OTTO DIX AND WEIMAR MEDIA CULTURE

TIME, FASHION AND PHOTOGRAPHY IN PORTRAIT PAINTINGS OF THE NEUE SACHLICHKEIT

ANNE REIMERS

Peter Lang

Otto Dix (1891–1969) was a leading figure of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* movement in painting in 1920s Germany. This groundbreaking study analyses for the first time in depth the relationship between Dix's verist-realist portrait paintings and the rapidly expanding mass media culture of the Weimar era.

Focusing on a selection of portraits created in the first half of the 1920s, the book explores four specific aspects: the way in which Dix engaged with fashion and celebrity culture; how he responded to the challenge posed by photography; how he dealt with a situation where black-and-white reproductions were the most common medium through which diverse audiences encountered his work, and the ways in which Dix's career development ran in parallel with the commentary on his artistic production in journalistic and specialist media publications. Temporality, medium-specificity and reproduction are identified as concerns that drove his aesthetic responses to a historically specific environment.

New archival material, letters and interviews by the artist, and a wide range of publications by art critics, cultural theorists and art historians of the Weimar era are drawn on to reveal new information about key paintings such as *Self-Portrait with Nude Model* (1923) and *Portrait of the Dancer Anita Berber* (1925).

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To my parents and Nick

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Introduction

> Photography has supplanted painting.
> Painting resists and does not wish to surrender.[1]
> – Ossip Brik, 'The Photograph versus the Painting' (1926)

> It is the destiny of everything living to become history one day;
> but artistic effort and creation that cannot stop considering whether it will make a good impression in the mirror of history, is already corrupted at its core.[2]
> – Paul Westheim, *Für und Wider* (1923)

Otto Dix is seen as a leading figure of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* in painting in 1920s Germany, and he is without a doubt the most studied and exhibited today. The work he started to produce after his return from the trenches of the First World War shocked with both its subject matter and visual means. Dix engaged directly with the dramatically changed cultural and social conditions in the post-war era. This was a time when art critics, such as Alfred Salmony in 1920, called for 'an active art [that] must be strongly figurative. With so much impact that the simplest man can understand it. So subversive and shocking that dangerousness and contempt cannot be further heightened.'[3] And this is what Dix delivered. He produced '*zeitbewusste Malerei*', as the art critic Willi Wolfradt described it in 1926, using a phrase that is perhaps most accurately translated as 'painting

1 Ossip Brik, 'The Photograph versus the Painting', repr. and trans. in Christopher Phillips, ed., *Photography in the Modern Era: European Documents and Critical Writings, 1913–1940* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art/Aperture, 1989), 213. First published in: *Sovetskoe foto*, 2 (1926), 40–42.

2 Paul Westheim, 'Vorwort', in *Für und Wider. Kritische Anmerkungen zur Kunst der Gegenwart* ['For and Against: Critical Notes on the Art of the Present'], ed. by Paul Westheim (Potsdam: Kiepenheuer, 1923), 14. (All translations from German into English are my own unless otherwise stated.)

3 Alfred Salmony, 'George Grosz', *Das Kunstblatt*, 4 (1920), 97.

aware of its contemporary context'.[4] According to Wolfradt, Dix was the leading representative of an art that wanted to 'leave the incest of the studio' behind and 'impact directly on man, to be relevant to him'.[5]

However, painters who decided to return to strong figuration during this period had to consider that this would put them into more direct competition with mechanically produced images which dominated the media landscape of the Weimar Republic, specifically with the other visual mediums of film and photography. Impressionism, Expressionism and other avant-gardist styles of painting that are now seen as leading towards abstraction had made the difference between painting and the mechanical reproduction of reality clear by developing a visual language more independent from external reality. It became a trope in contemporary writing that the unprecedented expansion of technological mass media culture in the 1920s was transforming human perception, the processing of visual information and the understanding of temporal structures, and for Dix and many of his peers the response was a 'return to the object'.[6]

The work Dix produced following his dadaist phase from around 1920 onwards used some aesthetic tools and conventions shaped by the German Old Masters, and his stylistic pluralism and the contemporary subject matter he applied it to has been the focus of much of the existing literature. Dix will have been aware of the problem some commentators had with a type of painting that returned to a more mimetic relationship with the external world. Film critic Béla Balázs objected to this type of painting specifically based on its 'reliance on particular artistic conventions that were taken from a bygone era and that were, therefore, manifestly inauthentic', and there was a general concern among supporters of avant-gardist directions

4 Willi Wolfradt, 'Otto Dix. Ein neuer Maler', *Berliner Illustrirte Zeitung*, 25/21 (23 May 1926), 669.

5 Wolfradt, 'Otto Dix. Ein neuer Maler', 669.

6 Fritz Schmalenbach, 'The Term Neue Sachlichkeit', *The Art Bulletin*, 22/3 (September 1940), 164.

in art that 'the reappearance of the same artistic devices found in the work of the previous century must necessarily be reactionary'.[7]

This study proposes that what made Dix's artworks innovative is also the fact that they engaged, in not immediately obvious ways, with a rapidly expanding media landscape, specifically film, photography and print. Artistic photography and film, or dadaist collages – artworks that made direct use of technology – may have seemed more 'appropriate for the time', more *zeitgemäß*, than those executed in the traditional medium of painting. However, it is my contention that the mechanical media played an important role in organizing artistic vision in the paintings under discussion, that they bear the traces of a 'reproductive optics' – a term drawn from Erwin Panofsky's 1930 essay 'Original and Facsimile Reproduction'.[8] Panofsky did not write about Dix, but a 'reproductive optics', I argue, made Dix's particular brand of realism *zeitgemäß*. The art critic Willi Wolfradt, one of Dix's earliest supporters, pointed out in 1924 that Dix's version of '*Sachlichkeit*', or 'objectivity', deliberately went beyond photography by offering – and he must have been thinking of contemporary portrait photography in particular here – a 'catalepsy of unretouched detailing'.[9] In an effort to defend Dix against his critics, he insisted two years later that the return to 'clarity, understandability, reality' was not 'a relapse into a banal copying of the external world'.[10] Wolfradt proposed instead that Dix's brand of 'objectivity is not least inspired by photography and cinema,

7 Devin Fore, *Realism after Modernism. The Rehumanization of Art and Literature* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012), 9–10.

8 Erwin Panofsky, 'Original und Faksimilereproduktion', *Der Kreis*, 7 (1930), 3–16, repr. in 'Original and Facsimile Reproduction', trans. by Timothy Grundy, *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, 57/58 (Spring/Autumn 2010), 332.

9 Willi Wolfradt, *Otto Dix*, Junge Kunst, 41 (Leipzig: Klinkhardt and Biermann, 1924), 9. I have used my own translation here instead of that provided in Olaf Peters, ed., *Otto Dix*, exh. cat. Neue Galerie New York and The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts (Munich: Prestel, 2010), 114, which reads 'the lockjaw of unretouched meticulousness'.

10 Wolfradt, 'Otto Dix. Ein neuer Maler', 669.

whose mechanically produced effects it aims to heighten through artistic energy'.[11]

The issue of 'medium-specificity' was raised due to the change in perceptual training attributed to photography and later also film, and in the 1920s, it became an issue central to contemporary debates about photography as a specifically modern medium. But Dix's engagement with technological media culture went further than Wolfradt's suggestion that the painter's aim was to heighten the 'mechanically produced effects' of photography and cinema. I contend that at a time when, as the writer Oskar Maria Graf observed, portrait painting was experiencing a 'downright hectic increase',[12] some of the verist-realist portraits Dix painted between 1922 and 1925, between his dadaist-verist phase and his conversion to a more old masterly naturalism in the second half of the 1920s, were tactical statements about the possibilities of portrait painting made by an artist facing a cultural paradigm that privileged the mechanically reproduced image. He devised strategies that could foreground painting's potential to offer perceptual possibilities different from – more importantly, in some aspects superior to – those offered by the photographic image. At the same time, Dix also considered in what way he could play an active role in harnessing the opportunities offered by the photographic reproduction of artworks, disseminated through photographic positives and the print media.

Dix's aim to upstage photography was in many ways the result of his experience of the war. The best example of this intention is his lost monumental painting *Trench* (*Schützengraben*), created between 1920 and 1923, a visceral painting that 'incurred particular indignation'[13] from both members of the general public and influential art world insiders, in particular the art historian Julius Meier-Graefe, when it was displayed by the Wallraf-Richartz-Museum in Cologne at the end of 1923 and then included in the important Spring exhibition at the academy in Berlin in May 1924.[14] With this painting that showed the decomposing

11 Wolfradt, 'Otto Dix. Ein neuer Maler', 669.

12 Oskar Maria Graf, 'Heinrich Maria Davringhausen', *Der Cicerone*, 16 (1924), 60.

13 Wolfradt, *Otto Dix*, trans. in Peters, *Otto Dix*, 116.

14 Its acquisition by the Wallraf-Richartz-Museum in Cologne in 1923 became the subject of a bitter dispute. See Andreas Strobl, *Otto Dix. Eine Malerkarriere der zwanziger Jahre* (Berlin: Reimer, 1996), 88–97.

bodies of dead soldiers in graphic detail, as did his portfolio of graphic works *The War* (1924) created shortly afterwards, the artist tried to show that painting could come closer to capturing reality and have greater visual, and therefore emotional, impact than photography. The *Lustmord* pictures Dix created between 1920 and 1922 pursued a similar agenda.[15] Newspapers, in contrast, did not print images other than those that preserved the 'dignity' of soldiers by showing the war as a heroic undertaking. Dix had gone into the war because 'I am a realist […] I had to see everything with my own eyes, to confirm: this is how it really is', and he wanted to bring this reality into his pictures.[16] In 1920, the director of the Dresdner Stadtmuseum, Paul F. Schmidt, described works by Dix that he had seen in an exhibition of the Dresdner Sezession, among them the dadaist paintings *Barricade* (1920) and *Prager Straße* (1920), as 'cruel pictures of the time', as '*grausame Zeitbilder*', that 'through the glaring immediacy of the hideousness of blood, misery, prosthetic existence and glued-on details', achieved the 'greatest possible attack on our senses'.[17]

With this artistic strategy, Dix deliberately provoked controversy to heighten public interest in his work and he saw himself in competition with other artists in this regard. His painter friend Otto Griebel recalled in his memoirs that both he and Dix were influenced in their turn towards a more challenging 'dadaist [art], which meant at the time an art with a realist-political emphasis', by the work of Berlin-based artists such as George Grosz, John Heartfield and Rudolf Schlichter, and that Dix made his intentions clear after the *First International Dada Fair* in 1920: 'We need to beat the Berliners!'[18] Struggling to sell his work, much of which was considered pornographic, Dix complained to his painter colleague

15 Olaf Peters, '"Painting, a Medium of Cool Execution": Otto Dix and Lustmord', in Peters, *Otto Dix*, 92–107.

16 Otto Dix, 'Über Kunst, Religion, Krieg. Gespräch mit Freunden am Bodensee, Dezember 1963', in Diether Schmidt, *Otto Dix im Selbstbildnis* (Berlin: Henschel, 1981), 255.

17 Paul Ferdinand Schmidt, 'Ausstellung der Dresdner Sezession (Oktober–November bei Arnold in Dresden)', *Der Cicerone*, 12/22 (1920), 826.

18 Otto Griebel, *Ich war ein Mann der Strasse. Lebenserinnerungen eines Dresdner Malers* (Frankfurt a.M.: Röderberg, 1986), 94 and 107.

Conrad Felixmüller: 'I'm not getting anywhere; my paintings are unsaleable [*unverkäuflich*]! Either I will become famous or infamous!'[19] Over the next two years, Dix's fame grew slowly beyond regional audiences through his participation in a number of larger exhibitions in Berlin, but it was the scandal around the confiscation of his painting *Girl in Front of a Mirror* at the end of 1922 from the *Juryfreie Kunstschau* in Berlin, the nationwide coverage of the ensuing court case for obscenity in 1923, and the controversy surrounding his war painting *Trench* that same year, that received national news coverage and quickly made him well-known beyond artistic circles and the exhibition-going members of the general public, the so-called *Kunstpublikum*. By 1923, Dix had become the leading protagonist of a 'new' naturalist direction in painting, although one who divided, and would continue to divide, opinion, whether due to the subject matter of his artworks, how he presented it, or the style in which he painted it.[20]

This book does not provide an overview of Dix's oeuvre produced in the 1920s. It focuses on a small number of portrait paintings the artist created in the first half of the decade – some frequently discussed, others rarely mentioned or reproduced – as case studies. My interest lies in questions of artistic agency and posterity, in how painters establish leadership both among their peers and in relation to other visual media, the role arts criticism can play in this, and how a broader contextualization of specific artworks can produce new interpretations. This study employs research strategies that cut across disciplines – across art, fashion, cultural and media histories – making it relevant beyond Otto Dix. I will explore in four chapters: how Dix engaged with a quickly expanding mass media and celebrity culture; how he identified the limits of technological image production and areas in which painting could still be superior; how he dealt with a situation where black-and-white reproductions were the most common way in which a diverse audience encountered his work in a wide range of outlets; and finally the way in which Dix's career development

19 Conrad Felixmüller, *Legenden 1912–1976*, ed. by G. H. Herzog (Tübingen: Wasmuth, 1977), 54.

20 Andreas Strobl has provided an overview of the reception of Dix's work and the development of his career over the course of the 1920s, of 'how and why Dix became famous', in *Otto Dix. Eine Malerkarriere der zwanziger Jahre* (Berlin: Reimer, 1996).

over the course of the 1920s ran in parallel with the commentary on his work, and on *Neue Sachlichkeit*, in art journals, newspapers, cultural and fashion magazines. Throughout this study, the tracing of complex and dynamic temporal trajectories plays a central role. 'Fashion' in its different incarnations – as a temporal agent, artefact, allegory and discursive trope – will be identified as an agent of rupture and directional force that Dix simultaneously engaged for his own ends while attempting to contain its destructive powers, and that connected his work in very specific ways to Weimar Germany's media culture.

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The first chapter of this book considers Otto Dix's *Portrait of the Dancer Anita Berber* (1925), one of the most intense and well-known paintings in his oeuvre, which has been described as 'without a doubt *the* icon of the Weimar Republic'.[21] The portrait and its subject, its exceptional emotional charge and dramatic aesthetics, seen from the light of Berber's scandalous life and performances as well as her early death in 1928, seems to exemplify many cultural and social developments of 1920s Berlin. What deserves further attention, however, is the fact that this is a portrait unlike any other in Dix's oeuvre: the subject of this portrait was a famous dancer and film actress, a fashion icon and celebrity, whose mediated image was already distributed in a wider economy of images. This exposure made her image extremely unstable. In fact, Berber's popularity had been in steep decline for more than a year when the artist decided to paint her. The ways in which the painter negotiated the temporal dynamics of rise and decline that Berber – and by extension his painting – were caught in will be examined to shed new light on the relationship of Dix's work to contemporary fashionable tropes and images.

Using Kracauer's essay on photography, published in 1927, as a starting point, the first chapter argues that Dix attempted to permanently inscribe into a painting what Kracauer described as the historic 'truth content' photography was unable to capture.[22] Artistic developments in a wider cultural

21 Peters, *Otto Dix*, 210.

22 Siegfried Kracauer, 'Photography' (1927), trans. and foreword by Thomas Y. Levin, *Critical Enquiry*, 19 (Spring 1993), 421–436.

field will be considered alongside this, with a focus on their currency at the time the painting was first displayed at the Neumann-Nierendorf Gallery in Berlin from February to April 1926.[23] The *Portrait of the Dancer Anita Berber* is revealed as an exercise in containment through a strategy of temporal de-anchoring, and the painter as a 'synthesizer' of trans-historical temporal dynamics. The artwork can thereby be reframed as a pastiche that marks an endpoint in a chain of production and reproduction of images – from contemporary media culture to distant art history. It demonstrates the new openness of processes through which images from mass media culture enter art history and functions as a display of the artist's mastery of a new temporal order. I contend that Berber's portrait should therefore be understood as a very specific type of intervention in Weimar modernity's discourse about the relevance of painted portraits in an image economy increasingly dominated by photographic reproductions.

The second chapter considers another arena where Dix tried to demonstrate that painting was still superior to mechanically produced images: in the representation of materials and surfaces, and in the creation of haptic effects. The material qualities of Dix's Dada works have been discussed in some detail by scholars such as Renate Heinrich.[24] However, there has been no sustained discussion of the depiction of fabrics and of the relationship between plastic and haptic surface effects, which, I argue here, should also be considered on the level of an artistic programme in some of the portrait paintings the artist created around 1923. This is important because the *Neue Sachlichkeit* was seen by contemporary commentators as a return to plasticity in the wake of the Italian movement Valori Plastici, but in Dix's work, plasticity and materiality intersected in a very unique way. My analysis focuses on *Self-Portrait with Nude Model* (1923) and *Portrait Mrs Martha Dix* (1923). The painting *The Family of the Painter Adalbert Trillhaase* (1923) and the lost *Double-Portrait* (1922) of Dix and his wife as dancers will also

23 Strobl, *Otto* Dix, 247. The exhibition travelled to Galerie Tannhauser, Munich, from June to July 1926.

24 Renate Heinrich, 'Material und Malerei: Dix und Dada', in Wulf Herzogenrath and Johann-Karl Schmidt, eds, *Otto Dix. Zum 100. Geburtstag 1891–1991* (Stuttgart: Hatje, 1991), 85–91. The importance of the depiction of materials has also been pointed out by Strobl.

briefly be considered. Temporal, behavioural and stylistic dialectics between the male and female figure in *Self-Portrait with Nude Model* will be identified, and the discussion of the *Portrait Mrs Martha Dix* in a fur coat and with fashionable make-up centres around her contrived posture and the fact that her make-up imitates that worn in front of the camera by film stars. By showing us what a film star's face looked like 'off-screen', in detail and in colour, Dix's portrait is able to raise the issue of the fictionality of the filmic image through a traditional visual medium that might at first sight seem less capable of reproducing reality than film technology. These portraits were set up to remind viewers of what mechanical images could *not* do by employing strategies of haptic detailing, exaggeration and incongruence, and by pitting different visual effects against each other. Fashion as a medium that allowed the painter to insert temporal dialectics into the picture will also play a role in the interpretation.

According to Wolfradt, what had propelled Dix to (re-)engage a naturalist painterly idiom were his 'starved reality instincts', his '*ausgehungerte Wirklichkeitsinstinkte*', which, by extension, one could posit as an affliction that was affecting the art-interested public more generally. For Wolfradt, it was specifically Dix's choice of extreme subject matter that enabled his paintings to bring reality – real life – back into the picture, to go beyond the 'ideality', or '*Idealität*', 'of civilisation and studio'.[25] These developments occurred in parallel with painting's turn away from external reality towards abstraction. However, reading the idea of 'starved reality instincts' differently, Dix might have felt, too, that society's 'reality-instincts' were starved due to an excess of mechanical reproductions of the external world in black-and-white. These could also not (yet) adequately represent space relations, material and surface details. Importantly, Dix turned his attention towards materiality just before photography would do so from the mid-1920s onwards, specifically Bauhaus photographers such as Walter Peterhans. The term 'Material Verism' will be put forward as an appropriate description of Dix's practice, a term Carl Einstein introduced in 1920 for dadaist collages produced by Dix's fellow verist Rudolf Schlichter, where

25 Wolfradt, *Otto Dix*, 5. Translated in Peters, *Otto Dix*, 113, as 'starved-out reality instincts'.

'the fabric of a suit is represented by the fabric of a suit'.[26] This term, I suggest, can encompass both Dix's dadaist works *and* some of the paintings that followed as a form of resistance against the dominance of the photographic image. From a broader perspective, the chapter argues that the portraits under discussion can be understood as theoretical objects that simultaneously engaged in current, wide-ranging art historical debates and contemporary media culture.

The third chapter considers painting's position within a wider image economy from yet another angle. In contrast to the previous two chapters, where the artist took an antagonistic stance to mechanical image production and multiplication, Dix also found a way to harness the opportunities mechanical reproduction offered for the promotion of his work, while simultaneously insisting on medium-specificity and protecting his original artwork from being 'tainted' by its reproduction. This chapter reveals why photographic reproductions of artworks were so important to painters more generally at the time, and why it mattered how the original artwork would translate in the reproduction. The essay 'Original und Faksimilereproduktion' by Erwin Panofsky, published in 1930, in which he discusses facsimile reproductions of artworks, is one of the sources engaged for this discussion.

A portrait by Dix thus far largely ignored by research published to date, not least because its location is unknown and only reproductions of it in black-and-white are available, will be at the centre of the enquiry in the third chapter: the *Portrait of the Poet Herbert Eulenberg*, painted in 1925. Rather than offering an analysis of the painting's function as a portrait, I will investigate issues of authorship and the problem of reproducibility as fundamental to the painter's decision-making processes and at the root of the artwork's aesthetics. I will also briefly draw attention to two other, lost paintings by Dix that share some of the qualities of the Eulenberg portrait and have received equally little attention: *Death and Resurrection*

26 '*stofflicher Verismus*'. Carl Einstein, 'Rudolph Schlichter', *Das Kunstblatt*, 4 (1920), 107–108. Schlichter did, however, not continue to produce collages, although his interest in dress styles remained, not least due to his fetishism for high, laced boots.

(1922) and *The Widow* (1925). In an era when, as László Moholy-Nagy put it, 'an almost imperceptible shift towards colourlessness and towards grey'[27] had occurred, Dix began to engage with the visual economy that had developed around the photographic reproduction of artworks in a range of media outlets, from postcards to newspapers. The chapter will reveal that he took an active role in the reproduction and distribution of his own paintings at the same time. What is more, in some of his works, Dix mocked the bad quality of, and bourgeois taste for, mass-produced coloured oil print reproductions of famous paintings for display in one's own home, demonstrating his engagement with yet another area of contemporary media culture.

While the first chapter looks at how Dix tried to harness the power of fashion, while also containing it, for his own career ends, the final chapter deals with the issue of fashion in the written discourse on artists, artworks and art movements, with focus on art journals that engaged with and ran alongside Dix's development and *Neue Sachlichkeit* as a direction in painting. The main focus will be on the second half of the 1920s, the period of time when the artist's career and the painterly movement he was seen as part of had been firmly established. I will consider two aspects of this discourse: firstly, the *language of temporality* art writers employed, specifically references to the German ready-to-wear fashion industry, or *Konfektion*, and secondly, the *temporality of language* as an issue that art critics became increasingly aware of. Their discussions centred around the use of *Schlagworte*, catchwords conceived to describe artistic developments – among them the term '*Zeitgemäßheit*', 'appropriateness for the time' or 'timelines'. It is my contention that, compared to previous decades, art writers employed references to 'fashion' as a critical concept in novel ways to discuss developments in fine art, and that this was owing to a greater awareness of the power of their own medium and vocabulary.

27 László Moholy-Nagy, *Malerei-Fotografie-Film*, Neue Bauhausbücher, 7 (Passau: Passavia, 1927; repr. with afterword by Otto Stelzer, Mainz: Kupferberg, 1967), 13. The book was first published in 1925 in the previous series of Bauhausbücher, 8 (Munich: Langen, 1925). The version used here is a facsimile of the 1927 edition. Eng. trans. as László Moholy-Nagy, *Painting, Photography, Film*, trans. by Janet Seligman (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1969).

Critical terms employed by art history had become suspect, and this required art critics writing about contemporary art to develop a different language and to coin new terms. However, in order to make themselves understandable, writers could not use an entirely idiosyncratic vocabulary either. In addition, they were also concerned about what they perceived to be an increase in the number of artists who were more interested in quick career success than originality and innovation. The terms *Kunstkonfektion* and *Konfektion* will emerge as tools to address the relationship between stylistic developments and fashions in art production in a new way. In the art historical writing of the era, the discussions had previously centred around the question of the logic and reason behind the development of artistic expression, based on the desire to organize historical forms into stylistic groupings. The aim was to place them within an organic visual narrative over time, while excluding expressions that were deemed to have been short-lived 'insignificant' fashions.[28] I argue that, in the 1920s, the focus of the discourse about fashion moved on from the concern about the behaviour of form in distant art history, and about *Kunsthandwerk* under the conditions of capitalism,[29] to a much stronger focus on contemporary fine art, on the behaviour of artists rather than their output, and to a more pronounced look inwards at the discursive tools and language employed by the writers themselves to discuss these issues.

In addition, this chapter will bring together writers who tried to assess whether Dix's oeuvre, and *Neue Sachlichkeit* in painting, would stand the test of time or whether they would ultimately be dismissed as superficial fashions. For Paul Westheim, the editor of the influential, elitist art journal *Das Kunstblatt*, much of contemporary artistic production was in danger of limiting its own future significance by 'too much contemporaneity', by 'something too bound to time, too time-limited'.[30] As Walter Georgi reflected in his review of the Spring exhibition of the Akademie der Künste in Berlin in 1926, *Neue Sachlichkeit* 'was for large factions of our youth

28 See Frederic Schwartz, *Blind Spots: Critical Theory and the History of Art in Twentieth Century Germany* (London: Yale University Press, 2005).

29 See Frederic Schwartz, *The Werkbund: Design Theory and Mass Culture before the First World War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996).

30 Paul Westheim, 'Kunst in Frankreich. L'Esprit', *Das Kunstblatt*, 6 (1922), 13.

fashion and recipe [...] one follows the tip-off just like when gambling on the stock exchange'.[31] Popularity posed a problem for one's reputation in the art world, in the present and potentially in the future, too, when the art historical canon would be shaped. It will become clear how the fate of an artist's career was almost inextricably bound to the currency of the labels used to describe his work.

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This study seeks to contribute new research to the field of Dix studies and of interwar German art history, to the study of modern art more generally and to the continued examination of the resistance that photography and other reproductive image-making technologies have provoked in painting. In particular the idea that concerns about mechanical reproduction are implicated at the inception of a painter's creative output has relevance beyond the Weimar era. This book looks beyond the familiar horizons of existing publications on Dix's work and challenges perceived disciplinary boundaries to develop methods by which new information and other structures of meaning could be revealed about some of his most iconic paintings. An investigation into how the artist's output intersected with the concerns of leading art critics, cultural theorists and art historians, from Siegfried Kracauer to Walter Benjamin, Richard Hamann, Erwin Panofsky and Hans Tietze, forms part of this undertaking. By attending to the historical specificity of the cultural environment in which he worked, while also locating aspects of the artworks' meaning in contemporary discursive contexts, I aim to open up productive new avenues for further enquiry, mapping out a way in which the actions and oeuvres of other painters of the Weimar era could also potentially be explored. The portraits discussed here interfaced with mechanical image technologies and print culture, with fashion and temporality, in a variety of very specific ways. By paying attention to precise nuances of the time period, and by drawing on material previously undiscovered, disregarded or not discussed in relation to Dix, I will reveal the complex, interconnected

31 Walter Georgi, 'Frühjahrsausstellung der Akademie der Künste Berlin 1926', *Deutsche Kunst und Dekoration*, 58 (1926), 299.

artistic strategies he devised in response to a specific historical milieu in order to demonstrate, with a sense of triumphant critique, that painting could still have abilities and functions different to mechanically produced images.

The perhaps central question that motivates this enquiry is which strategies artists can engage to establish themselves as leaders within their field and to retain this position – a situation made more challenging in Dix's case by the fact that his chosen medium was one that seemed to continue to lose ground. What was ultimately at stake for the artist with every painting he produced, every decision by curators and collectors, with every reproduction of his work in journals and newspapers, with every word writers employed to described it, was the level and the duration of his success. Walter Benjamin saw this, in agreement with the art collector Eduard Fuchs and quoting him here, as one of the most 'important questions which [...] attach themselves to art'.[32] It is this historically specific constellation, unique to every artist and even every individual artwork, that would determine the way in which both would enter and continue to be considered in art history – or whether they would do so at all. A critique of the artist as conscious of the instability of his position and the new demands made of his medium will reveal the intellectual and painterly challenges that a new, heightened form of commodification in tandem with an expanded media culture posed for an artist of the interwar avant-garde.

32 Eduard Fuchs, *Gavarni* (Munich: Albert Langen, 1925), 13, cit. and trans. in Walter Benjamin 'Eduard Fuchs: Writer and Historian', trans. by Kurt Tarnowski, *New German Critique*, 5 (1975), 29.