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Umbo. Photographer

Works 1926–1956

1902–1933: Bauhaus and Berlin

Umbo joined the Bauhaus in Weimar in the early 1920s. The school, and Johannes Itten's foundation course in particular, were defining factors in Umbo's work, although he only remained in Weimar for two years. After he was asked to leave the school, he went to Berlin on a quest to discover his own artistic style. He was actually planning to be a painter, but his Bauhaus friend Paul Citroen pointed him towards photography. In a very short time he created a new approach to portraits. With his radical close-ups and strong contrasts between light and dark, he translated not only new ideas from cinematic practice but notably Itten's theory of shapes into the medium of photography. Most of all, he perfected the play of light and shadow in his portraits of women from bohemian Berlin. His visual idiom lent fitting expression to the style of the New Woman. The writer and actor Ruth Landshoff, for example, posed for Umbo in numerous roles. He also pioneered new methods of press photography. Breaking with the convention for single images, Umbo composed pictorial series as narratives for the photo agency Dephot, which had recently been set up by Simon Guttmann. One example is the transformation of Mr André Wettach into the world-famous Clown Grock, a sequence that tells a story rather like a short film.

1 Untitled (Ruth. The Hand), c. 1926

This unconventional portrait made Umbo famous almost overnight. It adopts a completely new technique to portray the actor and writer Ruth Landshoff. In this picture the extreme contrasts between light and dark are so pronounced that all we see are her eyes and dark lipstick. Her facial features contribute to a flat composition more like a Japanese woodcut than a photograph. Despite the graphic quality of this minimalist aesthetic, the photographer manages to capture the personality of this Berlin author. Strong and confident she stares right at the camera, and yet she is both elegant and sensual.

2 Untitled (The Raging Reporter), 1926

Even before Umbo discovered photography, he was an enthusiastic collector of pictures from journals and illustrated magazines, and he experimented, as did many of his contemporaries, with the medium of photomontage. This image was created as a poster to advertise Walther Ruttmann's film "Berlin: Symphony of a Great City", and it was no less famous than the movie itself. It depicts the legendary journalist Egon Erwin Kisch. This "machine-man" with a camera for an eye, a loudspeaker for an ear, and a typewriter and printing press for his torso, personifies not only an increasingly mechanised society, but also the fast-paced dynamism of life in Berlin as an expanding media metropolis in the 1920s.

3 Miraculous Shadows, 1928

With extremely high angles and a whole range of new perspectives, many modernist photographers in the 1920s tried to develop a new gaze on the world. Quite often their images were "optical shocks". Umbo's view of the city, however, was founded on a balanced composition and a dreamy, almost other-worldly gaze, in contrast to the sober technical euphoria of "Neues Sehen" (New Vision).

A low evening sun bathes the street in this unreal setting. The long shadows are elements in the composition, highlighting the diagonal and vertical lines that dominate the image. The photograph seems to float above the street, and there is no logic to people's movements – an effect which Umbo reinforces by turning the shot 90° on its axis.

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1933–1945: Under the Nazi regime

When the Nazis came to power in 1933, Umbo lost the creative milieu that had inspired his artistic work in the 1920s. Many of his closest friends and clients suffered persecution in one form or another or else were driven into exile. Simon Guttman, too, left the country. Only Umbo's photographic experiments with the new "Sky Camera" and in 1935 the series "Reacting Salts" testify to his creative spark. His photojournalism from this period centres almost solely on the world of theatre, vaudeville, cinema and sport. There are other series too, however: a cruise aboard the "Wilhelm Gustloff" with the "Kraft durch Freude" movement, and training activities with the Nazi girls' organisation BDM. They were the result of his collaboration with illustrated magazines that served Nazi propaganda. These commissions brought him a regular income for the first time, but they also draw attention to the conflicts to which artists were exposed under a totalitarian regime. In 1933, for example, Umbo had lent his studio and equipment to a group around the left-wing working-class photographer Ernst Thormann. In 1943 Umbo's archives and studio were destroyed by an air raid over Berlin. He lost almost his entire work.

4

Untitled, from the series "The Sky Camera", 1934

These round pictures are like strange little self-contained worlds. Forests become ornamental formations; people resemble threatening creatures from another realm. Umbo used the "cloud camera", as the "mother of all fish eyes" was then known, to discover the world in playful ways. In fact, this innovative wide-angle lens had been designed by AEG in Berlin for a very different purpose: meteorological observations of the sky. But typically Umbo paid no attention to the rules. Instead of exploring clouds with this camera, he used it to reinvent the world people already knew.

1945–1980: In Hanover

When the war ended in 1945, Umbo moved to Hanover for family reasons. In those early post-war years he tried to pick up his successful career of the 1920s, but it proved to be an arduous undertaking. At first he worked mostly for Communist and Social Democratic magazines, turning down a number of commissions from major newspapers. Only his friend Simon Guttman, who had now founded the photo agency Report in London, managed to persuade him to produce several series for the internationally renowned Picture Post. These pieces of photojournalism, like "The Lost Child", highlight Umbo's empathetic response to controversial issues of the day. Nevertheless, the success he had enjoyed in the 1920s evaded him. In the mid-1950s he gave up his career as a photographer. He eked out a meagre living with casual jobs and occasional teaching. Umbo found a new artistic milieu in an art association, the Kestner Gesellschaft, where he remained active in an ancillary capacity until an advanced age. In the mid-1970s, when photography became recognised as an art form in museums, Umbo's work attracted the interest of galleries, art historians and collectors. In the final years before his death in 1980, Umbo witnessed the rediscovery and recognition of his outstanding early work.

5

Untitled, from the reportage "The Lost Child", 1951

A little girl stands in an empty space looking lost. As she walks away, she turns her head doubtfully towards the photographer. Her shy yet curious stare expresses a deep melancholy. The picture is of Ingrid Rummel, aged five and a half, who was living with her mother in an emergency camp run by the British armed forces for refugees from Germany's former eastern territories. In the early 1950s Umbo spent several days here working on an illustrated piece for the British Picture Post. The title was to be "The Lost Child". Umbo patiently gained the child's confidence, for she had been traumatised by the horrors of war and seems to take her time accepting him. Umbo's photographs of the little girl betray a gentle gaze as he manages to catch her emotions and character.