



Staging Them

Entartete Kunst

from Past to Present

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The *Entartete Kunst* (Degenerate Art) exhibition staged by the Nazi regime, stands as a historical case study of propaganda. Its denouncement of modern art, displayed as a chamber of horrors, contributed to compose an overarching enemy figure, a fabricated threat against the construct of the ‘Aryan’ nation. This translated to a fundamental opposition: modern art stood for chaos, immorality and madness—for degeneracy—and this threatened the harmony, homogeneity, and racial purity of the true body politic. At the time of the first *Entartete Kunst* exhibition, the composition of this enemy figure took the form of the ‘Bolshevik-Jewish’ conspiracy for world governance. But in the subsequent chapters of *Entartete Kunst* showcased throughout Germany, this enemy figure of degeneracy would more emphatically come to include black peoples as well.

The aim of propaganda is not to merely send a message, but to construct reality as such: to engineer a collectively embodied ‘new normal.’¹ The *Entartete Kunst* exhibition clearly fits this definition of propaganda, as it aimed to enforce a new national consent based on the dichotomy of racial purity versus degeneracy.

To construct a new reality, propaganda needs infrastructure, it needs a narrative, and it needs an imagination. In the case of Nazi Germany, this *infrastructure* consisted of the entire control over the state apparatus, which included all forms of media communication and cultural production. The *narrative*—or ‘master narrative’² in the words of Terence McSweeney—is essentially the Nazi’s origin story that tells us of its past, its present, and its desired future, which in this case is based on a mythological construction of racial purity which needs to be regained in order to defend the body politic from degeneracy and collapse. And lastly, the *imagination* that results from the Nazi’s infrastructure and master narrative, relates to the creation of a thousand-year Reich, embodied by the architectural model of Germania—the new name of Berlin—designed by Hitler and architect Albert Speer.

The ‘Us versus Them’ dichotomy is fundamental to any propaganda to create a successful antagonism by identifying a people in relation to their shared threat. In the case of oppressive propaganda, such as that of the Nazi regime, the enemy figure is composed not of real existential threats, but of relatively easy to defeat minorities—a strategy that guarantees a quick ‘heroic’ success over, in this case, the Jewish people and other minorities, and in the case of many contemporary examples of resurgent au-





thoritarianism and fascism, against Muslims and people of colour in general (often euphemistically referred to as ‘migrants’). The *Entartete Kunst* exhibition succeeds, by using the Us (racial purity) versus Them (degeneracy) dichotomy to do two things at the same time: it constructs a relatively easy to defeat enemy that is trumped up as a major existential threat, while articulating through this ‘negative social contract’ what defines a true people.³ In other words, not what we have in common is what defines us, but what we are threatened by—what ‘they’ are, ‘we’ are *not*.

The *Entartete Kunst* exhibition is too often described as purely historical, belonging to a bygone age of so-called ‘totalitarianism’.⁴ But on closer look, its narratives and strategies resonate with the culture wars in the Cold War era and today’s attacks against contemporary art by ultranationalist and alt-right actors. In our ‘post-modern 1930s’, as Yanis Varoufakis frequently terms it, so-called cultural Marxists, genderists and globalists—with the latter structurally evoked through attacks on the Jewish-Hungarian philanthropist George Soros—are framed as a threat that aims to structurally ‘depopulate’ white majorities through mass migration, corrupt the nuclear family structure and sanctity of religious institutions, and weaken national sovereignty.⁵ And once again, contemporary art is considered by ultranationalist and alt-right actors to embody this culture of ‘degeneracy’.

I will begin this essay with an analysis of the staging of ‘Them’—the composition of an enemy figure—through the use of modern art in the context of the *Entartete Kunst* exhibition, but subsequently attempt to narrate how similar strategies have continued to be employed throughout the Cold War up until the present.

1 *Entartete Kunst* Revisited

The *Entartete Kunst* exhibition that opened in Munich on 19 July 1937, was not the beginning but the culmination of an ongoing campaign against modern art waged by the Nazi regime. So-called ‘Schreckenskammern der Kunst’ (chambers of horror of art) or ‘Schandausstellungen’ (abomination exhibitions) had been structurally staged in the years preceding *Entartete Kunst*, to showcase what the Nazis considered as the ‘Jewish-Bolshevist’ threat. An important forerunner was *Spiegelbilder des Verfalls in der Kunst* (Images of Decadence in Art) that opened in Dresden in 1933, before travelling to eight other German cities until 1936.⁶ Some years before, in the book *Kunst und Rasse* (Art

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and Race, 1928), Nazi architect and racial theorist Paul Schultze-Naumburg had already raged against the degeneracy of modern art set against the ‘noble race’ that had brought about antiquity and the Renaissance, concluding: ‘Wherever a race degenerates, racial feeling has to disappear as well, and whenever racial feeling disappears, the ideal type in every genuine race is also lost.’⁷ The origins of these ideas might be found already in the pseudoscience of physician and writer Max Nordau, a co-founder of the World Zionist Organization, who published his two-part treatise *Entartung* (Degeneration) in 1892–1893. Nordau perceived the early advents of modern art—from the pre-Raphaelites to the Symbolists—as part of an ‘epidemic’ of degeneration and hysteria, arguing that ‘It never occurs to us to permit the criminal by organic disposition to “expand” his individuality in crime, and just as little can it be expected of us to permit the degenerate artist to expand his individuality in immoral works of art.’⁸

The notion of a degenerate art was thus structured on a pathological gaze long in the making in which the works of modern artists were considered direct symptoms of a time of supposed political anarchy and moral decay, compared to an idealized past of racial purity that was to be regenerated by the Nazi regime. Whereas the suffocatingly crowded ‘Entartete Kunst’ exhibition displayed a chaotically hung collection of works by abstract, Cubist, Expressionist and Surrealist artists, juxtaposed with photographs of physical ‘deformations’ and the mentally ill, a day before its opening, the *Grosse Deutsche Kunstausstellung* (Great German Art Exhibition) had been inaugurated in the pompous and spatial halls of Munich’s newly constructed Haus der Deutschen Kunst (House of German Art). While works of Oskar Kokoschka and Georg Grosz in the *Entartete Kunst* exhibition exposed the brutalities of the First World War and its aftermath of poverty and mental illness, which the Nazis considered as a shaming of their national pride and sacrifice, the *Grosse Deutsche Kunstausstellung* was structured on a regressive neo-classicism where the towering muscular sculptures of Nazi-favourite Arno Breker and the clinical Aryan nudes of painter Adolf Ziegler represented the Nazi renaissance Adolf Hitler aimed to bring about. ‘Germany ... means to have a *German* art once again’, Hitler roared at the opening of the *Grosse Deutsche Kunstausstellung*, ‘and this, like all the creative values of a people, must and will be an *eternal* art.’⁹

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But the dichotomy between the supposed chaos and degeneration of modern art and an eternal racially pure art, was not yet as absolute as the Nazis claimed it to be. Expressionist painter Emil Nolde, whose works were included in *Entartete Kunst*, had been an early supporter and member of the Nazi party, and Minister of Propaganda Joseph Goebbels had made great efforts, to no avail, to convince Hitler that Nolde's 'Nordic expressionism' represented the new vitality of the Nazi regime. Some artists found their works exhibited in *both* exhibitions, such as sculptor Rudolf Belling, whose bronze sculpture of a tripod of dynamic abstracted figures titled *Dreiklang* was considered degenerate, whereas his figurative muscular figure *Der Boxer Schmeling* was deemed racially pure.¹⁰ And while the *Entartete Kunst* exhibition framed degeneracy as inherent to their imagined Bolshevik-Jewish plot for world domination, only six of the 112 artists included were actually Jewish (instead, by displaying the purchasing price of each of the works in the inflated currency of the former Weimar Republic, which made them seem excessive, the 'Jewish' character of the works was allocated to the financialization of modern art rather than its creation).¹¹ But despite these contradictions, *Entartete Kunst* stood as a culminating point of the preceding chambers of horror exhibitions, in its endeavour to use art to stage a common enemy: the frightening ambiguity of 'Them' versus the monocultural construction of 'Us' in the 'Us versus Them' dichotomy.

Two million people would visit the *Entartete Kunst* exhibition, compared to the 420,000 that came to see the *Grosse Deutsche Kunstausstellung*. The affective joy of experiencing fear, rancour and superiority—comparable to visiting the carnival of rarities—became a crucial part of the Nazi propaganda arsenal. And it seems essential, in the light of the resurgence of authoritarianism and fascism in our present time, to consider how important the *pleasure principle* of fascism is. Too often, support of fascist politics is explained as a result of economic crisis and social frustrations, but the unambiguous joy that fascism offers in claiming superiority and imposing violence upon others cannot be underestimated: Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma* (*Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom*, 1975) continues to stand as a rare and ground-breaking study into this subject.

The Nazis would continue to engage the fascist pleasure principle in subsequent exhibitions. Later in the same year, *Der ewige Jude* (The Eternal Jew) exhibition opened in Munich as

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well, claiming to expose the ‘biological foundations of Jewry’ and their aspirations for world domination. Displays consisted of chaotic photocollages that derived their vocabulary from Bolshevik poster art, re-emphasizing the overarching danger posed by the Jewish-Bolshevik enemy, but also—as Michael Tymkiw points out—pitting avant-garde ‘fragmentation’ versus Nazi monoculture.¹² But the exhibition also featured fairground-attraction styled chapters, such as the staging of a Jewish freemason’s lodge full of skeletons. In this light, *Der ewige Jude* ‘turned Jew-hating into a kind of entertainment’.¹³ The success of these blockbuster exhibitions would also come to include *Entartete Musik*, which was mounted for the first time in 1938, as part of the *Reichsmusik-tage* (Reich music festival). Its aim was to expose ‘degenerate tonality’¹⁴ through the works of Arnold Schoenberg as well as ‘primitive’ jazz.¹⁵ Its exhibition poster depicted a black jazz musician, playing a saxophone, his jacket marked by a star of David depicted in bright socialist red. It is an image that essentially aimed to expand the Jewish-Bolshevik enemy into the Afro-Jewish-Bolshevik threat. And just as these enemy figures merged gradually through Nazi propaganda, so did these traveling blockbuster exhibitions themselves begin to mutate when *Entartete Kunst* and *Entartete Musik* merged after their respective openings into a single touring exhibition. The staging of Them solidified.

The fall of the Nazi regime is often equated with the fall of its theory on a racially pure versus a degenerate art, but already in the years following the Second World War, a new take on its practice emerged in the context of the capitalist democracy of the United States and its imperialist ambitions as embodied by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).

2 Reverse *Entartete Kunst*

Whereas the Nazi regime showcased modern art as the embodiment of degeneracy, after the second world war American modernist art would be employed for an equally propagandistic purpose, but would now come to represent American *supremacy*. The CIA saw the abstract works of modernist artists and their supposed ‘apolitical’ stance as an ideal counter-point to the overtly propagandistic neo-classicism of the Nazis as well as the Soviet doctrine of socialist realism that continued to be produced behind the Iron Curtain—despite the fact that in the United States itself, modernist art was attacked through rhetoric that had frightening





resonance with that employed by the Nazis. The idea of a cultural supremacy of American modernist art thus existed mainly in the mindset of an artistic elite on one hand, and an elite of secret service members on the other. The CIA, through its front organization, the Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF), would fund exhibitions and concerts in Europe to propagate American abstract expressionism and modern music, claiming itself as a safe haven of the cultural avant-garde in the face of the Soviets. CCF supported projects included large-scale touring exhibitions such as *Modern Art in the United States* (1955) and *The New American Painting* (1958–1959), which according to Frances Stonor Saunders, should essentially be regarded as a form of *reverse Entartete Kunst*.¹⁶ And the scope of this reverse *Entartete Kunst* operation was vast. From 1950 until 1976 the CCF ‘had offices in thirty-five countries, employed dozens of personnel, published over twenty prestige magazines, held art exhibitions, owned a news and features service, organized high profile international conferences, and rewarded musicians and artists with prizes and public performances’.¹⁷

Were artists and critics merely instrumentalized for the propagandistic endeavours of the CIA, or was the use of their work for political ends a continuation of their own political convictions? Art critic Clement Greenberg claimed American modern art to be a superior *modernist* art, characterized by its abstract ‘purity’ that was the ‘guarantee of its standards of quality’ as much as of its ‘independence’.¹⁸ The counter-point to modernist art was the instrumentalized ‘kitsch’ of dictatorships, as Greenberg argued: ‘The encouragement of kitsch is merely another of the inexpensive ways in which totalitarian regimes seek to ingratiate themselves with their subjects.’¹⁹ But this did not keep Greenberg from seeking for another kind of instrumentalization of modernist art, as he affiliated himself with the anti-communist movement. This is exemplified by his membership of the American Committee for Cultural Freedom (ACCF) in the early 1950s, an organization that campaigned against communism and was directly tied to the CCF.²⁰ The ACCF was symptomatic for the beginning of the Cold War and the rise of McCarthyism, that trumped up the Red Scare. Greenberg would serve as a prominent member from 1952–1953, and the level at which he sympathized with the organization’s agenda is expressed by his falling-out with fellow member and historian Arthur M. Schlesinger, whom Greenberg accused of not actively pursuing anti-communist activities.²¹ Greenberg was

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also one of the core members of the organization who refused to denounce the anti-communist campaigns of Senator McCarthy.²²

These positions seemed, with few exceptions, widely shared by the artists Greenberg favoured. Apart from the painter Ad Reinhardt, who, unlike most abstract expressionists that had previously espoused Marxist sympathies remained loyal to his leftist political orientation, and who was the only one of the group to participate in the March on Washington in support of black rights in 1963, many of the artists had direct and voluntary links to the anti-Communist movement. Robert Motherwell and Jackson Pollock—just like Greenberg—were members of the ACCF. In 1940, Mark Rothko and Adolph Gottlieb helped to establish the Foundation of Modern Painters and Sculptors, ‘which started by condemning all threats to culture from nationalistic and reactionary political movements’, but in later months became an active agent in the anti-Communist movement by ‘exposing Party influence in various art organizations’ with the aim to ‘destroy all Communist presence in the art world’.²³

In this light, the notion of ‘purity’ in abstract expressionism loses its self-proclaimed ‘universal’ characteristics (considering the group was structured on an idea of the dominating white male genius, there was never much ‘universal’ to it anyway). Pollock’s ‘drippings’ suddenly need to be evaluated in a specific geopolitical context. His wild dances around his canvasses while dripping paint in all directions are not merely an attempt to arrive at a truth located ‘within’ the act of painting itself, but should rather be understood as a ritual performance of the doctrine of freedom espoused by the dominant structures of power in capitalist democracy. The propagandistic strength of his work and that of the other abstract expressionists was located in the fact that while their anti-communist affiliations and intentions were explicit, their images claimed a universalism beyond the sphere of politics. In the words of art historian Eva Cockcroft, who contributed significantly to revealing the propagandistic role of modernist art in the CCF: ‘the Abstract Expressionists succeeded in creating an important new art movement. They also contributed, whether they knew it or not, to a purely political phenomenon—the supposed divorce between art and politics which so perfectly served America’s needs in the cold war.’²⁴ In our minds, the drippings of Pollock remain abstract; they do not ‘depict’ heroic American leaders or evil communists, even though,

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in fact, *they do*. In essence, there is nothing non-figurative about the works of modernist propaganda art, as it offers figurative representations of the freedom supposedly inherent to non-figurative representation. As such, it also embodies a key characteristic of propaganda art espoused by democratic regimes compared to dictatorships, namely to be visible as art, but invisible as propaganda.

Through progressive culture, the Soviet enemy could be exposed in its barbarity, both politically and culturally. But precisely here one of the great paradoxes of the CCF becomes evident, namely that its preference for modernist art was far more progressive than any other, overt national arts programme of the United States itself. For example, 'President Truman articulated a view held by many Americans that linked experimental, and especially abstract art to degenerate or subversive impulses'.²⁵ And under Senator McCarthy's witch hunt for Communist conspirators this sentiment was only strengthened. McCarthy's close ally, George Anthony Dondero of the US House of Representatives, even proclaimed that '[a]ll modern art is Communistic', claiming cubism, futurism, dadaism, expressionism, abstractionism, and surrealism to be 'primitive', 'insane', and 'in denial of reason'.²⁶

Paradoxically, the works that supported the CIA project of a reverse *Entartete Kunst* where thus, simultaneously, rejected as degenerate. This shows that the same artwork can serve opposite goals within different propaganda narratives. Or, even more complex, that a propaganda can both communicate a particular artwork as superior *and* degenerate at the very same time, serving different publics in the process: affirming the conservatism and fascist tendencies of constituents at home, while promoting an enlightened self-image abroad. On a national level, modernist art was used to construct a 'degenerate' Bolshevik enemy figure, while in Europe, they figured as a contrast point to the 'degeneracy' of Soviet socialist realist 'kitsch'. Through the same works, two enemy figures beneficial to the overall policies of the United States were staged at the very same time.

3 *Entartete Kunst* Today

What remains today of these strategies of *Entartete Kunst* and its techniques of staging 'Them', the visualization of enemy figures that serve to delineate a pure versus a degenerate people? We can certainly observe a contemporary continuation of Cold War cultural policies when it comes to, for example, the state of

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North-Korea. Exhibitions such as *The World According to Kim Jong-il*, mounted in the Kunsthal in Rotterdam in 2004 before travelling internationally with the catchphrase ‘Never before shown North-Korean art’, displayed *Juche*-styled socialist realist paintings depicting joyous peasants, heroic soldiers, and the fatherly figure of the late Kim Jong-il and his father, Kim Il-sung.²⁷ The exhibition’s design mimicked cliché-images of agitprop displays through bold all-caps titles and walls painted red, creating a contemporary version of the chamber of horrors in which supposedly enlightened democratic citizens could look with pity and contempt upon the poor subjects of archaic Communism and their manufactured world of lies and deceit. Such exhibitions have very little to do with North-Korean art, but rather serve as a contrasting point to declare the superiority of democratic free expression.²⁸ In other words, rather than being displayed as propaganda for the North-Korean regime, they are displayed as propaganda for what democracy *is not*. While refraining from the discourse on degeneracy, it is nonetheless clear that such exhibitions employ a dichotomy between free democracy and oppressive dictatorship, which overlap—for a different ideological purpose—with the core mechanisms of the original *Entartete Kunst* exhibition.

Another contemporary take on *Entartete Kunst* can be found in the curious project titled the Freethinkers’ Space, the first-ever exhibition space created in Dutch parliament in the political offices of the conservative-liberal People’s Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD) and the ultranationalist Freedom Party (PVV), from 2008 to 2010.²⁹ Exceptionally, the exhibition space was both initiated and curated by political representatives of both parties, namely the current prime minister of the Netherlands Mark Rutte for the VVD, and the second on the list of the PVV, Fleur Agema, who herself had studied architecture and was the author of an alternative prison model.³⁰ The starting point of the Freethinkers’ Space was formed in the aftermath of the murder of right-wing polemicist and filmmaker Theo van Gogh in 2004 by Mohammed Bouyeri, member of the Islamic fundamentalist organization known as the Hofstad Group. This act of existential censorship in the form of the murder of an artist created a new cultural frame for the extreme right, who began to manically identify any cultural repression that could be interpreted as a form of censorship motivated by Islamic faith. The racist and anti-left cartoons of Gregorius Nekschot for example, which were





met by online threats, became a cornerstone of right-wing cultural offensive. Even complaints by a citizen, supposedly of Muslim faith, in the village of Huizen regarding a painting of nudes titled *Danseuses Exotiques* by amateur artist Ellen Vroegh displayed in the town hall, became frontpage news for right-wing newspapers. And so, the indignation felt at a murder was transposed to isolated incidents, on which the VVD and PVV capitalized by claiming that the left-wing elite and its cultural institutions were incapable—and unwilling—to defend enlightened free artistic expression.

In July 2008, the Freethinkers' Space was opened, including works of Theo van Gogh, Nekschot and Vroegh, establishing a new cornerstone of the Dutch culture wars. The Freethinkers' Space employs the degenerate art trope in yet another way: by showing what the supposedly 'coward' leftist cultural institutions were unwilling to, it aimed to expose the 'degeneracy' of the ruling cultural elite that was unwilling to step up to defend the freedom of speech of white 'autochthonous' citizens. Quickly, Tofik Dibi, at the time a representative of the Green Party, challenged the curators of the Freethinkers' Space to also include artworks that had been subjected to right-wing censorship, such as an image of Anne Frank wearing a Palestinian *keffiyeh* shawl by graffiti artist T., and a banned poster made by the International Socialists that depicted an image of PVV leader Wilders on a Marlboro cigarette package, including a warning for the damage to the national health his right-wing rhetoric posed. The VVD party immediately accepted this proposal, and claimed the Freethinkers' Space defended the freedom of speech no matter its political orientation—despite the evidently anti-Islamic agenda displayed upon its opening. But their co-curators of the PVV refused, as they claimed the Freethinkers' Space was dedicated to artworks faced with Islamic censorship. As a result, the Freethinkers' Space turned into a kind of ideological chessboard. The PVV left its position as co-curator, while the Green Party joined in, and with each new addition of artworks the cultural conceptualization of 'freedom' represented by the works of art changed. In this light, Dibi's intervention can be regarded as an attempt to create a counter-propaganda by undermining the Us versus Them dichotomy that attempts to impose a monocultural regime structured on white freedom of expression at the cost of everyone else, and forcing new juxtapositions and ambiguities in the way we conceptualize freedom politically, culturally and artistically.³¹

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Despite such interventions, the Dutch culture war has continued to be dominated by right-wing forces. The rise of amateur pianist Thierry Baudet's ultranationalist, misogynist, and racist Forum for Democracy (FvD) party, is symptomatic in that regard, as he calls for a new cultural offensive in the form of what he calls a 'renaissance movement', exemplified by his victory speech after becoming the largest political party in the Dutch European elections of 2019:

And so, we stand here, tonight, literally at the eleventh hour. In the midst of the debris of what was once the greatest and most beautiful civilization that the world had ever known. A civilization that encompassed every corner of the world, that was full of self-confidence, and that produced the most beautiful architecture, the most beautiful music, and the most beautiful paintings that have ever existing beneath our celestial skies. Our country is part of the civilized family.³²

Notoriously, in the speech Baudet claims that the 'boreal world' is under threat—a term that means as much as 'far north' and is popular in extreme-right circles to claim 'white indigeneity'—due to a 'death cult' of self-hatred of the ruling elite, those who 'receive our art subsidies and design our buildings', declaring his own party to be the 'flagship of the renaissance fleet' instead.³³ In Baudet's essay 'Der "neue Mensch" ist ein Irrtum' (The New Man is an error) for the right-wing Swiss *Weltwoche* magazine, he even returns to attacking the Dadaists as an embodiment of the chaos and dangers of French Revolution ideals of radical equality, resulting in the 'ramblings' of Dadaist sound poems, and he further has openly called for the destruction of modernist buildings and propagated his disdain for atonal music.³⁴ As a counterpoint, Baudet—who in the meantime has become part of the art commission of Dutch parliament—demands: 'We want to recognize ourselves in the portraits of our ancestors in museums, we want to maintain our national holidays, and sing our songs and honour our history', positing this conceptualization of national culture as 'rooted' compared to the 'unrooted' nature of the cosmopolitan elite—an argument also used against the Jewish people by the Nazis.³⁵ It needs little historical effort to see how the dichotomy between pure and degenerate art is being replicated here: hatred





of ambiguity and the desire for the monocultural order. Baudet returns full circle to the core methodology of *Entartete Kunst*.

Evidently, the Netherlands does not stand by itself in this return to the trope of degenerate art. Bjoern Hoecke, representative of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD), remarked on Peter Eisenman's holocaust memorial in Berlin titled *Denkmal für die ermordeten Juden Europas* (Memorial to the murdered Jews of Europe), that Germans were the 'only people in the world who planted a memorial of shame in the heart of their capital'.³⁶ And the newly government-appointed director of the Ujazdowski Castle in Warsaw, Piotr Bernatowicz, has announced a battle against the art institutions that he considers to 'look like left-wing ideological ghettos', instantly cancelling collaborations with projects such as the Anti-Fascist Year.³⁷ Bernatowicz considers 'cultural Bolshevism' to dominate contemporary art production, which he wishes to combat—phrasings that are literally included in the institution's policy plan for the coming years.³⁸ Pride instead of shame in the face of national histories, however violent and cruel—or exactly *because* of the fascist pleasure principle that is derived from violence and cruelty—against the chaos, multiculturalism and gender-confusion supposedly propagated by cultural Bolshevism or, more popular, 'cultural Marxism': this rhetoric and these developments clearly articulate a new paradigm of degenerate versus pure art manifesting in our present time. The *Entartete Kunst* exhibition never entirely closed.

But this desperate return to monocultural paradigms, embodied by authoritarians from Trump to Bolsonaro, from Erdogan to Modi, also face a new *ambiguity politics*, that propagates not the staging of a fictional enemy but addresses real existential crises instead. The colonial and white supremacist statues that are being toppled and modified at this very moment as a result of the transformative Black Lives Matter movement, despite the desperate attempts of monocultural protagonists to maintain them as cornerstones for a renewed white 'renaissance'; the demands for pluri-historical canons that narrate not an absolute 'People' but *peoples-in-the-making*; and the role that artists play in new transnational movements and platforms, from the Democracy in Europe 2025 Movement (DiEM25) to the Progressive International to contribute to imagining new models of egalitarian life forms—these examples show a new insurgent emancipatory politics coming into being. Unlike the oppressive propagandas we

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discussed so far, such popular mass movements seek new forms of interdependent storytelling. They do not approach the past nostalgically, but the present transformatively; and the futures it proposes are not given but to be authored collectively in the process. Common infrastructures, common narratives, common imaginations—these do not represent top-down manipulative engineering, but a collective practice of world-making. In the face of monocultural propagandas, such emancipatory propagations—the propagation of ambiguity politics enabling a new pluricultural composition of *Us*—are a vital force to overcome the false dichotomies imposed upon us in violent pasts and presents.

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Notes

- 1 I base this notion of propaganda as a performance of power that aims to construct reality—rather than merely communicate within a given reality—on, amongst others, the propaganda model of Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman, *Manufacturing Consent* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988). See for further elaboration, Jonas Staal, *Propaganda Art in the 21st Century* (Cambridge, MA, and London: MIT Press, 2019).
- 2 Terence McSweeney, *The 'War on Terror' and American Film: 9/11 Frames Per Second* (Edinburgh University Press, 2016), p. 10.
- 3 This notion of a 'negative social contract' I take from Joseph Masco, *The Theater of Operations* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2014), p. 48.
- 4 Slavoj Žižek, *Did Someone Say Totalitarianism?* (London and New York: Verso, 2001).
- 5 See for an extensive mapping of the contemporary culture wars, Sven Lütticken, 'Performing Culture Otherwise', in Sven Lütticken and Maria Hlavajova, eds., *Propositions for Non-Fascist Living: Deserting from the Culture Wars* (London, Cambridge, MA, and Utrecht: MIT Press and BAK, basis voor actuele kunst, 2020), pp. 5–35. See also: Sven Lütticken, 'Cultural Marxists Like Us', *Afterall* 46 (Autumn/Winter 2018).
- 6 Christoph Zuschlag, 'An "Educational" Exhibition: The Precursors of Entartete Kunst and Its Individual Venues', in Stephanie Barron, ed., *Entartete Kunst: The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1991), pp. 83–97.
- 7 Paul Schultze-Naumburg, 'Art and Race', in Anton Kaes, Martin Jay and Edward Dimendberg, eds., *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1994), pp. 496–499, 498.
- 8 Max Nordau, *Degeneration* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1895), p. 326.
- 9 Facsimile of the *Entartete Kunst* exhibition brochure in Barron, ed., 'Entartete Kunst', pp. 356–390, 366.
- 10 Mario-Andreas von Luttichau, 'Entartete Kunst, Munich 1973: A Reconstruction', in *ibid.*, pp. 45–81, 55.
- 11 Stephanie Barron, '1937 Modern Art and Politics in Prewar Germany', in *ibid.*, pp. 9–23, 9. de Mello in 1992.
- 12 Michael Tymkiw, *Nazi Exhibition Design and Modernism* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), pp. 169–219.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 172.
- 14 Zuschlag, 'An Educational Exhibition', in Barron, ed., 'Entartete Kunst', p. 95.
- 15 Michael Meyer, 'A Musical Façade for the Third Reich', *ibid.*, pp. 171–183, 171.
- 16 Frances Stonor Saunders, *Who Paid the Piper: The CIA and the Cultural Cold War* (London: Granta Books, 2000), p. 119.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 1.
- 18 Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), p. 755.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 19.
- 20 Nancy Jachec, 'Modernism, Enlightenment Values, and Clement Greenberg', *Oxford Art Journal* 21, no. 2 (1998), pp. 123–132.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 172.
- 22 Saunders, *Who Paid the Piper*, p. 199.
- 23 *Ibid.*, pp. 275–277.
- 24 Eva Cockcroft, 'Abstract Expressionism, Weapon of the Cold War', *Artforum* 12, no. 10 (June 1974), pp. 39–41.
- 25 Saunders, *Who Paid the Piper*, p. 252.
- 26 *Ibid.*, p. 253.
- 27 Often translated as 'self-reliance', *Juche* is the translation of Marxism-Leninism by Kim Il-sung into the specific conditions of North-Korea, with strong emphasis on self-defence and national independence.
- 28 For a less propagandistic study of North-Korean art production, I refer to the work of Jane Portal. Although keeping in line with the problematic general characterization of North-Korea as 'totalitarian', she also maps the broader aesthetic vocabulary in North Korean art and crafts, among others in the form of traditional contemporary landscapes in coloured ink, glass, and porcelain works, and the curious and undertheorized practice of painterly depictions of antiquities and archaeological findings. See: Jane Portal, *Art Under Control in North Korea* (London: Reaktion Books, 2005).
- 29 See for a full documentation of the

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- Freethinkers' Space history and artworks, Jonas Staal, *Art Property of Politics II: Freethinkers' Space* (Eindhoven: Van Abbemuseum, 2010).
- 30 See further Jonas Staal, *Art, Property of Politics III: Closed Architecture* (Eindhoven: Onomatopee, 2011).
- 31 Together with the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, I reconstructed the Freethinkers' Space in 2010 in the museum as a case-study of the role of art in contemporary right-wing propaganda. From 2012 onwards, in collaboration with curators Nick Aikens and Christiane Berndes, we also invited other political parties to curate their own Freethinkers' Space in a project titled 'Freethinkers' Space Continued', to expand on the 'ideological chessboard' that the Freethinkers' Space became after Dibi's intervention and counter the right-wing cultural paradigm. The Green Party and social-liberal Democrats 66 (D66) curated their spaces in the Van Abbemuseum, the Labour Party in De Appel arts centre in Amsterdam, and the Socialist Party in cultural centre kuS in Heerlen.
- 32 Original quote: 'En zo staan we hier vanavond. Te elfder ure, letterlijk. Te midden van de brokstukken van wat ooit de grootste en mooiste beschaving was die de wereld ooit heeft gekend. Een beschaving die alle uithoeken van de wereld bestreek, die vol zelfvertrouwen was, en die de mooiste architectuur, de mooiste muziek en de mooiste schilderkunst heeft voortgebracht die ooit onder de sterrenhemel heeft bestaan. Ons land maakt onderdeel uit van die beschavingsfamilie.' Transcription of Baudet's victory speech, 20 March 2019.
- 33 Ibid.
- 34 Thierry Baudet, 'Der "neue Mensch" ist ein Irrtum', *Die Weltwoche*, 24 July 2019.
- 35 Original quote: 'We willen onszelf herkennen in de portretten van onze voorvaders in onze musea, we willen onze feestdagen behouden, onze liederen zingen en onze geschiedenis eren', Paul Steenhuis, 'Baudets probleem met Beethoven (en de vernielers van de "boreale" cultuur)', *NRC Handelsblad*, 7 August 2019.
- 36 Katrin Bennhold and Melissa Eddy, "'Hitler or Höcke?'" Germany's Far-Right Party Radicalizes', *New York Times*, 26 October 2019.
- 37 Robert Stasinski, 'Ujazdowski Castle Takes a Right-Wing Turn', *Kunstkritikk*, 16 March 2020. <https://kunstkrityk.com/ujazdowski-castle-takes-a-right-wing-turn/>.
- 38 Ibid.

