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Archipenko’s Failure:
Sculpture and criticism in post-World War I Berlin

Alexander Archipenko’s two-and-a-half years in Berlin from early 1921 to the autumn of 1923 present something of a paradox. His reputation at the time as a leading sculptor of the avant-garde was well established, perhaps nowhere more so than in Germany. At least four monographs devoted to Archipenko were published in Germany in the early 1920s, and supporters like the writer and critic Iwan Golli could self-assuredly make the now unlikely claim that ‘Archipenko is of the same importance for sculpture as Picasso is for painting’. Yet despite this attention, Archipenko’s stature had faltered by the end of his time in Berlin as he struggled with his work and lost the support of key German critics. Indeed, few artistic reputations have fallen so far as Archipenko’s from his prominence in the 1910s and 1920s to a seemingly entrenched secondary, even tertiary, status in the pantheon of early twentieth-century modernism. Pivotal to any understanding of this downward trajectory is an account of Archipenko’s Berlin years, a time when his reputation seemed to be both towering and teetering. This essay takes as its subject the writing and criticism around Archipenko during his Berlin years as an exploration of the texture of sculpture criticism in postwar Berlin and the critical context of what might be termed Archipenko’s failure.

*Happier times with a more certain sense of form*

Some of the complexity of Archipenko’s situation in Germany and the crosscurrents of art and criticism in the early 1920s can be inferred from a puzzling 1923 essay on the artist by the art historian Hans Hildebrandt. Published in a lavishly illustrated album, Hildebrandt’s idolising text seeks to bridge the gap between Archipenko’s pre-war ‘cubo-expressionism’ and his current artistic uncertainty. The text culminates with a discussion of Archipenko’s 1923 relief ‘Woman (Metal Lady)’ (fig. 1), which Hildebrandt describes as a:

shimmering structure, vibrating in a thousand reflections and yet so inviolably solidly constructed… Made with never before used technical means, and developed from the purest sense of style, it is the absolute expression of a new aesthetic conception of the nature of art, which points not to the past but to the future.

Within this brief passage Hildebrandt invokes a series of modernist clichés about Archipenko’s technical innovation, formal purity and absolute expression. Like a work of modern engineering, Archipenko’s ‘Woman’, we are told, is both ‘inviolably’ solid in construction and made visually immaterial and transcendent by ‘vibrating in a thousand reflections’. Futuristic in its embrace of new materials, his work remains pure and totalising in its ‘absolute expression of a new aesthetic conception’.
This rhetoric would be unremarkable except that Hildebrandt immediately follows his exaggerated praise with an oddly nostalgic, even pessimistic, final statement. Now referring to Archipenko's work in general, Hildebrandt makes a plea to posterity:

If we are again granted, if we again receive, what in happier times with a more certain sense of form was joyfully self-evident [was glücklicheren, gestaltungssichereren Zeiten frohe Selbstverständlichkeit gewesen ist], then Archipenko's work will have made no small contribution to this most valuable gift.3

Hildebrandt's exuberance now turns reactionary, as Archipenko's work is offered up as a eulogy to an imagined past, a lost heroic moment of the pre-war avant-garde when modernists shared a broad aesthetic vision of Europe's future. In contrast to this fantasy of a unified pre-war avant-garde, Hildebrandt conveys the profound uncertainty of the current moment. It is this striking combination of nostalgic and visionary rhetoric, using Archipenko to point simultaneously to a destroyed modernist culture and a desperately hoped-for future, that makes Hildebrandt's text particularly suggestive of the confusion of modernist practices and with it, the complexities of Archipenko's reception in Germany in the 1920s.

So says Archipenko! Such is Expressionism!

Already by the First World War, Archipenko had gained a major reputation in Germany for the undulating volumes and inversions of solids and voids in his early sculptures (fig. 2), which strongly influenced German Expressionist sculptors such as Oswald Herzog and Rudolf Belling.4 Archipenko's great promoter in Germany was Herwarth Walden, director of Der Sturm journal and gallery, who gave Archipenko solo exhibitions in 1913, 1918 and 1921, and included him in the 1913 Erster Deutscher Herbstsalon, as well as in at least fifteen group shows at the Sturm gallery in Berlin between 1914 and 1925. Walden's support was undoubtedly crucial for Archipenko's choice to move to Berlin. Having spent the years of the First World War in Nice in the south of France, Archipenko reestablished contact with Walden in Germany in the summer of 1919. That autumn, he twice asked Walden to send him 'reviews and everything that has appeared on me during the war'.5 Archipenko's final decision to settle in Berlin in February 1921 coincided with a large travelling
exhibition of his work organised by Der Sturm with stops in Berlin, Dresden, Wiesbaden, Hannover and Munich.

Unlike many Russian émigrés who came to Berlin in the years following the First World War and the Russian Revolution, Archipenko, who had left Russia in 1908 to study in Paris and had never returned, brought with him no direct experience of the revolutionary upheavals in Eastern Europe. Five of Archipenko's works were included in the celebrated First Russian Art Exhibition held in Berlin in 1922, but as avant-garde sculpture they were overshadowed by the constructivist work of Naum Gabo, Gustav
Fig 2

Alexander Archipenko

'Boxing (Boxers, Struggle)'

1913–1914, painted plaster,

23 ⅞ x 16 ⅜ x 16 in.  


Klucis, Aleksandr Rodchenko and others. Archipenko, moreover, was to have little if any contact with such important figures as Gabo or El Lissitzky, who arrived in Berlin in 1921 and 1922 respectively. Indeed, Lissitzky was no great admirer of Archipenko. ‘It is a pity,’ he wrote in his Berlin-based journal Veshch in 1922, ‘that Archipenko was not in Russia during these [revolutionary] years. The great tasks which presented themselves in our country would have inspired this worthy artist to valuable achievements; whereas now the gilt of the Salons is rubbing off on his work’.

Archipenko had been promoted and understood in Germany primarily as an Expressionist. Rather than considering Expressionism the exclusive realm of groups like Die Brücke and Der Blaue Reiter, many German critics in the years just before and during the war took a very inclusive view of Expressionism as an international phenomenon virtually synonymous with modernism itself. The poet and critic Theodor Däubler, for instance,
not only regarded Archipenko as an Expressionist, but considered Picasso, Paul Klee and George Grosz to be Expressionists as well. In 1916 Däubler wrote rhapsodically about Archipenko:

The most airborne sculptor is Archipenko:... With Archipenko souls are hurled against the planets.... The individual as a receptacle for spirituality. His enduring suffering in existence: a nest from which the starchild will fly through eternity. So says Archipenko! Such is Expressionism!9

The compressed and tension-filled forms of Archipenko’s work from the early 1910s fuelled Däubler’s fantastic prose, characteristic of a certain strain of Expressionist writing. But by the time of Archipenko’s touring exhibition in Germany in 1921, his sculpture had moved away from these Expressionist stylisations. At the very moment of his public achievements in Germany, Archipenko, paradoxically, was facing a crisis in his work and a reversal in his critical fortunes.

Against Expressionism

By the end of the First World War, Expressionism had achieved widespread critical and commercial success within Germany. As early as 1920, however, many of the movement’s ardent supporters had declared Expressionism dead, a victim of its own commercial triumph.10 Herwarth Walden continued to promote his stable of Expressionist artists at Der Sturm, but his gallery and journal had lost much of their pre-war power and influence.

For avant-garde enemies of Expressionism, most notably the Berlin Dadaists, Archipenko’s strong association with Walden (who was detested by the Dadaists) made him an easy target. In 1921 Archipenko’s sculpture-painting ‘Woman’ (1919) became the hapless object of ridicule in an altered postcard sent by Theo van Doesburg to Raoul Hausmann (fig. 3). Van Doesburg’s pen-and-ink additions to the postcard, originally produced by Der Sturm, include framing the figure between the syllables of ‘DADA’ written large, drawing a snarling, crude face onto the blank head of Archipenko’s figure, and writing ‘La Madonna Venerica’ (an invented Latinised version of venereal) along a wooden element running up the figure’s right side. In the caption below, van Doesburg relabels the sculpture as belonging to the DADA collection, extends the list of materials (wood and metal) to include ‘et merde,’ and correspondingly changes the title from simply ‘Woman’ to ‘Woman on the Chamber Pot’.11 Likely replying to an altered Sturm postcard Hausmann had sent him earlier showing a defaced image of Walden himself,12 van Doesburg’s gleefully transgressive commentary rejects the overly earnest and quasi-spiritual rhetoric (as in Däubler’s language above) associated with Archipenko’s work and Expressionism in general. By debasing both the materials and subject of Archipenko’s relief, van Doesburg joins Hausmann’s attack on Der Sturm and its artists, and vilifies Archipenko’s Expressionism as nothing more than sanctimonious kitsch.
Regardless of his continued association with a loose notion of Expressionism, Archipenko’s work of the early 1920s is characterised by an almost frantic stylistic diversity. By the time he arrived in Berlin, he had already decisively ventured into more naturalistic imagery (fig. 4). As early as 1920 his work had been cited as belonging to an emergent ‘Post-Expressionism’, a broad stylistic designation indicating a return to figuration and degrees of naturalism. In the fall of 1922, Paul Westheim, editor of the journal Das Kunstblatt, questioned dozens of artists, including Archipenko, as well as critics and museum officials, about the existence of a ‘new naturalism’ in contemporary art and published the range of replies in a special edition of Das Kunstblatt. Archipenko’s response explains that ‘[i]f Expressionism strikes out on a new path it is only in order to seize a new form, and not in order to become Kitsch’. In a footnote, he adds: ‘If I sometimes turn to naturalism, I do it because naturalism for me is the same as a musician practising scales’. For supporters like Iwan Goll, Archipenko’s stylistic shifts were explained not as ‘practising’ but by recourse to the most fantastic romantic absolutes: ‘For genius, all modes are only temporary stages’.

Genius or not, Archipenko would turn this question of style-change into the theme of a series of lithographs from the early 1920s. By depicting a fleshly, naturalistic female nude with heavy limbs and exaggerated hands and feet together with the more architectonically stylised and angular figure for which he was well known, Archipenko overlays his stylistic quandary onto a Pygmalion and Galatea theme of a sculpted object coming to life. Here, however, the Pygmalion fantasy of animation appears inverted. In ‘Two Female Nudes’, an angular, constructed sculpture fixed to a base leans forward and extends a welcoming arm to the naturalistic ‘real’ figure that tentatively climbs up to share the pedestal, thereby leaving the world of nature for the fixed, defined space of Art. A related lithograph, ‘Two Female Figures’, Archipenko’s contribution to the 1921 Bauhaus series Neue Europäische Graphik, depicts the naturalistic figure occupying the raised pedestal while the stylized sculpted figure looks on from the ground below. These self-conscious role reversals show Archipenko playing, and perhaps struggling, with the stylistic possibilities and problems of post-Expressionism.

**The decisive task of sculpture**

As Archipenko’s somewhat defensive reply to Westheim’s Kunstblatt questionnaire suggests, his turn toward naturalism was not always well received. Many of his former supporters began to question his recent work. The Bauhaus artist Oskar Schlemmer, who in 1919 had called Archipenko one of the ‘few really original artists’, noted in 1921 that everyone he talked to was disappointed by Archipenko’s most recent exhibition in Berlin and ‘likewise or even more with the man’. By the mid 1920s, the influential critic Carl Einstein derisively referred to Archipenko as a sculptor who ‘nervously preserves a cloying, closed contour;’ and Westheim accused Archipenko of a ‘false ambition to always be the Novateur, the forerunner. For this he has neglected the decisive task of sculpture today’.
Just what did these critics consider the ‘decisive task’ of sculpture to be? Both Einstein and Westheim called for a new spatial complexity in sculpture that undermined the privileged position given to frontality and pictorial clarity in Adolf von Hildebrand’s remarkably influential treatise, *The Problem of Form in the Visual Arts*, first published in 1893.¹⁸ Hildebrand’s prioritising of a primary vantage point and coherent frontal plane as the most essential qualities for sculpture had a profound impact on modernist sculpture theory, and provided the foil for the spatial complexity now advocated by Westheim and Einstein. Westheim wrote of the importance of incorporating the ‘architectonic’ into sculptural form and creating ‘three-dimensionality and plasticity by modelling with space [den Raum mitzumodellieren]’¹⁹ Einstein espoused a similar, if ultimately more radical, commitment to rethink the nature of spatial experience and break free from a pictorial conception of sculpture. ‘Frontality’, he wrote in his 1915 book on African sculpture, ‘almost cheats the viewer of the cubic’.²⁰ For Einstein, the appeal of both African sculpture and the best contemporary sculpture was the dissociation of volume from mass and the rejection of the Hildebrandian notion of space as an optical and pictorial effect generated by precise contours and perspective.

Many of Archipenko’s works from the 1910s, especially his inversions of solids and voids (see fig. 2), exemplified this modernist commitment to spatial complexity. By the early 1920s, however, Archipenko appeared to have abandoned these radical open spatial arrangements and returned to a more pictorial conventional of sculptural frontality. It was this turn away from spatial complexity (whether in his mannered naturalism or more abstracted reliefs and sculptures) that for many modernist critics constituted Archipenko’s failure.

Defending his newly negative opinion, Westheim explained that Archipenko’s ‘talent would have certainly sufficed to achieve something worthwhile here. But he has not done it’,²¹ Einstein put it even more succinctly: ‘Despite all his cubism. [Archipenko] emphasizes the usual frontality’.²² This was true both for the naturalistic works like ‘Feminine Solitude’ (fig.4), with its primary vantage point and strong contour, and for a work like ‘Metal Lady’ (fig.1), which no matter how fragmented or abstracted ensures its stability through a backing panel and a consistent relief depth from which no element protrudes beyond an established forward plane. For Einstein and others this meant an essentially conservative stance that closed off sculpture from its spatial and, ultimately, its social and political environment.

Intriguingly, the question of Archipenko’s ‘frontality’ reappears in El Lissitzky’s *Abstract Cabinet* constructed in the Provinzialmuseum Hanover in 1928, where Archipenko’s ‘Flat Torsos’ occupies a surprisingly crucial position (fig. 5). Visible from both entryways to what was one of the most radical exhibition spaces of the interwar years, ‘Flat Torsos’ stands in a corner on a protruding cube (painted red on its vertical face and black on its top surface) backed by a mirrored panel. It is in the reflected image behind Archipenko’s sculpture that the three different perceptions of wall colour
generated by Lissitzky's tri-coloured slats visually collide for the spectator. This is arguably the crux of Lissitzky's spatial disorientations and fracturing, an uncertainty to which the near reversibility of Archipenko's figure now unwittingly contributes.

Hans Hildebrandt's invocation of 'happier times with a more certain sense of form', discussed at the outset, was published in 1923, the same year Archipenko left Berlin for America. It likely mirrors Archipenko's own sense of nostalgia for what both he and Hildebrandt perceived as a less fractured pre-war community of modernism. In later years Archipenko fondly recalled the shared ideals of the Section d'Or in Paris, 'a group of artists working in various styles, not merely Cubism. Our greatest demonstration in Paris was in October, 1912, in a triumphant exhibition [at the
Galerie La Boëtie]... In 1914 war disrupted our unity. After the war was over, conflicts began to brew. Archipenko would never again find himself part of such cohesiveness, whether real or imagined. Once Berlin seemed to offer just that possibility; but as early as January 1923, having lost significant support in modernist circles and burdened by Germany's great inflation, Archipenko began making plans to leave Berlin, and what he now called 'the madness of Europe... a place destined for catastrophe'.

In something of a farewell letter to Hildebrandt, Archipenko writes of his imminent departure and reflects on his years in Germany:

In fourteen days we will be on the ocean toward an unknown future. Already now I feel that I am detached from European soil; the events and times of my stay in Germany seem already long-passed, but the future I only see as ethereal. I am outside of time and place, [as] if it could be otherwise.

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2 Hildebrandt, Archipenko, p. 16.

3 Ibid.


14 Archipenko, response to 'Ein neuer Naturalismus? Eine Rundfrage des Kunstblatts', Das Kunstblatt, 6 (1922), reprint, Nendeln, Liechtenstein: Kraus Reprint, 1979, p. 399 and p. 399. Within a year, the term neue Sachlichkeit or 'new objectivity' replaced the 'new naturalism'.


18 Adolf von Hildebrandt, Das Problem der Form in der bildenden Kunst (Strassburg: Heitz & Mändel, 1893). Hildebrandt's text was revised in 1903 and reprinted frequently through the 1920s.

19 Paul Westheim, Für und Wider: Kritische Anmerkungen zur Kunst der Gegenwart (Berlin: Gustav Kiepenheuer, 1923), p. 192; See also Westheim, Architekturkonsul des Plastischen (Berlin: Wasmuth, 1923), p. 20, where he writes of the need for sculpture 'to grasp space, not only to grasp, also to embrace, to model with air'. Both quotations refer to the work of Rudolf Belling, whom Einstein and Westheim felt succeeded where Archipenko failed.


24 Letter (in French) to Katherine Dreier, January 17, 1923. Katherine S. Dreier Papers/Société Anonyme Archive, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. See also Michaelsen, Archipenko, pp. 55-58.
