

Nazi Cultures of Display

A Digital Reconstruction of the Great German Art Exhibition and the Degenerate Art Show

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Few regimes have so radically transformed art into an essential component of politics and ideology as the Third Reich (1933-1945). To understand the mechanisms of the Reich's visual propaganda and its manipulative use of art, this project reconstructs the 1937 "Great German Art Exhibition." The first in a series of mammoth events to showcase the artistic achievements of Nazi Germany and provide a foil to so-called 'degenerate art', the exhibition was amply documented in its own time, which in the past decade has been used for a systematic online-based recording of the installation layout, participating artists, exhibited media, etc. (see [GDK Research](#)). Digital technology now opens the possibility to virtually reconstruct this infamous exhibition while supplementing the experiential, immersive dimension with access to a multi-dimensional critical and historical framework. Selecting a number of exemplary rooms, the digital reconstruction will allow for an in-depth study of the exhibition's spatial rhetoric and, most importantly, a sustained art-historical analysis of individual pieces. Such an analysis is mostly missing from the critical literature on the arts in Nazi Germany, which tends to focus on artists rather than art objects and, approaches the latter mostly as vehicles for broader socio-cultural strategies, thus reducing the pluralism of Nazi aesthetic idioms to a single official version. While a small but significant number of studies and exhibitions has recently challenged this view, most still shy away from a close reading of Nazi artifacts *as art*.

This noteworthy lacuna reflects the understandable anxieties surrounding a “state-of-the-art display” of an artistic production with literally murderous implications. Yet the failure to tackle Nazi art as art comes at a price. One particularly unsettling consequence is the monopoly thus granted to right-wing groups over the presentation of this problematic material. Particularly online, Fascist visual imaginary is often recycled to glorify, promote, and reinforce white supremacy. In the spirit of the National Trust for Historic Preservation’s approach to confederate monuments, this project focuses on a painful, problematic yet highly relevant aspect of Germany’s cultural heritage and its international afterlife. Because this heritage is lost (due to the exhibition’s quintessentially ephemeral nature as well as the physical destruction of many of the exhibited artworks during World War II), this project must by necessity resort to the most up-to-date digital resources, which also allows critical resistance to the distorting neo-Nazi narratives that exist on social-media platforms.

Currently, not only right-wing enthusiasts but also critics of Nazi art frequently perpetuate a belief in a total unity of Nazi ideology and Nazi art. Taking this totalitarian omnipresence at face value has, as Pamela Potter noted in 2016, essentially produced “a caricature of Nazi cultural conditions [as] a dystopia of artistic constraint, authoritarian micromanagement, and kitsch.”¹ This buys into the Nazi pretense that official art could indeed translate seamlessly ideological into pictorial rhetoric. But this was not always the case. A closer look reveals strange breaks in the rhetoric of many key works that visually undermine the ideology promoted by the works’ overt symbolism or allegorical intention, be it the homoerotic subtext of Arno Breker’s hypermasculine sculptures or the sense of alienation and psychological paralysis in Adolf Wissel’s peasant paintings. What seems to lurk behind these fissures is the struggle of high art (painting and sculpture) to press traditional genres (like genre painting) into a

Nazi mold. In contrast, works that delve into new subject matter rarely treated in high art or deemed of little worth by the art academies (such as images of sport or marine warfare) were much better equipped to develop a modern (and even modernist) visual language, not least by exploring the cinematic potential of large-scale painting. Unpacking such complexities matters if we want to understand the lineages of Nazi art and its afterlife, including the phenomenon of an international antimodernism (think the Chicago society “Sanity in Art” headed since 1936 by major arts patron and heiress Josephine Hancock Logan), and repaint the simplistic yet dominant black-and-white picture of regressive (evil) tradition versus progressive (good) modernism.

Developing a more nuanced critical framework to talk about art in the Third Reich, this project’s carefully curated space offers a re-assessment of that supposedly “great German art,” its effect on the viewer, and the role played by installation strategies to imbue it with aura (a process of auratization unwillingly underwritten by our fears to exhibit it). This critical framing is achieved via a user-friendly immersive learning environment that generates approachable content and self-directed, equally valuable and valued paths through a choice-driven interaction with content (via zoom and clicking). The greater the interaction, the more that content increases in volume and complexity via pop-ups of various sorts.² This emphasis on new, non-linear forms of access and learning is key to the project’s orientation toward public outreach and educational use.

The digital reconstruction will provide modern audiences with tools to recognize and interpret the manifestation of racist ideology in art, to understand its social-cultural mechanisms and to recognize its persistence in contemporary imagery. Such visual literacy is urgently needed given the kind of image-consumption fostered by today’s social media, a kind of looking geared toward gobbling up visual fast-food: images that are catchy, fleshy, digitally enhanced,

constantly proliferating, and decontextualized. Using digital tools that will speak to Gen Z, the project creates a kind of art-historical eco-system that encourages visual and historical learning.

This educational prerogative does not come at the expense of ambitious academic work. To the contrary; the virtual reconstruction presents a new environment for scholars to explore fascist display cultures and zoom in on individual works ‘in situ.’ Moreover, a supportive infrastructure of hyperlinks adds a repository for historical source material as well as the most up-to-date findings by curators and academics. The digital format thus allows for a novel border-crossing between teaching and scholarship not possible in traditional forms of publishing. As such, the project is programmatically situated at the intersection between museum, university, and public outreach. Given this set of overlapping investments, it is fitting that the Institute for Digital Arts and Humanities at IU Bloomington funded the project’s exploratory phase (digital prototype) and is committed to an additional \$11000 in seed money for further technical development of my immersive platform.

The ultimate goal of this project, a digital reconstruction of the representative rooms of the Great German Art Exhibition and the Degenerate Art Show, is rather ambitious. But as Rome was not built in a day, this project, too, is conceived in a series of steps. **While at the IAS, I** would aim to lay some of the content-groundwork: To that end, I would focus on the historical and theoretical framework, concrete research on specific rooms of the 1937 shows, and an identification and subsequent exploration of artworks essential to the installation’s overarching curatorial logic. The immediate product of this research will be an article as well as two or three recorded lectures posted on the internet.³ Another short-term objective is to produce a CfP for an initial international symposium as the basis for future collaborations (\$5000 seed money procured).

Allow me a final remark about my topic choice: The controversy around the 2019 Dutch exhibition *Design of the Third Reich* leaves no doubt that the path to stage Nazi art leads through a minefield. But what is gained, we must ask, by locking totalitarian art up in the poison cabinet? Speaking from the perspective of a German expatriate teaching young American adults, very little. Hitting the average undergraduate in my state-university over the head with the modernist club only makes them recoil. Many lack historical knowledge and visual astuteness in equal measures. Thus, unpacking seductive strategies of display, the allure of pathos-laden or easy-to-consume imagery, and the ubiquity of Nazi aesthetics in contemporary culture (from *Star Wars* to Nicki Minaj's "lyric video" of her 2014 hit song *Only*) seems a much more effective path to foster critical thinking, resistance to visual manipulation, and ultimately a willingness to face the visual world of the most unspeakable crimes. Failure to show Nazi art and consider it *as art* only feeds into tendencies to forget or desires to deny, risks making it, like any forbidden fruit, that much more mysterious and attractive, and blinds people to the way fragmented and decontextualized visual memes may carry the emotional, ideological and mythic power of unacknowledged roots.

¹ Pamela M. Potter, *Art of Suppression: Confronting the Nazi Past in Histories of the Visual and Performing Arts*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016, 35. See also Gregory Maertz, *Nostalgia for the Future Modernism and Heterogeneity in the Visual Arts of Nazi Germany*. Stuttgart: ibidem-Verlag, 2019, esp. 14-15.

² Ideally, the material will be available for open-access downloads, but with uploads rigorously restricted and submissions peer-reviewed; the implementation of security protocols to prevent hacking will be emphasized in the site's development.

³ See submitted video "Contagious Laughter" as sample for a Pecha-Kucha style presentation.