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“Judge for Yourselves!”—The *Degenerate Art* Exhibition as Political Spectacle*

NEIL LEVI

“German *Volk*, come and judge for yourselves!”¹

Thus Adolf Ziegler, National Socialist president of the Reich Chamber for the Visual Arts, opens the 1937 Munich exhibition *Degenerate Art*. What they could “judge for themselves” is clear enough—a quickly assembled selection of over six hundred modernist works of art seized from museums throughout Germany. Just what kind of an *event* Ziegler invites the German *Volk* to take part in has proven, however, a little more difficult to decipher.

Although the exhibition can clearly be classified as a species of propaganda—the fascist art form nonpareil—when critics turn their attention to *Degenerate Art* they tend to forget they are examining propaganda and concentrate instead on what the Nazis do, or fail to do, as curators of an exhibition of modernist art. As such, *Degenerate Art* is judged extraordinarily incompetent: the pictures are hung too closely together; works are incorrectly attributed and labeled; groupings meant to represent a single artistic movement (say Dadaism) include works from quite unrelated movements (like *Der Blaue Reiter*); quotations from artists and critics are displayed without regard for either their accuracy or their original contexts. Through this flurry of corrections postwar art historians express their desire to overcome the past.

Yet reprimanding these art-historical errors does not help us understand the spectacle and function of *Degenerate Art*. Whatever else they reveal about the function of modernist art in Nazi propaganda, the mistakes must also be seen as integral to the exhibition, displays by the National Socialist state of its power to exercise its will with impunity. Casual errors flaunt the speed with which this state was able to expropriate works from museums all over Germany so as to erect the exhibition in less than three weeks. Furthermore, the main targets of the exhibition are precisely those critics, dealers, and museum directors who claim to comprehend this

* I am grateful to Benjamin Buchloh, Andreas Huyssen, Rosalind Krauss, David J. Levin, Franco Moretti, Michael Rothberg, and Beth Drenning for their comments on earlier versions of this essay.

1. Reprinted in *Die “Kunststadt” München 1937*, ed. Peter-Klaus Schuster (Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1987), p. 218. Unless stated otherwise, all translations are my own.



John Heartfield. "Mirror, mirror, on the wall, who's the strongest of them all? The crisis." Arbeiter-Illustrierte Zeitung 12, no. 33. 1933.

art *properly*, as they speak for it. In the face of deliberate incomprehension, however, simply to reiterate the rejected discourse and categories of modernism is obtuse.

Instead, we need to think about how the curatorial structure of this exhibition reflects its function as propaganda. Goebbels' Ministry for Propaganda and Popular Enlightenment planned *Degenerate Art* as a counter-exhibition to the first annual exhibition of *Great German Art*, which opened in Munich's newly consecrated House of German Art on July 18, 1937. *Degenerate Art* opened a day later in the same city's Archaeological Institute—an appropriate enough venue for works that were to be consigned to the dustbin of history. As I will be arguing, the way to a productive interpretation of *Degenerate Art* lies in taking seriously the implications of its role as a counter-exhibition.

In formulating this purpose, Goebbels emphasized the need to distinguish

between “the arts of those days and the art of our days.”² Yet the very need to make this distinction, to stage it so publicly, suggests that the difference between the two periods in art was a matter of some uncertainty. The works of German Expressionism that constitute the bulk of *Degenerate Art* had actually been the subject of much dispute in the early years of the National Socialist regime. When we look at the main ideological positions for and against a “National Socialist revolutionary art” that would have included Emil Nolde and Ernst Barlach (both of whom ended up in *Degenerate Art*), we see the extent to which the exhibition symbolically resolves and retrospectively disavows the vexed question of the historical place of German Expressionism within Nazism.

Not only artistic movements but also iconic figures about which the Nazis were ambivalent—Christ, in particular—appear in *Degenerate Art*. Here again, the Nazis’ treatment of ambivalence offers us a fulcrum through which to think about the relationship between the two exhibitions. For many of the works displayed in this counter-exhibition are presented as “sullied” reflections of the same generic images the Nazis sanctified as *Great German Art*: farmers, soldiers, mothers, and landscapes. Yet what is most interesting about the structural relation between the two exhibitions is where it breaks down, as it does when we examine the logic of *Degenerate Art*’s spectacular display of “mocking” images of Christ in its opening gallery. Ultimately, the Nazis’ concern with “degenerate” representations of a figure about whom they were highly equivocal makes far more sense when understood (as will be developed further on) in relation to how the *Great German Art* Exhibition presents images of the sacred.

Furthermore, conspicuously absent from *Degenerate Art* are John Heartfield’s photomontages from the late 1920s and early 1930s. As a devastating satirist of Nazi party policy and pretensions, Heartfield is an artist whose works one might well have expected to see in this exhibition: the Nazis, one would think, would have had much to gain by devaluing his work. In this light, Heartfield’s exclusion suggests the criteria for inclusion in the exhibition and the strategies by which the Nazis stripped “degenerate” art works of their aura—strategies to which Heartfield’s works were peculiarly immune.

The omission of Heartfield’s work from *Degenerate Art* forces us to ask about the limits of the displayable in the exhibition. The disputes about Expressionism within Nazism, the relentlessly materializing manner of the exhibition’s display structure (in which the works are presented as overpriced commodities), and the ultimate expulsion of these works from the German public sphere as so much dirt, or, following Mary Douglas, as “matter out of place”³—all of this points to *Degenerate Art* as an attempt to construct modernist art as *object*, as analogous to

2. “[Zwischen den] Künsten von damals und der Kunst unserer Tage.” Note the transition from the plural to the singular, as if from diversity and multiplicity to singularity and unity. Cited in Mario-Andreas von Lütichau, “‘Deutsche Kunst’ und ‘Entartete Kunst’: Die Münchner Ausstellungen 1937,” in *ibid.*, p. 95.

3. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (London: Routledge, 1966), p. 35.

that part of the self that must be expelled for it to (continue to) be constituted as “clean and proper,” and the return of which threatens it with psychotic dissolution.⁴ At the same time, these sources of abjection are works of art the Nazis managed to *integrate* into their propaganda. If popular interest in the exhibition lead to its run in Munich being *extended* (over two million people are reported to have seen the show), it is clear that whatever danger the Nazis attributed to “degenerate” art works, this was a danger they thought their display could contain.

Does *Degenerate Art* compel us to start thinking in terms of an internally differentiated notion of the abject? Specifically, should we see material like Heartfield’s, excluded even from a controlled display of the “degenerate,” as a kind of second-order abject, that which the Nazis expel but cannot even bear to disavow publicly before doing so, an abject that cannot even be integrated into or contained by propaganda exhibitions? Does this material really threaten the Nazi self with the political equivalent of psychotic dissolution more acutely than the works exhibited as “degenerate”? Or does such inquiry incorrectly attribute to Nazism too consistent a visual culture, too truth-oriented a version of ideology?

The Art of Our Days

If the divide between “Degenerate” and “Great German” art is marked by time—by Goebbels’ distinction between “the arts of those days and the art of our days”—then the *tertium comparitionis* that enables the parallel is place, in particular, national territory: both exhibitions focus on *German* art. Adolf Ziegler and his assistants, whom Goebbels empowered to “select” works for *Degenerate Art* and, more generally, to clear German museums of works produced after 1910 that were symptomatic of the decay the Nazis ascribed to this era, did seize works by non-German modernist artists and could have displayed them, but they did not. Those non-German artists whose works were displayed in Munich either had been based in Germany (Kandinsky, Klee, and Feininger) or were among the sample of artists classified and exhibited in a separate room for being “Jewish, all too Jewish,” like Chagall.

As it happens, the most heavily represented artist in *Degenerate Art* was Emil Nolde, who had been a Nazi party member since 1920. This is a telling detail. First, it reminds us that the majority of the works displayed as “degenerate” are examples of German Expressionism. Second, that the most visible target of this exhibition should be a Nazi party member is symptomatic of one of the major unspoken issues “addressed” in *Degenerate Art*. Prior to 1937, the position of German Expressionism *within* Nazi cultural politics was hotly contested, part of a struggle between Alfred Rosenberg and Joseph Goebbels for control of Nazi cultural policy. The *Degenerate Art* exhibition provides a symbolic resolution to this contest.

4. I draw here on Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

The broad outlines of what is known as the Rosenberg-Goebbels dispute are familiar enough. Rosenberg and the members of his Fighting League for German Culture proselytized for a strictly representationalist way of seeing according to which figural distortion was a sign of degeneracy—whether physical (in the subject), mental (in the painter), or political (in the circumstances that allowed such works to be recognized as art). The Goebbels-affiliated group *Die Norden*, on the other hand, claimed figural distortion and non-naturalistic use of color as part of an “expressive” and future-oriented vision appropriate to a “National Socialist revolutionary art”⁵—a particularly Nazi version of Expressionism, it should be noted, both “national” and “Nordic”⁶; a version in which Expressionists like the Jewish leftist Ludwig Meidner or the Russian-born Kandinsky had no part.

Although Goebbels ultimately won control of the Nazi cultural sphere—the *Great German Art/Degenerate Art* spectacle is his show—he is generally seen as having done so at a cost: renouncing his personal preferences (he was known to esteem the works of Nolde and Barlach, and attempted to further their careers in the early days of the regime), allowing the closure of pro-Expressionist Nazi organizations and publications, and exhibiting *Degenerate Art* according to the dictates of the Fighting League’s antimodernist interpretive schema.

That the question of whether Expressionism was a species of “degeneracy” or of “National Socialist revolutionary art” could be argued at all, and that the latter position could, for a time, be supported in publications and state-supported exhibitions, sharply distinguishes German Expressionism from the other targets of negative Nazi propaganda with which it was ultimately identified. For the most part, the status of the Nazis’ “bad objects” was beyond debate. No Nazi ever argued that promotion of the Jews, Weimar, communism, or democracy would, seen from the proper perspective or under slightly different historical circumstances, be compatible with National Socialist ideology; no Nazi *could* have ever argued this way and remained a Nazi.

Yet, because Expressionism did not become the official art of Nazi Germany, the Expressionist dispute within Nazism has aroused little interest among scholars of Nazi aesthetics: the dramatic condemnation of modernism is understood as intrinsic to fascist cultural politics. The ideological and cultural significance of even a “minor” and apparently eliminated position should not, however, be underestimated.⁷ The Nazis’ contest over the meaning of Expressionism offers a crucial context for understanding the internal impetus behind a state-sponsored exhibition

5. *Die Norden*’s formation was reputedly catalyzed by the Fighting League’s rejection of Nolde’s membership application. See Georg Bussman, “‘Degenerate Art’—A Look at a Useful Myth,” in *German Art in the 20th Century*, ed. Christos Joachimides et al. (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 1985), p. 117.

6. Peter Reichel, *Der schöne Schein des Dritten Reiches* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1993), p. 91.

7. Apparently eliminated, but reputedly continuing to operate in secret: Otto Andreas Schreiber, one of the leaders of *Die Norden*, claims to have continued to organize exhibitions of Expressionist art—3,500 of them—under the auspices of the German Work Front’s “Strength through Joy” program until 1942. See Reinhard Bollmus, *Das Amt Rosenberg und seine Gegner* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlagsanstalt, 1970), p. 65.

in which Expressionist art works are juxtaposed with *Great German Art* and presented, if not performatively *disavowed*, as “degenerate.”

Neither side of the Rosenberg-Goebbels divide was as straightforward as it appeared. Take Goebbels, who is generally interpreted as performing an about-face on Expressionism. In addition to his initial support for *Die Norden's* demonstrations and exhibitions, the novel he wrote in the early 1920s, *Michael*, speaks explicitly about Expressionism and has been interpreted as itself representative of one aspect of that movement. That he then cast Expressionist works onto the “degenerate” scrap heap is therefore seen, understandably enough, as a pragmatic appropriation of the ideological position of the less politically agile Rosenberg.⁸ Yet this turn, including his stage-managing of the parallel exhibitions, is quite compatible with what Goebbels had been saying about Expressionism all along. For one thing, Goebbels consistently identifies Expressionism with the 1920s—he starts doing this in the 1920s and continues to do so through the 1930s. No wonder, then, that by the time of the *Degenerate Art* exhibition Expressionism has become one of the “arts of those days.” For another thing, it would be possible to show that the version of Expressionism promulgated in Goebbels’ writings has far more to do with the political realization of one’s will in shaping the world than with the aesthetic productions of Nolde, Barlach, and others. Goebbels may well manifest his *political* version of Expressionism precisely by repudiating Expressionist art works and arranging instead the world-structuring mass propaganda that was the real incarnation of fascist art: the party rallies, Olympiads, and Festivals of German Art.

Goebbels’ notion of Expressionism has enough room to accommodate a *Degenerate Art* exhibition; conversely, Rosenberg’s anti-Expressionism is elastic enough to endorse individual Expressionist artists, and even aspects of the movement as a whole. In his 1930 *Myth of the Twentieth Century*, Rosenberg notes that Expressionism is the product of “correct feeling,” the feeling that holds that the kind of “intellectualism” promulgated by Impressionism and Cubism was mythically bankrupt, and to which, in response, “[Expressionists] began to search for redemption, expression and strength.”⁹ He is, of course, more ambivalent about the results. But consider how Rosenberg elucidates his claim that Nolde and Barlach “display an outspoken talent”:

[A] Nolde seascape which hangs in the Crown Prince’s palace . . . is strongly and forcefully painted. However, other representative attempts are negroid, irreverent, raw and devoid of true inner strength of form. . . . Barlach dominates his materials like a virtuoso, and no one will deny the monumentality of his woodcuts. But whenever he represents men, he is foreign, completely foreign. . . . [G]aze upon Barlach’s Magdeburg

8. Reichel, *Der schöne Schein des Dritten Reiches*, pp. 98–100.

9. Reprinted in Alfred Rosenberg, *Race and Race History and Other Essays* (New York: Harper and Row: 1970), p. 152.

War Memorial, which was completed for the church there: little, half-idiotic admixtures of undefinable human types with Soviet helmets are supposed to represent German fighting men!¹⁰

More interesting than Rosenberg's already striking approval of aspects of Nolde's and Barlach's works is *how* he expresses this approval: the Nolde seascape is "strong" and "forceful," Barlach "dominates" materials, his woodcuts are "monumental." The works Rosenberg approves of are not the ones that look most like the way he thinks the world should look; they are the ones that best express "strength." This is not the language of adequate representation, but the Goebbelsian discourse of power and its expression.

It is when Rosenberg wants to describe Nolde and Barlach's *failures* that he talks in representational terms. Where these artists fail, for Rosenberg, is in representing the human figure. This is ambiguous in Nolde's case (if hinted at in terms like "negroid") but explicit in Barlach's: "[W]henever he represents men, he is . . . completely foreign." For the same reason, the "monumentality" of Barlach's art fades when actual monuments (German fighting men!) are at stake: suddenly it matters what kind of *helmets* the figures are wearing.

We might think that Rosenberg was expressivist about landscapes and representationalist about portraits because his racism blinded him to expressive values in art as soon as the human figure was involved. Yet as the case of the pro-Expressionist group *Die Norden* demonstrates, Nazi racism and appreciation for nonrealistic representations of the human figure need not be mutually exclusive. One senses that ultimately something else is at stake in Rosenberg's rejection of Expressionism. In a 1935 speech, when his battle with Goebbels was at its height, Rosenberg declares:

[A]rtistic personalities who, in themselves, we are ready to promote at any time, but who have gathered the laurels of the November Republic, should no longer have the right to influence the art policy of the National Socialist movement for the purpose of allowing their old Jewish patrons to ensconce themselves once again in German artistic life as so-called "good, exceptional Jews."¹¹

The quote is striking both for the latitude of Rosenberg's view of the artists who were to be marked as "degenerate" and, relatedly, for how little the bottom line of questions of artistic policy have, on his account, to do with aesthetics: indeed, such questions are left curiously *open*.

Rosenberg's speech reveals, instead, a Nazi artistic policy compelled to illustrate Nazi historiography and racial policy. The art work's place as a political

10. Ibid., pp. 160–61.

11. Published the next year as "Weltanschauung und Kunst," in *Gestaltung der Idee, Blut und Ehre*, ed. Thilo von Trotha (Munich, 1936), and reprinted in Rosenberg, *Race and Race History and Other Essays*, pp. 164–65.

and temporal signifier short-circuits discussion of its aesthetic properties. Rosenberg confesses that the artistic personalities in question were “in themselves” promotable and presumably therefore German, “Aryan,” and potentially Nazi—in other words, that they possessed all of the qualities *Die Norden* found in Expressionist art.

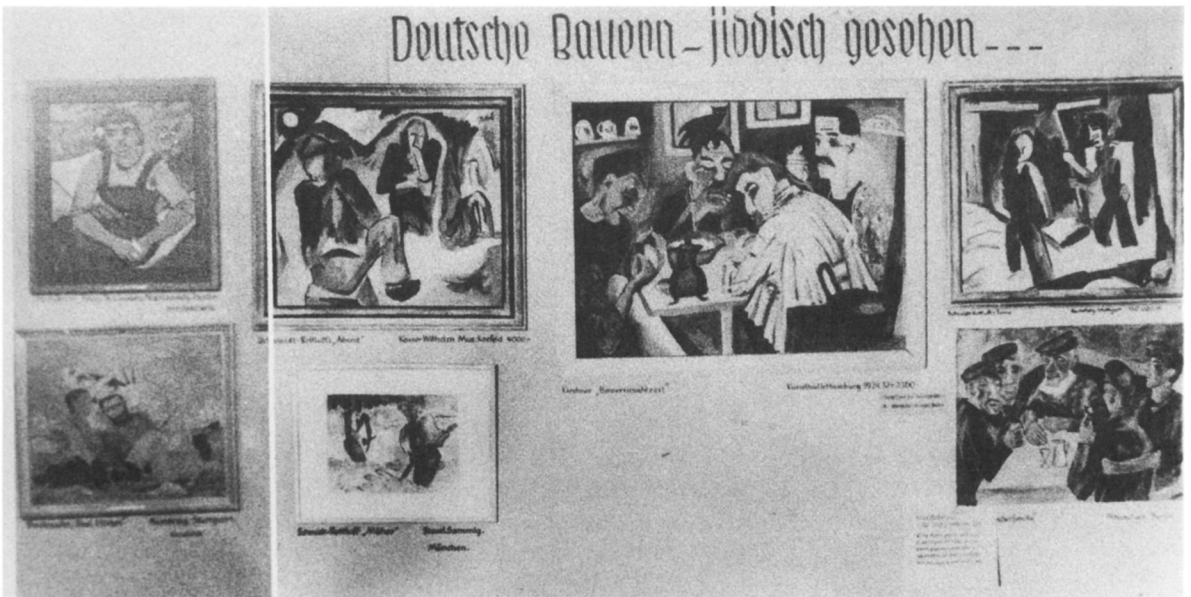
Rosenberg’s assertion that nevertheless the Nazi regime should not promote these artists rests quite explicitly on the need to negate the previous recognition afforded these artists during Weimar (the “November Republic”) and on the imperative to exclude Jews from German culture without exception. He thus also brings to light one of the distinguishing features of *Degenerate Art*’s ideology. German artists, as Germans, could not be wholly culpable for the “degenerate” art works they produced. Rosenberg suggests that, like the rest of the German nation, these artists (when they were not Jewish or Bolshevik) had simply been seduced by their “Jewish patrons” and betrayed by the “November criminals.”

It is therefore no surprise to find the presentational structure of *Degenerate Art* to be obsessively concerned with the apparatus of art dealers and art criticism. Although the concept of “degenerate art” was, for the Nazis, intrinsically “Jewish,” images of Jews and works by Jewish artists in the exhibition were few, and those on display were placed in a small, separate room. *Degenerate Art* emphasized, rather, the influence of Jewish critics and dealers. The Nazis prohibited art criticism in 1936, replacing it with “art description,” justifying the ban in the same terms as their justification of the exhibition: as popular emancipation from excessively foreign, Jewish influences, and as giving the public a chance to judge for themselves.

What this means, ironically enough, is that *Degenerate Art* is very much an exhibition of *words*. Specifically, it is largely an exhibition of quotations, most often extracts from works of art criticism that are meant to be revealed as false, absurd, when compared with the works to which they refer. These works are conveniently located next to the texts for the purpose of that comparison. Crucial to this comparative exercise are the other kind of words prominently on display in *Degenerate Art*: Nazi slogans that describe the works in question, dictate the “proper” meanings of the images, and prompt viewers to interpret the texts in question as either nonsense or swindle.

This performance of incomprehension in the face of art criticism masks the fact that Nazism, too, speaks a version of this language. Even the apparently most committed of anti-modernists, Alfred Rosenberg, speaks about this art in a manner sophisticated enough to reveal that he knows that paintings of blue horses need not be evidence of either artistic incompetence or defective eyesight. For the Nazis to exhibit *Degenerate Art* the way they do requires a disavowal of this knowledge. Further, calling for a demarcation of the boundary between “the arts of those days and the art of our days” demands, on Goebbels’ part, the willful forgetting of how even the propagandistic spectacle that stages and demarcates this boundary might in some sense be of “those” rather than “our” days. The exhibit therefore appears to provide a provocative political context in which to

View of the south wall of Room 3 of the Degenerate Art exhibition. Munich, 1937.



Section of the north wall of Room 3 of the Degenerate Art exhibition.

consider the implications of Judith Butler's suggestion that the abject is *that which is renounced as a possibility*, the specter of which threatens the subject with psychotic dissolution.¹² Read with an eye to the status of "Nordic Expressionism," *Degenerate Art* begins to look like a textual performance that is theatrical precisely to the extent that it forgets its very recent history.

Degenerate Christs

Working at this level of generality, the place of *Degenerate Art* within Nazi propaganda starts to look rather neat and easy to map out. But this map requires the overlooking of odd details, and reflections on the construction of certain objects as dirty or abject should be wary of a theory that puts everything into place. Although most of the works displayed were German Expressionist, telling the story of Expressionism does not tell the whole story of the exhibition. In particular, while an account of Expressionism under Nazism clarifies the performative *function* of the counter-exhibition, it does not tell us enough about that performance's structure and content.

In his speech to open *Degenerate Art*, Adolf Ziegler, who was responsible for the selection of works for both exhibitions, and whose triptych of nudes, *The Four Elements* (1936; later owned by Hitler), hung in *Great German Art* and contributed to his reputation as the "Master of German Pubic Hair," proclaimed that:

One has to be horrified, when, as an old soldier who served on the front, one sees how the German front-line soldier is spat upon and sullied, or when in other works the German mother is mocked by these swine as a lascivious whore or as a "real woman" with a facial expression of mindless imbecility, or when one sees how in a time during which the [Catholic] Center Party sat in government, public institutions could allow themselves to purchase so-called art works that ridiculed Christian symbols in a non-representational manner. *All in all one can say that everything sacred to a decent German was necessarily trampled into the dirt here.*¹³

Ziegler's statement proves to be the key to interpreting the contents of *Degenerate Art* in the light of its status as a counter-exhibition. If *Degenerate Art*, as Ziegler says, *necessarily* sullies everything the "decent German" holds sacred, its exhibition rooms should contain a kind of inverted guide to the Nazi sacred, a Nazi sacred that one might find displayed in *Great German Art*.

And the contents of the two exhibitions do reflect the relation that Ziegler describes: whenever something "holy to every decent German" is displayed as besmirched or polluted in the *Degenerate Art* exhibition, "cleansed" versions of the

12. See *Bodies That Matter* (New York: Routledge, 1993), especially p. 234.

13. *Die "Kunststadt" München 1937*, p. 218 (emphasis mine).

Ludwig Gies. Crucified Christ. 1921.



same icons appear in the *Great German Art* exhibition.¹⁴ Where *Degenerate Art* displays images labeled “Mockery of the German Woman Ideal: Cretin and Whore,” the House of German Art rescues the “woman ideal” through innumerable idealized mothers and countless allegorical nudes. Similarly, “degenerate” works deemed “Insulting of German Heroes of the World War” find their counterpart in the *Great German Art* exhibition’s images of soldiers and pilots preparing for battle and SS and SA men on the march. “German Farmers—Seen Yiddishly” are seen “properly” in *Great German Art* (indeed, farmers predominate among the professions represented here),¹⁵ and landscapes in *Degenerate Art* labeled “thus sick minds saw nature” are “cleansed” by the landscapes that constituted the majority of the images displayed in the House of German Art.

All of which is worth bearing in mind when we consider the first gallery of *Degenerate Art*, where in terms reminiscent of Ziegler’s speech a large wall text informs visitors: “Under the Catholic Center’s rule, impudent mockery of the God-experience.”¹⁶ The contents of the room are selected accordingly: with a single exception (Emil Nolde’s *Lost Paradise* [1921], displayed as *Adam and Eve*), every work in the large first gallery of *Degenerate Art* represents a scene from the

14. The *Degenerate Art* exhibition also constructs a series of “degenerate” attributes, which receive labels like: “Negro as racial ideal”; “Jewish, all-too-Jewish”; “Madness becomes method.”

15. Hildegard Brenner, *Die Kunstpolitik des Nationalsozialismus* (Reinbeck bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1963), p. 112.

16. “Unter der Herrschaft des Zentrums freche Verhöhnung des Gotterleben.”

Christian Gospels. The famous display of Ludwig Gies's *Crucified Christ* (1921; displayed as *Christ*), the first thing visitors saw when they entered the exhibition, is one of the more elaborately, even spectacularly, displayed elements of the entire show and in many ways representative of its techniques: the Nazis quote and ridicule a text praising *Crucified Christ*, and beneath the work itself stick a photograph of the sculpture as it was displayed in Lübeck's cathedral. Next to this photograph they attach a text that proclaims that this "horror" functioned in the cathedral as a "War Memorial to Heroes."

Thus the Nazis introduce their public to the concept of "degenerate art." They present this "sullied" religious imagery in a way that would lead one to expect that "cleansed" versions of these images would appear in the Nazis' Temple of Art. But here the symmetry that otherwise holds between the two exhibitions seems to break down: in the House of German Art there are no "cleansed" visions of the Christian Bible.

There is, it must be said, something puzzling about the Nazi focus on "mocking" images of Christ. Despite the complicity of the Christian church with some of the more heinous aspects of Nazi policy, and despite the anti-Semitic resources Christian dogma offered the National Socialists, significant political and ideological antagonism existed between Christian and Nazi institutions. Furthermore, the representation of Christ presented obvious problems for a state obsessed with "racial purity" and a solution to the "Jewish problem." Christ's "racial" status preoccupied the Nazis throughout the duration of their *Reich*. Evidence of continued attention to the issue of Christ's race as late in the game for the Nazis as 1944 indicates that the issue never gets resolved for them, nor can it simply be forgotten.¹⁷ Not knowing what to think nor what they wanted to think about Christ's "heritage," the Nazis continued to find him an ambivalent, troubling figure.

The only conceivable *Great German* parallels to *Degenerate Art's* images of Christ are the portraits there of *Nazism's* central object of devotion; when the "sullied" images of Christ are "cleansed" in the House of German Art they turn out to look like Hitler. The ten portraits and busts of Hitler that grace the *Great German Art* exhibition furnish its parallel to *Degenerate Art's* preoccupation with images of Christ and the New Testament.¹⁸ These representations of Hitler correspond to, even necessitate, the *counter-exhibition's* preoccupation with sacred experience and authority, and the proper attitude toward that authority. The Nazi investment in the symbolism of Christianity in *Degenerate Art* follows from the way the Nazis stage political power, and in particular, how they produce the *Führerkult*. Sacred symbolism is important to Nazism in a way that Christianity is not.

17. See *Die Bildenden Künste im Dritten Reich*, ed. Joseph Wulf (Gütersloh: Sigbert Mohn Verlag, 1963), p. 298.

18. Otto Thomae, *Die Propaganda-Maschinerie* (Berlin: Gebr. Mann Verlag, 1978). Thomae's figures do not include the countless medallions awarded during this exhibition that bore Hitler's image.

The hypothesis of a relationship between the exhibition of images of Hitler and those of Christ helps account for many peculiarities in *Degenerate Art's* presentation of religion. Whereas most of the *Degenerate Art* wall texts that describe trampled images of “what is holy to decent Germans” name icons—“German Heroes,” “German Woman Ideal,” “German Farmers”—Nazi references to New Testament images *avoid* referring to the (non-German) “Christ,” “Apostles,” and so on. The Nazis’ references are instead to the quality of iconicity or symbolism itself, upon which a “degenerate” outrage has been perpetrated. Thus Ziegler refers in his speech to Christian *symbols*, but does not say just which symbols are besmirched. Similarly, in the exhibition catalogue one finds comments like, “Any person of normal sensibilities . . . whatever his own religious allegiance . . . can only regard [these paintings] as a shameless *mockery of any religious idea*” (emphasis in the original). *Whatever* his allegiance; *any* religious idea: these are oddly ecumenical turns for a party that usually celebrates “fanatical” devotion to sacred tasks like art, politics, and war. The “degenerate” religious paintings are described as “figures of *Christian legend*” (emphasis in the original). Not Scripture or Holy Writ, but *legend*—as if the texts were simply a source of traditions and myths and did not have the status, for Christians, of divine revelation: “This is our oldest and most revered tale” not “This is the Word of the Lord.”

The language of the wall text in the “religion room”—“Under the Catholic Center’s rule, impudent mockery of the God-experience”—echoes Ziegler, but with a twist that most glaringly discloses the ambiguous role of Christian symbolism in this exhibition and its better fit with the Nazi sacralization of politics. The German compound word that I have translated as “the God-experience” is a neologism, *Gotterleben*. Ordinarily, if one were to speak of a divine experience in German, one would employ the term *Gotteserlebnis*: experience [*Erlebnis*] of God [*Gottes*, the genitive form of *Gott*]. It is a term that suggests a temporally circumscribed event that happens to one: the apprehension, mediated by the genitive case, *of* God, in whatever manifestation He chooses to appear. *Erleben*, on the other hand, is a rarely used noun form of a verb that means experience. *Erleben* compounds are scarce, but somewhat less so in Nazi German: the painter Wolfgang Willrich, for one, whose antimodernist tirade *Cleansing of the Art Temple* (1937) served as a blueprint for much of the *Degenerate Art* exhibition, employs them with alacrity, especially when referring to another sacred experience, that of art, which he calls *Kunsterleben*. Whereas an *Erlebnis* is of the moment, an *Erleben* implies a form of experiencing with mystical connotations more likely to emerge from an attitude of *sustained* devotion. Grammatically, *Gotterleben* also suggests a direct relation, God experienced without mediation (notice the absence of the genitive). Hence my rendering: “the God-experience.” An awkward translation, but all the more accurate for that awkwardness.

The best place to start looking for a parallel to this notion of *Gotterleben* in the exhibition of *Great German Art* is in a picture by Hermann Otto Hoyer that shows a young Adolf Hitler addressing an assembly in a small, dark room. Hoyer

depicts the direct experience of Hitler's presence as enjoyed by devoted party disciples, who mingle about him in the party meeting room unobstructed by crowds, platforms, technology, or SS guards. Why should we see this image as sacralizing? Hoyer calls the scene "In the Beginning Was the Word." In its inflated claims for the significance of its image, the bombastic, allegorical title is typical of Nazi-sanctioned works. Hoyer refers to the beginnings of National Socialism in language quite recognizably borrowed from the Christian Scriptures' Gospel of John. A wall text like *Degenerate Art's* "Under the Catholic Center's rule, impudent mockery of the God-experience" translates religion into the language of politics; here—and, by extension, in all of the images of Hitler in the Nazi Art Temple—this relationship is inverted and politics is transposed into the language of the Christian sacred.

Hoyer's image is representative of the notion of unmediated, holy experience embodied in the Hitler myth. The importance of messianic imagery for Nazi myths of national rebirth (palingenesis) becomes quickly apparent upon even the most cursory examination of Nazi propaganda. In the opening scene of Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* (1935), for example, as film scholars from Erwin Leiser on have remarked, Hitler is shown as descending, Messiah-like, to earth from the heavens.¹⁹ Films such as Riefenstahl's, mass party rallies, and radio broadcasts provided a *sense* of immediacy, a sense of direct access to Hitler, even though Hitler's presence was always, quite literally, mediated, channeled through various media: an *Erlebnis* presented as an *Erleben*. As Hitler himself put it at the 1936 Nuremberg party rally: "Not all of you can see me, and I cannot see all of you. But I feel you, and you feel me!"²⁰

At stake in the Munich *Degenerate Art* exhibition, then, is not Christ as icon, but the aura of Christ's image. The Nazis' construction there of "mocking" images of Christ almost literally mirrors—reflects and inverts—the utopian, messianic project of National Socialist propaganda. The Nazis' linguistic vagueness in their defense of Christianity reflects their shuttling between the appeal to entrenched Christian tradition as a repository of sacred icons and populist sentiment, and their ideological antipathy to actual Christian belief and institutions (tellingly enough, neo-Nazis in Germany today wear T-shirts with the slogan "Odin instead of Jesus"). Like the aura of the work of art (which Walter Benjamin derives from the ritual value of objects), religious aura is invoked nostalgically under National Socialism as part of its "conservative revolution" in order to serve the legitimation of something new: the palingenesis of the German nation under fascist dictatorship. Within *Degenerate Art*, New Testament images point us simultaneously toward the instrumentalization of Christian motifs and sentiments for Nazi political purposes (typically through the Nazis' unveiling of "mockeries") and the use of Christian

19. *Nazi Cinema*, trans. Gertrud Mauder and David Wilson (New York: Collier, 1975).

20. Adolf Hitler, *Hitler: Reden und Proklamationen 1932–1945*, ed. Max Domarus (Wiesbaden, 1973), vol. 1, p. 641; cited in Reichel, *Der schöne Schein des Dritten Reiches*, pp. 142–43.

motifs and imagery in the display of Hitler himself as a politician who transcends politics.²¹

National Socialism's aestheticization of politics revolves around the experience of Hitler's charismatic presence: the sacralization of his body and his voice. No wonder, then, that the experience of Hitler, a virtual *Hitler-erleben*, is the Nazis' "decent" substitute for the so-called impudent mockery of the *Gottesleben* and that, conversely, among all of the images of "what is holy to decent Germans" the image of Hitler is the only image that cannot be (seen to be) trodden into the dirt, the one truly taboo image in an array of purported transgressions.

Where's Heartfield?

The Nazis use representations of Christ to displace anxieties about their *Führer's* image and aura. Thus, even though the layout of the first gallery of *Degenerate Art* has less to do with its ostensible theme—modernist mockery of the New Testament—than with issues of political representation and political experience, the room is filled with Nolde's paintings of Christ from 1910 to 1912 and not John Heartfield's satirical photomontages of Hitler and his cronies from the late 1920s and early 1930s—"Impudent Mockery of the Hitler-experience" if ever there was! But this raises further questions: Wasn't the point of *Degenerate Art* to put on show and thus to contain the power of "dangerous" representations such as Heartfield's? Evidently, some images are more taboo than others, but wherein lies the difference?

Appealing to a taboo on negative images of Hitler does not, for instance, solve the larger puzzle of why Heartfield's other works, those less directly offensive to the *Führerprinzip* and lacking the faces of any party members at all, are also missing from the exhibition. Heartfield's name appears only once in *Degenerate Art*: as the "comonteur" (with George Grosz) of the April 1920 cover of *Der Dada Nr. 3*. Heartfield's work was well-known to the Nazi cultural establishment and he himself was familiar enough as part of the group of artists and writers—including both his friend Grosz and his brother, Wieland Herzfelde—who came under attack in *Degenerate Art* to warrant, on the face of it, extensive inclusion in the exhibition. Not that inclusion is a perverse sign of modernist merit, but a certain milieu, of which Heartfield was a prominent part, was under concerted assault in *Degenerate Art*, and yet his name and work were essentially invisible there.

The absence of Heartfield's work from the *Degenerate Art* exhibition is a telling omission bound up with the fact that his photomontages are designed for mechanical reproduction, popular consumption, and "enlightenment." Their inclusion in the counter-exhibition would have demanded changing the central

21. In light of such considerations it is worth asking how a collection of Nazi-approved Christian iconography would change the way we think about Nazi ideology. How would it have affected the public image of Hitler—himself ostensibly the savior of the German people—to have (Judaic) messianic competition in the House of German Art?



Heartfield. "The meaning of the Hitler salute: Little man asks for big gifts. Motto: Millions stand behind me!" Arbeiter-Illustrierte Zeitung 11, no. 42. 1932.

targets of the Munich exhibition from the Weimar art world to the communist press and would have at least implicitly exposed the technological and comparative means by which the notion of "degenerate art" itself is constructed for the German public.

Goebbels' mandate for the *Degenerate Art* exhibition charges Ziegler to expropriate "degenerate" works purchased by German museums after 1910; it does not cover images published in the press. The absence of the photomontages Heartfield produced for the communist press thus reminds us, first of all, that the Munich *Degenerate Art* exhibition is largely about art institutions and their administration. We see this most conspicuously in the large red stickers that were placed under most of the works announcing "Paid for with the hard-earned wages of German working *Volk*." Accompanying the red stickers were labels disclosing what had been paid for the objects, figures that could appear astronomically high if the purchase had been made during the German hyperinflation of the early 1920s.

The stickers provide a point of identification—with the “German working *Volk*”—from which viewers could “judge for themselves” whether the works in question (displayed as “mockeries” of sacred German icons and celebrations of “degenerate” ideals) bore either some generalizable use-value or an immediately recognizable “spiritual” value commensurate with the price on the tag. The stickers work, in short, to reconfigure the objects in question as overpriced commodities and to divest them of the auratic effects of institutional consecration, relocating them outside the domain of artistic tradition and into that of state administration.

The Nazis attribute blame for this misspending of the hard-working German *Volk*'s wages quite specifically, with interesting consequences for the staging of the exhibition. Much of the first downstairs room of *Degenerate Art*, for example, is devoted to an attack on the Dresden City Museum's former director, Paul Ferdinand Schmidt.²² Most striking about the hanging is an arrangement of paintings confiscated from that museum: the pictures literally surround a wall text that attributes the decision to buy them to “Dr. P. F. Schmidt.” The works serve, in other words, as illustrations of his purchasing policy: the “attribution” of these pictures not to individual artists, but to the museum's long-since fired director is the corollary of the Rosenbergian notion that the artists themselves were somehow “innocent” victims of the machinations of the art world.

To the extent that *Degenerate Art* is simply an assault on the museum and its power to consecrate works of art, it has more in common with the avant-garde of the early twentieth century than with, say, the cultural reaction of the French Academy's anti-Impressionism in the years of Impressionism's rise: less a failure to grant recognition to an emergent mode of representation than a concerted attempt to strip works *already recognized as art* of their consecrated status. After all, avant-garde movements such as Marinetti's Futurism and much of Dadaism are also dedicated to the elimination of the museum and its contents. Yet unlike the early avant-garde, as the celebration of the monumental House of German Art reminds us, the Nazis do not attack museums *as such*. They attack museums only insofar as museums are not National Socialist “art temples.” Their concentrated assault on Schmidt shows that, as problematic as the Nazis find the state of the institution of art in the early twentieth century, they do not critique the institution itself. Furthermore, their attempt to “make strange” curatorial decisions and purchases is not self-reflexive: there is no invitation within *Degenerate Art* to reflect on how the works for *this* exhibition were selected and presented, nor to question the authority of those responsible for doing so. Nor are the works of art in the House of German Art displayed with red stickers, although they, too, are presumably purchased with the taxes of the “German working *Volk*” (when not with funds

22. Earlier the pictures displayed in this room were part of a “Dresden Chamber of Horrors,” a traveling exhibition and precursor to *Degenerate Art* organized by the Fighting League for German Culture. See von Lüttichau and Christoph Zuschlag's articles in *“Degenerate Art”: The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany*, ed. Stephanie Barron (New York: Harry Abrams; Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1991).

seized from Jews). According to Ernst Bloch, the House of German Art alone cost nine million marks.²³

In contrast to the “degenerate” works, Heartfield’s photomontages for *The Club*, *The Red Flag*, and the *Workers’ Illustrated News (AIZ)* were not readily susceptible to the anti-institutional mode of attack. They were not purchased through taxes. *Texts* from aesthetically and politically oriented journals show up in *Degenerate Art*, but very few *visual* images from the press appear. Press excerpts are usually used to show what avant-gardists and “art-bolshevists” say about art, politics, and the bourgeoisie, and to demonstrate how modernist art gets into the museums in the first place. The privileged *images*, however, are the ones from the museums: paintings, drawings, and sculptures. Magazines and newspapers lie outside the domain from which the Nazis could strip institutional aura: they belong to the world of mechanical reproducibility.

All of which brings us to the second ground for the exclusion of John Heartfield’s montages from *Degenerate Art*, namely, that Heartfield works principally with photography. There are no artistic photographs in either of the parallel exhibitions. Photographs depicting “degenerate” works and artists are displayed in *Degenerate Art*, but they *document* the condition rather than serve as examples of it. Nevertheless, a particular notion, and a particular exploitation, of photographic representation and comparison is crucial to Nazi constructions of the “degenerate” and to the logic of the *Degenerate Art/ Great German Art* spectacle.

To see how this works we need to consider the broader context of Nazi campaigns against modernist art in Germany. Take the work of the Fighting League for German Culture’s leading spokesman and lecturer, Paul Schultze-Naumburg. In *Art and Race* (1928), he tries to show

how the peoples of predominantly northern feeling, or the peoples led by a Nordic upper strata, had created a canon for themselves that corresponded to the ideal corporeality of the Nordic type, and how this canon exercised its power, to a greater or lesser extent, upon foreigners [*Andersartigen*: literally, people of other kinds].²⁴

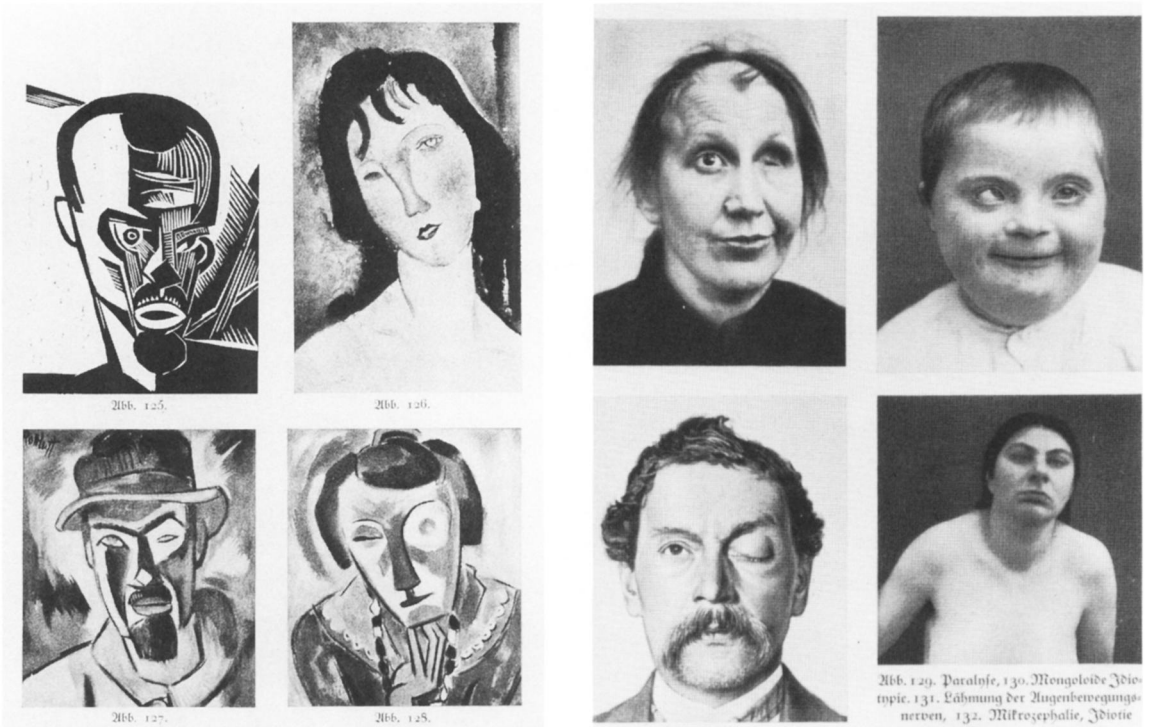
The examples Schultze-Naumburg provides of artistic representations that “correspond to the corporeality of the Nordic people” are, for the most part, *portraits* (he favors works by Rubens, Raphael, Rembrandt, Michelangelo, and Botticelli): faces or “physiognomies” of artists and types whose characteristics correspond to those promoted by Nazi racial ideals. Schultze-Naumburg demonstrates ideal corporeality through the photographic reproduction and manipulation of these works, cropping the images he selects to show how particular body parts—especially legs and hands—are crafted.

23. *Heritage of Our Times*, trans. Neville and Stephen Plaice (Oxford: Polity Press, 1991), p. 77.

24. Paul Schultze-Naumburg, *Kunst und Rasse* (Berlin/Munich: J. F. Lehmann’s Verlag, 1938), p. 125.

Juxtaposition of works of “degenerate” art by Karl Schmidt-Rottluff and Amedeo Modigliani and photographs of facial deformities. From Paul Schultze-Naumburg, Kunst und Rasse. 1928.

Photography comes more strikingly to the fore, however, in his examples of the “people of other kinds.” Ten pages of *Art and Race* juxtapose works by, among others, Picasso, Schmidt-Rottluff, Modigliani, and Nolde with photographs of people whose features are, for want of a better way to put it, grossly deformed.²⁵ The photographs are meant to document the affinity of modernist portraits with the bodies of “degenerates” and thus, according to Schultze-Naumburg’s theory, to show the deleterious effects of modernist art upon the health of the “Nordic race.” For Schultze-Naumburg, the loss of the artistic canon’s centeredness upon



Nordic corporeality leads to the contamination and degeneration of both art and race—actually, of course, not a *lost* center, but a fantasy of loss in the interests of a criticism of the present. Recall Walter Benjamin on mechanical reproducibility: “The technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition.” Schultze-Naumburg’s juxtaposition strips the reproduced works of their aura by detaching them from the domain of artistic tradition and *relocating* them alongside scientific photographs: the work of art is no longer a token of the tradition of which it is a part but a document of a pathological physical condition.

25. Ibid., pp. 114–23.

Yet Schultze-Naumburg's treatment of the moderns is not *unequivocally* as ahistorical as the pathologization of these works implies. The reproductions of objects by revered "old masters" comprise, if you will, a Schultze-Naumburgian artistic tradition, albeit of a highly selective, hermetically sealed, and racist sort, but all the more effective as propaganda for that. In its use of selected and cropped images, *Art and Race* presents artistic tradition as something immediately self-evident and assumes modernist portraiture's deviation from this tradition to be equally visible to the "untrained eye." *Art and Race's* presentation of modernist works derives its force not only from the comparisons with medical photographs, but also from the contrast of these reproductions of modernist works and medical cases with the pages of representational European portraiture—purported examples of the "ideal corporeality of the Nordic type"—that precede them.

Scholars of Nazi cultural policy tend to interpret Nazi aesthetics as regressive, as bourgeois insistences on representational realism and appeals to images that correlate directly to realities: Georg Bussman and Franz Roh are good examples of this tendency.²⁶ The tendency is a good one because it is justified, as we have seen, by what the Nazis *say* about art (Schultze-Naumburg's theory of the racial function of canonical art), by some of the limits the Nazis impose around even the concept of *Degenerate Art* (the prohibition on Hitler's portrait), and, indeed, by their general preoccupation with portraiture. But the *tools* of this reactionary aesthetics—what the Nazis use to go about documenting their case *against* modernist art—are timely enough, and it is through the use of these contemporary techniques that the exhibition creates its propaganda and constructs modernist art as "dirt" within the environment of the National Socialist state. Whatever Schultze-Naumburg's aesthetic ideology, his *methodology* is up-to-date with the concerns of the European intellectual vanguard. The year of *Art and Race's* first publication, 1928, is (as Walter Grasskamp points out)²⁷ also the year of Paul Valéry's *La Conquête de l'Ubiquité*, which discussed emergent techniques for the reproduction of art, and which eight years later provided the epigraph to Benjamin's reflections on the work of art in the age of its mechanical reproducibility. It is also the time of Siegfried Kracauer's reflections "On Photography" (1927) and of the exploration of photography in Surrealism in general and André Breton's *Nadja* (1928) in particular. Thus, the most advanced theoretical and artistic movements and what one might call the *musée dégénérée* converge in their interest in the uses and consequences of technical reproduction for art.

Schultze-Naumburg's work is an immensely influential and far from isolated instance of the fascist use of photographic comparison to discredit modernist art. National Socialist newspapers take advantage of the same technical capacities when they compare modernist works with those sanctioned by the state, including

26. See Roh, *"Entartete Kunst": Kunstbarbarei im Dritten Reich* (Hannover: Fackelträger-Verlag, 1967).

27. Walter Grasskamp, "'Degenerate Art' and Documenta I: Modernism Ostracized," trans. Michael Shae, in *Museum Culture: Histories, Discourses, Spectacles*, ed. Daniel J. Sherman and Irit Rogoff (Minnesota: University of Minneapolis, 1994).



ADOLF, DER UBERMENSCH: Schluckt Gold und redet Blech

Heartfield. "Adolf, the Superman: Swallows gold and spits out tin-plate." Arbeiter-Illustrierte Zeitung 11, no. 29. 1932.

works that appear in the *Great German Art* exhibition.²⁸ Yet despite the use of photographic reproduction to promote the art they sanctioned, the Nazis did not appear to regard photomontage as art, and especially not as art they could display as "degenerate." We are now closer to understanding why.

Reproducibility is not an unstated assumption in Heartfield's work: it is explicitly articulated. Nor does Heartfield conceal photography's malleability, the freedom that photography affords one to confound the line between image and reality, a freedom afforded by the commonsense intuition that what photography

28. For example, in the *Rheinische-Westfälische Zeitung*, March 29, 1936, paintings by Baumeister, Ernst, and Grosz are contrasted with landscapes by Nazi art professors; in the *Hessische Landeszeitung*, January 30, 1937, an article on four years of Nazi cultural policy compares works by Klee and Etienne Beothy with a painting of a farmer by Hermann Tiebert that appeared in the first *Great German Art* exhibition; and *Der S.A. Mann*, May 22, 1937, juxtaposes works by moderns including Felixmüller and Gies with "several artworks by practically unknown men from the S.A."



*Photograph of visitors in Room 3
of the Degenerate Art exhibition.*

represents *is* reality. Whereas propagandists like Schultze-Naumburg employ photography's "reality effect" to appeal to the self-evidence of the visible, Heartfield's work embraces this effect in order to undermine it and to create images of otherwise invisible social facts like Hitler's connection to big business and his relationship to the violence carried out by other hands under his orders and in his name. What could the Nazis say against photographic images that show Hitler swallowing gold or raising his hand in the Nazi greeting, only this time in order to accept big business's money? The same language that would explain how gold going down Hitler's throat is a manipulation of images logically also raises questions about the legitimacy of running a Picasso up against a case of elephantiasis and saying that the Picasso and the photograph show the same thing. Both Heartfield *and* Schultze-Naumburg take advantage of the freedom photography provides to put images of different things from different worlds onto the same scale and to suggest that they are related. But by pointing this out with respect to

Heartfield, the Nazis' own use of photography to appeal to "empirical reality" would lose its qualities of familiarity and self-evidence. Since Heartfield's works take advantage of precisely the same technologies and illusions as the Nazis themselves exploit, his work may have some immunity to their techniques of devaluation.

Heartfield's exploitation of reproducibility in his work is bound up with his insistence that he too was making populist political propaganda. The photomontages are specifically designed for reproduction, designed to appear on walls next to other political posters and in newsstands next to other publications. Even when his photomontages were exhibited for their own sake, as works of art, Heartfield insisted that copies of the publications they appeared in be put on show beside the "original" photomontage, to remind viewers of the ease with which each image could be and had been repeatedly reproduced, even as they could see for themselves each instance of cutting and pasting that went into the original's construction.²⁹ The *Degenerate Art* exhibition, itself a propaganda exercise, interprets much of modernist art as propaganda, but it rests on the gesture of *unmasking* it as such: this is Nazi propaganda's dynamic element. Art, like Heartfield's, that makes no secret of its identity as political propaganda cannot be unmasked in the same way.

There is, perhaps, something troubling about the assumption that the Nazis would not want to contradict themselves, would not want to criticize someone for doing what they themselves do. They seem most likely not to care about consistency so long as the contradiction remains unstated, and so long as the symbolic foundation of Nazi power, the *Führerprinzip*, remains untouched. But that is precisely what Heartfield's photomontages do. They put Hitler into contact with those very things that his identity as "clean and proper," as beyond politics, requires him to be distanced from or ignorant of: namely, calculated political deals, money and business, blood and corpses.

The abjection of Heartfield's photomontages for the Nazis rests on the issue of representation; the abjection of the works they exhibited in *Degenerate Art* rests, rather, on the issue of *interpretation*. Examining the contents of *Degenerate Art* as a counter-exhibition, as examples of the Nazis' expertise in propaganda rather than their ignorance about modernist art, foregrounds the historico-political notion that organizes the exhibit: the Nazis present *Degenerate Art* as the symptomatic product of a contaminated political past, one they continue to purge with just such exhibitions. But this historical contextualization is also, for the Nazis, the *solution* to the interpretive questions and ambiguities that modernist art, especially German Expressionism, presents Nazi ideology with in the first place: abjection, Kristeva insists, is above all ambiguity.³⁰ If we are to see *Degenerate Art* as a source of abjection for the Nazis, we cannot look past their need to reduce and

29. Dawn Ades, *Photomontage* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1993), p. 43.

30. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 9.

restrict the meanings attached to a range of objects that were the source of interpretive dissonances and thus a threat to the fantasy of a univocal *Volksgemeinschaft*: the *Degenerate Art* exhibition realizes in spectacular form what the ban on art criticism had made law the year before. The purportedly historical focus of the exhibition therefore underpins the “forgetting” of historical knowledge implicit in the Nazis’ staged incomprehension of (and consequent “incompetence” in the face of) the art criticism and works exhibited as “degenerate.”

But just how convincing a performance is *Degenerate Art*? Goebbels saw the show’s gargantuan visitor statistics as *in themselves* proof of the exhibition’s success. But why were these numbers more significant to him than, say, intelligence reports on what people were actually saying about the art? If we understand the *Degenerate Art* exhibition as a political event on a par with Nazi party rallies and festivals, then we can infer that more important for the Nazis than the sight of the art on display inside the exhibition itself is the spectacle made by the constant stream of visitors that crowd through it, witnessing *themselves* as horrified “decent Germans” and deceived “German working *Volk*” invited to “judge for themselves” under what the Ministry for Public Enlightenment and Propaganda had ensured were precisely the kinds of conditions that make autonomous reflection impossible.