**Einstein, Carl (1885-1940)**

Carl Einstein was the most radical art historian of the modernist period, active as a novelist, poet, playwright, translator, critic and publisher. His experimental novel *Bebuquin oder die Dilettanten des Wunders* (1912) (*Bebuquin, or the Dilettantes of Wonder*) plays an important role in European literary history. His most important works, however, were the pioneering art historical studies *Negerplastik* (1915) and *Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts* (1926, rev. ed. 1928, 1931), which have only recently been rediscovered as both thematically and methodologically ground-breaking contributions to modernist culture.

Born into a Jewish family in Neuwied, Einstein studied in Berlin and soon established in Germany and in France intimate connections to the most advanced intellectual and artistic circles of his time. He was initially influenced by authors such as André Gide, Paul Claudel and Stefan George, looking for an intellectual position between neo-Kantianism and Nietzscheanism, between Catholic restoration and the artistic avantgardes. In 1914, he volunteered for service in the First World War, where his trench experiences led to a political awakening. He participated in the Brussels soldiers’ councils and in the Spartacus uprising in Berlin as a communist activist, and as late as 1936 volunteered to fight in the Spanish Civil War at the side of the well-known anarchist Buenaventura Durruti. In July of 1940, Einstein, like many other leftist intellectuals of his generation, committed suicide in order to avoid arrest by the German forces.

Einstein’s early art historical essays culminated in his book on ‘negro sculpture,’ *Negerplastik*, which offered a comprehensive survey of the art of African masters. His accompanying text was heavily inspired by the spatial conception of cubism, and argued that Western art might learn from African scupture how to conceive of space ‘as a totality fixed through a single optical process of imagination’ rather than through a sequence of individual gazes (*Negerplastik*, S. XVIII). Returning to Berlin after the First World War and the 1918 revolution, Einstein joined the circle of Berlin Dadaists and devoted the next few years to a critical exploration of the relationship connecting Dadaist and Verist artists to social reality. In Einstein’s view, these artists attempted nothing less than the pictorial decomposition of bourgeois society and conducted painting as a form of ‘civil war’ (*Otto Dix*, in: *Das Kunstblatt* VII/1923, 99).

In his *Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts*, Einstein developed a compendium to art history focused less on a chronological approach than on the attempt to chart the development of modernist art from the revolutionary spatial conception of cubism to the new myths of surrealism. In this, he focused not simply on aesthetics but also on the cultural and political transformations of the twentieth century. Especially the third edition of 1931 added to this a manifesto for a radical aesthetic worldview based on anthropological, ethnological, psychological and cultural historical foundations.

After emigrating to Paris in 1928, Einstein published the journal *Documents* (1929-30), in which art works of a wide variety of genres and epochs were juxtaposed with one in another as part of an art history that Einstein defined as the ‘struggle of all experiences’ (*Aphorismes méthodiques*, in: *Documents* I/1929, p. 32). He henceforth worked with a conceptual vocabulary that combined aesthetic and anthropological aspects: hallucination, metamorphosis, archaism. Einstein demanded a re-mythologization of modernity that would give a bodily form to forces surfacing from the depths of history and the human psyche. Einstein hoped that the art of his century would constitute a proto-existentialist revolt against the biological fatality of death leading in the end to the liberation of humanity to which he devoted his whole intellectual and political life.

**Key Works**

*Bebuquin oder die Dilettanten des Wunders* (1912, *Bebuquin* 2008)

*Negerplastik* (1915)

*Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts* (1926, rev. ed. 1928, 1931)

**References and further readings**

Meffre, Liliane (2002): *Carl Einstein 1885-1940. Itinéraires d’une pensée moderne*, Paris: PU Paris-Sorbonne.

Fleckner, Uwe (2006) *Carl Einstein und sein Jahrhundert. Fragmente einer intellektuellen Biographie*, Berlin: Akademie Verlag.

Fleckner, Uwe (2008) *The Invention of the 20th Century. Carl Einstein and the Avant-gardes*, Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia.