

Lothar Brieger's *Das Frauengesicht der Gegenwart* (1930): a twofold perspective on women's photography in the Weimar Republic

CAMILLA BALBI

A flawed translation: the Weimar photobook

In the short, troubled, and contradictory life of the Weimar Republic, it seems possible to find a single, solid thread: mechanically (re)produced pictures. The "Golden Twenties" began with the idea of a new «Homo Protheticus» – which slowly transitioned from the medical field, and the injuries of the Great War, into the utopia of new aesthetic and technical challenges (Fineman, 1999, p. 89) – and ended with publications such as *Rassenkunde Europas* (Guenther, 1929), «studies in which a whole series of anthropometric measurements, often conducted on the basis of photographs, were put at the service of identifying the distinctive traits of the Nordic race, the strengthening and purity of which was to be pursued by means of precise repressive and eugenic policies» (Somaini, 2012), paving the way for the rise of National Socialism. Between these two poles, a unique, if unstable, public, and visual sphere emerged. One that relied on photography as a privileged medium to inform, navigate, and analyze reality, with a kind of «euphoric interest» (Uecker, 2007, p. 469). It is in this context, in which the idea that visual information was more meaningful than textual information became increasingly important¹, that the rise of the "Weimar photo essay" should be placed.

¹ There are countless accounts of how, in the mid-to late 1920s, the idea of a photography as an autonomous language was affirmed in art theory and criticism. For example, consider the famous title «Nicht mehr Lesen! Sehen!» (Stop reading! Look!) (Molzahn, 1928, p.78) with which the painter Johannes Molzahn addressed the readers of *Das Kunstblatt* in 1928. Another striking example on this regard is Bertolt Brecht's reply to the *Tage-Buch's* 1926 enquiry about the best books of the period. In his suggestions, notably, Brecht didn't mention any literature book, but only photographic books on contemporary politics and culture, going so far as to advise the readers to ignore the text, but simply observe the pictures (Brecht, 1992, p. 176).

As Daniel Magilow (2012, p. 7) points out, defining the essence of the photo essay is a particularly challenging task, as it requires dealing with a porous concept, in which objects that our modern sensibility might consider distant from each other (e.g., expensive experimental avant-garde photobooks and poor-quality photo-reportages published in the daily press) were understood by contemporaries as «belonging to the same visual field». In addition, the photographs published in photobooks were often sold as individual pictures to the illustrated magazines of the time, and vice versa – which made it impossible to draw a clear distinction between “high” and “popular” photography. Consequently, the Weimar photo essay inherently posed a challenge to traditional readings, as it required engagement with non-trivial strategies of typology, sequentiality, and narrative (Duttlinger, Horstkotte, 2017, p. 182), taking into account the text, the individual photographs, and the sequence of images. In cases such as the one analyzed in the next paragraphs, *Das Frauengesicht der Gegenwart* (Brieger, 1930) – in which the discursive theoretical framework of the photobook is not realized by the authors of the photographs – the problem of the relationship between text and image becomes even more pressing. In this case, the theoretical-individual project of the systematizer of the photographs and author of the text coexists with the visual and cultural strategies of the authors of the photographs depicted in the book. As we shall see, in his 60-page introductory text and his anthological selection of photographs, Lothar Brieger seems to understand them as illustrations of his own theoretical project. Yet, something, in the 71 photographic portraits of women that complement the work, seems to irretrievably transcend theory.

In the following sections, this precious and half-forgotten² theoretical and visual document of the feminist and female culture of the Weimar period will therefore be traversed in the various, sometimes idiosyncratic, paths of meaning it seems to trace. Having presented Brieger's theoretical framework for the first time, I will question the usual hierarchy between text and image, and “cross” the book in directions that the author did not foresee, but somehow allowed. This means considering the doubts about the possibilities of physiognomy expressed by both con-

² To date, there is no systematic study on the figure of Lothar Brieger, despite the fact that he was recently the subject of a novel on German-Jewish emigration to Shanghai (Krechel, 2008). While *das Frauengesicht der Gegenwart* has only been analyzed briefly, and only recently, in the catalogues raisonnés of the individual photographers who took part in it (cfr., Szwast, 2021; Tesch, 2016).

servative and progressive critics of the photobook; the media short-circuits established between the photographs and the visual culture of the time; and, finally, the possibility of reading the photographs of *Das Frauengesicht* as a historical and personal archive. The aim – in the methodological wake of W.J.T. Mitchell (2005) – is to explore not so much what these pictures *meant*, but what they *wanted*³. Indeed, the book represents an important opportunity not only to bring to light artistic subjectivities (the subjects of the pictures, the authors of the photographs) which have long been forgotten by historiography, but also to “open up” the genre of the photobook to the broader visual cultural landscape of the time, in the belief that «documents from the past (however recent) are never self-evident and need to be contextualized – captioned, annotated, or inserted into wider narratives» (Duttlinger, Horstkotte, 2017, p. 183).

“The not so historical face of the modern woman”

Lothar Brieger embodied, to a great extent, the new intellectual paradigm of the Weimar period. As Sauer (1972, pp. 260-262) noted, the Weimar intelligentsia differed from the Wilhelmine intellectuals in their non-academic affiliation and origins – for the cultural scene of the young republic was gradually taken over by new social subjects: from the working middle class, often Jewish, economically independent of the state, and professionally connected to newspapers and publishing houses. Embedded in this context, Brieger – the son of a Jewish optician – wrote about art and society for popular Berlin tabloids and newspapers (“BZ am Mittag”, and the “Vossische Zeitung”), published several non-academic art-historical books on a variety of topics⁴, and participated, as

³ Mitchell's methodological proposal, to which I refer in part, invites to suspend a purely “positivist” approach by opening the analysis to the idiosyncratic, sometimes irrational life of pictures, shifting our question «from what images *do* to what they *want*» (Mitchell, 1996, p. 82). This approach is all the more appropriate when it comes to the complex subject matter of the photobook and the simultaneous presence of textual and visual material by different authors. In this case, as Mitchell (1996, p. 81) writes: «vision is as important as language in mediating social relations, and it is not reducible to language, to the sign or to discourse. Pictures want equal rights with language, not to be turned into language. They want neither to be leveled into a “history of images” nor elevated into a “history of art” but to be seen as complex individuals occupying multiple subject positions and identities».

⁴ Brieger's production, which has not yet been studied, ranges from monographic works on modern authors such as Max Klinger and Auguste Rodin (Brieger 1902; 1903), to more

an art critic, in the avant-garde debates of his time – for example, in the controversy between Max Liebermann and Lesser Ury over the paternity of German Impressionism (Schütz, 2003, p. 365).

The journalistic writings of some of the leading intellectuals of the Weimar period – such as Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer – have long been canonized as having «an avant-garde function as the locus of a concerted effort to articulate the crisis of modernity» (Levin, 1995, p. 5). Nonetheless, the minor cultural critics of this period have been severely neglected by scholars. In the case of writers such as Brieger, this silence has deprived scholarship of a relevant perspective on the visual culture of the time: a perspective that combined and hybridized impulses from art history and mass culture in an unbiased way, re-establishing a relationship to images and media that differed from that of both academic art historians and militant critics.

Das Frauengesicht der Gegenwart is a remarkable example of this attitude. Although the book was essentially a photographic book, which the critics of the time compared with contemporary photographic publications such as *Unsere Zeit in 77 Frauenbildnissen*⁵, Brieger understood his work – as can be read in the *Vorwort* of the essay – as inherently art historical:

The book itself reveals that it was born out of an art-historical problem. Yes, one can say that with certainty, because without this art historical problem as a starting point it would never have been written. Seemingly innocently, the author became interested in an art-historical question and unconsciously found himself confronted with a human-historical question. (Brieger, 1930a, p. 1).

The study started from a contingent art historical question: why the “female type” had disappeared in contemporary art. This problem was approached from a dual perspective, the art-historical and the sociological – as characteristic of Brieger’s research. On the one hand, for the author, «painters no longer paint women and [...] the model becomes merely an

generalist studies dedicated to the art of the past (Brieger 1913; 1926) and artistic techniques (Brieger 1921a; 1921b).

⁵ This is what the editors of the *Jener Volksblatt* wrote in a note to the short extract of Brieger’s text published in the newspaper: « This book finds an extremely effective supplement in a second publication, “*Unsere Zeit in 77 Frauenbildnissen*”, which was published by Niels Kampmann Verlag in Heidelberg. These portraits show important women of the present. They were chosen from the point of view of their representation within our time». (Brieger, 1930b)

incidental opportunity for self-expression», on the other « today it seems that men are approaching the typical and women the individual, as if both tend to represent tasks that were previously reserved for the opposite sex». (Brieger, 1930a, pp. 3, p. 8). Based on these “militant” observations, Brieger traces the iconographic history of the female portrait, beginning with the sculptures of the ancient Near East, through the art of antiquity, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the Baroque, the Rococo and Romantic periods, to the art of his own time.

At first glance, the essay appears to be in line with the art-theoretical orientation of the period. The author moves in an almost Riegelian dimension, in which the attribution of a “type” or a “character” for the representation of men or women is associated with something like the *Kunstwollen* of the various historical epochs⁶. However, this art historical reconstruction combines, in a heterodox way, with a far more militant investigation of gender dynamics in history – conducted with a physiognomic gaze in which images become both interpreters and witnesses⁷. The stylistic history of the representation of men and women is subject to a “gender tension” that varies throughout history, and which the text reconstructs impressionistically. It will come as no surprise, then, that the authors Brieger cites are not art historians, but some of the most controversial theorists of his time: Otto Weininger and Oswald Spengler (Brieger 1930a, pp. 9, 28). On closer inspection, Brieger’s interpretative key is far removed from that of formalist art history and is more akin to Weininger’s *fin de siècle* “war of the sexes” (Kavka, 1995). Although he does not share the misogynistic positions of the author of *Geschlecht und Charakter* (1903), Brieger seems to see a social and psychological significance in the shifting roles of the post-war period, and recognizes a progressive gender change in the new republic, which was reflected in art history:

In other words, the new world had not yet achieved the creation of new cultural foundations and was content with a mixed intermediate stage. Basically, man still has the old ideal of woman, but reality has changed in such a way that he no longer finds it. And that is why, we do not have an image of woman in which the

⁶ A boldly diachronic discourse on the history of the canons of human representation from Riegl’s perspective, had been attempted in academic art history just a few years earlier by authors such as Erwin Panofsky (Panofsky, 1921).

⁷ Indeed, Brückle (2000, p. 135) notes how the relationship between type and individual, at the heart of Brieger’s art-historical *excursus*, was at the time one of the theoretical cores of physiognomics.

relationships and the evolution of our days are concretely expressed. So, the artist, whose need is not satisfied by reality, works purely historically. The portraits of women he paints reproduce all the types that have been created and from which his unfulfilled desire now selects. [...] The painter of our days can paint the women of all times, because he is no longer hindered by anything definite, but not the women of our days, because the necessary relationship between them does not yet exist. It is an age of becoming and transition, of desire and wanting, but it is not an age of realization. (Brieger, 1930, p. 33).

The same “realist” instance that drove Brieger's art historical research also led him to photography – understood here as a “transparent”, illustrative, medium⁸. The almost seamless transition from painting to photography – to which the 71 plates that conclude the book are dedicated – testifies to a complex movement in which ill-digested theoretical influences coexisted: the contextualist tendencies of art history, the impossibility of a unified stylistic analysis in the wake of the avant-gardes, and the objective tendencies of contemporary *Neue Sachlichkeit*. As the captions of the photos (reported in the table below) reveal, although Brieger's formal aim was to show the gradual transition from “type” to “character” in the contemporary female face⁹, the narrative that accompanies the photographs – whose aesthetic qualities are not commented on in any way – is that of a social typology. As in August Sanders' more famous *Antlitz der Zeit* (1929), published only a year earlier, the photographs are grouped according to the occupations of the sitters, to show how different professions drove the process of characterization (here paradoxically articulated in a typological sense) of the female face in different directions. Brieger, for example, sees in the pioneers of the feminist movement «faces in which the mixed character of the transitional face of the modern woman is undoubtedly most clearly expressed, faces that have become full of great and noble features, faces of a deepened, devoted, and newly won humanity» (Brieger, 1930, p. 46). Whereas in rural occupations, or more generally in non-bourgeois and non-intellectual profes-

⁸ « Thus, [the author's] desire to approach the female face of our time in a meaningful way led him to photographers. Natural considerations pointed in this direction. Recently it was read somewhere that the photographer is not a creative artist in the absolute sense but creates things that are to be evaluated aesthetically – and that is undoubtedly fair and wise. To understand a woman's face today, one must turn not to the artist but to the photographer. The photographer does not create according to his wishes and ideals, he is dependent on the model throughout his work, regardless of his will.» (Brieger, 1930, p. 33).

⁹ On the visual and medial creation of the “Neue Frau” cfr. Sykora, Dorgeloh, Raev, 1993.

sions (which are not represented in the photographs), «where women have long stood alongside men in their professions, where their competition is not new but almost natural, the transitions are not so obvious» (Brieger, 1930, p. 50). A major difference to Sander's project, however, lies in the nature of the publication itself. Brieger is not the author of the pictures, and the photographs – whose authors are cited in the captions – were not made for the book project. As Elke Tesch's recent archive research on Steffi Brandl's atelier (2016, p. 60) has revealed, they came from the existing photo stock of the photographic studios, and sometimes directly from the Ullstein publishing house. For this reason, what Alfred Dölblin (1929) already stated for Sander's book applies all the more to *das Frauengesicht der Gegenwart* – «namely, that this relatively slim volume resists straightforward interpretation and opens itself up to multiple readings» (Magilow, 2012, p. 102).

Title reported in the caption	Author reported in the caption
Fritzi Massary	Atelier Reiss
Rosamund Pinchot	Atelier Reiss
Schauspielerinnen Geschwister Stobrowa	Atelier Cami Stone
Käthe von Nagy	Atelier Cami Stone
Schauspielerin Toni van Eyck	Atelier Grestenberg (fr. Dührkoop)
Tilla Durieux	Atelier Grestenberg (fr. Dührkoop)
Podliaschuck	Atelier Cami Stone
Schauspielerin Annie Mewes	Atelier Steffi Brandl
Ruth Albu	Atelier Steffi Brandl
Die Schauspielerin Carola Neher	Atelier Cami Stone
Die Schauspielerin Konstanze Menz	Atelier Nini&Carry Heß Frankfurt a.M.
Schauspielerin Elisabeth Lennartz	Atelier Steffi Brandl
Die Chinesin Anna May Wong	Atelier Steffi Brandl
Die Schauspielerin Frieda Richard	Atelier Ernst fröster, Wien
Die Tänzerin Irene Weil	Atelier Nini&Carry Heß Frankfurt a.M.
Die Tänzerin Berthe Trümpy	Atelier Steffi Brandl
Tamara Desin	Atelier Kurt Vogelsang
Girlytp	Atelier Cami Stone
Revuetänzerin	Atelier Grestenberg (fr. Dührkoop)

dr. Alice Salomon die Führerin der Frauenbewegung	Atelier Reiss
Mme Halpern, geb. Prinzessin Andromikoff Paris	Atelier Nini&Carry Heß Frankfurt a.M.
Geschäftsinhaberin	Atelier Nini&Carry Heß Frankfurt a.M.
Die Privatsekretärin	Atelier Grestenberg (fr. Dührkoop)
Selbstbildnis der Photographis	Atelier Reiss
Photographin	Atelier Steffi Brandl
Astrologin	Atelier Nini&Carry Heß Frankfurt a.M.
Ärztin	Atelier Nini&Carry Heß Frankfurt a.M.
Medizinerin	Atelier Grestenberg (fr. Dührkoop)
Bakteriologin	Atelier Steffi Brandl
Studentin der Nationalökonomie	Atelier Nini&Carry Heß Frankfurt a.M.
Studentin der Philosophie	Atelier Nini&Carry Heß Frankfurt a.M.
Philologin	Atelier Grestenberg (fr. Dührkoop)
Dipl. Ing A. K.	Atelier Steffi Brandl
Die deutsche Fechtmeisterin Helene Mayer	Atelier Nini&Carry Heß Frankfurt a.M.
Cilly Feindt	Atelier Dr. Weller
Die Rennfaherin Hilde Sidel	Atelier Dr. Weller
Die Revuesängerin Aja Setti	Atelier Nini&Carry Heß Frankfurt a.M.
Die Kabarettistin Maria Ney	Atelier Dr. Weller
Frau Maria Schrecker, die Gattin des Komponisten Franz Schrecker	Atelier Nini&Carry Heß Frankfurt a.M.
Die Geigerin	Dr. Enke, Stuttgart
Die Pianistin Ljuba Sudkowska	Atelier Vogelsang
Malerin Erna Pinner	Atelier Nini&Carry Heß Frankfurt a.M.
Malerin Marie Laurencin, paris	Atelier Nini&Carry Heß Frankfurt a.M.
Alice Lahmann, Kunstgeweblerin	Atelier Vogelsang
Die Silhouettistin Lotte Reiniger	Atelier Cami Stone

Die Bildhauerin René Sintenis	Atelier Steffi Brandl
Bildhauerin Julia Hauff	Atelier Cami Stone
Die Puppenschöpferin Käthe Kruse	Atelier Steffi Brandl
die Gattin Thomas Manns	Atelier Nini&Carry Heß Frankfurt a.M.
Die amerikanische Schriftstellerin Anita Loos	Atelier Ernst fröster, Wien
Die französische Schriftstellerin Colette	Atelier Reiss
Die Schriftstellerin Dora Sophie Kellner	Atelier Steffi Brandl
die Dichterin Ina Seidel	Atelier Dr. Weller Berlin
Die Journalistin Helen Hessel	Atelier Nini&Carry Heß Frankfurt a.M.
Lady Sackville-West, das Vorbild des "Orlando"	Atelier Reiss
Jungmädchenkopf	Atelier Cami Stone
Jungmädchenkopf	Atelier Cami Stone
Jungmädchenkopf	Atelier Steffi Brandl
jungmädchenkopf	Atelier Grestenberg (fr. Dührkoop)
Bildnis einer Jungen frau	Atelier Grestenberg (fr. Dührkoop)
Frau Marum	Atelier Cami Stone
Frau von Einem	Atelier Grestenberg (fr. Dührkoop)
Gräfin Castell	Atelier Vogelsang
Frau Deichmann mit Söhnchen	Atelier Grestenberg (fr. Dührkoop)
Lady Abdy	Atelier Ernst fröster, Wien
Miß Elena Hutten New York	Atelier Ernst fröster, Wien
Mrs. St. John Hutchinson	Atelier Reiss
Contessa Jeanna Bosdari	Atelier Reiss
Exzellenz von Davidoff	Atelier Kurt Vogelsang
Frau von Below	Atelier Vogelsang

Das Frauengesicht der Gegenwart, *subjects and authors of the photographic plates*

A dual reception

An almost paradigmatic example of the book's idiosyncratic reading possibilities – and of that *Ungleichzeitigkeit* of Weimar culture that Ernst Bloch (1935) spoke of in those very years – lies in its immediate reception in the context of Expressionism and Jewish feminism. On the one hand, authors such as Fritz Blei – a prominent critic, essayist, and publisher of the time, who was close to Expressionist circles – subjected the essay to an interesting right-wing critique. In his review, which appeared in the popular magazine *Das Magazin*, Blei took up misogynistic arguments typical of the Expressionist rhetoric¹⁰ – in which «a severely suspicious attitude towards the material world as a realm of mere appearance and deception was transferred to woman, legitimized by Nietzsche's preoccupation with female "Putz"» (Wright, 1987, p. 588). Blei criticized Brieger for the actual premise of his research, the physiognomic perspective: the possibility – made impossible in his opinion by modern cosmetics and surgery – of deriving any conclusions of a socio-psychological nature from a woman's face:

The woman has no inclination at all to let you look through her face as through a window into her inner self. Rather, she does not want people to be able to look at her in this way. Especially when it comes to her face, she is anything but naïve. She makes sure to show what she wants to show and hides what she does not want to show. The face is her work of art. Even before the photo camera! (Blei, 1930, pp. 6103-6104)

Paradoxically, F. Silberberg¹¹ (1931) also came to similar conclusions about the ineffectiveness of Brieger's approach in the pages of the Jewish social feminist *Blätter des Jüdischen Frauenbundes für Frauenarbeit und Frauenbewegung*. Here the author addressed the aporia that Brieger implied in his discourse: the effort to restore both an individual and a typological perspective.

As far as the plates themselves are concerned, the author cannot, with the best will in the world, demand that we see the only characteristic face for the respective profession in all 71 examples. That would already be wrong, because one face can be characteristic of several professions, and several faces can be com-

¹⁰ We find similar arguments already in an article of his published two decades earlier in *Die Aktion* (Blei, 1913).

¹¹ Despite my efforts, it was not possible for me to reconstruct the author's identity.

pletely different representatives of one profession. [...] It was easy for me to test this using the example provided, by presenting a picture to several acquaintances, and concealing the name of the profession. It turned out that even the best examples were very rarely taken for what they were supposed to represent. I find the picture of the bacteriologist, for example, very characteristic. Nevertheless, I could also well imagine this woman as a doctor, a chemist, or an educator. [...] Finally, it must be emphasized once again that precisely because the female face has become so characteristic in our time, no fixed form, no type can be established for the individual professions. Therefore, the book cannot be an exhaustive representation of the female face of our time, but a "collection of a few examples that seem characteristic to the author". (Silberberg, 1931, p. 12)

These are important testimonies, because they express, from opposite directions, a similar skepticism about some of the main principles of physiognomic photography of the time: its realist instances and taxonomic ambitions. Among cultural critics in the twilight of the Weimar Republic, the politics of photographic truth began to falter. If in 1931 Walter Benjamin still saw in Sander's project «more than a picture book, an atlas of instructions», (Benjamin, 1931), *Das Frauengesicht* seems to raise doubts in his readers that the atlas is unreadable, the instructions insufficient.

Heretical readings

Silberberg's experiment of showing the photographs to friends, without text or context – in a kind of "guess who" game – is an important indication that, despite Brieger's efforts, the photobook inherently behaved like an "open text". A text that ultimately resisted unambiguous interpretations and showed its own nature, which was at once unified and fragmentary, in which the photographic image – treated in the text as an illustration – anarchically asserted its own nature, its own polyvocal referentiality. It is therefore necessary (and this task can only be partially successful) to consider the photographs in the broader cultural and editorial context in which they were seen by viewers of the time, in order to understand what imagery, they fed, what narratives they enabled. This task is all the more important when one considers that the portraits in *Das Frauengesicht* are not unpublished but were selected by Brieger from the editorial material to which he had access.

An example of the "unintentional openness" of the photographs towards the visual and media culture of the time is the portrait of the actress

Konstanze Menz. The photograph was taken by Nini and Carry Heß and originally published in the 6th issue (February 1929/1930) of the magazine "Uhu", published by the Ullstein Verlag (fig. 1), for which Brieger was a contributor. It was then presented – cropped – as the eleventh photo plate in the book (fig. 2).



Fig. 1 – Nini and Carry Heß, *Die Frankfurter Schauspielerin Constanze Menz*, 1930

With regard to this photograph, Szwest¹² (2021, p. 150) notes that it was impossible for readers of the time to look at the portrait without associating it with Friedrich Wolf's play *Cyankali*, which had appeared precisely in 1929-1930. The play was in fact dedicated to Konstanze Menz, his girlfriend, and was at the center of a heated cultural debate, because it addressed the drama of abortion and sharply attacked §218 of the penal code, which criminalized it.



Atelier Nini & Carry Heß, Frankfurt a.M.

Fig. 2 – Nini and Carry Heß, *Die Schauspielerin Konstanze Menz*, 1930

¹²Szwast's reconstruction, from which we take the brilliant reference to *Cyankali*, lacks however the awareness of the different destinations of the same photographs, an element that we find essential for understanding the visual short-cuts proposed from a medial and material point of view.

I would like to add that the portrait of the Stobrowa sisters in the third table of the book (fig. 3) must have made a similar – perhaps even stronger – impression on the readers of the time, activating their visual memory politically. Renee Stobrowa had, in fact, played Hete, Wolf's heroine, in the recently completed national tour of *Cyankali*. In the play, Hete was looking for a safe way to have an abortion and ended up dying for the effects of a home remedy that her own mother had desperately procured for her after endless rejection by society. In the photo, the actress is pictured with her sister Ilse in a clear *Neue Sachlich* taste. Her straightforward gaze into the camera and the maternal support she gives her younger sister could not fail to reactivate in the audience the drama of Hete, which – according to Wolf and Hammer (1978, p. 501) – had achieved more than 100 sold-out performances in German theaters between September 1929 and January 1930.



Atelier Cami Stone. Berlin

Fig. 3 – Cami Stone, *Schauspielerinnen Geschwister Stobrowa*, 1930

A similar argument can be made for many of the images in *Das Frauengesicht*, whose short-circuits with the visual and pop culture of the time and with the rise of the *Neue Frau* and emancipatory instances in the Weimar cultural landscape were unavoidable and uncontrollable. Just one year before the publication of the photobook, Tony van Eyck (fig. 4), for example, had played the role of an emancipated young girl and rape victim in the film *Geschminkte Jugend* (fig. 5). Overall, many well-known faces of feminism at the time can be found on the pages of the book – such as Alice Solomon, the founder of the *Deutsche Akademie für soziale und pädagogische Frauenarbeit*; Dora Kellner, the pacifist and feminist writer and journalist, wife of Walter Benjamin; and the feminist right-wing poet Ina Sneiderl. Far beyond Brieger's project, *Das Frauengesicht der Gegenwart* transmedially testified to, constructed, and activated an imaginary that had to do with the recent emancipation of women. An imaginary that was embodied by the *neuen Frauen* who, as Ruediger Graf (2009), has well shown, visualized not a historical situation but a project of cultural utopia, that portrayed women as pioneers of a future that was to be new, emancipated, and modern.



Fig. 4 – Atelier Gerstenberg, *Schauspielerin Toni van Eyck*, 1930

This is an intertextual counter-narrative that the book did not declare, but “dangerously” revealed. Indeed, the theoretical premises of the text were not too far removed from those of National Socialist rhetoric: although Brieger emphasized gender and social (but not racial) differences in physiognomic terms, he shared with the photographers of the *Rassen-theorie* what Sekula (1981, p. 19) defines as «aspects of the same general positivist outlook that was incorporated into the fascist project of domination». Nevertheless, the book is the only one by the author that was placed on the Index of banned book by the *Reichskulturkammer* in 1938. This happened – so it seems– precisely because of the photographs reproduced in it, that forced the theoretical framework in which they were embedded. As Claudia Koonz (1987, p. 157) points out: «Hitler, who vacillated on nearly every other crucial political issue, never relented on two biological axioms: separate the sexes and eliminate the Jews. Gottfried Feder, Nazi ideologue, linked the two aims: “the insane dogma of equality led as surely to the emancipation of the Jews as to the emancipation of women. The Jew stole the woman from us” ».

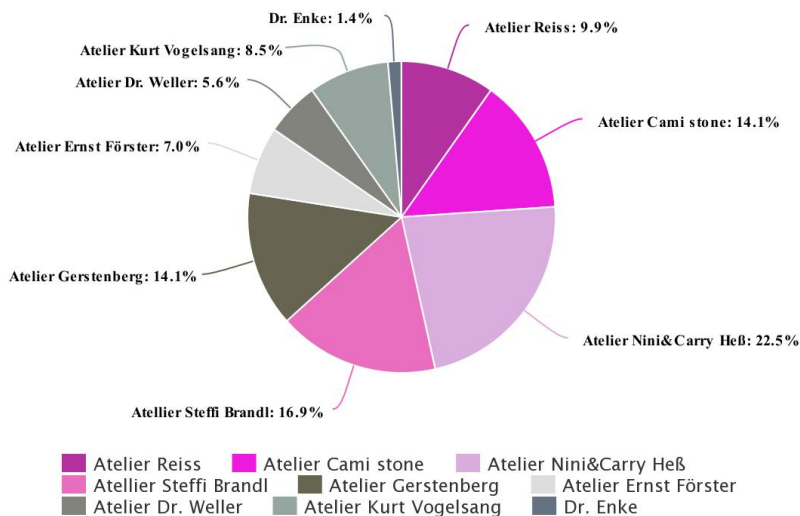


Fig. 5 – Carl Boese, Kurt von Wolowski, Toni van Eyck in “Geschminkte Jugend”, 1928/1929

A flower for Annie (one more layer)

And indeed, in no field did the female gender and Jewish ethnicity interact as much as in the photography of the time (Roemer, 2013, p. 99). This is a history that has long been overlooked due to historical biases (many of the female subjectivities discussed would have emigrated or have been killed in the Holocaust) and cultural biases (their interest in commercial photography would have long rendered them invisible to art history and collecting). One in which, as Berkowitz (2015, p. 246) noted, not only aesthetic but also socio-cultural parameters must be taken into account: «in addition to photographers per se, studios, photographic laboratories, and photographic equipment stores tended to be owned by Jews. Jews also worked behind the scenes as retouchers and technicians in laboratories developing film, including medical and dental X- rays. They were prominent, and troubling to antisemites, as photography editors and agents».

Photos in the corpus made by the studio of women photographers



From this point of view, there is a final narrative, invisible to contemporaries and invaluable to us, which the book conceals: more than half of the photographs in the book were taken by photo studios run by Jewish

women. In the case of some authors who emigrated or were killed a few years later (such as the Heß sisters¹³, Frieda Reiss, or Steffi Brandl), this represents one of the most complete sources for the reconstruction of their personalities.



Fig. 6 – Steffi Brandl, *Dipl.-Ing. A.K.*, 1930

Of its many narratives, this is perhaps one of the most unexpected: a book created to capture the face of the new woman can today serve to shed light, from the mists of oblivion, on the uncertain profiles of women who stood on the other side of the camera. In the future, the book that sought to capture the woman of the present has also become a book of ghosts.

Elke Tesch (2016, p. 62) reports that the photographer Steffi Brandl, in her personal copy of the book, handwrote the names of her two sisters («Nora und Annie!») next to the photos which were anonymously labeled

¹³ The corpus of the two photographers is now facing its first season of academic research. The most important contribution to date is Köhn, Wartenberg, 2021. The book accompanied an exhibition at the Museum Giersch in Frankfurt am Main from March to May 2022.

by Brieger “bacteriologist” (plate 30) and “graduate engineer” (plate 34). Suddenly, the taxonomy is here transformed in an affective family photo. In a final idiosyncratic use of the text, we do not know when, Steffi Brandl stuck a small, dried flower next to the photo of her sister Annie (fig. 6). An anarchic gesture on the body of the book, by one of its own authors, in which a photograph born with the ambition of being a social anatomy emphatically asserts its own irreducible, private and political, existential singularity. On January 5, 1943, Annie and Nora were deported from Vienna to the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp and killed on arrival (Ibid.).

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