
THE FORMATION OF NATIONAL SOCIALIST ART DISCOURSE AMID CONFLICTS

A CURATORIAL PERSPECTIVE ON
THE 1937 "ENTARTETE KUNST" EXHIBITION



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To my mother, for her unwavering love and support.

And to my father, who awakened my curiosity about history and taught me how to question, research, and think beyond isolated facts.

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Abstract

This thesis analyzes the formation of National Socialist art discourse as a contested and unstable process shaped by ideological conflict, institutional rivalry, and curatorial practice, focusing on the 1937 *Entartete Kunst* exhibition. Departing from interpretations that characterize Nazi art policy as monolithic or uniformly anti-modern, the study argues that National Socialist cultural ideology emerged through competing aesthetic positions and unresolved tensions between political authority and artistic form.

Adopting a curatorial and discourse-analytical perspective, the thesis examines exhibitions as sites of ideological negotiation rather than mere instruments of propaganda. It traces the intellectual genealogy of *Entartung* (degeneration), the transformation of museum practices in the Third Reich, and the succession of degenerate art exhibitions preceding 1937. Central to this analysis is the ideological struggle between Alfred Rosenberg and Joseph Goebbels, through which cultural policy was articulated, contested, and reconfigured. A case study of Emil Nolde reveals the paradox of a modernist artist who sought ideological alignment with National Socialism yet was ultimately marginalized by the very cultural project he supported.

The thesis contends that the *Entartete Kunst* exhibition did not resolve the regime's aesthetic contradictions but instead exposed the limits of authoritarian cultural control. Its extraordinary public reception—especially when contrasted with the comparatively modest success of the *Grosse Deutsche Kunstausstellung*—reveals the structural instability of National Socialist efforts to construct a coherent national art discourse.

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Introduction

The National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP) emerged as the leading party in the general elections of 31 July 1932 and came to power with Adolf Hitler's appointment as Chancellor on 30 January 1933. On 24 March 1933, the Reichstag voted on the *Gesetz zur Behebung der Not von Volk und Reich* (Enabling Act), granting Hitler extraordinary powers and effectively marking the end of the Weimar Republic and the beginning of the Third Reich.

Nevertheless, National Socialist organizational structures and ideological activity in social and cultural spheres had begun well before the party's accession to power. National Socialist worldview posited a close and intrinsic relationship between politics and culture, which led to the attribution of exceptional importance to the arts. Cultural and social "degeneration" was identified as a primary cause of Germany's perceived decline, and responsibility for this degeneration was assigned to communists, Marxists, and Jews. Within this framework, modernism was interpreted as the artistic manifestation of degeneration. For the supposed benefit of the German *Volk*, it was argued that art must be purified of modernist tendencies and reoriented toward a traditionalist aesthetic.

Yet the formation of National Socialist art policy cannot be understood as the product of a unified or consensual ideological position. On the contrary, it was shaped by numerous contradictions and conflicts—some ideological, others personal or institutional. Understanding these tensions is essential for evaluating both the cultural policies of the period and the actions undertaken in their name.

This thesis examines the development of National Socialist art discourse through these contradictions, key figures, and pivotal events, culminating in a curatorial analysis of the 1937 exhibition *Die Ausstellung "Entartete Kunst"* (Degenerate Art Exhibition). The study is structured around several interconnected themes: the ideological and institutional conflict between Alfred Rosenberg and Joseph Goebbels; the intellectual foundations of the concept of *Entartung* (degeneration); the condition and

transformation of art museums under the Third Reich; the smaller degenerate art exhibitions preceding 1937; and the case of Emil Nolde, one of the most controversial artistic figures of both the Nazi and post-Nazi periods.

Accordingly, the cultural organization and intellectual background of National Socialist art rhetoric from the mid-1920s to 1937 are examined to provide the necessary historical and ideological framework for a critical analysis of the *Entartete Kunst* exhibition.

Early National Socialist Cultural Ideology: Alfred Rosenberg and *KfDK*

In order to understand the formation and transformation of the National Socialist cultural ideology, it is crucial to perceive the early art rhetoric. One of the key figures to examine, that took a huge role from the very beginning until the end, was Alfred Rosenberg.

Alfred Rosenberg was a Baltic German who was the creator of Nazi ideology and racial theory and one of the few key figures who intellectually developed National Socialist philosophy. Rosenberg studied architecture in Moscow, settled in Munich in 1918, and became a member of the *NSDAP* in 1919. In 1923, he became the chief editor of *Völkischer Beobachter* - the Nazi newspaper which was donated to Adolf Hitler by Rudolf von Sebottendorf.¹ Through the newspaper, Rosenberg began to publicize his ideas about superiority of the Aryan race, predominantly inspired by the scientific racist Houston Stewart Chamberlain. The racial theories of Chamberlain, Joseph Arthur de Gobineau and Hans Günther influenced Rosenberg in the process of building the concept of racial superiority in Nazi Germany. Especially in the 1910s, the idea of racism was growing popular between the middle class and by the 1920s, certain claims began to be made that racial characteristics and art were interconnected.²

¹ Robert S. Wistrich, *Who's Who in Nazi Germany?* (2002), 209.

² Stephanie Barron, "1937 Modern Art and Politics in Prewar Germany", in *Degenerate Art: The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany* (1991), 11.

Rosenberg, after participating in *Hitlerputsch*, left the party for a short time due to disagreements with people of rank within *NSDAP*. In 1924, Rosenberg founded the *Großdeutsche Volksgemeinschaft, GVG*, a Nazi front organization, however after the disappointing results at the elections of 1928, he decided to compose a new formation called *Kampfbund für deutsche Kultur, KfdK* - Combat League for German Culture in 1929.³ *KfdK* is one of the most concrete examples of the organization of national socialist ideology in the field of culture, started apart yet later on worked openly under the auspices of the party. The main purpose of *KfdK* was to Nazify the social life in the III.Reich. *KfdK* sought to extinguish the “degenerate” and “foreign” influences in the field of culture and replace them with *Völkisch*, racist principles.⁴ They claimed only pure Aryan artists who practice within classic, nationalist and anti-modernist guidelines could be a part of the art world in the III.Reich. They named the enemy as *Kulturbolschewismus* (cultural Bolshevism)” which was a propaganda term used by Nazis to assault liberal, modernist tendencies that were growing in the Weimar Republic. Regarding that, Marxist and Jewish existence was demonized in cultural life. All forms of art or creative production got their share of this aggression, from music to architecture. Therebeside, *KfdK* played a crucial role in the popularizing of national socialist ideas in the cultural field.⁵ Due to its emergence as a separate organization from the *NSDAP*, they managed to receive the support and even membership of important figures from different artistic fields who had been staying away from national socialism. Membership of academicians was particularly valuable, as it enabled them to seize the opportunity to master and penetrate the mindset within universities. By the beginning of 1930, 12% of the members were academicians, including many important names such as Othmar Spann, Philip Lenard and Paul-Schultze Naumburg.⁶ While some members or sympathizers later also joined the *NSDAP*, some, although having nationalist opinions, kept standing apart from the Nazis such as composer Hans Pfitzner and writer Ernst Bertram. Through *KfdK*, Rosenberg managed to reach many intellectuals however it was not enough to reach the masses. Therefore, he used the

³ Robert S. Wistrich, *Who's Who in Nazi Germany?* (2002), 209.

⁴ Michael Meyer, “A Musical Facade for the Third Reich”, in *Degenerate Art: The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany* (1991), 172.

⁵ Jonathan Petropoulos, *Art as Politics in the Third Reich* (1996), 29.

⁶ Eralp Osman Erden, *Nasyonal Sosyalizmin Alman Sanatına Yansıması* (2004), 20.

Völkischer Beobachter. Starting from 1928, the newspaper began to publish exhibition reviews that were relatively soft and reasonable nonetheless, by 1930, their assailant position against modern art appeared visibly. The year 1930 was also the year that Rosenberg published his famous book “*Der Mythos des zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts. Eine Wertung der seelisch-geistigen Gestaltenkämpfe*” (The Myth of the Twentieth Century. An Evaluation of the spiritual-intellectual confrontations of our age).⁷ As one of the most-selling books in Germany during Nazi period, it was seen as a guide for socio-cultural composition that was intended to be built in Nazi Germany. However, it was often mocked by many high-ranked Nazis, including Hitler because of its extremely dense and obscure style of writing, though his over mystical, pseudo-philosophical theories were often seen as too abstract and superficial. Rosenberg had the most eccentric claims like “*Aryan Nordic race had produced not only the German cathedrals but also Greek sculptures and the masterpieces of Italian Renaissance.*”⁸

The activities in the field of arts and culture were not limited to visual arts only. Music was also seen as a propaganda tool to build a new nationalistic identity by the Nazis, as an example, Hitler always admired Richard Wagner as an ideological culture revolutionist and even once said that Wagner was his only predecessor. Through Houston Stewart Chamberlain, he got the chance for the first time to enter *Haus Wahnfried*, the house of Richard Wagner in Bayreuth, almost one month before *Der Bierhallputsch*.⁹ (The Beer Hall Putsch) Houston Stewart Chamberlain was married to Wagner’s daughter Eva, he highly influenced the Nazi ideology, especially Rosenberg, in terms of Aryan heroism but also Hitler in terms of internalizing the idea of the spiritual mission of the German *Volk*. At the same time, he admired Adolf Hitler and for that, he tried to consolidate his intellectual circle to support him. In fact, he even called him a *Lichtgestalt* (Figure of light) while quoting his words that openly confronted Marxism and Jews. Such that, he said “*Dieser Mann hat gewirkt wie ein Gottessegen.*”¹⁰ (This man had the effect of a divine benediction.) Correspondingly, the group of *Wagnerians* were eloquently represented in *KfdK*, where one of the most active

⁷ Jonathan Petropoulos, *Art as Politics in the Third Reich* (1996), 30.

⁸ Lynn H. Nicholas, “*The Rape of Europa*”: *The Fate of Europe's Treasures in the Third Reich and the Second World War* (1994), 8

⁹ Albrecht Dümmling, *Art, Culture, and Media under the Third Reich* (2002), 50.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 51.

members was Hans Severus Ziegler. Hans Severus Ziegler was a prominent name in Nazi Party, he joined the *NSDAP* in 1925 and was the editor of the weekly newspaper *Der Nationalsozialist*, the Nazi Party organ in Thüringen state. Between 1925 and 1931, he served as deputy *Gauleiter* (Provincial Governor in Nazi Government) in Thüringen where he had an organizational role in the regional branch of *KfdK*. Under the guidance of Ziegler, there were also notable sanctions in the field of music. Certain restrictions and bans were imposed for the foreign-influenced music styles, especially jazz music, which was openly attacked with the enactment “*Wider die Negerkultur for deutsches Volkstum*” (Against Negro Culture, for the German Heritage). *KfdK*, even before 1933, together with *SA* (Sturmabteilung) organized rallies and protests in Thüringen, in the concerts of modernists composers and musicians like Ernst Krenek and Igor Stravinsky who were labeled as “musical Bolsheviks” by Ziegler.¹¹

Thüringen as a Model Nazi State

Thüringen has a historical importance as the first German state with Nazi governmental influence. In 1930, a coalition government was formed with the partaking of *NSDAP*. Wilhelm Frick, who later had the role of *Reichminister des Innern* (Reichsminister of Interior) from 1933 to 1943, was elected as *Innenminister*. (Minister of Interior and Education). Therefore, Thüringen became the first place in Germany where Nazis had the opportunity to put their theory on education and culture into practice thus it could be seen as a sneak preview of how the cultural life in the Third Reich would look like.¹² Frick started his duty by replacing the directors of most of the departments inside the local government and, most importantly, interfered with the management and policies of the private and public institutions such as universities, theaters and museums. The most striking of his actions in the field of art education was the effort to erase the memory of the Bauhaus school in Weimar. Even though the Bauhaus school was already moved to

¹¹ Ibid., 52.

¹² Stephanie Barron, “1937 Modern Art and Politics in Prewar Germany”, in *Degenerate Art: The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany* (1991), 12.

Dessau by 1925 because of the increasing criticism and pressure, the influence was still visible in the city of Weimar and especially in the art schools and institutions. Wilhelm Frick removed or forcefully transferred the academicians and teachers who had connections or even sympathy for Bauhaus values. Thus, many works of Bauhaus artists in the city were destroyed, such as the murals of Oskar Schlemmer.¹³ Concordantly, in 1930 shortly after his joining the *NSDAP*, Paul Schultze-Naumburg was appointed as the director of the *Weimar Hochschule für Baukunst* (Weimar College of Architecture), which was the successor of Bauhaus school. Schultze-Naumburg was a known architect who was one of the founding members of *Deutscher Werkbund*, which appeared early in 1907 as a modernist art and design movement. *Deutscher Werkbund* was a substantial progressive association that can be seen as the paving for the Bauhaus movement. Back then, Schultze-Naumburg was a supporter of modernist architecture, and his racial thoughts hadn't transpired yet. In the pre-war period, his concerns were primarily moral and cultural traditionalism and conservation of traditional arts and crafts. However, after the First World War, like many others, his ideas also radicalized. He shifted himself towards the nationalist, anti-modernist side and espoused *Völkisch* standards. Hence, in 1928 he published his book *Kunst und Rasse* (Art and Race) which would later turn into a highly significant propaganda work for Nazi cultural policy. In the book, he claimed that modern art is "degeneration" whereas classic art is "pure" and "healthy". He asserted a connection between classic art and "Nordic beauty" as the form of "Aryan aesthetics" through selected artworks. The high point of the book was the part where he placed some photos of disabled or mentally ill people next to modernist artworks in order to contend a resemblance between them and strengthen the idea of "health" in art. However, this approach was not his own.

¹³ Lynn H. Nicholas, "*The Rape of Europa*": *The Fate of Europe's Treasures in the Third Reich and the Second World War* (1994), 9

Entartung

In 1922 Hans Prinzhorn, a German psychiatrist, published a book called *Bildnerei der Geisteskranken*. (Artistry of the Mentally Ill) Prinzhorn put together around 5000 works by 450 patients in and around Heidelberg as a study of their art production.¹⁴

Schultze-Naumburg utilized Prinzhorn's method of highlighting the importance of protecting the "healthy" forms against "sick" and "degenerate" through pseudo-scientific claims. The word "degenerate", in German "Entartet", was already used by Bénédict Morel, a French psychiatrist, in a medical-moral sense in the early 19th century. However, Max Nordau made the term widely known in cultural criticism. Max Nordau published his book "*Entartung*" in 1892. The book was a socio-cultural critique that claims modern literature and art is degenerate. According to him, modern styles of art such as Impressionism and Expressionism represent the decline in mental health of the society which can no longer observe nature and capture its beauty.¹⁵

Nordau synthesized the aesthetic and moral values to explain degeneration. The book became quite popular in the interwar years' cultural debate and the Nazis utilized his claims for their manifestations. The National Socialist use of the concept of degeneration did not emerge from a coherent theoretical tradition, but rather from a selective and opportunistic appropriation of earlier cultural criticism. But as with many ideas adopted by the Nazis, there is a contradiction here in essence. Nordau, himself a Jew, has built his idea of degeneration based upon social decay without any racial difference, which conversely was the main ground of the Nazi approach. He expressed a contempt for modernist movements in fine arts such as Impressionism or Symbolism; at the same time, he harshly criticized Richard Wagner as a prime example of degeneration in art. For the Nazis, Wagner was the cultural hero and the true example of strong, Aryan artist; however, according to Nordau, he was an irrational, overstimulated "pathological person" with nervous disorders that made him create hysterical and exaggerated works. He wrote "*Wagner's music is a pathological agitation of the*

¹⁴ Stephanie Barron, "1937 Modern Art and Politics in Prewar Germany", in *Degenerate Art: The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany* (1991), 12.

¹⁵ George E. Mosse, "Beauty without Sensuality/The Exhibition Entartete Kunst", in *Degenerate Art: The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany* (1991), 26.

senses... a hypnotic intoxication that replaces rational judgment with emotional excess.” in his book *Entartung*.¹⁶

To get back to the main point, Schultze-Naumburg, after compelling some serious attention with *Kunst und Rasse* and attaining a solid position as the director of Weimar Art School, he commenced to walk the talk by removing the paintings of Vassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee, Otto Dix, and Oskar Kokoschka from the building.¹⁷ He restructured the curriculum, brought artists and academicians from early *Völkisch* circles to remove the modernist, experimentalist practices in fine art and replace them with academic drawing classes. As an architect, he reoriented the architectural education in obedience to *Blut und Boden* ideology by embedding *Heimatschutz* principles and encouraged traditionalist/regionalist construction style instead of progressive, industrial methods that were adopted during the Bauhaus period. Apart from his actions in Weimar, more to the point, Schultze-Naumburg was giving lectures in different cities in Germany with his presentations, which were later, in 1932, gleaned and published by *NSDAP Verlag* with the name; *Kampf um die Kunst*. (Struggle for Art) In these lectures, Schultze-Naumburg tried to convince the audience that the modernist styles of art were dangerous, distorted versions of human and nature forms and supported a return to classical, “morally appropriate” art. He framed art as a battlefield between “national”, “traditional”, “healthy” and “foreign”, “pathological”. He was showing the audience a series of slides that began with the painting *Paradise Lost* (1921) by Emil Nolde.¹⁸ German Expressionism was the main target of Schultze-Naumburg’s lectures. He included works from Erich Heckel and Karl Schmidt-Rotluff, accompanied by derogatory words such as “eastern sub-humans” or “excrements of sick absurd sub-humans”.¹⁹ In the beginning of March 1931, while he was giving one his lectures to filled rooms in Berlin, the audience shouted; “When will Berlin be cleaned up?” as quoted by Ada Nolde, wife of Emil Nolde, in her letter to Max Sauerlandt, the director of the *Hamburg Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe*.²⁰

¹⁶ Max Simon Nordau, *Degeneration*, Translated from the second German edition (1895), 412.

¹⁷ Albrecht Dümmling, *Art, Culture, and Media under the Third Reich* (2002), 51.

¹⁸ Bernhard Fulda, *Emil Nolde – The Artist during the Third Reich* (2019), 69.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

Cultural Structuring in National Socialist Regime: *RMVP* - *RKK*

After *NSDAP* took the ultimate power, Wilhelm Frick was named Minister of the Interior and Alfred Rosenberg was appointed as “*Beauftragten des Führers für die Überwachung der gesamten geistigen und weltanschaulichen Schulung und Erziehung der NSDAP*.” (Führer's Representative for the Supervision of Intellectual and Ideological Education of the NSDAP) Under the authority of Frick, numerous art commissioners were hired and even among the *SS* (Schutzstaffel) art branch, *Forschungs- und Lehrgemeinschaft das Ahnenerbe* (The Ancestral Heritage Research and Teaching Society) was formed. Their duty was to support archaeological research to unearth things related to the heroic Germanic cultures, mainly for cultural propaganda. In October 1933, Hitler commissioned architect Paul Ludwig Troost to realize his first major building project *Haus der Deutschen Kunst* in Munich.²¹

On March 13, 1933, *Reichsministerium für Volksaufklärung und Propaganda* - *RMVP* (Reich Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda) was established under the authority of Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels. *RMVP* was one of the most instrumental organs in Nazi regime that created propaganda campaigns, controlled media and cultural activities concordantly to Nazi *Kulturpolitik*. Less than one month after its establishment, “*Gesetz zur Wiederherstellung des Berufsbeamtentums*” (Law for the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service) was promulgated by the Minister of the Interior. This law aimed to purge Jewish, anti-nazi civil servants from government or public service. *RMVP* was responsible for the execution of this law in the art and culture field.

In September 1933, *RMVP* created the *RKK*, *Reichskulturkammer* (Reich Chamber of Culture). *RKK* was a parent organization which was formed by seven different departments; *Reichskammer der bildenden Künste* (Fine Arts Chamber), *Reichstheaterkammer* (Theatre Chamber), *Reichsmusikkammer* (Music Chamber), *Reichsschrifttumskammer* (Literature Chamber), *Reichspressekammer* (Press Chamber), *Reichsrundfunkkammer* (Radio Chamber), *Reichsfilmkammer*. (Film Chamber)

²¹ Lynn H. Nicholas, “*The Rape of Europa*”: *The Fate of Europe's Treasures in the Third Reich and the Second World War* (1994), 10.

The “*Gesetz zur Wiederherstellung des Berufsbeamtentums*” law secured the membership mandatory for anyone working professionally in the art field. From artists to art writers or professors, anyone who refused to comply with this law was punished with *Berufsverbot*. (Professional ban)

The directors and employers of many museums, art institutions and academies were removed from their positions just after. Otto Dix, while teaching at Dresden Academy, was expelled from *RKK* which meant he could no longer teach or exhibit his works in Germany. The membership request of Paul Klee, professor at Düsseldorf Academy, was denied and he was forced into exile to Switzerland. Oskar Schlemmer was slandered for being a Jew by National Socialist students which led to a constrained “long term vacation.”²² The Prussian Academy of Arts, requested “voluntary resignation” of ten members including Kaethe Kollwitz, Kirchner, van der Rohe, Schmidt-Rottluff and the president of the academy Max Liebermann. Only Nolde reneged to comply since he was a supporter of Nazi Party himself.²³ These bans and suspensions later transformed into *Malverbot* (Painting ban) which prohibited rejected artists from reaching art supplies. Cleansing of rejected people from the art scene continued with erasing their works and legacy.

Curatorial Experiments to Display Degenerate Art

The demand of “cleaning up” the museums in Berlin reciprocated in 1933, initially with local *Schreckenskammern der Kunst* (Chambers of Horror of Art) or *Schandausstellungen* (Abomination Exhibitions), which led the way to *Entartete Kunst* exhibitions. These exhibitions could be seen as the experimentations to display “degenerate art” under different classifications. Around twenty different exhibitions were organized, some of them with a similar inventory, between the years 1933 and 1937. The first of these exhibitions was opened in Kunsthalle Mannheim on April 4

²² Lynn H. Nicholas, “*The Rape of Europa*”: *The Fate of Europe's Treasures in the Third Reich and the Second World War* (1994), 12.

²³ *Ibid.*, 13.

with the title *Kulturbolschewistische Bilder* (Pictures of Bolshevik Culture) and managed to attract 20,141 visitors in two months of time.²⁴ One of the most important exhibitions of this kind took place in Dresden, September 23-October 18, 1933. This was the first exhibition with the name *Entartete Kunst* (Degenerate Art) before its successor exhibitions in different cities. The exhibition was ideated by Richard Müller, the rector of Dresden Kunstakademie, who selected the displayed works mostly from the collection of Stadtmuseum Dresden by concentrating on the Expressionist artists, especially from the groups *Die Brücke* and *Dresdner Sezession Gruppe 1919*.²⁵ This exhibition is often called the prototype of the 1937 *Entartete Kunstausstellung* in terms of its display methods and mocking captions. The artists were attacked by being labeled as “criminal”, “communist,” or “diseased.” That campaign of discrediting the modernist artist was carried out by state hands with various methods. For example, some of the exhibitions, such as the one in Karlsruhe, were made forbidden to minors on the grounds of “erotic” and “obscure” paintings that were displayed.²⁶ The reviews of the exhibitions drew a parallel to the exhibited artworks and the works created by mentally sick people, which was the defaming technique that was made popular by Schultze-Naumburg. In addition, in order to create a contrast to the “bad” artworks, display of some exemplary works was utilized. In the Mannheim exhibition, there was a model gallery where approved and “healthy” artworks were shown to the visitors to lay down a criterion on what to expect from an artwork, while the other rooms are arranged in a purposefully careless manner, artworks too close to each other and even without the frames together with the names of the dealers and purchase prices. But despite the oppressive regime and the advocacy journalism, there were some people who still expressed their discomfort with this situation. Some reviews reflected their discomfort about how those artworks were treated, indeed in many museums, arguments broke out among the museum employees. In this respect, Oskar Schlemmer wrote to Joseph Goebbels with a glimpse of hope to express his complaints and call for his interference in *Schreckenskammern*.²⁷ Quite surprisingly, Oskar Schlemmer, whose

²⁴ Christoph Zuschlag, “An “Educational Exhibition” The Precursors of Entartete Kunst and Its Individual Venues”, in *Degenerate Art: The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany* (1991), 98.

²⁵ Ibid., 85.

²⁶ Ibid., 84.

²⁷ Ibid., 86.

works were already demonized by Nazis as early as 1930, relied on Joseph Goebbels, who was among the top National Socialist socio-cultural policy makers, to at least scale down the attacks on modern art. This appears as something vital to examine in order to understand the phases and foremost the conflicts during the formation of the Nazi sense of art.

Joseph Goebbels' Rise to Prominence

Joseph Goebbels joined the *NSDAP* as early as 1922 and in 1925 he started to work closely with Gregor Strasser, who was in charge of the reorganization of *NSDAP* in Northern Germany where the party had a significant breakthrough. However, Gregor Strasser and his brother Otto Strasser were publishing the journal named *Nationalsozialistische Briefe* (National Socialist Letters).²⁸ Together, they represented the radical leftist fraction within the *NSDAP* known as *Strasserists*. This ideology was named after Otto Strasser, who was the main intellectual force behind the idea. *Strasserists* view advocated anti-capitalism, anti-bourgeois cultural manners and decentralized rule within National Socialism. Joseph Goebbels, back then, was a fierce supporter of leftist, revolutionist ideas and contributed to the journal with his writings and attracted notice with his propaganda work. On January 24, 1926, the *Strasserist* wing organized a meeting in Hannover with the participation of the local *NSDAP* authorities from northern and eastern regions of Germany. In this meeting, the *Strasserist* fraction declared their party programme and their strategies for political growth. They announced that the party should follow the radical socialist movement, concomitantly containing overtones from Bolshevik policy. That sparked off a serious argument between northern and southern fractions in *NSDAP* and turned into a breaking point as one of the first internal conflicts of National Socialist ideology. Hence, Hitler decided to intervene in order to resolve the ideological conflicts and monopolize different fractions. The Munich headquarters of *NSDAP* organized a conference in Bamberg on February 14, 1926 where Hitler personally addressed the party members and his sympathizers with a forceful speech to persuade the audience that the only way

²⁸ Robert S. Wistrich, *Who's Who in Nazi Germany?* (2002), 77.

for National Socialism to be successful is due to centralized rule. He accused *Strasserists* of being Marxist and too socialist, therefore being too egalitarian. He claimed that “*Führerprinzip*” (Leader Principle) should not be argued, thus authority and unity could be strengthened. Hitler’s claims were approved by the majority of party leaders and the northern fraction began to lose their influence on governance in the *NSDAP*. Joseph Goebbels anticipated the wind of change and took a position with a utilitarian approach likewise he shifted his rhetoric towards Hitler’s puissance. Consequently, he was rewarded with the prestigious position of *Gauleiter* of Gau Berlin-Brandenburg.²⁹ In Berlin, he deposed the *Strasserists* and accused them of splitting the party and sympathizing with Marxism via various propaganda campaigns. His success in Berlin further solidified his position and paved the way for his later post as Minister of Propaganda.

However, his views on art haven’t changed that much.

Although the assailing opinions and radical actions were on the increase with each passing day in Germany, there was an evident ambiguity in terms of what should be accepted and which rules could be bent in which favor. Among the higher-ups in the field of art, on one side there were radical anti-modernists like Alfred Rosenberg, Paul Schultze-Naumburg, Hans Severus Ziegler and on the other side, there were nationalists who supported a national modernism, such as Joseph Goebbels and Ernst Gosebruch. That conflict between the policymakers in Nazi politics extended explicitly as late as 1937 and even later on behind closed doors in a milder manner.

With the formation of *RKK*, Alfred Rosenberg’s *KfdK* came to an end as Goebbels’ *RKK* became the only official authority within the domain of culture.

In the opening speech of *RKK*, he even remarked that the National Socialist government would nourish a flexible aesthetic policy, without any predetermined ways of thinking by the party politics. Thereof he appointed *non-Völkisch* and modernist names such as Richard Strauss to the Music Chamber and Stefan George to the Literature Chamber. Even though Goebbels managed to defeat *KfdK* in the bureaucratic war, the *Völkisch* faction within the National Socialists was still strong and the personal conflict between Rosenberg and Goebbels was still alive. This tension between two of them caused some serious concerns among the other party leaders. Goebbels made a compromise as he

²⁹ Robert S. Wistrich, *Who’s Who in Nazi Germany?* (2002), 77.

appointed Eugen Hönig to the head of the Fine Arts Chamber, Hönig was the head of *KfdK* in Munich where he was also teaching architecture in the Art Academy.³⁰ It was a move to delude the *Völkisch* camp, nevertheless, modernist exhibitions and the publications in support of modernist art went on.

The Struggle over Modern Art: German Expressionism

Goebbels was an ultranationalist and an antisemitist but never agreed on the principles of “*Völkisch art*.” As a well educated person who lived in large, cosmopolitan cities like Munich and Berlin, he leastwise despised *Völkisch* groups which were mostly formed in small regions. One of the reasons that Goebbels did not like Rosenberg might be Rosenberg’s theory of “master race.” The idea of master race was based on the healthy, strong, Nordic person which would offend Goebbels, as he was physically disabled with clubfoot. He also never approved Rosenberg’s Nordic Pagan religion myth since he was raised as a Roman Catholic like Hitler and Himmler.³¹

Goebbels had been following and openly admiring modern art even after the foundation of *RMVP*. He especially regarded Expressionism as the new national style to improve and properly represent German art in modern times. “*30 Deutsche Künstler*” (30 German Artists) exhibition was a case in point. “*30 Deutsche Künstler*” exhibition held in Galerie Ferdinand Möller, in Berlin. It was organized by *NSDStB* (National Socialist German Student Union) and opened on July 22, 1933. The works of Nolde, Schmidt-Rottluff, Macke, and Barlach, among others, were selected for the exhibition.³² In the exhibition catalogue; Otto Andreas Schreiber, a painter and a member of *NSDAP* and *NSDStB*, wrote the foreword: “*In a time that is not without significant dangers to the culture of the nation, the National Socialist students of Berlin and Northeast Germany have invited thirty German artists to an exhibition. In doing so, the youth actively engages in the cultural debate. For justice toward achievement! For the*

³⁰ Jonathan Petropoulos, *Art as Politics in the Third Reich* (1996), 26-27.

³¹ Ibid., 25.

³² Christoph Zuschlag, “An “Educational Exhibition” The Precursors of Entartete Kunst and Its Individual Venues”, in *Degenerate Art: The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany* (1991), 96.

freedom of German art!”³³ After the foreword, Fritz Hippler, as the district leader of NSDStB for Berlin-Brandenburg, had a text where he wrote: “On 7 November 1927, the following article by the art dealer Ferdinand Möller appeared in the *Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung*. Since Ferdinand Möller has also proven himself for more than twenty years to be a consistent champion of exclusively German art, we have decided to hold this exhibition of German art in his gallery.”³⁴ The following article by Ferdinand Möller with the title “*Wer trägt die Verantwortung?*” (*Who takes the responsibility?*) is worth quoting at length.

“It is actually not the task of the art dealer to make the following statements; other authorities should be responsible for that. But since they remain silent, it is necessary to draw public attention to the grievances in German artistic life that are such as to deprive an entire generation of German artists of their means of livelihood—and therefore of their ability to create. It must finally be said openly that it is an unworthy state of affairs when a nation looks only to works of foreign art, buying only works of French art — a few honorable exceptions prove the rule — while it has a generation of artists who, in talent and expressive power, in a word, in artistic quality, are in no way inferior to the young foreigners, but, in terms of individuality and personality, are superior. Is it not incomprehensible that young French artists have been able to gain a foothold here in Berlin, and therefore in Germany, who, as has been stated, “master the entire keyboard from Monet to Utrillo and are probably bought in such quantities only because they play a role in Berlin society”? It is surely only a bad joke when it is claimed that there are more Renoirs in Berlin than Renoir painted in his entire life; but it characterizes the state of affairs! This snobbery is, as has already been said elsewhere, “no longer bearable.” What is one to say when a Berlin artists’ association paves the way for these mediocre foreign talents by giving them exhibitions; its task should first be to sell the works of its own artists. Equally sad is the situation when German museum directors today show a preference for buying works of French art and advocate for them. Is it any wonder that the new German collectors, who see in the heads of our museums’ intelligent experts, also buy only French art? In no other country

³³ Otto Andreas Schreiber, *Ausstellung 30 Deutsche Künstler* (1933), 3.

³⁴ Fritz Hippler, *Ausstellung 30 Deutsche Künstler* (1933), 4.

in the world would such a thing be conceivable—certainly not in France. We have German art! But if the German people continue, out of ignorance, to hang their walls with the leftover studio works of the French, then the next generation will hold its head in disbelief at such madness. It is no excuse to say that contemporary art has never been recognized in Germany. For German artists it is a matter of life and death that the public — and not only the critics, as before, but also the art trade and collectors, especially museums — take a supportive stance toward them. We possess acknowledged masters of whom we have every reason to be proud. It is therefore the duty of all authorities not to systematically spoil the joy of our few collectors of German art. It is unacceptable that German artworks are given only cursory and disdainful attention; more than merely the interests of dealers are at stake. The present condition is shameful and cries out for remedy.

For four months I have again been active in Berlin's art scene with my exhibitions of German artists; I feel as though I were back in 1923 in New York, when I personally represented the first German exhibition after the war, organized jointly with Dr. Valentiner. One cannot expect the Americans to have a favorable attitude toward German art as a matter of course, but in Germany it should be different.”³⁵

This critical text by Ferdinand Möller could be seen as a concrete example of how important figures in the art environment in Germany, even before the Third Reich, viewed the status of German art. As might be expected, nationalist thinking was getting popular also among the people who were against National Socialism. Before anything else, conservative German intellectuals bookmarked how especially the French disparaged them and called them barbarians during the war.³⁶ Despite the nationalistic language of the text and its effort to feature German art, the exhibition still drew a response, especially from Rosenberg and his supporters. Rosenberg wrote some unrelenting letters to high-ranking government officials. Hence, the gallery had to close the exhibition three days after the opening at *Reichsminister des Innern* Wilhelm Frick's discretion. Hippler and Schreiber, as the organizers of the exhibition, were expelled from *NSDStB*. With the intervention of Goebbels and Walther Funk, the exhibition was reopened on condition that the *NSDStB* had to be disaffiliated from the exhibition.

³⁵ Ferdinand Möller, *Ausstellung 30 Deutsche Künstler* (1933), 4-6.

³⁶ Benjamin G. Martin, *The Nazi-Fascist New Order for European Culture* (2016), 3.

Goebbels worked the oracle, and many newspapers such as *Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung*, *Kunst der Nation*, and even *Die Kunstammer* (the magazine published by RdbK) supported the exhibition counter to the radical, anti-modernist National Socialists. He kept supporting *NSDStB* in their actions against the *Völkisch* movement.

At Nürnberg Party Congress in 1934, Hitler declared that he is against modernist art; however, he also openly criticized and ridiculed the *Völkisch* art criteria. This ambiguity kept the tension alive between modernists and *Völkisch*. In 1934, Goebbels even took part in the Honor Committee for the *Italienische futuristische Luft- und Flugmalerei* (Italian Futurist Air- and Flight-Painting) exhibition, which opened with speeches from Expressionist poet Gottfried Benn and the founder of the futurist movement, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti.³⁷ In August 1936, the first modernist painting was removed from a public collection in Germany. “*Improvisation 1912*” by Kandinsky was sold from Museum Folkwang by the director Klaus Graf von Baudissin, the successor of Ernst Gosebruch. On 23rd November, art criticism of any kind was banned by *RMVP*. Following that; Adolf Ziegler, a Nazi approved painter, took the position as president of the *Reichskammer der bildenden Künste* from Eugen Hönig in December, 1936. Along with these developments, the pressure on modern art and the individuals and institutions that support it has begun to increase significantly.

The Fate of Modernist Collections in German Museums: *Nationalgalerie Berlin*

Since the beginning of the 20th century, German museums have begun to collect avant-garde and modernist artworks. Many important museum directors, such as Gustav Hartlaub in Mannheim, Ludwig Justi in Berlin, Alexander Doerner in Hannover, Max Sauerlandt in Halle, emphasized contemporary German art and French Impressionism/Post-Impressionism. These directors often acquired artworks directly from German artists, from Liebermann to Kirchner. Therewhile, for instance,

³⁷ Jonathan Petropoulos, *Art as Politics in the Third Reich* (1996), 24.

Nationalgalerie in Berlin acquired a painting by Paul Cezanne in 1897, which made them the first museum to acquire a work of Cezanne in the world. The modernist collections in Germany, especially in the 1920s, attracted great attention from all around the world. In fact, Alfred Barr, the first director of MoMA in New York, was greatly impressed and cited the collecting policies of German museums during his visit to Germany in 1931.³⁸ In *Modern German Painting and Sculpture* catalogue which Barr created, he stated:

*“However much modern German art is admired or misunderstood abroad, it is certainly supported publicly and privately in Germany with extraordinary generosity. Museum directors have the courage, foresight and knowledge to buy works by the most advanced artists long before public opinion forces them to do so. Some fifty German Museums, as the lists in this catalogue suggest, are a most positive factor both in supporting artists and in educating the public to an understanding of their work.”*³⁹

The *Nationalgalerie* in Berlin held the largest collection on modern German art, in the beginning of 1930s. Ludwig Justi, who was the director of the museum since 1909, was the main figure behind the great contemporary inventory. He created the *Neue Abteilung* (New Section) dedicated only to German and international modern art as one of the first of its kind. The *Neue Abteilung* opened in Kronprinzenpalais in 1919 and extended substantially until 1933. In early 1933, some rearrangements were made such as subverting the chronological order of display and exhibiting some modern works in the main building along the works from the 19th century.⁴⁰

After its reopening in February 1933, the museum and Justi started to get some negative reactions. For instance, in March 1919, an article resounded with the title "*Die Juden in den staatlichen Bildergalerien*". (The Jews in the State Galleries) Some employees of the *Nationalgalerie* reported their complaints about “working in the same room with Jewish paintings” and demanded an intervention by *NSDAP* to remove Justi from his post.

³⁸ Stephanie Barron, “1937 Modern Art and Politics in Prewar Germany”, in *Degenerate Art: The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany* (1991), 13.

³⁹ Alfred Barr, *German Painting and Sculpture* (1931), 7-8.

⁴⁰ Annegret Janda, “The Fight for Modern Art The Berlin Nationalgalerie after 1933”, in *Degenerate Art: The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany* (1991), 105.

“In Germany itself there was a long anti-modern tradition, reaching back to Kaiser Wilhelm’s 1909 firing of Hugo von Tschudi, director of Nationalgalerie, for buying Impressionist paintings.” explains Lynn H. Nicholas.⁴¹

As a reference to the event that led to Justi taking Tschudi's place, the acquisition of Paul Gauguin’s controversial work *“The Birth of Christ.”*

Later in June 1933, it was decided by Hitler that *Kronprinzen Palais* had to be purged but the artworks should be protected in the storerooms. Before the opening of *30 Deutsche Künstler* exhibition a group from NSDStB organized a demonstration at Friedrich Wilhelm University and declared their support for the art of Nordic Expressionists; Nolde, Barlach, Heckel and Schmidt-Rottluff which led to the early closing of the exhibition in Galerie Ferdinand Möller.⁴² Justi also had his share of these demonstrations where he was accused of advocating “too international” art since he acquired many works from French and Italian contemporary artists. As a matter of fact, he was sent on an indefinite leave from his post on 30 June 1933 by Bernhard Rust, *Reichsminister für Wissenschaft, Erziehung und Volksbildung*. (Reich Minister of Science, Education and National Culture) The name that was chosen by the ministry to replace Justi was Alois Schardt. Alois Schardt was the director of the Art Museum in Halle an der Saale and former assistant of Justi in *Nationalgalerie*.⁴³ Contrary to what it seems, since he was also a supporter of modern art, his assignment could be seen as a government effort to protect modern art in *Nationalgalerie*. In this respect, it is conceivable that Goebbels was influential on Schardt’s appointment. Schardt had a vision of art, which he divided into three approaches: classical, naturalistic, and romantic. He put Expressionism in the third category. This was perhaps an attempt to legitimize Expressionism by placing it within Romanticism, a movement considered valuable for German art. He compiled these views in a lecture he titled “Was ist deutsche kunst?” (What is German Art?). However his seminars could not last very long

⁴¹ Lynn H. Nicholas, *“The Rape of Europa”: The Fate of Europe’s Treasures in the Third Reich and the Second World War* (1994), 7.

⁴² Annegret Janda, “The Fight for Modern Art The Berlin Nationalgalerie after 1933”, in *Degenerate Art: The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany* (1991), 107.

⁴³ Ibid.

because Rust imposed a ban on him to express any written or verbal opinions.⁴⁴ It was the time for *Gesetz zur Wiederherstellung des Berufsbeamtentums* (Professional Civil Service Restoration Act) to be enacted. This law ensured that Jewish people and opponents of Nazi regime could not work in civil service. Every employee had to prove their genetic pedigree in order to practice their profession. Schardt, as the director of *Nationalgalerie*, was responsible for the people that worked in the museum, as well the people that somewhat correlated to the museum. Schardt, in his effort to delude the government, created a report which included the unerring pedigree of modernist artists such as Klee, Marc, Feininger and Barlach.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, Schardt was dismissed from his position by Rust in November, 1933 and kept Kronprinzen-Palais closed. Eberhard Hanfstaengl was inducted as the new director. As his first action, he opened *Kronprinzen-Palais* in December.

However, as expected, almost all the modernist artworks were put in the storage during the reopening. In the next two years of his tenure, he managed to organize the old collection and also transformed the *Neue Abteilung*. Despite not being known as a supporter of modern art, which enabled him to be assigned, he insisted on at least protecting the modernist collection from harm by overlooking the orders from the government. It can be said that his defiance of orders was encouraged by the fact that Ernst "Putzi" Hanfstaengl, one of Hitler's closest friends, was his cousin. Even though there was high pressure on Eberhard Hanfstaengl, he tried different ways to exhibit some works of modern artists. He selected mostly landscape and still-life paintings instead of figurative works in order to avoid attracting too much repercussion. For example, landscapes by Nolde, Heckel and Schmidt-Rottluff remained on display while none of Kandinsky's or Schlemmer's works were exhibited in the new installation.⁴⁶ It was not a coincidence that some artists were more tolerable for the government, the influence of the modernist faction among the National Socialist led by Goebbels was still visible. The fight over Expressionism was still ongoing. Hanfstaengl kept acquiring modern artworks confidentially. In 1935, *Nationalgalerie* acquired a group of works from the Dresdner Bank including some by Alexej von Jawlensky, Oskar Kokoschka,

⁴⁴ Ibid., 109.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 110.

Max Pechstein.⁴⁷ Many of those artworks, unsurprisingly, stayed in the storage until the confiscations by the *Gestapo*. However there were various exhibition strategies developed by the employees of the *Nationalgalerie*. One of them was an exhibition idea with the title “*Deutsche Kunst seit Dürer*.” (German Art since Dürer) They thought they could showcase contemporary works by hiding behind the name a great Renaissance painter like Albrecht Dürer, whom everyone respected.⁴⁸ But things did not go as they expected. The museum was under serious reconstruction again. In 1936, *Nationalgalerie* opened again with a seriously diminished collection in the *Kronprinzen Palais*. Nonetheless, the remaining collection still attracted opposition such as the aggressive article published in *Das Schwarze Korps* newspaper. The title of the article was “*Kronprinzenpalais Saeuberungsbedürftig*” (Kronprinzen-Palais in need of cleaning) and openly indicted Hanfstaengl of lacking understanding of the cultural aims of the Reich.⁴⁹ Nolde and Schmidt-Rottluff were termed as “cultural Bolsheviks,” Beckmann as an “imitator” and Macke as a “second-rate pavement artist.” Although the writing was anonymous, its language was reminiscent of sculptor Walter Hansen or painter Wolfgang Willrich. Hansen was quite active in the protests against modern art in museum collections which he often participated in with *Hitler Jugend*.⁵⁰ Willrich at the time was creating illustrations and posters for racial publications aligned with the ideas of Rosenberg. He was also writing extremely assailing texts to attack museum directors, curators and art historians. Indeed, his attacks managed to put serious pressure on the *Nationalgalerie*. The museum, which was kept open due to the influx of foreign visitors for the Olympics Games, closed on October 30th on Rust's order. In the next months, the draft of Willrich's book *Saeuberung des Kunsttempels* (Cleansing of the Art Temple) was admired by many high-ranked Nazis and approved by the ministry to be published. Therewithal, he began to be seen as an expert in “degenerate art” and Goebbels ordered him an exhibition to display degenerate art in contrast with “German art.” Willrich and Hansen started to work together primarily in the modernist inventories

⁴⁷ Annegret Janda, “The Fight for Modern Art The Berlin Nationalgalerie after 1933”, in *Degenerate Art: The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany* (1991), 110.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 110.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 112.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

of *Kronprinzen Palais* and Dresden where they listed many artworks as degenerate.⁵¹ Their methodology was not completely approved by *Reichspropagandaministerium* and faced protests by employees of Goebbels. This could actually be seen as one of Goebbels' last invisible efforts against extreme anti-modernists. Although the idea of creating a counter-exhibition to the *Große Deutsche Kunstausstellung* (Great German Art Exhibition) was the idea of Goebbels together with Adolf Ziegler, a Nazi approved painter and the head of *Reichskammer der bildenden Künste*, (Reich Chamber of Visual Arts) Goebbels did not intend to portray all modernist works of art, especially expressionist ones, as bad art. The aim was to glorify the works in the *Große Deutsche Kunstausstellung* by juxtaposing them with works that were “examples of bad art” made after 1910 in another exhibition at the same time. Ziegler was assigned by Goebbels as late as June 30th, just nineteen days before the opening, to realize the concept and gather the artworks that were going to be exhibited. This decision has been communicated to all museums.

*“On the express authority of the Führer, I hereby empower the president of the Reichskammer der bildenden Künste, Professor Ziegler of München, to select and secure for an exhibition works of German degenerate art since 1910, both painting and sculpture, which are now in collections owned by the German Reich, individual regions, or local communities. You are requested to give Prof. Ziegler your full support during his examination and selection of these works.”*⁵²

Ziegler immediately formed a commission to select the artworks. Willrich was in the commission with his ruthless approach on degenerate art. Count Klaus von Baudissin, new director of the Museum Folkwang, was also present as a reliable man among the Nazi Party. The commission travelled around the country and confiscated a considerable number of works from all major art museums. For instance, 64 oil paintings, 73 drawings and 4 sculptures were taken away from the *Nationalgalerie* despite all the efforts of Paul Ortwin Rave, the museum curator in the *Nationalgalerie* who was forced

⁵¹ Ibid., 113

⁵² Stephanie Barron, “1937 Modern Art and Politics in Prewar Germany”, in *Degenerate Art: The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany* (1991), 19.

to cooperate administratively.⁵³ These confiscations continued even after the *Entartete Kunst* exhibition opened, the *Nationalgalerie* was banned from acquiring works by living artists and *Kronprinzen Palais* was emptied. According to Rave, around 700 works were shipped to Munich from thirty two different museums in the first two weeks of July.⁵⁴ On July 8 and August 28, the commission visited *Kunsthalle Mannheim*, the museum that had the famous focus on *avant-garde* art since the early 1920's and confiscated around 600 works. By that time, Gustav Hartlaub had already been expelled by the Nazis in 1934, yet, *Kunsthalle Mannheim* was still crucial in the context of the values it represented in the past and had to be eliminated. However, the commission exceeded its authority and confiscated also the works of foreign artists and the ones that were created before 1910. So, in the beginning the idea was to show only German artists in order to expose how German art collapsed but due to the commission's arbitrary decision, non-German artists were also added to the exhibition. In that case, *Kunsthalle Mannheim* with its large non-German collection that included names like Derain, Chagall, Ensor, Munch and Delaunay became an open target.

This purging process continued until the summer of 1938 without any legal basis, on 31 May 1938, the law finally passed and announced:

*"Products of degenerate art that have been secured in museums or in collections open to the public before this law went into effect may be appropriated by the Reich without compensation."*⁵⁵

From that point on, the only ones who could protect modern art were the German people, through their evaluation of *Entartete Kunst Ausstellung*.

⁵³ Annegret Janda, "The Fight for Modern Art The Berlin Nationalgalerie after 1933", in *Degenerate Art: The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany* (1991), 113.

⁵⁴ Stephanie Barron, "1937 Modern Art and Politics in Prewar Germany", in *Degenerate Art: The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany* (1991), 19.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

The Curatorial Analysis of 1937 Munich Entartete Kunst Ausstellung

*“We now stand in an exhibition that contains only a fraction of what was bought with the hard-earned savings of the German people and exhibited as art by a large number of museums all over Germany All around us you see the monstrous offspring of insanity, impudence, ineptitude, and sheer degeneracy What this exhibition offers inspires horror and disgust in us all.”*⁵⁶

With these words of Adolf Ziegler, on 19 July 1937, the *Entartete Kunst Ausstellung* opened in Munich’s *Hofgarten* arcades, marking a decisive moment in the National Socialist campaign against modern art. Organized by the Reich Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda, only one day after the inauguration of the *Grosse Deutsche Kunstausstellung* at the nearby *Haus der Deutschen Kunst*. The unfinished arcades of *Hofgarten*, as a space originally intended for administrative use rather than for exhibiting art, was a deliberate choice of venue. Its confined corridors and provisional character created an atmosphere that stood in sharp contrast to the monumental architecture of the *Haus der Deutschen Kunst*.

The exhibition aimed to mock, despise and distort the artworks of some of the most famous artists of modern art by displaying them in a disrespectful way with derogatory texts, inappropriate placements and even with false labels. The curating of the exhibition is well designed in terms of consolidating the message. The intentional usage of blind spots and corners with less lighting and almost no daylight also forces the visitor to think they are seeing something insignificant and worthless. In this section, Maria Andreas von Lüttichau's article titled "*Entartete Kunst, Munich 1937. A Reconstruction*" will be used as the main source for the exhibition descriptions.

The entrance led to a narrow staircase to the second floor where the exhibition started. In the first room, the artworks in religious themes were displayed. The first artwork that the visitors faced while climbing the stairs was Ludwig Gies’ *Kruzifixus*. (Crucified

⁵⁶ Mario-Andreas von Lüttichau, “Entartete Kunst, Munich 1937 A Reconstruction”, in *Degenerate Art: The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany* (1991), 45.

Christ)⁵⁷ Below the sculpture, it was written: “*This horror hung as a war memorial in the cathedral of Lubeck.*” On the walls, there were eight Nolde paintings with two Schmidt-Rottluff as if making their attitude against the Nordic Expressionists clear from the start. Behind the Nolde paintings that were hung tight-fittingly, a wall text was visible: “*Insolent mockery of the Divine under Centrist rule.*”⁵⁸ The second room was much smaller, and included only Jewish artists including Chagall. On the end walls, some long paragraphs oppressing Jewish and Marxist art from the speeches of Hitler and Rosenberg were written. The wall texts were not only used to mock the artworks but also to cite quotes in order to strengthen the “degenerate discourse.” Together with them, there were quotes of some degenerate people in the art world. For example, a quote of George Grosz: “*Wie kommt der Künstler heute in der Bourgeoisie hoch? Durch Schwindel.*” (How does an artist rise in the bourgeoisie today? Through cheating.) It can be said that the purpose here was to emphasize that degenerates gave themselves away with their own words. Over it, another quote was written: “*Der Künstler muss als Künstler Anarchist sein.*” (The artist must be an anarchist as an artist.) Kurt Eisner (*Jude*). The point to note here was that they decided to mark Jewish people by writing “Jew” next to their names. Some photographs of Rudolf Belling, Max Pechstein and Moritz Melzer were also pinned to the walls in the Room 2.⁵⁹

In Room 3, nudes by Hofer, Kirchner, Kleinschmidt and Otto Müller were present and accompanied by the captions “An insult to German womanhood” and “The ideal-foolish and whore.” The captions asserted that these artists openly insulted national and moral values of the German *Volk*. In this same context, Kirchner’s self portrait as a soldier “*Selbstbildnis als Soldat*” was exhibited with the fake title of “*Soldat mit Dirne*” (Soldier with whore) and added with the caption “An insult to the German heroes of the Great War.”⁶⁰ It should also be noted that the organizers did not even hesitate to even change the titles of the artworks to enhance the narrative. A group of works by Müller, Pechstein and Nolde were presented with the text “*The Jewish longing for the wilderness reveals itself, in Germany the negro becomes the racial ideal of a degenerate*

⁵⁷ Mario-Andreas von Lüttichau, “Entartete Kunst, Munich 1937 A Reconstruction”, in *Degenerate Art: The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany* (1991), 47.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 51.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 52.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 54.

art.” This emphasis on “negro” could be based on “*Against Negro Culture, for the German Heritage*” enactment which was pioneered by Hans Severus Ziegler especially in the field of music and later called as “*Entartete Musik Aktion*.” The most striking part of Room3 was the Dada Wall. This part was specially well thought out, presumably because Hitler placed a particular importance to Dadaists. A part of his speech from the 1934 Nürnberg party rally about Dadaism was placed on the opposite side of the Dada Wall to maintain the tension. In order to virtuate the narrative, a quote of Grosz, “Take Dada seriously! It’s worth it” was written on the wall in a rakish way accompanied by so-called details of “Kandinsky compositions” painted on the same wall behind the paintings of Paul Klee and Kurt Schwitters and two issues of the magazine *Der Dada*.⁶¹ The Room 4 was not composed of a certain theme or style, meanwhile did not have any captions or comments on the walls. The room was congested, walls were full of paintings which were hung crookedly, too close to each other, sometimes even juxtaposed. The curatorial focus here was to highlight the claim that the works were insignificant and banal. The purchase prices paid by the museums where these artworks were taken from were written under the works with the title, artist and the name of the museum. The standout works in this room were by *Die Brücke* artists together with Beckmann and Kokoschka.

Room 5 was the largest room of the floor where the wall texts and headings appeared once more. An interesting arrangement was made on one wall where watercolors of Kandinsky were hung one on top of the other in a crisscross pattern, rising upwards like a ladder. This made it almost impossible to see the artworks placed at the upper parts. These watercolors were labeled “*Crazy at any price*.” A supplementary information was given here that these works were made by Kandinsky, a professor at “communist” Bauhaus School until 1933.⁶² The information was utilized to demonstrate the degeneration in the fine art academies, the teachers being the reasons for the corruption in German art. Moreover, a watercolor of Klee was accredited to Kandinsky and placed among his watercolors. Another “mistake” was intentionally made where two works of Kandinsky which were created in a horizontal format, hung vertically and even without the title and provenance information. On another wall, some landscape and

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid., 61.

nature-morte paintings of Schmidt-Rottluff and Kirchner were displayed with the caption "*Nature as seen by sick minds.*" This sentence was a reference to the discourse of Schultze-Naumburg, degenerate artists as "unhealthy" and "mentally ill" people.⁶³ Room 6 and 7 were the two smallest rooms with square-plan at the end of the upper floor.

In Room 6, the artworks exhibited without labels, titles or any information. The attempt of trivialization of displayed works was very obvious in this room. One wall was dedicated only to Lovis Corinth with the infamous text "*Paid by the taxes of working German people.*" It stands out as one of the things done to highlight how the taxes of the German people, who were struggling with poverty, were squandered on worthless things by the Weimar government, and to incite hostility towards that era and its "so-called artists". There was the famous work by Franz Marc "*Der Turm der blauen Pferde*" (The tower of blue horses) on the west wall. Two Gerhard Marcks sculptures placed in such a way as to almost block the view of a large Nolde painting. On the wall above the door leading to Room 7, a dramatic sentence was written: "*Sie hatten vier Jahre Zeit.*" (They had four years.) as a reference of Hitler's speech where he declared his accession to power on February 1, 1933.⁶⁴ In Room 7, the works of German professors who were teaching in the fine art academies across Germany. Many of them lost their jobs dating from 1933 as they were smeared and blamed for the degeneration in fine arts. "*These are the masters who were teaching German youth until now.*"⁶⁵

The second part of the exhibition was located on the ground floor. In the lobby, two sculptures were displayed; a wooden figure by Kirchner and *Der neue Mensch* (The New Human) by Otto Freundlich which later was printed on the cover of the exhibition guide. The *Head* of Freundlich was positioned in the corner of the room in such a way that it was impossible to see it from different angles; at the same time, the shadow falling on it and the darkness behind it gave it a grotesque appearance.

Above the *Head*, the wall text was written; *The face of the "new man" of the "new world community" who is heralded by the "new art." The anarchist-Bolshevik Freundlich*

⁶³ Ibid., 63.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 64.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

writes *"Today we stand outside all history, we are ripe for the essence of our world destiny."*⁶⁶

As photographed, it was one of the deliberately bad highlights of the exhibition in terms of exhibiting methods. Two halls on the ground floor were narrow and quite dark. In the first room, prints and woodcuts of Kandinsky and Feininger were the standouts. Some books of drawings of Klee and Barlach were also exhibited inside a glass case. Five painting series of Schlemmer were also hung on the north wall. On the west wall, the works by local artists from the *Schreckenskammer* exhibition in Dresden were on display. The second room on the ground floor, was a relatively narrow corridor, one side of which consisted of windows. In the first part, there were works by Christian Rohlf and Paul Klee. The works on paper were exhibited without frames, crammed together. Some papers with derogatory comments were also placed among the artworks on the wall. A few woodcuts of Schmidt-Rottluff and a series of prints from several Bauhaus portfolios were on the north wall, again frameless.⁶⁷ As on the upper floor, there were also wall texts consisting of quotes from the exhibited artists and some museum directors.

For example, one was Rohlf's: *"Christian Rohlf's painting instructions. Take one meter of canvas, squeeze out the contents of various large tubes of paint all over it, vigorously smear the whole thing, stretch, and place in a frame."*⁶⁸

A still-life lithograph by Picasso was also in place together with a woodcut by Otto Andreas Schreiber, who was one of the organizers of the *30 Deutsche Künstler* exhibition in 1933. Inside the coves, paintings of Dix and von Jawlensky were hung so high up that it was almost impossible to see.⁶⁹ Relatively larger works with frames were also hung on the narrow walls between the windows. Of course, they were quite difficult to view since they were in the complete shade. All these curatorial decisions on the presentation were purposeful and very impactful.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 66.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 73.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 80.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 74.

Uncertainties in the Exhibition

The *Entartete Kunst* exhibition is a very clear example of how much of an impact the curator's creation of a narrative and using appropriate display methods that support the narrative can have on people and even distort reality as easily. It puts in front of eyes how curating was used as a tool to build or sway public opinion, if analyzed with a holistic approach.

Beginning in 1933, a series of degenerate and corrupt art exhibitions, featuring diverse themes and genres, were held in various German cities. These experimental exhibitions involved numerous different methods and exhibition styles. Initially simpler, they gradually became more aggressive, with additions made to create negative narratives. Works by many modern artists from various museum collections were included in these exhibitions, sparking considerable controversy. These debates were not only societal but also occurred among the Nazi leaders who organized these degenerate art exhibitions. The conflicts and indecisiveness discussed up to this point in the thesis were clearly observable in the 1937 exhibition, which went down in art history as a diabolical exhibition. This is a point often overlooked in the evaluation of this exhibition. This section will discuss these aforementioned indecisiveness.

There was a contradiction on the inclusion of August Macke and Franz Marc. Macke, who volunteered for the German army died in France in 1914 during the First World War at the age of 27. Marc, also a volunteer, was killed in Verdun in 1916. The portrayal of the artists who voluntarily gave their lives for their country in a war in a negative light has drawn criticism, and it also contradicted the concept of patriotism that the Nazis used as propaganda. The terms patriotism and “fighting for fatherland” was often utilized in the exhibition to create revulsion by claiming that some artists disrespected martyrs and veterans in their artworks. For instance, the works of Franz Marc, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner and Otto Dix were shown as if they were insults to German soldiers with the slogans like “*Deliberate sabotage of national defense*” or “*An insult to the German heroes of the Great War.*” Kirchner and Dix also served in the army during the First World War, it was known that they were psychologically deeply affected by the war and especially Dix frequently depicted war in their paintings. Two paintings of him;

Kriegskrüppel (War cripples) and *Der Schützengraben* (The trench) which were representing the horror of war and its bitter end, exhibited as defamation and mockery of those who fought and gave their lives for Germany.⁷⁰ For that matter, Kirchner's "*Selbstbildnis als Soldat*" (Self- portrait as a soldier) which he painted after his medical from the military in 1915, was ungratefully displayed with the fake title of "*Soldat mit Dirne.*" (Soldier with a whore)⁷¹ Thus, shortly after the opening, *Deutscher Offiziersbund* (German Officers Association) wrote a letter to protest the inclusion of *Iron Cross First Class* recipient Franz Marc in the exhibition, resulting in Marc's "*Tower of Blue Horses*" being removed. It was replaced by paintings of Corinth and Nolde. However, his other four works remained on display only altered their locations from Room 7 to Room 6.⁷² Similarly, numerous changes were made to the exhibition content and display formats after the exhibition's opening. For example, Rooms 6 and 7 on the upper floor were closed shortly after the opening and changed quite a lot. Probably for that reason, rather than a curatorial decision, the artworks in these rooms were displayed without any labels or texts until the closing of the exhibition.

Paul Ortwin Rave wrote:

*"These labels clearly show that the exhibition organizers are not concerned with art alone but making war on the public art administration. They bear a particularly evident grudge against the Reichserziehungsministerium. (Reich Ministry of Education) The numerous changes made in the inscriptions betray a degree of uncertainty on the part of the exhibition."*⁷³

After the semi-successful attempt of protecting Marc, *Deutscher Offiziersbund* wrote another letter about Macke to retrieve his reputation. Hence, the paintings of Macke in

⁷⁰ Mario-Andreas von Lüttichau, "Entartete Kunst, Munich 1937 A Reconstruction", in *Degenerate Art: The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany* (1991), 54.

⁷¹ Ibid..

⁷² Lynn H. Nicholas, "*The Rape of Europa*": *The Fate of Europe's Treasures in the Third Reich and the Second World War* (1994), 22.

⁷³ Mario-Andreas von Lüttichau, "Entartete Kunst, Munich 1937 A Reconstruction", in *Degenerate Art: The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany* (1991), 64.

Room 7 were removed from display. From the second week after the opening, Room 7 remained closed to the public, accessible only to journalists and special permit holders.⁷⁴ Another indicator of indecision was the erased writing traces on the walls in many rooms. It is known that some of the graffiti and slogans written on the walls at the opening were later erased. This may be due to negative reactions or some visitors protecting the artwork in the face of the derogatory writings. One of the rare and striking cases that show the confusion of the exhibition organizers was the inclusion of Rudolf Belling in the *Entartete Kunst* Exhibition. Two sculptures of Belling were on display; *Dreiklang* (Triad) and *Kopf* (Head) at the opening. Both were confiscated from *Nationalgalerie*, Berlin. Ironically, one of his sculptures, the sculpture of the boxer *Max Schmeling* was also being exhibited at the *Große Deutsche Kunstausstellung* (Great German Art Exhibition) at the same time. When this transpired, two sculptures in *Entartete Kunst* were promptly removed so as not to attract too much attention.⁷⁵ The exclusion of Kollwitz's works from the exhibition was also worthy of note. She was the first female member of Prussian Academy, from where she was forced to resign in 1933 due to Civil Service Law. Although her son was killed in World War I, she was considered undesirable because of her leftist ideas. She was named “degenerate” and only allowed to work at home and banned from exhibiting her work. Artworks of her were confiscated from the museums however, not included in the *Entartete Kunst Ausstellung* in 1937. It might be because the organizers were afraid of attracting negative reactions from the public since her works were widely admired and deeply associated with motherhood and German mourning.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Ibid., 65.

⁷⁵ Dagmar Grimm, Peter Günther. Pamela Kort, “The Works of Art in Entartete Kunst, Munich 1937” in *Degenerate Art: The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany* (1991), 210-211.

⁷⁶ Lynn H. Nicholas, “*The Rape of Europa*”: *The Fate of Europe's Treasures in the Third Reich and the Second World War* (1994), 14.

Emil Nolde Case: Paradox of Degeneracy

The earlier cases foreshadow the contradictions of National Socialist art policy, but it is in the case of Emil Nolde that these tensions crystallize most sharply, extending their impact well beyond the Nazi period as one of the most controversial and striking paradigms in the history of art. Nolde's presence in the *Entartete Kunst Ausstellung* stands in stark contrast to the regime's insistence on racial and ideological alignment as criteria for artistic legitimacy. 1,052 of Nolde's works were confiscated in the *Entartete Kunst Aktion*, making him the most heavily targeted artist of the Nazi art purge. His case is particularly paradoxical, as his fervent support for the Nazi regime coincided with the most extensive artistic losses.

Unlike many modernist artists targeted by the exhibition, Nolde was neither Jew nor politically oppositional to National Socialism. On the contrary, he joined the *NSDAP* in 1934, openly expressed admiration for Adolf Hitler. He repeatedly attempted to position himself as an exemplary "German" artist whose Expressionist style, as he claimed, derived from Nordic racial essence rather than foreign influence. Unlike artists who joined the party opportunistically or under pressure, Nolde perceived himself as ideologically aligned with its racial worldview. He consistently articulated antisemitic beliefs and framed modern art's "degeneration" as the result of Jewish influence, an argument that mirrored official Nazi cultural rhetoric.

So much so that he prepared a written proposal which he named "*Entjudungsplan*" (De-Jewification Plan) where he claimed that modern German art had been corrupted by Jewish dealers, collectors, museum directors and curators. He offered to remove Jewish stakeholders who had influence, from the art and culture field. For instance, a few days after the Jewish boycott on 1 April 1933, he wrote: "*I would like there to be a clean divorce between Jewish and German art.*" ⁷⁷

He believed that the contemporary art world of Germany in the 1900s was Jewish-dominated which repressed Germanness in art. Within this polemical framework, he positioned himself as a defender of Germanness in art, advocating

⁷⁷ Bernhard Fulda, *Emil Nolde – The Artist during the Third Reich* (2019), 101.

Nordic Expressionism, which he opposed to what he characterized as the superficiality and cosmopolitanism of French Impressionism. This ideological opposition was closely entangled with Nolde's long-standing personal and professional conflicts with Max Liebermann, whom he regarded as a model of a Jewish-dominated art establishment and as a key proponent of Impressionism in Germany. Nolde, retrospectively reframed his marginalization within institutional networks not as the result of aesthetic disagreement or professional rivalry, but as evidence of a wider struggle between German Expressionism and foreign, particularly French and Jewish artistic influence. He frequently took aim at French Impressionism, which he wanted to draw a clear line between himself. He mentioned:

*"The sweet, often sugary quality of the paintings by Renoir, Monet, Pissarro does not suit my Nordic, more austere spirit, but their art, because it meets the tastes of the middle line, has become the world's chosen favorite."*⁷⁸

His early autobiographical reflections were published in 1931 with the title *"Das Eigene Leben"* (The Own Life) and later with the continuation *"Jahre der Kämpfe."* (Years of Struggle)

These writings of him could be seen as the evidence that he wanted to align himself with the Nordic aryan theory which Rosenberg managed to establish before 1933 in order to secure himself a prominent position in the Third Reich. He tried to portray himself as the representative of young German art who practiced the "new national style" Expressionism.

On the other hand, the artist was being attacked by the anti-modernist faction within the Nazis. Schultze-Naumburg's *"Kampf um die Kunst"* started with his painting *"Paradise Lost"* accompanied by the question; *"Is this what the ideal German person looks like?"*⁷⁹

Schultze-Naumburg despised Expressionist artworks in his conferences which received a remarkable amount of attention that worried Emil and his wife Ada Nolde. In fact, his claim of a Nordic Aryan style coincided with Rosenberg's Nordic myth, that's why Nolde initially expected Rosenberg's support. He was also sympathetic to the *KfDK*.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 101.

⁷⁹ Bernhard Fulda, *Emil Nolde – The Artist during the Third Reich* (2019), 69.

Nevertheless, Rosenberg classified Nolde in the “cultural-Bolsheviks” group and called him degenerate because of the abstraction, color distortion and emotional excess in his works. As a matter of fact, works of Nolde were displayed in the very first degenerate art exhibitions in 1933 such as in *Kulturbolschewistische Bilder* (Images of cultural Bolshevism) in *Kunsthalle Mannheim* and in the first “*Entartete Kunst*” exhibition in Dresden.⁸⁰ Yet, that didn't deter him from evermore envisioning himself as “the state-artist of the National Socialist period.”

In this respect, even Oskar Schlemmer, the artist who faced fierce sanctions by the National Socialists, poured out in his diary in 1935 after reading *Jahre der Kaempfe*:

*“He had an ideal, or it formed in him, and he crafted everything according to it and judged everything by it, as indeed it should or must be. He is, thus seen, really the German artist whom National Socialism must unconditionally lift upon its shield, if there is justice in this world.”*⁸¹

Another victim of the regime, George Grosz, who moved to the US in 1932, also confided that Nolde had a great chance to become the representative of “modern” National Socialist art.⁸²

In his autobiographical writings, he narrated his anti-semitism through self-representation of being a victim of the Jewish art system. Due to Nolde's stand as a Nordic Expressionist against French influenced Impressionism, he was appreciated by the National Socialist view. During 1931 and 1932, there were articles praising him in the National Socialist newspaper, *Der Angriff*.⁸³ When his nine-part painting “*The Life of Christ*” in *Nationalgalerie* was accused of being “cultural-Bolshevik”, *Der Angriff* and *Der Stahlhelm*, another national conservative newspaper, supported his work. Expressionism, especially of Nolde and Schmidt-Rottluff, was gaining new admirers in Germany through the positive critics in newspapers.

⁸⁰ Christoph Zuschlag, “An “Educational Exhibition” The Precursors of Entartete Kunst and Its Individual Venues”, in *Degenerate Art: The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany* (1991), 98-100.

⁸¹ Bernhard Fulda, Aya Soika, *Emil Nolde – The Artist during the Third Reich* (2019), 26.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 25.

⁸³ Aya Soika, *Emil Nolde – The Artist during the Third Reich* (2019), 39.

The art magazine that supported modernist art in Weimar Germany, *Das Kunstblatt*, even mocked the anti-modernist approach and wrote: “*At least people are shifting away from the coffee-klatch tastes of Schultze-Naumburg and are discovering uniquely German qualities, and in all of these artists.*”⁸⁴

However, after the *NSDAP* came into power, liberal newspapers had to be closed but the question of whether Nordic Expressionism was compatible with the new regime stood. So, the acceptance of Nolde's artistic identity was still a question mark. There were some important figures and organizations within National Socialists that openly supported Nolde after 1933. *NSDStB*, with the *30 Deutsche Künstler* exhibition, clearly declared their support to Nordic Expressionists. Werner von Oppen and Hans Wiedemann, as government officials, Schardt, Thormaehlen and Harald Busch as prominent figures in the art environment, tried to provide persuasive references to prove how Nolde was purely aligned with Nazi art policies. Hans Weidemann was a minor but pivotal bureaucratic figure in the Nazi cultural administration under Goebbels in *RMVP*. Weidemann shared Goebbels' view on modern art and he put a great effort to establish Nolde as a state-artist. He recommended Goebbels to appoint Nolde as the director of the *Vereinigten Staatsschulen Berlin* (United State Schools of Berlin) or even as the president of Reich Chamber of Fine Arts. He even organized a small exhibition consisting of works by Nolde, Schmidt-Rottluff, Barlach, Heckel and Lehmbruck exclusively for Goebbels in the propaganda ministry. The purpose was to gild the pill to have Nordic Expressionism ratified as “the revolutionary, national art” and at the same time, to overcome *KfdK*.⁸⁵ Although there was no negative turn of events, this initiative did not yield the results Nolde had hoped for.

Goebbels, despite having initially no particular admiration for the works of Nolde latterly supported him as a “deeply German” artist, encouraged different modernist approaches and therefore supported Expressionism as well. Yet, his motive of support for Nolde and Expressionism did not coincide with Nolde's self-representation since Goebbels also admired Impressionism as a style and even had an Impressionist portrait of him by Leo von König in his office on Wilhelmstrasse.⁸⁶ Goebbels basically

⁸⁴ Ibid., 40.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 43-44.

⁸⁶ Jonathan Petropoulos, *Art as Politics in the Third Reich* (1996), 29.

advocated any type of modern art that is national and “high quality.” As evidence of Goebbels' growing interest in Nolde, Albert Speer wrote the following in his memoirs.

*“To decorate the Goebbels house, I borrowed a few watercolors by Nolde from Eberhard Hanfstaengl, the director of the Berlin National Gallery. Goebbels and his wife were delighted with the paintings until Hitler came to inspect and expressed severe disapproval. Then the minister summoned me immediately: “The pictures have to go at once, they are simply impossible!””*⁸⁷

Nonetheless, in November 1933, Emil and Ada Nolde were invited to the founding celebrations of the Reich Chamber of Fine Arts and seated on the sixteenth row, three rows in front of Alfred Rosenberg.⁸⁸ This was a symbolic indication that Rosenberg was gradually falling out of favor. In the same month, the Noldes attended the party for tenth anniversary of “*Bierkeller-Putsch*” as guests of honor, invited by Heinrich Himmler.⁸⁹ These events excited Emil Nolde and gave him hope for his plans for the future. Day by day, he began to position himself more and more emotionally aligned with the regime. So much so that, he even said: “*I get the impression more and more that Justi does not fit in the new state at all, his thinking is completely different.*” after the firing of Ludwig Justi, who bought two paintings of him for the modern collection of *Nationalgalerie*.⁹⁰ Efforts were also made to gain Hitler's personal favor. Schardt and Thormaehlen utilized the same method for Hitler that Weidemann used to impress Goebbels. They sent some works of Nolde to Munich where Ernst “Putzi” Hanfstaengl hung three of them at his home to make Hitler see them. Yet, Hitler reacted neither positively nor negatively towards Nolde's works.⁹¹

Hitler's first negative reaction came with the events that led to Schardt's expulsion from the *Nationalgalerie*, which had been unable to open due to non-compliance with regulations. He then ordered that the rules of art be followed without exception. But still, the new director Eberhard Hanfstaengl managed to tone down the tense

⁸⁷ Albert Speer, *Inside the Third Reich*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (1970), 32.

⁸⁸ Aya Soika, *Emil Nolde – The Artist during the Third Reich* (2019), 45.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 47

⁹¹ Ibid.

atmosphere with a few smart changes. He replaced Nolde's figurative paintings with landscapes or still-lives that appeared more acceptable.⁹² Nolde himself did not really understand why his figurative paintings were being pushed aside. As the time passed, the pressure mounted on Nolde, caught between acceptance and prohibition.

After hearing Hitler's sharp assault to Cubists and Dadaists in his speech at the party congress in Nürnberg; Nolde, in order to secure his place distant from other contemporary art styles, noted in his book: "*Intellectual art literati call me an Expressionist, I do not like this narrow definition. A German artist, that is what I am.*"⁹³ Nationalgalerie and Hanfstaengl somehow accomplished to continue exhibiting Nolde between 1934 and 1937.

In Museum Folkwang, one of the his big supporters Ernst Gosebruch was replaced by Count Klaus von Baudissin. Luckily for Nolde, von Baudissin, although aligned closely to Rosenberg's side, insisted on displaying his works. Furthermore, he made the biggest acquisition of Nolde ever made by a German museum with approximately 450 works, 95 directly from the artist. That sale made Nolde, the artist with the highest number of works sold to German museums between 1933 and 1937.⁹⁴ At that time, exhibitions held in some major galleries were as important as museums. For instance, Ferdinand Möller Gallery organized two grand Nolde exhibitions, one in 1934 and one in 1937. The second one; in April 1937, resulted exceedingly successful, only three months prior to the *Entartete Kunst Ausstellung*.⁹⁵ Interestingly, while this was a period when many museums were removing or even selling modern art pieces from their collections, with some being stored away or confiscated, one of Berlin's most famous galleries was able to hold such exhibitions publicly.

Yet, Nolde heard the news about the *Entartete Kunst Ausstellung* on 19 July, a few weeks before his 70th birthday party where he and Ada already invited around 130 guests including high-ranked members of Nazi Party and prominent figures in the art scene. Nolde was shocked and his initial worry was if the artworks would be damaged after the exhibition. He was stunned by the scale of his inclusion and perceived it as a

⁹² Ibid., 52.

⁹³ Bernhard Fulda, *Emil Nolde – The Artist during the Third Reich* (2019), 69.

⁹⁴ Aya Soika, *Emil Nolde – The Artist during the Third Reich* (2019), 57.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 57-58.

personal betrayal rather than political persecution. Even so, he believed the exhibition represented a misunderstanding, not the final judgement. He immediately initiated a campaign of petitions asserting his political loyalty and racialized understanding of Expressionism. He wrote several letters to Goebbels and Hitler. Although Nolde regarded his inclusion in the exhibition as a mistake resulting from a misunderstanding, Nazi cultural authorities classified his work as degenerate in accordance with their aesthetic criteria, making his case emblematic of the regime's rejection of modern form rather than an administrative error. Although not all high-ranking Nazis agreed, exceptional practices were now nearly impossible, and the uncertainty surrounding German Expressionism that had persisted for years finally came to an end. After all, Goebbels admitted that he regretted Nolde's inclusion and by the mid 1939, Nolde was discharged from the *Entartete Kunst Aktion* after two years of correspondence through his network. His works were removed from the exhibition inventory and were no longer present in the travelling exhibition within the Third Reich after Munich.⁹⁶ Furthermore, during the exhibition in 1937, he surprisingly received many support letters from art-lovers, the exhibition increased his popularity.

Nolde himself noted: "*The exhibitions of so-called "Degenerate Art" held in Germany in 1937, with recent paintings and sculptures from all German museums, contained in my opinion: one third truly degenerate art; one third indifferent-not good and not bad art; one third good and in some cases particularly good art.*"⁹⁷

Hereof, he continued to make his autonomous aesthetic judgements, however, he still did not reject the ideological framework that condemned modern art therefore tried to keep his reputation separate from artists.

In August 1941, Emil Nolde was formally subjected to a painting ban (*Malverbot*) issued by the Reich Chamber of Fine Arts, which prohibited him from producing or exhibiting artworks. The ban was communicated with a letter and framed as an administrative measure rather than a public act of punishment, effectively removing Nolde from artistic life without official denunciation. Nolde received the decision with

⁹⁶ Ibid., 62.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

bitterness, interpreting it as a profound personal injustice while continuing to affirm his ideological loyalty to the regime. Although he outwardly complied with the ban, he secretly continued to work in watercolor, later describing these small-format works as his “Unpainted Pictures,” a strategy that allowed him to maintain his artistic identity while privately sustaining the self-image of a persecuted artist.

During the 1930s, Emil Nolde consistently portrayed himself as a victim of what he described as a Jewish-dominated art world, a narrative he used to explain both his marginalization within modern art institutions and his subsequent inclusion in the *Entartete Kunst* campaign. He benefited from this ambiguity in the early years of the regime, receiving state purchases and institutional validation before being retroactively reclassified as degenerate. After 1945, however, Nolde fundamentally recast this narrative. In the postwar period, he emphasized his classification as a degenerate artist, the confiscation of his works, and the painting ban imposed in 1941, while largely omitting his earlier political commitments and antisemitic rhetoric. This shift allowed Nolde to reposition himself as a victim of the Nazi regime itself, a self-image that proved highly influential in shaping his postwar reputation and institutional rehabilitation. He actively sought to suppress evidence of his antisemitism, including attempts to destroy or conceal writings such as his de-Jewification proposal *Entjudungsplan* after 1945.⁹⁸

As Soika emphasizes, Nolde’s condemnation was not the result of a single ideological decision but rather the outcome of shifting institutional power struggles, particularly between Rosenberg’s cultural office and Goebbels’s propaganda apparatus. His treatment exposes the instability of National Socialist racial aesthetics and the limits of Nazi cultural control. Rather than offering ideological coherence, the *Entartete Kunst* exhibition functioned as a site where unresolved tensions—between form and ideology, loyalty and style, and nationalism and modernity—were staged rather than resolved. From a curatorial perspective, these contradictions are central to understanding both the exhibition’s internal logic and its broader historical significance.

⁹⁸ Bernhard Fulda, *Emil Nolde – The Artist during the Third Reich* (2019), 102.

The 2019 exhibition “*Emil Nolde – A German Legend: The Artist during National Socialism*” presented at the *Nationalgalerie* in Berlin, fundamentally revised the long-established narrative surrounding Emil Nolde. Based on extensive archival research conducted by Dr. Bernhard Fulda, the project drew on materials from the *Nolde Stiftung Seebüll* (Nolde Foundation Seebüll) that had previously remained inaccessible in order to protect the artist’s reputation.

“We... no longer see any reason to protect Nolde from himself. His art, which was pioneering expressionism and modernism, is strong enough to withstand the discussion about his relationship with Nazism.” said Dr. Christian Ring, the new director of *Nolde Stiftung Seebüll*, about opening the foundation archives to the public.⁹⁹

The newly available documents revealed Nolde’s opinion about National Socialism and Hitler himself. In the exhibition, his anti-semitic writings were publicly displayed while challenging the postwar image of the artist as an unambiguous victim of the regime. For decades, a narrative shaped in part by the *Entartete Kunst* exhibition had contributed to Nolde’s rehabilitation and heroic status, a perception that the 2019 exhibition decisively unsettled by presenting a more complex and critical account of his political engagement. While the exhibition attracted widespread attention and became one of the most visited exhibitions in Germany, visitors often found themselves uncertain how to respond upon learning about the personal and moral dimensions of an artist whose work they admired. At the same time, art lovers who had previously sympathized with the artist solely as a victim of the Nazi regime reported feeling deceived once the full scope of the historical narrative was revealed. The repercussions of this reassessment extended well beyond the museum context. One of the works included in the exhibition, *Breaker* (1936), had been displayed in the office of German Chancellor Angela Merkel since 2006. With the influence of the exhibition, the Chancellery decided not to take the painting back, in fact, obliged to remove both Nolde paintings from the Chancellor’s office.¹⁰⁰ Given Merkel’s previously stated admiration for Nolde and the absence of an official

⁹⁹ Tom Almeroth-Williams, “Exposing a Nazi: The Exhibition Destroying a Myth,” *University of Cambridge Stories*, June 13, 2019,

¹⁰⁰ Tom Almeroth-Williams, “Exposing a Nazi: The Exhibition Destroying a Myth,” *University of Cambridge Stories*, June 13, 2019,

explanation, this decision sparked widespread public debate about the symbolic role of art and the criteria for its display within political institutions.

This case illustrates how the evaluation of an artist is not fixed but contingent upon shifting political power relations and historical narratives. An artist once publicly condemned and exhibited as “bad” can, with changing power structures and perspectives, later be reinterpreted as an underappreciated artist and even elevated to a great artist status. Yet subsequent reassessments can introduce an alternative narrative in which the artist is no longer regarded as “bad” in artistic terms, but rather as morally compromised. In this way, the figure is positioned at both ends of the moral spectrum, revealing how artistic judgement and ethical evaluation are continually reshaped by changing historical, political, and cultural frameworks.

Conclusion

Contrary to widespread assumptions, Nazi art policies did not emerge or operate in a uniform, simplistic, or superficial manner. This thesis has demonstrated this claim through concrete examples, analytical interpretations, and by tracing the interconnections between events, institutions, and individuals. The National Socialist cultural ideology and its practices, often perceived as being uniformly hostile to modern art, were in fact far less one-dimensional and were not shaped solely by blind hatred. Every historical period possesses its own standards of taste and systems of aesthetic judgment, which tend to be more visibly articulated under totalitarian regimes. However, National Socialist cultural policy distinguishes itself from other totalitarian models through the intensity of its internal conflicts, contradictions, and unresolved dilemmas.

While all regimes contain internal struggles and ideological disagreements, the situation within National Socialism was marked by a notable separation, at many points, between political rivalry and cultural-ideological competition. As a result, Nazi cultural policy cannot be reduced to a monolithic, ignorant, or unanimously enforced approach. The

extraordinary importance attributed to art, the early recognition of its potential as a political weapon, and the regime's willingness to conduct prolonged experiments—many of which remain subjects of art historical, curatorial, and sociological analysis today—may partially be attributed to the fact that the regime's leadership included individuals with a personal, albeit unsuccessful, engagement with art. This assessment should not be understood as an attempt to foreground positive aspects of the regime, its figures, or its historical legacy. Any evaluation of the period that excludes the crimes against humanity, the systematic violence, and the immense suffering inflicted by the regime would be both incomplete and ethically untenable. Political developments and the cultural-artistic phenomena examined in this thesis cannot be analyzed in isolation from one another. At the same time, reducing the era solely to a narrative of pure barbarity; of millions blindly following a handful of villains in a campaign of total destruction and hostility, risks oversimplification. Such an approach not only obscures the mechanisms of this dark period but also effaces the experiences of individuals who lived through it and acted according to what they believed to be right.

For this reason, cultural and artistic policies must be examined with the greatest possible degree of objectivity. The attempt to construct a national art ideology is not unique to National Socialism; it is a recurring phenomenon in newly founded states, post-independence contexts, or periods of regime change. This was precisely the ambition of National Socialism, yet it never achieved a stable or definitive form. Initiated in the mid-1920s, this *Kulturpolitik* project effectively came to an end on 20 March 1939, when nearly five-thousand so-called “degenerate” artworks were burned in the courtyard of Berlin's Main Fire Station in *Lindenstrasse 40/41*.

What must be emphasized is that, for many of the individuals involved over the course of this approximately fifteen-year project, this moment represented not a culmination of success but a profound failure. In other words, the formation of the National Socialist art discourse ultimately consumed itself along with the works it destroyed, fading into the margins of history. It remains striking that a regime defined by such destructive and hate-driven political and social ideology pursued, within the realm of art, comparatively patient and experimental strategies. The idea of exhibiting what was deemed “bad” in

this case, so-called degenerate art—within a carefully constructed narrative does not initially appear as an act of outright annihilation.

Although the burning of the artworks can be interpreted as the logical conclusion of an ongoing process, it nonetheless stands in contradiction to years of intellectual labor, exhibition-making, and ideological justification. The extensive effort devoted to defining, displaying, and contextualizing art ultimately destined for destruction appears inherently paradoxical. The strategy of exhibiting what was considered degenerate likely emerged from an understanding that an idea cannot be eradicated by burning it, but only by convincing people of its falseness. This, in turn, demonstrates that alongside unreflective ideological followers, National Socialist cultural institutions also contained a significant number of highly educated, intellectually capable individuals who engaged deeply and seriously with these questions. The ambiguities and grey zones within Nazi cultural ideology emerged precisely at the intersection of these competing groups and their spheres of influence, ultimately contributing to the internal collapse of the regime's cultural project and the temporary elevation of figures such as Emil Nolde to heroic status. All things considered, it is hardly coincidental that the *Entartete Kunst Ausstellung* attracted over two million visitors, while the state-sanctioned *Grosse Deutsche Kunstausstellung*, located nearby, drew only around five hundred thousand.

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