



Schonfield, E. (2019) Body language in the prints of Käthe Kollwitz. In: Black, P. (ed.) The German Revolution: Expressionist Prints. The Hunterian, University of Glasgow: Glasgow, pp. 36-59. ISBN 9780904254990.

There may be differences between this version and the published version. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.

<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/181182/>

Deposited on: 6 March 2019

Enlighten – Research publications by members of the University of Glasgow_
<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk>

Body Language in the Prints of Käthe Kollwitz

The works of Käthe Kollwitz (1867-1945), one of the most significant German woman artists of the twentieth century alongside Paula Modersohn-Becker, have often been categorized as political propaganda. Where the emotional power of her work is recognised, it is usually said to be dominated by the theme of grief.¹ Her expressive intensity rivals that of Edvard Munch, and she has a political edge that he lacks.² Critical analysis of Kollwitz's work tends to emphasize particular themes, such as the depiction of war,³ grief and mourning, or the "maternal nude".⁴ In contrast to such thematic approaches, this contribution focuses on gestural techniques in Kollwitz's work, setting it within the dance culture and body culture of her time. A consideration of Kollwitz's use of body language reveals how she gradually consolidated her expressive power as an artist. She brought a performative, dramatic sensibility to her graphic art. This is particularly evident in the powerful hand gestures in her prints.

There is a definite development across Kollwitz's career from the early milieu studies of the 1890s towards the intense, minimalist studies of her mature, Expressionist period. It was in the first decade of the twentieth century that Kollwitz sharpened and refined her artistic techniques, shifting from Naturalism to full-bodied Expressionism. The panoramic scenes of her early print cycle *A Weavers' Rebellion* (1893-97), filled with multitudes, are gradually pared down to individual portraits and close-up studies of small groups of figures. This tighter focus increases the intensity and intimacy of her work, as hands, faces and postures move into the foreground. It was arguably her two visits to Paris on 1901 and 1904, and in particular her encounter with the sculptures of Auguste Rodin, that inspired Kollwitz to invest her works with an increasingly raw, plastic physicality.⁵

¹ Alice Miller, *The Untouched Key: Tracing Childhood Trauma in Creativity and Destructiveness* (London: Virago, 1990).

² Alessandra Comini, "Gender or Genius? The Women Artists of German Expressionism", in *Feminism and Art History: Questioning the Litany*, ed. by Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), pp. 271-91 (here p. 274).

³ Claire C. Whitner (ed.), *Käthe Kollwitz and the Women of War: Femininity, Identity, and Art in Germany during World Wars I and II* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016).

⁴ Rosemary Betterton, *An Intimate Distance: Women, Artists and the Body* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), pp. 20-45.

⁵ On Kollwitz's two visits to Paris, see Yury Winterberg and Sonya Winterberg, *Kollwitz: Die Biografie* (Munich: C. Bertelsmann, 2015), pp. 102-10.

This essay is divided into two main sections. The first section focuses on Kollwitz's interest in dance and body culture, which informs *La Carmagnole* (1901). The second section considers the development of gestural language in her mature work, concentrating in particular on the use of hands.

Expressionist Dance

In the first decades of the twentieth century, many forms of body culture flourished in Germany, Austria and Switzerland, including athletics, nudism, dance, eurythmics, and movement therapy.⁶ The first wave of the women's liberation movement in Europe coincided with campaigns to raise awareness about the benefits of physical exercise for women and men. Around the turn of the century, the American dancer Isadora Duncan toured around



Europe, and called for free, unrestricted movement for women. Kollwitz's career as an Expressionist artist thus paralleled the development of *Ausdruckstanz* (expressionist dance) in Germany; indeed, her artistic training introduced her to new ways of understanding the body.

At every stage of Kollwitz's artistic development we can find connections with the world of dance. Aged seventeen, she studied at the Verein Berliner Künstlerinnen, an art association for women. There, she was taught by the Swiss painter and printmaker Karl Stauffer-Bern, who advised her to visit an exhibition of the work of his friend Max Klinger, a leading Symbolist. There, she saw Klinger's fifteen-part cycle of etchings "Ein Leben, Opus VIII" (A Life, Opus VIII; executed 1883, first published 1884; see illustration to the left). It made a huge impression: "It was the first time I saw his work, and I was incredibly excited".⁷ The cycle represents the decline of a young woman, who begins her career as a dancer, but who falls victim to poverty, alcoholism and prostitution, and eventually drowns herself. In the etching pictured here, the young ballet dancer performs an arabesque, twisting away from the audience, and displaying to them her rear end.⁸ The

⁶ For a survey of German body culture, see Karl Toepfer, *Empire of Ecstasy: Nudity and movement in German body culture, 1910-1935* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

⁷ Käthe Kollwitz, "Rückblick auf frühere Zeit" (1941), in Käthe Kollwitz, *Die Tagebücher 1908-1943*, ed. by Jutta Bohnke-Kollwitz [1989] (Munich: btb Verlag, 2012), p. 737.

⁸ Copyright-free source of image:

<http://www.zeno.org/Kunstwerke/B/Klinger,+Max%3A+Opus+VIII,+%C2%BBEin+Leben%C2%AB,+F%C3%BCr+alle>

shadowy faces of the audience stare up, almost voyeuristically, at her exposed behind. Her tutu is comprised of shimmering concentric circles, which have an almost hypnotic effect. Indeed, the tutu almost seems to resemble an enormous eye, with the pupil formed by the dancer's pelvis; this reinforces the voyeuristic theme. Shortly afterwards, back at home in Königsberg, Kollwitz produced two genre paintings, "Before the Ball" and "After the Ball", which seem to have been lost, but whose titles suggest an interest in dance.⁹ Costume balls played "a big part in Käthe's life", as her friend Helene Bloch later recalled.¹⁰

⁹ Kollwitz, "Rückblick auf frühere Zeit" (1941), in Kollwitz, *Die Tagebücher*, p. 737.

¹⁰ Käthe Kollwitz, *Briefe der Freundschaft und Begegnungen* (Munich, 1966), p. 150. Kollwitz and her family regularly attended the annual fundraising costume ball for the *Sozialistische Monatshefte*, a socialist magazine.

After becoming engaged to Karl Kollwitz, a medical student, Kollwitz continued her studies in Munich from 1887 to 1889. There, in the Women's Painting Class of Ludwig Herterich, she attended life-drawing classes with nude models. During this period, she also attended many costume balls in carnival season – one surviving photograph of around 1889 depicts her in the costume of a goose girl.¹¹ At these artists' balls, the young Käthe Schmidt would sometimes sit on the steps and sketch her fellow dancers. On one occasion, she appeared as a “bacchante” (a maenad), i.e. a female worshipper of Dionysus/Bacchus, wearing a vine in her hair. In this Dionysian role, she sang and danced “with unbelievable passion”.¹² The god Dionysus is central to the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche, who, in his *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872) described Dionysian excess as a fundamental tendency in both art and life. Kollwitz's choice of role suggests her interest in Nietzsche, and this connection is confirmed by the many references to Nietzsche in her diary, later on. The concept of Dionysus represented a connection with primal forces and revolutionary energies, which Kollwitz also found in the working-class culture of her day. Modernism in general was drawn to so called “primitive”, non-Western culture, but it also often gestured to popular, working-class cultural traditions. Thus, Kollwitz's interest in dance and body culture aligns with her interest in depicting the life of the working classes. Working class women dressed very differently to middle class women; their clothes were looser, less restricted, making their body language more open and direct.¹³ These dress codes began to change in the 1890s,

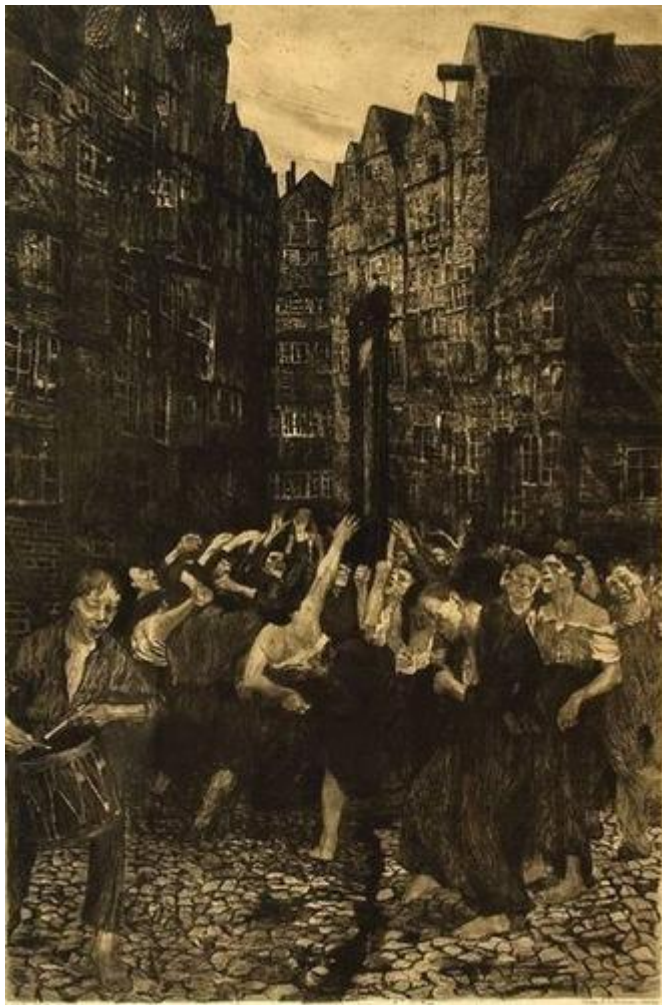
¹¹ The image is “Käthe Schmidt als Gänseliesel, München um 1889”. Cf. Yury and Sonya Winterberg, *Kollwitz*, p. 84.

¹² Yury and Sonya Winterberg, *Kollwitz*, pp. 83-84.

¹³ Yury and Sonya Winterberg, *Kollwitz*, p. 89.

however, as a result of the *Lebensreform* (life reform) movement that promoted a healthier, more natural lifestyle, and encouraged women in particular to wear looser clothes. Kollwitz's four nieces usually wore such loose clothes (*Reformkleider*), and sometimes even ran around naked.¹⁴

Kollwitz's interest in dance, and particularly Dionysian dance, culminates in *The Carmagnole* (*Dance Around the Guillotine*, 1901), an ambitious etching made just before her first visit to Paris in 1901. The *Carmagnole*, like the *Marseillaise*, is a popular song from the



French revolution of 1789, which glorifies armed revolutionary struggle and the sound of cannon. However, Kollwitz has transposed the guillotine into a typically German setting: the backdrop is formed by the historic alleyways of Hamburg, which she had visited and sketched in the mid-1890s.¹⁵ If we compare this etching with the Klinger etching mentioned above, the differences are striking. The dance does not take place on a stage, but on the street. Unlike Klinger's image, where the woman is the object of the gaze (which is implied to be male), the women in Kollwitz's image are simultaneously both performers/actors and spectators of the guillotine. They are active agents who are staging a

spectacle for their own benefit. The revolving centre of the spectacle is no longer the woman's body (as in the Klinger piece), but the guillotine itself, the weapon of revolutionary violence. While Klinger's dancer stretches upwards, extending her limbs to the utmost in an attempt to defy gravity, Kollwitz's women stomp around the guillotine with bended legs. The

¹⁴ Yury and Sonya Winterberg, *Kollwitz*, p. 224. For further discussion of the *Lebensreform* movement, see the essay by Sabine Wieber in this volume.

¹⁵ Yury and Sonya Winterberg, *Kollwitz*, p. 155. Jay A. Clarke is mistaken when he claims that the etching depicts "cramped, Parisian tenement houses" (p. 88); Jay A. Clarke, "The Carmagnole (*Dance Around the Guillotine*, 1901), in "Portfolio", *Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies*, vol. 28, no. 1, *Negotiating History: German Art and the Past* (2002), 82-105 (here pp. 87-88).

woman in the foreground is hunched and almost animal-like in her contortions. She seems to stamp her bare feet on the paving stones in an echo of the drum beat, suggesting her closeness to the ground. Instead of the controlled posturing of Klinger's ballerina, we see the uncontrolled shambling of Kollwitz's women. They are in a state of complete abandonment. The contrast between Klinger's Apollonian dancer and Kollwitz's Dionysian women could hardly be greater. Kollwitz's image is far from being triumphant, though; like Nietzsche's concept of the Dionysian, it is highly ambivalent. The etching conveys both a mood of liberation (women's liberation, class liberation) and the prospect of mob violence and revolutionary terror, emphasized by the stream of blood flowing away from the guillotine and towards the viewer. Some of the women even salute the guillotine, in what seems to be an uncanny anticipation of the Hitler salute. Many of the women have open mouths, but it is not clear if they are singing or screaming. There is a conscious primitivism, and even paganism, about this work: the women circle the guillotine almost like native Americans dancing around a totem pole. Their bare feet accentuate the "savage", animalistic quality of the dance. The bare feet of the dancers are muscular and slab-like, and planted firmly on the ground, completely unlike the pointed toes of ballerinas. The etching is not only radical in terms of its political theme, it is also radical in its presentation of the powerful movement of women's bodies. It is almost as if the women are not only celebrating their political emancipation, but also their sexual liberation from the corset of Victorian morality.

After *The Carmagnole*, Kollwitz stopped portraying dance scenes directly in her work, but her work continued to benefit from the ongoing cross-fertilization between art and dance. We should recall that German Expressionism was also a movement in theatre and dance, as well as in art and literature. At the Berlin Secession on 30 November 1909 she admired a dance scene painted by Martin Brandenburg, and resolved to reduce the forms of her etchings to the bare essentials, omitting any unnecessary details.¹⁶ Two of her nieces, Kati and Maria Stern, trained as dancers, and Kollwitz sometimes accompanied Kati to ballet school.¹⁷ Kati was later employed as a dancer by Max Reinhardt.¹⁸ In 1910, Kollwitz's son Hans fell in love with Grete Wiesenthal (1885-1970). Wiesenthal had been a ballet dancer at the Vienna State Opera, but in 1908 she founded her own expressionist dance group, developing a new, unclassical style of dance, based on swing technique. Through her son's close friendship with Wiesenthal, Kollwitz was present at the birth of German expressionist

¹⁶ Kollwitz, *Die Tagebücher*, p. 62.

¹⁷ Kollwitz, *Die Tagebücher*, p. 139.

¹⁸ Yury and Sonya Winterberg, *Kollwitz*, p. 224



dance. She saw Wiesenthal dance on 13 December 1915 and commented that she had become “more mature, beautiful and soulful.”¹⁹

<<< Grete Wiesenthal.²⁰

Wiesenthal’s work influenced the young Mary Wigman (1886-1973), the most famous exponent of German expressionist dance, and founder of her own dance school. Like the female figures Kollwitz had portrayed in *The Carmagnole*, Wigman’s dancers had bare feet and did not go *en pointe*; they remained in close contact with the floor; their movements often emphasized the weight of the body and the gravitational pull of the earth.



Mary Wigman>>.²¹

¹⁹ Kollwitz, *Die Tagebücher*, pp. 204-05.

²⁰ The image of Grete Wiesenthal is available here:

https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/f/f0/Grete_Wiesenthal.jpg

Lantern slide reproduction by Arnold Genthe (1869-1942) of a photograph by the Viennese photographer Rudolf Jobst (1872-1952). This image is available from the United States Library of Congress’s Prints and Photographs division under the digital ID agc.7a09891. A normal copyright tag is still required.

²¹ Image of Mary Wigman, 1922. <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:MaryWigmanMerkelbach1922.jpg>

In April 1920 Kollwitz attended a performance by another leading expressionist dancer, Niddy Impekoven, and remarked: “*Very* gifted. Much ability, temperament and humour.”²² Kollwitz was kept informed of the latest developments in dance by her sister Lise Stern, the mother of the dancers Kati and Maria. In 1926, Lise Stern published a survey of contemporary dancers in the *Sozialistische Monatshefte*, commenting on the work of Mary Wigman, Niddy Impekoven, Josephine Baker and Rudolf Laban.²³ As we shall see, there are strong parallels between Kollwitz’s visual art and Wigman’s performance art. Both of them, the artist and the dancer, reduced their gestures to the bare essentials, maximizing the effects of hands and faces in order to ensure the dramatic intensity of their work. In her memoirs, Wigman recalls that, aged twenty-one, while still living at home, she saw Grete Wiesenthal perform the *The Blue Danube Waltz* in 1908. Wiesenthal’s expressive hand movements were inspiring:

The Blue Danube Waltz deeply impressed me... For the first time in my life I saw that hands can be more than hands, that hands can become buds and flowers that can bloom before one’s eyes... And when the moment came when I finally broke away from the bourgeois family circle, I remembered Wiesenthal’s hands. And I said: I would like to do something similar. With God’s help I would like to do something that keeps the body in motion, something that sets the body in motion.²⁴

Hand gestures are thus central to the work of both Wigman and Kollwitz. Furthermore, Wiesenthal, a key influence on Wigman, knew Kollwitz personally, and it is very likely that Kollwitz and Wiesenthal were stimulated by each other’s work. In this way, we can observe a constellation of mutual influences between these Expressionist artists and dancers. The thematic resemblances between Kollwitz and Wigman are striking too, since death and mourning also play a central role in the work of both artists. In 1930 Wigman produced *Totenmal* (Memorial for the Dead) in Munich, in which she played “a matriarchal medium who struggled unsuccessfully between the living and the dead”.²⁵ Kollwitz and Wigman are known for their gravitas and dramatic power: they both embody a strong, powerful female physicality in opposition to the antiseptic *Girlkultur* (girl culture) of 1920s chorus girls such

²² Kollwitz, *Die Tagebücher*, p. 468.

²³ Kollwitz, *Die Tagebücher*, pp. 612, 889-90.

²⁴ Quoted in Susan A. Manning, *Ecstasy and the Demon: Feminism and Nationalism in the Dances of Mary Wigman* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p. 51.

²⁵ Kate Elswit, *Watching Weimar Dance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 114.

as the Tiller troupe.²⁶ To illustrate how this expressive physicality works in practice, let us now move to a closer consideration of hand gestures in Kollwitz's work.

Speaking Hands

Much of the intensity and drama of Kollwitz's mature work derives from the expressive power of hands. In 1925, Kollwitz was even filmed for a documentary, *Schaffende Hände* (*Creative Hands*), directed by Hans Cürdis, which focused on the artist's own hands as she worked.²⁷ However, her artistic focus on hands can be traced to the period around 1900. Around this time, she produced a series of portraits of working women, wearing dark clothes against a dark background. As a result of the hovering darkness, the faces and hands of the women are highlighted dramatically. These portraits have recently been described as "Madonnas for the industrial age".²⁸ The iconography of the pictures certainly alludes to the Virgin Mary. Their hands are clasped tightly in front of them, as if seeking to protect themselves. The women seem pensive, lost in thought. They do not look at the viewer directly, but remained absorbed in reflection. Perhaps they are thinking of children, whether born or unborn. After her visit to Paris in 1901, Kollwitz experimented with colour in this series, depicting women wearing a blue shawl, a colour traditionally associated with the Virgin Mary.

Woman with folded hands (*Frau mit übereinandergelegten Händen*, 1898), above, is a memorable black and white portrait.²⁹ The woman's hands seem to rest on her upper chest: is she perhaps pregnant? The side lighting is dramatic: one half of her face gradually merges into the darkness. The pattern of light is repeated on the hands: one is spotlighted, while the other fades into shadow. The woman's hair is tied back severely, and her black outfit adds to the impression of severity. Her face suggests a strong character, with a rounded jaw and a dimpled chin. Her mouth, a straight line, could express a wide variety of different emotions. It is composed and patient. The slanting eyebrows, however, suggest that she is concerned

²⁶ *ibid.*, p. 114.

²⁷ Kollwitz, *Die Tagebücher*, pp. 887-88.

²⁸ Skye Sherwin, Review of "Käthe Kollwitz: Portrait of the Artist" (Ikon Gallery, Birmingham), *The Guardian*, Saturday 16 September 2017, p. 44.

²⁹ Source: British Museum online catalogue.

http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=684903&partId=1&searchText=kollwitz&page=1



about something. The hands have much less definition than the face, they are flattened and reduced to outlines. They are pale, anxious, almost ghostly. Even so, the upper hand is strong, almost clenched into a fist. The clasped hands indicate her readiness to defend herself, and her family, if necessary.

Produced five years later, *Working Woman in profile looking to the left* (*Arbeiterfrau im Profil nach links*, 1903), is a variation on the same theme.³⁰ This time, there is a striking contrast between the hands and the face. The face is bony and chiselled: the chin, the cheekbone, and the ridge above the eye are shiny and translucent, almost as if the bones are rising up through the skin. But while the face is pinched and under-nourished, the hands are muscular and powerful. They are modelled almost sculpturally, with bold, strong lines. The influence of Auguste Rodin, whom Kollwitz had visited in Paris, is discernible here. If we compare this print with its predecessor from 1898, the treatment of the hands is remarkable. The hands have a raw power that contradicts the tiny face. While the uppermost hand in the 1898 print is flattened, almost blotted out by the light, the hands in the 1903 print are prominent, with stark three-dimensional modelling. They seem almost to pulsate with energy. The fact that the woman's hair and clothes are completely obscured by the black background

³⁰ Source: British Museum online catalogue.
http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=684770&partId=1&searchText=kollwitz&page=1

gives the hands an even more powerful presence. The discrepancy between the small, bird-like face and the monumental hands is almost uncanny. The muscled hands underline the fact that the woman is a worker. While the face looks away in silent sorrow, the hands indicate her physical strength. This woman may not have a voice, but her hands show that she can look after herself.

In the same year, 1903, Kollwitz produced *Woman with Dead Child*, one of her most famous works, using herself and her son Peter as models. It is a prophetic image, as Peter later died while serving in World War One. The mother's hand is right in the centre of the etching, curving upwards as it cradles the child, lifting the body towards the face. The mother's hand and face press together, almost smothering the child in an outburst of intense emotion. The motif of the hand on the head recalls Rodin's *The Thinker*, and it recurs in many of Kollwitz's prints from this point onwards. However, she does not only use hands to symbolise deep thought and intense emotion; she also used them to symbolise love. In her later work, hands very often reach out to other people as signs of love and active solidarity.

One example of this is *Help Russia! (Helft Russland, 1921)*. This lithograph was occasioned by the famine in Soviet Russia as a result of the anti-revolutionary war there, funded by Western powers. The poster was published as part of the relief efforts of the *Internationale Arbeiterhilfe* (International Workers' Aid) organisation founded in August 1921. The lithograph shows a collapsing man, with four hands coming to assist him and lift him back up. Kollwitz refrains from showing the man's chest – there are no sunken ribs on display; indeed, the man's neck is broad and muscular. The pathos comes almost entirely from the juxtaposition of head and hands. The outstretched hands show solidarity. These muscled hands are coming to give active help. Although there are only four hands (which would indicate two people, one on each side), the hands seem to multiply, suggesting a much more widespread public initiative.

Around 1922-23, Kollwitz produced a series of images protesting against war, in which hands are foregrounded once again. Around this time she produced an ink drawing entitled “Witwen u. Waisen klagen den Krieg an” (Widows’ and Orphans’ Accusation Against War),³¹ which shows a woman in black, with a small child huddled against her. The woman’s hands are clasped protectively in front of the child. This same motif forms the subject of her woodcut *The People* (*Das Volk*, 1922), featured in this exhibition.³² The woman shows strength in her grief: she is actively engaging in protecting the small child in front of her. Her strong left hand points stretches diagonally across the child, like a shield or a prohibition. She wants to stop people coming anywhere near the child, who snuggles securely behind her hand. Meanwhile, the woman’s calm determination is juxtaposed with the intense agitation of the five male figures surrounding her. The man on the left presses his fists into his mouth as if to stifle a cry. The man on the right grits his teeth and punches his clenched fist into his own forehead. It is interesting here that the male figures are shown gesticulating and losing control, while the woman, in contrast, remains firmly fixed on the most important practical objective: namely, protecting the next generation of children from the horrors of warfare. She is like a pillar of strength: the menfolk, consumed by their own emotional outbursts, huddle around her closely, as if they too were children and sought her protection. She is by far the strongest figure in the picture. If only everyone would listen to her accusation against war, and prevent any future wars from wiping out a new generation of children! There is a topical political message here: as early as 1920, the Weimar Republic was almost toppled by the Kapp-Lüttwitz Putsch, which attempted to install a military dictatorship. Indeed, from the early 1920s onwards, nationalists and right-wing extremists were calling for “revanche” (i.e.



³¹ The image is reproduced in *Käthe Kollwitz: Schmerz und Schuld. Eine motivgeschichtliche Betrachtung* (Berlin: Käthe-Kollwitz Museum, 1995), p. 179.

³² *Das Volk*, Blatt 7 der Folge „Krieg“, 1922. Woodcut.

revenge, military retaliation against France and other Western Allied powers). The subject of the woman protecting children from war was so significant to Kollwitz that she repeated it several times in 1922-23. *The Survivors* (*Die Überlebenden*, 1923), also shows a woman in mourning, but this time she hugs three children in her arms, with two more children on either side of them, one of them grabbing her arm in bid for some attention. Next to her are two veterans who have been blinded in the war, their eyes covered with bandages; one of them holds out his hand, asking for charity.

The mother sheltering children from war is also the subject of Kollwitz's final major lithograph, *Seed Crops Should Not Be Ground* (*Saatfrüchte sollen nicht vermahlen werden*,



1941), arguably her last testament in terms of her artistic legacy.³³ This print has a strong political statement: do not send children to war. Not only they will be destroyed, but the contribution to society that they could have made will also be wasted. Once again we see a strong woman sheltering three children in her arms. This time, however, she appears to be squatting on the ground, almost rising up out of the ground like an organic growth. The woman's body has become a natural shelter, forming a den for the children to hide in: her hands and muscular forearms provide a roof, and her rounded hips provide the walls. Although the figures are huddled on the ground, there is plenty of movement here: the woman is alert and on the look-out for trouble, as are the children. Hands touch each other gently, affirming the emotional connection between the figures: the woman's left hand curves downwards, resting gently and protectively on the shoulder of the central child; meanwhile, the child on the right reaches a hand up to rest on her knee. The squatting posture of the woman recalls Mary Wigman and her signature dance, *Witch Dance* (*Hexentanz*), first

³³ Source: <http://www.kettererkunst.de/kunst/kd/details.php?obnr=103004034&anummer=282&detail=1>

performed in 1914, and reworked several times in the following decades.³⁴ The dance piece is performed entirely sitting down, in order to symbolise the woman's strong connection with the earth. As in Kollwitz's lithograph, the dancer's body forms a powerful, protective circle in contact with the earth. The proximity of the body to the earth conveys a sense of close contact



with natural life forces. At the same time, the hands work together: they do not extend outwards into space; instead they connect with the other limbs: in the Kollwitz print, one hand rests on a forearm, which in turn makes a bridge between the child's shoulder and the woman's knee. In the still frame from *Witch Dance*, both of Wigman's hands rest on her ankles. In both cases, the connecting hands and limbs seem to form a circle of intense power. The close contact of hands and limbs is the epitome of Expressionist art and movement: not an extension into space, but the affirmation of a natural closeness with the earth. And in both cases, the power of artistic statement derives from the woman's contact with the ground, her centre of gravity simultaneously pressing against the ground and rising up from it, with great assertion and force. Incidentally, the connection between Kollwitz and Wigman was reaffirmed in 1946, the year after Kollwitz's death, when Dore Hoyer and the remaining members of the Mary Wigman dance school performed *Dances for Käthe Kollwitz* in Dresden.³⁵

As we conclude this brief survey of Kollwitz's graphic work, we have seen how her work gradually moves inwards from panoramic social scenes towards intimate close-ups. But the shift towards close-ups does not mean that movement and dance are absent: on the contrary, hand gestures become increasingly central to Kollwitz's work, and are foregrounded in order to maximise the sense of energy and drama. If we focus on the hands, faces and physical postures of Kollwitz's figures, the connections with expressionist dance become apparent. Kollwitz's images resonate with the performing arts of her time, and this contributes to the gestural and dramatic power of her work.

³⁴ A 1926 performance of *Witch Dance* is currently available on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hk7Ie3rbcSQ> (consulted 10 September 2018)

³⁵ Isa Partsch-Bergsohn, *Modern Dance in Germany and the United States: Crosscurrents and Influences* (Chur: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1994), p. 122.