

The Power of Curating: Die Entartete Kunst Ausstellung

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In this essay, I will discuss the power of art curating through a quite controversial case study in order to concretely demonstrate the effects and its importance.

As understood by the majority of the people, art curating is a practice of connecting art and society. That definition might look correct but it also can make people think that the curator is just the middlemen between artwork and the visitor. However the role of the curator is and should be more than that. In order to create the bridge between art and its audience, the curator has to create a narrative. This narrative should be comprehensible in all different steps of curating which are displaying things, communicating with the visitor and making things understood by the visitors through an experience.

It is basically a practice of showing things. Since how things are shown can be more convincing, therefore more important than how things really are for many people, it is crucial to understand how a narrative totally changes the way people look at it and build an opinion about it. In order to support this argument, a case study should be shown. Entartete Kunst Ausstellung (Degenerate Art Exhibition) which took place in Munich in 1937 might be considered one of the most impactful curating examples if analyzed with a holistic approach. It puts in front of eyes how curating was used as a tool to sway public opinion.



'Degenerate Art' exhibition catalogue, front cover (left) and p.31 (right), published by Verlag für Kultur- und Wirtschaftswerbung, 1937, Berlin, Germany. Museum no. 38041996105979. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

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. 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.



1. Plastik "Großer Kopf" von Otto Freundlich – in der Ausstellung "Entartete Kunst" präsentiert als "Der neue Mensch", Juli 1937. Foto: Georg Schödl. (Stadtarchiv München, DE-1992-FS-NS-01563)
2. Richard Haizmanns (1895-1963) Marmorskulptur "Figur" von 1929 (umbenannt in "Mädchen") vor der Dada-Wand, Raum 3 im Obergeschoß, Juli 1937. Foto: Georg Schödl (1899-1981). (Stadtarchiv München, DE-1992-FS-NS-000123)

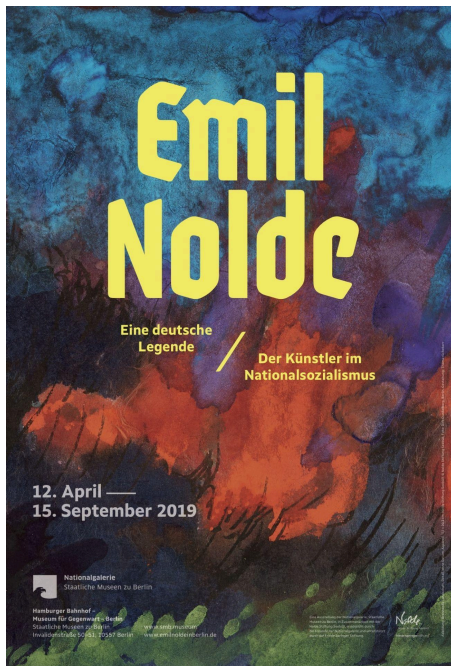
As it is seen in the photos above, the curating of the exhibition is well designed in terms of consolidating the message. The intentional usage of blind spots and corners with less lighting and almost no daylight also forces the visitor to think they are seeing something insignificant and worthless. Right here, another example should be given.



1. Bildagentur/Zentralarchiv, Staatliche Museen, Berlin/Art Resource, NY 2. June 26, 2003–September 29, 2003. IN1908.6

On the left, we see two paintings of Max Beckmann touching each other and an Emil Nolde painting hanging crooked. The composition as a whole looks grotesque with the buying price of the artwork written under some works, the text “Bezahlt von den Steuergroschen des arbeitenden deutschen Volkes” (Paid by the tax pennies of the working German people) to emphasize the money spent during the high inflation period while the people were having a hard time. All of the elements were used to build a hatred against these works that are called degenerate. In contrast, on the right, we see the exact same works by Beckmann, 66 years later hanged as masterpieces in MoMA, one of the most respected art institutions in the world. That’s why it can be said that context determines the entire narrative.

In order to answer the question “what kind of exhibitions do we really need?” I will discuss a different case study which is connected to the previous one. Therefore, the points that I have highlighted previously could also be applied to this example. On the other hand, since it is an exhibition of the present day, we have more data about visitors' reactions and the impact of the exhibition is more visible for us to evaluate.



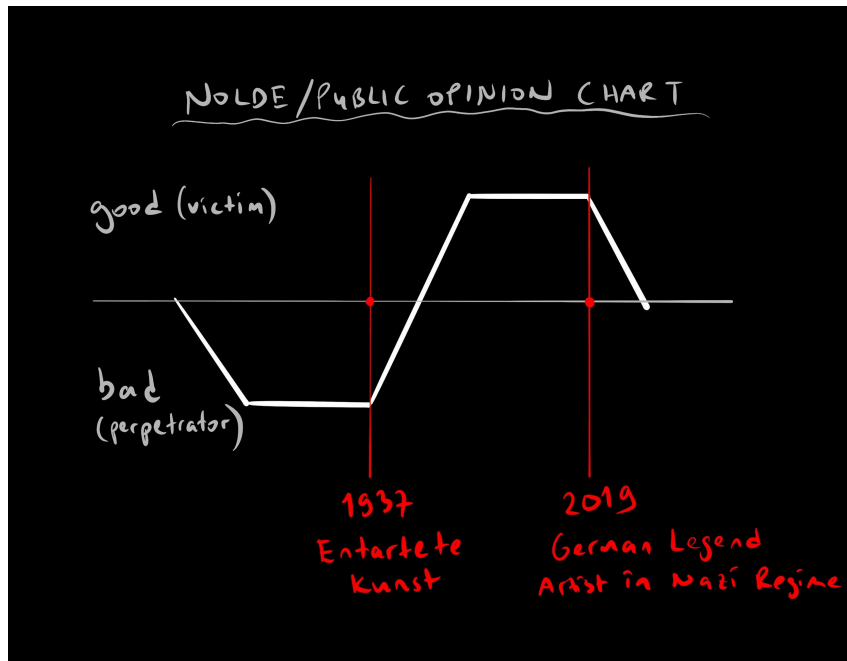
Emil Nolde, as a pioneer of German Expressionism, is considered as one of the greatest artists of the 20th century. He was one of the artists whose works have been exhibited in Entartete Kunst Ausstellung and who was also banned from painting by the Nazi regime in 1941. For these reasons he was seen as a victim of the Nazi regime ever since. But “Emil Nolde – a German Legend. The Artist during National Socialism.” exhibition at Nationalgalerie Berlin in 2019 has changed the story. Dr. Bernhard Fulda worked in the archives of the Nolde Foundation when the foundation decided to share documents that they had not previously made accessible in order to protect artists' reputation.

The findings of the research in the archives was striking and led to a diverse narrative about the artist. In this exhibition, it was stated that Emil Nolde was a member of the Nazi Party in the 1930s and to crown it all, his writings about his Anti-semitic view was exhibited. What is even worse is that when he found out that his works were added to Degenerate Art, he objected to the decision by claiming that he is an ideal nationalistic German painter who tries to save German Art from the jewish-led art world. He also asserted that German Expressionism should be the recent style of National Germanic art. Despite his close relations with some Nazi high command members such as Joseph Goebbels, as it so happens, he was categorized as degenerate which made him a victim of the regime. Once a supporter of the regime has been acquitted without doing anything. A narrative created in the Degenerate Art made him almost a hero until 82 years later a different narrative is told.

The influences appear to be immeasurable; “Even before the official opening, the project produced front-page news in Germany and in the international press: one of the Nolde paintings in the exhibition (Breaker, 1936) had been on display in the Berlin office of German Chancellor Angela Merkel since her election in 2006; now, in reaction to an official museum request for a return of the loan the Chancellery decided to hand back not just one but both paintings by Nolde from Merkel’s office. Since Merkel is on record as describing Nolde as her favourite artist, the lack of an official explanation for this clean sweep is causing a lot of speculation as well as a lively public debate about what kind of artworks should be on display in such a political setting.” as stated by University of Cambridge Faculty of History.

Thus, society needs exhibitions that show us things that we think we know in a different context, with a different narrative, through different perspectives.





To sum up, taking the case studies in consideration, the curator should be able to handle such sensitive issues with great care, separate the artist himself and the art when necessary, and present a synthesis of the two objectively when necessary. The main purpose here is to transfer information through art. If a distinction needs to be made between bad or good, beautiful or ugly, this should be left to the viewer. This attitude is of great importance in today's increasingly polarized societies and where politics permeates every aspect of life. In this regard, the curator has to be obliged to create accurate narratives, increase people's awareness of world events and show the audience angles they have not looked at before to give them the opportunity to fully evaluate what they watch, rather than controlling or directing their view or opinion.

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