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### Everything is Curated: Effective Control of “Degenerate” Art in Nazi Germany

In 1937, the Nazi party headed by Adolf Hitler collected all of the artwork deemed to be against their worldview from all of the galleries in Germany at the time. Expressionism, Surrealism and Dada, movements targeting emotion or abstraction as opposed to precise form, were most targeted in the collection of over 650 works. The exhibition that held these artworks, “Entartete Kunst,” or “Degenerate Art” in English, was held in Munich and across the street from the grand pillared white building holding the “Große Deutsche Kunstausstellung,” or “Great German Art Exhibition,” showcasing works that the Nazis found ideologically or artistically valuable. Both were curated by Hitler’s favorite artist at the time: Adolf Ziegler and the “Great German Art Exhibition” did happen to include many of his works. The “Great German Art Exhibition” was, unfortunately for the Nazi party, much less successful than its counterpart as 3 million visitors participated in the “Degenerate Art” exhibition, more than three times that of the “Great German Art Exhibition.”

While it may initially seem to be an unwise decision to place all of the works that could potentially harm their ideology in one place, the Nazis were able to strip the art of its potential power and convince the people of its degeneracy. In carefully understanding and manipulating the audience before and during the “Entartete Kunst” exhibition, the Nazi Party effectively silences the potential voice of the works of this “degenerate art,” because without doing so the ideas could have toppled their power.

At the time of the exhibition, Germany had been paying vast sums of money and was in massive amounts of debt due to the Treaty of Versailles. With the public suffering, the Nazi

party was able to take control with their promises of peace and an easy way out: to scapegoat vulnerable groups to explain the dark state of Germany. The Aryan ideal was made to be appealing to a large part of the population because it offered perfection. With a country in economic collapse, it was a sugar-coated way to blame others around them rather than acknowledge that their veterans or past selves may have been to blame. Modern art was a very large target to hit as “many people found modern art difficult to understand, it was relatively easy to expose it as a fraud” (Segal 52). This is not to say that modern art is a fraud but rather that it was not at all difficult to convince the public that it was. It was mostly agreeable to the public at the time that modern art was hard to understand collectively and since the Nazis had the initially simple idealistic perfection, once more the populace was encouraged not to think any deeper.

In a speech announcing the opening of the exhibition, Adolf Ziegler offered that art should be a “crystal-clear expression of life” and that the “diseased and degenerate...exerted substantial influence over the production of art.” Ziegler manipulates the public to think that all art has to be like life and that any art that is not picture perfect is degenerate. It is true that the Expressionism and Dada movements take more inspiration from human feeling and abstraction rather than a mirror image of life. The point of this art is to challenge the crystal-clear idea of beauty and reflection so it becomes immediately threatening to the Aryan ideology that holds that only perfection can be allowed and rather embraces the chaos of life. This art is meant to impassion and elicit a response in a way that is different from a picture-perfect setting.

The manipulation of the audience is very curated, especially in Ziegler’s speech. He carefully chooses words to make sure he always has the emotions of the audience in control. He creates a relieved and almost empowering tone that one might find in other speeches that actually

speak truth to power. He expresses that the artists and critics “abused the power of their pens” and that the exhibition is to stop this scourge. He condemns the artists as those that had abused their power, as if he *was* speaking truth to power. By framing it this way, he paints the Nazi party as saviors from a cause that the German populace is only now discovering. Viewing this from the modern day, it is extremely ironic as Ziegler states, “it is the seducers, not the seduced, who must be taken to task for these things” and that is completely correct. But it is not the artists that are doing the seduction. Everything is curated. Ziegler exclaims to the audience “German Volk, come and judge for yourselves!” but he has already stripped them of any way to judge that which he has not explicitly curated for them.

Segal argues in his book that, the choice of modern art as a scapegoat was not only to dissuade the German public from disagreeing with their Aryan ideology; this also served “a political objective: the creation of a collective enemy” (Segal 52). The aim here was to funnel the anxiety of the German populace in their nation’s economic situation and pin it on social degradation, something for which the Nazi party declared to have a solution. Every piece in the exhibit was designed to call to mind the heart of what the Nazis asserted to be causing this degradation, mainly the corruption of “images the Nazis sanctified as Great German Art: farmers, soldiers, mothers, and landscape” shadowing the “Great German Art Exhibition,” but there, instead, each category was intended to show how “proper Germans” could fix and right the wrongs shown to the populace (Levi 43). These categories were chosen to represent core ideologies that would be hard to argue against. That farmers, mothers and the landscape are valuable is very hard to dispute, and, after a massive failure in World War I, soldiers became an equally touchy subject. Zeigler makes this point as he argues that in the art displayed, “German front-line soldier[s] [are] spat upon and spattered in blood” and that a “German mother is

portrayed as a sex-starved whore.” He is not entirely wrong here even if they are exaggerations. Rather than spat upon, the viewers are shown the horror and raw emotion of war. Rather than being “sex-starved,” the viewers are shown the raw emotions of love and its discomfort. Most of the paintings were designed to paint the working class as struggling or the soldiers dying or fighting. Both the Nazis and the artists would view that both of those things are meant to make the audience feel uncomfortable and to show this raw emotion. But the Nazis make sure that because of the uncomfortable message hidden behind the art, the viewers do not confront this raw emotion and its message, instead taking only disgust and are thus repulsed. In order to dispute the claims of the Nazi Party, one would then have to go against the German working class, their families, their veterans and their land, all being offended because they were not given a chance to realize the offense.

“The Beach” (Image 1) by Max Beckmann was one of the works labeled as degenerate. Playing with perspective, shadow and movement, it is eerie and reminiscent of a child’s drawing. It elicits emotion in a way that “The Four Elements” (Image 2) by Adolf Ziegler does not. Each nude figure sits still as if they are posing for a picture. Their faces have little emotion even if they are much more realistic than that of the beachgoers. As “The Beach” appears in monochromatic video, it is unclear what colors were used to paint this. However, the shading is clearly less realistic, and the coloring is more solid rather than a realistic gradient. This contrasts heavily with the subdued and elegant colors true to life that Ziegler had painted. Where “The Beach” and expressionism truly excels is in theme and idea. Each beachgoer has a story and an emotion that a model that had sat for hours to be painted cannot. The happiness of the handstand and the love of the people under the umbrella is rawer than the still and lifeless models. This then in turn creates empathy and makes one think about the stories and emotions behind them and that

gives chaos and life. That gives reality. “The Four Elements” is a beautiful painting that is technically very well done. Thematically, however, there is nothing but a metaphor that stands in the title. It is a work that, in a museum, one might look at and admire its beauty but then immediately forget. It is an ideal that gives no story and no thought.

The problem here is that the Nazis can use the emotions that arise against the art as it elicits a very different feeling from the classical art. In using the uncomfortable or unusual feeling that the imperfect form elicits, the Nazis can compound it and say that not only is that uncomfortable feeling correct, all of the bad feelings can be framed within it. This means that the Nazis only have to deal with this initial idea that elicits discomfort and they have pretended to deal with the source. Adolf Ziegler claimed that they had in fact made sure that “this form of artistic engagement is finally done with and gone.” He argues that he and his party has solved the issue and that the populace can rest easy. By tying different unrelated topics such as Judaism and communism, they can get scapegoat again and again to play to people’s worst fears and retain the malleable majority of the public. While the exhibition was undeniably popular, it may not have been for the reason that the art was well received but that the “*succès de scandale* was another important factor contributing to the exhibition’s uncanny popularity” and did not really result in the public taking in the art as a differing ideology to that of the Nazis (Segal 54). Their response would then be more akin to reaffirming the beliefs of the Nazi Party as they would be going to see what was forbidden, not to ask why they might have found it threatening.

When imagining the setting of the “Degenerate Art” exhibition one might initially assume the Nazis to be petty and unintelligent as they display all the potential examples against their cause. Unfortunately, rather than being petty, it becomes very effective in defaming the art before it is given a chance to speak. Silent video taken at the time by the American filmmaker

Julien Bryan paints a stark picture of the interior of the exhibit. Paintings are stacked closely together and are only roughly organized to show disrespect. Long winding paragraphs tangled across, around, and through the exhibited works being “used in multiple ways: to deface, to emphasize, to ironize, and to interpret” as Ariela Freedman argues (8).

Each quote on the walls, as translated by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, seems to give words from the artists perspective such as “Take Dada seriously! It pays” scrawled next to the Nazis approximation of the artwork (Image 3) or “they say it themselves: ‘We act as if we were painters, poets, or whatever, but we...are just putting one giant swindle over on the world....’” (Image 4) taking up more room than even the bigger paintings. While pretending using the point of view of the artists, the displays change their image to that of a cheat or someone who only strives for money. This image was strategically crafted for the viewers of the exhibition to follow and agree with in their current social plight. Each work has a marked price tag with the price the initial art galleries had paid before the Ziegler took them. The price tags all had a subtext that read “Paid for with the taxes of the working German folk,” (Image 5) further reinforcing the idea that the artists are only corrupting German art for money and their own greed without having to work very hard.

This graffiti targeted “not only modern art but also the sponsors, critics, and institutions that once supported it” as then the only people who could dispute it were the people who were already being criticized (Freedman 9). As a viewer might move into the first room, an immediate example of this is given: a twisted sculpture of Christ on a crucifix “was hung beside a reproduction of a critical essay that praised it” (Image 6) (Freedman 9). The essay is unreadable as it is painted over by a large question mark, giving the audience no choice but to assume it to be inaccurate. In destroying the credibility of any potential naysayers, the Nazi party could unite

everyone without having to worry about some being swayed. When a naysayer that they cannot silence is presented, the exhibition was quietly changed, and another piece was put up to replace the contested one. A “Norwegian delegation objected... all that was required was that someone lay down the law, and the paintings were taken down” (Piper 3). Since the Norwegian delegation was from another nation and thus could not be silenced by the same methods, the Nazi party had to acquiesce.

While Freedman later argues that the graffiti “perhaps even inspired engagement” and “undermined the Nazi ability to control the reception and significance of this powerful art,” it is undeniably the case that the Nazi power remained for another 6 years until the end of the war and the infamous “Kristallnacht” (Night of Broken Glass) took place only a year after the Munich exhibition (Freedman 9-10). If the public was engaged, it was not a positive engagement. It is impossible to know what the past would have been without this exhibition, but it was designed explicitly to “control...reception and significance” as Freedman herself agrees. It does not matter that a critical thinker or an artist would find the exhibit telling or engaging because they had already been written off. Freedman views this from the lens of someone who has the skills to evaluate the art or the exhibit, but without this skill or training, the target audience of the exhibit is helpless to the manipulation. The Nazi Party effectively removed this skill before the exhibit even began.

Adolf Ziegler and the Nazi Party effectively used the art and the populace against itself by subtly manipulating them, both before the exhibit and within it. The most unsettling part of this research is that it is almost impossible to fight. In a situation where the populace has discredited you and has no way to discover that they are being manipulated, there is nothing anyone can do with logic. The only way to combat this manipulation is to prevent it before it can

even happen. In order to do this, there must be firm education in critical thinking and leadership so that the population is not taken advantage of. It is also necessary to remove corruption in governments so that there is no manipulating agency. But again, this raises a problem: how is one to change a government without an educated populace and how can one educate the populace with a corrupt government?

This aside, the fact that the Nazis created an entire exhibit to fight against art is a statement to art's true power. With an audience that understands how to confront their emotions and educated in critical thinking, art can have a profound impact and can change the way people think in an instant. This is why it was so threatening to a totalitarian regime such as the one the Nazi party enforced. A government such as this thrives on everyone thinking the same way to be predictable and easy to control. Art, music, and literature, all heavily censored in the Nazi era, introduce chaos into the mix. When people are encouraged to be different, *think* different, a regime built on simple principles that people are not supposed to challenge will fall. When everything is curated, even the mind, what must be done is to let in the chaos, let in the rawness of reality and not to fall into the manipulation and curation of a supposed utopia of sameness.



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Image Appendix



Image 1: “The Beach” by Max Beckmann



Image 2: “The Four Elements” by Adolf Ziegler



Image 3: "Take Dada seriously! It pays"



Image 4: "They say it themselves: 'We act as if we were painters, poets, or whatever, but we...are just putting one giant swindle over on the world....'"

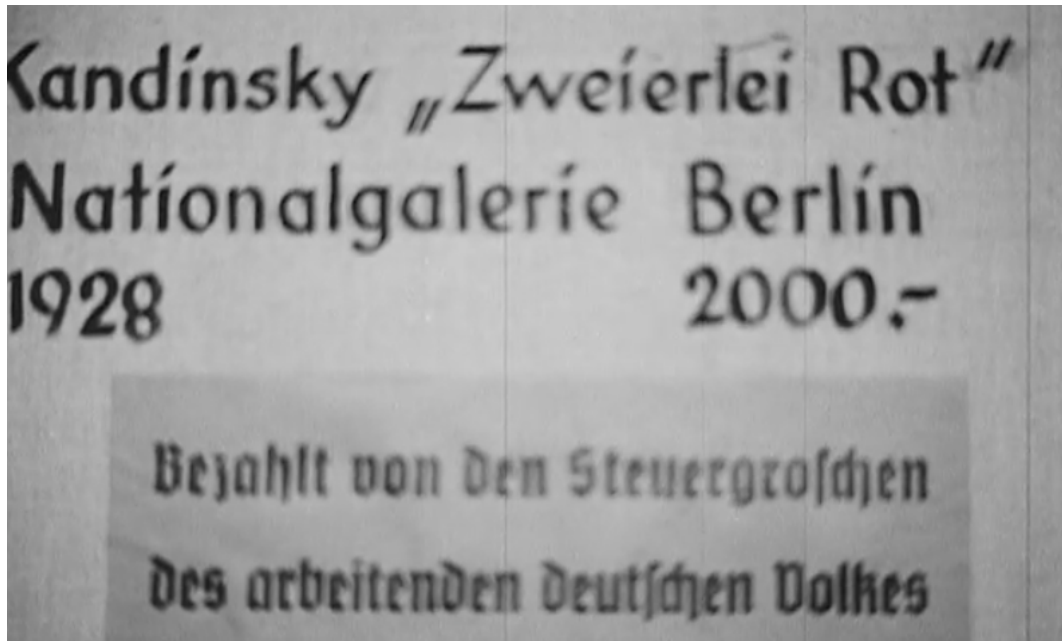


Image 5: “Paid for with the taxes of the working German folk.”



Image 6: A twisted sculpture of Christ on a crucifix “was hung beside a reproduction of a critical essay that praised it” (Freedman 9).