

Gregory Maertz

# **Nostalgia for the Future**

Modernism and Heterogeneity in the Visual Arts  
of Nazi Germany



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*ibidem*-Verlag  
Stuttgart

## **Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek**

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über <http://dnb.d-nb.de> abrufbar.

## **Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek**

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available in the Internet at <http://dnb.d-nb.de>.

Cover picture: Hubert Lanzinger (1880–1950), *Führerbildnis/Der Schirmherr der Deutschen Kunst/Der Bannerträger* [*Portrait of the Führer/The Patron of German Art/The Flag Bearer*] (1936/GDK 37). Oil on wood panel, damaged, 153.5 x 153.5 cm. German War Art Collection, Army Art Collection (G.O.1.4247.47), U.S. Army Center of Military History, Fort Belvoir, Virginia. Photo by Pablo Jimenez-Reyes. Reproduction rights courtesy of Stiebner Verlag. Reprinted with kind permission.

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Gedruckt auf alterungsbeständigem, säurefreiem Papier  
Printed on acid-free paper

ISBN-13: 978-3-8382-1281-4

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Stuttgart 2019

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Printed in the EU

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## Acknowledgments

The scholarship presented here would not have been possible without gaining access to repositories of objects and files of documents pertaining to the German War Art Collection and Adolf Hitler's acquisitions at the *Große Deutsche Kunstausstellungen*, the so-called NS-Reichsbesitz, as well as other related collections.

For these opportunities, I wish to express my thanks to the following people: Mitchell Wolfson, Jr., founder of the Wolfsonian-FIU, who threw open the museum's vast depot and library holdings to me as well as his extensive private collection; Renée Klish, former curator of the U.S. Army Center of Military History in Washington, D.C., who guided me through the Army's art vault and allowed me to make photocopies of the files related to the German War Art Collection; Gordon W. Gilkey, leader of the U.S. Army's German Wartime Art Project, with whom I spent many hours on two visits to the Portland Art Museum, and who shared his personal archive and presented me with a number of photographs and other artifacts associated with his duties in postwar Germany; Harald König and Heidrun Kemnitz, officials in the Bundesvermögensamt in Berlin, who granted my request to make research photographs of the objects in the German War Art Collection repatriated in 1951 and to examine the active files relating to the custody of both the German War Art Collection and the NS-Reichsbesitz; Iris Lauterbach at the Zentralinstitut für Kunstgeschichte in Munich, who helped me reconstruct the history of the Munich Central Collecting Point; Hans Ottomeyer, the visionary former director of the Deutsches Historisches Museum, and his remarkable assistants, Hans-Jörg Czech and Esther Sophia Sünderhauf, who granted unfettered study of the 1951 and 1986 sections of the repatriated German War Art Collection as well as the NS-Reichsbesitz, and who invited me to join the curatorial team that organized the exhibition *Kunst und Propaganda im Streit der Nationen* (2007); Ernst Aichner, the former director of the Bayerisches Armeemuseum in Ingolstadt, who provided lodging in the museum's medieval fortress (and astonishing hospitality) during the week I spent studying the objects in the German War Art Collection repatriated in 1986; Chris Dercon, former director of the Haus der Kunst, and Sabine Brantl, the museum's archivist, who privileged me with being the first scholar to examine and

photograph the museum's archives pertaining to the administration of the Haus der Deutschen Kunst, the *Große Deutsche Kunstausstellungen*, and the postwar Abwicklungsstelle; Dr. Lauchs, the courtly director of the mysterious Abteilung V at the Bayerisches Hauptstaatsarchiv, who authorized my transcriptions of artists' Fragebögen; Meg L. Melvin, curator of the National Gallery of Art Photography Archives, who located photographs proving that Gilkey's confiscations included works of art removed from the Central Collecting Point; Stephen A. Mize, archivist at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, who showed me the correspondence between Elie Wiesel, the museum's founding director, and Caspar Weinberger, U.S. President Ronald Reagan's Secretary of Defense; the staff of the National Archives in College Park, Maryland, where I discovered the property records relating to works of art seized by the Monuments Branch from the Haus der Deutschen Kunst, including Saliger's *Doppelakt*; and Line Daatland, Karin Hindsbo, Erlend Høyersten, Frode Sandvik, and Erik Tønning with whom I worked on the exhibition *Kunst i Kamp* at KODE: Art Museums in Bergen, which brought together objects from the German War Art Collection and the NS-Reichsbesitz.

I also wish to express my enormous sense of indebtedness to the colleagues who wrote on behalf of my applications for grants and fellowships which made the research and writing of this book possible: Mark Antliff, Omer Bartov, James G. Basker, David Craven, James Engell, Robert Fagles, Matthew Feldman, Alfredo Franco, Roger Griffin, Sabine Hake, Henry Millon, Steven Mansbach, John T. Paoletti, Erik Tønning, and Nancy H. Yeide. Thanks to their support, my work on this project benefited from the time, money, and resources provided by the American Council of Learned Societies, CASVA at the National Gallery of Art, the Gerda Henkel Stiftung, the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, KODE in Bergen, the NEH, the National Humanities Center, the Rockefeller Foundation, the University of Bergen, Teesside University, the Wolfsonian-FIU, and the Zimmerli Museum at Rutgers University.

Additional gifts of time, library access, and technical assistance came with a Visiting Research Professorship in the German Department at Duke University, where I began writing this book; a fortnight's residency literally in the Deutsches Historisches Museum where I examined the repatriated German War Art collection following the consolidation



of its 1951 and 1986 sections; and, during the completion of the first draft of this book, a blissful month as the guest of the “Christianity and Modernism Project” at the University of Bergen. A second draft was written during research leave at my cottage in the village of Gravir on the Isle of Lewis, and final revisions were completed in George Bridge and Paula McDowell’s magnificent house in Griggstown, New Jersey. The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at St. John’s University, under the stewardship of Dean Jeffrey Fagen, generously supplemented my grants with research leave and travel funding. My colleagues and students in the Department of English have likewise been supportive during the long gestation of this book.

My research also benefited from feedback I received on lectures and talks at Duke, North Carolina State, Princeton, Rutgers, Villanova, Wake Forest, the Universities of Bergen, Cal State LA, Cal State Long Beach, Georgia, Iowa, Konstanz, Manchester, New Mexico, Northampton, Otago, Teesside, and York, as well as at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, CASVA, the Slought Foundation at the University of Pennsylvania, the Deutsches Historisches Museum, the Wolfsonian-FIU, the National Humanities Center, and Yale-NUS College in Singapore.

In addition, I am grateful to the following people for their input and support: Chris Ackerley, Susanne Baackmann, Fabio Barry, Kim Bergen, Nicholas Blaga, Margot Brandlhuber, Christopher Browning, Peter Bunnell, Mark Byron, Peter Chametzky, John W. Coffey, Michèle Cone, Caroline H. Cooney, Elizabeth Cropper, Jay Curley, William C. Donahue, Florence Dore, Josiah Drewry, Wolf-Dieter Dube, Modris Eksteins, Richard J. Evans, Sarah Farmer, Monika Flacke, Matteo Fochessati, Finn Fordham, Hal Foster, Peter Fritzsche, Christian Fuhrmeister, Sara Galletti, Kata Gellen, Roger Griffin, Olga Grlc, Ruth V. Gross, Geoffrey Harpham, Robin C. Hemley, Keith Holz, Paul B. Jaskot, Martin Kagel, Aristotle Kallis, Scott Klein, Lutz Koepnick, Claudia Koontz, Ewa Lajer-Burcharth, Marianne Lamonaca, Irving Lavin, Cathy Leff, Patricia Leighton, Timothy Lenoir, Thomas Y. Levin, Michael J. Lewis, Chris Löhr, Frank Luca, Peter Lukehart, Deborah Lutz, Nancy MacLean, Paula Michaels, Michael McKeon, Michael B. McKinley, Neil McWilliam, Elizabeth Mansfield, Jörg Merz, Hans-Ernst Mittag, Bella Muccari, Jakob Norberg, Philip Nord, Lynn H. Nicholas, Peter Nisbet, Therese O’Malley, Morna O’Neill, Peter Paret, Jonathan Petropoulos, Thomas Pfau, Barbara Picht, Achim Preiß, Uwe Puschner, Ruben David Quintero, Jean-Michel Rabaté, Rochana Rapkins,

Sven Reichardt, Wolfgang Schmidt, Jeffrey T. Schnapp, Sarah Schroth, John Beldon Scott, Craig Hugh Smyth, Heinrich von Staden, Kristine Stiles, Dan Stone, Robert Swanson, Maria Taroutina, Maiken Umbach, Richard Unger, James van Dyke, Kirk Varnedoe, Eirik Vassenden, Gerhard L. Weinberg, Gennifer Weisenfeld, G. William Whitehurst, Carolyn Williams, Isabel Wünsche, and Andrés Zervignon.

Together with everyone else working on the visual culture of Nazi Germany, I owe a major debt to the work of Peter Chametzky, Peter Fritzsche, Christian Fuhrmeister, Olaf Peters, Jonathan Petropoulos, Pamela M. Potter, Ines Schlenker, Alan E. Steinweis, and James van Dyke. Equally indispensable to this project has been the work of Mark Antliff, Omer Bartov, Modris Eksteins, Richard J. Evans, Roger Griffin, Jeffrey Herf, Ian Kershaw, Mark Mazower, Eric Michaud, Gavriel Rosenfeld, Timothy Snyder, Nicholas Stargardt, and Thomas Weber.

Portions of the research for this book were published previously and in different forms. I am thankful to the editors of these volumes and special journal issues for the opportunity to share early versions of my research with a learned readership. Parts of Chapters 1 and 5 were first published in the special fascism issue of *Modernism/modernity* XV: 1 (January 2008): 63–85. Chapter 2 is an expansion of an article published in *The 'New Man' in Radical Right Ideology and Practice, 1919–1945*, ed. Matthew Feldman, Jorge Dagnino, and Paul Stocker (Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), pages 87–104. Chapter 3 is based on an article published in *Modernism, Christianity, and the Apocalypse*, ed. Erik Tønning, Matthew Feldman, and David Addyman (Brill, 2015), pages 166–186. A preliminary version of Chapter 4, on Nazi maverick Baldur von Schirach's patronage of modernist art, was published in the journal *Patterns of Prejudice* 50 (2016): nos. 4–5: 337–358. Sections of Chapter 5 appeared in the collection *Art and Artistic Life during the Two World Wars*, ed. Giedrė Jankevičiūtė and Laima Lauckaitė (Vilnius: Lithuanian Cultural Research Institute, 2012), pages 387–411.

Many of the works of art published in this book, chiefly objects in the German War Art Collection, are reproduced here for the first time. Others, including works by Emil Nolde and Erich Heckel, have not been seen since the 1930s. Several objects were lost in artists' studios that burned as a consequence of the Allied bombing of German cities or, like Gustav Klimt's *Musik II*, disappeared in the final months of combat as the war came home to the Reich. Still others, like Franz Radziwill's *Stilleben*

*mit Pfeife* [*Still Life with Pipe*], were destroyed in the Nazi pogrom against modernist art. For assistance with copyright clearance and the acquisition of images on an ambitious scale, I wish to thank Anne Dorte Krause at the Deutsches Historisches Museum, Dr. Markus Raeder at the Bayerisches Staatsministerium der Finanzen, Sabine Brantl at the Haus der Kunst, Andreas Hagenkord at the publisher Georg D.W. Callwey, Hans-Peter Copony at Stiebner Verlag, Paul Rachler at the Künstlerhaus in Vienna, Amy Silverman at the Wolfsonian-FIU, Shannon Morelli at the National Gallery of Art, Carsten Jäger at the Rudolf-Hengstenberg-Gesellschaft, Liza Fuegenschuh at the Gustav Klimt Foundation, Lis Linnet Herrscholdt at the Nolde Stiftung Seebüll, Birgit Harand at the Städtische Galerie Rosenheim, Ines Otschik of the Christian Schad Stiftung, Sarah M. Forgey at the U.S. Army Center of Military History, Todd Leibowitz at the Artists Rights Society, and Barbara Roosen at VG Bild-Kunst. Special thanks to Imogen Stuart in Sandymount near Dublin, who provided a photograph of her father, the art critic Bruno E. Werner, and to Hazel Caine Corte-Real in Cascais, Portugal, whose hospitality during my research visit in October 2017 has only been exceeded by her generosity in approving the reproduction of works of art created by her grandfather, Eduard Schloemann, as well as the cherished last photo of him before he was killed in action on the high seas.

Valerie Lange acquired this book for ibidem Verlag and was unflaggingly helpful in answering countless questions as I prepared the text and negotiated the labyrinth of German copyright clearance for many of the images published here. Florian Bölter designed and formatted the text.

Unless otherwise indicated, translations from German to English in the text and notes are my own.

My deepest expression of gratitude goes to those who sustained me on this long journey: April Alliston and her family, George Bridge, Neko Case, Matthew and Claire Feldman, the late Jinx and Juju, Jane Sharp, Stephen Sicari, Erik and Fionnuala Tonning (and Erik's parents and sons), Richard Vogel, and Frederick Wegener. Lastly, this book is dedicated to my *'ohana*—the Lens, Parkers, Coatses, and Imries.



## Preface

The origin of this book can be traced to a pregnant encounter, some years ago, with Mitchell Wolfson Jr., the renowned collector of fascist art and propaganda artifacts, in Princeton, New Jersey. Not long afterward, I found myself in the Wolfsonian in Miami Beach, standing before Ivo Saliger's *Doppelakt* [*Double Nude*] (fig. 1), a painting submitted for inclusion in the 1945 *Große Deutsche Kunstausstellung* [*Great German Art Exhibition*] (which never opened) at the Haus der Deutschen Kunst [House of German Art] in Munich. By digging into the Wolfsonian's acquisition records, I discovered that the provenance of this work by one of Adolf Hitler's favorite artists is full of anomalies. Firstly, by virtue of the post-war settlement made between the victorious Allies and Austria, the former Ostmark of the defeated Nazi Reich, Saliger (1894–1987), as an Austrian citizen, was exempt from the sanctions imposed on German artists whose works had been purchased by the Führer. Such penalties included the expropriation and sequestration of these works of art by American occupation officials—a policy that has continued into the present even as the custody of such objects passed from Bavarian officials in Munich to the German Federal Republic's official memory repository, the Deutsches Historisches Museum, in Berlin. Second, following the collapse of the Nazi regime in May 1945, *Doppelakt* was, after vetting by the U.S. Army's Monuments Fine Arts and Archives Branch, released from the basement depot of the Haus der Deutschen Kunst into the hands of the artist in newly independent Austria. At this point, Saliger's painting disappears from the historical record. But then, in 1985, 40 years after its repatriation, a sales receipt shows that Mr. Wolfson bought the work from an art dealer in Salzburg.

While examining *Doppelakt* in the Wolfsonian, I wondered: "What was the fate of other works of art produced under the patronage of the Führer, the Nazi Party, and other state organizations? And did all such works resemble Saliger's strangely contemporary and not neoclassical looking nudes? Could there have been, in a dictatorship noted for its polycratic dysfunctionality, exceptions to the stylistic orthodoxy associated with exhibitions held in the Haus der Deutschen Kunst?" It was at this moment that an investigation began that led me to museums, ar-

chives, and depots in Washington, D.C., Portland, Oregon, Munich, Ingolstadt, Berlin, and Vienna. It was on these journeys that I encountered paintings, sculptures, and graphic works that challenged, in a completely radical way, our understanding of the visual arts of Nazi Germany.

In the catalogue that accompanied the recent exhibition *Degenerate Art: The Attack on Modern Art in Nazi Germany* (2014), Olaf Peters declares that National Socialism “produced mediocre, politically motivated art and aesthetic irrelevancies” that “undermined the conditions of real art and destroyed artistic modernism.”<sup>1</sup> It is not the objective of this study to make aesthetic judgments on the works of art admired by Hitler and his entourage. Rather, this book argues that National Socialist art is a far more complex and nuanced phenomenon than Peters lets on. Indeed, the evidence for the claims made here is based on the countless cases in which “real” (i.e., “degenerate” modernist) artists were selected to represent the Reich’s “mediocre” and “irrelevant” aesthetic ambitions. Moreover, it is clear that Peters’ position reflects an inversion of the “Nazi hyperbole” that exaggerated the dangers of modernism—the “Feindbild in the cultural arena”—of the Weimar era. Pamela M. Potter recently noted that “by taking this hyperbole at face value, arts fields for many years also helped to construct what was essentially a caricature of Nazi cultural conditions, vividly representing the era as a dystopia of artistic constraint, authoritarian micromanagement, and kitsch,”<sup>2</sup> when even the briefest acquaintance with the patronage mechanisms of the Third Reich reveals that such a dystopian construct was socially and politically an impossibility. Of course, many works of art that appeared in the *Große Deutsche Kunstausstellungen* manifest an attempt to create a “modernist anti-modernism”—an experiment predicated on the need to enlist the visual arts in the horrific biosocial engineering of a racial utopia. But many artists who participated in the eight annual Munich shows—at least 64 in total—saw works of theirs removed from museum collections during the great purge of 1937, and this figure does not in-

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<sup>1</sup> Olaf Peters, “From Nordau to Hitler: ‘Degeneration’ and Anti-Modernism between the Fin-de-Siècle and the National Socialist Takeover of Power.” In *Degenerate Art: The Attack on Modern Art in Nazi Germany 1937* (Munich: Prestal Verlag, 2014), 33.

<sup>2</sup> Pamela M. Potter, *Art of Suppression: Confronting the Nazi Past in Histories of the Visual and Performing Arts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016), 35.

clude the many entartete Künstler who participated in the supplemental exchange exhibitions that opened in the Haus der Deutschen Kunst starting in December 1938. The best-known of these artists—because their works were either accessioned to the NS-Reichsbesitz, i.e., Hitler’s personal collection, or were confiscated for being “degenerate”—include Rudolf Belling, Ewald Jorzig, Georg Kolbe, Paul Ludwig Kowalski, Anton Lamprecht, Werner Peiner, Josef Pieper, Emil Scheibe, Kurt Schwippert, Hans Spiegel, Rudolf Schlichter, and Will Tschsch. The dovetailing between the presentation of official art in the *Große Deutsche Kunstausstellungen* and the purge of entartete Kunst is, of course, striking. That same official art-degenerate art overlap is just as pronounced when we examine the 56 Wehrmacht combat artists whose works were confiscated as “degenerate,” but who nonetheless participated in the 1943 and 1944 Munich shows as well as in the modernist exhibition sponsored by Baldur von Schirach, *Junge Kunst im Deutschen Reich* [*New Art in the German Reich*], and were also put forward, by Party proxies Peter Breuer, Bruno Kroll, and Bruno E. Werner, as trustworthy fabricators of the “new art” of the “new Germany.”

The question, then, that must precede any aesthetic judgments about Nazi art, is this: which Nazi artistic idiom is under consideration? That of the painters who languished in internal exile prior to their reemergence in the service of the Wehrmacht, whose distinctively modernist work survives in the 9,176 objects in the German War Art Collection? That of artists anointed as paradigmatic figures in Party-sponsored publications such as *Münchener Künstlerköpfe* [*Munich’s Leading Artists*], *Deutsche Maler der Gegenwart* [*German Painters of the Present*], *Deutsche Plastik der Gegenwart* [*German Sculpture of the Present*], and *Die Kunst für Alle* [*Art for Everyone*]? That of works exhibited in *Junge Kunst* and other heterodox exhibitions, such as the *Gustav Klimt Ausstellung*? Or simply the official art displayed in the *Große Deutsche Kunstausstellungen*, which is the only Nazi idiom that Peters acknowledges to have existed.

The conventional wisdom challenged by this book holds that the visual arts in Nazi Germany embody a backward-looking conservative or pastoral völkisch aesthetic with no room for dissent. This now outmoded position was the product of an overreliance, in terms of evidence, on a relatively small number of objects—the 775 works purchased by the Führer at the *Große Deutsche Kunstausstellungen* between

1937 and 1944—and, for a framing argument, on a “totalitarian-structuralist-intentionalist-fascist” paradigm of interpreting art produced under Hitler. The limitations of this approach were ably demonstrated recently by Potter.<sup>3</sup> To be fair, in the decades following the end of the Second World War, the only works of art associated with Nazi patronage readily available to scholars or viewable by the public belonged to the NS-Reichsbesitz. Such a circumscribed pool of evidence in turn gave rise to a disproportionate focus on Hitler’s personal collecting activity—a classic case of overdetermination. In other words, the collective tendency to ascribe “aesthetic nazification” (which was actually a multi-causal phenomenon with a diverse, polyvocal group of artists, patrons, and critics) to the actions of a single individual, even if he served as the regime’s patron-in-chief, or to a few of his paladins, fostered neglect of a vast multiplicity of causes, conditions, and practices that contributed to the heterogeneous rather than monolithic quality of the visual arts of Nazi Germany. At the very least, the examination in this book of the German War Art Collection and the NS-Reichsbesitz (as well as additional objects represented in exhibitions other than the *Große Deutsche Kunstausstellungen* and in prominent Nazi-sponsored publications) has confirmed that strict stylistic coherence and uniformity were notably lacking in works of art produced with Nazi patronage. Indeed, it is the central contention of this book that a surprising number of modernist idioms flourished, not just in the shadows of the Nazi dictatorship, but openly and with the enthusiastic support of the regime’s most powerful individuals and institutions. This book does not claim to be an exhaustive study of Nazi art, but rather identifies the presence of at least four modernist idioms in the cultural body politic of Hitler’s Germany. The emergence of these modernist idioms out of Nazi patronage is shown to be caused by the overwhelming presence of “degenerate” modernists in the ranks of “official” artists and by the response to an increasingly radicalized and volatile arts scene, in which experimentation in self-adjustment to Nazi aesthetic norms resulted in stylistic departures from the regime’s effort to articulate a future-oriented, eugenic style in the annual exhibitions at the Haus der Deutschen Kunst. Evidence of these idioms was discovered upon gaining access to the German War Art Collection, the NS-Reichsbesitz, and the records of the collecting activity of

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<sup>3</sup> Potter, *op. cit.*, 38.



Hitler at the Haus der Deutschen Kunst, which revealed the identity of the artists, their stylistic tendencies, the appearance of their works, their sources of patronage as well as exhibition and sales history, and the postwar disposition of their work.

As discussed in Chapters 1, the modernist art of Nazi Germany includes thousands of paintings and works on paper executed in neo-impressionist, expressionist, surrealist, and Neue Sachlichkeit modes by German combat artists, which were exhibited and sold under the aegis of the Wehrmacht, but were seized by units of the U.S. Army in 1945–46, and remain sequestered and out of public view. In disproportionate numbers, artists recruited into combat art units had been classified as *entartet* or “degenerate” which should have excluded them from participation in the *Große Deutsche Kunstausstellungen*. Chapter 2 presents a new analysis of the Nazi-era works of art best known to scholars and the public—those purchased by the Führer at the Haus der Deutschen Kunst. In this analysis, many of the apparently traditional elements of these works—e.g., idealized nudes and heroicized agricultural and industrial workers—are subjected to a fundamental reassessment that reveals that these conventions were appropriated by artists working in the regime’s signature eugenic style in order to make them serve a far more radical, modernizing agenda—namely, by offering the Volk an emulative glimpse of its biological future, based on nostalgia for lost Aryan perfection, before the future had arrived, these artists foreshadowed and instigated the realization of the National Socialist biosocial utopia. The discussion in Chapter 3 examines how, following the closure of the traditional venue for the exhibition and sale of their work (the *Münchener Kunstausstellungen* [*Munich Art Exhibitions*]), Christian artists in Germany adjusted their work in accordance with Nazi preferences. By repurposing religious tropes and iconography to function as potent fascist symbols, these artists, who were associated with a tradition in every way hostile to National Socialism, found themselves serving the eugenic, future-oriented aesthetic of the regime. The focus in Chapter 4 is on artists who entered “internal exile” after January 1933, but who nonetheless participated in regional exhibitions, joined the Wehrmacht combat art program—the *Staffel der Bildenden Künstler* [*Squadron of Visual Artists*—and saw their work reproduced in aesthetically ambivalent publications, all of which oscillated between conforming with and transgressing Nazi aesthetic norms as foregrounded in the NS-

Reichsbesitz pictures. In addition, a preponderance of internal exiles and combat artists were selected for the daring modernist exhibition hosted by Schirach in 1943. Struggling to articulate an accommodating modernism, these art producers have not previously received their due. Finally, based on previously unexamined archives, Chapter 5 reconstructs the legal and administrative frameworks devised by the U.S. military government to accomplish two tasks: firstly, to control the postwar circulation of German art properties associated with Nazi patronage, and second, to denazify and rehabilitate artists tainted by collaboration with the regime. These included both canonical and forgotten figures in the twentieth-century history of art. This chapter also offers the first postwar examination of denazification documents submitted to occupation authorities by artists represented in the NS-Reichsbesitz and the German War Art Collection.