

Artists and Prophets

By [James J. Conway](#) / [October 5, 2015](#) / [Bohemians](#), [Mystics](#), [Networking](#), [Prague](#)



Oh Schiele

A young man, seen in profile, is leaning back in a cane chair with a robe cast over its side. He has thick wavy hair and holds a palette in one hand, in the other a long, thin clay pipe set at the same angle as his outstretched right leg, his foot an impatient blur. The man is regarding a half-length portrait set upon an easel, turned to face the viewer; the subject is an evidently important personage of advanced years, white-whiskered and copiously bemedalled.

This sepia photo, dated 1874, is the earliest image in the outstanding exhibition *Artists and Prophets*. Having originated in Frankfurt, it is currently showing in Prague's Trade Fair Palace, which is neither fair nor a palace, and has seen no trading since the modern block was repurposed as an offshoot of the National Gallery (it has a great café though). The young man in the photo is [Karl Wilhelm Diefenbach](#), then studying art in Munich. The subject of the portrait, one of Diefenbach's first works, is Wilhelm I, the Prussian king elevated by Bismarck to stewardship of the newly established German Empire in 1871. **Cocky, insolent even, the young artist views the Kaiser as his equal – at best. This single small image perfectly illustrates a key anomaly of the empire: the fantastically vibrant avant-garde that flourished in defiance of an authoritarian power structure. While Kaiser Wilhelm stands for a conception of society differing little from that of the 18th century into which he was born, Karl Wilhelm would become the apostle of a new age whose influence is felt even now.**



The artist's arrival in Munich in 1872 marks the beginning of the exhibition's hundred-year timeline and it is Diefenbach who offers the most compelling example of the show's thematic focus: the curious, recurring collision of image-making and the messianic impulse that occurs in German-speaking Europe in that period, usually accompanied by ostentatious non-conformity, at times shading into actual insanity. It details the secret inheritances of one to another which together form a narrow, crooked route that sometimes curves toward the broad, straight path of Modernism, but just as often veers away.



Imperial worthies would have no place in Diefenbach's later work, which rejected the reactionary values of Germany's mainstream culture. There is a clutch of Diefenbach's [quasi-Symbolist canvases](#) here, much smaller than I imagined. His best-known work also appears, the 1892 utopian frieze of silhouetted children and animals and the artist himself entitled *Per aspera ad astra* – through hardship to the stars. The drab foyer space in which it is displayed does Diefenbach's magnum opus no favours, and it requires a couple of awkward kinks in the sequence to fit it all in. Hung above head height, it is still close enough that time's irreverent desiccation is apparent in the black paintwork.

By the time *Per aspera ad astra* had secured Diefenbach's reputation as an artist he was already notorious as a *bürgerschreck*, an enemy of bourgeois conventions. He promoted pacifism, communal living and a return to nature; disdained alcohol, meat and tobacco; dressed in a kaftan and sandals with his severe face framed by apostolic locks. Consequently images of Diefenbach tend to overshadow those by Diefenbach: his appearances in public and their treatment in the press were far more influential than his works.



If we return to that first image for just a moment, a third figure becomes apparent, crouching beneath the canvas, his gaze directed at the artist. His identity is unknown, but he would certainly not be the last person to look up to Diefenbach; he represents the numerous followers to come. Diefenbach's magnetism was undeniable, evident in the artfully staged

images of him and his eccentrically dressed family in various settings. But his charisma functioned at best from afar; his career was littered with adherents throwing themselves at their idol's feet, only to recoil when they turned out to be feet of clay.

The first such follower was Hugo Höppener, whose loyalty to Diefenbach earned him the name "Fidus". Barely out of childhood himself, he adopted the master's reverence for the infant, the innocent in harmony with nature which recurs frequently in his own works. After his break with Diefenbach he expanded his vision to encompass plans for utopian/occult temple structures which he showed in proto-PowerPoint presentations across the country. A model of one of the best-known examples, the Temple of the Earth, makes plain the stupendous scale of Fidus's imaginings.



Had it been built, this temple would have crowned Monte Verità, an alternative colony founded in Switzerland by [Gusto Gräser](#) at the beginning of the 20th century. Although he joined Diefenbach for just a few months in 1898, **Gräser provides the strongest link between his original teachings and the Aquarian counterculture to come. Along with his idealistic community and influence on Hermann Hesse, his long vagabondage across Germany in bardic garb found sympathetic observers among the crowds of gawpers and the disdainful press. Here, again, Gräser's true significance is not to be found in a catalogue raisonné but in his public image.**

While the above-named figures are reasonably familiar to me, Gustav Nagel came as a complete revelation. Born in 1874, he turned to alternative health treatments as a sickly young adult, just like his idol Diefenbach once did. With Nagel the link between prophecy and conventional artistic production is severed, but paradoxically his is one of the most visually arresting parts of the exhibition. Here the prophet's art comes not *per aspera* – labouring at the academy, slaving at the canvas, fighting for the attention of the fickle bourgeoisie – but by reaching directly *ad astra*, or better still, becoming one.



It was the new medium of the postcard by which Nagel made his name, selling photographs of himself in Christ-like poses by the thousand. Many came with inscriptions from the Gospels in his own phonetic, lower-case style (he rendered his own name as “gustaf nagel”). Nagel offered the public a starry yet approachable variety of spiritual succour at the end of a century whose pace of change had left them bewildered and insecure. In essence his doctrine of elemental Biblical truths, of brotherly love and simplicity strayed little from the core messages of the late 19th century Christian revival. The delivery, however, was utterly new. The conception of celebrity these artefacts represent is so modern that even as I followed the row of postcards, I found it difficult to believe what I was seeing.



“Jerusalem syndrome”, the delusion that one is actually Jesus, or Mary, usually strikes after the victim has arrived in the Holy City. Nagel, however, arrived in Jerusalem with the condition, having set out on foot in 1902 (en route he finally met Diefenbach in Capri, an encounter that ended in predictable disappointment). With his profound identification with Christ and habit of going about half-naked and barefoot, even in snow, it should come as no surprise that Nagel’s sanity was a subject for conjecture. His own father tried to have him committed, while [Magnus Hirschfeld](#) vouched for his soundness of mind.

Nagel set up a natural healing clinic on Arendsee, around halfway between Berlin and Hamburg. Inspired by Fidus and his unbuilt temples he created a kind of transcendental Dollywood, the Outsider architecture of the huts, grottos and jetty with its unmistakably phallic pillars all providing more settings for Nagel to pose amidst. But the rigour of Nagel’s vision was not without consequence for others. He insisted, for instance, on baptising his daughter Klara, born in late November, in the lake’s frigid waters. She died of hypothermia in a matter of days.

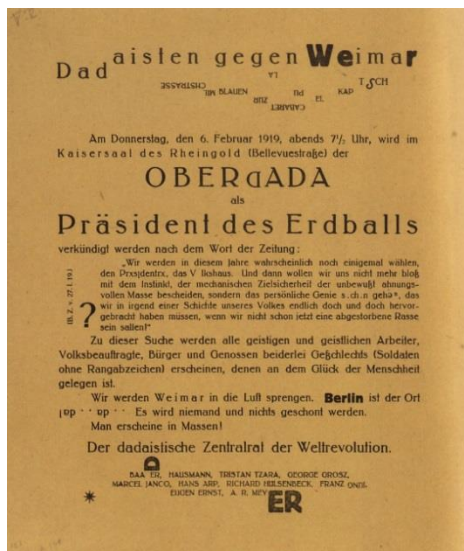


It is the work of Czech visionary artist František Kupka which appears to have prompted the exhibition’s move to Prague, and here again there is a direct link to Diefenbach. As the now well-established pattern demanded, Kupka was initially drawn to and subsequently repelled by the master. In the rows of sinister sphinxes depicted in his *La voie du silence* series, he seems to be working through his relationship to Diefenbach, who used similar imagery in his

own work. But his breathtaking abstractions, such as [*Plans verticaux et diagonaux, reminiscences hivernales*](#), are more suggestive of the sublime than almost everything which precedes them.

A process of Chinese whispers means Diefenbach's example becomes harder to discern as the show progresses in time. There are some curious choices: I understand that many of the names mentioned above are of minority interest and sympathise with the curators choosing a more recognisable figure like Egon Schiele as their (literal) poster boy. As mesmerising as Schiele's self-portraits are, their inclusion here feels forced, and appears to have come at the expense of artists who might have been a better thematic fit. Where, for instance, is [*Elisàr von Kupffer*](#), an artist who actually started his own religion?

And what of women? The spiritual mission which seized Diefenbach, Fidus, Gräser et al. was unquestionably an overwhelmingly male phenomenon and there are no more women among the main subjects here than there were at the Last Supper. Of the 448 exhibits, just *four* are by women, three of them by Käthe Kollwitz and they, naturally, relate to men. Is there really no place for, say, [*Else Lasker-Schüler*](#), and the eccentric enactment of the Old Testament she brought to both her work and her day-to-day life?



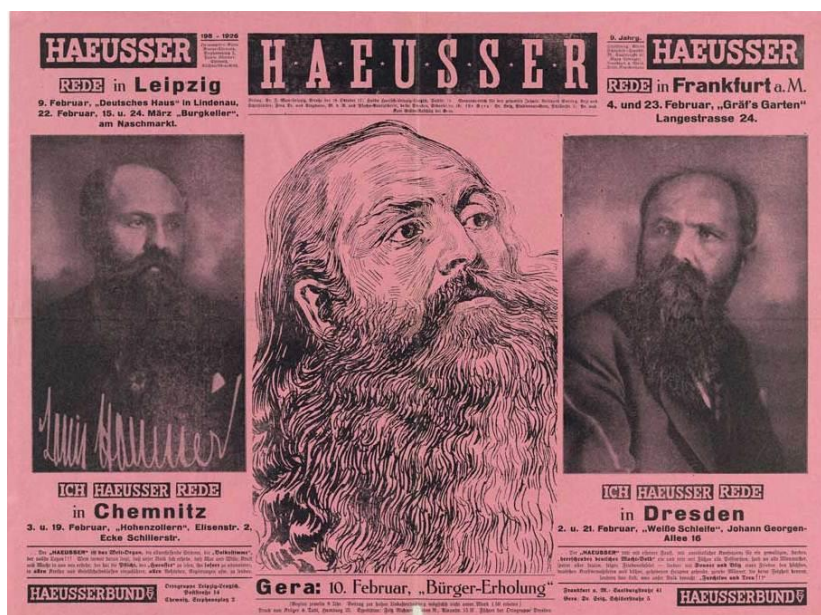
The other female artist, in case you were wondering, is Hannah Höch, represented by her portrait of a man who would become one of the loosest cannons in German arts and letters. He first attracted attention in 1899, writing to the magazine [*Jugend*](#) under the name of "God". The correspondent was in fact Johannes Baader, who took the shamanic showmanship of Diefenbach and Gräser and added a manic intensity all his own. His provocations foreshadowed the Dadaists with whom he is most readily associated, and it was young punks like [*Hugo Ball*](#) and Raoul Hausmann who had more to learn from him than he from them. His radical interventions – disrupting a church service and a constitutional conference – pre-dated happenings and performance art by decades.

But there was more to his work than chaos: like Fidus, he proposed nondenominational temples which were out of step with the times (tellingly, both men were rejected from the Bauhaus by Walter Gropius). Many of the other pieces associated with him, even the collages, are text-based. They reflect his outsized ambition, as he styles himself "President of the Globe" and "Oberdada", or pronounces a "day of peace" to be observed every 26 September – the day I visited.



While Dadaism was the most radical response to societal collapse in the wake of the First World War, the era also brought forth a new caste of wandering prophet which reached a far larger public. There were plenty who were prepared to take up the example of Gustav Nagel, who spent much of the 1920s on his estate. When he emerged from rural seclusion to contest the Reichstag election in 1924 with his own party, one of his opponents was a certain Ludwig Christian Haeusser. Born in 1881, Haeusser was a successful champagne merchant in his early life but over-reached himself with dubious business methods and moved to Switzerland. In 1918 he visited Gusto Gräser in Monte Verità, an encounter which appears to have inspired his own programme of al fresco evangelism.

Haeusser became the most prominent of the “inflation saints” – others included Friedrich Muck-Lamberty, Max Schulze-Sölde and Leonhard Stark – wandering preachers who imitated Christ to varying degrees, each offering their own artisanal brand of spiritual renewal to a country in trauma. They attracted sizeable crowds and the collective visual impact of their propaganda is astonishing. Just as striking is the near-total absence of the inflation saints from English-language accounts of this era. Not just compelling in themselves, they also have much to say about the country’s evident desire for a redemptive leader.



Of course we know where that led, and the rise of Hitler provided a test of character for those we have already discussed. Fidus, whose later work incorporated rune-like lettering, conspicuously blond subjects and glorification of German culture, sought to align himself with the Nazis, but he was too idiosyncratic to be of use to them. On the other hand, Gustav Nagel proved surprisingly principled, protesting the persecution of the Jews and the war, for which he was interned in Dachau concentration camp.

Of the post-war artists included in the exhibition, it is Joseph Beuys who best fits the bill. He, too, was a *bürgerschreck* whose provocations were visible to a far larger public than ever visited his exhibitions. He combined the confrontational performance of Baader with the instantly recognisable profile of Diefenbach, whose paintings he sought out on Capri. And like Haeusser and Nagel, he formed his own political party. Meanwhile the bearded, long-haired drop-out they prototyped decades earlier was becoming the dominant countercultural model.

By contrast, the inclusion of Jörg Immendorff draws a particularly long bow. His late 1960s work is brutishly polemical, precisely expressing the views of a politicised young artist of the time, nothing more, nothing less. And viewing Hundertwasser's endlessly reproduced works in the original, I did not feel like I was experiencing any new aspect to them that would justify their inclusion. On the other hand, revisiting the work of Outsider artist Friedrich Schröder-Sonnenstern reveals an extensive back story. He came to prominence in the 1950s as an unschooled artist with feverish depictions of demonic, big-buttred forms, like something out of a Lil Wayne cheese dream. But he had already appeared at the margins of the inflation saint movement, forming his own sect in Berlin in the 1920s and attracting a measure of local fame for his habit of distributing bread to the poor.



On pitching up in Prague, *Artists and Prophets* has acquired an installation by contemporary artist Jonathan Meese, outsized canvases surrounding a cabin decorated inside and out in which the artist, largely invisible to the audience, staged a performance to mark the opening. You can watch the whole thing [here](#) if you have a couple of hours and some Nurofen to hand. Meese's compulsive taboo-busting and notion of the "dictatorship of art" draw directly on the example of Beuys and Baader, and the paintings acknowledge the artist's "über-daddys". Just as telling is the end of the performance when a wall of Meese's self-made grotto is removed and he is finally visible to the audience. Greeted by massed smartphones, he becomes a Gustav Nagel for the digital age.

There is so much in this exhibition that deserves greater exposure. I can imagine, for instance, Taschen going full coffee table on Karl Wilhelm Diefenbach's proto-hippy family portraits, Gustav Nagel's postcards or Ludwig Christian Haeusser's campaign posters. The currents and counter-currents represented here really do, as the curators insist, form a "secret history". And if that appeals, I thoroughly recommend the enormous [catalogue](#), which has essays in both German and English.

Aus: <https://strangeflowers.wordpress.com/.../artists-and-p...>