

Apologetics for National Socialist aesthetics and politics

Taking Positions: Figurative Sculpture and the Third Reich

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Taking Positions: Figurative Sculpture and the Third Reich is an exhibition of sculptures most of which were completed by German artists during the period of the Nazi regime (1933-45). The exhibition originally opened at the prestigious Henry Moore Institute in Leeds in Britain, has now been moved to Berlin and is scheduled to open 20 January in the German city of Bremen. It includes work by Nazi Germany's most prominent sculptor Arno Breker and features the latter's *The Wounded* on display in a public exhibition for the first time.

The exhibition is entitled *Taking Positions*, but an examination of the pieces and the accompanying scanty information material makes clear that Penelope Curtis, the curator of the show, has refrained from taking any clear position regarding the human, social and artistic consequences flowing from the abomination of Nazism. In her programme notes Curtis claims that: "Individual biographies at the back of this catalogue aim to provide some of the basic details about political affiliation and patronage against which artistic production can be measured." In fact, the catalogue says nothing about Breker's extensive relationship with the Nazi Party, including the fact that he was a prominent party member from 1937 and on intimate terms with all its leading figures, including Hitler.

Curtis remarks that her aim is to make an "unspectacular" appraisal of the included work: "A rare chance to see this sculpture sculpturally, rather than pictorially, for the art of the Third Reich has predominantly been seen iconically..." In the obscurantist manner of post-modernism Curtis declares that her exhibition is "about reading difference." She continues in her notes that such "difference" is to be read "in relation to extreme political circumstances," but then says nothing concrete about fascist politics and its impact on art and culture, concluding blandly in one passage that "There is no simple correlation between sculpture and political beliefs."

While there is no *simple* correlation between art and politics, the experience of 12 years of Nazi dictatorship in Germany, involving the subordination of the arts to the needs of the fascist elite, provides undeniable evidence of a link between the two phenomena. Curtis attempts to erase the political background to the work of figures like Breker, in favour of a variety of "pure art" or "art for arts' sake." In doing so, she opens the door to some quite dreadful and unforgivable apologetics by other contributors in the exhibition's official catalogue. Arie Hartog of the Gerhard Marcks Haus, for example, takes up in limited fashion the issue of the political background of figures like Breker and concedes meekly that sculpture was "harmed by the Third Reich," but then concludes that, after all, "the sculptors behaved no differently from numerous other German intellectuals."

Hartog also seeks to downplay the significance of the arts for fascism and writes: "The visual arts played so insignificant a role in the National Socialist German Workers' Party conception of itself that this art market,

being an insignificant minor showcase, was left to a middle-class public which could here indulge its aesthetic fantasies." In reality, the fascists were very much aware of the significance of the political instrumentalisation of art. In 1929 Hitler proclaimed: "Throughout the ages art is the expression of a world-outlook, a religious experience and at the same time the expression of a political will to power" (quoted in Backes, *K Hitler und die bildenden Künste*, 1988).

Hitler helped personally supervise the exhibition of *Degenerate Art* held in 1937 which declared war against virtually all of the prevailing schools of modern European art. Hitler and his propaganda chief Goebbels were very conscious of the necessity of manipulating not just film, but also architecture and the fine arts to hammer home their political and military plans. On the significance of art Italian fascist leader Benito Mussolini was even more explicit: "Art for us is an essential necessity of life.... It is necessary to create it, otherwise we are merely the exploiters of an old tradition; it is necessary to create the new art of our times, Fascist art" (quoted in Montemaggiore, *A Dizionario della dottrina fascista*, 1934).

Hartog notes that the first victims of the Nazis were Jewish citizens and adherents of left-wing parties, but then cold-bloodedly comments: "With the disappearance of the Jewish middle class went also an important clientele for modern German art." Arguments are advanced in the catalogue to the effect that artists were able to use "niches" and "gaps" in the Nazi system to exercise a certain form of artistic freedom or even, very covertly, to articulate opposition. These points were eagerly taken up by the reviewer of the extreme right-wing German newspaper *Junge Freiheit* in its own review of the exhibition to bolster the paper's own efforts to relativise the atrocities of Nazism.

On entering the exhibition one is immediately confronted with Breker's monumental *The Wounded* (completed 1942) dominating the first room, which also includes sitting figures by Wilhelm Lehbruck, Gerhard Marcks and Georg Kolbe. Kolbe is the only one of this latter group to continue his artistic work under the Nazis, although he was never such an important figure for the National Socialists as Breker. Lehbruck committed suicide in 1919 and Marcks lost his job in 1933 when the Nazis took power.

Curtis seeks to demonstrate a certain continuity between German sculpture in the first quarter of the twentieth century and the works completed under the Nazis. However the contrast between *The Wounded* and the other figures in the room could hardly be greater. While Kolbe and Lehbruck (*Seated Youth*) have attempted to imbue their figures with a sense of pathos and thoughtfulness with their heads bowed towards the ground, Breker's sculpture presents a larger than life-size muscular and naked seated figure, with his head in the crook of an arm propped on a knee.

Breker has devoted all his efforts to producing the sort of super-

physically developed and evidently mentally vacuous figure so favoured by the cretinous entourage around Hitler. A closer look at the statue reveals that the physical state of the figure is totally at odds with the condition implied by its title. There is no trace in the figure of any sort of wound, either of a physical or spiritual nature. The muscles of the man are tensed. The right hand of the figure is flexed and hangs like a claw. This is not a wounded man, physically limp and mentally reflective, seeking to recover his powers and perhaps contemplating the reason for his injury. Breker's *The Wounded* is a coiled spring, a warrior waiting to pounce and exact revenge. (It was, appropriately enough, a favourite of Andy Warhol, the American pop artist.)

The Wounded is a bland, bombastic work, a cartoonish response to the Greek ideal. All one has to do is compare the Breker work with similar subjects treated by Rodin. The latter's sculpture reveals—indeed embodies—the process of immense intellectual and moral struggle. Breker's work speaks of self-delusion and delusions of grandeur. Every muscle is blown up out of proportion, yet there is no hint of inner conflict or turmoil. The man's brow is unfurrowed. He is the petty-bourgeois clerk's fantasy of himself as the *Übermensch* (superman). It is a pitiful work, a piece of kitsch.

A second, thoroughly unconvincing sculpture by Breker, entitled *Active Life* (*Wager*), shows another naked, muscular young man with one hand resting daintily on his hip in the manner of a dandy and with his head turned towards an imaginary admiring public. The figure was intended for Hitler's own new Reich Chancellery.

The career of Arno Breker has been well documented, in particular by the author Jonathan Petropoulos in his valuable book *The Faustian Bargain*. Petropoulos makes clear that Breker's career had nothing to do with the “exploitation of gaps and niches” within the fascist system; he devoted his artistic talents unflinchingly to Nazi opportunism. The following brief sketch of Breker is largely drawn from the book and recent lecture notes by Petropoulos.

Born in 1900, Breker travelled to France as an aspiring artist in 1927 and lived there until 1932. That year he won the Rome Prize awarded by the Prussian Academy of Arts, which entailed a fellowship in Rome. During his stay in Rome he had his first introduction to the future Nazi propaganda minister, Joseph Goebbels, who visited the German colony during a trip south in early 1933 and, according to Breker, encouraged the “artists to return to Germany where a great future was awaiting them.”

After short visits to Munich and Berlin, Breker returned to Paris in 1933, but he soon left for Germany. His transformation into an official Nazi sculptor was gradual and complicated. For inspiration he drew heavily from classical Greek sculpture. One critic comments: “He believed that the resulting works, massive figures built upon timeless Hellenic precedents, would define the aesthetic idiom both domestically and abroad.”

The scale of Breker's work—some of his figures were 30 metres high—required the introduction of mass forced labour for the quarrying of the stone necessary for the commissions. In addition to “monumentalising” his figures, Breker was also required to alter his style. After the war, Dr. Victor Dirksen of the Städtisches Museum in Wuppertal-Elberfeld observed, “that his artistic style went through a change after 1933 is not to be disputed.... He became a state sculptor.” He preserved certain elements of his pre-1933 work—above all the Hellenic and mythical motifs—while adding monumentality and frequent political allegory to suit the taste of the regime.

Breker met Hitler for the first time in 1936 and in February 1938 he wrote to architect Emil Fahrenkamp, the director of the State Art Academy in Düsseldorf: “Thank God I had the luck again recently to see and speak with the Führer.” Breker joined the NSDAP in 1937 and became a “political leader”—a position that entitled him to wear the brown Nazi uniform as official dress.

From 1938 he closely collaborated with Nazi architect Albert Speer. The latter promised him complete “artistic freedom” in his endeavours. His first two creations were *Sword Bearer*, renamed *Wehrmacht* by Hitler, and *Torch Bearer*, otherwise known as *The Party*, which adorned the New Reich Chancellery. This began a close collaboration and friendship between Breker and Speer. Together they visited Hitler, who explicitly identified Breker as his favourite sculptor.

Forty-two of his works appeared in the eight *Great German Art* exhibitions held annually in Munich, where the regime exhibited officially sanctioned art. Another scholar noted, “While it was the function of [Nazi] cartoonists to circulate a negative picture of ‘inferior’ races, the art of Breker and Thorak provided, perfected and emphasised a positive image of a Nordic super-race within a scheme of classicizing representation. *Sturmer* -caricature and Breker sculpture cannot be separated from one another. They were both equally and simultaneously promoted because they endorsed and illustrated racist policy” (Grasskamp: *Denazification of Nazi Art*).

In his book *Old Dreams of the New Reich*, Jost Hermand developed this idea, observing, “National Socialist art is thus not unproblematically ‘beautiful,’ not merely devoted to perfect forms and empty content; it is also imminently brutal, an art based on convictions which, when realised, literally left corpses in their wake.”

In his memoirs, Speer remarked that Hitler expressed his ideology through his building projects: “These monuments were an assertion of his claim to world dominion long before he dared to voice any such intentions even to his associates” (Speer: *Inside the Third Reich*). Breker's works offered a sculptural equivalent. In other words, he helped disseminate this ultra-nationalistic, hegemonic and racist ideology—even though he included a swastika in only one of his works.

As a result of commissions, salaries from his various posts and gifts from Hitler, Goering, Himmler and other Nazi leaders, Breker became extraordinarily wealthy. Hitler told his inner circle that Breker should have an income of at least a million marks per year and that he would look into special tax breaks so as to avoid cutting into the sculptor's income.

Breker was the only German artist to have an exhibition in Nazi-occupied France. His works were also admired by Joseph Stalin, when he saw them in the German pavilion at the 1937 World Exposition in Paris, and he expressed an eagerness to engage Breker. The offer was repeated in 1946, but Breker demurred. Other world leaders who acquired his work included Mussolini and Haile Selassie.

At the end of the war Breker was one of the few Nazi sculptors to be tried by the denazification courts. In the end, he was classified as a mere “fellow traveller”—a category that allowed him to work again. He was fined DM 100, plus costs. The additional costs amounted to DM 33,179—a sum which Breker refused to pay.

The denazification board portrayed him as more of a victim than an opportunist. They noted that the statues *Torch Bearer* and *Sword Bearer* had been renamed by Hitler, thereby giving them a political significance that the artist had not intended. The judges' astonishing verdict was based on the notion that Breker had tried to behave in a scrupulous and modest manner, even though the Nazi leaders had made this difficult. The court declared that “according to the measure of his power [he] managed to resist the National Socialist rule of violence.”

After the war Breker was unrepentant about his behaviour and continued to consort with former Nazi figures. His contacts with colleagues from the Third Reich served him well in the post-war period and he was able to play a leading role in German artistic circles. He was commissioned by the architects Friedrich Tamms and Rudolf Wolters to create sculptures for buildings in Düsseldorf.

In 1954, one critic described Breker as “officially scorned, unofficially working at full capacity.” His flattering sculptures were so successful that he gradually emerged as one of the most frequently requested portraitists

of the post-war period.

Breker's supporters alleged he was an important artist who expressed fundamental and eternal truths. For example, in an introduction to a 1961 exhibition catalogue the critic Georges Hilaire identified him as one of the "most cultivated artists of the century." His defenders often revived ideas from the Third Reich. A 1970 article in the radical right-wing *Deutsche Nationale Zeitung* described Breker's work as "a spiritual revolt against nihilism."

In the 1980s efforts at his rehabilitation moved from the radical right-wing fringe to more mainstream conservative layers. This provoked opposition and in 1981 the opening of a Berlin exhibition of Breker's art attracted hundreds of protesters. Repeated efforts by right-wingers to rehabilitate Breker have up until now come to nothing.

Now 20 years after the unsuccessful exhibition in Berlin, Penelope Curtis has once again fashioned a platform for the sanitising of Breker's work. While there can be no case made for suppressing the work of an artist such as Breker, the form in which Curtis has organised and presented the current exhibition is not only politically, it is also *artistically* reprehensible. Evidently influenced by post-modernist ideological currents which emphasise the relativity (and basic worthlessness) of historical knowledge, Curtis seeks to establish continuities and *differences* purely within the sphere of art itself.

Curtis and her German collaborators' attempted rehabilitation of Breker is not an isolated event. The past few years has witnessed a crop of films and exhibitions devoted to the work of German artists who were the favoured filmmakers, actors and actresses of Hitler and Goebbels—Leni Riefenstahl, Gustav Gründgens, Marianne Hoppe.

There is a broader ideological background to the current campaign. Curtis represents an influential lobby amongst artists and intellectuals who advocate political abstinence and indifference. Such an attitude is a thin cover for right-wing politics. Moreover, at a time of growing imperialist belligerence, there is considerable pressure from the German government, among others, to discourage intellectuals from publicly criticising official government policy. Whatever the intentions of its organisers, the Breker show is objectively part of the effort to legitimise German imperialism's ambitions, or, in any event, to neutralise or lessen hostility to its brutal past.

If there is a single lesson to be drawn from the perversion of art and culture under fascism (and a similar conclusion can be drawn from the Stalinist perversion of art under the state doctrine of "socialist realism"), then it is that genuine art, which always contains an element of protest and expresses "man's need for a harmonious and complete life" (Trotsky), is incompatible by definition with cowardice and opportunism, much less with the open advocacy of racist and fascist views. In denying the relation between art and social reality in her presentation of the current Berlin exhibition, Curtis has done a great disservice to art and the artist.



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