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The Degenerate Art Show

(A History of Art Censorship in Nazi Germany)

By John Silvers

As early as the year 1920, thirteen years before his coming to power in Germany, Adolf Hitler had already pinpointed avant-garde art as a major threat to the success of his newly formed National Socialist German Labor Party (NSDAP or Nazi Party). Hitler himself was an aspiring

painter, who as a young man had failed to gain acceptance into the Academy of Visual Arts in Vienna, when his work was deemed unsatisfactory. Enamored of the romantic realism of works painted prior to the 1860's, Hitler harbored a strong hatred for emerging art forms such as expressionism, cubism, surrealism, and dadaism. His

harsh opinions of modern art were likely fueled by a desire to obtain revenge for the squelching of his own artistic dreams. In an early speech to the Nazi party, Hitler proclaimed, "We demand the legal fight against a tendency in art and literature which exerts a subversive influence on the life of our people."

Why was modern art such a threat to Nazi Germany? Expressionists made it clear that their art would not be constrained by social norms or the bounds of realism. The works of popular modern German artists like Otto Dix and Max Beckmann exposed the inner psychological/emotional lives of their subjects.

Many modern artists, such as Dix and Beckmann, (both of whom served in World War I) were anti-war and expressed that sentiment in their work. Abstract art of this nature encouraged a high level of viewer interpretation and it was not conducive to Hitler's political agenda to allow the public to be intellectually disassociated from the NSDAP. With this in mind, Hitler branded this kind of art as obscene, a violation of religious feelings, an appeal to class struggle, an encouragement of military sabotage, and a resemblance to the artistic efforts of the mentally handicapped. The intent of the accusations was to create in the viewer a predisposition against



Poster for original "Degenerate Art" Show

the art work. One of the most significant early developments in the successful propagation of Hitler's ideology was the founding of the Combat League for German Culture in the late 1920's. Although not officially sanctioned by the NSDAP, the League was a repository of racist and national-conservative associations. Its members carried out openly aggressive agitation on a local level throughout Germany. When Hitler was named Chancellor of Germany in 1933, he immediately changed certain laws governing civil service. This move allowed him to dismiss from office unwanted university and academy pro-

fessors, as well as approximately thirty museum directors, and replace them with members from the Combat League. And in doing so, he placed local decision-making directly in the hands of his supporters.

Now that they were largely in control of the country's museums, the Combat League saw to it that the modern art departments were shut down and their collections locked up in storage. It was at this point that the first exhibitions aimed at defaming avant-garde art and its defenders were organized. As it would be in the case of the famous "Entartete Kunst" (Degenerate Art) exhibition of 1937, these early local shows displayed works of modern art in a crooked, cramped, and unflattering style. They were often hung upside down or without frames, to give an appearance of crudeness. The galleries were poorly lit. Anti-Semitic, anti-Communist, and anti-intellectual slogans were commonly scrawled on walls as commentary on the art and the artists. Exhibition titles such as "Images of Cultural Bolshevism," "Chambers of Horror of Art," and "Art that Did Not Issue From Our

Soul" reveal these presentations as primarily political. They were not intended to exhibit the works of art for their own sake; the "subversiveness" of the art was to be seen as an indication of the degeneration of German culture under the "decadence" of the former government, the Weimar Republic. This provocation of the public's indignation was designed to bring about the celebration of Hitler as the hero of a revolutionary new government contributing to his political stabilization.

By 1936, Hitler and Reich Minister for Public Enlightenment and Propaganda Joseph Goebbels had achieved almost total control over German cultural affairs. The fields of literature, press, broadcasting, theater, music, film, and the visual arts were all tightly monitored by the Reich Chamber of Culture under Goebbels. Only members of the Chamber were permitted to practice these in professions. A test of racial ancestry and political reliability was administered to applicants to the Chamber, making it possible to exclude unwanted artists and

Continued on page 4



Charlie Chaplin in "The Great Dictator"

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Cabaret: The Framing Device

By Jim Niesen

The dilemma: How to convey the complexity of the historical events which make up the story of the Entartete Kunst exhibition while avoiding the trap of well-meant but earnest kitchen sink naturalism (which is want to sink into the realm of love story -- witness the recent film *Titanic* where the obvious tale of young passion obscures a much more interesting film lurking beneath the story: an examination of classism and relative human value in the early days of the twentieth century) or emerge as a form of "history from above"-events seen only from the perspective of the "great men" whose names are most commonly connected with and who are often held to be solely responsible for the historical events.

The solution: To play the events as if they are being re-enacted by a troupe of 1930's German Cabaret performers as a contemporary agitprop newspaper, using the skills of their trade to pass on what they know. This allows the company to avoid the heroic or great man syndrome in the narrative and to tell the story from the point of view of ordinary people, with the famous figures of the time appearing on stage never as in the round representations, but only as caricatured cabaret-theater portraits.

Some background on the cabaret form: Cabaret blossomed into a unique medium for political and cultural satire in the German Kabarett of the twenties and early thirties. The cabaret inherits its name from the French wine cellar where tipsy guests spontaneously joined in song while alternately being entertained by balladeers, jugglers, and carnival performers. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, the song, or chanson, became the principle form of entertainment provided by the French cabarets. The chanson not only entertained but functioned as a reporting vehicle-a performed alternative to the newspaper that was largely controlled by the ruling class. The chanson was thus one of the few means by which people could record their daily history and publicly voice their reactions to contemporary events.

The solo chanson soon gave way to the cafe-concert that evolved into the music hall (which catered to large audiences) and the intimate cabaret. The cabaret was from its inception in 1881 a more intellectual and self-consciously artistic form. It was a testing ground for young artists who deliberately advertised themselves as avant-garde and a critically reflective mirror of topical events. Walking the tightrope between the legitimate stage and the variety show, it carved out its own independent territory always maintaining its rebellious wit and dissident nature. Performing on a small stage for smallish audiences, the cabaret performer played directly to the audience, breaking down the fourth wall amid an atmosphere of intimacy and hostility.

Early programs functioned on the principle of surprise, improvisation, and spontaneity. The members of the Paris establishment knew they were coming to be insulted. Aristide Bruant, a prominent cabaret star immortalized in the drawings of Toulouse-Lautrec, claimed he treated his better guests like "dung." "They laugh because they think I'm joking, but I am not joking."

By 1900 the cabaret form had moved eastward to Berlin. Here it would lose some of the playfulness of its French

originators and take on the more serious and more satirically aggressive tone of its German creators.

In the years following the end of the First World War, Berlin emerged as Germany's first truly cosmopolitan city. Permissiveness pervaded the city. Berlin embraced all comers.

120 daily newspapers were published here. Theaters sprang up overnight. Cabarets mushroomed. The cabarets thrived on the lax censorship and featured erotic entertainment.

American-based jazz was incorporated into this Kabarett culture that gave rise to a group of serious left wing artists who used the small stage to expose and satirize the conditions of German society.

It is important to note how much the cabaret influenced Brecht and through him twentieth century theater. As early as 1924 Brecht spoke of an "epic smoke theater," a place where people might come casually to watch and participate in a performance. (To Brecht a smoking audience meant a thinking audience.) The actors played directly to their audiences, not to each other, and comments from the audience were incorporated into the performance. The short, sketch-like scenes of the cabaret performance, which were non-consecutive but loosely linked left their mark on almost all of Brecht's work. Many of Brecht's actors, of course, came from the cabaret stage.

With the rise of Hitler, the repressive measures of the Third Reich made it impossible for public satirical activity to continue within Germany. Theaters were closed and important performers were forced into exile, imprisoned, and murdered. A significant number took their own lives.

Reconstructing "Entartete Kunst": the LA Exhibition

By Michael Goodfriend

On February 1991, an exhibition entitled "Degenerate Art": *The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany* opened at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. The exhibition was a meticulous reconstruction of the infamous art exhibition *Entartete Kunst* (Degenerate Art) staged by the Nazis in July of 1937. In the catalogue that accompanied the



reconstruction of several rooms of the original *Entartete Kunst* show," said Ms. Barron, "ours was an exhibition in which there was no margin for substitution in the roster of requested works. Much of the art we sought required exceptions to long-standing loan restrictions." In the end, the reconstruction required the cooperation of over 100 lenders from around the world. In some cases, entire exhibitions of modern, pre-WWII art scheduled in other cities were delayed so as not to jeopardize loans planned for the LACMA show.

As the exhibition developed, it expanded beyond a reconstruction of the original show to include documentation of Nazi censorship of other art forms. Researchers uncovered volumes of information regarding the Nazis' suppression of film, music, and literature. The exhibition was expanded to include these materials. Designers of great reputation were involved in the development of the show. Distinguished architect Frank Gehry designed the installation, LACMA designer Jim Drobbia conceived and executed the graphics, and expert modelmaker Eric Marable reconstructed a scaled down version of the original exhibition hall.

Funding for the show came from a wide range of sources. The Federal Republic of Germany took great interest in the exhibition and supported it with a generous grant. Other funding was provided by the Federal Council on the Arts and Humanities, and the Institute for Museum Services. Most of the support, however, was provided by the National Endowment of the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities. The NEA's Fellowship for Museum Professionals helped to underwrite Ms. Barron's months-long research work in Germany.

Ironically, as the exhibition was being developed, the very sources of its funding were coming under attack in Congress. Both the NEA and the NEH were facing criticism for supporting work branded "obscene" by members of the House and Senate. The censorship of art works in public exhibitions and the budget cuts that were threatening the funding for "Degenerate Art" created an eerie parallel to the conditions that gave rise to the original show in 1937. In the

exhibition, organizer Stephanie Barron, curator of Twentieth Century Art at LACMA wrote, "From the outset it was clear that to reconstruct as much as possible of the original *Entartete Kunst* exhibition of 650 works of art, let alone to place German events of more than fifty years ago in perspective for American audiences, would be a formidable undertaking." Conceiving, organizing, and mounting the exhibition took five years of sustained effort. To determine the exact composition of the original show and to trace the fate of the works included, experts studied dozens of photographs which were only recently discovered in the archives of the National Gallery of the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. Archival materials were also researched in numerous other museums in Switzerland, Germany, and cities throughout the US, particularly at the Getty Center for Art History and the Humanities in Los Angeles.

Researchers traveled to the site of every venue of the original exhibition to interview eyewitnesses and collect important material for the remounting. Ms. Barron spent several months in Germany and other European countries conducting research and securing loans from museums and private lenders.

"Since it was conceived as a

Continued on page 7

The Ten Commandments of Cabaret Life

1. Come, if possible, late so that the guests already there know that you have something else to do.
2. Give your coat to the woman in the Cloakroom. You're a friendly man and the coat is knew.
3. Sit down haphazardly and noisily. Then change your seat often until you find one with the right shape.
4. Read the menu and wine list loudly and noisily to your companion. Learn it if possible by heart, and then order a portion of 'later'.
5. When everything concerning your material welfare has been looked after, take part - even if at first only unwillingly - in the artistic presentation. Look upon the confederer with contempt right from the start. He's an ass and because of that, let him feel your spiritual superiority.
6. Place your loud interruptions exactly where they don't fit. This actually belongs to the enlivening of the programme.
7. If you're a woman, then criticize the dress of the performing artiste loudly and skillfully. (Don't forget your lorgnette for this.)
8. During song presentations, blow your smoke unbotheredly toward the podium. The singer will inhale it willingly. It makes his voice soft and supple.
9. During acts, use your cutlery and glasses in an unbothered fashion. Their sound does one good and replaces the band.
10. When you have been bored long enough by the programme and have gotten angry over the bill, leave as noisily as you came in with the consciousness of having spent a most enjoyable evening.



German film icon, Marlene Dietrich

From *Simplicissimus-Kunstlerkei*

Censorship in the US – The Web Site

By Maria Knapp

Originally, this article was supposed to be a time-line showing highlights in the history of censorship in America, but I got a little sidetracked. I knew I had to do research for this article and, being a 90's kinda person, I skipped the library and went straight to the Internet. After going through numerous search engines, I stumbled upon this really great website: The Fileroom (<http://www.cd.sc.edu/es/FileRoom/documents/CategoryHomePage.html>). The Fileroom is a website that, "Despite the impossible nature of attempting to define censorship...proposes to address it, providing a tool for discussing and coming to terms with cultural censorship." Described as a "social sculpture" in its introduction, the information posted comes from the Chicago Cultural Center, as well as postings to the web site from outside sources.

The Fileroom has four categories to help search for specific censorship cases: Dates, Locations, Grounds for Censorship, and Medium. I went for Country. Each case was clearly arranged listing the artist/author/producer, confronting bodies, dates of action, location, description of the art work, description of incident, and the results of incident. As I looked through the listings in the United States, I noticed a trend in the entries. Before 1800, the predominant medium for the censorship case was Press or Speech. During the 1800's, the cases were generally literature. It wasn't until the 1900's that the incidents began to focus on film, theater, and art (paintings, sculpture, prints, etc.).

The number of entries made it impossible for me to print the whole list. Instead, I practiced my own form of censorship and picked out, what I felt, were the highlights either because of the incident, or the result.

Diego Rivera murals at Rockefeller Center

Artist/Author/Producer: Diego Rivera
Confronting Bodies: U.S. Government
Dates of action: 1933
Location: The Rockefeller Center, New York City

Description of the Art Work A mural portrait commissioned by Nelson Rockefeller for Rockefeller Center in New York City. Its subject was to be "human intelligence in control of the forces of nature." The 63 feet by 17 feet mural contained in the center a portrait of Lenin.

Description of incident On May 22, 1933, Rivera was called down from his scaffold where he was still working on the unfinished mural. He was handed a check for \$1,400, the balance of his fee, and informed that he had been dismissed. Within 30 minutes the mural had been covered by tarpaper and a wooden screen.

Results of incident "Seeking a compromise, Rockefeller suggested that Rivera should replace Lenin with some unknown face; the artist offered to add Lincoln but refused to expunge Lenin. Charged with willful propagandizing, he declared only that "All art is propaganda." Since he had accepted his payment, Rivera was unable to force the Rockefeller to exhibit or even keep his work. The mural was subsequently removed from the wall..." Source: *The Encyclopedia of Censorship*, J. Green, Facts on File, pg. 254

August Henkel Murals

Artist/Author/Producer: August Henkel

Confronting Bodies: Federal Art Project

Dates of action: 1940

Location: Brooklyn, New York

Description of the Art Work August Henkel's murals

Description of incident August Henkel's murals at Brooklyn's Floyd Bennett Airport are taken down and destroyed. The Relief Bill of 1940 required artists to

sign the loyalty oath of the Federal Art Project. August Henkel refused to sign the loyalty oath in the FAP contract, resulting in the removal of his murals.

Results of incident In 1943 all funding for the WPA stops.

Source: *Record no Art Journal*, Robert Atkins, Fall '91, Vol. 50 #3, pg. 34

Dread Scott's Proper Flag
Artist/Author/Producer: "Dread" Scott Tyler

Confronting Bodies: Republican state senator Walter Dudydz and veterans organizations

Dates of action: 1989+

Location: Chicago, Illinois

Description of the Art Work "What Is The Proper Way To Display A U.S. Flag?" is an installation by "Dread" Scott Tyler. The piece is constructed so that on the gallery wall appears the title with a photograph depicting images of the flag. Below the photograph is a book on a shelf. On the floor, directly beneath the shelf is the United States flag spread neatly with the width against the wall and the length extended out towards the viewer.

Description of incident Dread Scott Tyler's work was part of a minority student exhibition at The School of The Art Institute of Chicago entitled "A / Part of The Whole." After requests by school administration for Tyler to withdraw the piece, "What Is The Proper Way To Display A U.S. Flag?" was reluctantly included in the juried show. Within a week of the exhibition's opening on February 17, 1989, protests and threats arose. The press, alerted to the fact of a flag on the floor that viewers were stepping on, came in with minicams. An attack on the institute was orchestrated by Republican senator Walter Dudydz, along with representatives from veterans' organizations, including the Veterans of Foreign Wars, the American Legion, and Viet-Now, who filed a suit in Cook County Circuit Court to close down the show.

On March 2, Tony Jones, president of the School of The Art Institute, stood in court before Judge Kenneth Gillis as he readily dismissed the suit. Gillis ruled that the institute had not violated either state or federal laws concerning the flag. "This exhibit is as much an invitation to think about the flag as it is an invitation to step on it," Judge Gillis said reminding the court works of art are protected under the First Amendment. This ruling had little affect on the protesters outside of the school.

Amidst numerous bomb threats and physical threats to students, faculty, staff and visitors to the school, security was fortified with plain clothes police, and visitors to the gallery were restricted to eight people when it was not necessary to close the gallery due to threats. The school stood by the artwork for the duration of the show. Senator Dudydz arrived in the gallery one day with a bucket of sand and a pole and hung the flag.

Chicago Police Department informed the school that they were not criminally liable for the piece, but any viewer who walks on the flag may be charged with a felony. A teacher, visiting Chicago, walked on the flag in order to write in the book was arrested when police were alerted by a veteran.

Results of incident The exhibition remained in the gallery for its scheduled duration, but Tyler was not allowed to submit "What Is The Proper Way To Display A U.S. Flag?" for his thesis project in the school's graduation show. The School of The Art Institute of Chicago's government funding was cut from \$70,000 to \$1 and many benefactors pulled donations. Source: *CAC Censorship Archive*

Spivey Painting
Artist/Author/Producer: Spivey, August

Confronting Bodies: Riverside Art Museum Curator

Dates of Action: 1991
Location: Orange County, California

Description of Artwork Two paintings addressing the artist's personal fears and interpretations of AIDS and sexuality: Jesus Christ presents a surreal vision of Jesus Christ and includes imagery of male genitalia and Sweet Sugar, which addresses the impact of AIDS, depicts surreal genitalia on three connected faces.

Description of incident Riverside Art Museum Curator Jim Reed removed two paintings dealing with the AIDS crisis by artist August Spivey on the grounds that the works were "sexually explicit." Spivey had submitted the two works, Jesus Christ and Sweet Sugar, after the curator, according to Spivey, requested his participation and specifically noted that he wanted the exhibit to be confrontational. After the museum requested Spivey's participation in the exhibit, the artist entered into a contract with the museum, specifying the paintings to be shown and the dates of the exhibition. The museum began to promote the exhibit and Spivey's participation in it. But about a week before the show, a reporter at the Riverside Press asked Spivey for his reaction to his exclusion from the exhibit, the first the artist had heard of any problem.

Fulfilling his contract, Spivey nevertheless brought his artwork to the museum on the designated day. Curator Reed refused to accept the two paintings, but indicated he would accept alternatives. Spivey refused, telling the curator he considered this action censorship. The confrontation was witnessed by reporters, although Spivey denies alerting the press. Reed later told the Newport Beach/Costa Mesa Press that he chose to exclude Spivey from the exhibit because he felt the artist was using the show to gain publicity for his own work by calling television stations and reporters. The larger theme of the show was in danger of being lost, he contended. Reed also denied that sexual content was a consideration in the decision. Museum Director Mary Alice Cline supported Reed's decision, saying that publicity of "obscenity" in the show would draw attention away from the subject of AIDS. Spivey

denies rallying publicity or calling broadcast.

Results of incident Spivey reports that Reed left an apologetic note on Spivey's doorstep after the cancellation, explaining he could not show anything "sexually explicit or suggestive," although his work is moving and powerful. The work was not shown. Source: *People for the American Way*

Serrano's "Pieta II"
Artist/Author/Producer: Andres Serrano

Confronting Bodies: University of Alabama students and surrounding community

Dates of action: 1993

Description of the Art Work Andres Serrano's "Pieta II" shows a plastic figurine of Michelangelo's statue of the Madonna and Jesus submerged in cow's urine and blood.

Description of incident A county official and university students in Birmingham, Alabama called for the return of the photograph, which had been purchased by the university arts department, because they considered the work offensive and blasphemous.

The University of Alabama's Visual Arts Gallery solicited private donations for the purchase of the photograph. Before exhibiting the work, gallery officials began receiving letters of protest from students and government officials. Jefferson County Commissioner Jim Gunter threatened to vote to withhold funds from the university unless the gallery returned the photograph.

University President Charles McCallum issued a statement saying that although he personally found the photograph offensive, he nonetheless supported, "free and open discussion of such matters as the nature of art, freedom of speech, and the role of religious beliefs in the academic environment." A motion was passed by the faculty senate supporting the gallery.

Results of incident "Pieta II" is available for viewing by appointment at The Visual Arts Gallery. Sixteen Alabama counties have passed resolutions condemning the gallery's purchase.

Source: *Artistic Freedom Under Attack* 1994

Degenerate Art and Artists in NYC

The following pieces were in "Degenerate Art" in Munich in 1937 and can be seen today at The Museum of Modern Art:

- Paul Klee**
The Angler 1921
The Vocal Fabric of the Chamber Singer, Rosa Silber 1922
Around the Fish 1926
The Chattering Machine 1929
- Ernst Ludwig Kirchner**
Strassenszene (Streetscene) 1914
- Emile Nolde**
Christ Among The Children 1910
- Karl Schmidt-Rottluff**
Parisees 1912
- Max Beckman**
Deposition (descent from the cross) 1917

The following artists who had pieces in "DA'37" are represented currently at MoMA, although not the specific pieces that were in the show: Marc Chagall, Max Beckman, Otto Dix, Max Ernst, Wassily Kandinsky, Wilhelm Lemberuck, Piet Mondrian

The following artists did not have pieces displayed in "DA'37," but their work was seized by the Nazis and sold at the Fischer Auction in 1939. Examples of their work are on display at MoMA:

- Henri Matisse**
Bathers with a Turtle (sold at Fischer Auction, but not to MoMA)
- Amadeo Modigliani**
Portrait of a Woman (sold at the Fischer Auction, but not to MoMA)
- Pablo Picasso**
The Two Harlequins (was sold in Fischer Auction and on display at MoMA)

The following pieces can be seen at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum:

- Emile Nolde**
Junge Pferde (young horses) 1916
- Wassily Kandinsky**
paintings

The following piece from "DA'37" can be seen at the Metropolitan Museum of Art:

- Paul Klee**
Ghost Chamber with the tall door [new version] 1925

The following piece from "DA'37" can be seen at the Metropolitan Opera at Lincoln Center:

- Wilhelm Lemberuck**
Large Kneeling Woman 1911
- The following can be seen at the Jewish Museum (1109 5th Avenue):
"Still More Distant Journeys: The Artistic Emigrations of Laser Segall" (Until May 10, 1998)

Creating Without a Net

By Sarah Dacey Charles and Heidi K. Eklund

When The Irondale Ensemble Project set out to do The Degenerate Art Show, there was no written script to serve as a skeleton for the performance. In a very real sense, Irondale set out on a blind date. We were to perform without the guarantee of a known quantity—the text. We had to create without a net.

How does an ensemble of artists generate theatrical material out of thin air? It starts with a feeling, then an idea. In this case Jim, the artistic director, wanted to explore the parallels between art censorship in this country and the censorship of the avant-garde in Nazi Germany. Initially, we set about individual and group research. We read, read, and read. We read about the artists. We found out about the "Entartete Kunst" show in Munich in 1937. We looked for examples of art censorship in the world throughout history. Then, we shared our research to the other company members to see what topics and issues would emerge. After more talk, it was time to play, play, and play some more, exploring all the possibilities on the themes through improvisation. Then, came the painful process of editing, polishing, and memorizing the structure until it was ready to perform!

In order to give you a true sense of what it is like to create without a net, we asked the company to speak about the process in their own words. Here's what they said:

Q: What has surprised you the most about this project?

Jim Niesen: The divergent points of view, the range of them, and the individuality of them, and how they compliment one another. They speak to each other in a way that both raises and expands the course of the debate.

Q: What is the difference in working this way as opposed to working with a script?

Heidi K Eklund: It's like making love as compared to having sex. When you are working with someone else's script you can only invest so much of yourself. You are using your body and voice to express someone else's words and ideas. It's like having sex without the love because it's not as close, not as spiritual, not as risky as using your entire self (mind, body, soul) to create as we are in "Degenerate Art". Let's go one step further; it is like giving group birth.

The Degenerate Art Show. Continued from page 1

essentially impose a professional ban on them. Although modern artists were not permitted to do their work, Hitler recognized the advantages of displaying their art to the public for his own political gains. He believed that if he could create popular agreement that all modern art sprung from the minds of Jews, Bolsheviks, intellectuals, elitists, homosexuals, and spiritual lunatics, and that these same people were the cause of unemployment, inflation, Germany's defeat in World War I, then he could use the public's outrage to support his plans for German expansion in the East and the purification of Germany. With this goal in mind, Hitler and Goebbels decided to officially order and oversee the creation of two special shows in Munich: the "Great German Art Exhibition" and "Degenerate Art."

The Great German Art Exhibition opened on July 18, 1937 in a tremendous forty-room museum called the House of German Art. It was the first building ever to be commissioned by the Nazis and the Führer had it built especially for the show. Filled with 1,200 sculptures, paintings, and graphics by 557 artists, the show was

This show is "our baby" as a group. I feel that we aren't without a net at all. The ensemble is the net. We all are necessary and we hold one another up. I only wish there were more theaters that worked in this way.

Q: What does creating without a net mean?

Sarah Dacey Charles: It's creating without a set vision in your mind of what the outcome will be. It's trying to move beyond your own perfectionism and allowing yourself to play. It's creating more from an internal rather than external impetus. In other words, it's saying what you want to say not what you think people want to hear. It's very scary. It's also very freeing, new and really cool!

Q: What is your greatest fear working in this way?

Patrena Murray: I think my greatest fear through this process of learning is thinking that I don't have an answer personally for myself about some of the views that come up about society. Yeah, that's my greatest fear: thinking I won't have answers.

Q: How has working without a net affected your acting technique or process?

Terry Greiss: The first thing is it makes me much more aware when I am blocking impulses. This way it's really working from impulse to impulse, idea to idea; then, going back and asking "OK, what did I do and how do I figure out through technique how to repeat that." It has made me really aware to be open to the curve balls that my partner is throwing me and that I throw to my partner. The other thing that's so important is learning how to listen to the audience, really including them as a partner in any scene even if I am in a scripted text. When I am creating in front of an audience I'm really listening for their reactions because I've got nothing else.

Q: Is working with Irondale different from what you thought being an actor was going to be like?

Jake (our intern): I have had very little experience in theatre, period. The plays I have done were as follows: you get the script, you learn it, you block it, and you do it. This work with Irondale is completely different. It doesn't even feel like I'm rehearsing. It feels like we just come in and play games. And in the end I'll probably say "Wow look how everything has come together..." I can't wait to see.

and drawings from 412 artists were earmarked for "Degenerate Art." Well known artists represented in the show included: Piet Mondrian, Paul Klee, Marc Chagall, and Wassily Kandinsky. German expressionists such as Otto Dix, Max Beckmann, George Grosz, Ernst Krechner, and Emile Nolde were also included in the exhibition. Although Jews were a focal point of the show's persecution, only six Jewish artists were represented. Yet Nolde, who had been a loyal Nazi for sixteen years, had the greatest number of works in the exhibition (26).

Borrowing tactics from earlier propaganda art shows, the exhibition of "Degenerate Art" employed a chaotic presentation style in which pictures were jammed together with insulting slogans. Some were so insulting that even Hitler thought they were too strong. (Ironically, this chaotic style of presentation was not unlike that used by dadaists, one of the artist movements that the Nazis were defaming.)

Q: How does working on theatre in this way affect your working relationship with other company members?

John Silvers: I have to throw aside my ego and do what works. It is just really being willing to be completely open and supportive in a way in which most working environments are not. In those situations it's so competitive, it's not really about working together as much as scoring points and being recognized. In this situation, however, I feel that in order to succeed on the level we'd like to, we need to find a way to support each other and to share, and to do things together. It can only be done out of mutual respect for the individuals I am working with, and for the work itself.

Q: What do you like best about this process of working?

Damen Scranton: It's knowing that everything is coming from somewhere inside of you. Every actor that I know has felt at one point or another, while they were up on stage, shackled to the text. Or that they wished they could say whatever they wanted in a certain moment—something that was true to them instead of the character. We get to do that in this process. We still have to appease the director, but it's very liberating not to have to appease the playwright as well.

Q: How has working in this way changed you as a person?

Michael Goodfriend: I think that the core rule of improvisation is that to every offer you have to say "Yes". You can't edit yourself or make negative choices in your acting. Carried over into life, that rule has great effect on the

way you perceive things. If you say "Yes" to every offer that life presents, it makes every day so much more exciting and enjoyable. Also, working without a script tends to impel you to dive into things head-on and to take a flying leap into storytelling rather than a hesitant step into a preconceived idea. Diving into things head-on gives you the courage to take risks, which whether on stage or off can lead to wonderful discoveries about yourself and your abilities that you didn't know you had. Lastly, Irondale's strong, political and sociological point of view stimulates me to strengthen my own opinions. Because we discuss controversial issues everyday, I find I care a lot more about the city and the politics that are relevant here. I think Irondale's made me a more responsible New Yorker.

Q: How much do you censor yourself working in this way?

Michael-David Gordon: I try not to censor myself at all but, of course, that can't help but creep in from time to time. I try to keep a mantra in my head to just let material go where it goes and not put too much structure on it...to not say, "that's a bad idea." I try to keep the phrase "that's a bad idea" out of my personal lexicon as much as I possibly can. I guess I censor myself 20% of the time when I feel I'm not really successful. With improvisation, there's a lot more room for failure. Every other idea is potentially a bad one which I guess is better than every idea being a bad one. My mantra is "show your ass as much as you can, let the pieces fall where they may, and just be out there in the space."



Bertolt Brecht (with clarinet), Karl Valentine (with tuba), and Liesl Karstadt (with bell) at a Munich Oktoberfest, circa 1920. (Durov's Pig)

and drawings from 412 artists were earmarked for "Degenerate Art." Well known artists represented in the show included: Piet Mondrian, Paul Klee, Marc Chagall, and Wassily Kandinsky. German expressionists such as Otto Dix, Max Beckmann, George Grosz, Ernst Krechner, and Emile Nolde were also included in the exhibition. Although Jews were a focal point of the show's persecution, only six Jewish artists were represented. Yet Nolde, who had been a loyal Nazi for sixteen years, had the greatest number of works in the exhibition (26).

Borrowing tactics from earlier propaganda art shows, the exhibition of "Degenerate Art" employed a chaotic presentation style in which pictures were jammed together with insulting slogans. Some were so insulting that even Hitler thought they were too strong. (Ironically, this chaotic style of presentation was not unlike that used by dadaists, one of the artist movements that the Nazis were defaming.)

Using these tactics and prohibiting the attendance of children created an atmosphere of taboo which brought in an average of more than 23,000 visitors a day for two and half months. Free of charge, the "Degenerate Art" show attracted more than 2,000,000 viewers over a four-month period; nearly three and a half times as many as the first installation of the annual "Great German Art Exhibition." Over the next three years, the show traveled throughout Germany and Austria and was seen by almost 1,000,000 more. Whether they came to find the art they loved or the art they hated, "Degenerate Art" remains to this day the most successful and popular modern art exhibit of all time.



Heinrich Hoffmann's candid photographs of Adolf Hitler and Adolf Zeigler choosing sculpture for inclusion in the Great German Exhibition, Munich, 1937. (Degenerate Art)

Josephine Derenne as Mrs. Moanlot in the Stormbird Caberet sequence of Theatre du Soleil's Mephisto, 1979. (Durov's Pig)

Crossword

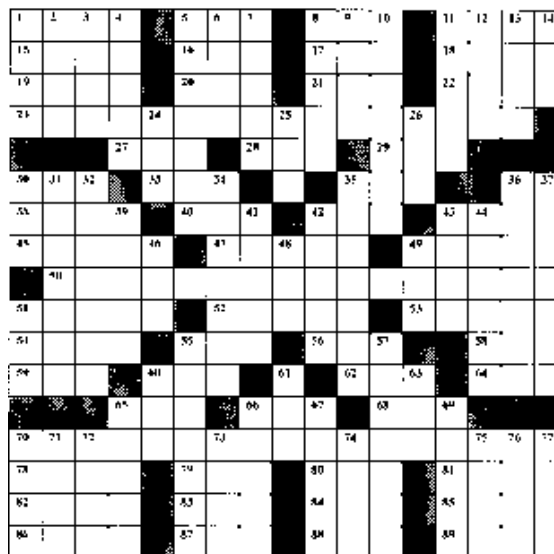
Across

1. Sections of grass
5. European mountain
8. ____ alai
11. Hauls
15. It's white in the middle...
16. Russian space station
17. Everyone
18. Mueller's "Zigeunerkind mit ____" (Gypsy Child with Donkey, 1927)
19. Anti-censorship org.
21. Nothing
22. Extremely
23. Start of quote from the Nazi "Degenerate Art" Exhibition Brochure
27. Pat gently
28. Urgent msg.
29. Fuel
30. Macabre author
33. British military div.
35. Cigarette
36. Home-____
38. "____ be alright."
40. A way to drink coffee
42. Saudi export
43. Scorch
45. Gertrude, or a mug
47. "Ladies and ____"
49. Irish surname
50. Part 2 of quote "you ____"
51. City on southern Turkey
52. Actor Atkinson
53. Go bad
54. Strikes
55. "Game, ____ & Match."
56. Dept. of Parks and ____
58. Sarah or Bruce
59. Hatchet
60. Room for conversation
62. "Big ____ Pee Wee"
64. Peds. And surgs.
65. "____ in Black"

66. ____ Miss
68. Negatives
70. End of quote
78. Curved trajectories
79. Disembowel
80. Anger
81. American oil company
82. Fabric of open texture
83. "We ____ Family"
84. Pie dish
85. El ____
86. Pop
87. Boy
88. Superlative suffix
89. Adolescent

Down

1. Lava or Dial
2. Killer whale
3. Sandwich shop
4. Puget
5. Single-celled protozoa
6. N.Y. train
7. Seizes and devours (with "upon")
8. Roman god of beginnings
9. "Put ____ on it!"
10. Against the law
11. Blue jeans
12. Exploiter
13. "American Graffiti" actor
14. ____ and the Family Stone
24. ____ and feather
25. Exclamation of amazement
26. Film union
30. Gumshoes (abbr.)
31. "Degenerate" artist
32. Raise
34. Segall's "Zwei Schemen" (Two Phantoms) was exhibited by the Nazis as "Zwei ____"
35. Type of stocking
36. Before
37. Holds protectively
39. Legal holds on property
41. 1992 Presidential candidate



42. Ocean mammal
43. Hack
44. "____ and Maude"
46. Gun org.
48. Direction indicated in Hitchcock title (abbr.)
49. Painful exclamation
51. "Take On Me" band
55. Country in northwest Africa
57. Objectionable ____
60. Brun's "____ Schauspieler (The Actor)"
61. Olympian Hyman
63. Hawaiian food

65. One of three sisters
66. Selected (with "for")
67. Best of a group
69. Meager
70. Karen Finley props
71. ...and good with milk
72. College in LaJolla, CA
73. Energy field
74. Eye part
75. How reggae music may make you feel.
76. Common skin ailment
77. High ____

The Funding "V" Chip - Arts in Education

By Terry Greiss

Like all Americans I am fond of conspiracy theories. I really love the idea of a "coven" of sub-sub CIA government men who are spreading HIV around, infecting the "darker" classes of people and other undesirables. I'll pick up any book that says Walt Disney or Barbara Walters, or Walter Winchell or anyone else was responsible for JFK's death. I'm not saying that I believe them all, but I am fond of them. They feed my passion for the covert, and help me keep a reasonable skepticism where our government or any other government is concerned. I think it's a very American trait.

So I naturally I look for conspiracies even when the trail leads to the "hand that feeds me." As we feverishly research material with which to create piece entitled "Degenerate Art", I ask myself: Is the fact that the government, (and other funding sources), is increasing funding for Arts-in-Education (AIE) as it decreases its funding for Arts-in-Art part of a calculated strategy to keep the "degeneracy" out of art?

Please don't misunderstand me (and certainly don't take away our education funding), I am not advocating any cuts in arts funding from anyone, for anything. I find it fascinating however, that the NEA, as it dwindles into oblivion, can only muster as its best defense the piano lessons and band instruments it funds in rural school systems. Conservative legislators are trying to tie any funding of an Arts Endowment to arts education mandates. The NEA is closed-mouthed about any attempts to correlate its funding of Arts-in-Education programs with a decrease in the support of artistic disciplines. Indeed, it is difficult to figure it out. The Endowment has completely changed its funding categories since the threat to its continuity began. Disciplines are now grouped into categories, (Creation and

Presentation; Heritage and Preservation; etc. Arts-in-Education remains a separate program), and according to a spokesperson at the NEA, education has always been a focus of all category or disciplinary funding. My guess is, and this is purely my own opinion, that if the Endowment survives, it will be because that AIE focus is increased and stressed. The New York State Arts Council, (a wonderful source for our own Manna from Heaven), has sponsored, with the complete endorsement of Governor Pataki, a major new education initiative, "The Empire State Partnerships". This funding of up to \$100,000 is for artists to plan, develop and partner "whole-school" arts programs, in which every student must participate. The Annenberg Foundation has successfully launched its NYC Arts Education Partnership Initiative and created the new Center for Arts Education. Schools receive up to \$350,000 for 5-year partnerships with artists and cultural organizations. Other similar initiatives abound, many with the best of intentions and tremendous ambition. Let's help kids, find money for artists, etc. and, (now here's the conspiracy part), if we put them in schools they probably can't do anything to upset the status quo or for want of a better word, degenerate. This is how artists can be controlled. It's hard to do degenerate stuff in 45-minute periods in institutions that are guarded by armed security personnel. In the past degenerate artists have not been known to create art using "learner outcomes", "learning standards", "curriculum guides", and "assessment plans". But these are all part of the contract for getting the dough.

It is that pot of money that both sustains and potentially threatens the arts today. Funders love Arts-in-Ed. As a representative of one foundation said, "Arts-in-Education is, for funders, the 'safe sex' of the 90's." No one can get upset with

the idea that money is going to help kids learn better. The odds are pretty good that a Seventh Grader in Queens will not be creating a "Piss Christ" because Andre Serrano came into his classroom. Most drama workshops don't have young girls covering themselves with chocolate a la Karen Finley. (The threat of acne alone would prevent them from participating.) Nevertheless artists are leaping, not just running to keep up with the funding frenzy. After all, even artists have to eat, sometimes. Because we, as a society increasingly fear the notion of art, we have changed the playing field with grant money. A new field has been created, AIE and a new type of cultural institution -- the ARTS-IN-EDUCATION Organization. This is certainly an arts-related field, a by-product of the arts, but it is not always art-producing. This field and the funding that has created it has turned artists into artist/educators and the various disciplines of the arts into "arts education" or "art basic to the core curriculum". This is not to say that this is all bad -- it is not. I have seen, participated in, and helped to create some very fine programs. I believe that art is not only an essential component of an education, but of a civilization. But let's be aware of a potential danger here as well. (Here goes the old conspiracy hunter again.) There is a real chance that the making of art, which is often messy, impossible to define, sometimes tasteless and anathema may be replaced by nice, easy-to-justify, easy-to-fund, and finally easy-to-dismiss Arts-in-Education.

For arts-in-education to be valid, art must be created. I won't even talk about good art, for who among us can ever be sure of what that is? I just mean art, not "art in the service of...". And, if the truth be told in the current construct of our educational system, there just is not time to make art that might really educate our

young people, and also ourselves. We are too busy forging partnerships with schools, negotiating release time for classroom teachers so that they can involve themselves in the programs, creating projects that fit the jargon (see above "learner outcomes", et al), and designing multi-cultural, drop-out preventive, self-esteem building and empowerment, literacy-enhancement, conflict-resolving, sexual responsibility programs, that must reach every child in a school.

Many of us know that the arts are really not separate from education. The term arts-in-education does both of the key words a great disservice. Are there comparable categories of Math-in-Education and Science in Education? Cultures that have been judged great have left legacies of great art work and art has been at the center of the life of great societies. It is a pity that we cannot accept that as fact and create a similar legacy for our antecedents with pride. It seems that we are in a time, (hopefully a brief one), in which we feel that for us to nurture our artists we must "employ" them as assistants in other fields. That's one theory. The other, of course, is that it's all a plot to keep the arts tied to the same corporate values that our young people are learning in their schools.

The problem with this theory, of course, is that if it is true that the school can control the artist, it is also possible that the artist may actually change things in some schools. Brecht once said "It is the purpose of art to speak truth to power." Heaven help that kind of degenerate thought from seeping into our educational institutions. We could be in for some real problems. On the other hand, that possibility is reason enough for us to continue, even if my flight of fancy conspiracy theory was proven to be a little bit true.

Pondering the Unanswerable

By Michael-David Gordon

"Are you fucking serious?"
 "Do you really sit around talking about that bullshit?"
 "That's the work you do all day?"

These were the delicate, subtle responses to a mention of what we at Irondale had spent the better part of the week discussing. The question: "What is art?" The result of a week's worth of inquiry: a myriad of responses, a myriad of feelings, diatribes, readings, speeches, videos, pronouncements, at least one dramatic exit (stage left-- a response to the sheer untenability of another's argument), approximately 173 smoked cigarettes (of various brands and qualities, I'm led to believe -- I don't smoke), 216 cups of coffee consumed, 86 trips to the bathroom, 301 break-time telephone calls, and many, many moments of full, brow-furrowed, thoughtful silence.

I attempted to explain to my incredulous Java-mate (we were lounging at the corner coffee house) our purpose in pursuing this particular question at this particular time (aside from the pure necessity of figuring out what the hell we are going to do for the show we are creating about the "Degenerate Art" exhibition mounted by the Nazis in 1937). As I witnessed him getting increasingly skeptical and cynical (not to mention enduring his laughing in my face about what I do for a living), I noticed my own desire to completely change the subject to something much more concrete and useful -- the Dow Jones Industrials for example. I felt a distinct sense of embarrassment, of being considered shallow, as though I was regarded as no more than a perpetual college student with nothing better to than sit around the ratskellar thinking about the meaning of life. Didn't I have something more important to do? Were there not children starving in Biafra? Homeless people, literally right outside my door? If I listened closely I could hear the not-so-faint echoes of my relatives (all very industrious, responsible 9-to-5ers): "Get a real job. Playtime's over." It was an actual struggle to hold on to the belief that thinking about the question "What is art?" (and its related questions: Does art matter? If so, why? What is the responsibility of the artist to the society? etc.) was an important, even necessary way to spend my time.

The ability to articulate the need to explore such a question sometimes seems as elusive as the question itself. This need seems to call out, to beckon, to dare one to actually stop the turning of the everyday-gotta-get-it-done-2-days-ago-so-I-can-get-on-to-the-next-thing-that-I-don't-have-time-to-think-about wheel that so many of us find ourselves spinning on a daily basis. One is dared to stop and look into the room of questions, without any guarantees that there are answers, or for that matter, even windows or doors.

* * *
 "Lets not argue about it."

In my opinion, there's a truly harmful and conversation-killing turn-of-phrase disguised as an appropriate emotional need. The hunger for the definitive answer, the way, the authoritative affirmative, is a hunger that lurks, I suspect, deep inside our collective marrow. The desire for a relatively simple, clean, somewhat challenging --but not too challenging-- arrival at the facts, the story, the 411 (as they used to say in my old neighborhood), THE TRUTH, bonds humanity as a group. In the "Can't we all just get along" style of conversing there is no argument, no struggle, no CONFLICT. We huddle together against the chill of the big question, breathing a gigantic sigh of relief at not having to deal with the frustration, fear, and just plain old pedestrian feeling of stupidity that can arise from an investigation of the unanswerable. A question like "What is art?" can drive you crazy -- in part because try as you may, there is no definitive answer. Try, as an experiment, asking that question (or one like it - "What is love?") at your next dinner party and see what happens. Chances are at least one of your guests self-immolates and two pieces of china will perish within the hour.

There's something slightly murderous that rises up inside of us when someone puts us up to one of "those" questions. It's a primary dynamic behind the unsaid rule that, if one's desire is to have a great party, a "successful" date, or a socially comfortable evening, then a discussion of politics and religion are taboo.

There is a tension, a dissonance, that transpires when a question is of a certain size, elasticity, and breadth. We want to get that behemoth in a corner where we can subdue, box, and stamp it -- always knowing what it means and certainly not wanting its specifics to change up or, even worse, get institutional on us. We want questions corralled, brought under control, fit neatly into a column or two on Page Six of the local daily to be read (or not) at our leisure. We like our truths in the here and now, and singular -- thank you



Cartoon of Hitler from the German Art Nouveau magazine Jugend 1928. (The Cabaret)

very much.

And why do we have to think about these kinds of questions anyway? What law says we are obligated to philosophically beat ourselves about the head and shoulders, dealing with issues and questions that are unlikely to purchase us even one pair of "Air Jordans." Don't we have enough to deal with -- what with the economy, and Iraq, and the Rangers' uneven hockey season-- without taking on questions that lead to yet more questions? Really, don't we deserve a break? Don't we have a right to only deal with the easier, everyday questions: "Will I get a raise?", "Will I get a seat on the subway?", "Will So-and-So like me enough to invite me stay over tonight?", "Do they have sesame seed this morning?", etc. What is it that makes some people go to those places where the questions lead to more questions, where the layers are so, well, layered?

Simplicity, it would seem, is anathema to us strange earthlings, we perpetually wandering souls who pursue this netherworld of issues; issues so complicated, so multi-faceted, that answering them seems next to impossible.

Perhaps answer-

ing is beside the point. Perhaps "the pleasure is in the pursuit." There is joy in the eternal uncovering of possibilities, in the constant struggle with the concept of the Truth. Such pleasure to ask, "What of the truth? - Is there more than one? -- Who's truth: yours, mine? And if more than one, how does that fact impact our need for order, structure, and the one great "Is"? Consider: if there were two burning bushes, how would our hero have known which instructions to follow. It is the journey, the investigation, the very act of taking on the big questions knowing, on some level, that you can never really arrive at the definitive answer, that is the real big bang. There is sheer pleasure in trying to satisfy this urge to know, to see, to get at some modicum of understanding. There is sheer pleasure in thrashing back and forth through an idea or question until either it --or you-- give up.

There are those who do want the rigors of the impossible --the untouchable, the unfathomable-- as a way of keeping in touch with that part of ourselves that won't stand for compromise, that won't cotton to the easy solution or to the available intellectual shorthand. Perhaps we need that sense of adventure, the wandering, the idea that there's a search for something that remains hidden, nebulous, and precious. There are times when we tire of the simple, the uncomplicated, the everyday; the tackling of the unanswerable is a way to leave that behind for just a short period of time. To be able to sit and contemplate an idea or a question can sometimes feel as active and as rigorous as a good game of tennis or basketball; you leave it feeling that not only has your brain gotten a workout, but your emotions and body as well. Notice the next time you see people in a serious, passionate debate. Watch what happens to their bodies, how they move, how they gesticulate, even how they breathe; it's not unlike watching a kind of dance. Only in this case the idea is the music, and conversation the medium.

In exploring these big questions --the ones for which there are probably many answers-- we slip out of the every day, and move into an alternate reality, one where the power is in the exploration, and the prize is the enjoyment, the desire, and the acknowledgment that such a journey matters. One must stand up, and say, that to think --to consider big questions-- is an end in and of itself. That to understand and to help someone else to understand as well, is an honorable and oh-so-human endeavor. In defending this stance it is possible that we are able, for a short time, to see what is possible in the unanswerable. The attempt to answer the unanswerable is an essential part of the joy of being alive.

So, in response to "Java John" (John's his real name - not Java) I say, "Yes, I'm quite fuckin' serious. Sometimes, asking 'those' questions is the very best thing I can do with my time."

Thanks

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Lisa Walker, Elena Pelacharo, Nicole Potter, and Michael David Gordon in Bertolt Brecht's St. Joan of the Stockyard.

"Volks Kunst": What Do The People Want?

by Ken Rothchild

Despite all the heated and strident debate concerning the NEA and the role of the Arts in the public domain, one of the least asked questions is, what do the people want? Not what they don't want ("I don't want my tax dollars paying for that filth"), but what they do want.

In a recently published book titled "Painting by Numbers" two emigre artists from Russia, Alexander Melamid and Vitaly Komar, asked just that question. But in addition to asking what individuals want, they also posed the following question: Can one come up

with a popular consensus for what the public wants in a piece of art? They provided an answer through that most American of devices, the public survey poll and from that poll they created a painting that represented America's consensual desire. The picture is, amongst other things, a landscape (88%) painted realistically (60%), 44% blue (the percentage of people who stated that was their favorite color), with soft edges (61%), with blended colors (45%), animals (51%), regular people and historic figures (50%). Upon looking at the rendition Komar and Melamid painted I'm not sure many people would want to hang it in their living room, although it is exactly, scientifically what "the People" wanted. As Melamid says in the book:



Adolf Ziegler (at podium) opens the exhibition "Entartete Kunst" at the Archäologisches Institut, Munich, July 19, 1937. (Degenerate Art)

"If you look at individuals, even at individuals in a small group, you will never find the answer. Behavior of the masses is different from the behavior of individuals. But still the nation behaves in some way. Why the country as a whole acts in this way when each person alone would act another way? It's a totally unresolved problem. Coming from Russia, I think Stalin? Was I responsible for Stalin? No, that's ridiculous. Were my parents responsible? Maybe so, but logic tells you they cannot be. These things are not the work of individuals. And when we talk about what the people want, we mean the People and not individual people. Of course individual people want this or that, but the People --the masses-- want some thing too, and it can be totally different. That's what makes the result of the poll interesting. The nation wants it. It doesn't matter what individuals want. It's about the masses."

Interestingly, yet obviously, you can take the same data from the poll, put it in the hands of a different set of artists, and arrive at a completely different set of images. This is just what happened when the Alternative Museum in

SOHO, the original exhibitor of "America's Most Wanted" painting, had forty other artists produce their own version from the data. An artist friend who participated said it was hard and strange, because the questions an artist is asking himself about the image he is producing are not the questions that were asked of people of what they wanted to view. This reflects exactly what Komar and Melamid said above, about finding something the People want that no one individual wants.

But lets look at the last part of that quote again:

"Of course individual people want

this or that, but the People --the masses-- want some thing too, and it can be totally different. That's what makes the result of the poll interesting. The nation wants it. It doesn't matter what individuals want. It's about the masses."

One can almost hear in one's mind an 'au courant' version adding political spin to that last phrase: "It's about the masses, stupid" (and imagine it rumbling around the mouth of Jesse Helms or Bill Clinton.). From that one phrase it is only a short step to discerning the tenor of the current discussion over the role of the Arts in America.

The Nazis believed that art was a cultural imperative, and the necessary and natural expression of the gestalt of popular culture. They believed that the definition of that which was considered art -- what was deemed worth looking at -- had been kidnapped by a small coterie of degenerate elitists who were wielding art as a weapon to destroy the moral fabric of society. To insure that people became aware of this "assault" they staged several exhibits, including the one this issue is focusing on. And many people were shocked, once it was brought to their attention. Its important to remember that this "degeneracy" was brought to the forefront of consciousness by those in power, much as the on-going debate concerning federal funding for the arts was fueled firstly and primarily by Congressional leaders.

When looking at the Nazis and America (as we surely are through this project) one obvious difference, in terms of the specific subject matter we are examining, becomes apparent: Germans consider the Arts central to their identity, whereas Americans do not. Yet there is at least one seemingly benign similarity: both the Nazis and the current American government consider Family Values and family morality (at least in principle if not in practice) to

be of central importance. A related commonality to both is the feeling that Art has the power to affect or even destroy those values, and that it is necessary for the State to do everything within its power to protect the embodiment of those values: "the People".

Both these regimes (past and present) consider it crucial to hold up this art for the people to judge in a "common sense" kind of way --as if that were the only way something can be looked at-- and demonize those who would have it looked at differently. They control the terms of the debate in order to surreptitiously guide an outraged populace to an "inevitable conclusion". The debate isn't really about what the public wants versus what "the arts elite" wants; it's about the imposition of a standardized belief system, of conformity, on our pluralistic society. It's about demonizing those who would view the world in multiple ways as a means of achieving the political objective of a controlled, conformist society.

So now it can be admitted: the title of this piece, "Volks Kunst": What Do The People Want?" is a misleading title, because when it comes to the art debates, it essentially doesn't matter. It's an interesting question in and of itself, but not central to the politics of the debate. "The People" are only invoked to be paragons or Philistines. The "Volk" do not matter as individuals. This is the true parallel for our society of the 1937 Nazi exhibit of Degenerate Art.

Yet I want to make one thing clear about this argument: I'm not here to paint our government with the Nazi brush. I don't want to demonize the opposition by purporting that they desire a totalitarian state, or a different kind of Holocaust, or any of the other evils specific to Nazi Germany. I want people to look at the society of Nazi Germany stripped of its evil and ask, "Is that the world I want to live in?" For, make no mistake, there is much of that society that would be admired by our leaders if it were stripped of the Nazi moniker.

As I write this, the President of the NYC Board of Education is proposing that elementary school children be required to wear uniforms to school. Many politicians, and parents (65%), have signaled their approval, including Mayor Giuliani who has stated that, "[Our school system] is in need of more discipline, more sense of order, more sense of structure" (Daily News). It is easy to illustrate how similar this is to a Nazi proclamation, although I am not claiming that this kind of sentiment inevitably leads to an American form of National Socialism. A more important issue is that making that kind of direct comparison sensitizes the debate and leads to a demonization that obscures the truly important question, that being: "Is this the kind of Society one wants to live in?" To reverse the equation ask yourself, if one could create a National Socialist State without the genocide, how appealing might that be? (Remember Mussolini and the trains that ran on time?) The National Socialists celebrated the common sense and wisdom of "the People", family values and morality. They worked to achieve a society where those were the only allowable values. Other values were legislated against and their proponents demonized. As Mayor Giuliani said of Norman Siegal (head of the ACLU) and his opposition to school uniforms for elementary students, "if it were up to Norman, there would be people on the

street attacking other people, and we would do nothing about it." (Daily News) By highlighting the evil of the National Socialists we obscure how popular their society was at the time, both in Germany and abroad. (We celebrate Jesse Owens as a symbol of putting the lie to Hitler's and Germany's racial theories, but at the time of his gold medal Jesse Owens could not have played major league baseball, or eaten in many restaurants even in our Nation's capitol, or purchased a house in many of our nation's neighborhoods.) Is that the kind of society we want to live in?

To return to the world of the NEA and Congress, and the slippery slope these battles represent, perhaps a quote from the book "The Art of The Third Reich" states it most succinctly:

"What is frightening about these works of art is not so much what is Fascist about them, but what is normal, a normality which pleased so many. Looking at the mediocre and undemanding art on offer, one can but wonder if the popularity of the regime was based on the fact that it provided a mass art which corresponded to what most people liked, a pleasant reassuring art which gave answers and did not ask questions. Art as the affirmation of a better world has always had its supporters." (page 304) ... "National Socialist paintings, sculptures, and architecture were popular because they seemed to express what most people expected from art." (page 305)

To restate the old proverb: people should be careful what they wish for, because as "the People" they just might get it.

Reconstructing "Entartete Kunst": Continued from page 2
foreword to the exhibition catalog, museum directors Earl A Powell III of LACMA, James N. Wood of the Art Institute of Chicago, and Tom L. Freudenheim of the Smithsonian Institute wrote, "As the 1990's begin, museum exhibitions are in a precarious position. If government support for the arts is jeopardized, the ability of all museums to organize exhibitions will be affected and the museum as an educational institution will be seriously diminished."

After it's long-awaited opening in Los Angeles, the show moved to the Art Institute of Chicago, and eventually to the Smithsonian Institute. Washington was a much desired site for the exhibition organizers. "Now, when the arts are the subject of much discussion and controversy," Ms. Barron commented, "the chance to have this show seen in our nation's capital is very important. In the current political climate, with funding from the NEA and NEH drastically reduced, it is difficult not to speculate whether "Degenerate Art": The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany could be mounted today."

Despite the dark context of the original show, the curators of the re-mounting did not aim to dwell on the past. Rather, they sought inspiration from the survival of those works. Ms. Barron comments on this goal in the exhibition catalog, "An exhibition that reflects on a dark moment in cultural history but focuses on those works of art and creative geniuses that survived is a celebration of the power of art to transcend the most daunting circumstances."

The curators sum up powerfully with their profound hope that the exhibition "will contribute to the continuing ... vigilance and reaffirmation that are an essential component of the health of our nation's intellectual and artistic traditions."

