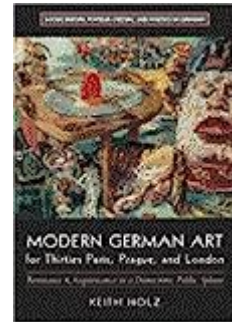


Keith Holz. *Modern German Art for Thirties Paris, Prague, and London: Resistance and Acquiescence in a Democratic Public Sphere.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004. xvii + 359 pp. \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-472-11370-5.



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The Dialectic of Exile

Keith Holz's book is a prodigious achievement that synthesizes into one narrative the experiences of various German exile artists' groups in Prague, Paris, and London during the 1930s. Based on thorough archival and press research in the Czech Republic, Germany, France, Great Britain, and the United States, his work adds to and methodologically enhances an extensive secondary literature concerning German exile artists of the World War II era. That literature includes monographic studies on leading figures of the migration, research into specific exhibits and exile centers, and exhibition catalogues covering several centers and the fate of various artists.[1] Much of this literature is in German and French; Holz's book also makes a good deal of this story available to English language audiences for the first time.

Holz sets aside interpretive approaches more commonly found in exile studies devoted to the unraveling of artist biographies and in-depth explorations of specific art works. He adopts instead an institutional framework of analysis. Holz specifically queries the manner in which governments, galleries, and critics set the terms for, reconsidered, and manipulated the meaning of Ger-

man art in exile according to their changing political interests and aesthetic assumptions. And unlike other institutional studies on this topic, Holz's account pays close attention to the manner in which a range of discourses, inside and outside the art world, and from different perspectives, including those of the Communist left and Nazi right, impinged on the meanings that these artists attempted at any given moment to formulate about their art. This discursive dialectic between the exiles, their activities, and the art worlds and governments of their host countries forms the analytic core of Holz's study.

Holz proceeds by lexicographical analysis of press accounts, books, and published statements of various key figures and organizations, political as well as artistic, in each of the three metropolitan centers taken up in his study. His painstaking attention to shifting and contested terminological meanings can at times be overwrought. Such deliberateness nonetheless pays off with a finely calibrated picture that allows us to glimpse some of the impassioned urgency that hung on words at a time when they could spell the difference between life and death. Most specifically, his work clearly illuminates the

political instrumentality given to the word “freedom” as it came to be applied to the modernist art produced by some of the exiles. The story told here reveals how such art, defined by its penchant for formal innovation and personal expression allegedly “free” of politics, was used politically by the democratic West during the World War II era in its struggle against the unfreedom and artistic traditionalism not only of Nazi tyranny, but also of Soviet Communism.

Holz’s institutional approach downplays the lives and works of the emigration’s artistic stars. Some, like John Heartfield, Oskar Kokoschka, Max Beckmann, and Max Ernst, nonetheless make their appearance at key junctures in the narrative. Each of these famed artists had international reputations and a stable of patrons and dealers whose continued support cushioned economically at least some of the more extreme dislocations of the exile experience. Holz’s attention is fixed instead on an array of lesser-known artists infrequently discussed in the exile literature. Partly out of their belief in collective action (several were involved in Communist left and workers’ revolutionary artist organizations before 1933) and partly out of their relative inability to make a living on the art markets of their host countries, the artists discussed by Holz banded together into groups. In their collective incarnations, they set about two interrelated goals: to sustain one another in exile and to promote an image of German culture counter to the one taking shape inside Nazi Germany.

Holz reproduces some of their work in this volume, including images in caricature, photomontage, painting, and various print media. The ephemeral and agit-prop nature of much of this art, some of which is reproduced here for the first time, poignantly conveys the realities of limited resources and rapidly changing circumstances that affected what these artists were able to produce. The author also generously illustrates his book with photographs (that had languished until now in an archive in Arizona taken by exile photographer Josef Breitenbach. Breitenbach’s snapshots, which Holz carefully guides us through, provide some of the only visual documentation we have of exhibits staged by these exile collectives.[2]

The book unfolds chronologically, moving from one exile center to the next. Cross-referencing between centers increases as the narrative moves closer to war and as these artist collectives, whose chances for survival grew dimmer each day, began to collaborate with one another across borders. The first four chapters consider the strategies of and responses to these artists in Prague,

Paris, and London from 1933 up until the staging in 1937 of the infamous Degenerate Art show in Munich. This exhibit, which announced the Nazi regime’s official policy of defamation and eradication of artistic modernism from the Reich, fundamentally altered, as Holz documents, the strategies, self-understanding, and reception of these artists and their collective endeavors in exile. The concluding three chapters of the book consider exile responses to the Degenerate Art show and the activities of the collectives up until their demise in 1939 with the outbreak of World War II.

Chapter 1 opens with a discussion of what constituted “German” art in Paris before the exiles began to arrive in 1933. During the 1920s, tentative and infrequent cultural exchanges took place between Germany and France in an effort to foster international cooperation and understanding following World War I. As Holz’s careful attention to critical terminology points out, French commentators tended more often than not to subsume understanding of German art, and whatever information it might yield about German culture and history in general, under the rubric of well-established formalist criteria used within France for the discussion of French art. After Hitler’s appointment as Chancellor in 1933, no official pronouncements emerged from the Nazi regime about what was and was not to be understood as “German” art. This left German exile artists in Paris with no fixed notion or perceived imperative at this juncture to define themselves as distinctly and differently “German” in defiance of the particular brand of “German” art only later given international infamy by Hitler in 1937. Many of the artists discussed in this first chapter instead lent their talents during the early years of exile to various exhibits and demonstrations that protested the persecution of Jews and Communists inside Germany.

Holz’s second chapter turns to Czechoslovakia. Given the nation’s history and multi-ethnic constitution, understandings of “German” art in the early and mid-1930s became divided, as Holz explores, in a four-way contest between Czechs, German exiles, diplomatic representatives of the Nazi regime, and the populations of Sudeten Germans within Czechoslovakia’s borders. The dramatic core of this chapter details the struggles between these various groups, the art they each promoted, and, most spectacularly, their clash over an exhibit of John Heartfield’s incendiary anti-Nazi photomontages in 1934 at the Prague Mnes Fine Artists’ Society.

The third chapter returns us to Paris and the formation of the Kollektiv deutscher Knstler (Collective of Ger-

man Artists), the first such organization of German exile artists. The group came together in late 1935 and persisted through 1937, bracketing the election of France's Popular Front government in 1936. During these years, Max Ernst and Otto Freundlich along with other members of the Collective staked their positions in ongoing debates over art's role in revolution. These debates extended and intensified questions that animated leftist art groups in the 1920s concerning which kind of art (realist, surrealist, or abstract) best suited the goal of radical social and political transformation. With the Popular Front, however, talk of art and revolution gave way, as Holz subtly traces, to concern instead over art's role in anti-fascist struggle. Seen within the larger narrative of Holz's book, this shift forecasts, on the one hand, the eventual political evisceration of what many of these exiles believed their art to be about and, on the other, the reinscription of such art's political utility within Western democratic culture as an emblem of "freedom" against tyranny.

In chapter 4, Holz shifts to London, where knowledge about German art before the Degenerate Art show of 1937 was virtually non-existent. This critical vacuum was crucial, Holz argues, to the emergence of a definition of German modernism as German Expressionism (to the strategic exclusion of Dada and other more politicized currents of early twentieth-century German art) that more or less holds sway today. Focusing on the critical writings of Herbert Read (famous for his promotion of British surrealism), Holz unfolds how Read's and other British critics' pronouncements on art overlapped with Britain's policy of appeasement in response to Hitler's growing menace. In Read's reflections on German art, one thus encounters various attempts to suggest commonalities between British and German culture and a pronounced aversion to "political" art, such as that practiced by some of the members of the German exile collectives active in Paris and Prague.

Chapter 5 takes up German exile responses to the 1937 staging of the Degenerate Art exhibit. In Prague, the Oskar-Kokoschka-Bund formed in late 1937 as the need to articulate an alternative view of German culture became acute. The group staged exhibits that countered not only the Degenerate Art show inside Germany, but also displays within Czechoslovakia that, in forecast of Hitler's designs for a Greater German Reich, featured works by Sudeten and Reich German artists side-by-side. In Paris, the Collective of German Artists was defunct by Summer, 1937. It was superseded by the Deutsche Künstlerbund (German Artists' League, later renamed the

Free Artists' League). Holz recounts the initial efforts of this group, assisted by the tireless Paul Westheim, to stage a large-scale counter-exhibit to Degenerate Art.

Chapter 6 reconstructs critical debates surrounding the unveiling of the German Artists' League counter-exhibit in Paris. Holz also informs us of the involvement of this League in plans for a similar show slated for London's New Burlington Galleries. The League intended the London exhibit to be titled "Banned German Art" as an unmistakable protest against Nazi cultural repression. Through the malignant twists and turns of Britain's appeasement policy, however, the show was altered before opening to the public in summer 1938. Retitled "Twentieth-Century German Art," it offered instead a politically eviscerated display of Expressionism alongside work of other artists favored by the Nazi regime. In Paris, the German Artists' League, with assistance from the Oskar-Kokoschka-Bund in Czechoslovakia, staged its own similarly defanged "Free German Art" exhibit in Summer, 1938. The show (documented by Josef Breitenbach) included some 100 works by well-known German, mostly Expressionist, artists. Attempts by members of the German Artists' League to include more politically explicit statements within this exhibit of "Free German Art" were obviated, as Holz pointedly remarks, by the increasing lack of freedom and political censorship imposed on the exiles as (enemy) foreign nationals while France geared up for war with Germany.

Holz's final chapter describes the tragic fate of the exiles as they scattered, were imprisoned, and sent to their deaths in advance of Hitler's march into Czechoslovakia and France and the German assault on Great Britain. This chapter recounts the last major and sadly fruitless effort of the Free Artists' League in Paris to broadcast its plight to the world. The League assembled thirty picture and text agit-prop panels entitled "Germany of Yesterday—Germany of Tomorrow" (again documented by Breitenbach) that outlined Nazi atrocity and the League's belief in an alternative German culture of the future. Despite the promotional efforts of Paul Tillich and Thomas Mann, the exhibit, which was intended for the 1939 New York World's Fair, never saw the light of day. Fair officials, hewing to the United States' policy of isolationism, declined the works for fear of provoking Germany.

Holz's book charts the discursive shift from "art and revolution" to "art and anti-fascism" and, eventually, "art and freedom" that washed over and through these German exile artist collectives during the traumatic decade of the 1930s. With close attention to words and their use, his

analysis lends important insight into the emergence not only of Modernism (now with a capital M) as the art of Western democracy during the World War II era, but also of Expressionism as Germany's canonical contribution to that Modernism. Holz demonstrates well the manner in which this vision of "German Modernism as Expressionism" affirmed the interests of an ascendant bourgeois liberalism by willfully excluding Dada and other leftist artistic challenges to liberalism's less-than-revolutionary agenda.

Unaddressed by Holz, however, is the equally telling exclusion of Neue Sachlichkeit from this "German Modernism as Expressionism" formula. This late 1920s German art movement blurred comfortable boundaries between modernist innovation and tradition, progress and reaction. Neue Sachlichkeit confounded, moreover, distinctions between the avant-garde, on the one hand, and cultural regression, on the other, a distinction that subtends Holz's account of the exiles and their struggle against Nazi cultural dictates. Moving beyond this study sets us on the path to yet deeper inquiry into the broader scope of Modernism's repressions, including the crisis of modernity (so powerfully described by Horkheimer and Adorno in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*) of which Modernism's canonical formulation was a symptomatic

part. Keith Holz's indispensable book is thus important reading for those interested not only in exile, but also in the vicissitudes of modernity both during and after World War II. Though focused on the German exile experience of the 1930s, *Modern German Art for Thirties Paris, Prague, and London* exposes the ideological underpinnings of the following decades in which Communism became pitted against capitalism and Socialist Realism against Modernism in the long chill of the Cold War.

Notes

[1]. Important exhibition catalogue sources include: Badischer Kunstverein (Karlsruhe), *Widerstand statt Anpassung: Deutsche Kunst im Widerstand gegen den Faschismus 1933-1945* (Berlin: Elefant Press Verlag GmbH, 1980); Neue Gesellschaft für Bildende Kunst, *Kunst im Exil in Großbritannien 1933-1945* (Berlin: Neue Gesellschaft für Bildende Kunst, 1986); and Stephanie Barron and Sabine Eckmann, eds., *Exiles and Emigrants: The Flight of European Artists from Hitler* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1997).

[2]. For more on Breitenbach, see Keith Holz and Wolfgang Schopf, *Im Auge des Exils: Josef Breitenbach und die Freie Deutsche Kultur in Paris 1933-1941* (Berlin: Aufbau Verlag, 2001).

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