



# ARTE DEGENERADA • 80 ANOS

REPERCUSSÕES NO BRASIL

ORGANIZAÇÃO  
Helouise Costa  
Daniel Rincon Caires



MUSEU DE ARTE CONTEMPORÂNEA  
da Universidade de São Paulo

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## ***Some notes on the genesis of the exhibition “Degenerate Art”, Munich 1937***

Olaf Peters<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract:**

This article will shed some light on the decision making process regarding the exhibition Degenerate Art. The contextualization of the genesis of the notorious exhibition is of central importance to come to an understanding of the dynamics of the destructive art policy of the Third Reich. The traveling exhibition (from 1938 until the early 1940s the changed exhibition was shown in a number of German and Austrian cities) will be evaluated. The plundering of the modern art collections in German museums has to be another focus of this text and ended up in the selling of iconic works in Switzerland in 1939. **Keywords:** “Degenerate Art” Exhibition; Third Reich; Looted art; Nazism and Art.

### **Resumo:**

Esse artigo elucida o processo de tomada de decisões referentes à exposição Arte Degenerada. A contextualização da gênese desta famosa exposição é de central importância para o entendimento das dinâmicas da política artística destrutiva do Terceiro Reich. A exposição itinerante (entre o ano de 1938 e o início da década de 1940 versões modificadas daquela exposição foram apresentadas em diversas cidades alemãs e austríacas) será analisada. A pilhagem das coleções de arte moderna dos museus alemães, que deverá ser um outro foco deste texto, culminou na venda de obras icônicas na Suíça em 1939. **Palavras-chave:** Exposição “Arte Degenerada”; Terceiro Reich; Obras confiscadas; Nazismo e Arte.

Over the last years I had the chance to realize three interrelated exhibitions covering the topics “Degenerate Art” (2014); Berlin during the Weimar Republic (Berlin Metropolis, 2015), and German and Austrian Art during the 1930s (Before the Fall, 2018). They did focus on one historical event, on the cultural history of a metropolis and on the artistic development in painting in the shadow of Hitler’s power. Exhibition and book on Degenerate Arte did cover the genesis of the term (Max Nordau), the development of the Nazi art policy, the exhibitions of shame after 1933, the Austrian venues of the traveling exhibition and the coverage of the topic in the moving images. In the exhibition

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I confronted official Nazi art and so called Degenerate Art (that was later adapted by the Pinakothek der Moderne in Munich) and we also pointed at the loss of works and lives.

In this text – based on the research I did for the exhibition in New York in 2014 – I would like to point out one aspect: the genesis of the exhibition in Munich as a paradigmatic or maybe symptomatic case of Nazi art policy. How can we explain the specifics of how the exhibition in Munich in 1937 came to pass? One premise as a result of decades of research in the field of the “Third Reich” has to be clear at the beginning to understand the symptomatic character of the following: In the field of culture we can observe clear frictions within the regime; there were unclear responsibilities and rivalries that lead to tension and contradictions. On closer inspection, it becomes clear again and again—as in the case of “degenerate art” as well—that these rivalries and competing responsibilities represented a crucial, constitutive factor in Nazi art policy, which was responsible in no small measure for demonstrable trends to radicalization – without underestimating the ideological aspects. It evolved against the backdrop of dissatisfaction with official, so-called characteristic German art, which was presented as the antithesis of “degenerate art.” Even the notorious ideologist Paul Schultze-Naumburg had to admit and hope: “If the effects of all this [the Nazi measures after 1933] on art have not yet become evident, that is because art is a plant that has to grow slowly and cannot be produced by measures as a finished product. It will take considerable time before Germany art is healed of the symptoms of the sickness of Marxism. Naturally, even more time will pass before the seed of a time begins to grow on the freshly plowed field. Logically, however, one day Germany will produce an art that corresponds to the racial existence of its residents, who have been freed of an enormous pressure by a new political life and can now develop freely, unhampered, and in accordance with the inner law of their nature.”<sup>2</sup> The National Socialists did not achieve that: they produced mediocre, politically motivated art and aesthetic irrelevancies; they undermined the conditions of real art and destroyed artistic modernism over the course of a spiteful and brutal campaign, culminating in the Munich exhibition of 1937.

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2 Note: See the original contributions, translated by Steven Lindberg, in Olaf Peters (ed.), *Degenerate Art. The Attack on Modern Art in Nazi Germany, 1937*, exhibition cat. Neue Galerie New York (Munich, London and New York: Prestel 2014) and my essays in social research, vol. 83, no. 1, Spring 2016 and New German Critique, no. 130, February 2017. Schultze-Naumburg, *Kunst und Rasse*, Munich and Berlin 1938 (3rd edition; 1st edition 1928), 6.

The *Entartete Kunst* exhibition provided the counterimage to it and was directly prompted by the presentation of official art<sup>3</sup>. During the period that followed, this juxtaposition of “German art” and “degenerate art” was repeatedly employed to defame modernism as “un-German” and “degenerate”<sup>4</sup>. Munich was not only the so-called capital of the movement but also traditionally the “art city” of the Wilhelmine empire<sup>5</sup>. After 1918, however, the city could scarcely maintain that status. In Munich, which had lost its traditional exhibition building in a devastating fire in 1931, the Haus der Deutschen Kunst was built, accompanied by a large propaganda campaign<sup>6</sup>. The crucial function of the *Grosse Deutsche Kunstausstellungen* (GDK), in association with prestigious journals such as *Die Kunst im Dritten Reich* (later *Die Kunst im Deutschen Reich*), from 1937 onward was to provide artists with aesthetic guidelines for producing art in the future<sup>7</sup>. It was intended to be an alternative picture to the supposed cultural decay of the Weimar era, but its contours were not very clear. One of the main problems of the National Socialists turned out to be the fact that no one knew precisely which art should really be presented as the official art of the “Third Reich.” The reactionary circle around Bettina Feistel-Rohmeyer of the *völkisch*, National Socialist Deutsche Kunstgesellschaft e.V.<sup>8</sup> (German arts society) and the one around Alfred Rosenberg, the leader of the *Kampfbund für Deutsche Kultur*<sup>9</sup> (Militant league for German culture) had certain ideas, but their like-minded colleagues continued to create works that could by no means satisfy these ambitions of quality; what they produced was mediocre political art that even Hitler rejected. The Reich propaganda

3 See Ines Schlenker, *Hitler's Salon: The "Grosse Deutsche Kunstausstellung" at the Haus der Deutschen Kunst in Munich, 1937–1944* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007), and Marlies Schmidt, *Die "Grosse Deutsche Kunstausstellung 1937 im Haus der Deutschen Kunst zu München": Rekonstruktion und Analyse*, 3 vols., PhD diss. (Halle an der Saale: Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg, 2009).

4 See Adolf Dresler, ed., *Deutsche Kunst und entartete "Kunst": Kunstwerk und Zerrbild als Spiegel der Weltanschauung* (Munich: Deutscher Volksverlag, 1938).

5 On Munich, with a focus on the Secession, see Maria Makela, *The Munich Secession: Art and Artists in Turn-of-the-Century Munich* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1990).

6 Karl Arndt, “Das ‘Haus der Deutschen Kunst’—ein Symbol der neuen Machtverhältnisse,” in Peter-Klaus Schuster, *Nationalsozialismus und “entartete Kunst”: die “Kunststadt” München 1937* (Munich, Prestel 1987), 61–82.

7 See Berthold Hinz, “Bild und Lichtbild im Medienverbund,” in Hinz et al., eds., *Die Dekoration der Gewalt: Kunst und Medien im Faschismus* (Giessen: anabas, 1979), 137–48.

8 See Kirsten Baumann, *Wortgefechte. Völkische und nationalsozialistische Kunstkritik 1927–1939* (Weimar: VDG, 2002) and Joan L. Clinefelter, *Artists for the Reich: Culture and Race from Weimar to Nazi Germany* (Oxford, UK: Berg, 2005).

9 See Alan E. Steinweis, “Weimar Culture and the Rise of National Socialism: The Kampfbund für deutsche Kultur,” *Central European History* 24, no. 1 (1991): 402–23, and Jürgen Gimmel, *Die politische Organisation kulturellen Ressentiments: Der “Kampfbund für deutsche Kultur” und das bildungsbürgerliche Unbehagen an der Moderne* (Münster: LIT, 2001). On Rosenberg, see esp. Bollmus, *Das Amt Rosenberg und seine Gegner* (see note 1), and Ernst Piper, *Alfred Rosenberg: Hitlers Chefideologe* (Munich: Karl Blessing, 2005), esp. chaps. 6 and 7.

minister, Joseph Goebbels, knew very well how to assess such hackwork and the harm to propaganda that resulted from the reaction attitude it represented. Moreover, he and those around him had other aesthetic preferences; after all, some had long believed that some German Expressionism could be declared German art<sup>10</sup>. Established figures of the art world operated accordingly during the early years of the regime. For example, the director of the museum in Halle, Alois J. Schardt, an enthusiastic advocate of the art of Lyonel Feininger and Franz Marc, attempted as provisional head of the Nationalgalerie in Berlin to draw a line from German Romanticism to Expressionism and also presented this thesis in a speech, with members of the Nationalsozialistischer Studentenbund (National Socialist students' league) in the audience<sup>11</sup>. But after just a few months Schardt's unusual ideas failed, and the presentation of his concept was forbidden, and it was toned down by his successor, Eberhard Hanfstaengl<sup>12</sup>.

During this conflict Adolf Hitler did not take a clear position at first, apparently given those involved some leeway. After his annual speeches on culture during the party conference in Nuremberg in September, a certain lack of orientation reigned<sup>13</sup>. Hitler rejected both *völkisch* art and modern art, although he did not explicitly mention Expressionism, so that its advocates could long harbor vague hopes. Even a moderate version of *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New objectivity) was offered, under the label "New German Romanticism,"<sup>14</sup> as a possible artistic option for the Nazi state and supported by Nazi-leaders like Rudolf Heß. In the subsequent period, however, the traditional Munich school triumphed in some cases alternating with a toned-down, conservative *Neue Sachlichkeit* or moderate sprinklings of Impressionism and even Expressionism.

The works at the *Grosse Deutsche Kunstausstellung*, and the general ideas about art—to put it pointedly—were essentially oriented around the

10 See Thomas Mathieu, *Kunstauffassungen und Kulturpolitik im Nationalsozialismus* (Saarbrücken: PFAU, 1997), 88–91.

11 On Schardt, see Ruth Heftrig, Olaf Peters, and Ulrich Rehm, eds., *Alois J. Schardt: Ein Kunsthistoriker zwischen Weimarer Republik, "Drittem Reich" und Exil in Amerika* (Berlin: Akademie, 2013).

12 See Alfred Hentzen, *Die Berliner National-Galerie im Bildersturm* (Cologne: G. Grotzche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1971), and Annegret Janda and Jörn Grabowski, comp., *Kunst in Deutschland, 1905–1937: Die verlorene Sammlung der Nationalgalerie im ehemaligen Kronprinzen-Palais; Dokumentation* (Berlin: Gebr. Mann, 1992).

13 See Adolf Hitler, *Reden zur Kunst- und Kulturpolitik, 1933–1939*, ed. and comm. Robert Eikmeyer, with an introduction by Boris Groys (Frankfurt am Main: Revolver, 2004).

14 See James A. van Dyke, "'Neue Deutsche Romantik' zwischen Modernität, Kulturkritik und Kulturpolitik, 1929–1937," in Dieter Schwarz, ed., *Adolf Dietrich und die Neue Sachlichkeit in Deutschland*, exh. cat. (Winterthur: Kunstmuseum; Oldenburg: Landesmuseum, 1994), 137–65.



nineteenth century. They restored obsolete genre painting and showed works that were not exactly ideologically motivated but rather mainly landscapes, genre paintings, and paintings of animals<sup>15</sup>. Other than that, it primarily featured depictions of women, especially nudes vaguely modeled on antiquity<sup>16</sup>, and only a much smaller number of ideological, specifically National Socialist works of art. Sculpture and architecture were, in any case, the preferred genres in the “Third Reich.”<sup>17</sup> The volatility of these overwhelmingly unimportant works resulted from their context, since in connection with the incipient martial policies of *Lebensraum* (living space) and extermination, these depictions of farmers plowing or of blonde women took on the character of obfuscating, affirmative works of art in the service of war and the final solution.

Just how difficult it was to select appropriate works to represent Hitler’s aesthetic ideas is demonstrated by the organization of the first *Grosse Deutsche Kunstausstellung*. And just how open the situation could be when it came to selecting appropriate art is illustrated by an early episode in which committee member Eberhard Hanfstaengl, after being reassured about “great generosity” when it came to aesthetics, asked the Munich Gauleiter Wagner whether the Expressionists Emil Nolde and Ernst Barlach could be presented in the *Grosse Deutsche Kunstausstellung*. Gauleiter Wagner responded in a characteristic, loose way: “Of course, anyone who is making something good has to be admitted; we are not excluding any names, only works.” That was the state of affairs just a year before the exhibition opened, and it illustrates the extent to which those involved were in disarray.

Joseph Goebbels, the propaganda-minister of the “Third Reich”, had clear words to describe the sometimes chaotic conditions under which works for the GDK were selected in subsequent years. In his diaries he wrote on June 6, 1937: “And then the Haus der deutschen Kunst. The building is fabulously beautiful. One day it will be counted among the truly great buildings of our epoch. We are looking at the selections of the

15 See Berthold Hinz, *Die Malerei im deutschen Faschismus: Kunst und Konterrevolution* (Munich: Carl Hanser, 1974), and Joachim Petsch, “‘Unersetzliche Künstler’: Malerei und Plastik im ‘Dritten Reich,’” in Hans Sarkowicz (ed.), *Hitlers Künstler. Die Kultur im Dienst des Nationalsozialismus* (Frankfurt am Main and Leipzig: Insel, 2004), 245–77.

16 See Anne Meckel, *Animation—Agitation: Frauendarstellungen auf der “Grossen Deutschen Kunstausstellung” in München 1937–1944* (Weinheim: Deutscher Studienverlag, 1993).

17 See Joachim Petsch, *Baukunst und Stadtplanung im Dritten Reich: Herleitung, Bestandsaufnahme, Entwicklung, Nachfolge* (Munich: Carl Hanser, 1976); Barbara Miller Lane, *Architektur und Politik in Deutschland, 1918–1945* (Brunswick: Friedr. Vieweg & Sohn, 1986); and Wilfried Nerdinger (Ed.), *Bauen im Nationalsozialismus. Bayern 1933–1945*, exh. cat. (Munich: Prestel 1993).

jury. The sculptures are passable, but the paintings are in some cases outright catastrophic. They hung pieces that immediately produce horror. That's what happens with a jury of artists. They all look at the school, at names and intention, and most of lost any sense of the real art of painting. The Führer is wild with rage. Prof. Troost fights with the courage of a lion but she by no means succeeds with the Führer. All the others on the conservative jury withdraw in misery. Only Prof. Ziegler still has courage. A painting by Staeger was rejected that I myself had purchased a few days ago. But now the Führer is getting involved. That's good. Afterward, I will take Ziegler to task as well. He is entirely crushed."<sup>18</sup>

This quotation is revealing in several respects. First, it makes it clear that there were no aesthetic standards or directives established in advance that would have helped the jury make its selection. The nine-member jury consisted of, among others Gerdy Troost, an architect's widow; the sculptors Karl Albiker, Josef Wackerle, and Arno Breker; and the insignificant painter Conrad Hommel. Adolf Ziegler<sup>19</sup> and the political graphic artist Hans Schweitzer, known as Mjöltnir, were important members of the Reichskulturkammer (Reich chamber of culture) on the jury<sup>20</sup>. So Goebbels could take Adolf Ziegler to task because he was the president of the Reichskammer der bildenden Künste (Reich chamber of the fine arts) and hence Goebbel's direct subordinate<sup>21</sup>. His being reprimanded by Hitler represented an enormous loss of prestige for Goebbels, since it meant his central artistic representative had proved to be alarmingly incapable of sounding out and implementing the Führer's aesthetic ideas. That accounts for the subsequent harsh rebuke by Goebbels<sup>22</sup>.

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18 See *Die Tagebücher von Joseph Goebbels: Sämtliche Fragmente*, ed. Elke Fröhlich (Munich: K. G. Saur, 1987), *Aufzeichnungen 1924–1941*, 3:167, entry for June 6, 1937.

19 On Ziegler, see Christian Fuhrmeister, "Adolf Ziegler (1892-1956), nationalsozialistischer Künstler und Funktionär," in *200 Jahre Akademie der Bildenden Künste München*. "... kein bestimmter Lehrplan, kein gleichförmiger Mechanismus", Nikolaus Gerhart, Walter Grasskamp and Florian Matzner, eds. (Munich: Hirmer, 2008), 88-95

20 See Peter Paret, "God's Hammer," in Paret, *German Encounters with Modernism, 1840–1945* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2001), 202–28.

21 Ziegler's famous triptych *Die vier Elemente* was hanging about Hitler's fire place in the Führerbau in Munich for many years. On Ziegler's paradigmatic work, see Elke Frietsch, "*Kulturproblem Frau*": *Weiblichkeitsbilder in der Kunst des Nationalsozialismus* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2006), esp. 160–203.

22 Also noteworthy and typical was the immediate consequence of the jury's blatant failure: no aesthetic guidelines were formulated; rather, the jury was summarily replaced. Until 1944 it was Hitler's personal photographer and the Reichsbildberichterstatter (photo chronicler of the Reich) Heinrich Hoffman, who made the selection from several thousand submissions (in 1937 there were ca. 15, 000 submissions, 1,500 of which were exhibited) for the sale exhibition, at which Hitler had the right of first refusal. On Hoffmann, see Rudolf Herz, ed., *Hoffmann & Hitler: Fotografie im Dienste des Führer-Mythos*, exh. cat. (Munich: Stadtmuseum, 1994).

Hitler was truly distressed by the artistic submissions. Goebbels commented on this in his diary on June 7, 1937: "In train to Regensburg. Führer starts on the jury again. Would rather postpone the Munich exhibition a year than exhibit such crap. [...] He is in a complete rage."<sup>23</sup> Hitler himself remarked in his opening speech—in which, revealing, he had to emphasize the quality of the graphic works submitted—that the development of a new German art would be a long process: "And when sacred conscientiousness once again comes to its right in this field, then, I have no doubt, the Almighty will rise out the mass of these honest creators of art up to the eternal firmament of the immortal, gifted artists of great times."<sup>24</sup>

The Führer needed such empty rhetoric to console himself about the blatant failure of artists in the "Third Reich" because the Nazi art policy had systematically destroyed art and the conditions for it. That policy was not in the position to attract important figures, even those who initially hesitated, had not in some cases even understood that they were being rejected and defamed, or even would have been prepared to work together in some way with the new state. In subtly different ways, that was true of Max Beckmann, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Emil Nolde, and Oskar Schlemmer, for example, who by no means went directly into the opposition or completely refused to cooperate. With Albert Speer, Arno Breker, and Leni Riefenstahl, competent but second-rate figures stepped into the front row, and their artistic achievements are still disputed today<sup>25</sup>.

Along with the *Schandausstellungen* (exhibitions of shame), exhibitions of so-called degenerate art were presented regularly in the German Reich from 1933 onward<sup>26</sup>. The supporters of the Kampfbund and those with *völkisch* views of art managed, despite Alfred Rosenberg's relatively modest position of power in comparison to Joseph Goebbels, managed to produce indirect pressure. For example, they largely determined the categories used to judge art. Admittedly, that did not mean that Hitler accepted the backwoods positions of the *völkisch*, but it did have the consequence that the malicious campaign against so-called "Jewish art

23 *Die Tagebücher von Joseph Goebbels* (see note XVII), part 1: *Aufzeichnungen 1924–1941*, 3:167–68, entry for June 6, 1937.

24 Adolf Hitler, "Rede zur Eröffnung der 'Grossen Deutschen Kunstausstellung,' München, 18.7.1937," quoted in Schuster, *Die "Kunststadt" München 1937* (see note V), 242–52, esp. 252.

25 See Jonathan Petropoulos, *Artists under Hitler. Collaboration and Survival in Nazi Germany* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 2014).

26 See Christoph Zuschlag, "Entartete Kunst". *Ausstellungsstrategien im Nazi-Deutschland* (Worms: Wernersche Verlagsanstalt, 1995).

bolshevism” that was being fought in parallel was successful. So it was not Rosenberg’s aesthetic positions that gained acceptance but rather his negative objective: destroying modernism. Ironically, Goebbels, Rosenberg’s “mortal enemy” within the party, was responsible for implementing that policy.<sup>27</sup>

The exhibitions that are sometimes seen as precursors to *Entartete Kunst* do not by any means explain the specifics of how the exhibition in Munich in 1937, which today is rightly seen as synonymous with the cultural barbarism of the National Socialists, came to pass. The tactical initiative of Joseph Goebbels was crucial, which enables us to work out the real relationships and mechanisms of art policy in the “Third Reich.” There were again reminders of the failure of the jury of artists at the Haus der deutschen Kunst and of the role played by the jurors Ziegler and Schweitzer, who reported to Goebbels. That was on June 5, 1937. On June 30, 1937, Goebbels was handed a decree from the Führer that scandalously authorized this same Ziegler to impound paintings in German museums and thus to violate the authority of the ministry of culture under Bernhard Rust, who was merely informed about the decree, which was then disseminated by circular. It read: “The president of the Reichskammer der bildenden Künste, Adolf Ziegler, professor at the Kunstakademie, has been charged by the Führer with impounding the products of the period of decay still found in the museums, galleries, and collections belonging to the Reich, the states, and the municipalities.”<sup>28</sup>

In the general climate of disappointment with its own official production of art, faced with the continuing campaigns of Rosenberg and his types, and after the dramatic loss of prestige suffered by members of the Reichskulturkammer, and hence of Goebbels himself, with regard to the jury for the *GDK*, the minister of propaganda cleverly seized the initiative from Rosenberg and Rust in order to make an impression on Hitler with his especially radical approach. All this happened as a result of the circumstances and was by no means planned well in advance. There was certainly no long-standing discussion of showing “German art” in

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27 *Die Tagebücher von Joseph Goebbels* (see note XVII), part 1: *Aufzeichnungen 1924–1941*, 1:502, entry for February 21, 1930.

28 Circular by the Baden regional office of the Reich Ministry for the People’s Enlightenment and Propaganda, August 7, 1937, reprinted in Zuschlag, “*Entartete Kunst*” (see note XXV), 207. This decree put in check an unauthorized rush forward by Hermann Göring, who had issued a decree to the Prussian minister of culture, Rust, who reported to him. The works of art were seized based on the Gesetz über Einziehung von Erzeugnissen entarteter Kunst (Law on seizure of products of degenerate art), *Reichsgesetzblatt* 1938, pt. 1, no. 88, pp. 611–12.

Munich while at the same time settling accounts with “degenerate art.” The *Entartete Kunst* exhibition, which today is often mentioned in the same breath with and even regarded as a well-planned complement to the GDK, was by no means planned as the exhibition we know. Rather, having been put together ad hoc and improvised, it was stylized as the long-planned settlement of accounts with modernism. The organization of the exhibition reveals, on the one hand, Goebbels’s concern about his position within the Nazi leadership and, on the other, the National Socialists’ purely propagandistic understanding of policy, which scarcely left room for long-term considerations.

One crucial factor was that five days after the disaster in Munich Goebbels took up the book *Säuberung des Kunsttempels* (Purging of the temple of art) by the painter and art critic Wolfgang Willrich.<sup>29</sup> The book was published by Lehmanns Verlag in Munich in 1937; it spoke of art bolshevism, art anarchy, and a “red contamination of art”; and it criticized the supposedly corrupt modern business of art. Above all, however, the collages of images of modern art published in the book, which were produced by Willrich himself, had a suggestive effect. The entire book was conceived as denunciation: Willrich placed great emphasis on identifying by name the artists, modern art journals, and museum directors acquiring modern art. The book’s sensationalist frontispiece was the author’s own painting of a pregnant blonde woman: *Hüterin der Art* (Guardian of the species), which already associated the doctrine of genetics with the “degeneration of art.”

Goebbels’s diaries for June 11, 1937, states: “Reading: Willrich, *Säuberung des Kunsttempels*. That task is necessary and I will take it on.”<sup>30</sup> This was opportunistic, since Hitler had already spoken out several times against the modern art Goebbels preferred but never called for anything specific to be done about it, but also tactical, since with his radical rush forward Goebbels once again seized the initiative in cultural policy. It was the action of an agile propaganda minister who did not have the slightest problem throwing his own convictions overboard and making Rosenberg’s line his own. Goebbels had recognized that Hitler’s speech for the opening of the Haus der deutschen Kunst would include ranting about the “art of decay,” as the distorted counterimage to German art.

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29 Wolfgang Willrich, *Säuberung des Kunsttempels*, 2nd ed. (Munich: J. F. Lehmanns Verlag, 1938; orig. pub. 1938).

30 *Die Tagebücher von Joseph Goebbels* (see note XVII), part 1: *Aufzeichnungen 1924–1941*, 3:171, entry for June 11, 1937.

Goebbels's tactical skill is evident from these sentences in his diary on July 10: "Spoke for a long time about the fine arts. The Munich exhibition will be very good. Führer wants to give a harsh speech against the art of decay. And I will make my contribution through the exhibition on the art of decay."<sup>31</sup> Goebbels took action when it was effective and consolidated his own position of power and, unlike Rosenberg, not at inappropriate times and out of narrow-minded ideology. Initially, significantly, there was resistance: On June 12 Goebbels wrote: "Worked in the field of the art of decay. Resistance everywhere. Now even from Speer and Schweitzer. I don't understand it. But we will make a clean sweep."<sup>32</sup> Precisely one week later, on June 19 and hence only a month before the opening, Munich has been chosen as the site for the *Entartete Kunst* exhibition: Goebbels arranged this settling of accounts in complete haste and as late as July 1 he was by no means certain himself that it could be completed to open in parallel with the GDK.

Goebbels had the first idea for such an exhibition—albeit with Berlin as the venue—on June 4, 1937, on the day before a visit to Munich with Hitler to examine the jury's selection. On that day he wrote in his diary: "Hopeless examples of art bolshevism are presented to me. But now I'm intervening. The professors with Rust have to be dismissed. And I want to organize an exhibition in Berlin with works from the era of decay. So the people can see and understand. I have Ziegler to instruct the jury in Munich to look keenly and to establish stricter standards. [...] Discussed my measures against art bolshevism with Speer. He will help me with it."<sup>33</sup> So initially Goebbels was thinking about dismissing art professors reporting to Rust, as part of internal power struggles, and only secondarily about an exhibition in the region of Greater Berlin, of which he was Gauleiter. Albert Speer, who had in the meanwhile become Hitler's favorite architect following the death of Troost, seems to have backpedaled, and the instruction to Ziegler came too late. On the early morning of June 5 Hitler and Goebbels flew to Munich together, and the blow-up described above took place.

A look at the true starting point for the exhibition in Munich illustrates the increasing radicalization of Goebbels's art policy: Goebbels was engaged in the subject of "degenerate art" as early as the spring

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31 Ibid., 3:198–99, entry for July 10, 1937.

32 Ibid., 3:172, entry for June 12, 1937.

33 Ibid., 3:166, entry for June 5, 1937.

of 1937, in the context of a propaganda exhibition titled *Gebt mir vier Jahre Zeit* (Give me four years' time) announced by Hitler on January 30, 1937.<sup>34</sup> That show was intended to display the achievements of National Socialist Germany and, according to Hitler, to prepare by means of propaganda what had already been created or at least begun. It was always one of the National Socialists' techniques for power—not least because the balance sheets of their own achievements was often rather modest—to disparage their opponents, to produce a propagandistic image of the enemy in order to mobilize energy and effects and to proclaim an apparent state of emergency.

The exhibition was intended to look a kind of shop window with evidence of “degenerate art,” which supposedly undermined the cultural identity of the German people. This shifted the focus to the ouster of modernism from the culture of the “Third Reich,” which had forced into line politically. This seemed to be answer in the negative the question of a possible “Nordic Expressionism” as the art of the Nazi state, which was debated controversially even within the Nazi movement. The selection and presentation were the responsibility of two completely insignificant painters who had perceived the broad acceptance of the avant-garde during the Weimar Republic as a setback and could not give free rein to their hatred: Wolfgang Willrich, whom we have already discussed above, and Walter Hansen, a vocational and drawing instructor from Hamburg, whose are the National Socialists themselves repeatedly described as amateurish. Armed with authorizations from the Reichspropaganda-Ministerium and the Gestapo, the two of them first gained admittance to the Kupferstichkabinett (Prints and drawings collection) of the Nationalgalerie in Berlin and the Kronprinzenpalais (Crown prince's palace), which held the modernist collection of the Nationalgalerie.<sup>35</sup> They visited other museums and assembled their materials. It is characteristic of the Nazi leadership that they often employed dubious characters; in this case, they were both artistic amateurs and fanatic denouncers.<sup>36</sup> With the powers they claimed, they radicalized a policy that those in power had neither planned nor anti-

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34 See Zuschlag, “*Entartete Kunst*” (see note XXV), 169–76.

35 See Alfred Hentzen, *Die Berliner National-Galerie im Bildersturm* (Cologne: Grote, 1972).

36 On the biographies of these two, see Zuschlag, “*Entartete Kunst*” (see note XXV), 371–76 and 385–86.

pated in this form.<sup>37</sup>

Despite intense research in research in recent years, no one has yet managed to determine whether the “degenerate art” shown in the exhibition *Gebt mir vier Jahre Zeit*, which was surprisingly modern in its presentation, consisted of originals or just illustrations in books. It has been established that the approach to the matter was highly uncoordinated and was disputed even within the propaganda ministry, since Reichskulturkammer under Goebbels behaved rather hesitantly and even disapprovingly and forbid, for example, the exhibition of artists from the Dresden association Die Brücke or the Expressionist sculptor Ludwig Gies. In the spring of 1937 these represented the final reflections within the Nazi administration whether Expressionism should be produced from intransigent Nazi fanatics, since both Gies and the Brücke artists were at the center of the *Entartete Kunst* exhibition in Munich in the summer of 1937.

In the end, Willrich was even forced to resign in the late summer of 1937, after the SS-leader Heinrich Himmler had already distanced himself from him and Karl Kauffmann, the Reichsstatthalter (Reich governor) in Hamburg, refused to lend him works for his campaigns. Willrich’s radical line continued to be pursued successfully by others, however, and Hansen was given the opportunity by Rust—whom Goebbels attacked repeatedly—to establish an archive of “degenerate art.” Such initiatives illustrate once more how separate, competing centers of power within the “Third Reich” were trying through independent action to preserve the possibility of initiatives on the path they had set out even with the specific policy did not necessarily correspond to the most deeply held ideas of the protagonists.

To sum up what we have said thus far: With regard to the specific behavior of Joseph Goebbels in connection with organizing the *Entartete Kunst* exhibition, two crucial points play a role: First, the theme of “degenerate art” was chosen as the subject of a propaganda show, albeit on a

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37 A letter from Heinrich Himmler, the head of the SS, to Wolfgang Willrich on September 18, 1937, makes it clear that even extreme Nazi ideologues and proponents of the policy of extermination responded with reservations to the blind fanaticism of these failed, insignificant artists. See Heinrich Himmler to Wolfgang Willrich, September 18, 1937, quoted in Joseph Wulf, *Literatur und Dichtung: Eine Dokumentation*, vol. 3 of Wulf, *Kultur im Dritten Reich*, 5 vols. (Frankfurt am Main: Ullstein, 1989), 143–44. On the art policy of the SS and its context, see essentially Michael Kater, *Das “Ahnenerbe” der SS, 1935–1945: Ein Beitrag zur Kulturpolitik des Dritten Reiches*, 2nd ed. (Munich: R. Oldenbourg, 1997; orig. pub. 1974), and Jan Erik Schulte, ed., *Die SS, Himmler und die Wewelsburg* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2009).



modest scale, and was implemented despite internal resistance from the propaganda ministry as part of the exhibition *Gebt mir vier Jahre Zeit* in early 1937. In the process, Goebbels had to push a line through, owing to different positions within his ministry where the leadership of the propaganda section and the Reichskulturkammer were at odds. Second, the minister, who had certainly sympathized with modernism, realized that Hitler would campaign harshly against modernism on the occasion of the opening of the GDK and was also decidedly dissatisfied with the work on the GDK jury done by the propaganda minister's subordinates. To make amends, Goebbels suddenly became vehemently active on *Entartete Kunst* and pursued a radical line that could be certain of winning Hitler's approval. The initiative came from Goebbels, who had Hitler approve an "exhibition on the art of decay," rather than receiving that assignment from him. It is even reasonable to doubt whether Hitler would ever have come up with the idea of the Munich exhibition<sup>38</sup>, which he visited for just under ten minutes just a few days before opening.<sup>39</sup>

One day after Adolf Hitler ceremoniously opened the *Grosse Deutsche Kunstausstellung*, Adolf Ziegler, in his function as president of the Reichskammer der Bildenden Künste (Reich chamber of the fine arts), gave the speech for the opening of the *Entartete Kunst* exhibition. He deeply despised modernism and observed: "You see around us monstrosities of madness, of impudence, of inability, and degeneration. What this show has to offer causes shock and disgust in all of us."<sup>40</sup> He railed angrily at the representatives of modernism, whom he even called "pigs." At the same time, however, he was honestly surprised by the fact that the museums were still full of modern art. Despite the *Schandausstellungen*, the reality of life in the "Third Reich" was not what the propaganda tried to suggest or what functionaries perceived<sup>41</sup>. Against this backdrop, Ziegler announced a comprehensive purge of German museums from "degenerate art." But even after the exhibition and the impounding of works, modernism and "degenerate artists" had by no means disappeared completely from the everyday lives of Germans.<sup>42</sup>

38 See essentially Hans Mommsen, "Hitler's Position in the Nazi System" (1981), in Mommsen, *From Weimar to Auschwitz* (Princeton: Princeton UP 1991), 163–188.

39 See Zuschlag, "Entartete Kunst" (see note XXV), 184.

40 Adolf Ziegler, "Rede zur Eröffnung der Ausstellung 'Entartete Kunst,' München, 19.7.1937," in Schuster, *Die "Kunststadt" München 1937* (see note V), 217–18, esp. 217.

41 See Hans Dieter Schäfer, *Das gesplittete Bewusstsein: Deutsche Kultur und Lebenswirklichkeit 1933–1945* (Munich: Carl Hanser, 1981).

42 See, exemplarily, Winfried Nerdinger, *Bauhaus-Moderne im Nationalsozialismus: Zwischen Anbiederung und Verfolgung* (Munich: Prestel 1993).

The *Entartete Kunst* exhibition was held in the rather cramped-seeming spaces of the plaster-cast collection of the Archäologisches Institut in the Hofgartenarkaden, not far from the newly constructed Haus der Deutschen Kunst. Around 600 works (paintings, sculptures, drawings, and prints as well as books) were included in the exhibition<sup>43</sup>, which has been reconstructed since the mid-1980s based on the essential research of Mario-Andreas von Lüttichau.<sup>44</sup> All currents of modern art since 1905 were affected: Expressionism, Cubism and Futurism, Dadaism and Verism/Neue Sachlichkeit as well as Constructivism, but Expressionism dominated. Among the perfidious strategies of the exhibition organizers was an introduction that appealed to the religious sensitivities of the audience. In the entrance one saw the famous, impressive, now lost crucifix by Ludwig Gies as well as works by Emil Nolde and Max Beckmann. The fact that the sometimes neopagan and emphatically anticlerical National Socialists would present, in the capital of Bavaria, modernism as supposedly mocking Christianity is one of the ironies of history. The fact that Judaism was addressed in a second room—supposedly religiously and racially fundamentally opposed to the Christian Occident—was scarcely coincidence. Christian tradition—which was partially appropriated by National Socialism—and Catholic-tinged anti-Semitic resentment was to be mobilized against modernism.

There were also efforts to create a suggestive aesthetic for the exhibition, for example, when the dramatization strategies of the Dadaists were effectively copied or adapted on one smaller wall by exhibited the works staggered together with simplistic keywords and quotations. Although the concept for the first *Internationale Dada-Messe* of 1920, which agitated by means of photographs and posters, was not implemented systematically but rather got lost in the lyric Expressionism of the likes of Kandinsky, the exhibition design, which at the time seemed revolutionary, promised to shock and perplex. The prejudices that the majority of visitors already had were supposed to be confirmed and incited by this. By contrast, the image of the human being (Nolde, Brücke), antiwar themes (Dix), and stylistic complexes in connection with the phenomena of primitivism, children's drawings, and the art of the "mentally ill" as sources for modern (Klee) were presented in

43 Information from Zuschlag, "Entartete Kunst" (see note XXV), 190.

44 See Schuster, *Die "Kunststadt" München 1937* (see note V), 120–82b, and Mario-Andreas von Lüttichau, "Entartete Kunst," Munich, 1937: A Reconstruction," in Stephanie Barron (ed.), *Degenerate Art. The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi-Germany*, exhibition cat. LACMA (New York: Harry N. Abrams), 45–81.

other adjoining rooms in a comparative conventional way in a crowded, two-row hanging. Evaluative comments, demagogic slogans, and exaggerated sales prices could not be lacking if they wanted to ensure that the viewers condemned what they say.

Understandably, given how hastily it was organized, the exhibition was not accompanied by a catalog or guidebook. A bright red insert was, however, included in the catalog of the *Grosse Deutsche Kunstausstellung*. It sensationally called for a visit to the nearby *Femeschau* (vehmic exhibition): “See it! Judge for yourself!” It delegated aesthetic judgment to an unprepared and uninformed mass audience that, owing to its incompetence, could only helplessly take refuge in judgments based on taste. Modernism, by contrast, was depicted here as a pathological undertaking that had been strategically pushed through by a small, Jewish clique at the cost of “German art.”

Several contemporaries already recognized that the National Socialists’ propaganda show was playing modernism up to be something that had never existed in that form. On November 14, 1937, *Die Frankfurter Zeitung* published an article written by the critic Carl Linfert titled “Rückblick auf ‘entartete Kunst’”: “Nevertheless, the specific feature of this is event is something else: the objective whose products are shown is at the same time reproduced here; indeed, produced even more here, in a strangely productive way, than before.”<sup>45</sup> Perceptively, Linfert saw through the background of the entire event: the purely propagandistic and, in that sense, specifically fascists political understanding of the National Socialists constructed the alternative world of modern, “degenerate” art in order to obscure the weaknesses of its own production. To sum it up pointedly as a thesis: It was primarily the disappointment over the desolate state of the arts in the “Third Reich” that led to the *Entartete Kunst* exhibition and action. Consequently, we have before us what historical scholarship has called the “realization of the negative elements of the worldview” of National Socialism: “The hypertrophy of its own national value, depicted positively in racial theory, and the hypertrophy of its own social value, depicted positively in the concept of the exclusive, species-specific community of the people of members of the Germanic master race, could be specified and realized

<sup>45</sup> Carl Linfert, “Rückblick auf ‘entartete Kunst,’” *Frankfurter Zeitung*, November 14, 1937, reprinted in full in Zuschlag, “*Entartete Kunst*” (see note 3), 197–99, and Andreas Hüneke and Carl Linfert, “*Entartete Kunst*”: *Kommentar 1989/1996 zum Kommentar 1937* (Cologne: Internationaler Kunstkritikerverband, 1997).

in political practice not in a positive form but only in a negative one: by rejecting and defaming everything “foreign” and “abnormal,” all “undesirable elements” that did not conform to the dictate of the middle-class, national values of order and performance. [...] The selection of negative elements of the worldview that took place during the process of seizing power and over the course of later developments in the Third Reich—they alone became objects of practical implementation; the positive utopias continued to be only distant goals and the objects of propagandistic edification—represented at the same time an increasing radicalization, perfecting, and institutionalizing of inhumanity and persecution.”<sup>46</sup>

At the moment when their own overdrawn expectations failed and at the moment when they flagrantly lost face, Goebbels and Hitler sought refuge in revenge and radicalization. If they could not establish anything significant themselves, they could at least manage to destroy the hated counterimage.

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<sup>46</sup> See the classic essay by Martin Broszat, “Soziale Motivation und Führer-Bindung im Nationalsozialismus” (1970), in Broszat, *Nach Hitler: Der schwierige Umgang mit unserer Geschichte* (Munich: dtv, 1988), 11–33, esp. 28–29.

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