



Frode Sandvik, Erik Tønning, eds.. *Art in Battle*. Stuttgart: ibidem Verlag, 2017. Illustrations. 256 pp. \$110.00, paper, ISBN 978-3-8382-1064-3.

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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

In July 1937 two landmark art exhibitions opened across the street from each other in Munich, Germany, with the intention of creating a confrontation between conflicting styles of art for the ages. On one side, held at the Archaeological Institute, was the now-infamous exhibition of “degenerate art,” that is, post-1910 artwork deemed by Adolf Hitler to “insult German feeling ... and reveal the absence of adequate manual and artistic skill.”[1] This exhibition was a blockbuster event, drawing nearly one million visitors in the first six months and eventually traveling to twelve other cities between 1938 and 1941. Displayed just across the street, at the House of German Art, envisioned by Hitler as a grand classical paean to a new era of German artwork, were nine hundred works of art comprising the first annual Great German Art Exhibition. Though the show purported to exhibit the best of a new era of German art, it did not elicit the passionate feelings evoked by the exhibition just one hundred yards away from it, drawing just one-third of the crowd in its opening months.[2] Though both shows have subsequently been the focus of art historians, rarely have they been put in conversation, their Janus-faced relationship sufficiently examined and mined for more nuanced revelations about the relationship between the Nazi regime, art, power, politics, and aesthetics.

It has taken, in fact, a recent exhibition from a Norwegian art museum to do just that. *Art in Battle* opened at the Bergen Art Museum (KODE Bergen) in September 2015, running for five months. The exhibition was a collaboration between the museum and the University of Bergen’s Modernism and Christianity project, and contained two parts. On the one hand, it was a reconstruction of exhibitions, including the 1942-43 show *Kunst og ukunst* (Art and non-art) in Oslo, arranged by Nazi authorities in Germany and Norway. On the other, it was a rare display of paintings of German combat artists, or *Kriegsmaler*, who were stationed in Norway during the Second World War. Though it did not make international headlines, the show was revolutionary in its own right, as perhaps the only exhibition in an art museum—not historical or cultural museum—to place works of art from Nazi-era artists in a firm historical *and* aesthetic continuum. Eschewing the temptation to understand “Nazi culture” merely as a brief but dark break with history, and one perhaps unworthy of serious art historical consideration, the exhibition and its complementary catalogue argue that Nazism generated art that must be studied, and cannot be so easily partitioned from wider aspects of European culture and politics of the past and present, “no matter

how much we wish it were otherwise,” as Matthew Feldman writes in his afterword (p. 246).

The exhibition’s compact but wide-ranging catalogue includes contributions from an international collection of art historians and curators and is set apart by its collective breadth. In just over two hundred pages, the essays address everything from the institutional history of museums and artist groups like the Bildende Kunstneres Styre (BKS) in Nazi-occupied Norway to the modernist aesthetics in art and literature of the Nazi era to the work of specific artists whose lives and production spanned beyond just the war years. The collective result is impressive, even radical, scholarship that treats the Nazi approach to art and culture in the context of Norwegian occupation as both exceptional and arbitrary, but never monolithic. After all, despite what we may wish to believe, Nazism did not develop or function outside of space and time, just as Nazi-era art was not produced in a vacuum. *Art in Battle* asks difficult questions about art under Nazism; for example, what if some of the work *both* conveys fascist, racist utopian visions *and* is aesthetically “good” (Feldman, p. 246)? What does it mean for art to be dangerous? And what if we still find aspects of “dangerous” art pleasurable? Questions like this not only nuance our understanding of cultural production under the Third Reich but also make us uncomfortable because they make the rise and hold of fascism feel less monolithic and abstract, and more arbitrary and human.

The catalogue, featuring nine essays from German, Norwegian, and American scholars, is groundbreaking since it is the first time many of these historians and art historians have been in conversation. With the focus on Norway, the exhibition and catalogue align with the now widespread understanding of artistic production within the Third Reich as “colonization,” an idea popularized by Mark Mazower. Line Daatland, Anite Kongssund, and Dag Sohljell begin with institutional histories of Norwegian art museums, exhi-

bitions, and artist groups in the context of Nazi occupation in 1940. They stress the fluidity of National Socialist ideology and its application in Norway under Søren Onsger, Quisling Norway’s leading artistic ideologue. In short, though presented less venomously than its counterpart at the *Entartete Kunst* (Degenerate art) exhibition in Munich in 1937, *Kunst og ukunst* in Oslo was similarly “vague and ambiguous” in its criteria for choosing “degenerate art” (p. 244). This supports the argument championed by scholars like Jonathan Petropoulos that there was a lack of stylistic consensus throughout the Third Reich beyond art produced by non-Jewish artists.

Gregory Maertz, Christian Fuhrmeister, Erik Tønning, and James van Dyke each work to challenge and break down the binaries we still closely associate with Nazi-era art and culture. Fuhrmeister calls them “heterogenous” Nazi aesthetic and cultural notions instead, and points out the danger of stressing totalitarian homogeneity when examining Nazi artistic agendas that were applied to the growing Nazi empire after 1937. Importantly, Maertz, in his contribution on art produced by combat painters in the Squadron of Visual Artists (SBK) stationed in Norway, creates a “counter-archive” of paintings that further problematizes the binary of traditional/modernist art that remains so deeply entrenched in the study of Nazi-era art.

Despite the impressive scope of *Art in Battle*’s entries, there are a few areas that remain frustratingly untouched. Many of the essays, especially those focused on the aesthetic qualities of Nazi cultural and artistic production, rightly push back against the strict periodization of 1933 to 1945. Van Dyke’s contribution on painter Julius Paul Junghanns in particular rightly presents the full biography of the artist, who is perhaps most famous for his Nazi-era paintings extolling the virtues of “Blut und Boden” (blood and soil). In chronicling Junghanns’s extensive pre-1933 artistic career, van Dyke reveals the limits of simple, monolithic categories like “Nazi art.” As with his

revolutionary monograph *Franz Radziwill and the Contradictions of German Art History, 1919-1945* (2010), van Dyke's shifted periodization presents an artist whose work—and personal life (Junghanns famously supported allowing a Jewish colleague to continue his work in the academy)—was not initially highly regarded by many young Nazi officials. Initially, in fact, traditional genre painters like Junghanns were not imagined as the painters of the “New Germany,” though this changed in 1937. Van Dyke's exploration of Junghanns's early years as an anti-modernist genre painter of landscape and animal scenes also calls into question the heretofore persistent notions about the monolithic nature of “Nazi art.” In fact, as van Dyke's work here and elsewhere convincingly argues, many artists rose quickly after 1933 by “professional default rather than ideological commitment” (p. 231). Junghanns's traditional paintings were popular before 1933, but were immediately and innately regarded as encompassing values of “New German Art” under the Nazi regime. Further, the idea that the Nazi regime marked a radical and retrograde break from modernism and progressivism in art in the post-World War I era is simply wrong. Rather, the history of Nazi-era art must be understood as firmly enmeshed within the broader history of modern art, which forces us to acknowledge the role that all art plays in historical struggle.

Yet most of these contributions, van Dyke's included, fail to push periodization beyond 1945. Of course, they are limited by the scope of the project; however, what is lost when the works and lives of these artists are presented as “ending” with the war in 1945? Admittedly, some artists were blacklisted in their respective countries; Junghanns's reputation never recovered in Germany, and many Norwegian artists who found success after 1940 were boycotted by buyers. Yet some of these painters were able to continue their careers until their deaths decades later, especially those who worked as *Kriegsmaler* (many were accepted as soldiers just doing their jobs, or as

artists who simply recorded the universally horrific experiences of violence and suffering). Maertz in particular might have alluded more strongly to this in his otherwise groundbreaking contribution on the modernist stylistic tendencies of combat artists in Norway. Ultimately, perhaps these questions are best addressed in another exhibition, one that examines the legacy of Nazi-era art and combat art far beyond 1945. In the end, the catalogue's narrow focus on Norway only underscores the need for more scholarship and exhibitions that nuance the persistent notions of Nazi-era art and cultural production as monolithic and operating in impermeable binaries, retrogressive, or a blip in the cultural canon. If we, as scholars and consumers of art, are only able to see Nazi-era artwork as an aberration, an abstracted diversion from the norm, then we may be that much more susceptible to unwittingly repeating the past.

Notes

[1]. Frederic Spotts, *Hitler and the Power of Aesthetics* (New York: Overlook Press, 2002), 162.

[2]. Berthold Hinz, *Art in the Third Reich* (New York: Random House, 1979), 1.

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