***Berthe Weill: Art Dealer of the Parisian Avant-Garde*, exh. cat.**

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Berthe Weill: Art Dealer of the Parisian Avant-Garde

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Curated by Sophie Eloy, Anne Grace, Lynn Gumpert, and Marianne Le Morvan

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The exhibition *Berthe Weill: Art Dealer of the Parisian Avant-Garde*, a collaborative venture between the Grey Art Museum in New York, The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, and the Musée de l'Orangerie in Paris, sheds light on a lesser-known but important gallerist of modernist painting in the first part of the twentieth century. Born in Alsace to a working-class Jewish family, Berthe Weill (1865–1951) apprenticed, starting at about the age of fifteen, in a relative's small print and painting gallery in Paris before launching the Galerie B. Weill in Montmartre in 1901. Between 1901 and 1941, the gallery had four locations in Paris and exhibited works by artists who constitute an inventory of the canon of modernist painters: Picasso, Matisse, Modigliani, Chagall, Derain, Dufy, etc. Weill was greatly committed to young, emerging artists, many lesser known today, and she favoured women painters, such as Émilie Charmy and Suzanne Valadon. The Galerie B. Weill closed in late 1941 after the Nazi invasion of France. Even though she was attacked in an anti-Semitic periodical ("She displays the complete lack of aesthetic sense of the Jewish race"), Weill survived the war through the protection of the concierge of her apartment building and financial support from friends. After the war, her contribution to the art world was recognized when she was made a Chevalier of the Légion d'Honneur in 1948. A few years before, in 1946, many of the artists she exhibited, including Picasso, Matisse, Bonnard, Chagall, and Dufy, donated works to an auction that raised enough funding to support Weill until she died in 1951.

Berthe Weill: Art Dealer of the Parisian Avant-Garde continues a genre of exhibitions dedicated to French and German art dealers or gallerists, such as Paul Durand-Ruel, Ambroise Vollard, Daniel Kahnweiler, Alfred Flechtheim, and Johanna Ey, who championed European avant-garde art. For much of the twentieth century, dealers were most often discussed only anecdotally in the history of art because of their commercial undertakings, which seemingly needed to be kept at a distance from the purity of modernist pursuits. These dealer exhibitions, along with the pioneering work on art markets by Harrison and Cynthia White, Nicholas Green, Robert Jensen, and others, have repositioned dealers as "vital to the history of taste and collections" and "at the heart of social, economic, cultural, quantitative history and geography."[1] These art intermediaries are also now often considered essential to the art historical canon: "Art dealers also make art history."[2]

Dealer exhibitions both question and re-enforce the separation of art and commerce in their attempts to focus on art dealers as both selfless champions of avant-garde painting and as cunning entrepreneurs who support and exploit artists for their own financial gain. This exhibition on Weill is exceptional in its focus on a Jewish woman who was raised by working-class parents and who navigated the artworld differently than her male counterparts. Unlike Durand-Ruel and Vollard, she was born neither into a family of art dealers nor into wealth. As a woman, she had other battles to fight: "A single woman," she wrote, "has just one goal her whole life: to defend herself!"[3] While her male counterparts charged artists for renting space, postage, promotion, and framing, Weill refused artist's offers to pay for their exhibitions. For artists with "talent but no cash (and there were many)," as Marianne Le Morvan writes in the book that accompanies the exhibition, she was "their sole recourse" (18). Weill also

positioned herself in opposition to other male dealers in her unwillingness to sign exclusive contracts with artists, which hurt her pocketbook and placed her in a precarious position in the art market. Her gallery often kick-started artists' careers, but after exhibiting in her gallery, they would frequently "be sought after by other dealers who were looking to increase their profitability" (22). Such was the case with Picasso, Matisse, Derain, and others. It was the same for her clientele, who would later buy works from more established galleries. "[L]acking a strategy as aggressive as her competitors and forever hovering on the brink of success, she could only watch as talents left her gallery in droves" (20). Nevertheless, Weill stayed committed to her cause "to make room for the young" (*Place aux jeunes*), as stated on her gallery's business card and, in doing so for forty years, she was the longest-lasting gallerist in Paris to focus exclusively on emerging artists.

The exhibition and accompanying book suggest that Weill is an unknown entity in art history. While she certainly has not until now received the same attention awarded to her French male counterparts, she was not entirely lost in the history of art and collecting, if only appearing in the margins (or literally the footnotes) until Gill Perry's 1995 study of female painters in Paris in the 1920s.[4] While Perry contextualized Weill in feminist terms, Ezra Mendelsohn wrote about her Judaism.[5] In 2011, Marianne Le Morvan published the first in-depth biography of Weill, the fruit of two decades of archival research on the gallerist and her gallery.[6] Le Morvan, moreover, co-curated the exhibition and founded the Berthe Weill Archives (https://www.bertheweill.com/).

The exhibition in Montreal was installed in nine clearly articulated sections, some differentiated by theme and others by artists or group of artists. The curators included archival materials (Weill's pince-nez, invitations to exhibitions at her gallery, letters to her colleagues, catalogues from her gallery, etc.), contemporary photographs, and quotations on the wall from Weill's 1933 memoir *Pow! Right in the Eye! Thirty Years Behind the Scenes of Modern French Painting*. The goal of the exhibition was to give the visitor a sense of Weill's importance in the Parisian artworld through the range of paintings she exhibited, or likely exhibited: the curators had to make reasoned guesses to select works when there was a lack of conclusive documentary evidence. The exhibition was organized chronologically, with the first rooms dedicated to Weill's gallery up to 1910. The emphasis here was on her early exhibiting of illustrators, including Toulouse-Lautrec, and painters like Matisse, the Fauves, and Picasso. (Weill bought the first works Picasso ever sold in Paris.) These first rooms also contained many surprises, lesser-known but revelatory works, such as Philadelphia-born Black sculptress Meta Vaux Warrick's 1901 *The Wretched* and French painter Raoul de Mathan's *The Circus* (1908) and *The Assize*

Berthe Weill, Art Dealer of the Parisian Avant-garde, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, 2025 (exhibition view). © Émilie Charmy, ADAGP, Paris / CARCC Ottawa 2025. Photo: MMFA, Denis Farley.

Court (1909), comparable depictions of a circus and a courtroom. The next few sections featured works from Weill's gallery from 1910 to the late 1920s: a Cubist room with works by Ferdinand Léger, Alice Halicka, and Diego Rivera; a section on the nude with a sub-section devoted to Weill's scandalous 1917 Modigliani exhibition, his only solo show during his lifetime; and a section, "Broadening the History of Art" that highlighted Weill's fierce defence of expatriates and women painters, especially Charmy and Valadon. The final room, "The Late Years," focused on Weill's gallery from the late 1920s until its closure in 1941 and especially on artists included in the postwar auction, whose proceeds supported Weill until her death.

The neat and orderly—one could say modernist—character of the installation had both drawbacks and benefits. Of course, all histories are condensations of the past created through selections and choices of material that cannot touch on all aspects of what has occurred. The clean quality of the exhibition was one such choice on the part of the curators and designers, to present the past in a particular way, but it seemed in marked contrast to Weill's own gallery, which contained a more diverse assortment of objects, not only paintings but also antiques, *objets d'art*, and books, sometimes arranged in a cluttered fashion. (Weill's sale of paintings was not always profitable: "Antiques, antiques!" she declared, "Our salvation in spite of everything.")[7] The exhibition's cleanliness also contrasts with Weill's iconoclastic personality, as evidenced in her 1933 memoir, and with the raucous parties she hosted, as illustrated in period photographs. The exhibition made a strong case against earlier, conventional art historical narratives of the period, which excluded Weill and many of the artists she exhibited, but it did so in traditional art historical and museological terms: the installation's divisions and clarity constructed an imaginary space, a new narrative to exist alongside a more established one.

At the same time, the installation, with its clearly ordered sections, made for an accessible experience for visitors; it allowed them to easily understand Weill's contributions to the history of art through the artists she championed, many of whom formed the canon of modernism. It also clarified how she supported those on the margins, especially female painters and immigrants to Paris. The exhibition was thus a journey of discovery, not just of Weill herself but also of those lesser-known artists associated with the "School of Paris."

The elegant book that accompanies the exhibition, more a complementary text than an exhibition catalogue, includes five essays, three at the beginning and two at the end, which sandwich twenty-two short pieces on artists or groups of artists who exhibited in Weill's gallery. Le Morvan's introduction gives a view of Weill's life and introduces the reader to many of the exhibition themes: Weill as an "anti-dealer"; her life dedicated to art; her need to cope with the misogyny and anti-Semitism of her times. Charles Dellheim's thoughtful essay, "What Are You?," explores Weill's position as an outsider to French society due to her Judaism, even though, as he explains, "there is no evidence that she was an observant Jew" (31). Anne Grace's insightful piece explores Weill's self-presentation in portraits of her by artists she exhibited in her gallery. In Charmy's portrait of Weill, the artist, Grace suggests, portrayed her friend in terms of the "unconventional and challenging paths" taken by "two passionately independent career women" (46). The final two essays by Ambre Guthier and Robert McD. Parker, discuss, respectively, Weill's publishing program (especially catalogues and journals of the Weill Gallery) and her clientele, including Chicago Mayor Carter H. Harrison IV. The twenty-two short entries on artists and groups of artists give a sense of Weill's centrality to the Parisian art world of the first half of the twentieth century: her personal relationships with artists; her feisty dealings with other gallerists; her support for now lesser-known painters, like the Hungarian Jew Béla Czóbel, who represents "her support for young, emerging artists; for foreigners who contributed to the Parisian avant-garde; and for the development of the Fauves as a group" (90); and her championing of female artists such as Charmy, with whom she formed "a bond that over time became almost familial" (118), and Valadon, whom Weill described as an artist who "never made any concessions. A great artist!" (144).

As with most catalogues of dealer exhibitions, the accompanying book fills in many details about Weill, her gallery, and her relationship with artists that are left out of the exhibition. It should be noted, however, that the installation in Montreal, in its organization and text, both the large explanatory panels and the extended labels, outlined all the pertinent

themes explored more fully in the book. Like all good histories, the exhibition urged visitors to use their imagination to recreate another world, in this case Weill's of avant-garde art, which included not only the usual suspects but also those outside the mainstream. As such, the exhibition and its accompanying book, in giving us a glimpse into Weill's worldview and her fierce backing of emerging artists, offered a much more diverse representation of the Parisian art world of the first half of the twentieth century than is usually found in texts and exhibitions about the period.

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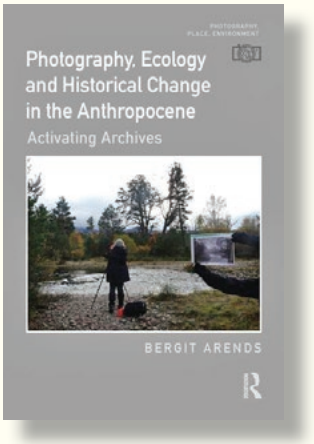
1 Sylvie Patry et al., "Paul Durand-Ruel, an 'Unrepentant Risk-Taker,'" in *Discovering the Impressionists: Paul Durand-Ruel and the New Painting*, exh. cat., ed. Sylvie Patry (London: National Gallery, 2015), 14.
2 Hans Albert Peters, "Alfred Flechtheim zu Ehren," in *Alfred Flechtheim: Sammler. Kunsthändler. Verleger*, exh. cat., ed. Hans Albert Peters (Kunstmuseum Düsseldorf, 1987), 9: "Auch Kunsthändler machen Kunstgeschichte..."
3 Berthe Weill, *Pow! Right in the Eye! Thirty Years Behind the Scenes of Modern French Painting*, ed. Lynn Gumpert, trans. William Rodarmor (University of Chicago Press, 2002), 148. Weill's memoir was originally published as *Pan!... dans l'oeil...ou trente ans dans les coulisses de la peinture contemporaine 1900–1930* (Paris: Librairie Lipschutz, 1933).
4 Gill Perry, *Women Artists and the Parisian Avant-Garde* (Manchester University Press, 1995).
5 Ezra Mendelsohn, "Should We Take Notice of Berthe Weill? Reflections on the Domain of Jewish History," *Jewish Social Studies* 1, no. 1 (1994): 22–39.
6 Marianne Le Morvan, *Berthe Weill, 1865-1951: La petite galeriste des grands artistes* (Paris: L'Écarlate, 2011). See also Le Morvan's recent *Berthe Weill, Marchande et mécène de l'art moderne (1865-1951): Biographie* (Paris: Flammarion, 2025).
7 Weill, *Pow! Right in the Eye!*, 37.



Bergit Arends
Photography, Ecology and Historical Change in the Anthropocene: Activating Archives

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Karla McManus

In the last five years, multiple exhibitions, monographs, and edited collections have addressed the topic of ecocritical approaches to photography and art history, and Bergit Arends's *Photography, Ecology and Historical Change in the Anthropocene* contributes to this growing area of research.[1] In this book, Arends addresses how contemporary art photography has helped to visualize the Anthropocene, defined broadly as the current period in which human-driven forces have propelled major changes to the climate and large-scale alterations to the natural world. The fifth book in the "Photography, Place, Environment" series from Routledge, Photography, Ecology and Historical Change in the Anthropocene, this book uses artistic case studies to explore the relationship between contemporary photographic practices and historical archives that address the environment. Arends argues that photographers are drawn to revisiting historical records of the environment (or "archives," as she calls them), both photographic and written, to make ecological ideas of the past relevant by placing them in dialogue with contemporary thinking. Arends sees these artistic responses as "re-performances" of archives, which she roots in a series of epistemological strategies used by artists for developing