

INTRODUCTION

Born in Berlin in 1897, Erwin Blumenfeld fled from Hitler in 1941 to become a highly acclaimed New York fashion photographer. What had the forty-four-year-old done before that? The likes of a strong artistic hand do not develop overnight. I went to school with his granddaughter and, already in those days, I noticed the drawings, montages, and photographs on the walls of her house. They hardly looked as if they were from one hand, and yet I was told that they were all by grandfather Erwin. Years later, as a proven specialist on Dada, I felt it right to follow up my former curiosity in order to provide a base for a more profound understanding of Blumenfeld's oeuvre. The result is this book.

Blumenfeld's early work consists in a written estate of poetry and prose, a collection of some one hundred, mostly unpublished, montages, sixty drawings, a few paintings, and many family photographs. The fact that Blumenfeld clearly applied techniques of montage in his later photographs prompted me to focus my research on this specific body of work. Erwin Blumenfeld did not make his montages for the general public; if he gave them out at all, it was together with a letter or as a personal gift. Most of the works come from the estate, but a certain number also originate from the collections of Paul Citroen, Francis Picabia, Tristan Tzara, and Paul Zech. Blumenfeld hardly ever took part in exhibitions—a fact that still weighs on the reception of his oeuvre.

For the first time, this book compiles all the montages as they are known today and proposes a general chronology. Besides Blumenfeld's autobiographical *Eye to I* and his judicious selection of *My One Hundred Best Photos*, letters and texts from the family archive were consulted. The early correspondence of 1915 to 1916 with his Dutch friend, and later wife, Lena Citroen (Blumenfeld), Paul Citroen's cousin, is particularly revealing. In his letters, like nowhere else, Blumenfeld discloses his personal thoughts and feelings.

Of Jewish-bourgeois background, Erwin Blumenfeld was raised as a businessman in late Wilhelminian Berlin. He was caught between the collapse of all the moral values ever impressed on him and the ideals and promises of a self-confident artistic avant garde. Personal strokes of fate in Blumenfeld's life (1897–1969) were accompanied or even triggered by historical events: the embarrassing syphilitic insanity and subsequent death of his father in 1913, the family's bankruptcy, the betrayal by his own mother when he attempted to desert from the army, and the loss of his

*“I never
want to be a poet,
never an artist,
never a hero,
always and always
only a human.”¹*

brother in the war shaped his approach to the world. An era had come to an end. In addition, Blumenfeld, whose physiognomy was very “Jewish,” suffered greatly from the German anti-Semitism of the time.

As a fourteen-year-old, Erwin Blumenfeld compiled a list of 360 books that he wanted to be given for his bar mitzvah; at sixty, the photographer wrote that manuscripts were the most beautiful portraits.² Between those dates lies his oeuvre. Whether montages, drawings, or photographs, no image was created without lyrical, literary, or dramatic associations. Already as a schoolboy, Blumenfeld looked for allies in literature. He found a lead for his perception of the world in the misogynous writings of Otto Weininger and August Strindberg. And Weininger's theory of the androgynous nature of every human being remained a strong influence throughout his life. Strindberg demonized woman and yet had to admit that it was the love of a woman that saved him from suicide. Blumenfeld too discovered this dependency and was a passionate worshiper of the other gender.

Blumenfeld's early friendship with Paul Citroen and Walter Mehring, who found recognition as painter and poet respectively, his association with Galerie Der Sturm and Berlin's bohemia surrounding Else Lasker-Schüler, Salomo Friedlaender-Mynona, and his closeness to George Grosz collided with his career in the garment trade. He sensed the urge to write, paint, and act on stage, but in no way did he want to be a “poor poet.”

Although attracted by strong artistic personalities with whom he liked to compare himself, Blumenfeld was convinced of the incompatibility of “artistry” and “humanity.” For him, a “human” was an educated, feeling person who acted authentically according to individual principles. His heroes were representatives of “humanity.” “Mysticism,” a complex mixture of popular beliefs, was another of Blumenfeld's central motifs. The idealist Blumenfeld relentlessly points at social and religious abuse of “humanity” and “mysticism.”

In 1918, Blumenfeld moved to Amsterdam, where Lena Citroen was living. There, together with Paul Citroen, he tried his hand at art dealing—without success. He finally decided to set up his own trade and opened a shop for leather handbags. He wrote and pasted in a little room above the shop when he lacked clientele. On the weekends, he was a Sunday painter after the model of the self-taught customs officer Henri Rousseau. In 1935, bankrupt and artistically isolated, he left Holland for Paris in order to take up photography as a profession. In 1941, after an odyssey of two years in various French internment camps, he managed to emigrate to New York, where he made a brilliant career as a fashion photographer.

Blumenfeld was an uncomfortable person full of contradictions. He was without compromise, unconcerned about what other people thought of him, and he had learned to believe only in himself. He did not have very many real friends. The kind of cynicism that, in May 1933, made him suggest gassing seventy million Germans prompted even George Grosz and Else Lasker-Schüler to call him to moderation.