otto Dix, *Skat Players*, 1920
oil and collage on canvas, 110 x 87cm.

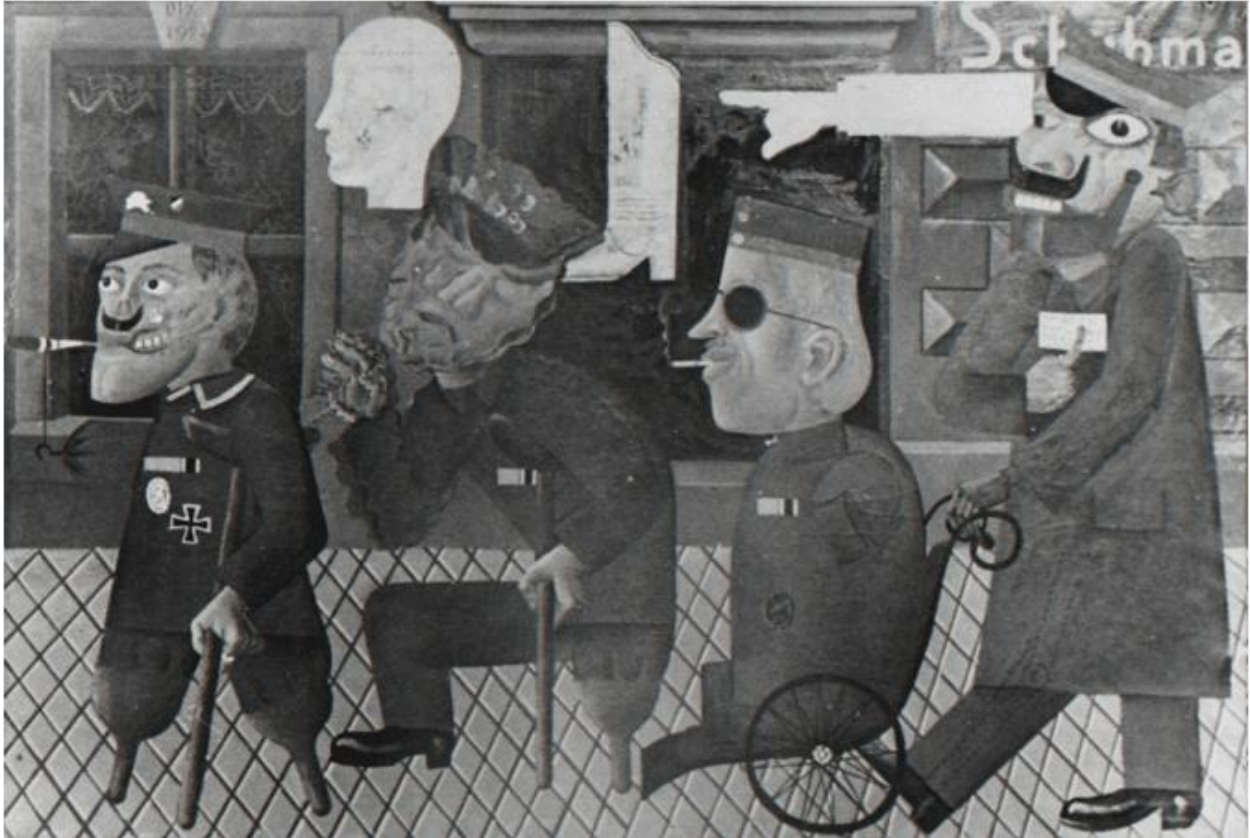


Figure 3: Otto Dix, *45% Fit for Employment*, 1920, oil on canvas (lost work)



Figure 4: Opening of the First International Dada Fair, Berlin, June 1920

A SOCIAL ART HISTORY OF PROSTHESES IN OTTO DIX'S *PRAGUE STREET*

Prague Street (Devoted to My Contemporaries), 1920, is one of the most remarkably transgressive works Dix created after the war. Depicting a well-to-do street in Dresden, Germany, *Prague Street*'s composition focuses on two men with extensive physical disabilities. The first sits beneath the display window of a prosthetic limb shop, petitioning money from passersby. The second moves past him using a knuckle board—a common means of transportation for people without lower limbs—to transport himself up the busy street (Fig. 5). A closer look at *Prague Street* reveals that every figure is touched by disability in some way. Even the mannequin in the shop window wears a neck and back braces and appears to have a large scar on the side of its head. Given the overwhelming number of soldiers who returned wounded from the front, it is plausible to assume that anyone living in Dresden in 1920, if not disabled themselves, had a family member or close acquaintance whose body had been transformed by war injury. Physical disability was a present reality in Weimar society, one that Dix chose to embrace. By populating his image with unacceptable bodies in a cultural climate where disability was objectified as spectacular, pitiable, or disturbing, Dix transgressed social boundaries in order to present a portrait of class and ableism in Weimar society.

Considering his own war injuries, it is unsurprising that Dix was attuned to the constellation of bodies surrounding him and society's complex reactions to them. *Prague Street* can be read as a social history of Weimar Germany in that it illustrates how bodily irregularity and impairment touched everyone to varying degrees and with various consequences. The two central figures have equally irregular bodies; however they inhabit different social classes, meaning that their experience of disability and their ability to cope with ableist society's demands vary greatly. The man using the knuckle board can afford bourgeois clothing, while the

man who is begging appears to wear a military-commissioned uniform jacket with the sleeve torn at the site where his left arm was severed. Depicting individuals from separate social spheres, Dix exposes the disabling effects of class structures and presents a study of the social and political debates surrounding postwar bodies.

Prague Street also divulges socio-political investments in the corrective use of prostheses in Weimar society. Dix's subjects are given details that make them shockingly true-to-life, creating a nuanced portrayal of the postwar ontology of the disabled body as a site of both stigma and potential. By making disability his central motif in *Prague Street*, Dix points to physical trauma as a shared condition of Weimar society and provides an incredibly deep and diverse consideration of the materiality of corrective prostheses as negotiations of bodily alterity in Weimar Germany. According to Ott, "Prosthetic devices, as social objects with a complex set of meanings in the daily lives of people, have rarely, if ever, been understood as part of vernacular material life."⁴⁰ Dix's attention to the material culture of prostheses in his time chronicles World War I's unequal impact on different groups within Weimar society.

The limbs for sale in the shop window in *Prague Street* are identifiable as real prosthetics produced at the time. The artificial leg is an Anglesey leg, a new and expensive model that contained knee and ankle spring joints for more natural movement (Fig. 6). The arm above it is the American-designed Carnes arm, which also offered greater dexterity than previous prosthetic designs (Fig. 7). According to historian Heather Perry, "The numerous levers and intricate gears [of the Carnes arm] enabled the wearer to perform more detail-oriented movements that were beyond the scope of tool-like work prosthesis... tying a necktie, picking up coins from a flat

⁴⁰ Katherine Ott, "The Sum of Its Parts: An Introduction to Modern Histories of Prosthetics," 2.

surface, riding a bicycle, and taking banknotes out of a wallet.”⁴¹ The German government purchased the patent for the Carnes arm in 1916 and mass-produced it for a short time during and after the war. It remained extremely costly, however, and only the wealthiest amputees could afford it. Prosthetic manufacturing was a lucrative industry, and the well-designed artificial limbs were “kept out of the reach of the poor behind glass windows.”⁴²

The majority of the most seriously wounded German soldiers in World War I were from the working class and could not afford to purchase their own prosthetic limbs. Recruits from poor rural communities or urban factory neighborhoods were sent to the front lines before the officer class and thus suffered the most intense casualties and battlefield trauma. As a working-class artist and soldier, Dix was aware of this and sought to confront viewers with postwar inequality. The government-issued prostheses available to working class soldiers were shoddy at best, as is obvious in *Prague Street* from the begging man’s wooden limbs that appear to do him no good. With the initial wave of amputees returning from the battlefield, the German medical field was completely unprepared. In the early years of the war, obtainable prosthetic limbs did not fit correctly, and came with very little instruction, meaning that veterans who did receive prostheses often did not use them. As journalist Hunter Oatman-Stanford describes, “Many arm amputees simply stopped wearing their uncomfortable devices, put them in a cupboard somewhere, and never used them again, while some leg amputees found life easier with crutches than wearing uncomfortable, heavy prosthetic legs.”⁴³ As the war continued, however, the

⁴¹ Heather Perry, “Re-Arming the Disabled Veteran: Artificially Rebuilding State and Society in World War One Germany,” in *Artificial Parts, Practical Lives: Modern Histories of Prosthetics*, ed. Katherine Ott, David Serlin, and Stephen Mihm (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 94.

⁴² William H. Robinson, “Otto Dix’s ‘Portrait of Joseph May,’” 313.

⁴³ Hunter Oatman-Stanford, “War and Prosthetics: How Veterans Fought for the Perfect Artificial Limb,” *Collector’s Weekly*, October 29, 2012, <http://www.collectorsweekly.com/articles/war-and-prosthetics/>.

government realized that it needed to address this problem, not only for individual morale but for the sake of the national economy. Veterans needed to return to work as quickly as possible in order to fill labor shortages, particularly in munitions and factory production.

In 1916, Siemens-Schuckert— a German engineering company that produced military aircraft— developed a prosthetic device that came to be known as the work arm. Essentially a tool holder, the work arm came with a series of job-specific hand attachments that were designed by “analyzing the various occupations in minute detail and listing the motions absolutely necessary to their performance” (Fig. 8).⁴⁴ The work arm was most useful in factories, as it allowed disabled men to perform the same skills with the same speed as their able-bodied competitors. By issuing the work arm to working class amputees, rather than a more aesthetically pleasing limb or a limb capable of fine-motor skills, the government was able to retrain and return them to their pre-war factory jobs; thus rehabilitating individuals and the national labor force in one fell swoop. Rhetoric promoting the work arm emphasized wounded soldiers’ responsibility to return to work. In an educational pamphlet entitled “Caring for Cripples: A Word of Explanation to Both Comfort and Warn,” published in 1915, German doctor Konrad Biesalki wrote from the perspective of a disabled veteran: “Yes! I don’t need to remain a useless cripple, I may once again eat my own bread with my family and I will be the same man that I was before, even up to the little injury that I want to accept— for the sake of the fatherland— as a sign of honor.”⁴⁵ Those who would or could not learn to use their prostheses were labelled uncooperative and idle; failure to be reintegrated into the workforce equated with failure to contribute productively to society.

⁴⁴ Heather Perry, “Re-Arming the Disabled Veteran: Artificially Rebuilding State and Society in World War One Germany,” 86.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

In its lack of empathy, the state's plan to return veterans to their pre-war station in life clashed with the individual desires of returning soldiers. Having served their country, many working class veterans hoped to better their economic position by obtaining administrative or professional work rather than going back to manual labor. As Perry describes, "the majority of recovering workers... [preferred] rather to relearn their penmanship and apply for positions at the government's postal or train administrations" than return to their factory jobs.⁴⁶ The denial of individual opportunity within the state's pursuit of efficiency also reveals its approach to bodies as fungible, interchangeable parts in the machine of the national labor force. The standardization of the Siemens-Schuckert work arm meant that it "could be attached to practically any disabled body."⁴⁷ Severed muscle, bone, and flesh that would have held a tool for labor could be substituted with the tool itself, just as the individual worker could be substituted or replaced. During the war, the German military had treated individual bodies as fungible commodities in the service of an abstract cause and national interest. As life was expended, it was replaced. One fallen body could be substituted by any newly recruited body until so many had been killed that the country faced an immense shortage of manpower. The government's control over the type of prostheses issued to each amputee reified its oppression of corporeal individuality.

Today, the choice whether or not to use an artificial limb is deeply personal. The process of learning to use a prosthetic limb is often long and at times painful. Doctors recommend prostheses with the assumption that people who have had amputations or were born with fewer limbs need to regain something they lack. Many people with fewer limbs, however, are comfortable in and proud of their bodies as they are. Because of the mandate to return quickly to

⁴⁶ Ibid., 93.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 89.

work, veterans of World War I were denied the option of refusing an artificial limb without risking economic vulnerability and social exclusion. The increasing emphasis on corporeal typology in postwar society meant that bodies with missing limbs were considered unfit and needed supplementation in order to be tolerated in public.

Because of the unequal distribution of prosthetic limbs in postwar Germany, social class was “inscribed upon the body” according to what type of prostheses one used.⁴⁸ A material culture arose surrounding artificial limbs in which it became visually assessable whether or not someone was a productive member of society. Aesthetics were superfluous, as limbs such as the life-like Carnes arm were expensive; but at the same time, access to aesthetically acceptable limbs became the key to whether or not one’s body was considered abject. In *Prague Street*, Dix explores this reality by displaying the full spectrum of class-determinant negotiations of disability. In addition to the Anglesey leg and Carnes arm in the shop window, a slighter older model of prosthesis is visible in the lower left corner of the composition. The wooden hand holding a cane has articulated fingers, controlled with levers that allowed for grasping objects, making it a luxury. The gloved hand in the upper left corner, which art historian Susan Laikin Funkenstein identifies as belonging to a dandy, may also cover a prosthetic hand or conceal scars or missing fingers.⁴⁹ Gloves were a common form of *passing* after the war, allowing people to appear in public as nondisabled. The importance of passing is echoed on the right edge of the canvas, as the woman in a pink dress, whose leg juts into the frame, wears a platform shoe. At the time, this would not have been an aesthetic choice but was likely because one of her legs was

⁴⁸ Ibid., 97.

⁴⁹ Funkenstein, “A Man’s Place in a Woman’s World: Otto Dix, Social Dancing, and Constructions of Masculinity in Weimar Germany,” 172.

shorter than the other and she wanted to modify the height of one shoe in order to avoid walking with a limp.

By contrast, the man sitting in the center of the composition in *Prague Street*, often referred to in scholarly analyses as “the beggar,” is unable to pass because of the extent of his injuries and his limited economic resources. To borrow a term from black studies theorist Saidiya Hartman, this figure is *phobogenic*, meaning that his aberrant physical appearance incites nervousness, fear, and even hostility in those who encounter him.⁵⁰ He wears three wooden limbs; but his prosthetic legs have no feet. Both his poverty and his physical appearance situate him as the most abject figure in the composition. The knees of his pant legs are worn through as if he has spent time crawling. According to Ott, posture and comportment were incredibly important in the early twentieth century, as the inability to stand straight triggered associations with evolutionary regression.⁵¹ The man using a knuckle board transports himself with erect posture by using poles to propel himself forward rather than his hands. He is also dressed smartly and proudly wears a military lapel pin, broadcasting his war service in contrast to the begging man, who perhaps did not serve long enough before being wounded to receive rank. Prague Street was in a bourgeois neighborhood of Dresden, and the begging man would have been an affront to polite sensibilities. In addition to his three dismembered limbs, he is missing both eyes and would have been blind. The passersby steer clear of him in a conflation of fear and nervousness at his corporeal difference.⁵² The second figure distances himself from that

⁵⁰ Saidiya Hartman, “Redressing the Pained Body: Toward a Theory of Practice,” in *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-making in Nineteenth-century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 57.

⁵¹ Katherine Ott, “The Sum of Its Parts: An Introduction to Modern Histories of Prosthetics,” 29.

⁵² Ato Quayson, *Aesthetic Nervousness: The Crisis of Representation*, 7.

abjection by avoiding eye contact. The begging man's missing eyes and multiple prostheses are only part of the visual stigmata he bears, however.

The awkward tilt of his head suggests that he might be trembling. Spontaneous tremors are a common symptom of post-traumatic stress, a condition that Dix depicted frequently in his work. In *40% Fit for Employment*, the figure second from the left is rendered with squiggling lines to convey intense physical tremors. Post-traumatic stress was severely misunderstood at the time and often labelled as hysteria. Military officers received slightly better treatment, often being diagnosed with battle exhaustion; but for working class soldiers, psychological symptoms were diagnosed as inherent weakness, unwillingness to fight, or fits against authority.⁵³ It was not uncommon for veterans with debilitating post-traumatic stress to be shunned from employment and resort to begging. As Berlin Dada member George Grosz once described:

Real or fake war casualties were sitting at every street corner. Some of them sat there dozing until somebody came by, then they would twist their heads and start convulsively shaking. Shakers, we called them. 'Look Ma, there's another one of those funny shakers.' We had become quite immune to all the weird and disgusting sights.⁵⁴

Grosz' lack of compassion is ironic considering that he simulated his own mental illness at the beginning of the war in order to avoid the draft. But the word "look" in this quote reveals the prevalent objectification of both physical and psychological difference as spectacle in Weimar society. At the same time that disability had been made more commonplace by the Great War, institutionalized medicine's categorization of difference caused "vernacular versions of medical diagnosis"—staring with the intent to determine someone's impairment—to emerge in public space.⁵⁵ The viewer's gaze, directed at the begging man, echoes this practice.

⁵³ Brigid Doherty, "See: We Are All Neurasthenics '!' or, the Trauma of Dada Montage," 105.

⁵⁴ George Grosz, quoted in William H. Robinson, "Otto Dix's 'Portrait of Joseph May,'" 313.

⁵⁵ Katherine Ott, "The Sum of Its Parts: An Introduction to Modern Histories of Prosthetics," 8.

Dix also pushes against the exercise of staring, however, by inserting figures in *Prague Street* that are unwilling to submit to diagnosis. To the right of the man who is begging is a small figure wearing a blue dress. At first glance, she appears to be a child, but she might in fact be a woman of short stature. Dix gives her an almost uncanny quality through her proximity to the mannequin in the shop window and the ambiguity of her doll-like form. As Ott has argued, staring at people with disabilities involves the urge to classify difference “within organizational categories of loss and inadequacy.”⁵⁶ In Weimar society, it was believed that one could determine another’s social status, ability, and quality of life through visual cues; whether these be the type of prosthetic limb they wore, their clothing, or military insignia. Contemporary viewers would have felt tension and uncertainty from wanting to know and categorize each figure in *Prague Street*, and this woman-child’s opacity— her refusal to cooperate with the rules of observing and control— disrupts the project of the ableist gaze. In a society that determined worth by appearance, this ambiguity was an act of resistance.

In addition, the begging man’s prominent nose and narrow features identify him as Jewish.⁵⁷ Typology at the time associated certain traits with national and racial identities and suggested that so-called degenerates could be recognized by their facial features.⁵⁸ The headline of the large newspaper fragment under the wheel of the knuckleboard reads “Juden raus!” (“Jews out!”). Dix likely tore it from a leaflet, published in support of Social Democrat candidates during the June 1920 parliamentary elections, that criticized anti-Semitic politics. His cropping leaves only the hate phrase and points to growing racial tensions. In looking for a scapegoat for

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Matthew Biro, *Dada Cyborg: Visions of the New Human in Weimar Berlin*, 168.

⁵⁸ George Mosse, “Shell-Shock as a Social Disease,” 106.

national defeat, government authorities accused German Jews of lacking patriotism and initiated the Judenzahlung, or “Jew count,” with intent of proving that Jews had shirked military service. Their results proved the opposite— that in fact 80% of men of Jewish heritage served on the front lines— but the state still published false statistics in order foster anti-Semitism and perpetuate the myth that Jews were traitors during the war.⁵⁹ By making the central figure in *Prague Street* both Jewish and physically disabled, Dix reveals the ideological conflation between ableism and racism in postwar German society.

In its embrace of the multivalence of bodily pathology in Weimar society, *Prague Street* points to new ways of knowing and being in the world in postwar Germany. Through his attention to the material culture of prostheses, Dix exposed the obstacles working-class veterans faced in negotiating life and society in altered bodies. Rather than being inherently disabled by their war injuries, Dix’s subjects experienced a range of ability and oppression determined by the class restrictions placed on them and the economic resources available to them. By transgressing social taboos and depicting non-normative bodies, Dix countered the state’s investment in the rehabilitation of aberrant bodies to the detriment of individual rights and well-being and created an authentic portrait of social inequalities. His acceptance and appropriation of wounded bodies in all their variation and nonconformity led him to rethink the category of corporeal normativity and the kinds of bodily composition that could present social and aesthetic value.

⁵⁹ Matthew Biro, *Dada Cyborg: Visions of the New Human in Weimar Berlin*, 160.

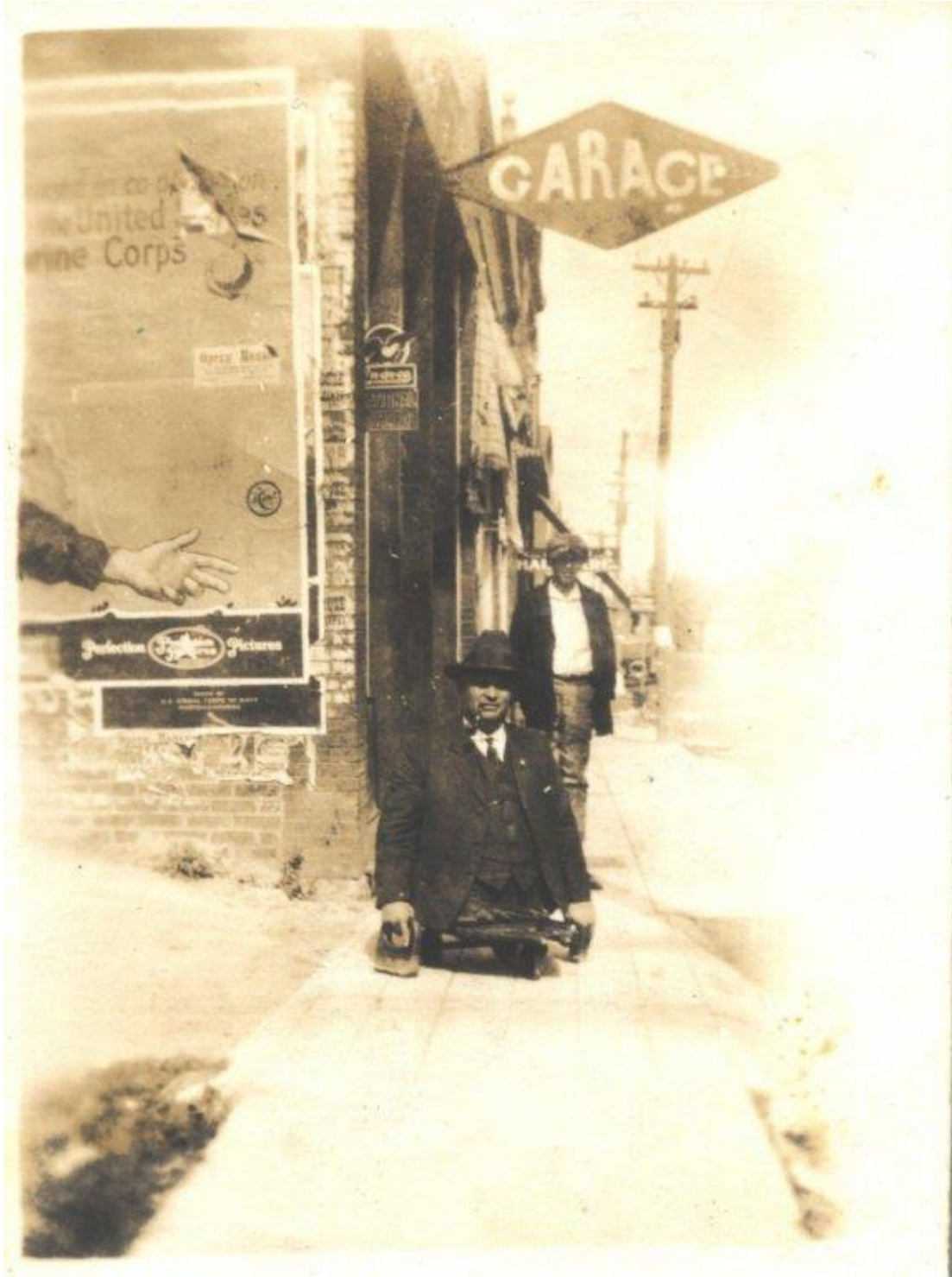


Figure 5: Man on knuckle board, 1920-1930,
Smithsonian National Museum of American History



Figure 6: “Anglesey” artificial right leg, England, 1915-1925
The National Museum of Science and Industry, London

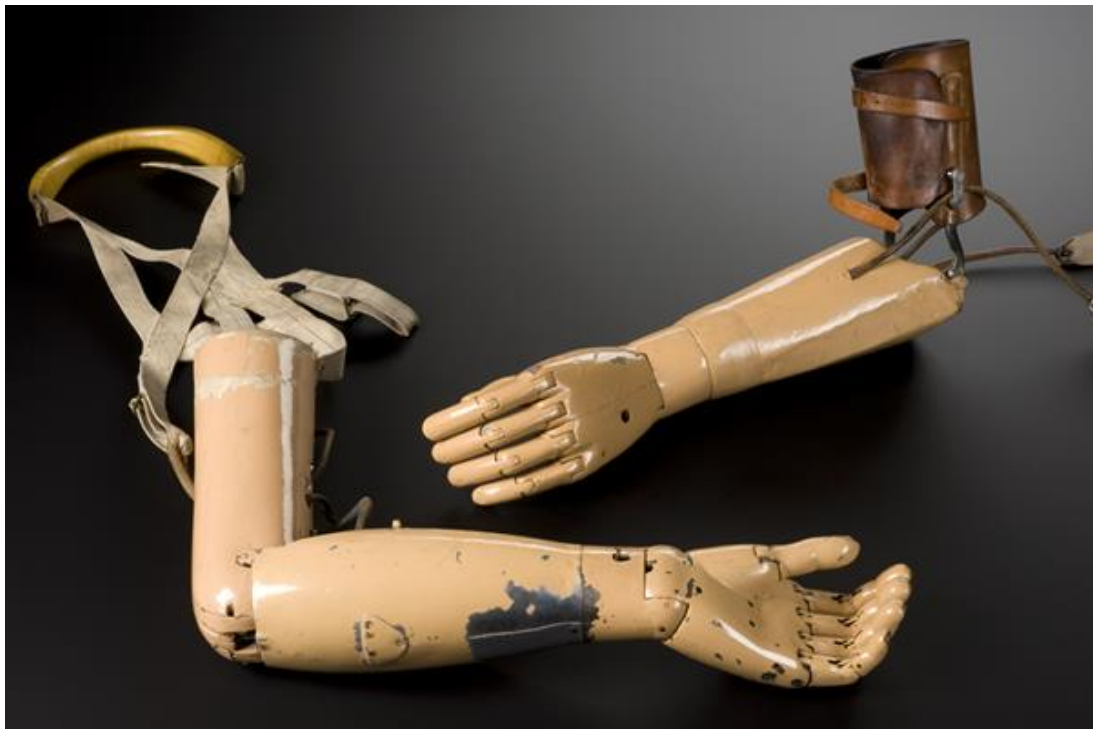


Figure 7: “Carnes” artificial right and left arms, United States, 1915
The National Museum of Science and Industry, London

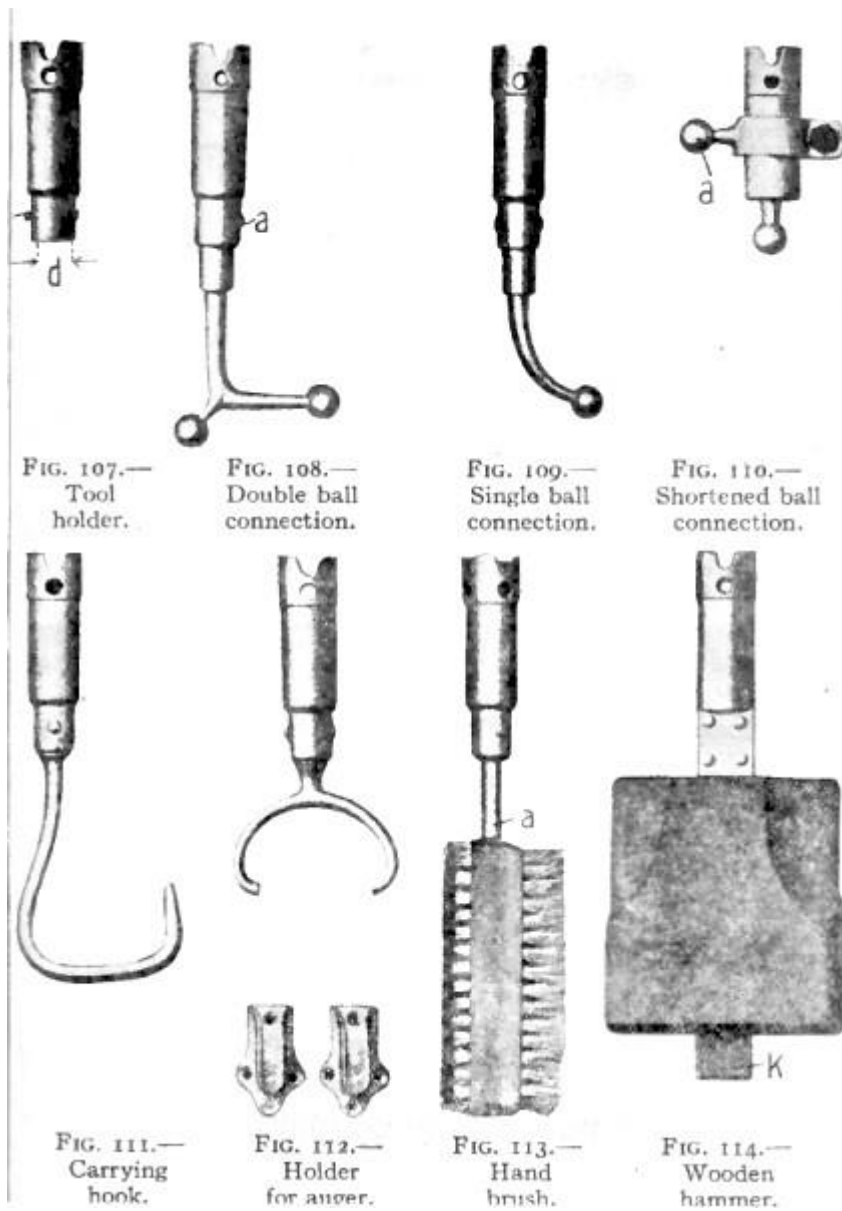


Figure 8: Hand attachments for the Siemens-Schuckert “work arm,” 1918

THE VETERAN'S BODY AS MIXED MEDIA

At the same time that socio-political investments in the wounded body in Weimar Germany demanded individual rehabilitation for the welfare of the nation-state, Otto Dix embraced the aesthetics of war-altered bodies as a visual rhetoric of resistance. *Prague Street* (*Devoted to My Contemporaries*) was the first work in which Dix experimented with collage. Unlike many of the other German Dadaists, however, he did not altogether abandon the medium of painting but combined it with other materials. A detailed examination of the shop windows in the background of *Prague Street* reveals that he grafted collage elements—torn pieces of newspaper, a woman's head cut from the page of a magazine, the back of a postcard—directly onto the canvas, overlapping paint with ephemera. Dix's experimentation with mixed media in *Prague Street* divulges the extent to which the disabled bodies he encountered during and after World War I influenced not only the content of his work but also its form. Veterans returned from the front inhabiting bodies composed of absences and excesses, often acquiring in military hospitals an amalgam of flesh and non-flesh. Entirely or partially missing limbs, disfigured faces, scars, and other wounds were covered with skin grafts and prostheses; juxtaposing flesh with wood, tin, aluminum, and other textures.

These irregularly reconstructed bodies had a generative effect on Dix's practice by presenting the possibility of a composition that did not depend on cohesion and a radically new way of being and appearing in the world in which value was not determined by corporeal wholeness. *Prague Street* suggests that Dix had begun to rethink the canvas as a container for different mediums and approaches. Paint and pencil, postage stamps, newspapers, and photographs cohabit the same space much as disparate materials cohabited the canvas of the body in Weimar society. Dix made an even more direct association between mixed media and

the assemblage of veterans' bodies in *Skat Players*, also created in 1920. The man pictured in a blue officer's uniform at right, wearing a military Iron Cross of Merit, has a prosthetic jaw composed of tin foil; while the large skin graft on the side of the center figure's head is made of ersatz cloth.⁶⁰ Biro has pointed to *Skat Players* as an example of German Dada's interest in the cyborg, a man-machine hybrid with super human abilities, because the three men's prosthetic lower limbs blend with the legs of the table and because they appear to have new abilities due to their prosthetic parts.⁶¹ Taking Biro's reading, it seems possible that Dada artists saw veterans' bodies as differently abled because of their prosthetic parts, not inherently disabled. Dix and his contemporaries were undoubtedly alert to the intersection between human bodies and machines, not least because of the dangers of machine technology they had witnessed firsthand during the war. But as historian Katherine Ott has noted, representations of cyborgs usually come from investments in human ability and augmentation that have little to do with tangible, lived experiences of disability.⁶² Considering Dix's awareness of the class and economic issues surrounding disabled veteran's lives, it is more likely that he sought to represent the reality of inhabiting a mixed-media body in a society that valued homogeneity.

Veterans who had lost a limb or facial feature clearly knew the boundary between their own body and their prosthetic, between flesh and non-flesh. Using a prosthetic limb was not, in most cases, an effort to reconstitute corporeal wholeness or obtain a higher, cyborg level of ability; but rather a tool for daily agility, transportation, and social acceptance. Similarly, *Prague Street* makes use of congruent fragments that work together but resist continuity. Dix maintains

⁶⁰ Brigid Doherty, "See: We Are All Neurasthenics '!' or, the Trauma of Dada Montage," 130.

⁶¹ Matthew Biro, *Dada Cyborg: Visions of the New Human in Weimar Berlin*, 172.

⁶² Katherine Ott, "The Sum of Its Parts: An Introduction to Modern Histories of Prosthetics," 21.

in his depictions of people with fewer limbs the distinction between body and prostheses, as can be seen in the stark contrast between the begging man's three wooden limbs and his hyper-fleshy right hand, which Dix articulates with emphatic line. Through mixed-media, Dix incorporates non-art materials into art, mirroring the integration of non-conforming parts into one configuration for daily use by the veteran body. These parts are not blended, as one would expect in the case of a cyborg, but share a fractured, binary state— existing as *both and*. Disjunction is a way of being in war-altered bodies; similarly, paint and paper collage are not bonded in *Prague Street* but work together through their disconnection— lacking nothing without being whole. Within the field of black studies, theorist Jared Sexton calls this an “embrace of pathology without pathos”— aberrance that does not occasion pity.⁶³ By arranging paint beside ephemera on the canvas, Dix creates a composition that is at home with its own incoherence and replete with manifestations of the complexity of material trauma. He resists the ableist mandate to correct the fragmented body by constituting it on canvas with unapologetically disparate parts.

The embrace of aberrance in Dada collage and photomontage has often been understood as iconoclastic. Dadaists identified themselves as iconoclasts with the collective purpose of defacing the monument of western history, culture, and civilization that had only led to mass slaughter through nation-states' interest in industrial warfare. Dada's assault on tradition, which included collage, explosive performances, and other radical new forms of artistic practice, was a calculated response to the corporeal assault on bodies in their contemporary moment— both during the war and continuing in the political instability of the early Weimar Republic. Collage, which incorporated found materials and cutting and pasting by chance, was an especially suitable

⁶³ Jared Sexton, “The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism,” *InTensions Journal* 5 (2011): 27-28.

weapon for this purpose because it was “a means of transforming modern art by undermining its traditional values of originality, authenticity, and the individuality of the artist’s touch.”⁶⁴

Interestingly, Siebers proposes that the notion of iconoclasm holds anxiety about disability. To *de-face* a work of art implies an act of wounding and reverberates with corporeality and personified trauma. As Siebers explains, “Beholders discover in vandalized works an image of disability that asks to be contemplated not as a symbol of human imperfection but as an experience of the corporeal variation found everywhere in modern life.”⁶⁵

The practice of collage, then, may be considered *disableist*— privileging the altered, severed, and discordant body or medium for the sake of social critique. Equally as important as Dix’s compulsion to wound the conservative tradition of art was his refusal to mend the aberrant body. As Doherty states, “Dada montage aimed to be mimetic of traumatic shock in such a way that the materialization of shock experiences would be affected in the bodies of both maker and beholder.”⁶⁶ The cut or tear can be thought of as a continuation of the wound, recognition of life with embodied trauma, and an insistent return to the site of rupture. Amy Lyford, in her article “The Aesthetics of Dismemberment,” argues that ripped photographs and newspaper clippings have a direct psychological association to torn and ripped bodies.⁶⁷ Torn paper becomes a purposeful extension of the tearing of bodies— a recognition that modern life is rife with corporeal trauma and an insistent return to the memory of rupture. Dix cuts through the materiality of paint with collage, leaving the segments disjointed. Collage becomes the

⁶⁴ Matthew Biro, *Dada Cyborg: Visions of the New Human in Weimar Berlin*, 158.

⁶⁵ Tobin Siebers, *Disability Aesthetics*, 10.

⁶⁶ Brigid Doherty, “See: We Are All Neurasthenics ‘!’ or, the Trauma of Dada Montage,” 128.

⁶⁷ Amy Lyford, “The Aesthetics of Dismemberment: Surrealism and the Musée du Val-de-Grâce in 1917,” 56.

appendage media affixed to the painted canvas, with paint signifying normative materiality and collage representing the new irregular materiality of disabled bodies. Disability is thus both the central motif and the defining aesthetic of *Prague Street*.

Dix's accentuating of the corporeality of the war suggests he saw multivalent meanings in postwar bodies. As an artistic action, "the representation of disability by modern art produces unanticipated effects, turning traditional conceptions of aesthetic beauty away from ideas of the natural and healthy body" to the emulation of irregularity and discontinuity.⁶⁸ Richard Huelsenbeck wrote in the *Dadaist Manifesto* in 1919 that:

The highest art will be that which in its conscious content presents the thousandfold problems of the day, an art which one can see has let itself be thrown by the explosions... which is forever gathering up its limbs... The best and most extraordinary artists will be those who every hour snatch the tatters of their bodies out of the frenzied cataract of life, holding fast to the intellect of their time, bleeding from hands and hearts.⁶⁹

Dix's refusal to mend and rehabilitate his images of the human form challenges able-bodied emphasis on wholeness and instead embraces the aesthetics of pain, dismemberment, and bleeding as Huelsenbeck suggests. By privileging the fragmented and irregular aesthetic of the traumatized body, Dix points to a possibility of ontology not dependent on corporeal unity.

In addition to inspiring Dix's collage aesthetic, the act of severing became a viable compositional tool for him in *Prague Street*. The composition asks to be considered in fragments, with each figure disconnected from the next, moving in different directions and not seemingly cohabiting the same world. The picture plane violently crops the limbs of three figures, leaving an arm, a hand, and a leg jutting into the image. These floating limbs are echoed by prosthetic parts in the shop windows, the most heavily collaged portion of the canvas— a

⁶⁸ Tobin Siebers, *Disability Aesthetics*, 134.

⁶⁹ Richard Huelsenbeck, "Dadaist Manifesto," 1918.

single foot, an arm, and a leg without bodies and a mannequin without limbs in the window at right; and a hand and two wig-stand heads in the window at left. The composition reverberates with wounds. If there were any residual doubts that corporeal disability was a widely shared experience in Weimar Germany, *Prague Street*'s composition erases them with its partial bodies oscillating in the frame as if a grenade has exploded and sent them asunder. Even the shop building has been wounded: a gaping hole in the plaster above the begging man's head recalls the bombing of Dresden during the war. Dix's contemporaries understood fragmentation as their new reality, and Dix attempts to depict how they negotiated everyday life within the legacy of trauma. Biro argues in his article "History at a Standstill" that Dix's aesthetic involved "a method of reading select fragments of modern life so that they disclosed larger oscillating assemblages or constellations of meaning."⁷⁰ With fragmentation as the new standard, the composition may or may not read as whole.

Part of Dix's production of layers of meaning involved the layering of appropriated ephemera— newspapers, postage stamps, currency bills, and more. Dadaists saw any material as ripe for appropriation if it served their political purpose. As Biro states, "The art historical tradition... was no longer seen as a continuous and nonreversible development leading up to the present day. Instead, it was material to be appropriated—potentially useful but in no way universally binding—in whichever ways and through whatever media the politically engaged artist deemed appropriate."⁷¹ Thus Dix's choice of ephemera gives insight into his political viewpoint. By combining painting with "mass culture," Dix blurs the line between so-called high

⁷⁰ Matthew Biro, "History at a Standstill: Walter Benjamin, Otto Dix, and the Question of Stratigraphy," *Anthropology and Aesthetics*, no. 40 (2001): 153.

⁷¹ Ibid.

and low art.⁷² On the pavement beside the begging man is a large fragment of a manifesto written by Austrian expressionist Oskar Kokoschka, who was a professor at Dresden Art Academy and a contemporary of Dix's. In it, Kokoschka laments the destruction of great works of art by demonstrators and paramilitaries during the Kapp-Putsch uprising. Many revered artworks had been destroyed during World War I, and more were destroyed by ongoing domestic conflicts. But rather than mourn the loss of paintings and sculptures, left wing artists called for masterpieces to be pulled from galleries and placed on the barricades, believing it might deter violence against civilians. In response to Kokoschka's manifesto, Berlin Dada leaders John Heartfield and George Grosz wrote: "With joy we welcome the news that the bullets are whistling through the galleries and palaces, into the masterpieces of Rubens, instead of into the houses of the poor in the working-class neighborhoods!"⁷³ They suggest the absurdity of the fact that artworks needed to be protected and preserved from political turmoil, while human bodies could be damaged without a thought. Dix was often critical of both sides politically, but appears to side with Heartfield and Grosz by referencing these political events in *Prague Street* while at the same time intentionally wounding the medium of painting with collage.

Dix also alludes to the lamenting of cultural treasures in *Prague Street* by placing a partial Greco-Roman sculpture in the shop window at right. Juxtaposing classical statuary among the store mannequins and prostheses, Dix appropriates and subverts the art historical past in light of present bodies. His inclusion of the Greco-Roman sculpture is provocative given Siebers' argument that damaged artworks acquire new aesthetic value through their missing parts. For example, *Aphrodite of Melos*— one of the most revered symbols of beauty in western art

⁷² Susan Laikin Funkenstein, "A Man's Place in a Woman's World: Otto Dix, Social Dancing, and Constructions of Masculinity in Weimar Germany," 177.

⁷³ Quoted in Matthew Biro, *Dada Cyborg: Visions of the New Human in Weimar Berlin*, 170.

history— is disabled, having lost both arms. The connection between the visibility of the disabled body and iconoclasm in art practice reaches toward a theory of creative destruction; as Siebers has noted, “it is often the presence of disability that allows the beauty of an artwork to endure over time.”⁷⁴ Dix also appropriated historical forms of painting in *Prague Street*. The work was first displayed as part of a loosely-joined triptych along with *The Barricade*, which directly references the Kapp-Putsch, and *Skat Players* at the Berlin Secession in 1921. This appropriation was a radical reimagining of a traditionally religious form of painting and also mimicked grandiose history paintings in its scale. But Dix bestowed the gravitas of these citational forms onto the figure of the begging veteran, who was considered socially abject. As Biro has noted, “In Dix’s art, the present appeared as an amalgam of distinct, often outmoded traditions vying with one another in the chaos of everyday life... the present was exploded and analyzed in relation to a constellation of interrelated historical predecessors.”⁷⁵

Dix’s technique was more than appropriation; it was in fact *misappropriation*. The triptych at the Berlin Secession was not religious but rather a searing social critique. In a similarly subversive manner, several details in *Prague Street* read as contradictory. The gloved hand at top left drops a postage stamp into the begging man’s hand instead of a coin. In the shop windows, there are visible reflections of people who are not really there on the street outside. A soldier wearing a Brodie helmet, two men wearing top hats, another man walking uphill, and even a small self-portrait of the artist haunt the glass, having no exterior referents. These misnomers convey the presence of disability aesthetics in *Prague Street* by producing a disjointed effect, a shattering of the sign from the signifier. As misaligned reflections, they

⁷⁴ Tobin Siebers, *Disability Aesthetics*, 5.

⁷⁵ Matthew Biro, “History at a Standstill: Walter Benjamin, Otto Dix, and the Question of Stratigraphy,” 155.

reaffirm the idea that Dix is purposefully resisting a sense of coherent wholeness. Instead, as Biro describes, a montage of various forms “present themselves to the spectator’s eye, and their simulations and conflicting claims on the viewer’s attentive faculties produce... this sense of dynamic agitation.”⁷⁶ The faces in the shop windows, composed of overlapping collage and paint, also evoke memories; populating the background of *Prague Street* with ghost images of both the battlefield and Dresden of the past and asserting the inescapable tangibility of remembered perceptions. Layered and difficult to unpack, these ephemeral details point to the transience of bodies during the war and reveal that supposedly objective official memory was not to be relied upon.

A final dispersion of meaning in *Prague Street* is the fact that Dix defaced his own image. A graffiti-like sketch covers the outermost layer of the work, as if someone has scratched symbols over the surface. Dix may have been referencing the battlefield once more, as it was common for soldiers to draw and write graffiti on trench walls. The symbols are discernible as part skeleton, part scythe, suggesting death and violence once more— the work is literally marred by trauma. There is also a head in profile drawn on the wall beneath the shop window on the left and the head of a skeleton-soldier drawn near the feet of the woman-child. Interestingly, this ambiguous figure holds a piece of white chalk, meaning she may be the one who is to blame for this graffiti. The most opaque figure in *Prague Street* is thus the one responsible for iterating the surface opacity of the canvas, producing further indeterminate meaning through defacement.

By attaching multiple meanings to the veteran bodies in *Prague Street*, Dix produced an aesthetic that is not easily digestible but transgressive and multivalent. Far from being marginal and delimiting, disability is at the generative core of *Prague Street*. Dix’s adoption of the

⁷⁶ Ibid., 173.

medium of Dada collage, combined with his retention of paint on canvas, creates an undulation of physical implications. Not only does *Prague Street* depict the wide range of bodily forms that composed modern corporeality, it does so through an insistence on mixed materiality that probed what it meant to exist in the twentieth century in radically different bodies— bodies that carried in them the memory of trauma and the weight of socio-political oppression. Dix's experience of trauma and his attention to altered bodies after the war, his incorporation of collage's indeterminacy, and his resistance to reconstituting the fragmented human form reflect the central importance of disability to understanding his work. In its exploration of corporeal diversity, *Prague Street* makes space for analyzing the current of ableist prejudices and inequality in Weimar Germany. What Biro calls "dynamic agitation," what Siebers calls "a distinct version of the beautiful"— the unsentimental, unapologetic reality of the irregular body visible in Dix's work— is proof of an aesthetic of disability that is irremovable from lived experience and vitally significant to art in the twentieth century.⁷⁷

⁷⁷ Matthew Biro, "History at a Standstill: Walter Benjamin, Otto Dix, and the Question of Stratigraphy," 153; Tobin Siebers, *Disability Aesthetics*, 9.



Figure 9: Otto Dix, *Skat Players*, *The Barricade*, and *Prague Street* (*Devoted to My Contemporaries*) at the Berlin Secession, 1921

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