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DOSSIER

EL OBJETO DESBORDANTE. ESPACIOS INMERSIVOS Y ESTRATEGIAS MULTISENSORIALES EN EL ARTE

Editado por Eduard Cairol y Tomas Macsotay Bunt

THE OVERFLOWING OBJECT. IMMERSIVE SPACES AND MULTI-SENSORIAL STRATEGIES IN ART

Edited by Eduard Cairol y Tomas Macsotay Bunt

DESTRUCTION OF IMAGES AS A TOTAL WORK OF ART. THE GESAMTKUNSTWERK AS BLACK HOLE

LA DESTRUCCIÓN DE IMÁGENES COMO OBRA DE ARTE TOTAL. LA GESAMTKUNSTWERK COMO AGUJERO NEGRO

Nausikaä El-Mecky[1]

Abstract

The destruction of images is a process that often produces a new imaginary, a visual spectacle in itself. Even after the original image has been obliterated, its absence can create its own powerful aesthetic that survives centuries. The article focuses on two historical case studies: the iconoclasm in Zurich in the 1520s and the National Socialist attack on so-called degenerate art. Through these, it aims to show how destruction can yield a total work of art through a carefully planned, even scripted, process that is far removed from the «lunatic running around with a sledgehammer» stereotype. It argues that many attacks on images are characterised by transformation, mysticism and performativity, during which a careful oscillation between absence and presence plays an important role. Ultimately, this contribution strives to create a new understanding of destructions of images through the frame of the Gesamtkunstwerk.

Keywords

Destruction of Art; Iconoclasm; Degenerate Art; National Socialism; Reformation; Zwingli; Spectacle; Audience Participation

Resumen

La destrucción de imágenes es un proceso que a menudo produce un nuevo imaginario, un espectáculo visual en sí mismo. Incluso después de que la imagen original haya sido borrada, su ausencia puede crear una estética propia y poderosa que sobrevive durante siglos. El artículo se centra en dos estudios de casos históricos: la iconoclasia en Zúrich en la década de 1520 y el ataque nacionalsocialista al llamado arte degenerado. A través de ellos, pretende mostrar cómo la destrucción puede dar lugar a una obra de arte total a través de un proceso cuidadosamente planificado,

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incluso guionizado, que se aleja del estereotipo del 'lunático corriendo con un mazo'. Sostiene que muchos ataques a las imágenes se caracterizan por la transformación, el misticismo y la performatividad, durante los cuales una cuidadosa oscilación entre la ausencia y la presencia desempeña un papel importante. En última instancia, la contribución se esfuerza por crear una nueva comprensión de las destrucciones de imágenes a través del marco de la Gesamtkunstwerk.

Palabras clave

Destrucción del arte; Iconoclasia; Arte degenerado; Nacionalsocialismo; Reforma; Zwinglio; Espectáculo; Participación del público

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The idea of the Total Work of Art[2] has become so «inflated»[3] that it might be easier to ask: «what is *not* a Gesamtkunstwerk?». Originally, the notion of the total work of art was liberating yet definable. You could encounter and enter a Gesamtkunstwerk, e.g. an opera building, and let yourself be absorbed by the merging of different artistic disciplines such as architecture, light, sound, drama and music.[4] A total creative concept in which different artistic disciplines did not simply co-exist, but were engaged in constant dialogue: architecture heightened[5] drama or light enhanced sound – jointly conspiring to sweep visitors away towards a profound, sublime experience.

Although the concept of the Gesamtkunstwerk may have been freeing and disruptive in many ways, you still knew where it was, and when you encountered it – which becomes a lot harder when you follow more recent definitions of the total work of art.

Whether you went into an opera house, a theatre or even an entire part of a city dedicated to the conjoining of the artistic disciplines like the Mathildenhöhe Colony (Darmstadt, Germany), the total work of art was still clearly tied to a place: pass through a door, cross a road, a park or a gate and there it was – potentially limitless as an aesthetic experience, yet physically contained.

Some of the later definitions of the total work of art, however, crash through the roof of the paradigmatic Wagnerian opera building.[6] A total work of art can now be anything – no longer tied to a place or even a period in time: Stalinism[7] and even totalitarianism in general have been called a total work of art;[8] so have virtual reality[9] and suicide.[10] After all, each of these widely disparate examples could each be called creative, immersive, aesthetic, multidisciplinary and / or sublime – even if many of them have little or none of the positive connotations of a work of art.

On the one hand, this can be like an unshackling: an artist no longer has to adhere to a certain medium or location. And the idea that *anything* can be a

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2. The terms «*Gesamtkunstwerk*» and «total work of art» are used interchangeably in the article.

3. Orig. in German: *inflationär*. See Jahn, Peter Heinrich: «Gesamtkunstwerk», in Jordan, Stefan, & Müller, Jürgen (eds.): *Lexikon Kunstwissenschaft: Hundert Grundbegriffe*. Stuttgart, Reclam, 2012, pp. 142-144, p. 143.

4. See e.g. Bermbach, Udo: *Der Wahn des Gesamtkunstwerks: Richard Wagners politisch-ästhetische Utopie*. Stuttgart & Weimar, J.B. Metzler, p. 212f; Wagner, Richard : *Die Kunst und die Revolution*. Leipzig, Otto Wigand, 1849 and: *Idem*: *Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft*. Leipzig, Otto Wigand, 1850.

5. For the concept of different artistic disciplines enhancing each other see e.g. Wagner, Richard: *Die Kunst...*, p. 24 and *Idem*: *Das Kunstwerk...*, p. 129ff.

6. For a nuanced and critical exploration of Richard Wagner, the Gesamtkunstwerk and the opera as a total work of art, see e.g. Pederson, Sanna: «From Gesamtkunstwerk to Music Drama», in Imhoof, David; Menninger, Margaret Eleanor, & Steinhoff, Anthony J. (eds.): *The Total Work of Art: Foundations, Articulations, Inspirations*. Oxford & New York, Berghahn, 2016, pp. 39–55, in which Pederson also states how the term «Gesamtkunstwerk... became [one of the] Wagnerian trademarks... [though the term is] largely absent from his writings» (p. 42).

7. See Groys, Boris: *Gesamtkunstwerk Stalin: Die gespaltene Kultur in der Sowjetunion.* Munich, Hanser, 1988.

8. See Jahn, Peter Heinrich: *op. cit.,* p. 143.

9. See e.g. Wilson Smith, Matthew: *The Total Work of Art: From Bayreuth to Cyberspace*. New York & London, Routledge, 2007.

10. As for instance in the photo series by photographer Kishin Shinoyama in collaboration with writer Yukio Mishima depicting the deaths of different Japanese «everymen» such as a fisherman and a soldier – and which culminated in Mishima's own – highly ritualistic – suicide a few months later in November 1970. See Smith, Zadie: *Intimations*. Penguin, USA, 2020, p. 27 and Shinoyama, Kishin: *Yukio Mishima: The Death of a Man*. New York, Rizzoli, 2020.

Gesamtkunstwerk mirrors the indefinability and dissolution of traditional artistic disciplines in the contemporary art world – a world where excrement,[11] being shot in the arm[12] or even nothing[13] have been framed as art works, to be displayed, sold and archived.

But there is also a negative side. You could argue that the very idea of the total work of art has become so greedy – gobbling up anything and everything – that it has collapsed in on itself and, like a black hole, has absorbed and extinguished all sense and purpose – thus rendering itself obsolete as a theoretical and aesthetic category. Or, as Margaret Menninger writes: «Perhaps the concept of the total work of art has even become the victim of its own success; indeed, it may have evolved into a «label with no meaning».[14]

Still, despite the apparently limitless stretching of the concept, it would be a shame to do away with a more traditional – and more limited – definition of the total work of art. Despite the many potential pitfalls of the term, the Gesamtkunstwerk discourse's dynamic merging of disciplines and actors can make us look at art and aesthetics with fresh eyes.

If the boundaries of the definition «Gesamtkunstwerk» can be stretched, they could also be expanded in order to apply to the destruction of images. Therefore, this article aims to situate itself at the (perhaps impossible to find) «sweet spot», where the total work of art is not just limited to a contained space like the opera house – or the Bauhaus![15] –but expands to immersive and interdisciplinary aesthetic environments and experiences without overextending the Gesamtkunstwerk-concept into utter pointlessness.

Therefore, the working definition of the total work of art used in this article is the following: an aesthetic, artistic experience that draws on various artistic disciplines that all involve different senses and numerous actors, containing multitudes – such as sight, touch, light, sound, movement and stillness – as well as a ritualistic involvement of the audience. Audiences are not passive witnesses but consist of crucial, active agents without whom the Gesamtkunstwerk of destruction would be incomplete.

And yet, within this more limited definition of the Gesamtkunstwerk as an interdisciplinary, immersive work of art, this article still revolves around another paradox – that of destruction as creation. I am however referring to a simpler,

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11. Piero Manzoni's *Merde d'Artiste* (1961).

12. Chris Burden's *Shoot* (1971).

13. Mary Ellen Carol, *Nothing* (1990s–now) and Maria Abramović's *512 Hours* (2014) both created works of art around «nothing» resulting in a row about Abramović's not acknowledging Carol's work, see e.g. Rushe, Dominic: «Art star Marina Abramović caught up in row over 'Nothing'», *The Guardian,* 29. May 2014. *https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2014/may/29/art-star-marina-abramovic-row-nothing-serpentine*

14. Menninger, Margaret: «Introduction», in Imhoof, David; Menninger, Margaret Eleanor, & Steinhoff, Anthony J. (eds.): *op. cit.,* pp. 1-20, p. 1.

15. See e.g. Bergdoll, Barry: «Bauhaus Multiplied: Paradoxes of Architecture and Design in and after The Bauhaus», in Bergdoll, Barry, & Dickerman, Leah (eds.): *Bauhaus 1919-1933: Workshops for Modernity*. New York, MoMA, 2009, pp. 41-61, p. 43.

much more pedestrian notion of destruction and of the Gesamtkunstwerk than the philosophical and linguistic disintegration of the term itself.[16]

Thus, in the essay I would like to argue that destruction of images produces a spectacle that forms a total work of art in itself. The selected testcases are of images which prior to their destruction were nested – like Russian dolls – in environments which themselves have been called total works of art: churches, cathedrals, chapels, museums and galleries.[17] The article considers destruction and creation both as binary oppositions and as synonymous phenomena: viewing destruction as both the enemy and a source of aesthetic invention.

WHY DESTRUCTIONS OF IMAGES (CAN) PRODUCE TOTAL WORKS OF ART

Just because an image is obliterated does not mean that destruction is a quick and unambiguous process of erasure or subtraction. Even if burning or smashing a statue or painting can happen in an instant, the overall process of obliteration is much more drawn out than that specific moment. The selected case studies in this article show that though destruction may appear to be a brutal, vulgar act devoid of any beauty, attacks on images were (and are!) often embedded in deliberate, performative and aesthetically conceived processes. I would like to emphasise that it is not my intention to argue that destruction of images is cause for celebration. Rather, the lens of the Gesamtkunstwerk is used to show that attacks on images, even if morally reprehensible, can be dense and complex events.

Additionally, befitting the multi-faceted nature of the total work of art, destruction is rarely straightforward. It can be symbolic rather than literal, surrounded by (ironic or serious) re-enactment of existing ceremonies or procedures that have a clearly sequenced «script» (from liturgy to public execution). It can endure as an immersive experience long after the original destruction occurred. Brutal materiality and nuanced ephemerality can co-exist: the chopped off heads of statues with their scratched-out eyes can still make us shudder many centuries after the instant of cutting or chopping: the vestige of destruction as durable as – or perhaps even more than – the original image.

One of the fascinating aspects of immersion in the total work of art is the merging of material, permanent elements with the ephemeral. Physical objects and structures (scenography, instruments, curtains, backdrop paintings, the overall architecture, costumes) are brought to life by temporary or evanescent components (the movement of bodies, voices, sound, light, smoke and audiences that are only there at that precise

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16. For a much more theoretical exploration of destruction, Gesamtkunstwerk and philosophy see Bergande, Wolfram «The Creative Destruction of the Total Work of Art: From Hegel to Wagner and Beyond», in Ruhl, Carsten; Daĥne, Chris, & Hoekstra, Rixt (Eds.): *The Death and Life of the Total Work of Art: Henry van de Velde and the Legacy of a Modern Concept*. Berlin, Jovis, 2015, pp. 128-145.

17. See e.g. Roberts, David: *The Total Work of Art in European Modernism.* Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2011 and Imhoof, David, *op. cit.*

moment in time). In this article, I argue that destruction of images brings together the material and ephemeral in the same – or perhaps even more poignant – manner: the obliteration of the image is accompanied by ritualistic, multi-sensory layers of performativity and audience involvement. The physical image becomes transient through its eradication, whilst the fleeting nature of destruction becomes solidified in the material traces the destroyed image leaves behind.

Furthermore, I would like to highlight an additional aspect which I consider essential in the effectiveness of both the «regular» total of work of art and destruction-as-total-work of art. This aspect is also related to the aforementioned oscillation between materiality and ephemerality, namely: the deliberate use of appearance and disappearance.

To go back to archetypical examples of Gesamtkunstwerke such as the Wagnerian opera or processions,[18] perhaps the most climactic moments occur when something normally hidden is revealed – or when something normally observable is concealed:

A statue is brought out into the street; the lights go out in the theatre; an altar is not just closed, but hidden under cloth; clergy enter wearing their special Easter vestments rather than their everyday ones; incense wafts through the church; a rustling, clinking collection basket of money is passed around the pews; the tragic heroine wears a modest nightgown instead of an elaborate dress, standing still on a dark stage that just moments ago had been brightly lit and bustling with characters; the ghost appears from stage right; the veil is lifted – or placed over the body; the procession disappears around the corner, the sound trailing in it its wake slowly dies away. Different sensorial elements move simultaneously and according to their own idiosyncratic timelines.

The same thing occurs when images are intentionally, purposefully destroyed. These instances build to a climax where what was perceivable disappears and vice versa, happening along interweaving yet disparate timelines, where the after-effects of the destruction can be instantaneous, or linger. Condemned images are brought out to cheers, horror or respectful silence and shown to be obliterated. Smashing, burning or whitewashing come with their own multisensory immersion: the smell of burning, the noise of something breaking, the shouts or whispers from the crowd. Sometimes the audience only witnesses symbolic destruction, in which the images are ridiculed and stripped of their art status, unaware that the images go on to be literally burnt (as in the second test case). On other occasions, people are only shown the aftermath of the material destruction (as in the first test case).

When images are destroyed, I argue, we are not dealing with a thoughtless, «barbaric» act in which chaos reigns supreme and pieces of the image fly about at random. Rather, destruction – and which parts of its process are shown and hidden – is often a carefully calibrated process which involves and excludes the

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18. See e.g. Thomas, Andrew L.: *A House Divided: Wittelsbach Confessional Court Cultures in the Holy Roman Empire, C. 1550-1650*. Leiden, Brill, 2010, p. 93.

audience through a fine-tuned, immersive scenario to create maximum suspense and catharsis.

The elements outlined above – spectacle; multisensory immersion and calibration of presence and absence – are used in this article as key frameworks to demonstrate how destruction can yield a total work of art. To illustrate and expand this, the article focuses on two very different case studies, disparate in terms of time, context and intentions: the Zurich protestant iconoclasm of 1524, and the National Socialist Degenerate Art Exhibition of 1937. On the surface, these two events could not be more dissimilar: while the Zurich iconoclasts physically smashed images, the Degenerate Art Exhibition «only» *metaphorically* reframed the images. In Zurich, the images are religious objects with supernatural powers ascribed to them, in Nazi Germany we are dealing with aesthetic works of art stemming from a mostly secular context. The audiences, too, are of a different calibre: Zurich's churchgoers had often invested (spiritually, but also economically) in the attacked images for generations, whereas many visitors of the Degenerate Art Exhibition saw the «reviled» images for the first time. It seems as though the only thing these two events have in common is that artefacts were attacked during both of them.

However, this article aims to show that we can recognise various recurring mechanisms within both cases – mechanisms that may also be applied to other iconoclastic acts in future research. The cases were chosen based on their disparity – and take their seemingly different nature as an invitation rather than as an obstacle to reconsider the meaning of creation, destruction and immersiveness of images.

UNEVENTFUL, IMMERSIVE ICONOCLASM IN ZURICH

Within little more than a week in 1524, the Swiss city of Zurich removed its religious images. In an orderly and democratic fashion, centuries of religious tradition were wiped out. Images that had been paid for by the congregation[19] and stroked, admired and loved, were now smashed, whitewashed or burnt (Figure 1)[20] – without rowdiness. For the various Reformatory movements that swept the European continent during this era, Zurich was exemplary.[21] Besides orderly, the iconoclasm was extraordinarily thorough. In e.g. the Netherlands[22] or Lutheran parts of Germany, a new kind of visual iconography was developed to replace the traditional Catholic

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19. See e.g. Palmer Wandel, Lee: *Voracious Idols and Violent Hands: Iconoclasm in Reformation Zurich, Strasbourg and Basel.* Cambridge etc., Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 84f.

20. Another relevant aspect of iconoclastic attacks is how they often yield images that depict and / or propagate destruction, such as this one. The paradox of an image that embodies iconoclasm is a fascinating one, and frequent at that (see footnote 21).

21. Such as Strasbourg, Basel, Bern, Constance, Schaffhausen, Ulm, Augsburg and possibly Geneva, as well as some *Oberdeutsche* towns. See e.g. *Idem*, p. 60 n. 16.

22. That is not to say churches were not «gutted» in other iconoclasms across the continent – the empty aesthetic (sometimes with allusions to destroyed imagery) could even reappear in new images, such as can be seen, for instance, in the paintings of austere church interiors by 17th century Dutch painters Emanuel de Witte or Pieter Saenredam, see e.g. Vanhaelen, Angela: «Iconoclasm and the Creation of Images in Emanuel de Witte's 'Old Church in Amsterdam'», *The Art Bulletin*, June, Vol. 87, No. 2 (2005), pp. 249-264.

one, whereas in Zurich most artists either had to seek a new profession or leave.[23] Other artists had to fall back on the town council's support to survive[24] and only a handful of glass painters and decorators of secular buildings remained.[25]
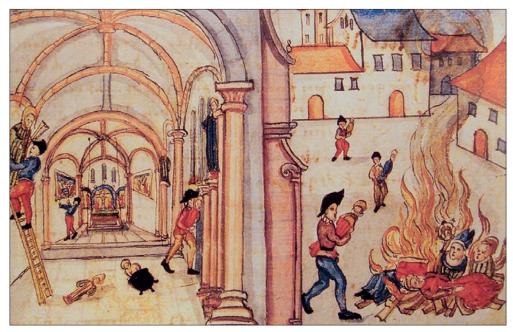
The change was a rapid one: only four years earlier, in 1520, the city council beheaded[26] a man named Uly Anders for blasphemy. He had tried to smash a crucifix at an inn[27] and then threw it out of the window, shouting it was idolatrous.[28]

And yet, despite the risks inherent in illegal iconoclastic acts, Zurich's official, exemplary and legal iconoclasm of 1524 was accompanied by numerous, risky, illegal attacks.[29] It could be argued that legal and illegal actions against images

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23. See e.g. Wüthrich, Lucas: «Die zürcher Malerei im 16. Jahrhundert», in Naegeli, Marianne, & Hobi, Urs (eds.): *Zürcher Kunst nach der Reformation: Hans Asper und seine Zeit*. Zurich, Schweizerisches Institut für Kunstwissenschaft, 1981, pp. 9-14.

24. In 1526, the painter Hans Koewen applied and received financial support from the *Almosenamt*; he could no longer feed his wife and children, see Staatsarchiv Zürich (StAZ) FIII, 1a, 19. See also Palmer Wandel, Lee: *Always Among Us: Images of the Poor in Zwingli's Church.* Cambridge etc., Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 164.

25. Wüthrich, Lucas: *op. cit.,* pp. 9-14.

26. See e.g. Palmer Wandel, Lee: *Voracious Idols...,* p. 53; Altendorf, Hans-Dietrich: «Zwinglis Stellung zum Bild und die Tradition christlicher Bildfeindschaft», in Jezler, Peter, & Altendorf, Hans-Dietrich (eds.): *Bilderstreit: Kulturwandel in Zwinglis Reformation.* Zurich, Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1984, pp. 11-18, pp. 12-13.

27. This incident did not occur in Zurich proper but in Uznach. The legislation of Zurich extended beyond the town into the rest of the *Landschaft*. For many excellent examples, see Huber, Peter Heinrich: *Annahme und Durchführung der Reformation auf der Zürcher Landschaft in den Jahren 1519 bis 1530*, (published dissertation), University of Zurich, Faculty of Philosophy, 1972.

28. StAZ, B VI, 248, *Liber Baptisalis 1520*, f. 31, 1520.

29. See e.g. Eire, Carlos: *War against the Idols.* Cambridge etc., Cambridge University Press, 1986, p. 79ff.

were inextricably linked. They even appear to be each other's mirror images: the legal iconoclasm of 1524 occurred in broad daylight and was carried out by officially appointed people behind closed doors. On the other hand, illegal iconoclasms were carried out at legal risk,[30] at times surreptitiously and, perhaps most importantly, were conducted by the population.

Additionally, these attacks on images also echo and subversively re-enact the ritual, spectacle and mystery of their original Catholic setting. Just like Catholic liturgy has been called a total work of art,[31] both legal and illegal iconoclasms could be called Gesamtkunstwerke in their reliance on an immersive, multi-sensory experience and their alternation between presence and absence to enhance their impact on the audience.

THE TWO-EDGED SWORD OF ILLEGAL ICONOCLASM

Even before the iconoclasm, Zurich was unusual: a city of around 5,700 governed by a democratically elected city council of 212 members.[32] As the Reformers, a group headed by charismatic theologian and preacher Huldrych Zwingli, gained ground, they did not need to win over an aristocratic ruler – they had to sway the population instead.

Interestingly enough, images had not been at the forefront of the Reformers' agenda by any means for several years. Though all preachers advocated for drastic reform and a return to the old Apostolic Church,[33] each of them focused on different issues that ranged from theological (e.g. the cult of the Virgin and the saints)[34] to socio-economic issues influenced by religion (e.g. church tithes[35] or the draft into the Pope's army).[36] It remains unclear whether the Reformers pushed the image issue onto the population or whether the population, through illegal iconoclastic acts, forced the issue to the top of the Reformers' agenda. In any case, according to Lee Palmer Wandel, the image question proved a lot more incendiary than many other pressing issues: «People did not take up… other biblical injunctions in support of redistribution of wealth, of charity toward the poor, of the reordering of social ethics, with equal passion or effect…»[37]

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30. However, by 1522, just 2 years after the beheading of Uly Anders, the consequences could be less drastic for the transgressors involved. See e.g. Göttler, Christine, & Jezler, Peter: «Zeittafel», in Jezler, Peter, & Altendorf, Hans-Dietrich (eds.) *op. cit.,* p. 152, and Palmer Wandel, *op. cit.* p. 6off.

31. See e.g. Gerhards, Albert, & Kranemann, Benedikt: *Introduction to the Study of Liturgy*. Collegeville, Liturgical Press, 2017, p. 109.

32. See Jacob, Walter: *Politische Führungsschicht und Reformation: Untersuchungen zur Reformation in Zürich 1519-1528*. Zurich, Zwingli Verlag, 1970 and Palmer Wandel, *Voracious Idols…,* pp. 55-57.

33. Palmer Wandel, Lee: *Voracious Idols…,* p. 62.

34. *Idem*, p. 54.

35. See e.g. Gäbler, Ulrich: *Huldrych Zwingli: Eine Einführung in sein Leben und sein Werk*. Zurich, Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2004, p. 50.

36. Egli, Emil: «Zum Piacenzerzug», *Zwingliana* 2/3, 1906, pp. 85-90 and Huber, Peter Heinrich: *op. cit.*, p. 20.

37. Palmer Wandel, Lee: *op. cit.,* p. 9.

By 1523 – around the same time that the incidence of illegal iconoclastic attacks peaked[38] – the Zurich Reformers invested a lot of effort into convincing people that images were bad, using their eloquence to preach to audiences across the spectrum – from the learned to the illiterate, switching between Latin and local dialect according to the demands of the occasion.[39] They expressly condemned the spontaneous attacks on images, while at the same time continuing to fan the flames of iconoclasm; an approach that may be called opportunistic *Realpolitik* or benevolent cautiousness (depending on how cynical we want to be).[40] Their cautiousness may have come out of a concern for the diplomatic relationship with other Swiss districts, the *Eidgenossen*, who had already severely condemned the rapid changes that were happening under the increasing influence of the Reformers in Zurich. Too much «anarchy» could cause a war.[41]

The volatility of the image issue was thus both an irresistible tool to promote the Reformers' cause and a great risk. Soon, images came to be a proxy for what was apparently wrong and exploitative about the Church.[42] Perhaps *because* images had been so cherished it was, paradoxically enough, easier to transform a strong emotion of attachment into the equally strong emotion of enthusiastic loathing. Images became a symbol of money badly spent: on decoration and idolatry instead of on helping the poor. Religious images came to be considered, as Palmer Wandel puts it, «voracious...stealing food and heat from needy human beings, 'the true images of God.»[43]

The image issue turned out to be propagandistic gunpowder: explosively effective, but with the potential to blow up in the hands of whoever employed it. This made for a precarious balancing act: the Reformers wanted the population to enthusiastically support the removal of images that they previously stroked, kissed or admired – and which even their great-grandparents may have contributed to through tithes.[44] Yet the people were not to get *so* riled up that they should storm into the churches and take matters into their own hands.

To make matters even more ambivalent, Reformers were not above performing some symbolic, illegal actions of their own. One event, the so-called «Affair of the Sausages» stands out: in March 1522, when the eating of meat was forbidden for Lent, Christoph Froschauer, a printer and prominent Zurich supporter of the Reformation, served sausage to his twelve employees, who were hard at work completing a decidedly un-profane text: a new edition of the epistles of Paul.[45]

Though the «Affair» could be construed as a casual, private act, it could likewise be viewed as a highly symbolic re-enactment merging the sacred and profane, echoing

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38. *Idem,* pp. 58-59.
39. See e.g. Eire, Carlos: *War against...,* p. 99 and Huber, Peter Heinrich: *op. cit.,* p. 19; pp. 52-53.
40.   In a text titled «Advice Concerning the Mass and Images» from December 1523 various preachers stated nobody should bring images in or out of churches – see e.g. Palmer Wandel, Lee: *Voracious Idols...,* p. 82.
41. Gäbler, Ulrich: *op. cit.,* p. 79.
42.   Palmer Wandel, Lee's *Voracious Idols...* entire book makes a very convincing argument for this.
43. *Idem,* p. 190.
44.   For an excellent description of these treasured objects. Also see p. 10; p. 84f.
45. See Lindberg, Carter: *The European Reformations.* Oxford etc., Wiley-Blackwell, 2010, p. 161.

tradition whilst subverting it at the same time. Was it a simple kindness extended to what just coincidentally happened to be twelve[46] workers – or a ceremonial, subversive re-enactment of the Last Supper and its Twelve Disciples?[47] It could be read as an everyday act of eating, or as a ritualistic manner in which the – rather profane – foodstuff was employed to make a religious and political statement, like a pastiche of taking the communion wafer.

The presence of two prominent Reformers, Leo Jud & Zwingli, enhanced the momentousness of the occasion – though Zwingli apparently did not partake of the food.[48] Subsequently, Froschauer was arrested. Zwingli, who held the highly influential position of people's priest at the Großmünster, Zurich's principal church, could have played down the affair and thus extricated Froschauer. But instead, Zwingli escalated: preaching a sermon titled *On the Choice and Freedom of Foods* that same month, in which he argued that the Bible did not prohibit meat during Lent and people were therefore free to fast, or not.[49]

The «Affair» muddles the line between the legal and the illegal somewhat, especially since Zwingli was an influential, public figure representing (at least some of) the authority of the Church. By condoning this supposedly blasphemous act, he was, in a way, legitimising it.

Though it may not have been iconoclastic in the literal sense, the meal at Froschauer's can be linked to iconoclasm in various ways. Firstly, the incident, according to David Kling, «marked the public inauguration of the Swiss Reformation»,[50] causing a chain reaction that lead to an increase in iconoclastic acts by Zwingli's base soon after. Secondly, assuming it was intentional,[51] the performative, hidden-yet-public «Affair of the Sausages» contains many aspects of the ceremonial, subversive and immersive characters of both legal and illegal iconoclasms around this time. One could argue that the reliance on spectacle loaded with meaning was one of the preferred tools of choice of Zurich iconoclasts – in both legal and illegal acts. Moreover, the involvement of Froschauer's twelve employees hints at another element we encounter in the iconoclasms of this era: the judicious employment (as well as calculated exclusion) of the population.

Though four years seem like a very short time for iconoclasm to shift from capital crime to town council policy, it is still possible that for many the wait for the official removal of images took unbearably long. The town council would eventually decide that religious images were to be removed, yet kept pushing back the date. There

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46. Though the list of guests balloons to sixteen or more depending on witness statements, see e.g. Kissane, Christopher: *Food, Religion and Communities in Early Modern Europe*. London, Bloomsbury, 2020, p. 56.

47. See e.g. Wagner, John A.: *Documents of the Reformation.* Santa Barbara, ABC-Clio, 2019, p. 101.

48. See e.g. Oberman, Heiko Augustinus: *Masters of the Reformation: The Emergence of a New Intellectual Climate in Europe.* Cambridge etc., Cambridge University Press, 1981, p. 212.

49. Zwingli turned the statement into a pamphlet the month after (April 1522). See Lindberg, Carter: *op. cit.,* p. 161.

50. Kling, David W.: *The Bible in History: How the Texts Have Shaped the Times*. Oxford etc., Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 171.

51. Another argument for the intentionality of the act can be found in witness statements of the affair, in which Bärbel von Arm, one of Froschauer's maids, states how the meat was obtained under a pretence: that it was for a woman who had just given birth – a valid excuse to obtain meat during Lent. See Kissane, Christopher, *op. cit.,* pp. 55-56.

was to be no rioting, no anarchy – and no one was allowed to touch the condemned images.[52] They existed in a state of suspension. In a sense, Zurich's churches had become gunpowder depots, filled with images awaiting their destruction. Akin to prisoners on death row, they were deemed worthy only of obliteration,[53] which they awaited more strictly safeguarded than ever before.[54]

CIVIL SERVANTS AND SLAIN DRAGONS

When the official iconoclasm, after multiple delays, finally happened in the middle of June 1524 (or the 2nd of July),[55] it could be called anti-climactic. Or it could be seen as the perfect balancing act, involving *and* excluding the population just enough to provide catharsis whilst avoiding a riot. It could be construed as a pragmatic, banal demolition – or as a spectacular, immersive event filled with mystery, an almost miraculous transformation.

Finally, the long-awaited iconoclasm began: seventeen men appointed by the city council, including a stonemason, a carpenter and three lay priests, went into the town's churches, closed the doors and got to, as Lee Palmer Wandel puts it, reducing everything[56] that was offensive «to the substances from which they had been made.»[57] It was the process of image-making done backwards – an inverted transfiguration during which sacred images created for celestial purposes now became the raw materials to be used for a wide range of pragmatic uses. Though the process occurred behind closed doors, the population that had pushed for the removal of the images was involved indirectly. The poor were gifted some[58] of these re-constituted, formerly precious, materials, such as sculptures or paintings for firewood[59] – instead of spiritual salvation, such images now provided a more immediate kind of rescue: keeping the poor warm during winter, or as Carlos Eire puts it: «the destruction of cultic objects [was turned] into a charitable and practical operation.»[60] Other sculptures were smashed into cobblestones whilst objects made out of precious materials were turned into coins for the poor.[61] It could be read as another inversion of the cycle of money and images in a church setting: images

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52. Huber, Peter Heinrich: *op. cit.*, pp. 79-80.

53. *Idem*, p. 49.

54. *Idem*, pp. 56-57.

55. There exists some ambivalence concerning this date. Emil Egli for instance dates the official iconoclasm on the 2nd of June, see Palmer Wandel, Lee: *Voracious Idols...*, p. 97 versus Egli, Emil: *Actensammlung zur Geschichte der züricher Reformation in den Jahren 1519-1533*. Aalen, Scientia-Verlag, 1973 (reprint from Zürich, 1879), doc. 552.

56. People who had donated images to the churches were allowed to retrieve these beforehand, see e.g. Gordon, Bruce; Baschera, Luca, & Moser, Christian: «Emulating the past and creating the present: reformation and the use of historical and theological models in Zurich in the sixteenth century», in Gordon, Bruce; Baschera, Luca, & Moser, Christian (eds.): *Following Zwingli: Applying the Past in Reformation Zurich*. Abingdon & New York, Routledge, 2016, pp. 1-40, p. 30.

57. Palmer Wandel, Lee: *Voracious Idols...*, p. 97 and Eire, Carlos: *op. cit.*, p. 164.

58. Other images and objects were burnt, see e.g. Altendorf, Hans-Dietrich: *op. cit.*, p. 15.

59. See e.g. Eire, Carlos: *op. cit.*, p. 164 and Sigg, Otto: «Bevölkerungs-, agrar- und sozialgeschichtliche Probleme am Beispiel der zürcher Landschaft», *Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Geschichte*, vol. 24, 1974, pp. 1-25.

60. Eire, Carlos: *op. cit.*, p. 164.

61. Palmer Wandel, Lee: *op. cit.*, p. 97.

turned into a kind of reversed collection basket – becoming coins that wandered back into the pockets of the congregation that had contributed to their purchase. Subsequently, the newly «decluttered» interiors were whitewashed.[62]

After it was all over, the population was allowed back into their churches. Although they had not participated in the destruction, they could still immerse themselves in its aftermath. This may have been no less spectacular – as Diarmaid MacCulloch puts it:

> When a parish congregation came to sit in their newly stripped, whitewashed and lavishly betexted church building, they could know that the Word of God was literally all around them…this was a transformed sacredness, not the end of the sacred place.[63]

The space had been gutted, with no tolerance even for music as even choir books had been removed[64] – but the emptiness had its own substance. All the traditional elements of the church, their overwhelming, enveloping cosmos of images and sound, were replaced by an equally all-enveloping silence, and luminous openness.

Zwingli may have been well aware of destruction's spectacular potential. He admired the designs of Leon Battista Alberti – now Zurich's churches, without all their visual distractions, similarly displayed the elegant bones of their architecture in their full whitewashed glory.[65]

Zwingli also appeared to be conscious of aesthetic potential when it came to the rawer traces of destruction. Two years after the 1524 iconoclasm, the altar stones, broken out of Zurich's churches, were piled up into a richly ornamented *Kanzellettner*[66] in the Grossmünster. In 1526 Zwingli stood atop this elevated podium for the structure's inaugural sermon. From there he transmitted the victory of the pure Word,[67] standing on the 16 crushed altar stones as upon a slain dragon. Though the ripping out of altar stones may have been a craftsmanly moment that had long passed, the *Kanzellettner* froze that destruction in time and alchemised it into a new aesthetic that appeared to do diametrically opposed things: using the old symbolism and simultaneously commemorating its obliteration. Embodying the victory of Protestantism in Zurich, the erasure was set in stone.

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62. See e.g. EULER, Carrie: *Couriers of the Gospel: England and Zurich, 1531-1558*. Zurich, Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2006, p. 17.

63. MacCULLOCH, Diarmaid: *The Reformation: A History.* London etc., Penguin, 2005, p. 542.

64. See e.g. ASTON, Margaret: «Bullinger and iconoclasm», in CAMPI, Emidio, & OPITZ, Peter (eds.): *Heinrich Bullinger: Life – Thought – Influence Vol. I.* Zurich, Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2007, p. 633 and GARSIDE, Charles: *Zwingli and the Arts*. New Haven etc., Yale University Press, 1966, p. 73ff.

65. MAY, Gerhard: «Kunst und Religion VI: Frühe Neuzeit», in KRAUSE, Gerhard, & MÜLLER, Gerhard (eds.): *Theologische Realenzyklopädie.* Berlin, De Gruyter, 1990, pp. 274-292, pp. 280-281.

66. GUTSCHER, D., & SENN, M., «Zwinglis Kanzel im Zürcher Grossmünster – Reformation und künstlerischer Neubeginn», in JEZLER, Peter, & ALTENDORF: *op. cit.* pp. 109-116. I would awkwardly translate this as a «preaching tower and screen».

67. See e.g. WEIBEL, Thomas et al.: *Geschichte des Kantons Zürich, Band 2*. Zurich, Werdverlag, 1996, p. 198 and STOCK, Alex: *Keine Kunst: Aspekte der Bildtheologie*. Paderborn etc., Verlag Ferdinand Schöningh, 1996, p. 62.

ROWDY THEATRICALITY

As mentioned previously, Zurich's population played a confusing role in the official iconoclasm: citizens may have ensured the official Zurich iconoclasm even took place, and yet they only got to see the iconoclasm once the dust had settled. Kept out, only to be routed back in – at an opportune moment – into the spaces whose transformation they cared about so much. This dynamic was reversed during the various illegal iconoclasms that took part not only around Zurich but all over Switzerland.

When the congregations were granted access to their whitewashed churches, the *mise-en-scène* in all likelihood was dignified, sublime even. Meanwhile, illegal iconoclasms were not seldom marked by a very different kind of theatricality: one that was rowdy and profane yet still indebted to spectacle, ritual and unexpected mysticism. Each of these illegal iconoclasms can be read as individual Gesamtkunstwerke in their own right. However, they can also be seen as crucial pieces in the mosaic of the Zurich iconoclastic experience. Chaotic, illegal attacks may have made the organised, official Zurich iconoclasm an inevitability – and dictated the terms of its execution.[68] Wanting to put a stop to the illegal attacks whilst harnessing political and theological momentum, they may have pushed the Zurich authorities to empty their churches of contentious images sooner rather than later. Meanwhile, concerns this would lead to chaos could have also prompted an approach to their legal iconoclasm that looked and felt like the polar opposite of the illegal attacks.

Though some illegal iconoclasms in and around Zurich were sober and perfunctory – an image would be grimly smashed or a crucifix at a crossroads solemnly taken down[69] – plenty more illegal iconoclasms were a lot rowdier. Spectacle has been used in many Reformatory iconoclasms aside from the ones in Zurich, particularly during actions that were not official, when the population took matters in their own hands.

In a satirical pastiche of a court case, religious statues would be interrogated and «put to death» by hanging or beheading or, hinting at another kind of superstitious trial, thrown in the water to see if they would sink or swim – like witches.[70] All the senses were involved in these ritualistic anti-ceremonies: iconoclasts would sprinkle themselves with holy water and swear oaths,[71] a cloister's entire wine reserves would be drunk,[72] or the host fed to goats.[73]

What is interesting about these illegal iconoclasms is that they have a paradoxical stance when it comes to the supernatural powers of the images they targeted. On

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68. On the tension between the orchestrated and the spontaneous in 16th century iconoclastic movements see also FREEDBERG, David: «Iconoclasts and their Motives». Maarssen, Gary Schwartz, 1985, pp. 25-27.

69. See e.g. PALMER WANDEL, Lee: *Voracious Idols...,* p. 60ff for a thorough analysis of various iconoclasm trial records.

70. See e.g. SCHNITZLER, Norbert: *Ikonoklasmus - Bildersturm: Theologischer Bilderstreit und ikonoklastisches Handeln während des 15. und 16. Jahrhunderts.* Munich, Wilhelm Fink, 1996, p. 230; p. 321.

71. PALMER WANDEL, Lee: *op. cit.,* p. 67.

72. PALMER WANDEL, Lee: *op. cit.,* p. 131.

73. EIRE, Carlos: *op. cit.,* p. 128

the one hand, the brutal, irreverential treatment was a show of bravado. Humour often replaced solemnity to underline that these were not sacred objects but mere man-made matter, devoid of celestial powers. And yet, this did not prevent some opponents from ascribing supernatural powers of the lowest order to these images – in which the devil was.[74] Idols were also believed to provide their own ghostly support for the Reformatory cause, with legends circulating about idols carrying each other into the flames, as though the images, though representing sinfulness, were by divine intervention enabling their own oblivion. That many religious images were magnets for destruction – yet somehow still awe-inspiring – could also be abused by the iconoclasts for entertainment, such as when one prankster stuffed a statue with gunpowder. Once the statue was set alight, the ensuing explosion apparently converted the prankster's comrade straight back to Catholicism.[75]

Illegal and legal iconoclasm may have met most pointedly in the Grossmünster. Here, a painting of the town's two patron saints Felix and Regula was maimed during an illegal action – the eyes scratched out.[76] As an aside, this «classic» in the repertoire of iconoclastic modifications is fascinating as it uses the image against itself: instead of obliterating it, the scratching-out turns the damage into a permanent vision that inspires a similarly visceral effect as looking at a maimed body, the more so because of the image's previously cherished and inviolable status. Later, a legal action both hid and preserved this site of iconoclasm, turning the religious image into a secular one and using even more metaphorical dismemberment. The part of the image featuring the bodies of the saints was sawn off, whilst their faces were painted over with images representing Zurich's various neighbourhoods.[77] Rather than getting rid of the entire image along with the tradition of venerating the saints it represented, the now offending depiction and its initial destruction may have made the painting even more meaningful, precisely because of its layering of contradictory elements of the sacred and profane. Proudly displayed – yet somehow invisible – the painting was in close physical and symbolic proximity to another monument of destruction: Zwingli's *Kanzellettner* of destroyed altars. Both are static objects that are frozen in their moment of iconoclastic transformation – visuals in which presence and absence remain locked in a state of constant oscillation.

Although the official Swiss iconoclasm may have taken place over the course of just a few days, upon closer inspection it cannot be so neatly contained – neither temporally or spatially, nor socially or aesthetically. The iconoclasm's many inherent

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74. Ascribing devilish seductive powers to statues occurred in Zurich in one of the earliest tracts against idolatry, *Vom alten und neuen Gott, Glauben und Lehre,* written under the pseudonym of Judas Nazarei; it defined image-worship as «a raising of the creature over God through the deception of the devil». Nazarei, Judas (pseudonym): «Vom alten und neuen Gott, Glauben und Lehre», in Kück, Eduard [ed.]: *Neudrücke deutscher Litteraturwerke des XVI und XVII Jahrhunderts – Flugschriften aus der Reformationszeit, Vol. XII.* Halle, 1896, p. 3 – cited from Eire, Carlos: *op. cit.,* p. 76.

75. Aubigné, J.H. Merle D': *History of the Great Reformation of the Sixteenth Century.* New York, 1846, p. 767, cited from Eire, Carlos: *op. cit,* p. 128 n. 88.

76. Weibel, Thomas: *op. cit.,* p. 195.

77. Jezler, Peter: «Die Desakralisierung der zürcher Stadtheiligen Felix, Regula und Exuperantius in der Reformation», in Dinzelbacher, Peter, & Bauer, Dieter R.: *Heiligenverehrung in Geschichte und Gegenwart.* Ostfildern, Schwabenverlag, 1990, pp. 296-319, p. 299.

opposing forces may still have created a cohesive, immersive experience. I believe this paradoxical quality can be found across many attacks on images. To further explore this, let us move some 400 years forward in time.

NATIONAL SOCIALISM AND THE DEGENERATE ART EXHIBITION

Another case which takes a very interesting approach to showing and hiding destruction, and of subversion and immersion is the National Socialists' «degenerate art» policy. The comparison with Zurich has been chosen deliberately, since, under their divergent surface, both case studies have a lot in common – even though the destruction is of a very different kind. In the case of «degenerate» art, the perpetrators of this «legal» destruction wanted the audience to be rowdy (to a point) – and yet unlike the Zurich iconoclasms, most of the damage was not material – but metaphorical.

In July 1937, two shows opened in Munich across the same park. Though serving the same purpose – defining the art canon of the Third Reich – they could not have been more different. The most successful of the two was in fact an anti-exhibition: the *entartete Kunstausstellung* [EKA], or «Degenerate» Art Exhibition, was akin to a freak show and was visited by over three million visitors[78] over its four-year-run.[79] Here viewers could see, supposedly for the last time, the kind of art that no longer had a place under National Socialism. With art hung in the most unflattering way in cramped, badly lit rooms, visitors were invited to ridicule so-called «high culture» to begin the purging of art fostered and created by a so-called «Judeo-Bolshevist» conspiracy.

Art that was experimental, melancholy, showed negative representations of war or in any other way clashed with the moral and aesthetic values of the Reich was now to be forcibly extricated from the country's museums, galleries, print media and art academies[80] – ultimately expurgated from its visual culture. The images in question were not allowed to fade away quietly – to be afforded the dignity of taking the poison in their own home, so to speak. Instead, a prolonged public shaming of these art works, previously held up as genius works by a deceitful, self-appointed cultural elite, was organised. Across the park, as the «good twin» to the EKA's «bad» one, the *Große deutsche Kunstausstellung* [GDK] took place. In airy, dignified rooms,

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78. See e.g. ZuschLag, Christoph: *Entartete Kunst: Ausstellungsstrategien im Nazi-Deutschland*. Worms, Wernersche Verlaggesellschaft, 1995, p. 329. The estimate is of 3.2 million visitors over the course of four years, as the exhibition travelled to thirteen cities in total.

79. See e.g. ZuschLag, Christoph: *op. cit.*, pp. 5-9, the exhibition began in Munich, on the 18th of July 1937, and ended in Halle, on the 20th of April, 1941.

80. See e.g. MERKER, Reinhard: *Die bildenden Künste im Nationalsozialismus: Kulturideologie, Kulturpolitik, Kulturproduktion*. Cologne, DuMont, 1983, pp. 157-58; PETROPOULOS, Jonathan: *Art as Politics in the Third Reich*. Chapel Hill & London, University of North Carolina Press, 1996, p. 75; ZuschLag, Christoph: *op. cit.*, p. 169; LEVI, Neil: «'Judge for Yourselves!' – The 'Degenerate' Art Exhibition as political spectacle», *October* vol. 85, Summer (1998), pp. 41-64, pp. 51-53.

visitors could admire the future of «Aryan» art: classicist, optimistic, balanced works. Unsurprisingly, the GDK drew far smaller crowds than the EKA.

With mass media at their disposal, it seems puzzling that the Nazis dedicated such resources to this. After all, visual art was only a niche medium, compared to the impact of e.g. cinema or the subsidised *Volksempfänger* radio,[81] not to mention to public space as a whole – which the Nazis transformed to such an extent with their posters, parades, uniforms, swastika banners etc. that National Socialism itself has been called – albeit controversially – a total work of art. So why did the Nazis target art?

It has often been suggested that Hitler, rejected as a young artist for his more traditional style, acted out a personal grudge on a massive, public scale (not an out-of-character thing for a dictator to do). However, interestingly, Hitler may not have been the driving force behind the *EKA* but Joseph Goebbels, a man who loved the same experimental art that ultimately ended up branded as degenerate. I will explore this twist below. Meanwhile, we could also consider another reason, which brings it closer to the actions of the Zurich iconoclasts. Unlike the religious images destroyed in Zurich, the images targeted by the Nazis were not cultic objects. And yet, there may have been imbued with another kind of transcendentality. Art in museums can have an almost sacred, untouchable quality – museums have often been compared to temples. Ripping it out of its hallowed context and subjecting it to public shame may have been a strong statement about how deeply the ploughs of national-socialist change would uproot existing structures.

It is often assumed[82] that the majority of visitors had never gone to see any modern art until its symbolical execution at the EKA, strapped to the metaphorical scaffolding of the EKA's jarring exhibition design. Thus, by pulling a cultural phenomenon normally restricted to a small segment of the population into the limelight, the Nazis enabled a carnivalesque reversal of roles, where the «uneducated» in fact knew better than the so-called «cultural elites»[83] and could topple what seemed sacred and stable. This gesture of empowerment thus would have gone far beyond the original cultural impact of the targeted art works. Audiences were further elevated by seeing themselves reflected in the «eternal»[84] art of the Reich – their bodies mirrored in the «purest and noblest concept of the human body»[85] in classicised depictions of «regular» people such as farmers and soldiers in the GDK.

In terms of attachment, many EKA visitors may have had a very different relationship with the images on display than the citizens of Zurich: neither caring about nor knowing of the images on display, for many the «degenerate» images

81. By 1941, 65% of Germans owned a radio, see e.g. KOCH-HILLEBRECHT, Manfred: *Homo Hitler: Psychogramm des deutschen Diktators*. Munich, Goldmann, 1999, p. 57.

82. See e.g. GUENTHER, Peter: «Three Days in Munich», in BARRON, Stephanie (ed.): *Degenerate Art: The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany*. New York, Harry N. Abrams, Inc. Publishers, 1991, pp. 33-44, p. 43 .

83. As Hitler put it, «an art that cannot count on the most joyful and deepest consensus of the healthy, broad mass of the *Volk*, is unsupportable», see e.g. JOST, Hermand: «Bewährte Tümlichkeiten», in DENKLER, Horst, & PRÜMMEL, Karl (eds.): *Die Deutsche Literatur im Dritten Reich*. Stuttgart, Reclam, 1976, p. 120.

84. DOMARUS, Max: *Hitler: Reden und Proklamationen 1932-1945 Vol II*. Munich, Brend'amour, Simhart & Co., 1962, p. 605.

85. SCHULTZE-NAUMBURG, Paul: *Kunst und Rasse*. Munich, J.F. Lehmanns Verlag, 1928, p. 60.

would have held little or no aesthetic or spiritual meaning. That, however, did not make a visit to the EKA any less absorbing, as it was not just the images, but also their destruction that played a significant role.

A MACHINE FOR METAPHORICAL DESTRUCTION

FIGURE 2. COVER OF THE 1937 DEGENERATE ART EXHIBITION CATALOGUE FEATURING OTTO FREUNDLICH'S 1912 SCULPTURE *DER NEUE MENSCH.* Copyright: Public domain / Wikimedia commons.
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/ File:Entartete_%22KUNST%22_Ausstellungsführer_30_ Pfg._Degenerate_art_Exhibition_catalogue_front_ cover_1937_Nazi_Germany_Propaganda_Otto_ Freundlich_Der_neue_Mensch_(L%27Homme_ nouveau)_1912_No_known_copyright_ restrictions_17-20_(3).jpg

When visitors entered the Munich EKA they entered a liminal space where they were invited to look at art that was already walking its Green Mile of oblivion. The entire set-up was orchestrated to just about resemble a regular exhibition – whilst also stripping the modern art on display of its «aura».[86] Similar to the Zurich iconoclasm, Nazi degenerate art policy tactically employed strategies of showing and hiding.

The printed materials for the EKA appropriated the modernist language of the time whilst making it appear ridiculous. In this sense, the National Socialists were having their cake and eating it, too: benefiting from the eye-catching quality of modernist imagery whilst putting it to shame in one fell swoop. A liminal process of suspended destruction already occurs in exhibition posters and the accompanying catalogue, not dissimilar to Zwingli's *Kanzellettner.* The cover of the 1937[87] EKA catalogue (and anti-catalogue) is particularly fascinating in this regard (FIGURE 2): the font is attention-grabbing, the manner in which the 1912 sculpture *Der neue Mensch* [the New Man / Human] by Jewish artist Otto Freundlich has been captured is grotesque. Yet, grotesque, I believe, in the manner in which propaganda works best: attracting and agitating in equal measure, like the poster for a horror movie or the cover of a penny dreadful. The dramatic contrast between light and shade, the slight fish-eye lens effect, and low angle make the head appear imposing, terrifying and haughty – but also, in the sculpture's similarity to a chopped off head, subjugated and thus ultimately harmless.

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86. LEVI, Neil: *op. cit.,* pp. 41-64.
87. The actual catalogue only came out after the 1937 Munich exhibition.

As the inverted commas around «*Kunst*» [art] on the cover communicate, we are the witnessing the «peeling off» of the art-label attached to these images. The font, red and aggressive, is not that dissimilar from the *Fraktur* font the Nazis employed in many of their serious propaganda posters, but the crayon-like texture of the text and the appearance of an awkwardly cut piece of paper add to the effect of clumsiness, whilst also echoing the popular modernist technique of collage. Strangely, the overall effect is still somehow harmonious – and very clearly designed and planned, a balancing act of distorted modernist elements.

The printed materials ensured the exhibition already began in public space, compounding the effect of immersion with posters and postcards that featured or imitated «degenerate» works of art (with the admonition *Nachdruck verboten* [reprinting prohibited] making paraphernalia even more salient).[88] Besides these ephemera, bodies were also bringing the lure of the exhibition to the street – with people crowding at the EKA entrance (FIGURE 3). Is there anything that makes us more eager to see than a crowd of people who themselves are trying to see something hidden from our view?

FIGURE 3. A CROWD GATHERING IN FRONT OF THE ENTRANCE OF THE DEGENERATE ART EXHIBITION. Copyright: Available for non-commercial use from the Yad Vashem photo archive, Archive number 5648_33. *https://www.yadvashem.org/collections/about-the-online-photo-archive/copyrights-and-permission-for-use.html*

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88. See e.g. ESKILSSON WERWIGK, Sara: «Ein Gemälde geht ins Exil: Auf den Spuren der 'Kreuzabnahme' von Max Beckmann», in FLECKNER, Uwe (ed.): *Das verfemte Meisterwerk: Schicksalswege moderner Kunst im Dritten Reich*. Berlin, De Gruyter 2009, pp. 105-136, p. 121.

The Nazi's tactics did not just prolong the erasure of «degenerate» art in time and expand it in space – they also made the images a lot more mysterious than they had been before. Where previously most of these now «degenerate» images had hung unperturbed in the country's museums (at least until Hitler rose to power), now minors were banned from entering.[89] Another layer of the illicit and thrilling was added, a tantalising absence that made the *show* all the more attractive, yet the *images* all the more repulsive. Inside the exhibition, paintings were placed in a tightly curated setting, as if adhering to an analytical checklist of rejection. Instead of the traditional organisation by artist or movement, now the works had been re-arranged according to what made them «degenerate», e.g. distorted use of colour and form; negative representations of war or the idealisation of idiocy and cretinism.[90] Everything was done to not leave the reception of these works to chance: slogans such as «An insult to the German heroes of the Great War»[91], stickers covering the name of the artist with the text «paid for by the taxes of the German working people»[92] or the prices that these so-called art works had fetched.[93]

Peter Guenther, who visited the exhibition as a young man, also describes the role of visitors' bodies in the exhibition rooms:

> The large number of people pushing and ridiculing and proclaiming their dislike for the works of art created the impression of a staged performance intended to promote an atmosphere of aggressiveness and anger.[94]

Guenther thus describes a paradoxical kind of behaviour: people controlled to act in the uncontrollable manner that is normally taboo in exhibition spaces. He also recalls the loud comments, none of them positive, during his first visit.[95] Thus, the audience was not just there to absorb and be routed through an emotional *parcours* of growing revulsion and indignation – their role was crucial in finalising the exhibition's immersive concept by providing aggressive haptic feedback by jostling, as well as a soundtrack of snickering. Guenther reports how this *mise-en-scène* was so effective that even he, an admirer of modern art who was used to hearing these works criticised, could no longer enjoy them.[96] This kind of immersion, where not only the line between exhibited object and exhibition space is blurred, but also the boundary between the spectator and the visuals they see, resonates with Anne Ring Petersen's description of installation art. Petersen describes how in installations the audience is «positioned as a living presence

89. *Idem*, p. 121.
90. See *Entartertete 'Kunst' Ausstellungsführer*. 1937, p. 6; p. 12 and p. 18 respectively.
91. Von Lüttichau, Mario-Andreas: «Entartete Kunst, Munich 1937: A Reconstruction», in: Barron, Stephanie (ed.): *op. cit.,* pp. 45-82, p. 54.
92. *Idem*, p. 63.
93. See e.g. Guenther, Peter, *op. cit.,* p. 36.
94. *Idem*, p. 38.
95. *Idem*, p. 38. The atmosphere was a lot quieter during a second visit, see also p. 43.
96. *Idem*, p. 43.

within the space of the work».[97] We could argue that the Nazis, through the EKA, went even further and created an installation (or total work of art) that made the viewer's aesthetics merge with the Nazis' ideology.

By entering the EKA, visitors activated the exhibition's machinery as both installation and anti-installation, a sphere where viewers' affects were simultaneously activated (fuelling their anger and derision) and muted (preventing them from being moved by the images). An upside-down world where regular rules of physics no longer seem to apply, where art becomes non-art, and images are obliterated, whilst remaining, materially speaking, unmodified – and present.

VALUABLE DEGENERACY

Though the metaphorical destruction happened with the willing involvement of the millions visiting the EKA, the actual destruction occurred out of public view. This happened in contradictory ways which mirrored the regime's own haphazard aesthetics. Similar to Zurich's idols, which were as valuable as they were worthless, «degenerate» art was both burden *and* bounty. As the exhibition travelled, more and more «degenerate» art was accumulated – local art was included to foster a regional connection (and disconnection at the same time).[98] This meant that a decision had to be made about what to do with the growing surplus of «degenerate» works. After having been so ostentatiously removed, they could not be brought back before the public eye. Thus, different strategies of repression occurred: many works were stored in enormous depots, but some art was burnt in secret, perversely at museums by the staff – the very institutions and people originally entrusted with its safekeeping.[99]

Neither could the Nazis ignore the monetary value of these works. Unlike in Zurich, where the images' remaining value resided in their raw materials, the Nazis operated in a modern context with an international art market. And so, they had the art sold at e.g. the illicit Galerie Fischer auction in Switzerland[100] or traded for older pieces more fitting with the Nazi notions of the canon.[101] It may seem the Nazis were very good at compartmentalising: pragmatically exploiting all the monetary value of «degenerate» art without being swayed by their aesthetic, and with a black-and-white concept of what art was to be branded as «degenerate» and what art as «Aryan.» However, this is an illusion – in fact, I would go as far as

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97. Petersen, Anne Ring: *Installation Art: Between Image and Stage*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2014, p. 55.

98. See e.g. Zuschlag, Christoph: «An 'Educational Exhibition:' the Precursors of Entartete Kunst and Its Individual Venues», in *op. cit. (footnote 81)*, pp. 83-104, and p.90.

99. See e.g. Janda, Annegret: «The fight for modern art: the Berlin Nationalgalerie after 1933», in Barron, Stephanie (ed.): *op. cit.*, pp. 105-118, p. 110; p. 117. Thousands of works were also burnt in 1939 in the Berlin fire brigade's courtyard, see e.g. Hüneke, Andreas: «On the Trail of Missing Masterpieces: Modern Art from German Galleries», in: Barron, Stephanie (ed.): *op. cit.*, pp. 121-133, p. 121 and Schuler, Hannes: *Hitler's Museum* [Documentary], 2006.

100. See e.g. Barron, Stephanie: «The Galerie Fischer Auction», in: *op. cit. (footnote 81)*, pp. 134-146.

101. Joachim von Ribbentrop and Otto Abetz for instance took confiscated «degenerate» art in France and sold or traded it for more «suitable» art, see Petropoulos, Jonathan: *op. cit.,* pp. 134-135.

to argue that the Nazis' inability to create their own aesthetic standards was one of the driving forces behind their attack on modern art. The exhibition acting as a magical knife – one that would not only excise controversial art from the Reich's visual culture but also cut through the Nazis' rampant ambivalence about art.

HIDDEN ART, HIDDEN DOUBTS

The Munch EKA and GDK created a mirage of decisiveness – as though it was obvious to anyone what «Aryan art» was and what was not. In practice, it proved much more complicated to apply the Nazis' already entirely inconsistent and pseudo-scientific notion of racial superiority to a field as complex and diverse as art.

Lacking clear criteria, several prominent Nazis tried to advocate for their own very differing aesthetic preferences behind the scenes. These ranged from mystical Germanic imagery to idyllic depictions of humble folk. Perhaps most surprisingly, Joseph Goebbels, who became the driving force behind the EKA, loved modern art so much that he sent a telegram to Edvard Munch on his 70th birthday in December 1933.[102] However, having failed to convince Hitler with his enthusiasm for experimental art, Goebbels sacrificed his aesthetic predilections and began to mercilessly persecute the art he loved.[103]

Ambivalence did not end with Goebbels' «U-Turn». Museum directors wrote to each other asking for advice about what could and could not be shown for years after Goebbels' switch. As late as 1937, director Braune of the Württemberger Staatsgalerie asked his Berlin colleague Eberhard Hanfstaengl, if he thought Braune could show a few little works by Max Beckmann.[104] Not only was Beckmann Jewish, he had been expelled from his teaching position four years earlier.[105] Confusion reigned supreme: exhibitions would be shut down for «degeneracy», while the same artists received glowing write-ups in state-controlled newspapers.[106] Arno Breker and Joseph Thorak – who would become the most prominent sculptors of the Third Reich – had works confiscated by the EKA committee.[107] Therefore, Hitler did not follow up on his 1933 vow made during his first *Kulturrede* [speech on culture] in Nuremberg,[108] when he claimed that anyone branded as «degenerate» would forever be banished from the Nazi art world.

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102. BACKES, Klaus: *Hitler und die bildenden Künste*. Cologne, DuMont, 1988, p. 110.

103. FRÖHLICH, Elke (ed.): *Die Tagebücher von Joseph Goebbels: Sämtliche Fragmente, 1923-1940*, *Vol. 2*. Munich, Sauer, 1987, p. 554.

104. STAATLICHE MUSEEN ZU BERLIN – ZENTRALARCHIV (SMBZA), Akte ING 872, p. 569, Dr Braune: «Letter to Eberhard Hanfstaengl, Director of the Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin», 26.7.1937. This becomes a particularly typical thing to ask, as Beckmann was a Jewish painter, and by 1937 all «difficult» (i.e. not pro-Nazi) museum staff had long been removed.

105. ESKILSSON WERWIGK, Sara: *op. cit.,* p. 114.

106. See EL-MECKY, Nausikaä: *Dangerous Art: Towards a Theory of Organised Legal Attacks on European Art*, (unpublished PhD Dissertation), University of Cambridge 2013, p. 204ff.

107. See SMBZA, GERMAN ARTISTS INVENTORY, Akte ING 803, 49 and *Beschlagnahmeinventar Entartete Kunst – Datenbank* (EK Inventar), Nr.: 15106, *http://emuseum.campus.fu-berlin.de/eMuseumPlus*.

108. See e.g. LASER, Björn: *Kulturbolschewismus!: Zur Diskurssemantik der Totalen Krise,1929-1933.* Frankfurt am Main, Peter Lang, 2010, p. 362.

The EKA and GDK may have been effective tools to do away with the Nazis' hidden «demons» of aesthetic inconsistencies: by constructing the EKA as a total work of art dedicated to metaphorical destruction, they involved the audience in a symbolic purging of «bad» art and thus suggested, on multiple visual, auditory and haptic levels, how straightforward and natural their decision-making process was. After all, what is more clear-cut than a public execution? The Nazis' apparent clarity about art was curated not just inside the two Munich exhibition venues of 1937 – one could argue that they mounted an installation for separating good art from bad art at the urban level: visit a particular Munich neighbourhood, turn left for the bad stuff, right for the good.

And yet, the lack of clear criteria[109] continued to generate new inconsistencies – though the question is whether this even mattered. The loudness of the EKA acted as an effective decoy, to the extent that many today still assume that Nazis had clear (and very simplistic) ideas about art. Yet years after the inaugural 1937 exhibitions, works that looked suspiciously similar to «degenerate» works (e.g. experimental techniques, negative representations of war and old age or melancholia, all reasons that forced legions of artists out of their jobs or even into exile)[110] kept popping up in the yearly iterations of the GDK. With their two 1937 Munich exhibitions, the Nazis created a spectacular veil to cover up their inconsistent views on art.

THRIFTINESS AND RECYCLING

Through these examples, I have attempted to show how two entirely different approaches to destruction can still generate an immersive, spectacular Gesamtkunstwerk. Whether the destruction is material, like in Zurich – or mostly symbolical – like in the Degenerate Art exhibitions, and whether the audience is kept out, like in Switzerland, or lured in as in Nazi Germany – both examples demonstrate how destruction of images is not simply a bunch of lunatics running around with sledgehammers. Rather, these are carefully scripted events, mindful of the effect on the audience, generating a new kind of imaginary in service of the destroyers' ideology. Rather than being obliterated in one brutal blow, destruction of images exists within a prolonged state of oscillation: between the momentary and the long-term; between the passive and the active involvement of the audience[111]

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109. For a more detailed exploration of the inconsistencies of Nazi art policy see EL-MECKY, Nausikaä: *op. cit.,* chapter 4.

110. *Idem*.

111. Of course not everyone who lived in Zurich or Berlin during the eras of the case studies actually witnessed these destructions. However, Gesamtkunstwerk is posited in this article as an event that requires the active involvement of an audience, though not necessarily the attendance of everyone who would be affected by the revolutionary changes which brought the destruction. Many historical events have few immediate witnesses and yet impact millions. The examples provided here however did draw larger crowds and could therefore be understood as spectacles that relied on the participation of a significant number of audience members, involving them in these climactic events as not just witnesses but also as actors.

and between presence and absence. The cases in this article were intentionally chosen to show how entirely different destructions – in terms of time, space and motivation – can still create an immersive, aesthetic environment. These are far from the only ones and I would argue we would have to try very hard to find an attack on images that does *not* generate new spectacular imagery. From repentant, «decadent» ladies sobbingly ripping the jewels from their throats and launching them into Savonarola's «bonfires of the vanities», to the smoke from a pyre of Ancien Régime paintings considered toxic being fanned like «incense» towards a bust of Louis XIII during the French Revolution,[112] ritualistic events have often created a liminal bridge between the existence and annihilation of images. Beyond the ritualistic, we can find examples of seemingly fleeting destructions that we can «admire» until today: the brutal «recycling» of the Incan sun temple Coricancha in Cuzco, Peru by the Spanish conquistadors: partly destroyed, partly transformed into a cathedral, capturing and simultaneously stripping the celestial aura of the place to bolster the Spanish' own idea of sacrality. Similarly, statues of holy figures have been mutilated but otherwise left standing like a gruesome warning for centuries and across religions: a head on a pike that won't decay. Recently, through photography and video, opposing camps in Iraq from ISIS to US troops have employed destruction or toppling to create enduring digital images. You could call this a kind of thriftiness, an urge to squeeze the maximum efficacy out of an attack on images – why waste a perfectly good obliteration if you can still employ it months or even years later?

Unsurprisingly, it is not just the «enemies» of images that have realised how spectacular destruction can be. Artists, too have demonstrated that creation and destruction need not be binary opposites: we can see this in Jean Tinguely's 1960 machine *Homage to New York*, an intricate, moving «suicidal sculpture» that destroyed itself – or in Titus Kaphar's TED talk «Can Art Amend History?» (2017)[113] during which Kaphar painted over the reproduction of a Frans Hals 17th century group portrait, erasing all the white sitters, «sparing» only a young black boy. In 2018, mysterious artist Banksy secretly integrated a shredder into the frame of his work *Girl with Balloon* (2006) which started to cut the painting into strips just after it had been sold for 1.4 million dollars, an action that – perhaps not all that surprisingly – doubled the work's market value.[114] Banksy shows that there is not only aesthetic value in destruction but, if you play your cards right, also lots of money.

And so, whether it is born out of the heat of religious conflict or bubbles up as an amusing artistic experiment, the destruction of images can be mesmerizing, perhaps enthralling us even more than the original images ever could.

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112. IDZERDA, Stanley J.: «Iconoclasm during the French Revolution», *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 60, No. 1, October, 1954, pp. 13-26, p. 17.

113. Titus KAPHAR: «Can Art Amend History?», *TED* [live, recorded talk and performance], April 2017.
https://www.ted.com/talks/titus_kaphar_can_art_amend_history?language=en

114. See e.g SHOOT, Brittany: «Banksy 'Girl With Balloon' Painting Worth Double After Self-Destructing at Auction», *Fortune*, 9. October 2018.
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SERIE VII HISTORIA DEL ARTE
REVISTA DE LA FACULTAD DE GEOGRAFÍA E HISTORIA

9

ESPACIO, TIEMPO Y FORMA

UNED

9

ESPACIO, TIEMPO Y FORMA

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