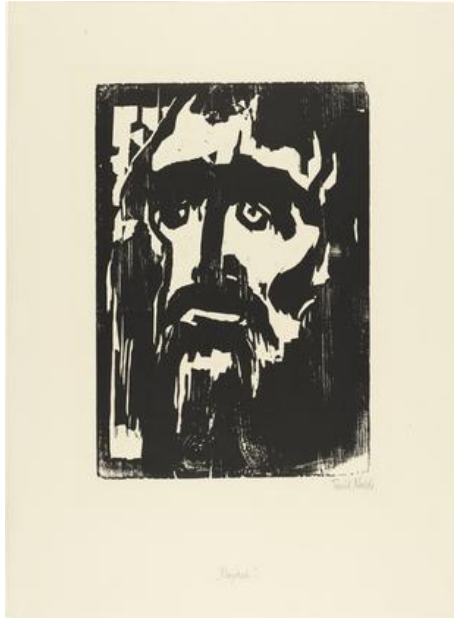


REVISED 3/9/2012

“The Mad Square: Modernity in German Art 1910-37”, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia, November 25, 2011-March 4, 2012.



The now-typical blockbuster exhibition, “The Mad Square,”¹ with works borrowed from all over the world, opens with a wall text explaining why the exhibition is entitled “The Mad Square”: “The title – The Mad Square (Der tolle Platz) – is drawn from Felix Nussbaum’s 1931 painting included in this exhibition, which depicts Berlin’s famous Pariser Platz as a mad and fantastic place expressing both meanings of the word ‘toll’. The ‘Mad Square’ is both a physical place – the city, represented in so many works in the exhibition – and a reference to the state of tension and turbulence that characterizes the period. The ‘square’ can be seen as a modernist construct that saw artists moving away from figurative representations towards increasingly abstract forms.”² It proceeds through rooms that assemble different chapters in the Expressionist, Dada, Bauhaus, Constructivist, and New Objectivity insurrections that accompanied Germany’s slow, pre- and post-Versailles Treaty slide toward fascism in the 1910s through the 1930s, ending with a room devoted to the suppression of “degenerate art” by Adolf Hitler. In this last room – just after a continuous screening of Fritz Lang’s Expressionist-Sci-fi film *Metropolis* (1927), contiguous with a series of works denoting Berlin in the 1920s (then the “third largest city in the world after New York and Paris”³) – and amidst denunciatory posters and works depicting the end

game for an era that investigated and put on display the essential and inherent madness or “otherworldliness” of art, a book in a single vitrine was displayed, opened to two facing woodcuts. The woodcut on the left by Emil Nolde in many ways summarized the purpose of the various revolts and attempts at providing art with a social and utopian purpose as fin-de-siècle and then post-WWI Germany suffered through wave after wave of political and economic strife, everything coming to closure with the apocalypse of WWII. The austere woodblock print, dated 1912 (and inserted into a book published in 1919), more or less “said everything” that needed to be said.

Image (above) – Emil Nolde, *Prophet* (1912). Woodcut. 12 5/8 x 8 3/4” (32.1 x 22.2 cm.); sheet: 19 11/16 x 14 3/8” (50 x 36.5 cm.). Courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, New York. © Nolde Stiftung Seebüll, Germany.

If Expressionism and its Other, Dada, were assaults on the conventions of the time (and the latter upon the former, etc.), and if the decadence of German society (both high *and* low society, but mostly *high*) is the central event of most of this art, the moments midstream when Constructivism and the New Objectivity arrived (following on generous wall space devoted to the various incarnations of the Bauhaus) makes sense. Foremost in this regard, then, were the somewhat delicate works displayed by El Lissitzky and László Moholy-Nagy – a series of the former’s

¹ Curated by Jacqueline Strecker, Curator of Special Exhibitions, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney. The exhibition was at the Art Gallery of New South Wales from August 6-November 6, 2011. For a statement summarizing the exhibition, see Jacqueline Strecker, “The Mad Square: Modernity in German Art 1910-37”, in *Kultur: Magazine of the Goethe-Institut in Australia* 22 (June 2011): pp. 4-5. For a review written by the coordinating curator of the exhibition at NGV, see Petra Kayser, “The Mad Square: Modernity in German Art 1910-37”, *Melbourne Review* (December 2011-January 2012): p. 40. Clearly reviews written by the curators of the event being reviewed call into question the entire apparatus of present-day art criticism, the incestuous nature of the so-called artworld, and any claim to objectivity and/or critical distance on behalf of the journals involved. The Goethe-Institut additionally underwrote the parallel program “Berlin Sydney”, a series of events held “across Sydney’s leading art venues including the Art Gallery of New South Wales” featuring “theatre, music, cabaret, exhibitions and events” in association with “The Mad Square”. *Kultur*, p. 35. See “Calendar of Events”, *ibid.*, pp. 31-35.

² Wall text, “The Mad Square: Modernity in German Art 1910-37”, National Gallery of Victoria. March 3, 2012. With reference to Felix Nussbaum, *The Mad Square* (1931). Oil on canvas, 97 x 195.5 cm. Berlinische Galerie, Landesmuseum für Moderne Kunst, Fotografie und Architektur. Pariser Platz features the iconic Brandenburg Gate, an architectural monument that will take on particularly ugly connotations in the post-WWII Cold War.

³ Exhibition wall text.

“Prouns” (elegant visual conundrums), and a series of the latter’s “Photograms” (camera-less photographs), plus conventional black-and-white photographs by Moholy-Nagy of “artforms inspired by a machine aesthetic” (as the somewhat shallow or art-history “lite” wall texts intoned, these texts originating in Sydney most likely, where the exhibition first opened).

That both El Lissitzky and Moholy-Nagy migrated to Germany from the East is telltale ... This period in the mid- to late-1920s was in many senses exceptional, primarily because the madness of Expressionism and Dada gave way to an attempt to turn modern art’s generally anarchic resources toward a social process of reform (of resurrection from the flames of cynicism and dereliction, these two pseudo-“degenerate” qualities rightly the eternal mystery of the Expressionist and Dadaist camps, both of which always contained a secret moral lining anyway, as did Surrealism, most especially in the case of Hugo Ball, who left the Cabaret Voltaire to go into seclusion and write about Byzantine angelology financially supported by Hermann Hesse). The wall texts announce, therefore, with El Lissitzky’s “Prouns”, that “romantic idealism” and “documentary realism” came into a somewhat high and accordingly imperiled accord during this hiatus, with the attendant passage toward abstraction intended as a visual means of instilling a rational-utopian agenda for art (inspired by Kasimir Malevich and Russian Formalism, no less),⁴ all – of course – somehow echoing in Germany from the enchanted internationalist milieu known as Modernism, and something that had effectively migrated from the East by way of Russia, where revolution had in fact taken root, whereas Germany was effectively still caught in the throes of post-revolutionary reaction. A series of anti-Bolshevik posters, for this reason, appear early, before the chronological progression of the exhibition hits these middle years of seeming sobriety.

In attempting to sort out the parade of images assembled (paintings, prints, posters, photographs, etc.), plus dull functionalist furniture from the Bauhaus era, a truly dazzling display of art under duress in times that can only be called radically demented, and after being told by a smiling gallery guard that it is not permitted to use a pen to take notes (and woe to those who did not bring a pencil),⁵ it was Emil Nolde’s *Head of a Prophet* (1912), then, that upon further pen-less reflection signaled the key element of the entire cavalcade of art works en route to Hitler’s suppression of this experimental field, an intense historical moment that sought to access the interior of art in relation to social and political economies; or, a phase in the modernist circus that sought the role art might play in commenting upon the dereliction of duty by its so-called elders, both the political and artistic cadre/elite that more or less establishes the bounds of what is appropriate and what is not.

Yet in this day and age, and with a similar range of discordant socio-economic currents roiling the body politic (and the body politic of Art proper), it is curious to be force-marched through an exhibition post-2007, after paying \$18.00 and with nowhere to sit and reflect because there are no benches anywhere within the galleries, that ultimately makes *no* connection to the present state of affairs while also expending enormous effort and monies to document and titillate by way of effectively sensationalizing a period that produced a body of work that at its very foundation was entirely an attempt to evaluate and re-condition the moral morass of Germany in the years of the

⁴ The wall text notes these works by El Lissitzky connote “formal possibilities beyond representation” and that Constructivism came to a particularly cogent and elevated form in Germany from 1922 to 1923 ... For a more nuanced treatment of this moment, see the exhibition catalogue, *The Mad Square: Modernity in German Art 1910-37*, edited by Jacqueline Strecker (Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2011). See especially, Petra Kayser, “Constructivism and the Machine Aesthetic”, pp. 163-67, in *ibid.* Moholy-Nagy’s enlightened expectations for the new multiple, interrelated arts of modernity are to be found in László Moholy-Nagy, *Painting, Photography, Film* (1925). See László Moholy-Nagy, *Painting, Photography, Film*, trans. Janet Seligman (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1969). First published *Malerei, Fotografie, Film* (Munich, 1925), with a second edition published by the Bauhaus in 1927 incorporating a new layout and design by Moholy-Nagy. Moholy-Nagy joined the Bauhaus in 1923 at the age of 28. This moment of “clarity” amidst the madness of the competing schools of modern art was distinguished by its attempt to banish subjectivity from the production of artworks – to access the pure instrumental agency of the apparatus of art as speculative thought itself, albeit through the impersonal processes of the artwork in relation to the greater forces operative within society or “the world” at large. Derived in part from Soviet agit-prop art, its moment failed with the subsequent slide toward the politicization of art both in the East and in the West, a process that unleashed the repressed aspects of subjective agency always present in art regardless of attempts to exterminate it. For the photograms, see *Moholy-Nagy: The Photograms: Catalogue Raisonné*, edited by Renate Heyne, Floris M. Neusüss, with Hattula Moholy-Nagy, with texts by Herbert Molderings, Renate Heyne (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2009).

⁵ I filled out the appropriate “customer comments” form upon exiting the exhibition ... The attendant at the Information desk suggested that the “no pens” rule might be a condition of some of the loaned art works, which for the most part were all behind glass anyway ...

Weimar Republic. Nolde's head of Christ sends shivers down the spine as a result. For this image (nonetheless entombed in a book, in a vitrine, in the last room) overrides all other images in the exhibition insofar as it is the very image of the suffering embedded in all images, and the theological-existential hallmark of what remains, arguably, the event of art today – the redemptive, metaphysical-existential mark of art in service to insurrection as resurrection (renewal) of the sorry subject of History proper; the imperiled human subject/soul.

Exiting through the gift shop, as is the case today for the art tourist most anywhere in the world, one has a choice of many inexpensive, ersatz “objets d’art”. In the postcard section one will find an array of images of one of just about every style of art the NGV has to offer. Thus, I left with postcards of Francisco Goya y Lucientes' *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters* (“etching and aquatint printed in sepia”, 1797-98), Albrecht Dürer's *Melencolia I* (“engraving”, 1514), and Hans Memling's *The Man of Sorrows in the Arms of the Virgin* (“oil and gold leaf on wood panel,” 1475-79), and I will return one day, with pencil, to seek these works out (if they are not in storage or on loan elsewhere). I could not find a postcard of Nolde's *Head of a Prophet* (1912), as it is not part of the NGV's collection, though I now know where to find the book,⁶ given the irreducible international standards of the attribution for displayed works of art that museums must still adhere to, even if they would rather not bother. (1683 words)

GK/AGENCE 'X' (DRAFT 03/04/12)

⁶ *Genius I* (Munich: Kurt Wolff, 1919). National Gallery of Art, Canberra. Accession number 90.1047.1. N.B.: Having no “NGV-authorized writing implement” to write this down, I therefore e-mailed myself the details just before exiting the last gallery into the gift shop. The Wolff publishing house was founded in 1913 and first specialized in Expressionist literature. After WWI, Wolff Verlag began a series of publications entitled *Genius*, which featured modern art and literature, including prints from major artists of the time. *Genius* was published between 1919 and 1921, with only three issues ever coming out. Kurt Wolff fled Germany in 1931, first to France and Italy, and then to the U.S. See *German Expressionism: The Graphic Impulse*, edited by Starr Figura (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2011), p. 266. Catalog of an exhibition held at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, New York, March 27-July 11, 2011. A singular, unbound print of the same Nolde woodblock is in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art. A note from *MoMA Highlights* (1999; revised 2004), p. 53, states: “This brooding face confronts the viewer with an immediacy and deep emotion that leave no doubt about the prophet's spirituality. His hollow eyes, furrowed brow, sunken cheeks, and solemn countenance express his innermost feelings. Three years before Nolde executed this print, he had experienced a religious transformation while recovering from an illness. Following this episode, he began depicting religious subjects in paintings and prints, such as the image seen here.” http://www.moma.org/collection/object.php?object_id=62151.