

DOCUMENTS OF A VICTIM

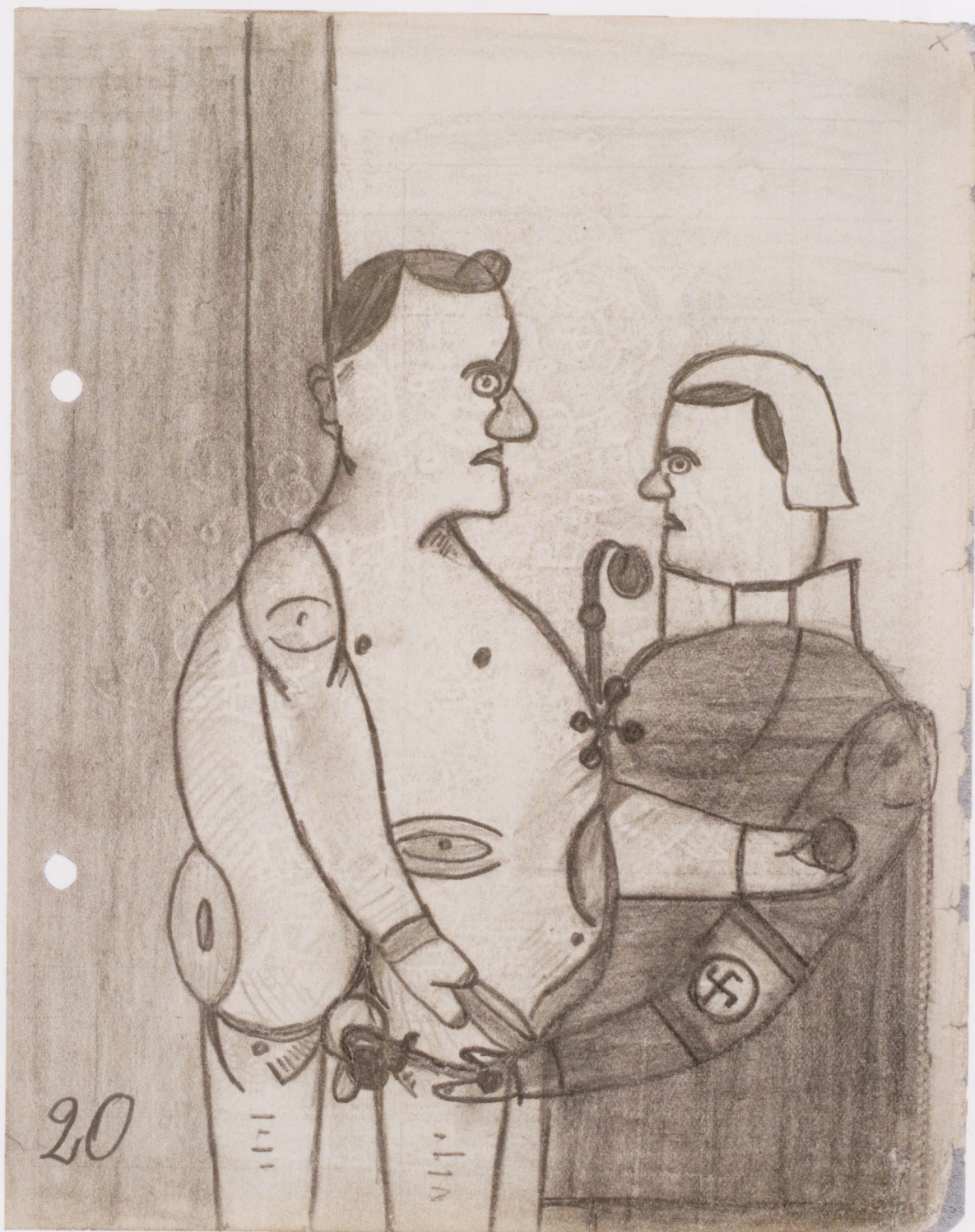
The "sterelation" drawings of Wilhelm Werner

THOMAS RÖSKE and MAIKE ROTZOLL



All works were made between 1934 and 1938 using pencil on paper, and are from the Prinzhorn Collection, Heidelberg

The Triumph of Sterelation ("25"), 8.1 x 6.3 in. / 20.5 x 16 cm, Inv. Nr. 8083 (2008) fol. 25 recto



Untitled ("1"), 8.1 x 6.3 in. / 20.5 x 16.0 cm,
Inv. Nr. 8083 (2008) fol. 1 recto

At the end of 2008, the Prinzhorn Collection in Heidelberg, Germany, acquired from a private individual 30 small, numbered drawings dating from between 1934 and 1938 by an inmate of Werneck Asylum in Lower Franconia, Bavaria. In 2010, the Collection was able to acquire 14 more drawings by this artist from the same source, this time without numbers. They are fascinating not only because of their singular figurative aesthetics but also because they stand out as examples from a period in German history when hardly any asylum

art was kept – and as unique documents on the atrocities of Nazi medicine. The author, Wilhelm Werner, was not known at all at the time, and there is hardly any information about him because his medical file has not been found. The documents that are available only reveal that he was born on September 18, 1898, admitted to Werneck Asylum in 1919 with the diagnosis of “idiocy” and transferred to an “unknown institution” on October 6, 1940. Other than these scant facts, it was noted that he was Catholic, unmarried and without a profession.



Untitled ("17"), 7.9 x 6.3 in. / 20.1 x 16.1 cm, Inv. Nr. 8083 (2008) fol. 17 recto

We now know that the unknown institution to which Werner was transferred in 1940 was the "Euthanasia" killing asylum Pirna/Sonnenstein. As most "transfers" were directly gassed on the day of their arrival, we probably also know the date of his death. Werner's images are drawn on the backs of pages from a thin notebook originally intended as a shop order book. A staff member at the institution took the bundle of drawings with him when he left Werneck in 1938. He showed it to friends and acquaintances many times until his death, fascinated by the explosive nature of its content and the unique compositions of the drawings, so that the pages are worn.

He also punched holes in the pages and reassembled them.

These pencil drawings are the only preserved works of art on the sterilisation of patients from the Nazi period, which started in 1934. Until now, only a few poems have remained that represent an artistic attempt to process this invasive operation affecting the core of personality, but no visual works. The drawings also indicate an immense complexity in processing these experiences with the help of original schematic renderings of people and things. For this reason alone, the diagnosis "idiocy" seems puzzling.

On the inside of the book cover, which was preserved as well, Werner refers to himself as an "orator of the people

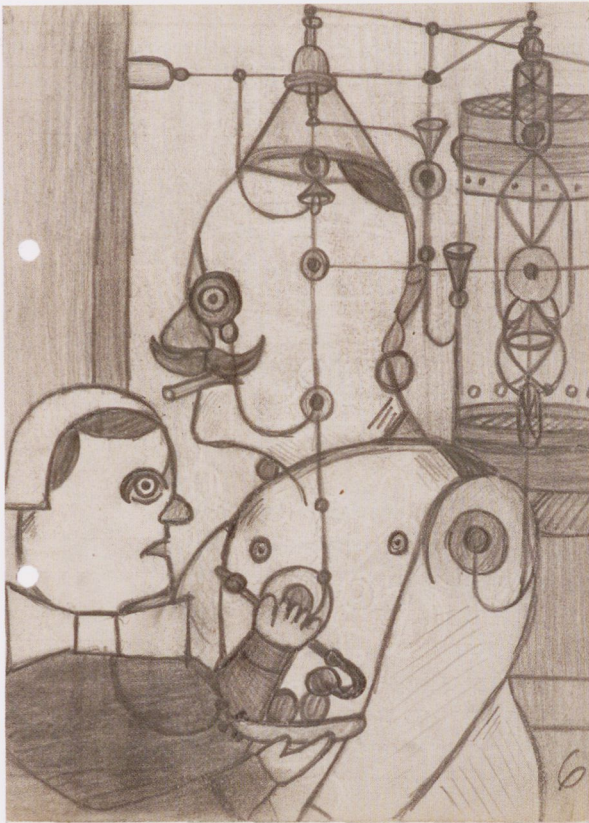


For the Matter of Sterelation ("13"), 8 x 6.1 in. / 20.2 x 15.5 cm, Inv. Nr. 8083 (2008) fol. 13 recto

and theatre director Wilhelm Werner, Werneck Asylum". Indeed, his drawings seem like scenes from a puppet show. The space of action is flat, the figures mostly act parallel to the plane of the image surface. Their heads are usually depicted in profile; arms and legs are only connected to the always-voluminous bodies at a single point; the hands often taking on a schematic mitten-like shape. When the figures are nude, the turning point at the outside of the shoulders can even be seen, like the split pin of a jumping jack; navel and anus are accentuated, the nipples are positioned too high up on the chest. The actors differ in dress, hairstyle, and gender: deaconesses in habits,

men wearing suits, naked men, clowns with spherical bodies, partly dressed, partly naked, and naked boys.

Werner often "stages" meetings of doctors and nurses with the victims of surgery. The doctors here mainly play the part of observers and controllers, while the deaconesses manipulate the genitals of the men and boys in question. The artist's sympathy is clearly with the seemingly helpless victims. Especially impressive are the round clowns who, although dressed as comic figures, undergo surgery with a serious face or juggle with testicle "balls." At the same time, the "perpetrators" are not presented as unambiguously evil. "Portraits" of several



Untitled ("6"), 8 x 6.1 in. / 20.2 x 15.5 cm,
Inv. Nr. 8083 (2008) fol. 6 recto



Untitled, 8.1 x 6.3 in. / 20.5 x 16 cm,
Inv. Nr. 8083 (2010) fol. 2 recto

men and a deaconess, depicted by Werner in half or total figure or from the knees up, exude a quiet authority. The only person whose name is mentioned in pencil, Dr Hans Weinzierl, was head physician of the surgical department in Schweinfurt from 1920 to 1945. The fact that he cooperated on the compulsive sterilisation of patients at the institution cannot be proven (the hospital files from this period no longer exist).

Even the drawing with the demonstrative title *Der Siegeszug der Sterelation* ("The Triumph of Sterelation" – Werner always spelled "sterilisation" incorrectly) is rather ambiguous. Was it intended sarcastically, or did Werner want to develop a humoristic fantasy about suffering for a "good cause", referring to the propaganda vehicles that could often be seen in Nazi Germany?

Time and time again, Werner shows bulbous testicles being removed, indicating castration. Yet this was not the common practice at the time. The "Law for the Prevention of Genetically Diseased Offspring" in principle stipulated only making the person in question infertile. In fact, castration was originally prohibited unless there were medical reasons or a sexual criminal act argued for it. Werner was probably not castrated in the medical sense of the word, because he had not committed any crime. Yet, he apparently experienced the surgery as an "emasculatation" and therefore chose the removal of testicles as a motif.

In nine of his drawings, Werner shows surgical instruments under the title "For the Matter of Sterelation". Like "classical" depictions from surgical textbooks, they

show bowls, hooks, syringes, or devices used to sterilise medical instruments. Werner could have seen such instruments before or after the operation. The drawings also feature several apparatuses reminiscent of anaesthesia masks. Unconsciousness during the operation itself might explain why Werner erroneously assumed that castration had taken place and always showed the deaconesses as the surgeons. Two of his drawings show, step by step, how the instruments are used to remove the testicles. The protagonists are reduced to hands and the beginnings of arms. Did Werner see respective images, for example plates in the operating room or in books?

What kind of individual development led to these complex drawings? Research has revealed some facts about Werner's biography. His father was a machinist and house painter, but lived with his wife and their two handicapped children in the poorhouse of Nordheim am Main. Before World War I, Wilhelm was given to the Gemünden Idiot Institution for several years. This institution had been founded in 1882, primarily to provide a rudimentary education to those who could not keep up in elementary school due to mental limitations. Reading, writing and arithmetic were the main subjects taught, but drawing lessons were also taken seriously, as "an invaluable means of collecting the volatile soul of the idiots, to bring them to fixate and to reasonably look at things, to rule over the body, to enable them to perform planned movements." (1) There, pencil was favoured over charcoal, as it allowed for cleaner work. In Gemünden, Wilhelm Werner therefore probably not only learned to



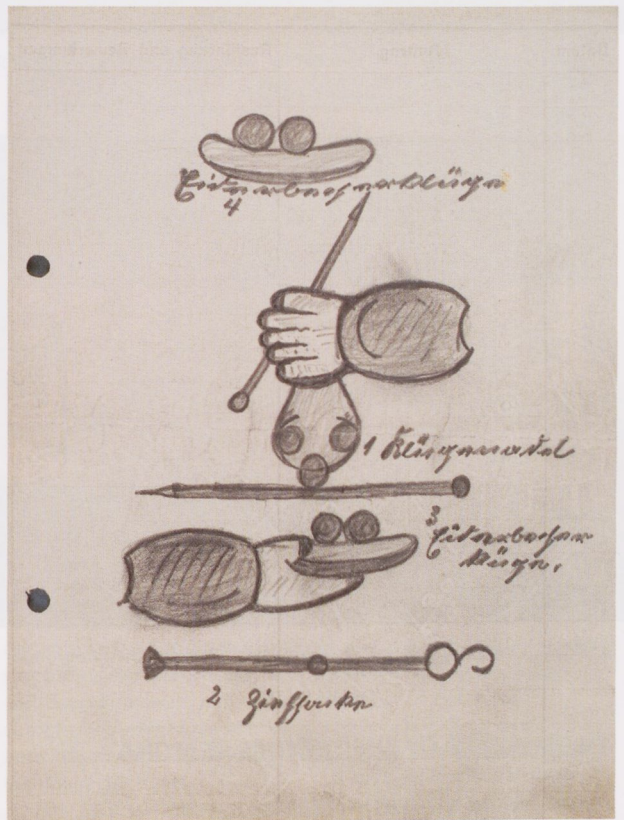
Untitled, 8.1 x 6.3 in. / 20.5 x 16 cm, Inv. Nr. 8083 (2010) fol. 7 recto



Untitled, 8 x 6.1 in. / 20.2 x 15.5 cm, Inv. Nr. 8083 (2010) fol. 8 recto

write but was also encouraged to pursue his drawing talent, whereby the idiosyncratic renderings of the body indicate that he was self-taught in many respects. His solitude after returning to the poorhouse in Nordheim would have provided ample opportunity for that.

Later, in Werneck Asylum, drawing obviously became an important means for Werner to express himself. The puzzling quality of his drawings and their tendency towards the grotesque emphasise the creator's social outsider position. If we do not understand the images, this is perhaps because we cannot (yet) place ourselves in the mind of the creator. In a sense, we are missing the questions to which he provides the answers. But the foundations of these impressive drawings are not entirely foreign. Stylistically speaking, they are startlingly similar to works by Oskar Schlemmer, although as an asylum inmate Werner is highly unlikely to have had any opportunity to model his work on the contemporary artist's. The similarity should rather be seen as an unconscious mark of contemporary culture, which leaves no member of society untouched. Starting from this, Werner developed his own visual language for things that exceed our horizons of experience. This is what makes the drawings such extraordinarily important documents. (2)



Untitled, 8.1 x 6.3 in. / 20.5 x 16 cm, Inv. Nr. 8083 (2010) fol. 11 recto

Notes:

1. Johann Michael Herberich, *Methodik des Schwachsinnigen-Unterrichts zum Gebrauche in Lehrerseminarien, Hilfsschulen und Anstalten, sowie für den Einzelunterricht* (Donauwörth, 1910), p. 97.
2. For further reading, see: Thomas Röske and Maïke Rotzoll, *Wilhelm Werner – Sterelationszeichnungen* (Heidelberg, 2014) [German and English].

Thomas Röske is the director of the Prinzhorn Collection and president of the European Outsider Art Association.

Maïke Rotzoll is a medical historian teaching at Heidelberg University and has published repeatedly on works of the Prinzhorn Collection.