

OTTO FREUNDLICH
COSMIC
COMMUNISM

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Confessions of a Revolutionary Painter¹

Part I.

We shall be understood by those for whom we fight.² We must fight with them, side by side, we must fight on the side of the revolutionary proletariat. All that we have thought and created is of no value in the present struggle. Yet, it is not worthless. But it lacks the supportive power of the people, the comrades. Why shouldn't they be willing to grasp something difficult once they know that it was intended and created for them. But first they must know that we do not wish to shirk the strict obligations of revolutionary solidarity and want to fulfill them with joy. Perhaps that will rob us of the time to continue our work on what we consider to be true, which today is useless, though, for the cause itself. That is likely. But we must be prepared for that as well. We must be willing to regard this artistic development, to which we have dedicated ourselves exclusively our whole life long, and which brought us boycott and poverty, as finished.

Because now the *ideal* humanity, for which more serious artists always created their works, has become the *real* humanity. It is here, it has taken the great ethical task in its hands. Fulfilling this task is both a necessity for it and its purpose in life. But that has altered time and space. The artist, who saw before him the lofty idea of human solidarity as a new start to the universe in a broad temporal and spatial form, somewhere *and* some time on Earth, but as something certain, something that has to come, now sees it as a demand from the masses in the present *and* in his immediate surroundings. The great inspirational power, which the best and most gifted of artists had as their great distant goal, and which is most magnificently expressed in Beethoven's IX Symphony, this inspirational force is now expected from close by. But for this, the bridge is still missing. And we must not pretend to ourselves that it is *not* missing. And even if we are at a loss as to how it should be built, it nevertheless remains for us to leap *in one go* across the trenches and stand suddenly amidst those without whom the practical work of living will never be a reality, who themselves realize the new society of humanity one stage after another at jeopardy to their own lives.

These stalwart fighters and modest heroes are not representative, their pathos is the "Internationale," illegal work, abuse, jail, and often certain death. Their sacrifice is their pathos, they sacrifice themselves and will continue to sacrifice themselves until the duty, which they perform for all humanity, is vindicated and has attained its goal. They cannot abstract themselves from their very selves, history does not permit that; because history has placed them in a predicament in which they must die or from which they must free themselves. How much worse it would be for them if they did not have their great teachers. But they do have their great teachers, and these great teachers have also learned an infinite amount from them. For if the great teachers had not learnt such a great deal from the working people, whom they wanted to enlighten about their miserable conditions, they may well have remained misunderstood.

We artists likewise wish to learn from the working people. But how? We have rent much that was cruel from our hearts: petty bourgeois sentiments, in opposition to the petty bourgeois. Bourgeois sentiments, in opposition to the bourgeoisie, and much based on many other oppositions. Because we hail from the petty bourgeoisie, from the bourgeoisie; certainly many of the most famous artists also come from the proletariat. But before they could be anything they first had to become middle-class citizens, attend middle-class art schools, and assimilate the high intellectual culture of the bourgeoisie. Many were drunk from their successes, i.e. from material successes and recognition in the press. They had acquired a steady fame, and the doors of the rich and powerful were wide open to them. Even the artist who savagely criticized bourgeois society in his drawings and paintings received great admiration from precisely this section of society, and the museums could not afford not to have his works. But he scarcely existed for the proletariat, they did not know him, even though this art was inspired by their suffering.

How did this come about?—because other artists, whose astute minds had realized that, however they looked at it, every form that they depicted was inevitably conventional, i.e. obeyed the demands of the society which they thanked for their training, remained in that respect artists who summoned every element of the great art of the past, from every country in the world, yet saw that in the best case they would remain skillful monkeys if they continued in that way, because it would never lead them to liberation from the yoke of convention. With that the entire world of forms was damned and besmirched for them, and everything turned in a circle. The leap had to be ventured away from all the myths down the ages, as well as from the realm of nature, which the philistines, the moneyed large and small, always invoked; nature had become their categorical imperative, the one in fact that they imposed on the artist; nature the α and ω of their aesthetic, by which they saw whether the artist kept to the straight and narrow or not. Nature knew no criticism, and all who copied it were also without criticism, and criticism was not wished for from the artists.

The eye of the artist is, however, an incorruptible critic. It sees through the masks, even if they are made of iron. And even if every bush, every flower, every brook, every cliff were hidden by a mask, the artist would see it and say: you're lying. And he stood there one day, looked around, and saw himself surrounded by a nature that wore masks, and by people who all wore masks, and he said: you're lying, off with those masks. But they were stuck tight and had turned to skin. That was a terrible discovery. And that's where we are today. Turn whichever way you will: we're still there. We tried to divine the truth from things and produce a true art that affirms the entire world of things. We have failed. Failed through the passive resistance of the things themselves. Because things were passive behind the masks and they wore their masks passively. Unredeemed by any romanticism. We saw just one thing: the technique of the painter, which is the flesh, blood, and bone by which he constructs, it yielded nothing but the *effect* chewed over a thousand times; nor was it meant to be anything but the thousand-times-chewed-over effect. And worst of all this tendency to present this effect was rooted in the artist himself, from even the most vacuous kitsch painter to the richest and most noble talent, yes, even the genius.

There were geniuses who had fought death struggles over it: Cézanne and Van Gogh. We need not wonder that their work remained a fragment, but simply admire all the more how they forged so far ahead with their work and try to make it clear to ourselves what an enormous achievement in terms of character strength and bold invention has been stored in their works. As we were young, we had to take up this bequest. Which meant we had to continue it. Many of us simply repeated what the masters said, and arrived in that way at fame and glory. We, however, had to proceed further. Which is something different. Going further is not repeating. In all this it must be emphasized that the old costumes in which we alone recognize and acknowledge the world of appearances as such is the sole existing, sole possible image of nature. Is it the only possible one? And do we need another? For the majority, even these questions seem to be blasphemy.

We have nevertheless proceeded a long way along this road and every work we created is the answer: no, this nature is not the only possible one, and we need another. May those who have the courage to develop from individualism to collectivism also have the courage to make the world of things disappear for once. Otherwise they will remain with grandpa, who hangs there in a papier maché frame above the sofa, and with the Biedermeier style. Let them tell themselves: the things you are looking at are visual memories, rendered as a physiological function by heredity, but they came about through the one and the same educational principle that came to be repeated over many generations. This educational principle had the aim of isolating things, because this principle of isolation corresponded with the character of human society, in which there were only individual egos.

But who was it that characterized society as the summation of millions of individual egos? Well, that was private ownership, which always spawned, more or less, high capitalism. Only what is individual can be left be; and whoever is to be left be must be isolated. From this, one can see that our world of things, which we call nature, is already very old. And that the reason why we have smashed this convention has very deep social causes. That collectivism, which is to say Communism, which has got rid of the individual as an end in itself, is unable to escape the consequences that emerge from a mind freed of property and being possessed. One day we shall be understood. The epoch of discovering nature anew for art will first be able to arrive once art has gone through an epoch free of nature.

The consequences that emerge from a mind freed of property and being possessed reveal themselves in painting insofar as it dispenses with the illusion of feigning three-dimensionality. Not that it in any way dispenses with space and form. What it dispenses with initially is the division (dualism) between foreground and background. Dispensing with this dualism means foregoing the world of things, i.e. its depiction. Its depiction is only possible by means of a painting technique that aspires to feign three-dimensionality and requires the foreground, middle ground, and background.³

So what remains? When nature has been eliminated as a motif of painting that has become unable to imitate an object what then is the positive, the distinguishing property that such painting depends on?

At the beginning of the steam engine was the kettle. When George Stevenson observed that the boiling water in his kettle not only sent steam issuing from the spout but also created an exit for itself by rhythmically lifting the lid, his attention was diverted from the immediate purpose of the boiling water, which served to make a cup of tea; Stevenson had observed this and had the great revelation that steam is a force capable of lifting a weight. This was the discovery of a natural law that was also proved to be of the greatest importance for physics and astronomy. Just what resistance people placed in the way of the inventor of the steam engine, what struggles it took before the first railway could forge a connection between two towns, is written down in the history of the origins of the railway. I want to compare the invention of the railway and its history with what I have to say about that development of painting/ sculpture that did not imitate the objects of nature.

The purpose of representational painting and sculpture is comparable to the purpose of water for tea. Both arts were an excellent means for the historical portrayal of the religious and political powers, of the views and deeds in their eras. And yet there is a driving force in these artworks that does not completely equate with the purposes they served, and this is precisely the temporal connection which—unlike with languages—instantly permits us to establish a living relationship with the artworks of every epoch purely by looking. This driving force is comparable with the physical forces of nature—not that I wish to say that it is a physical force. But just as the power of steam was revealed to Stevenson while boiling water for tea, a force that is one of the mightiest in the universe, it became evident to a number of painters and sculptors in our era that while fashioning landscapes and people, this fashioning proceeds according to the laws of forces that go beyond the specific purpose of the given motifs and that can only then reveal the greatness, the enormity of their universal validity when they are released from any representational motif. Through this realization the artist was placed at a crossroads.

Here we wish to hand the word over to two different artists, each of whom will give his views on this insight in his own way: The first artist says: What's it to me that the power that enables me to depict landscapes and human figures has some deeper reason and purpose than to depict these landscapes and figures? It is enough for me that I can paint a landscape or a portrait the way I want to paint them. It is enough for me when I have an idea for a picture with human figures on it, with streets, factories, and trees, that I do studies and then execute it all in the technique I learned and further perfected in accordance with my needs. The finished painting is always that, at least, which I can achieve in precisely this period of my life. There is no end to an artist's progress, as I know, and every further accomplished work still leaves much that I must struggle to attain, and that keeps my spirits alert.

The second artist says:⁴ As I began to paint and to sculpt, I had an ideal of art. I studied the art of the Greeks and old masters, the masters of Impressionism, and also went to various art schools, where I did life drawing and painting. I created pictures according to my own ideas and modeled portraits and human figures in clay. But since I was dissatisfied with working as an epigone using the techniques of the Impressionists or Rodin, I strived to find a means of expression whose form and content was personally experienced. What had bothered me most of all was that

there was a trick for depicting people, landscapes, and objects, which doubtless existed quite unconsciously as one of the artists' conventions, but that bowed to the demands of the *beholder* to receive a certain illusion from the painting. This illusion that the beholder demanded was three-dimensionality.

I investigated the means, how in fact the three-dimensionality of bodies and space was achieved and what was the psychological reason why the beholder found such satisfaction in front of the painting when he felt it could be grasped, i.e. is plastic. As for the painting or drawing technique for this plastic effect, I discovered a trick there which tied even the revolutionaries of Impressionist painting to the ground of a convention that contradicted their revolutionary initiative. As for the beholder of such pictures, who demands a three-dimensional illusion for the objects on them, I discovered that the hand that always wants something graspable, also wants to grab, i.e. catch, hold, and possess. So it was the old, deep-rooted urge to possess that demanded this illusion of three-dimensionality from the painter.

My viewpoint was not so clear when it came to sculpture. Or rather, sculpture kept me fixed on the depiction of the person. Even if the relationships in a head were perceived according to plastic measurements, the highlights fell on the more prominent curves, the shadows in more sharply defined depths, heads remained heads with forehead, eyes, nose, mouth, and chin. In painting I had been quick to abandon the naturalistic technique and dispense with the threefold gradation of colors, which alone were always sufficient to create the illusion of plasticity in both painting and drawing. I sought to overcome this suggestion forever rendered by the same means by looking carefully.

In a vaulted cellar in an old edifice that served as a tavern, the walls had been painted with pilasters. What is it, I asked myself, that makes these painted pilasters seem to me to be plastic bas-reliefs. For I know they have not been tooled in stone, but simply painted on the wall in watercolors. With great application I began to study the individual color nuances painted next to one another and attempted to determine their juxtapositions in every detail, just as the hand of the painter had actually painted them. That was terribly hard: I managed to distinguish the deeper gray from medium gray, but my analysis failed when it came to light gray, and I felt solely the plastic suggestion of the pilaster. But I did not flag and finally I succeeded in training my eye so that it remained keen and alert in its discrimination, even with this third brightest nuance of the three grays, the dangerous spot where looking misted over and became plastic illusion. It now became increasingly easy for me to see the colors next to one another, the way they were painted, and even there, where the transitions had been done, I looked long and attentively and, satisfied by the feeling of plasticity, did not turn away. I now even looked attentively at street signs with plastically painted letters. There the plastic suggestion was produced with the most diverse technical means, ranging from academic painting technique to modern poster technique.⁵

While I also dispensed pretty early on in my artistic development with a technique of the kind used for the painted pilaster and painted purely flat surfaces, each placed tightly and without transition next to the other, and built up the entire picture in that way, the primal element of this planar art was nevertheless a bowed

curved surface, i.e. a plastic element. But the one thing regarding the origin and meaning of these efforts was achieved: the elements of the mural had been realized. And I had the opportunity to make a large mosaic in which everything was composed according to the law of the pure surface.⁶ But when I made a window with colored panes and my design was to be produced in a small studio for stained glass painting, the master glazer taught me that a planar curve cannot be cut out of the glass in one piece.⁷ So the curved surface had to be cut out in numerous pieces, which were then separated from one another by the lead but, viewed against the light, still retained their unity.

But not all of the surfaces from this first design were curved. Instinctively, and wiser from my studies of ancient stained glass from the XII + XIII century, I had also painted trapezoidal surfaces in my design, and these could easily be cut from the glass with a diamond. This experience was of great importance to me when I designed a second window, but it was to be of even greater importance for my further artistic development, although at that time I did not yet realize as much. But when I painted my second design for a stained glass window measuring 1 meter wide and 2 meters high,⁸ I did not paint in the lead glass with narrow black surfaces, but instead placed the colored trapezoidal shapes directly next to each other. While painting these colored trapezoidal surfaces directly next to one another I was beset by an excitement as if by a new kind of life in painting.

Not until many years later was I taken thither to where this new life was fully revealed to me. The intimate connection between all the surfaces on one picture, in which like a cell in an organism each passes the energy on to the next cell until there is but an unbroken circulation of these energies throughout the entire organism, this could first be realized by the accumulation of all colors in one picture. And this was the one goal that I strived to attain, because it tallied with my social convictions: with Socialism. For this reason I had to proceed step by step to an ever greater de-individualization. I had to eliminate the egocentric aspect that is closely connected with the depiction of people, plants, and things, I had to arrive at a kind of dialectical language of the colors themselves. I combined complexes of kindred colors with one another, which for their part joined up with complexes of other color units, and so on, until the entire picture was covered. Every color complex could contain its own ultimate chromatic dynamism, which bordered seamlessly on all sides on the neighboring color complexes, and made the contrasts of the others, and with that its difference to them, clearly recognizable; but since every color complex obeyed the same law, an organism could form in which there was no more individualism, in which the entire richness of the color scale could be brought to fruition, without one color unit living at the cost of or repressing the others. Every color complex, whether it was formed solely of strong reds or solely of grays, asserted itself alongside the others, maintaining its self all the more strongly the more it set off the self of the other. The coexistence of all these color complexes, each of which represents a color individuality, results in the perfect collective of all the colors on a picture surface.

The picture that I was able to paint in this manner was like a fine line for me, dividing the past from the future. Everything resembling a motif was overcome. The contrast and amalgamation of the color surfaces constituted the dialectical language

of the picture. But even on this path there is a development. Because after the technique of glass cutting forced me to break up the curve-shaped, finely tapered surface into sub-sections consisting of trapezoidal surfaces, and also because being rectangular, they could be cut from the glass pane with a diamond, this curve-like, finely tapered surface no longer seemed sufficient to me to enable the whole rich instrument of planar painting to be brought to its full effect. The planar curve was itself like a body, which lay however nicely and without gap beside the other planar curves, but which did not grant the richness of the dynamism that was attained through the juxtaposition of trapezoidal, rectangular forms.

Thus it was as if the tips of these planar curves had been snapped off, and remained, seemingly like something curved in my picture, as a bent rectangle with one convex and one parallel curve, one convex and one concave. This bent rectangle, which was, for instance, blue throughout, now consisted of lots of rectangular blue surfaces in various shades of blue, with their tones alluding to the adjoining color complexes in other colors.

The concept behind the picture, which freed itself after great efforts of self-mastery from the motif of nature and which had drawn on the realm of pure energies, now underwent a transformation. The energies themselves proved to be of differing quality. One part belonged to the province of pure energies, another to the realm of forms. But while previously the energies that engendered form were the superior in painting, if not almost the only ones, they were now assigned to the pure energies and with that lost their exclusiveness, i.e. their manifestations, which shaped the world of perception. But even if we no longer include the manifestations of our perceived world in our concept of the picture, we nevertheless find ourselves on the fundament of experience, of a new manifestation that results from the ongoing development of the [...]⁹ law governing images and the energies expressed therein and thereby. So if the depiction of these pure energies is not an aim in itself, but contains rather the tendency to delve into this world of forms and to assimilate to them, we have described the two elements which, by eliminating the insulating layer that divides them, join up in the picture to form a new unity. This unity is a dialectical whole, i.e. a whole in which the erstwhile antitheses of pure forces with a [...]¹⁰ of the experiential world exist as values. The possibility of transposing the entire world of appearances into a unity of tensions must be regarded as the prerequisite for a new kind of experience.

The stages in this new manifestation are still few. Nor can it be any other way. All the longer is the path that lies before us. But why not joyfully avow this distant vision. Why not rise up here into a stratosphere and over and beyond that. Why bemoan that the sylvan idyll and the intimacy of the hearth are not to be found in the regions of this greater purview. Nobody is forced to leave the firm enduring Earth. But the results of an experience must be checked on the fundament on which they were established. And one cannot reach this fundament by good intentions alone, but also by work. Because much that is important in other fields is replaced here by another discipline. [...]¹¹ A highly interesting fact has been brought to light by planar art, which artists have struggled over for a good thirty years: the forms of the world of appearances are not their final nor their sole expression, rather that after abandoning

this manifestation a newly formed unity can be created, with the pure i.e. formless energies that become the content of a new experience. This self-sacrifice cannot be forced but only voluntary. We shall try to explain this from the artist's experience.

Part II.¹²

The yearning for heaven, which prompted the Christian people to stretch up their arms longingly to the sky, did not bridge the abyss. With that, the wish had to become deed. With that, the power that separated people, unattainably outside and over the world, had to be drawn into the world. With that, passion had to become action. With that, the kind of dualism had to be abandoned that presented a sharply delineated body vis-à-vis an unattainable counterpart. With that, the air space disappeared as emptiness. That is how the silhouette of the body filled up with an anatomy of planar functions, which likewise filled all that surrounded the body with densely packed lines of action. With that, the inside and the outside were established on the same universal law. The vehicle of this law was, however, purely the individuality of the artist. His universal ideal stood in contrast to a reality in which only particularism, only private bourgeois life prevailed.

The artist thus created his universal artworks despite reality and counter to it. Which meant he had constantly to break down resistances, external resistances that were also internal ones. So he created his universal artworks not only in defiance of reality and counter to it, but also in defiance of his own personal reality and against *himself*. Which means the artistic act of creation was aided by violence. It is this that many are unable to excuse in the works of this epoch and reproach as a shortcoming. Doubtless their violence is their shortcoming, and yet the reproach is unjustified. Because how could one ever take a step forward, which has always to be wrested from the resistance of the surrounding world, if one didn't take things in hand, didn't go against the stream, didn't force the recalcitrant material into the new form. Those who are allotted this task are fighters, and their decisions are made in the heat and energy of battle, and what they manage to present contains the victory and the vanquished opponent. That adheres to them, to these presentations, battle born, and that which within ourselves is still a foe, a vanquished foe, feels affected.

But gradually even the opponent becomes a fellow fighter and with that there is no more enmity and instead of enmity there is the doubled power of creative collaboration that is open to the entire world. The violence has disappeared.

Being a fellow worker, fellow fighter, that is the answer to the riddle by which dualism disappears from the artwork and from the world. Off into a future without boundaries. That is our rosy dawn in which a socially united humanity experiences its first day of creation. More than with the discovery of America, with the discovery of the future comes the spirit of modern civilization, the establishment of universal solidarity among the whole of humanity. Every social utopia is directed to a better future, and the scientific socialism of Marx and Engels has raised the solidarity of all humanity to certainty. The avowal of the Internationale is the positive law, the constructive work in the midst of the revolutionary struggles. So demand no more from the revolutionary artist than he can achieve. The law that guides him is the impending law of the Internationale; what it must smash are empty conventions, what it puts in their place are the facts of total interconnectedness. What is attached

to it, the struggle against egocentric self-assertion, already contains in real artworks the victory over egocentric self-assertion and the affirmative powers of the great, universal solidarity. And this, which lives and is alight in thousands upon thousands of revolutionaries, will be recognized in all that people have produced in its spirit and will produce in the entire future.

But there are two questions which each must ponder. The first question is that of the *old* individualism: "Does this face show the marks that a personality has been constructed?" The second question is that of the *new* individualism: "Does this face show the marks that a world has been constructed?" The portraiture that we are familiar with is that of the *old* individualism. A portraiture of the *new* individualism does not yet exist, because the marks, the building blocks of a new world, of the *collectives* of all energies must be visible therein. But how are we to render this visible with the old technique of individualistic *and* egocentric portraiture? How could one convey in that way a moral that denies the individual as an end in itself?

Because the technique of the old portraiture has evolved from morals: that the individual and every single thing is an end in itself, which is why they were depicted as isolated manifestations. And why on the works painted in this technique we find a sum of isolated things. Thus the morality of the collectives, which denies the individual thing as an end in itself and is there to realize the collectives as the principle overriding the individual, requires a different technique that accords with its morals. Now that we have distinguished the two different ethical, i.e. socio-ethical drives that determine the two different kinds of painting, we can look at the two techniques that produce these two different genres of painting.

The purely individualist technique of painting comes from Italian Renaissance portraiture. It was the Renaissance that founded the haughtiness of the individual. Instead of the static self-containment of the primitives, which still prevailed in Giotto, the Renaissance began to liberate the individual from this self-containment and thus liberate his movements. The liberation of the human body from its static, i.e. architectonic constraints could only be convincingly achieved however by mastering anatomy, and in order to depict the anatomically constructed body, geometrical perspective was required.

When viewed foreshortened, an arm, leg, or body had to be drawn or painted as it appears from a certain angle to an eye skilled in perspective. That requires immense studies with models and thus heralded painting from models. So perspective, the anatomy of the human body, liberation of the individual from the laws of architecture, all came together to give expression to one sole tendency in painting, to wit: that of depicting the human body in its perspectival-anatomical, i.e. plastic, three-dimensional manifestation. While even the three-dimensional spatial depth of a street or a room could now be depicted purely by lines, this was only possible for the corporeal with the help of gradations of light and shade and the colors. One can of course interpret a body cubistically, as the Cubists have done in our epoch. But what can be done effortlessly with a row of buildings, being as they are geometrically constructed, does not succeed that simply with rounded bodily forms. And while Cubism continues to deserve our admiration as a bold and necessary feat, it was only by an act of violence that it was able to force the individuals and objects freed from

their architectonic restrictions into an architectonic unity. That was its tragedy, our tragedy, even if we attempted to convey architectonic unity not by a Cubist break-up of the picture surface but by building up painted surfaces.

The ever-progressive release of the individual manifestation since the Renaissance from architectonic, i.e. collective constraints had taken such root as a centuries-old habit of idolizing the self that all life was understood, perceived, experienced, and painted as simply a loose connection between mutually incomplete, isolated individualities. This unproblematic view of life was the prerequisite for the invention of photography.

Certainly the photographic exposure demonstrates the same gradations of light and shade with which the painters of the Renaissance attained the illusion of spatiality and plasticity, because this illusion is perfectly achieved by three color values painted side by side, changing from the darker shade to the medium and the lightest. By these means one can simulate the plasticity of a sphere or cone.¹³ But it will be shown that the technique of Renaissance painting will pass on completely into photography as soon as color photographs or color movie film are widely manufactured, because this painting technique from the Renaissance, invented so as to depict the individual manifestation as an autonomous whole and to release it from its surroundings, has elevated as an end-in-itself in painting something that was only of secondary importance in the times of architectonic, i.e. collective constraints. This is why we see the glass painters of the XII and XIII centuries¹⁴ build up and organize their large colored windows by the means of the surface. The corporeal aspect of the forms is alluded to discretely, but it fully aligns itself with and obeys the planar law that determines the power, beauty, and consistency of these windows. Thus the validity of the relief-like effect in painting and drawing is by no means as universal as it seems to us as heirs to the Renaissance and photography.

As little as we can cling to the ideal of man who stands today against the collective development of humanity in the form of a condottiere in Italy and his monkeys in Germany, and demonstrates the epigonal barrenness of authoritarian arrogance, we can just as little use a painterly technique that was created for the aggrandizement of authoritarian and arrogant individualism, even if this individual is simply a bottle or an apple.

But people continue to feel that they are Lorenzo di Medici; and still the revolutionary comrades believe that photography and photographic film are the last word in modernism, or indeed the first and only word of the collective, socialist world art. They regard us, who have already abjured the Renaissance ideal for thirty years now, with distrust and incomprehension and, in the light of the great results of a lengthy past, dispense with the knowledge and critique of the means by which they were achieved. For which reason they denied the artists who had departed from the basis on which Renaissance art was built, denied them their moral co-operation, and with that the process of developing a universal art has further been hampered: hampered by the resistance of the individuals, which is transposed from there to things and the whole of the visible world.

Thus the artist, who has been assigned the task of releasing and liberating the energies that are *bound* to the physical by the old individualism, finds himself before closed doors. And yet he has the hope or indeed the certainty that one day they will swing wide open. Because once the comrades have realized that the old myths

are dead, that the myth itself, which only half a millennium ago seemed to embody humanity's longing for a community spanning the world, has shown that it does not match up to this ideal, and for that reason was forsaken by the old creative energies of art. Because a myth is dead as soon as the creative energies of art are no longer able to sustain themselves from it and thus abandon it. Which is to say the arts themselves die and are dead as soon as the power of truth in which they once believed, and which always renewed and rejuvenated its powers of innovation, as soon as this power of truth is extinguished and merely continues to be practiced as an old habit.

But the *vital aspect* of art, which saved it from being a dead teaching, had to turn to life itself, centralized life not spent by any myths. Thus art tore itself from the hierarchy of the church and, above all during the times that saw the blossoming of not only the dictatorship of the church but also the dictatorships of the imperialisms and of capital, freed itself from all these dictatorships. The process by which this struggle for liberty took place cannot be described here, it deserves to be treated by art history as a special field of study. Just this much though: the church's power dogma was: control over the human soul in this life brings an afterlife. The power dogma of imperialism was: control over all mineral resources on Earth. The power dogma of capitalism was: control over and exploitation of manpower. All three dogmas have this in common: conquest and subjugation, property. This thousand-year dictatorship of property has been totally instilled into human nature, yes, it has even rendered the complexion of our ideas of nature completely in its own likeness. And not even the naturalist and Impressionist artists were able to free themselves from this likeness of the dictatorship of property. Because even property is a myth. Just like the church, a finely branching ideology has developed and established on this its method for raising people in the family and the state.¹⁵

But how is it possible that even nature can be impregnated by the dictatorship of property. Do the trees, the hills, the landscapes and the rivers, the apples and the bottles all look like an industrial magnate? The answer to this depends on the values we hold. The value that things, that the world have for a person is introduced to it by him, is seen in it by him, that is how he depicts them. A new value generates a new depiction, which does not compare itself with the old, contemporary or foregoing values, but recognizes its difference from them and is now able to activate new creative energies which for their part shape matter itself; a new value of this kind is weak and will only be short-lived. But if it does not flinch from shining into all that lives in the present and that lived in the past, nor flinch even from shining into the heart of *those who establish values*, into all of his atavisms, slowly an unused, unspoiled material appears that is strong enough to summon up a new world of appearances.

But for this we need fact-based ideology and morals as our guide, which can be no other than a social ideology and morality and one alone that surmounts and eliminates the principle of property: only scientific socialism can achieve this. It alone is the arbiter between an old and a new form of being. It alone can give time, space, and form a new meaning, a new face. It alone can wean people from the illusion of property and power. And thus once individual being has completely identified with collective being, the individual manifestation will have also become identical with the human collective. But, people will ask, will we ever be able to see this collective

humanity? And hasn't the individual manifestation been perfectly captured in the photographs of crowds and in film footage of crowds? Of course. Every single person in this crowd belongs to a family, has himself a family, has a small amount of property and works fully dedicated on building up the socialist collective. This however is a view of the collective as seen by the individual; only a very small fraction of the collective becomes visible in this way. But the larger the exposures of crowds taken with a camera, the smaller the number of recognizable individuals, the more they lose their collective character. But we need the means of representation in order to give the *collective* its *universal* character, because by this means alone is its permanency given. Only through such means of representation does the intrinsic nature, the materiality, the concrete distribution of the energies in the collective become visible. The collective, as an organizational principle of energies, permits these energies to appear under a law of configuration. And in order that this law and its application appear, i.e. can be made visible, the clarity and unity of the collective structure must be *capable of being portrayed*. But these can only be portrayed if the portrayal of the individual is relinquished: the portrayal of human individuality as well of animal and objective individuality. Only in this way will the collective be elevated to the visible fact that dualism has been overcome by it.

So we have no other choice at the moment for depicting the surmounting of dualism through the collective than by foregoing the portrayal of people, animals, things, and the entire objective world. [We] require [the] introduction of units which together permit an unbroken synthesis. That every individual, every discrete thing must actually be seen as egocentric and thus adverse to the collective is obvious to every painter who has attempted to break through the individualistic structure in order to join up with a universal one.

As the universal could still be expressed by mythology, it was enough to let the individual perform a mythological function. Everything remained here in the gesture, all that was required was the wish, the longing to bridge the abyss in dualism. But the universal has stepped out of the framework of the myth, has become an active, practical potential, it is the meaning behind the human community, has become its collective law, it is recognizable and workable, it is active. Passion has no creative place in it, such as was the case in dualistic mythologies; suffering is no longer a self-centered suffering but a collective suffering which does *not* resign itself.

Here are two powerful minds that have shaken the proletariat from its resignation: Marx and Engels. Dualism disappears from history and with that the individual as bearer of dualism. The collective becomes universal and produces individualities who are bearers of the collective. The painters, sculptors, and architects who hurry ahead and accompany the development and never make compromises with impunity must dig ever deeper into the laws of collectivity and universalism. And their honest decisions, which are precipitated in paintings, will one day be recognized for their true importance alongside the paintings from the dualist world era. In them the revolutionary world proletariat, united in the socialist world collective, will again recognize the strong discipline and self-denial that brought it to victory.

Finished in Paris November 1935.

- 1** Complete version of a text from Otto Freundlich's estate—a forty-two page manuscript written in sütterlin script, transcribed by Eric Wychlacz—previously published only in excerpts, here with the kind permission of Association Les Amis de Jeanne et Otto Freundlich. Cf. Otto Freundlich, "Bekenntnisse eines revolutionären Malers," in Uli Bohnen, ed., *Otto Freundlich: Schriften. Ein Wegbereiter der gegenstandslosen Kunst* (Cologne, 1982), pp. 197–202.
- 2** Freundlich originally wrote here: "who we love. We must fight for love."
- 3** The following passage was deleted here by Freundlich: "The sculpture is body and remains body. Working in stone and clay means working bodily; because the clay is by nature body and so is the clay. So here the attempt to try to fake physical, i.e. three-dimensional things, does not even arise. The sculpture is thus what remains by its nature isolated and can be possessed. Certainly, the painting is isolated inasmuch as it has four edges, however large it may be, i.e. as a mural or stained glass. What is needed is a third factor that resolves this isolation of the painted surface or the plastic art form, and this third term is architecture."
- 4** Here Freundlich deleted: "I am an autodidact."
- 5** Freundlich deleted the following at this juncture: "The plastic effect can be achieved in black and white graphics and in painting by placing 3 gradations next to one another. In black and white graphics it is enough to go from black to dark gray, from dark gray to paler gray and to place them within the contours of a drawing. In painting the same plastic effect can be obtained from the transition from a dark color to the middle tone and from that to the paler tone. This principle must be obeyed, regardless of which colors may be used in the painting or watercolor, this triple gradation of the light color from darker to lighter can thus be viewed as the underlying principle for depicting a plastic effect in drawing or painting. I think that this trinity in the gradation of the colors can be referred to, without doing any violence to it, as a dialectical principle. Only once the workings of this 'dialectic' have been introduced into aesthetic understanding will it be possible for me to advance from the dialectical schema of dark, middle, light to a non-schematic dialectic of color and black-and-white graphics, and to describe it."
- 6** *The Birth of Man*, 1919, HvW 8, p.131.
- 7** Freundlich executed his first window in 1922, in an unidentified workshop in Naumberg an der Saale.
- 8** HvW 11, p.140.
- 9** One word illegible.
- 10** One word illegible.
- 11** One illegible sentence.
- 12** Freundlich deleted the following paragraph here: "The second artist who has been allowed to speak in this report is me. I have not availed myself of mythological terms in order to depict my course of development as an artist. But philosophical, ethical, and religious ideas dominated my youth and my first artistic and intellectual awakenings. Already I experienced social injustice very early on, the way it led to poverty and unemployment, and tried in my own personal way to actively help by denying myself even what was absolutely necessary for me, until my energies were drained. Throughout my artistic development I was never a Naturalist or Impressionist, because they lacked for me the universalism which medieval art had through Christianity. Nor, however, have I imitated Christian art, because I knew that only a universalism personally acquired and applied by modern man could make up for the shortcoming. The pure surface, which I already employed very early on as the primal element in my paintings, was the means for me to convey this universalism in an image. Which meant that once I had decided on the pure surface, I employed none of the technical means of expression from Naturalism and Impressionism and thus also felt essentially alien to their way of looking at nature. But I saw my pictures as a conception of universal nature, which were one with the technical construction of the image. This technical construction was, as I said, the pure flatness of every color, which lay sharply delineated side by side as curve-like surfaces tapering to a point."
- 13** Freundlich deleted here: "There is no need of a light-and-shade effect in order to simulate the three-dimensionality of a cube or a pyramid on a surface, this can be done by lines alone."
- 14** Freundlich originally inserted here: "during which the Catholic Church represented the collective universal element in all its cathedrals."
- 15** An early draft of the text contained the words: "Already today a great many know what it means to be boycotted by property. This fate was not so widely known in our youth."



OTTO FREUNDLICH

Salon des Réalités Nouvelles,
Galerie Charpentier, Paris, 1939



WASSILY KANDINSKY



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A Word of Welcome

It was an unprecedented gesture of solidarity and appreciation: in 1938, a large number of distinguished modernist artists—including Jean Arp, Georges Braque, Alfred Döblin, André Derain, Robert and Sonia Delaunay, Max Ernst, Walter Gropius, Wassily Kandinsky, Oskar Kokoschka, Fernand Léger, Pablo Picasso, and Sophie Taeuber-Arp—signed an appeal to the French government on behalf of Otto Freundlich, a pioneer of abstract art. They drew attention to the precarious financial situation of the artist, who had been denounced as “degenerate” by the Nazis, and called for donations toward the purchase of one of his major works for the Musée du Jeu de Paume as a means of supporting him. This initiative and the famous names associated with it are sufficient to underscore the outstanding importance of an artist to whom the Nazis paid “unconscious tribute” in seeking to use him for their own ends (to quote the words of the appeal). Because his monumental 1912 sculpture *Large Head* appeared on the cover of the catalogue for the infamous Munich exhibition *Degenerate Art* in 1937, Otto Freundlich still stands today as an emblem for the vilification of the artistic avant-garde in the Nazi period. The artwork went missing as the defamatory exhibition traveled to various cities and is now regarded as lost. The Jewish Museum in Berlin exhibits a “Black Mark” in its place as a symbol of the loss and destruction of artworks under National Socialism.

Unfortunately, the reputation enjoyed by Otto Freundlich in the art world of his day, the reception of his work in the work of other artists, and his role as a pioneer of modernism are almost completely forgotten today, as are his theory of abstraction and his dream of a “new man in a kind of cosmic communism.” As art historian Joachim Heusinger von Waldegg has observed, Otto Freundlich pursued “the ideal of a socially engaged, ethically committed art.” For him, the development of a new art and a new society were intimately linked. In this, he was a forerunner of the conception of art that was expanded after 1960 by Fluxus and action artists such as Joseph Beuys. He himself never had the chance to resume his once so promising artistic career after World War II. In 1943, he was denounced as a Jew in the South of France, arrested, deported to an extermination camp, and murdered there.

For far too long, his extraordinary work was denied the public attention it deserves, in part because critical portions of his oeuvre were lost or destroyed as a result of his persecution, including thirteen of the fourteen works confiscated from German museums and collections for the exhibition *Degenerate Art*. This makes the exhibition *Otto Freundlich: Cosmic Communism*, which was developed by the Museum Ludwig in Cologne and the Kunstmuseum Basel in close collaboration with the Musée Tavet-Delacour in Pontoise, all the more important, indeed overdue.

In Germany, it represents the first major retrospective of the artist's work since the exhibitions at the Wallraf-Richartz-Museum in Cologne in 1960 and the Rheinisches Landesmuseum Bonn in 1978–79. It provides the first comprehensive overview of Otto Freundlich's activity and influence and makes it possible to trace the development of his artistic and theoretical approaches.

It is with gratitude and pleasure that I have agreed to become the patron of this very special exhibition. It not only constitutes a worthy monument to one of the most distinguished artists of the avant-garde; it also recalls the terrible suffering and injustice inflicted on artists—especially those with Jewish roots—under the Nazi reign of terror. It is our historical and moral obligation to keep these memories alive. Not least in this spirit, I wish the exhibition great success and many interested visitors.

Prof. Monika Grütters MdB
Minister of State to the Federal Chancellor

Foreword

It is a pleasure and an honor for us to be able to mount the first retrospective of Otto Freundlich's work in almost forty years at our museums. There is much about our cities that connects them with this artist. He left traces behind in both of them, which this exhibition reveals. They were also home to figures who very early on admired and supported Freundlich and his art.

In Cologne, the most important of these was the tobacconist and art patron Josef Feinhals, who not only rented a studio for the artist but also commissioned his mosaic *The Birth of Man* (1919, HvW 8, pp. 131–132), which still survives today. It was in Cologne in 1931 that Freundlich had his only solo exhibition in Germany during his lifetime. It was organized by the gallerist Andreas Becker in his spaces in Wallraf-Platz. Also based in Cologne were artists Franz Wilhelm Seiwert, Heinrich Hoerle, Gerd Arntz, Walter Stern, and August Sander, the so-called Cologne Progressives, with whom Freundlich was closely tied. This intimate connection to the Rhineland is almost certainly the reason why the Wallraf-Richartz-Museum was the first public institution to devote a solo exhibition to the artist in 1960. Curator Günter Aust was still able to speak with some of Freundlich's fellow artists and gain information from them firsthand, which made his exhibition a milestone. It represented the inexcusably belated recognition of an artist who had not only been persecuted as "degenerate" but was murdered because of his Jewish origins and political convictions. Aust's monograph, published by Dumont Verlag, remains a standard-bearer on the artist even today.

Because of the Nazi madness and its aftermath, Freundlich's rehabilitation did not take place in Germany until 1960, but it occurred in Switzerland decades earlier thanks to clear-sighted connoisseurs. In 1939, as director of the Kunstmuseum Basel, Georg Schmidt began to acquire the art that had been seized from German museums as "degenerate." Freundlich's works, however, were not among those that reached Switzerland as "internationally exploitable." In 1936, while he was still the librarian of Basel's Kunstgewerbemuseum, Schmidt visited Freundlich in Paris, and in 1937 he invited the artist to participate in the exhibition *Constructivists*, which he organized for Kunsthalle Basel together with curator Richard Lichtenhan. In addition to Wassily Kandinsky, Piet Mondrian, and Kazimir Malevich, he included a number of works by Otto Freundlich in the show. Schmidt owned a painting by Freundlich as part of his private collection and also sought to acquire his works as director of the Kunstmuseum Basel. Thus, the large painting *Composition* from 1932 (HvW 165, p.233) was added to the collection as early as 1947 with the help of Richard Doetsch-Benziger. It was later followed by a small but very fine painting on wood (HvW 166, p.265) and a pastel (HvW 252, p.174), both of which formed

part of the donation of Marguerite Arp-Hagenbach. Freundlich enjoyed a lifelong friendship with Jean and Sophie Taeuber-Arp, which was also expressed in an artistic kinship among them.

In many ways, however, Freundlich's most important supporter was the Basel-based elementary school teacher Hedwig Muschg. She met the artist in 1929, probably through her brother, Hans—a sculptor who moved to Paris—and supported him selflessly, sparing whatever she could from her meager salary. Freundlich thanked her with artworks, which grew into a sizeable collection over the years. The painting from Museum Ludwig's collection (HvW 199, p.249) as well as the one from Kunstmuseum Basel (HvW 165, p.233) are both dedicated to her. We are grateful to her half-brother, Adolf Muschg, for contributing his reminiscences of this great friend and supporter of the artist to our catalogue.

But the circle of Freundlich's supporters and fellow artists was not restricted to Cologne and Basel. Museum directors in other towns and cities also rendered outstanding services to his work. One of these was Max Sauerlandt of the Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe in Hamburg, who acquired Freundlich's works for his collection as early as the late 1920s, including *Large Head* (1912; HvW 63, p. 77), which would eventually come to a baleful end on the cover of the visitors' guide to the defamatory exhibition *Degenerate Art*. Another of Freundlich's early admirers was Wilhelm Wartmann, director of Kunsthaus Zürich. He exhibited the large sculpture *Ascension* (1912; HvW 76, pp. 186–187) not long after its production together with works by Jean Arp, Constantin Brâncuși, Robert Delaunay, and many others at the large exhibition *Abstract and Surrealist Painting and Sculpture*, held in October–November 1929.

Freundlich also had a circle of fellow artists in France, where he relocated permanently in 1924. From 1930 on, he lived with the artist Jeanne Kosnick-Kloss. She followed Freundlich to the Pyrenees when he was forced to hide from the Nazis and their French collaborators and managed his estate until her death in 1968. The couple's legacy went to the Musées de Pontoise outside Paris at the initiative of their then director, Edda Maillat. Maillat, assisted by Hedwig Muschg, spent decades painstakingly reviewing and organizing the artist's estate and making it accessible to scholars and art historians, for which she is owed a heartfelt debt of gratitude. Also deserving of thanks is her successor in the position, Christophe Duvivier, who published a monograph on Freundlich in 2009 and did everything he could to support our project with loan works and information. Professor Emeritus Joachim Heusinger von Waldegg organized a retrospective of Freundlich's work for the Rheinisches Landesmuseum in Bonn in 1978, at which time he also compiled the catalogue raisonné. We wish to thank him most sincerely for sharing his research and vast knowledge with us and for supporting this project from beginning to end.

We have also received valuable support from the highly commendable Association des Amis de Jeanne et Otto Freundlich, all of whose members we would like to thank in the person of its chairman, Jérôme Serri. There is one of them, however, whom we wish to single out for special mention. Had it not been for the energetic involvement of Swiss patron Gerson Waechter, this exhibition might never have

taken place, at least not at this time or in this form. In 2014, his passionate interest in Freundlich set a ball rolling which was passed by Rita Kersting—who at that time was still at the Israel Museum—to Museum Ludwig and from there back to Switzerland and the Kunstmuseum Basel. We cannot thank him enough for the initial impulse as well as for financially supporting the exhibition.

We have been moved and excited by the tremendous amount of support we have received since we began preparing this exhibition. In agreeing to become its patron, the German Minister for Culture and the Media, Prof. Monika Grütters, sent a clear signal of support. The Kulturstiftung der Länder with its Secretary General Isabel Pfeiffer-Poensgen, Switzerland's Art Mentor Foundation Lucerne, the Landschaftsverband Rheinland, and the KPMG AG made substantial funding available, which gave us the security to move forward with our plans and ensured our creative freedom. If we have been able to assemble an exhibition consistent with our vision and in the spirit of the artist, it is thanks to the domestic and foreign institutions and private lenders whose pledges also sent a signal of solidarity with Freundlich. We wish to thank above all the Berlinische Galerie, one of the exhibition's principal lenders, for its active and scholarly support.

A highlight of our exhibition is the presentation of Freundlich's mosaic *The Birth of Man*. Freundlich always regarded this 1919 mosaic as one of his major works, and he was heartbroken to know that it was shut up in a box and languishing in a shed. In the end, it was that box that enabled the work to survive the war, so that in 1954 it could be installed at the Cologne Opera. Thanks to the support of director Birgit Meyer, her technical director Patrik Wasserbauer, municipal conservator Dr. Thomas Werner, his colleague Dr. Marion Grams-Thieme, and restorer Gereon Lindlar, the work is now in a position to demonstrate its pioneering character for Freundlich's oeuvre. In this connection, we wish to convey our special thanks to Deputy for Art and Culture Susanne Laugwitz-Aulbach and to Mayor Henriette Reker for their energetic support. Thanks also to the Friends of the Wallraf-Richartz-Museum and Museum Ludwig for supporting the not exactly routine undertaking of transporting the mosaic from the opera house to the museum.

Both exhibition and catalogue also have scholarly ambitions. It was important to us that we incorporate into this project the research carried out at universities and museums, in order to make it accessible to a broader audience. We are grateful in this connection to the catalogue's contributors as well as to the libraries and archives that originally made this research possible, especially the IMEC Archive in Caen and in particular Nathalie Léger, Dr. André Derval, and Dr. Yves Chevrefils Desbiolles, who supported our research unreservedly.

We have also embarked on a research project of our own, which seeks to take an in-depth look at Freundlich's painting technique. Under the direction of restorer Verena Franken, works by Freundlich have been studied systematically for the first time; initial findings are published in this volume. We wish to extend our heartfelt thanks to the Rathgen Research Laboratory of the National Museums in Berlin with Prof. Ina Reiche and her team; the Laboratoire d'Archéologie Moléculaire et Structurale, Paris, with Dr. Philippe Walter and Dr. Katharina Müller; and the Technische Hochschule of Cologne, in particular Prof. Gunnar Heydenreich, Prof. Doris Oltrogge,

and Prof. Hans Portsteffen; as well as to all the museums and private collectors who made their works available for this interdisciplinary project. We are indebted to the Wallraf-Richartz and Bröhan Museums for their ever straightforward and uncomplicated administrative assistance.

We wish to thank our colleagues and collaborators who worked on this exhibition and the accompanying catalogue. Above all, however, we are deeply grateful to the exhibition's curator, Dr. Julia Friedrich, who began working on this project in 2014 and is principally responsible for the fact that exhibition and catalogue are now able to shed new light on this important artist.

We are firmly convinced that this exhibition makes clear the significance of Otto Freundlich's work and shows that his name belongs beside those of his fellow artists, from Pablo Picasso to Robert Delaunay and Wassily Kandinsky.

Yilmaz Dziewior
Director, Museum Ludwig, Cologne

Josef Helfenstein
Director, Kunstmuseum Basel

Julia Friedrich

Abstraction as Opening Up An Introduction to Otto Freundlich's Aesthetics

Abstraction is not a formal property. It is a relationship. Everything abstract relates, whether positively or negatively, to something concrete. This is rarely clearer than in the pioneering work by Otto Freundlich, who was one of the first to produce abstract art. Abstraction for him was not a self-reflection on the medium. It mirrored complex processes in nature and society. The manner in which this was done should have raised Freundlich to the ranks of the most compelling and interesting artists of his century—but the Nazis thought otherwise.

Indeed, when it comes to this artist the Nazis seem to have been the victors. Even today, a long shadow has been cast over his life and work because he was doomed to play a leading role in the vilifying *Degenerate Art* exhibition, which opened in 1937 in Munich before touring the country and giving the philistines a lesson in horror. His *Large Head* (HvW 63, p.77) was depicted on the cover of the exhibition guide and titled in the text "The New Man" so as to suggest that what Freundlich, the Communist Jew, was up to was the very thing the Nazis had reserved for themselves: fabricating people. And that was not the only one of their manipulations, whose entire scope has been charted out by Mandy Wignanek in the present volume.

Worse than any manipulation, though, were the acts of destruction, because afterwards no amount of investigation can help. Of the fourteen works that the Nazis seized from German museums, only one has re-emerged (HvW 109, p.84). Freundlich had to part with a great deal during his life. The Nazis severed the connection between him, as he lived in France, and his early work, which was stored in his old studio in Berlin at Kaiserplatz (now Bundesplatz) 17. The building survived the war, but all that he left there is now deemed lost.

In the desperate knowledge of no longer being able to access a part of his oeuvre, Freundlich drew up a list around 1941, while fleeing the Nazis and their French collaborators, containing all the titles of the works he could remember from 1923 on (pp.282–301). He added small sketches to it, and even painted three of the works again from memory (HvW 101, p.111; HvW 105, p.90; and HvW 111, p.91). All these attempts at reconstructing his work are a help, as are old photos, but they cannot undo what was done. Especially painful is the loss of the sculptures. They were built to be viewed from any angle, so not even a photograph can serve as more than a reference. The gap that the Nazis ripped out must be filled as best it can by research, but it must also remain recognizable for what it is.

In 1978 the research received a valuable boost in the form of the catalogue raisonné compiled by Joachim Heusinger von Waldegg.¹ A further piece of fortune is that the artist's singular texts have been preserved in Freundlich's estate, for they

must be seen as part of this highly philosophical person's art, which would lose a lot without them. Günter Aust, who in 1960 mounted the first major exhibition of Freundlich's works, already edited a volume of Freundlich's writings to follow on from his monograph.² Heusinger von Waldegg similarly appended a reader to his catalogue raisonné containing important texts and letters, and finally Uli Bohnen presented the essential volume of his writings, the *Schriften*.³

One of Freundlich's most mature and considered texts, his "Bekenntnisse eines revolutionären Malers" ("Confessions of a Revolutionary Painter"), written in 1935 in Paris, had only previously been available in abbreviated form. It has been freshly transcribed for the present volume from the original manuscript. In these "Confessions" Freundlich explains his artistic program, which over the following pages will be located in the context of his work and times. The latest findings on the various groups of related works, his techniques, and the periods in his artistic development can be found in the essays, which have been written for this volume by some of the leading Freundlich researchers.

Old and New Nature Freundlich commences his "Confessions" on a hopeful note: "We shall be understood by those for whom we fight."⁴ The most telling aspect of this sentence is the use of the future passive. Freundlich will be understood by the revolutionary proletariat for whom he is fighting. Which means that up until the time of writing, 1935, he had yet to be understood by it, let alone by the middle classes, although they were of no importance to him.

There is no need to put it as polemically as John Heartfield did when he wrote that not even Freundlich's "most logical thoughts on color" would be able to mobilize "as many as a dozen workers,"⁵ but there is no escaping the question of how the revolutionary proletariat was supposed to grasp from his painting and sculptures that Freundlich was on its side. With very few exceptions—which include the central mosaic *The Birth of Man* (HvW, p. 131) and the painting *My Sky is Red* (HvW 168, p. 272)⁶—Freundlich never conveyed unequivocal signals in his works, except perhaps in the titles. In this he differed fundamentally from the Cologne Progressives, whose political goals he shared and with whom he was also closely connected.

Although the Progressives kept coming very close to artistic abstraction, it remained a boundary line which the artists dared not cross out of consideration towards the "worker-beholder." Franz Wilhelm Seiwert stated for instance that he knew that "the imagery of abstraction is still very poorly understood today."⁷ The workers were able to identify their lives and struggles in the Progressives' works. Typical of Freundlich's advanced pieces are, by contrast, the colorful, prismatic surfaces he developed from stained glass painting and mosaics.

The artist gave his reasons for choosing the path to abstraction in his "Confessions." He underscored in them his renunciation of objective nature. It is not, he notes, the only possible one—"we need another."⁸ He illustrated the discovery of this new, other nature with the (unfounded) anecdote that George Stephenson arrived at the principle behind the steam engine on observing how the steam in a kettle forced up the lid. According to Freundlich, in this way Stephenson discovered

the action of a hitherto unharnessed force. A "driving force" of this kind also resides in representational painting and sculpture, he writes, and "is comparable with the physical forces of nature," even if that is not to say "it is a physical force." And yet it goes "beyond the specific purpose of the given motifs" and can "only then reveal the greatness, the enormity of its universal validity when it is released from any representational motif."⁹

So the driving force Freundlich refers to was already present in art up until that time, but like water contained by a dam, it had been penned in by motifs, blocked, held fast. It would only be able to produce its full effect once it was liberated from that. Not simply a mental energy, it is on a par with the very forces of nature.

The force that Freundlich outlines, which only develops once freed from the material, motivic aspects, is highly reminiscent of the views held by the natural sciences at that time. Science had likewise encountered processes which, although demonstrable and in certain ways also "physical," could no longer be pictured, and as such were both real and, at the same time, abstract. Everything that had previously been regarded as tangible mass and substance suddenly seemed to have dissipated. Freundlich kept informed about the latest developments in, among other things, physics through his cousin Erwin Finlay-Freundlich, who was an associate of Albert Einstein.¹⁰

The world of modern physics consists of quanta, energies, charges, tensions, processes, and fields which, in the majority of cases, can only be observed indirectly and in some cases only gleaned theoretically. There are now no substances, masses, or forms; physical understanding has departed from Euclidean space. Rita Wildegans, who is the first to study the influence of scientific thought on Freundlich, has analyzed how his surface was conceived of as an "extra-Euclidean space," and his curve appears to be in keeping with the "curved space-time manifold" in the Theory of Relativity.¹¹ But these can only be taken as "comparisons," as Freundlich himself emphasized. Painting and sculpture are not collections of formulae.

Even if Freundlich's art was based, like the new physics, on processes rather than static substances, like all art (even Conceptual Art) it remained bound to a substantial basis—in his case paint, canvas, bronze, which can be directly seen, touched, and experienced. The artist did not wish to deprive anyone of a naive, sensual encounter with his works and the attending joys. But he pointed emphatically to an intellectual, abstract motion, to an energy lying behind the sensual. This is of a complexity not yet conceived of by the old art, an as yet untapped force whose "universal validity," says Freundlich, is only first revealed when freed of motif, of figuration and representation.

At this point Freundlich extends his argument to include society. The driving forces in the nature and art of yore are bound to objects. But this can be seen as a property relationship: the ego as subject puffs itself up to become the owner of the objects. And since the subject as proprietor confronts the object as property in a dualistic modus, everything gets trapped in a fateful inertia. Freundlich felt that all thing-based perceptions of the world are permeated by this property-mindset.

The “hand that always wants something graspable” wants to possess, for which reason the eye likewise demands the “illusion of three-dimensionality”¹² as an illusion of ownership. Ultimately even nature appears to be “imbued with the dictatorship of property.”¹³

Freundlich was not alone in his rejection of a dualistic world picture. Walter Gropius wrote in 1919 that “the old, dualistic world-concept which envisaged the ego in opposition to the universe is losing ground. In its place is rising the idea of a universal unity in which all opposing forces exist in a state of absolute balance.”¹⁴ But Freundlich went much farther than Gropius, he located the ego in the realm of property, which in his view was doomed to extinction. With that the driving force that overturns the ingrained property structure, and also the reified world of bodies and motifs, becomes a revolutionary force. Because “the object as antithesis to the individual will disappear, as will a person’s existence as an object for another.”¹⁵ No longer will proprietors and their property, subjects and objects rule over society; their place is to be taken by an active, anonymous proletariat, not as a monolithic block but as complex motion. The proletariat will be grasped as a collective of equals in motion. It is this collective that will first make the “concrete distribution of the forces” visible, it is this collective that for the first time will be the “organizational principle for forces.”¹⁶

A complexity of this kind is not to be found in the works of other Communist artists, who, in the service of propaganda, resorted to a simplified, at times crudely simple depiction of reality. Freundlich, on the contrary, could have appealed to Marx, who in his preface to *Das Kapital* wrote: “In the analysis of economic forms, moreover, neither microscopes nor chemical reagents are of use. The power of abstraction must replace both.”¹⁷ The outcome of an individual’s work can still be observed, but not that of an entire industry; a single commodity can be touched and looked at, but not commodity exchange; a single person can attend an eviction or demonstration, but not class struggle.

Freundlich considered that art should be abreast of the times, or indeed ahead of them, that it should offer the whole wealth of not only perception but also thought. “Today, being political means changing the forms,”¹⁸ he wrote. For which reason he could have seconded Max Raphael’s complaint: “No one today shows you as clearly as socialist artists what art is not.”¹⁹ That, along with the political aspect, was a reason why Freundlich left the Novembergruppe in 1919. It was his desire that “artists would become creative and a model not only in outward form, but truly, emphatically in their inner form.”²⁰ But if, on the other hand, art were to restrict itself to purely aesthetic relationships, he would have rejected that with equal vehemence. That is why he left the Abstraction-Création group in 1934, of which he had been an early member, just as he had been in the previous group, Cercle et Carré (Kandinsky, Mondrian, Vantongerloo, et al.).²¹

Unlike other abstract artists of his day, Freundlich’s artistic abstraction was not restricted to the artwork’s internal relationships. It stood for a “comparison” with natural and social processes which can no longer be observed as such with the naked eye. But his abstraction wanted more than simply to describe these processes, these “driving forces,” it wanted to be *driven* by them: Freundlich wanted to be a

“fellow worker, fellow fighter,”²² even if he could only first be understood by the workers and fighters of the future. If not the purposes of today, he nevertheless served those of tomorrow.

Guild and Future

Even if Freundlich was more daring with his abstraction than the Cologne Progressives, like them he loved the medieval artisans’ guilds.²³ These guilds were already a part of the anonymous collective he was working towards. They pursued an art tailored to practical ends, which at that time was still innocent about property and the bourgeoisie, and thus of the dualism between subject and object, owner and possessions, and often had a broad cosmological horizon. Freundlich did not look back to the Middle Ages in nostalgia: they appeared to him to anticipate a time when privilege and private property will have been surmounted.

Undoubtedly Freundlich’s most intense encounter with artisanal art was in 1914 when he lived for five months in the north tower of Chartres cathedral. His passion for stained glass and mosaics came from that time. His high esteem for craftsmanship arose, however, at an earlier date. He not only opposed the rejection it so frequently

met with, he countered it: “Applied art differs in principle . . . in no way from high art,” as he wrote to Max Sauerlandt, “but the two differ today inasmuch as applied art draws on *evolving* life and high art recognizes a historical, social and visually complete world picture as the sole and definitive one.”²⁴

By applied art he was on no account referring to an art that worked with traditional methods along traditional lines, but to one that invoked the guiding ideas of the medieval guilds. Only then is the meaning of “*evolving* life” comprehensible, because he saw the future as governed by the action of the collective. The “historical, social and visually complete world picture” is however the one defined by property-mindedness and thingness, against which he pitted the “driving forces” of social change.

Applied art was thus not a safe and tranquil niche for him but the realm for realizing the future. In this spirit of the future, Freundlich produced designs in 1911 for Adya van Rees, who later wove them into carpets. While one of the first (HvW 3, fig. 1) was still largely figurative and resembles in its composition and form of depiction Freundlich’s painting *Composition with Figure* (HvW 108, fig. 2), another (HvW 5, fig. 3), dated 1912–13 in the

Herbstsalon catalogue, is perfectly abstract and resembles his *Composition* from 1911 (HvW 107, fig. 4), which in the artist’s own words was his first abstract painting.²⁵ He had yet to arrive at his typical spatial compartmentalization, at the energetic charge in the fields that distinguish his mature work, but already Freundlich’s first abstraction is pure movement and as such presents the dissolution of materiality and boundaries. “Abstraction here is the abolition of objective and formal limitation in favor of an illimitable perceptual dynamism,”²⁶ as Erich Franz noted. Although the work with its long-drawn-out strips still evinces Jugendstil influences, the colors have already been placed side by side without delimiting lines.

As in a *Head* Freundlich did later in 1923 (HvW 131, p.133), he presented here strips of paint set next to one another. The altered chromaticity and the geometrical surfaces show the influence of mosaic work. After World War I and through his



Fig. 1 Adya van Rees, after a design by Otto Freundlich *Composition*, 1912
HvW 3
Tapestry in wool
Lost

Fig. 2 Otto Freundlich *Composition with Figure*, 1911
HvW 108
Oil on canvas
54 x 65 cm
Donation Freundlich –
Musées de Pontoise



acquaintanceship with Gottfried Heinersdorff, he developed his special glass and mosaic technique. Once again, his orientation to the guild idea in general and the influence of Chartres in particular was decisive for this work. Freundlich wanted to return with all force to the period prior to the Renaissance cult of the ego, into the communally minded Middle Ages. He drew intellectual and formal inspiration from this period, without wanting personally to become a late-Gothicist. Time and again he pointed out that the ego of the Renaissance had been accompanied by the introduction of illusionism in art. And even in Cubism, illusionism had persisted in the form of bodies—or in Freundlich's reading: possessions. This set him apart from the Cubists, with whom he had already established contact in 1908 and even lived with for a time. In fact, he shared a lifelong friendship with Picasso.



In his "Confessions" Freundlich gives a vivid description of how he liberated himself from the "illusion of plasticity"²⁷ and put a more intelligent, "dialectic" art in its place. This was an art of surfaces, albeit interrelated surfaces. And even there he took his bearings from the Middle Ages: "The old murals done in mosaics, the stained glass windows in the old cathedrals up until the thirteenth century, are all composed in a planar manner."²⁸



Similarly what had always been the most striking element in his painting gained further importance after Chartres: color. Unlike most other German painters of his day, his feeling for color sensitized him to the "life-affirming, optimistic chromatic euphoria of Orphism";²⁹ he was friends with the Delaunays as well.

After World War I, color actually became more important to him than form, because it is the colors themselves that create the space, the force fields and contacts,³⁰ and dissolve all that is firm and material. For this they have to enter into a mutual tension, an exchange with one another. "In keeping with the energetic conception of the picture structure, Freundlich understood the interaction between the colors as a force with a concrete effect that was capable of crushing the stubborn resistance of things," as Heusinger von Waldegg observes.³¹ Thus color is neither an end in itself nor material, but is also always thought of in a functional and emblematic way in the picture. Color ideally remains what it is in the pane of a cathedral window flooded by sunlight: the expression of a sense of motion.³² Since Freundlich avoided illusionist effects, he never attempted to produce this, but he certainly saw it as his task to stimulate motion by means of objective color relations.

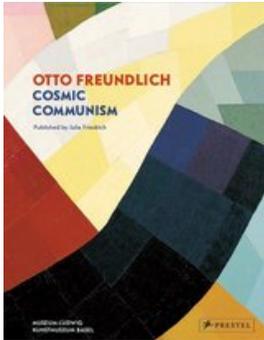
Fig. 3 Adya van Rees, after a design by Otto Freundlich
Composition, 1912–13
HvW 5
Tapestry in wool
Lost

Fig. 4 Otto Freundlich
Composition, 1911
HvW 107
Oil on canvas
200 x 200 cm
Musée d'Art moderne de la Ville de Paris

Contour and Cosmos

The model of the glass window, which was to determine Freundlich's art from 1914 onward, shifted the previously cited requirements for abstraction to a larger if not cosmic context. Since the term "abstraction" is often used in a vague manner, it is worth recapitulating what Freundlich meant by it.

Strictly speaking, representational art is already abstract because quite simply a painted tree is not a tree. As Freundlich pointed out, "even the best painting that depicts natural things is simply an abstraction of nature and can only be abstract



Julia Friedrich

Otto Freundlich

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Prestel

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A German painter and sculptor of Jewish origin, Otto Freundlich was widely known in the art circles of his day. He was on close terms with the leading artists of Expressionism, Fauvism, Cubism, Orphism, Dada, Suprematism, De Stijl, Bauhaus, Constructivism, the Cologne Progressives, and ultimately with the abstractionists. While his work was influenced by artists of these movements, Freundlich created a unique body of work in his paintings, sculptures, mosaics, and stained glass. This stunningly illustrated book follows the arc of Otto Freundlich's life and work, and explores the development of his artistic and philosophical ideas.

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