

Herbert Kühn, “Expressionism and Socialism” (May 1919)

Abstract

After the German defeat in the First World War and the revolution of 1918/19, many followers of Expressionism cherished the hope of a social and spiritual renewal of Germany. This text, which appeared in the art journal *Neue Blätter für Kunst und Dichtung* in 1919, illustrates this hope for a rejection of materialism, machines, militarism and nationalism and a turn towards humanity, spirituality and international understanding. The text was written by the art historian Herbert Kühn, who was an art critic and political editor of the *Halberstädter Tageblatt* at the time. Published in May 1919, while the National Assembly elected four months earlier was drafting the new constitution of the Weimar Republic, it is reproduced here in excerpts. Like many other supporters of Expressionism at the time, Kühn saw socialism as the political embodiment of the ideals they aspired to.

Source

Expressionism is in origin not a problem of form. What is of primary importance is the transformation of the spirit, the change in that primal relationship that is signified in the relation of the self to the world.

[...]

Machines, created by men to help men, cannons, automobiles, railroads, airships, telegraphs—for the use of man, for his advancement—they arose, raised themselves above the creator—slew him. His will shattered. His consciousness wasted away. Time rebelled.

[...]

Man perished through materialism. We died from the unspiritual: War.

And we awoke anew to a new existence.

The world war is the final result of an epoch that had forgotten the self, an epoch that had trespassed against the spirit, an epoch that therefore had to destroy itself.

[...]

We have conquered the soul anew, the spirit.

[...]

And thus we attain that which the epoch before us had forgotten—humanity.

We bring it forth out of ourselves. We recreate it anew. We build on it, we model and form, in order to raise it to greater heights, in order to conceive it more broadly in order to make the more powerful, luminous, blazing, the One that struggles within us, the One that occupies us, the One that fulfills us: Man.

[...]

In socialism man awakens to his rights. Man, who formerly looked on—now, enslaved, exploited, oppressed, saw in agony how the world destroyed him. ...

Matter destroyed us. Matter crushed us. Joyless work, which man invented, the increase of capital, when man created—the machine—raised itself up against man—killed him.

God was killed.

But God does not let himself be killed.

[...]

1910 the revolution in art began. 1910 Picasso painted, 1910 Kandinsky, 1910 *Die Aktion* appeared.

Art is ahead of its time.

As is philosophy.

Husserl, Bergson, Eucken, Simmel—each name a rediscovery of the spirit, a rediscovery of humanity.

But still the time had not come.

Matter still had to carry out its last blow, the explosion, the destruction—then the way was also politically then completely freed for the belief in humanity—socialism.

[...]

Expressionism is—as is socialism—the same outcry against matter, against the unspiritual, against machines, against centralization, for the spirit, for God, for the humanity in man.

It is the same cast of mind, the same attitude toward the world, that has different names according only to different areas in which it appears. There is no Expressionism without socialism.

It is not by chance that the new art opens itself so strongly to politics, it is not by chance that there are periodicals for politics (Social Democracy) and Expressionism.

It is not by chance that the new art rises up just as much against war, against militarism, as the best of the Social Democrats do.

We want humaneness, unity of the spirit, freedom, brotherhood of the essentially human, and we despise border-post insanity, chauvinism, nationalism.

As with Tolstoy, patriotism is for us the most offensive form of meanness, of pettiness, of falsehood. Out of this false breed grows baseness of mind. Inevitably.

[...]

We greet you, thou French brothers, comrades, united—thou, Barbusse, and thou Romain Rolland, thou J. P. Jouve, and André Gide, Henri Guilbeaux, and Martinet, Duchamp and all the others.

We greet you Italians, you Czechs, Poles, Russians, Finns, British, and you, you Indians.

The artists are ahead of their times, they prepare the ground, they engrave the hearts, they sow the seeds.

[...]

We want a new world. A better world.

We want **Humanity!**

Source: Rose-Carol Washton Long, ed., *German Expressionism, Documents from the End of the Wilhelmine Empire to the Rise of National Socialism*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1993, pp. 177–78.

Source of original German text: Herbert Kühn, „Expressionismus und Sozialismus,“ *Neue Blätter für Kunst und Dichtung*, no. 2 (May 1919), pp. 28–30.

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