
1927

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Knowing the artwork "itself", or enduring historical alterity

Otto Dix's *Neugeborenes Kind auf Händen (Ursus)*

IN 1927, SHORTLY AFTER the birth of his second child, his first son, Otto Dix painted *Neugeborenes Kind auf Händen (Ursus)* (fig. 1). It is a relatively small painting, measuring 50 × 43.5 centimetres, executed in mixed media on plywood. Its subject is seemingly simple and direct. Out of a deep blue darkness, two hands wrinkled with age emerge, holding a newborn, and almost equally wrinkled, baby boy in a white cloth. Arguably, what immediately strikes the one who faces the painting is that it addresses the beholder. The contrast between the indistinct background and the meticulous care with which the child and the hands are rendered creates a gestural effect. This is not an image of someone holding a child, but of someone handing over a child. Put differently, the painting not only represents, but rather presents the newborn to the viewer. This gesture suggests at once a generous gift and a binding obligation; it demands something in return from the beholder. The reciprocal logic of the gift and the responsibility of attentively caring and catering for a new life create a relational bond that captivates the viewer in front of the painting.[1]

Another way of putting this is that the gesture of the painting endows it with an agency that seems to transcend the fictional space of the image and intervene in the reality of the beholder. The painting apparently insists on attention, but offers no obvious explanation as to why. The dark void of the painting from which the hands with the child emerge refuses, unlike the Christian iconographic tradition to which Dix obviously refers, to provide answers to fundamental existential questions about the enigma of life. The first encounter with the artwork thus leaves the viewer bewildered. Why do the child and the hands emerge from a compact darkness without any spatial or temporal determination?

Figure 1. Otto Dix, *Neugeborenes Kind auf Händen (Ursus)*, 1927. Oil and tempera on plywood, 50 × 43.5 cm.

1. In his well-known essay of 1925, Marcel Mauss had explored the reciprocity of the gift just a couple of years before the painting was created. Mauss 2016.

Whose hands are these and why is the person holding the child not depicted? Is there a proposal or request coming with the offering gesture? As visually striking the painting might be, it evades simple explanation and immediate understanding.

It has been argued that interpretation is "the act by which we seek to do away with our incomprehension".[2] This doing away with incomprehension might also be phrased in terms of a quest for knowledge. A first fundamental question to ask, then, would be what it is that art historians claim to know something about when they assert to produce knowledge about art? How narrowly or how broadly defined can the object of knowledge be for us to still claim that the knowledge produced makes the artwork itself knowable? The ability of artworks not only to "speak" but to "act" upon the beholder has been the subject of renewed interest for quite some time now and prompted a number of publications theorizing the agency of art and, more recently, its affective power.[3] At a surface level, a common denominator of these approaches is the shift in focus from the interpreting subject, which in the wake of poststructuralist critique has become the normative perspective, to an actively intervening object. One could be tempted to describe such methods as object-oriented, but the question is whether this way of subjectifying or animating artworks says anything about the objects themselves or whether it is just another way of theorizing the projections of the interpreting subject? Agency and/or affect may be appropriate concepts to capture something essential of what the encounter with and experience of a painting such as Dix's evokes in the viewer, but do they help us better understand the work *per se*?[4] Here, of course, the next question arises: what does it mean to put the object "itself" at the centre? It is not my aim to explore this particular issue in detail here, but I would like to draw attention to the fact that claims to bring the artwork to the fore, implicitly or explicitly to do it justice, may be voiced from diametrically opposed premises and result in divergent methodologies.[5]

2. Bätschmann 2003, p. 182.

3. Horst Bredekamp (2014) has reminded us that all known cultures have in one way or another recognized the prevalence of *imagines agentes*. Some key publications on the subject are Freedberg 1989; Holly 1996; Mitchell 2005; Bredekamp 2010; Best 2014; van Eck 2015. The issue is also a central theme in Elkins 1997. For some recent critical readings of the revived interest in agency and the related concept of affect, see von Falkenhausen 2019; Rampley 2021.

4. See Mårten Snickare's chapter in this volume for a less sceptical approach to "affective knowledge".

5. In the introduction to an anthology dedicated to exploring and theorize the im-

For instance, Oskar Bätschmann argues that "an object-specific theory and method" concerned with artworks "as themselves" primarily implies that the work of art is not treated as a document, i.e. as "evidence" of something beyond itself, such as the artist's biography, political contexts or social hierarchies of power. This focus on "what renders a work visible" should not, according to Bätschmann, be conflated with the viewer's immediate experience of the art object in the present; considering an artwork as itself requires taking into account its historical contexts, while also insisting on the essential difference between artwork and context.[6] Mieke Bal offers a completely different conception of what it means to understand a work of art "on its [...] own terms". While, like Bätschmann, she insists on engaging with artworks through "a qualified return to the practice of 'close reading'" and, while doing so, treating artworks as "second persons", allowing them "to speak back", her focus is exclusively on engaging with the artwork in its present existence with the aim "to articulate how the object contributes to cultural debates".[7]

What I take as a basic assumption in what follows is Bätschmann's assertion that "strictly speaking, it is impossible to interpret a single work".[8] If Bätschmann seems to offer this as an argument for the importance of historically situating the work of art, which I can certainly agree with and to which I shall return in the last section of this essay, as for now I see it more as a reminder that it is impossible to make any claims about an artwork in isolation. The artwork needs to be related to some kind of context in order to be intelligible. It has been pointed out that there are no given contexts; contextualizing an artwork always involves selections and delimitations.[9] However, images obviously do not emerge in a visual vacuum. In that sense, at least, there is a given frame of reference; images always mean in relation to other images. Therefore, in what follows, I focus on Dix's painting "as itself" or "on

plications of the artwork's material presence and "compelling visuality" as part of a historical interpretation, Robert Zwijnenberg and Claire Farago explicitly phrased their agenda in terms of doing justice to individual artworks. Zwijnenberg & Farago 2003.

6. Bätschmann 1984, pp. 9, 132, 154–155; 2003, quotations pp. 179, 180. See also Keith Moxey, who, like Bätschmann, rejects analytical perspectives that limit themselves to considering art as historical documents. Unlike Bätschmann, however, Moxey emphasizes that it is the aesthetic power of the artwork in the present that disqualifies such approaches. Moxey 2004.

7. Bal 2002, pp. 8–10, 44–45. See Dan Karlholm's chapter in this volume for a further discussion on the prospects of approaching artworks as persons.

8. Bätschmann 2003, p. 192.

9. Bal & Bryson 1991.

its own terms" in the sense that I have let the visual specificity of the artwork limit and decide the contexts that I bring to bear on it. In other words, I focus on pictorial contexts that the painting has helped me identify through (more or less) tangible visual references. It goes without saying that these contexts do not exclude other, equally valid ones, or that the following discussion would thus be exhaustive.[10]

Emulating Old Masters

Since the early 1910s, Dix had emulated the formal features of the Old Masters of the German and Flemish Renaissance and he consciously employed traditional painting techniques, elaborating with thin layers of oil and tempera.[11] In many of his portraits, he depicted the individual with great attention to detail while the surrounding environment was reduced to a uniformly coloured and inarticulate spatiality. The revival and reworking of the Renaissance portrait tradition was something that occupied Dix well into the 1930s. Overt references to Hans Holbein the Younger's portrait of Henry VIII (1540, fig. 2) can be found, for example, in Dix's portrait of the actor Heinrich Georg (1932, fig. 3). The half-figure format, the bodies that come close to the viewer and almost exceed the picture plane, the grim expressions of the faces and the gazes that slip past the beholder, the position of the arms, as well as the monochrome backgrounds with inscriptions, are all common denominators.



Figure 2. Hans Holbein the Younger, *Henry VIII*, 1540. Oil on wood, 88.5 × 74.5 cm. Gallerie Nazionali, Palazzo Barberini, Rome.

→ Figure 3. Otto Dix, *Heinrich Georg*, 1932. Oil and tempera on wood, 100 × 83.5 cm.

More poignant in this context, though, is his 1912 self-portrait, *Selbstbildnis mit Nelke* (fig. 4). Dix's painting clearly refers to Albrecht Dürer's first self-portrait, *Selbstbildnis mit Distel* (1493, fig. 5).[12] Dix's portrait,

10. An additional context would be, for example, the visual culture of Weimar mass media, where photographic images of more or less isolated hands were commonplace. Recent research has begun to explore Dix's paintings in relation to a broader visual culture, see e.g. Reimers 2022.

11. On Dix's painting technique, see Miller 1987. Interestingly, the subject of the painting in focus here, Dix's son Ursus, also wrote about his father's painting technique. Dix 1991.

12. On Dix's historical references in his early self-portraits, see Schubert 1977.


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executed while he was still a student at the Königliche Kunstgewerbeschule in Dresden, is basically a companion piece to Dürer's painting. Like his predecessor, he portrays himself in three-quarter profile against a uniformly coloured background, he has the same stern posture and solemn facial expression, and he glares out of the picture with a concentrated, scrutinizing gaze. Instead of the thistle, he holds a carnation. The painting is executed in a glaze technique, where Dix, in traditional manner, has applied thin, translucent layers of oil and tempera on paper mounted on a panel of poplar wood. In this context, the pronounced focus on the portrayed is of particular relevance. The artist puts himself, the individual subject, at the centre in a manner that emulates an older portrait tradition and thus implicitly invokes the humanist ideal of the Renaissance.[13] In *Neugeborenes Kind (Ursus)*, the individual is at the centre too, and here even more pronouncedly so because the newborn child lacks both clothing and attributes that anchor it in time and space—it is essentially bare humanity.



Figure 5. Albrecht Dürer, *Selbstbildnis mit Distel*, 1493. Oil on parchment transferred to canvas, 56.5 × 44.5 cm.

→ Figure 4. Otto Dix, *Selbstbildnis mit Nelke*, 1912. Oil and tempera on paper mounted on poplar panel, 73.7 × 49.5 cm.

The soft hairs on the child's heavily tilted head, the heightened colour of its grimacing face, the dots of darker pigment on the skin, the creases on its arms, legs and stomach, and the wrinkled soles of its feet as well as the ageing lines and veins of the gnarled hands in which it is held and the folds and falls of the white cloth are all rendered with attentive accuracy. The graphic quality of the figurative elements bears the same kind of detailed rendering that contrasts sharply with the indistinct background also found in Dix's self-portrait and which, in terms of execution, consciously emulates the technical skills of Renaissance painters. Apart from these rather generic visual references and the revival of traditional craftmanship, there are more explicit references to well-known sketches

13. Dix's continued interest in the distinctiveness of the individual keeps his portraits from appearing as constructed types to the same extent as those of his contemporary colleagues such as Christian Schad and Georg Schrimpf. On the portraits of the *Neue Sachlichkeit*, including those of children, in terms of constructed types that create distance from the viewer, see Hülsewig-Johnen 1990, pp. 14–20; Heisig 2011, p. 247.


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by Albrecht Dürer. Among the preserved sketches by Dürer there are several images of isolated hands and drapery with folds but also of children's heads (figs 6–7).[14] Dix's painting bears a striking resemblance to some of these, which together with the way he signed the painting—with his surname spelled with a lower case "d" as used by Dürer at the beginning of his career—testifies to his active engagement with Dürer's art.[15] This type of sketching was, of course, a natural part of artistic practice and Dix also busied himself with drawing isolated hands and folds (fig. 8). However, in the painting of the newborn child, the disembodied hands and cloth with folds have taken on a more decisive significance because they constitute the infant's only visually "readable" or comprehensible context. The dense darkness of the blue background against which the figurative elements of the image emerge offers no recognizable spatial framework. Although what at first appears to be a compact and undifferentiated darkness shifts to a lighter blue in the upper part of the painting, the horizon line or cityscape that seems to appear at the height of the child's head is rather the result of the viewer's desire to be able to spatially orientate their gaze in the image. In fact, there is nothing there but a chromatic space that cannot be meaningfully described or known.





The representation of the child on the white cloth is an indisputable allusion to one of the most central pictorial tropes in Western art history, the Christ child. Countless paintings of the Birth of Christ, the Adoration of the Magi, or the Virgin and Child depict the naked Christ child lying on or partly draped in white cloth, referencing the swaddling cloth wrapped around the newborn that is explicitly mentioned in the Bible.[16] On closer inspection, the white fabric in Dix's painting is not

14. Dürer's drawings of folds and hands have been the subject of numerous studies, see e.g. Widauer 2010; Heuer 2011.

15. On Dürer's way of signing his works as part of the creation of his "trademark", see Zaunbauer 2019, p. 22.

16. Luke 2:7; 2:12.



Figure 8. Otto Dix, *Faltenstudie*, 1927. Charcoal, heightened with white, on paper, 64.2 × 48.3 cm.

← Figure 6. Albrecht Dürer, *Three Studies of Dürer's Left Hand*, 1493–1494. Pen and brown and black ink, 27 × 18 cm.

← Figure 7. Albrecht Dürer, *Gewandstudie*, 1508. Brush, pen, black ink, black ink wash and white highlights on green prepared paper, 25.7 × 19.2 cm.

entirely white, but has elements of blue on the left and yellow on the right, the latter creating a soft golden glow that subtly echoes the use of gilding in older Christian art. In the Christian pictorial tradition, the Christ child does not appear as an isolated motif but is included in narrative scenes anchored in biblical texts. Disembodied hands, though, were introduced as a symbol of God in Jewish art of the 3rd century CE and were subsequently adopted by Christian art. As a pictorial element, the *Manus Dei* have appeared in various iconographic contexts, such as Moses receiving the Ten Commandments, the Expulsion from Paradise and the Ascension of Christ, where they have signified God's presence or voice.[17] Although the disembodied hands in Dix's painting clearly depart from established iconographic conventions, they provide additional resonance to the image's Christian references.

Unlike the Christian pictorial tradition, there are neither narrative references nor overt symbolical meaning in Dix's image. The painting is more about figuration and gestural address than about narration and symbolic signification. It is essentially lacking "inner communication": there is no diegesis unfolding. Instead, its spatial organization and gesture of the hands seem to create a shared communicative space for image and viewer. If an artwork defines itself also by what is excluded, and the fragmented and indeterminate character of what is depicted can thus be recognized as an interactive or intersubjective device, this might partly explain the power with which the work captures the viewer and seems to demand something of them; a response, a commitment or a completion of what the painting has only begun.[18] But what has begun here? If we are to pursue the Christian theme established by the picture, it is

17. Sachs *et al.* 1994, pp. 160–161.

18. On the artwork's capacity to establish its own communicative space and thus to a certain degree pre-configure the viewer's reception, see Kemp 1983; 1992; 1998.

impossible to avoid noting that the birth of Christ foreshadows his agonizing death and that the swaddling cloth prefigures the linen cloth that Joseph of Arimathea wrapped around Christ's dead body.[19] Moreover, the hands holding the child and the white cloth are iconographically related to the Pietà (a motif particularly present in German late medieval and Renaissance images), in which the Virgin holds the mortal body of Christ, wrapped in a loin cloth or shroud. In addition, it could be noted that some of the oldest depictions of the Manus Dei are found in representations of the Old Testament's account of the Binding of Isaac, where God puts Abraham to the test by commanding him to kill his only son.[20] What was first perceived as a potential gift now emerges as a sacrifice.

Portraying human vulnerability

The immediate reason for the work's creation was the birth of Dix's second child, his son Ursus, in March 1927. Several sketches have been preserved and they suggest that the motif was distilled from the moment of the boy's birth. A drawing in black ink, *Geburt III* (1927, fig. 9), seems to have been executed in the delivery room. In the foreground is a woman's swollen belly and bare lower body. Between her spread legs, a figure with sleeves rolled up is holding the infant. The artist has omitted the faces of both the mother and the person holding the child. In another drawing, strongly foreshadowing the final composition of the painting, the bow of the small string that ties the umbilical cord is visible behind the boy's right knee (fig. 10). In this sketch, as in the painting, the hands and the body of the newborn emerge from a void. In a watercolour painting executed in April 1927, about a month after the birth of the child, the white void of the paper has been filled with the darkness that is also a prominent feature of the painting (Centre Pompidou, Paris, inv. no AM 2003-311).

Figure 9. Otto Dix, *Geburt III*, 1927. Ink on drawing cardboard, 45.1 × 38.2 cm. Kupferstichkabinett, Dresden.

Figure 10. Otto Dix, *Neugeborenes von zwei Händen gehalten. Ursus*, 1927. Ink on drawing cardboard, 42.4 × 36.2 cm. Kupferstichkabinett, Dresden.

The character of the sketches as instantaneous images executed in the immediate vicinity of the child's birth reverberates in the painting's focus on the very moment when the boy appears as an individual separate from his mother's body. This is the instant when the child is seen for the first time. The long fingers that gently support the head and shoulder and the deep creases in the child's thighs created by the light pressure of the lower hand's supportive grip on the body mark the child's fragility. But

19. John 19:40; Mark 15:46; Matthew 27:59; Luke 23:53.

20. The motif appears on Roman sarcophagi from the 4th and 5th centuries CE and in Roman catacomb painting. Sachs *et al.* 1994, p. 161.





the hands not only embrace the child in a protective gesture but also provide support for display. The splayed-out fingers of the upper hand seem to adjust the position of the head in order to expose, bringing forth the child as a revelation.[21]

Although *Neugeborenes Kind auf Händen (Ursus)* is obviously related to a specific event, it is no naturalistic documentation. The painting remained in the family's possession until the late 1990s, but it was exhibited for the first time in 1929 and then a dozen more times before it was taken on permanent loan to the Galerie der Stadt Stuttgart (today's Kunstmuseum Stuttgart) in 1978 and acquired by that same institution in 1999, indicating that it was perceived as an exhibition piece and not a private keepsake.[22] Moreover, the painting's visual isolation of the child establishes a temporal and spatial uncertainty which precludes clear references to the specificity of the artist's intimate sphere.

Neither the above-mentioned sketches nor the painting are exceptions in Dix's oeuvre in the sense that ever since the birth of his first child, his daughter Nelly in 1924, he had turned to his own children as subjects in his art. Children are also a prominent feature in many of his other paintings and portraits, to which I shall return below. In Dix's portrayals of children, too, scholars have been quick to identify art-historical references, both to the Dürer period and to German Romanticism.[23] The paintings of his own children, in particular, have been associated with Romanticism's idealizing images of children. His portrait of *Nelly in Blumen* (1924, fig. 12), for example, is often seen as entertaining a visual dialogue

21. I am indebted to Margaretha Thomson for pointing out the revelatory aspects of the image.

22. Exhibitions and literature up to 1989 are listed in the holdings catalogue of the Kunstmuseum Stuttgart, which has a significant collection of Dix's works, see Schmidt 1989.

23. See e.g. Hartmann 1989; Hirner 1990.



Figure 11. Philipp Otto Runge, *Die Hülsenbeckschen Kinder*, 1805–1806. Oil on canvas, 131.5 × 143.5 cm.

with Philipp Otto Runge's idyllic portrayal of *Die Hülsenbeckschen Kinder* (1805–1806, fig. 11). However, *Neugeborerenes Kind auf Händen (Ursus)*, and the closely related painting *Neugeborener mit Nabelschnur auf Tuch (Ursus)* (1927, fig. 13), occupy a special place among the portraits of his own children, since they depict the infants without any reference whatsoever to their immediate social context. The latter work also draws on the Christian pictorial tradition, but as the child is now placed in the centre of a white cloth that stretches across the picture plane, the *vera icon*, the true image, is the most immediate visual reference here.[24]

Much of the enigmatic allure of *Neugeborenes Kind auf Händen (Ursus)* can be ascribed to the contrast between the detailed accuracy of the figurative elements and the opaque space that surrounds them. As suggested above, its visual "call" is mainly due to the fragmentary rep-

Figure 12. Otto Dix, *Nelly in Blumen*, 1924. Oil on canvas, 81 × 55.5 cm.

24. Horst Bredekamp has discussed the *vera icon* as a "substitutive image act" with a special ability to act on the viewer. Bredekamp 2010, pp. 173–178.




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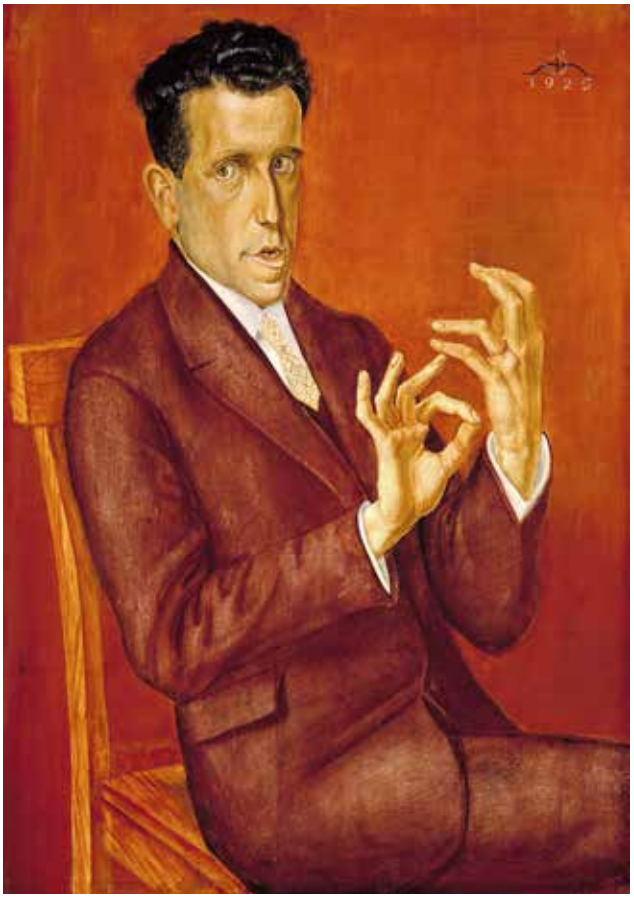


Figure 14. Otto Dix, *Hugo Simons*, 1925. Tempera and oil on plywood, 110.3 × 70.3 cm.

resentation of the hands that emerges from the darkness. In several of Dix's portraits from the 1920s, the execution of the sitter's hands constitutes a crucial expressive element. For instance, in his portraits of the lawyer Hugo Simons (1925, fig. 14), the journalist Sylvia von Harden (1926) or the art dealer Alfred Flechtheim (1926) the clearly accentuated, gesturing hands with splayed-out fingers serve as an important part of the model's characterization. Obviously, in conventional portraiture, hand gestures and body language have often been used as an expressive and symbolic means of visual communication.

In *Neugeborenes Kind auf Händen (Ursus)*, the grimacing and crooked body language of the infant and the gesture of the hands seem all the more prominent because of the scarcity of other visual elements that help us understand what we are looking at. But here they do not help us to better distinguish an individual's character or personality. Although we know that the painting represents the artist's son, it is in fact difficult to consider the painting as a portrayal of a specific individual. Even the title of the work is ambivalent and it does not seem to fully fulfil its purported function as anchorage of the meanings of the image.[25] Labelling the artwork *Neugeborenes Kind auf Händen (Ursus)* certainly indicates that the painting represents the artist's son, but only hesitantly so because the boy's name is put in brackets (as opposed to the anonymous hands that appear in the main title).[26] In fact, despite Dix's meticulously detailed depiction of the child's grimacing face and wrinkled body, the baby boy paradoxically has generic rather than individual features. So, if

Figure 13. Otto Dix, *Neugeborener mit Nabelschnur auf Tuch (Ursus)*, 1927. Mixed media on wood, 60 × 50 cm.

25. Barthes 1977.

26. It is unclear to me whether the title was decided by the artist himself, which is the most plausible, or if it was added later, but that is rather irrelevant for my argument.

we accept the transition from gift to sacrifice suggested above, it seems that the responsibility for deciding who should be the sacrifice lies with the beholder; it could be *his* (Dix's) child, *the* (Christ) child or *any* child.

Otto Dix is perhaps best known for his works of social criticism and satire, which depict the gruesome horrors of the First World War and its devastating consequences in the politically fraught milieu of the Weimar era in excruciating detail or grotesque exaggeration. In these works, too, Dix often entered into dialogue with canonized works from European art history. His series of engravings *Der Krieg* (1924) revives Goya's *Los desastres de la guerra* prints (1810–1820), and the triptychs *Die Großtadt* (1927–1928) and *Der Krieg* (1929–1932, fig. 15) not only adopt the format of altarpieces but revisit the pictorial repertoire of the German late Gothic period and carry references to among others Lucas Cranach the Elder, Mathias Grünewald, Hans Holbein the Younger, and, again, Albrecht Dürer.[27] As a leading exponent of what contemporary art historians such as Gustav Hartlaub and Franz Roh labelled *Die neue Sachlichkeit*, Dix thus made a name for himself with an unsentimental, naturalistic visual idiom coupled with historicist references and pastiches. The artist's rejection of an expressive, subject-oriented concept of art in favour of what has been aptly described as an "amalgamation of the sordid iconography of the post-war avant-garde with the technical mastery of the Old Masters" served as an effective strategy for gaining attention and recognition in the Weimar art world.[28]

Many of the paintings that brought Dix critical attention seem to have a relatively clear objective to expose, process or criticize contemporary traumas, crises and realities of life. What *Neugeborenes Kind auf Händen (Ursus)* is all about is not as clearly spelled out. The painting's tension between excessive visual information and impenetrable obscurity renders a surreal effect that makes the child appear as both utterly frail and strangely alienated. Precisely this, I suggest, is key to understanding how it was embedded in contemporary critical visual discourses on the situation of children in interwar German society, characterized by economic bankruptcy, social misery and political conflicts. Depictions of vulnerable children of the urban precariat served as a powerful symbol in the critical imagery of the time. Socially and politically committed artists such as Conrad Felixmüller, Hans Grundig, Karl Hubbuch and Georg

27. Herzogenrath 1991; Scholz 1991; Schwarz 1991.
28. van Dyke 2009, p. 44.



Figure 15. Otto Dix, *Der Krieg*, 1929–1932. Mixed media on wood, centre panel 204 × 204 cm, left and right wing each 204 × 102 cm, predella 60 × 204 cm.

Schrimpf exposed how children suffered and were ruthlessly exploited in the miserable urban environments of the interwar years. They thus joined forces with contemporary educators, psychologists, politicians and intellectuals who focused precisely on the urban living conditions of children. The image of the child as a defenceless victim was repeatedly used as an effective metaphor for social injustice.[29]

Dix too devoted himself to these issues in several paintings, such as *Arbeiterjunge* (1920), *Frau mit Kind* (1921) and *Mutter mit Kind* (1923).[30] With *Streichholzhändler II* (fig. 16), executed in the same year as *Neugeborenes Kind auf Händen (Ursus)*, 1927, Dix responded to the debate on child labour with a pictorial language that did not shy away from the miserable reality of impoverished children while at the same time referencing the "pathos formula of older visual arts" by having the boy standing next

29. Heisig 2011.

30. On Dix's paintings of mothers in relation to Weimar politics, see Vangen 2009; on women artists' images of motherhood in the Weimar era, see Meskimmon 1998.

to a column as in older portraits of the nobility.[31] The idyllic portraits of his own children, mentioned above, thus stand in sharp contrast to the critical works in which Dix exposed children's vulnerability in poverty or mocked their conformist existence in the petit bourgeois family. Dix was not alone in creating pictures of children of a diametrically opposed nature. The portrayal of children by several contemporary artists—among them Conrad Felixmüler, who, like Dix, portrayed his own children and children on the margins of society in completely different modes—were equally wide-ranging, and it has been pointed out that the idyllic utopias tended to reinforce the accusing tenor of the socio-critical works.[32] But whether Dix depicted the idyll of his own children or the privileges and hardships of other children, he usually situated them in recognizable social contexts. The image of the newborn Ursus, on the other hand, presents the child's existence in a limbo without a social framework. It is an existence beyond and before language, where words have no function. Perhaps this also contributes to the sense that words seem unusually inadequate and insufficient in the face of this painting, that everything depends on the visual and the gestural.



Figure 16. Otto Dix, *Streichholzhändler II*, 1927. Mixed media on wood, 120 × 65 cm.

It has been noted that the painters of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* emphasized the relation between human self-assertion and suffering, thereby questioning human existence in mass society.[33] In *Neugeborenes Kind auf Händen (Ursus)*, Dix metaphorically engaged with a similar theme by, on the one hand, presenting the child as a generic representative of the human collective and, on the other, emphasizing the vulnerable solitude of the individual. In this, he joined forces with one of the contemporary artists who was perhaps most consistently committed to critically expos-

31. Krystof 1995, p. 239, quoted in Heisig 2011, p. 252.
32. Heisig 2011, pp. 238, 249–250.
33. Heisig 2011, p. 243.

ing human suffering in the wake of war and social deprivation: Käthe Kollwitz.[34] Kollwitz, like Dix, often made use of the visual tropes of the Christian pictorial tradition. In many of her works, suffering figures appear in solitude against a compact darkness. In this, she created some of the most powerful images of how the precarity of the individual united the human collective.

Whereas several of Dix's other paintings of suffering children addressed the acute social issues of Weimar Germany, the image of the newborn Ursus at first seems to have been detached from current political events. However, by visually highlighting the child's vulnerability in an as yet unknown, and visually inaccessible, world and at the same time iconographically referring to the Christian pictorial tradition, the painting of the newborn child calls attention to the double meaning of *Opfer*: both victim and sacrifice. Arguably, Dix thereby situated the image of his own child in the midst of current social debates.

Dix revisited

So far, I have tried to make Otto Dix's painting knowable by drawing on (some of) the visual relations that the painting's own pictorial idiom seems to indicate. As far as has been possible within the scope of this essay, I have moved between what could be described as the immediate visual milieu of the painting—including the artist's oeuvre and the artistic environment at the time of the work's creation—and a broader array of images to whose stylistic, iconographic or thematic features Dix's painting establishes tangible, and thus meaningful, connections. In doing so, I have kept to the past, i.e. I have only considered what could be described as historically valid relationships, connections and contexts. The focus has thus been on what has been defined as the artwork's "three systematic relationships": the co-text, the con-text and the pre-text.[35] A fourth relationship, described by Michael Ann Holly as "the post-text, the afterlife of the object as it continues to work at organizing its remembrance in the cultural histories that emplot it", has received less attention.[36] The reason for this is neither a naïve belief in or claim to definitive historical truth about the artwork, nor a denial of the "ineluctable contemporaneity" of the art-historical object.[37] It should

34. See e.g. Moorjani 1986.
35. Bal 2006, p. 189.
36. Holly 1996, p. 14–15.
37. Moxey 2004, p. 750.

rather be seen as a recognition of what Susanne von Falkenhausen has theorized as the artwork's "historical alterity".[38] Crucially in this context, von Falkenhausen argues that recognizing historical alterity "implies a greater orientation towards the object than towards the interpreting subject".[39] This again raises the question of what it means to focus on the work in itself or on its own terms.

Arguably, it is precisely this alterity, i.e. the artwork's emergence within a visual, textual and social context with its own situated discourse that was different from the present, that both enables and necessitates art-historical knowledge. Oskar Bätschmann relates this alterity to a loss of the artwork's original "function", which defamiliarizes the object and creates uncertainties about meaningful ways to engage with the artwork in the present.[40] Even if I would argue that this kind of "gap" between the artwork and its beholder is due to an irreversible loss of "moment" rather than a loss of function—not least because the art-historical object's ascribed status as art might be conceived of precisely as a meaningful function in the present—I take Bätschmann's argument as an acknowledgement of historical alterity.

As suggested in the first section of this essay, Mieke Bal has offered an entirely different perspective on and scholarly approach to this issue. Her proposition to engage in "preposterous history" centres on how contemporary art appropriates and creates "subversive footnotes" to older art. These practices of "contemporary quotation", she argues, "really changes older art" that no longer exists in the context of its production.[41]

In the course of writing this essay, I came across a work of art that offered an opportunity to revisit Dix's painting precisely from a preposterous point of view: Jens Fänge's *La Gran Aventura* (2022, fig. 17).[42] Fänge's piece was created for the group exhibition *The Spring* shown at Galleri Magnus Karlsson in Stockholm in the summer of 2022. The artists of the gallery had been invited to participate in the exhibition with the request to produce an artwork that in some way related to another artistic work.[43] *La Gran Aventura* overtly quotes *Neugeborenes Kind auf*

38. von Falkenhausen 2020, pp. 203–206.
39. von Falkenhausen 2020, p. 206.
40. Bätschmann 2003, p. 183.
41. Bal 1999, quotations pp. 6, 15.
42. For a general introduction to Fänge's art, see af Petersens & Elgh Klingborg 2017.
43. For the gallery's description of the exhibition concept, see https://www.gallerimagnuskarlsson.com/exhibitions/21-kallan-the-spring-group-exhibition-with-gallery-artists/, accessed 4 January 2023.



Figure 17. Jens Fänge, *La Gran Aventura*, 2022. Assemblage, oil, vinyl paint and textile on panel, 65 × 38 cm.

Händen (Ursus) in the "willfully anachronistic" manner that, according to Bal, enables contemporary art to "be construed as theoretical objects that 'theorize' cultural history".[44] In the context of this essay, *La Gran Aventura* thus seemed as impossible to ignore as the preposterous storying of *Neugeborenes Kind auf Händen (Ursus)* proved to be unreasonable to fulfil.

La Gran Aventura is an assemblage composed of oil, vinyl paint and textile on panel and measures 65 × 38 centimetres. Against a compact background painted in black, a baby in a nappy and a rainbow cape is held up by abruptly disembodied hands. The child and the hands are sprinkled with green twigs with leaves. Instead of recycling the symbolic significance of the white cloth in Dix's painting, the child here has been provided with another key signifier of the Christian pictorial tradition: a white halo made of textile attached to the panel. In his work, Fänge has drawn attention to a particular detail in Dix's painting: the way the newborn spreads his toes. This element is quoted, translated and transformed in the assemblage into the victory sign that the child forms with his fingers.[45] To cut it short, the fragile and vulnerable child has been resurrected as a self-confident, laurelled and glorified little superhero.

Having come thus far, the unavoidable question arose: how could the preposterous superhero be construed as a theoretical object that could be brought to bear on Dix's painting? And on whose terms would such an encounter occur? I will not pursue such a task here, since it seems to me that revisiting Dix's work solely on the basis of its being quoted and recast

44. Bal 1999, p. 5.

45. According to a brief statement on the gallery website, the artist "saw the same sign, but with the toes of the baby in Dix's painting". https://www.gallerimagnuskarlsson.com/exhibitions/21/works/artworks-4480-jens-fange-la-gran-aventura-2022/, accessed 4 January 2023.

in the present would distract from rather than recognize the painting itself. Moreover, like Dix's painting, Fänge's assemblage points to its own visual contexts, of which Dix's work is only one, albeit an obvious and central one. Reading *Neugeborenes Kind auf Händen (Ursus)* through *La Gran Aventura* thus also seems to risk a misrepresentation of the latter work by an arbitrary sidelining of other con-texts, co-texts and pre-texts.

It should be noted that I am in no way doing justice to Bal's arguments or analytical claims here. Her cultural analysis entails a much more profound, sophisticated and complex procedure that has many merits and is, in fact, an apt reminder of the importance of close engagement with the artwork. But if the present is the only legitimate locus of analysis, and if the sole or main purpose is to engage with the artwork as a contribution to contemporary cultural debate, then I find it difficult to see this as compatible with addressing the work "itself" and on its own terms. Susanne von Falkenhausen has argued that such a presentist viewpoint fails to recognize the object's historical alterity and risks imposing the viewing subject's narcissistic projections onto the disempowered object.[46] She thus rightly posits this as a stance of ethics in art-historical research and proposes "a mode of seeing that perceives and accepts the otherness of what it sees".[47] Arguably, making the artwork knowable can be realized neither by trying to overcome its unfamiliarity by objectivist historicism, nor by willfully ignoring it through narcissistic presentism, but only on the basis of embracing and enduring its historical alterity, which is also to accept that it can never be fully known.

Coda

I first encountered Otto Dix's *Neugeborenes Kind auf Händen (Ursus)* in an exhibition of the artist's work in London in 1992.[48] My strongest memory of this occasion is that the painting seemed to insist on attention: it was as if it was directly addressing me when I entered the gallery room. I was captivated by the gesture of the hands emerging seemingly out of nowhere and by the vulnerability and fragility of the child immersed in an unknown darkness. During the course of writing this essay, I had the opportunity to revisit the painting in the Kunstmuseum Stuttgart, a

46. von Falkenhausen 2020, ch. 8.

47. von Falkenhausen 2020, p. 22.

48. The exhibition, arranged to commemorate the 100th anniversary of Dix's birth in 1891, was first shown in Galerie der Stadt Stuttgart and the Nationalgalerie in Berlin before it travelled to the Tate Gallery in London in 1992.

second encounter more than thirty years later that proved to be crucial for the finalization of this text. Not only did I get the chance to confirm, correct and expand my observations of the painting's formal and material specificities at a detailed level that no reproduction can ever match (I was now particularly struck by the absolute absence of idealization, the golden shimmer of the white fabric and the chromatic variations of the background which I did not remember from my first encounter and which do not always appear in reproductions); the re-encounter also made it clear that although the brief moment of intense wonder at seeing the painting for the first time was forever lost, since I now know the work quite well, the inexplicable dimensions of the painting are still just as strong. The (historical) alterity of the painting remains, it still eludes and marvels, albeit in a slightly different manner. Perhaps because in the end, spending time in front *Neugeborenes Kind auf Händen (Ursus)* has also altered me.

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