

Ian Wallace, *The First Documenta 1955*

A lecture presented by Ian Wallace on the occasion of the symposium on early post-war modern art titled: "The Triumph of Pessimism"; University of British Columbia Department of Fine Arts, September 26, 1987

The First Documenta 1955

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The Documenta exhibitions of contemporary art held every five years in Kassel, West Germany, are now well known. They are awaited and received with great expectation and occasional controversy. Having established a reputation for historical prognosis and the legitimization of the present, they have become a focal point for ideological as well as aesthetic discourse surrounding contemporary art. In the summer of 1987, Kassel hosted Documenta VIII. But the first Documenta exhibition held in Kassel in the summer of 1955 was not necessarily expected to continue. It was simply called "Documenta: Art of the Twentieth Century," and in that title lay the ambitions of the project. Occurring mid-year, mid-decade, mid-century, it positioned itself as a fulcrum between the past and the future. It consciously historicized contemporary art in the process of its development and in doing so influenced all such exhibitions since.¹ But above all, the conception and execution of the first Documenta crystallized Germany, specifically the decade of 1945 to 1955, during which the contestation for legitimization was fought and won, through the decade of 1955 to 1965 when abstract art was more or less paramount, after which the hegemony of abstraction broke down under the influence of American Pop art and more radical political tendencies.

The excitement and sense of urgency that inspired this first Documenta was the recognition by certain individuals that the time was ripe for a definitive statement on a new situation for post-war German art. The exhibition was proposed in 1954, just after the main organizers, Arnold Bode and Werner Haftmann, had seen the successful Venice Biennale of the summer of 1954, and after Haftmann's first major survey of modern art, *Painting in the Twentieth Century*, which formed the outline for the first Documenta project, was published in that same year.² This historical opportunity came at a time when several threads of political as well as aesthetic tendencies needed a public presence, a public forum of judgment.

The foremost ambitions of this first Documenta were stated by its organizers, specifically by Werner Haftmann who wrote the introduction to the catalogue: primarily that it consolidate the return of modernism to Germany after its hiatus during the National Socialist regime between 1933 to 1945; and secondly that it reintegrate German modernists, specifically abstractionists, into the mainstream of European cultural and political life, in the post-war period. This was accomplished through an intensive rationalization of the expressive and redemptive powers of abstract art by virtue of its links with the language of the self, creative freedom, and internationalism. And a third probably unplanned

¹ Documenta is a private corporation heavily subsidized by civic and state agencies. A corporation committee selects a director who then is responsible for the program of the exhibition. The ideological character of each exhibition, its character and motivations, thus inevitably becomes the center of discussion. The exhibition history is as follows:

DI	1955
DII	1959
DIII	1964
DIV	1968
DV	1972
DVI	1977
DVII	1982
DVIII	1987

A history of the exhibitions up to Documenta V can be found in *documenta-Documente*, Kassel, George Wenderoth Verlag, 1972.

² Werner Haftmann, *Malerei im 20. Jahrhundert*, Prestel Verlag, Munich, 1954. Revised English editions appeared under the title *Painting in the Twentieth Century*, London, 1960, and New York 1965. These English editions contain considerable additional material reflecting the expanding influence of American art after the Documenta II in 1959.

consequence of this exhibition was the identification of abstract art as the design motif for the emerging consumer culture that pulled West German politics irreversibly into the orbit of Western capitalism during the 50s.

It took the decade between 1945 and 1955 to prepare the ground for the return of modernism in Germany.³ There were many stages to this development, and the importance of Documenta is not so much that it initiated this process but that it crystallized and consolidated it. The ideological thrust of such a history in these circumstances meant something much more than just a recuperation and celebration of the pre-war tradition of German modernism in the context of broader international or at least European developments. It was part of a cultural rehabilitation process that was politically motivated and linked specifically with the alignment towards Western Europe that was pursued by Conrad Adenauer and the Christian Democratic Party which formed the Bonn government with a decisive majority after 1953. Documenta was part of recognition of national rootedness and the role of history and tradition in this process. This was its specific ideological role and the status of abstract art was at the center of it.

The reputation of the subsequent installations of Documenta was based exclusively upon its summarizing of contemporary developments. But the initial Documenta of 1955 performed a unique historical role. Unlike the exhibitions that followed, the first Documenta attempted a systematic recuperation and accounting (but not necessarily a thorough one) of the history of modern art from 1905 to the 1950s, albeit from a decidedly German perspective, and, as I have already noted, from the perspective of Haftmann's book, which more or less formed a ready-made outline for the Documenta project. It was a historical construction aimed at rehabilitating modernist art, specifically abstract art and the expressionist tradition, from the slur of "degeneracy" it was given by the Nazis when they presented it as "Entartete Kunst," or "Degenerate Art," in an exhibition of that title which toured German cities to record crowds in the period 1937 to 1938. The connection between modern art and "un-Germanness" remained as the problematic of anti-modernism and the unresolved inheritance of the Nazi cultural policies in the public sphere in Germany until well after the war. While the fascists had to systematically vilify modernism in their attempt to "regenerate" German culture in the form of a politically-correct academic realism, the organizers of the first Documenta had to reverse this history. They had to resituate the interrupted history of German modernism as the authentic history. Yet still in the shadow of the de-nazification program and the failure of the concept of "collective guilt," the Documenta organizers could not name the enemy of modernism. It was merely suppressed as an absence, but one which nevertheless still cast its shadow over everything that followed.⁴

To the little extent that Nazi cultural policies could be divorced from their political policies, the programmatic anti-modernism of the Nazi regime remained as an underlying influence upon popular cultural attitude towards the visual arts throughout the early post-war period. This anti-modernist attitude was defended as well by conservative, primarily religious ideologues such as the influential

³ An excellent chronicle of exhibitions and events of this period can be found in Dieter Honisch, *Kunst in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland 1945-1985*, Nationalgalerie Staatliche Museen, Berlin, 1985, p. 454 ff. See also Jutta Held, *Kunst und Kunstpolitik in Deutschland 1945-1949*, VAS Elephantine Press, Berlin, 1981.

⁴ Haftmann in fact did name Hans Sedlmayr as one of the conservative anti-modernists in his introduction to *Painting in the Twentieth Century*, London, 1960, page 311. Although he characterized Sedlmayr's analysis as "sharp and comprehensive," he did link such negative attitudes to modernism as dangerously close to Hitler's "degenerate art" program. For the most part, however, there is a surprising silence regarding the specific effect that recent history had upon contemporary culture, a silence that amounts to a form of unspoken censorship. On the issue of the failure of "collective guilt," see Nicholas Pronay and Kieth Wilson (eds.), *The Political Re-Education of Germany and her Allies After World War II*, Croom Helm, London, 1985.

Munich art critic Hans Sedlmayr, who, in his book of 1948 title *Art in Crisis: The Lost Center*, argued that “the artistic abortions” of modernism reflected “symptoms of extreme degeneration.”⁵ Although the theme of spiritual loss and regeneration was shared by progressive critics, Sedlmayr’s language and attitude retains the virulent reactionary flavour of fascism, and it is no coincidence that *The Lost Center* was written from classroom lectures given in Vienna during 1941 to 1944. The mission of the Documenta organizers to recuperate the history of prewar German modernism from “degeneracy” for new needs and interpretations as the authentic German culture of the post-war period has to be understood in the face of the prevailing attitude represented by Sedlmayr and others like him.

The relation of the present to history then was an uncanny paradox. The Documenta organizers had to evoke a memory and suppress it at the same time. Moreover, although much of the Nazi art that filled an overt role in promoting political and militaristic propaganda was confiscated in the denazification campaign, there still remained many highly placed and competent artists who had won a position in the fascist cultural program for their allegorical public sculpture and a countless number who had won a reputation with harmless and very popular genre subjects. For the modernist enterprise represented by the first Documenta, this is one reason among others why those artists whom the Nazis replaced the modernists with during their regime, were not included in Documenta, and thus condemned to a form of oblivion.

In addition to the conservatives and anti-modernists in the Western zones, there was also another even more problematic factor coloring the relations to a reconstructed history attempted by the Documenta organizers. This was the existence of a center and center-left socialist consensus that still was an important factor in West German politics and cultural perspectives up to the early ‘50s. This consensus generally supported what we might call an active anti-fascist recollection registered through forms of social realism and an emphasis upon political subjects. This consensus, while granting a liberal attitude towards creative freedom, felt that the abstractionists who rejected subject matter and insisted upon a suppression of memory and tendentious politics in artistic subjects, were trying to evade the necessity for political engagement and an active accounting for the past in post-war art.⁶ The fact that most of the important anti-fascist artists of the Weimar period, who were dominantly social realists, Käthe Kollwitz being the most important, were excluded from the historical panorama of the first Documenta, certainly gives credibility to this criticism. This consensus, though, by the time of Documenta, was for the most part locked into an alliance with the East block, and thus could at the time be safely but not legitimately disregarded by the Documenta committee who were bent on consolidating a regenerated modernism from within the ideological direction of the Western alignment.

The earliest tentative steps to re-exhibit the “degenerate” modernists occurred immediately in Berlin at the end of hostilities.⁷ As early as 1946, the Berlin gallery Gerd Rosen gave solo shows to abstractionists Ernst Wilhelm Nay and Werner Heldt. Socialist artists working in the figurative traditions such as Max Pechstein and Käthe Kollwitz were now featured in the museums. In 1947, the public in Berlin were reintroduced to the “Masters of the Bauhaus” and by 1949 European connections were reconfirmed in such exhibitions as “The French Masters of Today” shown in Berlin, which featured such previously

⁵ Hans Sedlmayr, *Art in Crisis: The Lost Center*, Hollis & Carter, London, 1957. (*Verlust Der Mitte*, Otto Muller Verlag, Salzburg, 1948.)

⁶ Jost Hermand, “Modernism Restored: West German Painting in the 1950s,” *New German Critique* 32, Spring/Summer, 1984, p. 27.

⁷ For an account of the exhibition history in the immediate post-war period see *Grauzonen Farbwelten: Kunst und Zeitbilder 1945-1955*, Akademie der Kunst, Berlin, 1983, pp 183-342.

slandered artists as Marc Chagall. Monographs and literature promoting abstract art began to appear in the late '40s. German modernists who remained in Germany even though they were prohibited from exhibiting, began to receive favorable attention after years of isolation. The most notable and vocal of these artists was Willi Baumeister, an abstractionist from Stuttgart who won prizes at the Venice Biennale of 1950 and at Sao Paolo in 1951.

Nevertheless, even in the early 1950s, the preeminence of modernism was by no means universally accepted. With the hardening of ideological positions during the onset of the Cold War, the liberal-democratic ideals of the period, generally identified as the "third way" or "the vital center," had to be more vocal to have an effect.⁸ The legitimacy of modernism was the subject of a number of debates in this period, and this situation was not limited to Germany alone. It was even an intense issue in America when the anti-communist crusade turned against the New York school and such progressive museum people as Alfred H. Barr had to come to their defense.⁹ The identification of modernism with individualism and freedom of expression and abstraction with internationalism was a common language of legitimization for liberal factions in both America and Germany.

The urgency of the political situation in Germany, however, necessitated the formation of highly developed philosophical and historical rationalizations, and as often as not, the underlying political dimension of the moment was spoken through aesthetic issues. Given the political division of the country into competing ideologies of capitalism and socialism, the debate over modernism in early post-war Germany was particularly intense. As cold-war positions hardened after the Berlin Blockade in 1948, the original pluralism of artistic developments in both Russian and allied occupied territories came to take increasingly fixed positions by the early '50s and this ideological polarization found its aesthetic counterpart in the battle between modernist abstraction and social realism.

This came out for instance in the debate between Georg Lukács and Theodor Adorno over the political legitimization of realism and modernism as competing artist formations.¹⁰ In his book titled *Realism in Our Time*, published in West Germany in 1957, Lukács attacked the decadence and alienation in modernist literature, which had become a prevalent theme in existentialist writing in the West. He implied that the normative values of socialist realism were the product of a superior healthy society offered by Socialism. In his review of Lukács' book, Adorno defended themes of alienation in modernist literature and noted that a healthy society cannot be ideologically or institutionally ordained.¹¹ Moreover, Adorno spotted in Lukács' concept of the "socially healthy" those conformist attitudes which "flare up again" after having "survived the epoch of Hitler, when it was institutionalized" and which reflects indignation at "what is unnatural, over-intellectual, morbid and decadent."¹² In the same essay Adorno articulated the fundamental tenets of the modernist position in his statement that "social truth thrives only in works autonomously created" and "art does not provide knowledge of reality by reflecting it photographically or 'from a particular perspective,' but by revealing whatever is veiled by the empirical form assumed by reality, and this is possible only by virtue of art's own autonomous status."¹³ Adorno's arguments here

⁸ Rob Burns "German Intellectuals and Ideology," *New German Critique* 8, Spring 1976, p. 14. Urns discusses the activity around Hans Werner Richter, *Der Ruf* magazine and Gruppe 47. For discussion of Schlesinger and "The Vital Center," see Serge Guibaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1983, p. 191ff.

⁹ Alfred H. Barr jr., "Artistic Freedom (1954)," in Barr, *Defining Modern Art*, Harry N. Abrams, New York, 1986.

¹⁰ Peter Hohendahl, "Art Work and Modernity: The Legacy of Georg Lukács," *New German Critique* 42, Fall 1987, p. 33ff.

¹¹ Theodor Adorno, "Reconciliation Under Duress," found in *Aesthetics and Politics*, New Left Books, London, 1977, p. 151 ff. Quote taken from Theodor Adorno, "On Commitment," in *Aesthetics and Politics*, p. 179.

¹² Adorno, "Reconciliation Under Duress," p. 162.

¹³ Peter-Klaus Schuster, "The 'Inner emigration': Art For No One," *German Art in the Twentieth Century*, Royal Academy

were shared by all the major apologists of modernist art in post-war Germany. This emphasis on the autonomy of modernist art, and especially the apparent autonomy from subject matter offered by abstract art, was an independent and more ideologically determined German version of the same affirmation of modernist autonomy that had emerged from American critics of the same period, Clement Greenberg being the most prominent. In Germany the issue of autonomy was conditioned by two specific historical experiences: the first being the overbearing subjection of art to politics during the Nazi regime, which created an instinctive distaste for “socially responsive” art amongst a sector of modernists in the post-war period; the second being a habit of silence and seclusion, a flight to the inner self amongst the prohibited modernist artists who remained in Germany during the Nazi period – an experience known as “inner emigration.”¹⁴

This debate between the modernists and the traditionalist realists was the central issue of an event in 1950 known as the Darmstädter Gespräch or Darmstadt Dialogue, a symposium held on the occasion of an exhibition focusing on the theme of “The Image of Man in Our Time.”¹⁵ In this symposium the conservative critic, Hans Sedlmayer, who had gained considerable attention through his 1948 book, *The Loss of the Center*, which formulated a vigorous attack on Modernism, met with equally vigorous resistance by the abstractionist Willi Baumeister, who had published his polemic in defense of abstraction in 1947 under the title of *The Unknown in Art*.¹⁶ In contrast to Sedlmayer’s indignation at the “artistic decline” which accompanied the “huge inner catastrophe,” Baumeister proposed that the viewer is enriched by the enigmatic primordial forces released by artistic creation thus allowing the spirit to overcome decay. Baumeister was specifically defending a form of calligraphic mystical abstraction that had evolved in the late ‘30s under the influence of Wassily Kandinsky and Paul Klee, and which was similar to tendencies surfacing in the New York school at the time.

Also present at this symposium was Theodor Adorno who had just returned to a professorship in Frankfurt after a long exile in America. Adorno’s defense of modernism was based on the critical powers of dissonance offered primarily by the model of music, and he urged the modernists to refuse to become the tool of the manipulative mass media, or the “culture industry” as he called it. Adorno’s perception of the values of negativity created by the effect of dissonance in works of art was somewhat more radical both politically and aesthetically than the progressive supporters of modernist abstract painting in a language of redemption, reintegration and affirmative silence.¹⁷ Although Adorno and Baumeister both came down in favor of modernism, their positions remain different in character: Adorno’s “negativity” contrasts with the redemptive tone of Baumeister’s “positivity,” and this contrast sets up comparisons

of Arts, London, 1985, p. 460 ff. ‘Inner Emigration’ was a phrase which emerged during a debate between Thomas Mann and Frank Thiess in which it was identified as a “political attitude of retreat from politics.” ref. Ralf Dahrendorf, *Society and Democracy in Germany*, W.W. Norton, New York, 1967, p. 271.

¹⁴ Hans G. Evers, *Darmstädter Gespräch: Das Menschenbild in unserer Zeit*, Darmstadt, 1950. See also Yule Heibel *In the Fifth Zone: Abstract Painting and Modern Art in the Western Zone of Germany After WWII*, unpublished dissertation, Dept of Fine Arts, UBC, 1986, p. 25 ff.

¹⁵ The title of Sedlmayer’s presentation was “The Dangers of Modern Art.” The audience was noisy in its disapproval of Sedlmayer’s thesis. Re. Evers, *Darmstädter Gespräch*. Baumeister reiterated ideas presented in his 1947 book, *The Unknown in Art (Das Unbekannte in der Kunst)*, Curt E. Schwab, Stuttgart, 1947).

¹⁶ Willi Baumeister, *Ibid*.

¹⁷ By the term silence is meant an “enigmatic” or obscure language; what Adorno referred to as the “jargon of authenticity” and which he saw as the “historically appropriate form of untruth in the Germany of the past years.” In his 1967 introduction Adorno wrote: “It is nothing new to find that the sublime becomes the cover for something low. This is how potential victims are kept in line. But the ideology of the sublime no longer acknowledges itself without being disregarded. To show this fact might help criticism from stagnating in a vague and non-committal suspicion of ideology, a suspicion which has itself fallen into ideology. Contemporary German ideology is careful not to pronounce definite doctrines, such as liberal or even elite ones. Ideology has shifted into language.” Adorno, introduction to *The Jargon of Authenticity*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1973, p. xxi. For further comments on Baumeister and Domnick, see footnote

with the question of pessimism and optimism.

Although it featured traditions of figuration as well as abstraction, the first Documenta decidedly positioned contemporary abstract artists as the legitimate future of the modernist tradition and thus consolidated and legitimated modernist abstraction as the dominant trend for the next decade – a tendency that was reaffirmed in the next two Documenta exhibitions of 1959 and 1964.

The importance of the first Documenta for the promotion of modernism and abstract art had implications outside of Germany as well as inside. Werner Haftmann, who wrote the catalogue essay and directed the selection of painting for the first three Documenta exhibitions, was the instrumental figure in this ideological process. The subtitle of the first Documenta, “Art of the Twentieth Century,” echoes Haftmann’s book, *Painting of the Twentieth Century*, published in Munich in 1954 by Prestel-Verlag, the same publisher of the Documenta catalogue itself.

Haftmann’s book of 1954 was eventually translated into English following the inclusion of contemporary American abstraction in Documenta II in 1959. The publication of a revised text in England in 1960 and in New York in 1965 not only established Haftmann’s book as one of the standard texts of modernism but was also instrumental in transmitting post-war European art to America for a generation of students between 1960 and 1968. This influence was enhanced further when Werner Haftmann, along with Alfred Hentzen, who selected the sculpture for the first Documenta, were co-curators of a major survey of post-war German painting at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1957.¹⁸ We will return to Haftmann’s essay for the Documenta catalogue after we identify a second key figure and describe the exhibition itself.

Arnold Bode, a designer and teacher of exhibition design at the Werkakademie in Kassel, was the original conceiver and designer of the exhibition itself. Stimulated by plans for a national garden show in Kassel, Bode took up the challenge by the mayor to “reflect where art stands today” and called in a team to create an exhibition that would make a definitive statement on the current situation.¹⁹ Bode was above all excited by the process of putting new life into the ruined shell of the Museum Fredericianum which was built in the mid-eighteenth century as the first public museum building in Europe. Badly damaged by air raids in 1942–43, the Fredericianum was still in ruins in 1955, standing as a ghostly reminder of a culture overtaken by the barbarism of the twentieth century. Bode, who was a strong believer in the significance of the modernist movement, foresaw that such a location for an exhibition of “art of our time” would persuade the many opponents of modernism in post-war Germany of the significance of abstract art and the modernist tradition for the regeneration of cultural health in Germany.

But Bode’s excitement was not purely an act of redemption or regeneration. It offered an opportunity to experiment with new display techniques. In an interview in 1977, Bode remarked upon his inspiration at seeing an exhibition in Milan in 1952, in which a large Picasso was hung on steel scaffolding in front of a rough wall.²⁰ Bode’s borrowing of this concept is clearly visible in the installation shots of the first Documenta. Judging from the photographic record, the installation gave an open atmosphere of relaxed and dignified contemplation. The rough, unfinished walls of the damaged Fredericianum were given a fresh coat of paint. Its spacious rooms and high ceilings were accented with a variety of false walls, some

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¹⁸ Werner Haftmann and Alfred Hentzen, *German Art of the Twentieth Century*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1957. T

¹⁹ Arnold Bode (interview), „War wieder eine grossartige Ruine de...“, *Kunstforum International*, March 1977, p. 212.

²⁰ Arnold Bode, *ibid.* p. 212.

painted white and others in black and shades of gray, which were strategically placed for maximum visual effect. Lighting was unobtrusive and hidden by special suspended beams. Natural daylight entering the large ground-floor windows was filtered with white plastic curtains. The floor was left as rough unfinished concrete which made the color of the works and the white brick-work of the walls stand out dramatically.²¹

Bode made a stunningly modern installation in the context of a ruined palace. The image of potentiality and regeneration could not be overlooked by the audience in its time. Bode's aesthetic of modernist design extended from the banners on the exterior to the design of the catalogue cover. Both used typography as an abstract graphic design element in the manner of the Bauhaus school. This was most evident on the cover of the catalogue where the enlarged clean shape of a lower case sans-serif "D" forms a graphic architecture that signified modernity.

These graphic aspects are important. They announce an aesthetic framing which conditions expectations and the readings of the work inside. Thus the variety of work, from the figurative-expressionistic work from the pre-war years to the post-war modernists, was unified under an installation aesthetic that was spectacular without being theatrical, and which allowed each work to speak for itself, yet be seen in harmony with the others.

And in the main hall, a large 1955 abstraction by the Kassel artist Fritz Winter was hung opposite a major Picasso, *Girl Before a Mirror*, 1932, borrowed from the Museum of Modern Art in New York. This was an eloquent attempt to counterpoise a contemporary work by a local Kassel abstractionist with the accomplishments of a major artist of the modern period. Such contextualization was consciously employed in the installation and used to create an atmosphere to legitimate contemporary German modernists in the light of a glamorous representation of key historical works by modern masters such as Picasso, Klee, Fernand Léger and others. This designing of visual spectatorship in the end certainly contributed to the unique success of the exhibition: the legitimization of contemporary modernity in the light of a tradition of modernity, redemption in dignity, spectatorship as a public act of judgment-sharing, a public form of consensus in the form of a public display of individual judgment. This carefully designed theater of redemption was a great success with the public. This was likely helped by the presence of the National Garden Show centered around the Orangerie nearby, but the pictures of crowds and the attendance figure of 130, 000 over the two months of the exhibition (between July 15 and September 18) put the seal of approval on Documenta, placing it on the level of the long-established Venice Biennale.

A statistical gloss reveals the scope of the exhibition at a glance.²² There were over 670 works by 148 painters and sculptors. There were 58 German artists, about one-third of whom were established in the post-war period; that is, in the few years preceding Documenta itself; 42 French artists, again one-third from the post-war period; and 28 Italians also of whom one-third were post-war. There were two Dutch artists, Piet Mondrian and Theo van Doesberg, but the COBRA group and Karl Appel were, surprisingly, missing. Six Swiss artists of the "Concrete Art" school were included, and eight post-war British artists including Henry Moore but missing Francis Bacon who was a big hit in Documenta II, which followed in 1959. In retrospect, however, the biggest surprise was the fact that there were only three Americans:

²¹ The commercial sponsorship of the first Documenta is highlighted by the fact that Göppinger Plastics of Göppingen published an ancillary catalogue to the main exhibition catalogue featuring Bode's installation designs utilizing Göppinger materials and the glowing reviews of Bode's innovations.

²² All the following statistics were taken from the catalogue published on the occasion of the exhibition. *Documenta: Kunst des XX. Jahrhunderts*, Prestel Verlag, Munich, 1955.

Alexander Calder, Joseph Albers, and a painter, Karl Roesch, who was a student of Karl Hofer in Berlin in the '20s, and who immigrated to America in 1933. This absence of Americans was corrected in the next Documenta of 1959, which featured the work of Jackson Pollock, who died in 1956. What this absence of American art underscores, however, is that post-war abstraction in Europe, even the work that has close affinities to the abstract-expressionists of the New York school, such as that of Willi Baumeister or Fritz Winter, was an independent development with its own ideological motivations.

Haftmann did not invite disturbances into the fragile ideological construct of the first Documenta. Considering that it was attempting to be a comprehensive look at modernist art since 1905, the curators, while obviously sympathetic to modernism, nevertheless had a problem with the notion of the avant-garde in its political contexts. Although Haftmann discussed modern painting as expressing a "radical reversal of the existential system of reference" and a "new critical relationship to visible reality," his concept of the political ground of art is essentially a "vision of a global federation," which reveals "its central and luminous 'political idea'."²³ But this global federation is ultimately limited to the Western alliance. His support for a "radical" and "critical" outlook is strictly metaphysical and existential, and precludes any actual change to political society.

"Documenta Art of the Twentieth Century" was missing the Russian Constructivists, the Berlin Dadaists (it included Kurt Schwitters and Marcel Duchamp), German Neue Sachlichkeit artists such as Rudolf Schlichter (who died in May 1955 in Munich) or perhaps more understandable, given the anti-socialist political biases of the Documenta committee, the Weimar revolutionary left of the '30s such as Otto Griebel, Hans Grundig, and John Heartfield. Less understandable (or perhaps, a clear indicator of the political biases of Documenta) was the exclusion of the long, accomplished and courageous career of the socialist Käthe Kollwitz, who died shortly after the fire-bombing of Dresden in 1945. Major Surrealists such as Salvador Dalí and René Magritte were also not included. The selection committee, obviously dominated by Haftmann, made an impressive roster of the conservative – that is, politically neutral – modernist mainstream, informed primarily by the core tradition of German expressionism – that is, those who were already recognized by German museums in the Weimar period.

As for the contemporary post-war artists who comprised a third of the exhibition, and who often were given prize exhibition space, they were predominantly academic abstractionists who worked within the institutions.²⁴ There were certainly some renegades such as Wols, who had emigrated to France in the '30s and died there from acute alcoholism in 1951, but they were isolated cases. It is also telling that such anti-institutional avant-gardists such as Jean Dubuffet and L'Art Brut, or the COBRA group, were left out, even though they had established a presence in Europe by 1955. Yet Haftmann's biases were not totally fixated on abstraction – he did include the dominantly figurative artists Otto Dix and Karl Hofer from the pre-war period – but the post-war generation was definitively dominated by the abstractionists.

Predictably, the exhibition was fundamentally attached to the outline of Haftmann's book of 1954. Haftmann's choices were by and large correct (for the time) but they were not original to him. They were part of a long-accepted pre-war as well as post-war hagiography.²⁵ The outline of Haftmann's text almost

²³ Werner Haftmann, "Moderne Kunst und Ihre ‚Politische Idee‘," *Jahresring*, 1957/58, Deutsche Verlags Anstalt, Stuttgart, p. 84.

²⁴ These artists teaching in the academies included most of the major post-war figures discussed in this essay: Baumeister, Winter, Hofer, Held, Werner, Nay, and numerous others.

²⁵ Curiously, Prestel Verlag of Munich, Haftmann's publisher, in the same year (1954) released an almost identical survey of German art by Ludwig Grote (*Deutsche Kunst im zwanzigsten Jahrhundert*). Grote, in 1953, had organized a major

exactly duplicates Carl Einstein's 1931 *Die Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts*, one of the first comprehensive published surveys of modernist art which has been the primary pre-Nazi text of modern art in German and which was published in a fine hardcover, color-illustrated edition by Propyläen-Kunstgeschichte Berlin, a serious series of period studies in art history.²⁶ Along with an earlier book by Max Hildebrand, Einstein's book must have been the original blueprint for Haftmann's early interests in modernism as a young art historian and critic in Berlin in the early '30s.²⁷ Einstein's book was a highly selective survey which focused on modernist developments; covering Cubism, Futurism and Expressionism but ignoring German academics, symbolists, realists, and impressionists, such as Hans Thoma, Franz von Stuck, and Lovis Corinth. Einstein's book spoke above all to the '20s, and his exclusively modern outlook was used as a guideline when the Nazis came to compile their list of "degenerate artists" for the exhibitions of 1937–38. Troost, the architect of the House of German Art in Munich, where all the official exhibitions of art of the Third Reich were held, used Einstein's book to explain Marxism in art to Hitler and Goebbels.²⁸

By reconstituting the modernist tradition established by Einstein's book, Haftmann recuperated for the '50s those modernists who were first removed from the museums (the modern wing of the National Gallery in Berlin was closed in 1933), then removed from teaching posts (this included Bode, Dix, Klee, Schlemmer, Hofer, and Baumeister), then whose work was confiscated and exhibited with jeering and distasteful slogans in the "Entartete Kunst" exhibitions which toured Germany to record crowds in 1937–38.²⁹ These artists, of course, included all German nationals who were practicing modernist and expressionist styles from 1900 on (as well as foreign modernists in German museums such as Chagall, Kandinsky, and Picasso) including Dix, Nolde, Schlemmer, Klee, Schmidt-Rotluff, Hofer, and Baumeister. As modernist enemies of the new German art promoted by the fascists, the "degenerate" artists were paraded before the community to be scourged and humiliated then removed from history. Winter, Hofer, Baumeister, and Werner, whom we generally think of as post-war modernists, were active before the war but had their exhibiting careers cut short by the fascist regime. Although forbidden to exhibit, they remained in Germany throughout the Third Reich and carried on their work, secretly carrying on the spirit of modern art through the attitude of what later came to be known as "inner emigration." During the

exhibition of German modernists for the Kunstmuseum Lucerne titled "Deutsche Kunst Meisterwerke des 20. Jahrhunderts," and which also, like Haftmann's Documenta line-up, defined the period from Modersohn-Becker to Baumeister.

²⁶ Carl Einstein, *Die Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts*, Propyläen-Kunstgeschichte, 16 Berlin, 1931.

²⁷ By 1930, even before the establishment of the Third Reich, the Nazis had begun to attack the cultural dominance of the modernists in the national museums. Alfred Hentzen, who was to work later with Haftmann on the committee for the first Documenta, was at the time the director of the National Gallery in Berlin and was an avid supporter of modernism. The modern wing of the National Gallery was closed by the Nazis in 1933 and Hentzen was removed from his post. Both Hentzen and Haftmann wrote for the short-lived journal, *Kunst der Nation*, which attempted to keep the modernist movement alive with the National Socialist regime. This journal was for a short while supported by Goebbels who, however, backed away from this support in the face of the more radical anti-modernism of Rosenberg. The journal stopped publication in 1935. After this point the dominant art journal in Germany was *Kunst in der Dritten Reich*, edited for a period by Alfred Speer. ref. Georg Bussman, "'Degenerate Art' – A look at a Useful Myth," in *German Art in the Twentieth Century*, Royal Academy of the Arts, London 1985. pp 116-227. In this atmosphere, Haftmann's commitment to modernism was certainly against the grain of official policy. Although these moderate modernists were relatively untouched by the prejudice of the Nazis, they nevertheless could not maintain a public profile of support for the modernists. They were part of a small discrete circle of modernists centered around the gallery of Gunther Franke in Munich. These contacts later were renewed publicly after the war, resulting in the participants to the committee of the first Documenta. It is likely that the Documenta event might have been secretly fantasized in Munich during the war.

²⁸ For the identification of Einstein's book with the "Entartete Kunst" exhibition, see Berthold Hinz, *Art in The Third Reich*, Pantheon Books, New York, 1979, pp. 24-25.

²⁹ Peter-Klaus Schuster (ed.), *Nationalsozialismus und 'Entartete Kunst'*, Prestel Verlag, Munich, 1987. The attendance figures quoted for the first Munich exhibition of Entartete Kunst (July to November, 1937) seem exceedingly high at 2,009,889. ref. George Bussman, "'Degenerate Art' – A Look at a Useful Myth," in *German Art in the Twentieth Century*, Royal Academy of Arts, London, p. 113. But whatever the actual attendance figures, it is hard to disagree with Bussman's comment (p. 114) that "never before or since has an exhibition of modern art reached a greater number of people, or found a greater resonance, than this anti-exhibition."

prime of their careers they were denied any official public activity. Yet because of this they were granted immediate recognition as untainted martyrs after the Nazi regime fell in 1945, and thus they became prime candidates for important positions in the academies and cultural institutions. Scourged in the '30s they are redeemed in the '50s. And thus the political institutions and the institution of art itself shared in this redemption by returning this generation to a position of eminence.³⁰

The career of Willi Baumeister was a classic instance. His early work won him recognition as a major abstractionist in the '30s. Will Grohmann, who was to play an important supporting role in the return of post-war abstraction and who had a hand in Documenta II, had written a monograph on Baumeister in 1932. Baumeister was removed from his teaching post in 1933 and included in the "Entartete Kunst" exhibitions. During the war years, Baumeister worked secretly on a series of small abstracts on cardboard titled *Gilgamesh* and wrote *The Unknown in Art*, published eventually in 1947. After the war, Baumeister's work became more lighthearted, characterized by an allegorical play of quasi-figurative shapes similar to Joan Miró and the late work of Paul Klee. Baumeister took on a teaching position in the Stuttgart Academy in 1946. He won a prize in the Sao Paolo Biennale in 1951, and his pre-war work was featured in the 1952 Venice Biennale as well as at the first Documenta. As a leading figure who was a outspoken and insistent partisan of abstract art in the face of efforts to undermine the return of modernism in the post-war period, he came into conflict with the government over his objection to the placing of a virulent anti-modernist as consul in Paris and confronted the conservative anti-modernist Hans Sedlmayr in the famous Darmstädter Gespräch in 1951. Baumeister died in Stuttgart on August 31, 1955, during the first Documenta in which his work was given a place of honor. He still stands as one of the most important artists of this period.

Another exemplary figure was the Berlin artist Karl Hofer. As a pre-war figurative expressionist who had an influence as a teacher promoting work which was political, critical, figurative, and allegorical, Hofer, along with Käthe Kollwitz, lost his teaching position at the Prussian Academy of Art in Berlin in 1934. And also being included in the "Entartete Kunst" exhibition, he was forbidden to exhibit. During this period though, he painted some of his most powerful allegories, including the 1943 painting, *The Black Room*, which was featured in the first Documenta. At the end of the war, his new position as the principal of the Hochschule der Bildenden Kunst in Berlin made him one of the leading spokesmen for an allegorical, tendentious figurative art in the early post-war period. As such he thus found himself in opposition to the partisans of abstraction, and he thus became identified (perhaps unfairly in the eyes of the avant-garde) with a worn-out academic and stylistically conservative figurative tradition. Nevertheless, in fact Hofer was an open-minded supporter of all forms of art.³¹ His influence is still visible in the work of such contemporary German painters as A. R. Penck, the early work of Georg Baselitz and Jörg Immendorf. Hofer died in Berlin in the spring of 1955 at age 78.

The painter Fritz Winter was of a slightly younger generation. Born in 1905, he attended the Bauhaus in the late '20s as a student of Klee, Kandinsky, and Oscar Schlemmer. When the Nazi reactionary period foreclosed on his career in the 1930s, he worked privately in the Munich region, painting small, dark, anguished abstractions, typical of the pessimistic mood of "inner emigration." After a period of internment in a Russian prisoner of war camp, Winter joined Arnold Bode on the teaching staff of the

³⁰ It should be noted, however, that the intellectuals such as Haftmann, Alfred Hentzen, and Will Grohmann were able to continue working in the context of the Universities throughout the Nazi regime. This likely has a bearing on their own responses to modernism in the post-war period.

³¹ Karl Hofer, „Zur Situation der Bildenden Kunst,“ *Der Monat*, vol.8, no. 77, 1955, p. 425.

Werkakademie in Kassel and in 1955 was appointed professor. At Documenta in Kassel, as we have seen, a large painting of Winter's was proudly displayed opposite Picasso's *Girl Before a Mirror*. Similar careers can be traced in the work of Werner Heldt, Ernst Nay, Theodor Werner, Werner Gillies, Emile Schumacher, and others.

Although the first Documenta gave a great deal of prize space to the recognized pre-war masters (Picasso was featured with 21 works from the post-war period alone), this "lost generation" of the 1930s were positioned to inherit the future. In order to reintegrate contemporary German modernists to the mainstream of modern art, Haftmann, in his own book, and especially in his revised editions, as well as in Documenta, positioned Baumeister, Winter, and other abstractionists as the post-war European school of the future – the new abstraction as the "New Reality," a "truly metaphysical experience that gave them new meaning" which had been "revealed to them in a flash of illumination."³²

Werner Haftmann's own career has a bearing on the theme of redemption. Born in 1912, he studied art history in Berlin, and in the early '30s he contributed to the short-lived magazine, *Kunst der Nation*, which attempted to create a climate of acceptance for modernism within the National Socialist regime.³³ Working in Munich in the late '30s, that is, during the time of the first great exhibitions of Nazi art and the first "Entartete Kunst" exhibitions, he published a monograph on the sculptor Ludwig Kaspar, who was included in Documenta. During much of the war he worked in art-historical research in Florence where he developed his contacts with the still active Italian modernists. After the war he promoted the cause of the modernists and published a monograph on both Paul Klee and Fritz Winter in 1951, and subsequently his *Painting in the Twentieth Century* in 1954. Haftmann since then has published on modernists such as Chagall and Emil Nolde and was director of the National Gallery in Berlin until his death in 1980.

Haftmann's background as an art historian prepared him to view the present in terms of an historical perspective, a perspective touched with Hegelian terminology and idealism. Haftmann was perfectly suited to sense the significance that the most marginal and modest works could hold within the larger scope of history, and it is within this larger scope that Haftmann could monumentalize the miniature (one thinks of the small scale of Klee's late works). From his historical ideology, the modest achievements of the German modernists could be written as more than history – they could be incarnated as destiny. Haftmann was insistent that the contemporary work in the first Documenta be reviewed once again in terms of the tradition of modernism (particularly German modernism) since 1905 (beginning with the work of Paula Modersohn-Becker). For Haftmann the specific situation of German culture demanded "a broad attempt based in history, so that this fleeting, permanently-changing and one-dimensional 'present' point in time, regains its depth and multidimensionality."³⁴ The terrible disasters of the recent past, which had stunned Germany with the prohibitions and perverted loyalties of fascism, and the devastations and fears which touched everyone in the closing years of the war, followed by the denazification program of the allied occupation forces, had forced a stunned silence on the German people, a desire for the erasure of history. Haftmann insisted on the regeneration of memory, a regeneration of the traditions of German modernism, and that the present should be viewed in terms of this modernism which the previous generation had vilified as "degenerate" and "un-German." Haftmann forced reconciliation with these divided loyalties.

³² Werner Haftmann, *Painting in the Twentieth Century*, London, 1960, p. 12.

³³ On the journal *Kunst der Nation*, ref. footnote 27 above.

³⁴ Werner Haftmann, Introduction to the catalogue for *Documenta: Kunst des XX. Jahrhunderts*, 1955, p. 16.

But Haftmann's language is veiled; he forces his own silence on the events of the recent past. He could not speak the name of the shameful history of which everyone was a part, but neither did he avoid the issue. He only alludes to it indirectly, as though he could assume that the reader would already know what the essence of the subject was. In the introduction to his essay in the Documenta catalogue he wrote: "I guess we cannot get around touching once more upon these painful memories of the recent past, in which Germany stepped out of the united efforts of the European spirit, and isolated itself through a seemingly bizarre iconoclastic attack that rejected already-obtained achievements of this effort in all areas."³⁵ It was not just the disaster of the war as such that Haftmann is referring to – he is also specifically referring to the Nazi rejection of European modernism and the German exponents of it.

But more importantly, Haftmann also stresses that although "the discrediting of modern art" was a great injustice, it could not touch the "inner substance" of modernist commitment – it merely forced the modernists who stayed in Germany to retreat underground and embody a symbolic resistance, a resistance that is only expressed in a private and individuated form – an attitude later termed "inner emigration," a retreat to an ideal autonomy of the self reflected in the work of art. Because of this illusory autonomy from the political reality of fascism, the artist was also able to transcend the isolation of the self. In Haftmann's view, the cultural and political ideology of the Third Reich could not affect history in the larger scale because it could not touch the inner ideal of artistic autonomy which kept the thread of modernist ideals, alive during the dark years. "It did not change the course of the artist's calling, since his entire being was embedded in an inevitable logical consistency (Folgerichtigkeit) which was at the basis of the general structural change of spirit of the epoch."³⁶ In this quasi-Hegelian (and Heideggerian) language Haftmann totalizes the relations of the artist as an individual within a universalized and rationalized dimension of history. This Hegelian romanticism positions the autonomous artist as the microbe who can defy the aberrant history of the immediate present in the name of a history that is a logical and inevitable continuum of all time. Again, Klee's late works painted on burlap and Baumeister's *Gilgamesh* series of 1943 painted on cardboard, stand as ciphers for this ragged determination. The use of a "primitive" or prehistoric calligraphy as a "secret language" to camouflage the "deep subject" was characteristic of the late work of Klee and especially Baumeister, who discussed the relevance of prehistoric art as offering enigmatic ciphers for a new spirit of modernist abstraction in his 1947 book, *The Unknown in Art*, written during the war.³⁷

The modernist version of the spirit of the epoch (the zeitgeist) allows history itself to redeem the "painful memories of the recent past." The spirit of the epoch demanded a "negation of the object" – and predictably, Haftmann reaches to analogies of science to fortify his argument, and also predictably he translates them into Hegelian generalizations, thus bypassing any contradictions that might arise from an examination of specifics in favour of the widest, most malleable and metaphorical concept of the issue at

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ A discussion by Serge Guilbaut on the issue of "camouflage" and representation in relation to the abstract paintings of Jackson Pollock has a bearing on the work of Baumeister, although the motivations must have been different. Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, p. 197. Guilbaut rejects the probability of any "secret" message lurking behind the surfaces of Pollock's painting, and if there is in Baumeister's paintings, one could only guess at its content. However, Baumeister frequented the circle of Dr. Ottomar Domnick, a neurologist and writer from Stuttgart who attempted to theorize a "will to form" in terms that were both existentialist and psychoanalytic: "The man and his work are one. But this occurs on a higher plane because unconscious factors, which cannot be controlled by the artist, nourish his work. These forces originating from the depth of his personality impregnate the artistic creation and are subdued by it. Thus the spirit conquers the chaos of emotion. Here form and content, expression and creation become identical." Domnick, "Expression and Creation," in *Hans Hartung*, Domnick Verlag, Stuttgart, 1949, p. 54-55. Domnick was a participant at the Darmstädter Gespräch.

hand, what Adorno described as the “Jargon of Authenticity.”³⁸ Referring to Kandinsky, Umberto Boccioni, and Franz Marc, Haftmann rooted the “ground of reality” of their art “in its replacement of matter with that of fields of vibration.” Haftmann advances this to a now-familiar conclusion: “algebraic proportions replaced object-related geometry and produced the image as an independent object in itself – an autonomous object in whose rhythm and proportions the human spirit could realize itself visibly.”³⁹ The attempt to articulate some basis of knowledge other than in the realm of representation (and its attendant social and political references) characterized most of the writing in Germany at this time. Science, psychology, and metaphysics were all called upon to perform a task that could free the subject from the actual political consequences of their concepts and works and reduce empirical reality into an atomistic pulverization of form “which is verifiable only as a reflection of reflections which shine mysteriously into our earthly system of reference.”⁴⁰ This search for camouflage offered by a metaphysical and existentialist retreat from the world which characterized the attitude of “inner emigration” during the Nazi period seems to have hung over well past the war as a dominant world outlook.⁴¹

Earlier in his essay, Haftmann introduced a curious reference to “the massive mobilization of the pacifiers of the dogmas of mass happiness,” which frightened the general consciousness of contemporary culture out of the continuity of art.⁴² Here, again, Haftmann is using an oblique language to refer to a specific feeling that could scarcely be spoken: that is, that the now-despised regime of fascism for a few brief years, 1933–40, captured the imagination of the people and simultaneously with the elimination of modernist art, opened up a glimpse of utopia and heroic idealism through a glorification of mass culture. This was accomplished by the total mobilization of mass media, of illustrated magazines, of radio, and spectacle festivals – what Adorno would later call the culture industry; those devices of modern communication that form mass desire, limiting it, and channeling it to the objectives of a repressive state, aided by a language of false legitimization. The original Volkswagen was called the “strength through joy” car (or Kraft durch Freude, KdF), named by Hitler after the organization, which was, in his own words, “the most concerned with filling the broadest masses of people with joy, and thus with strength.”⁴³ This KdF car never became available on the domestic market until after the war, even though the factory was financed through a saving stamp system which started in 1938. In any case, this “mass happiness” was part of the experience that made it difficult for post-war Germans to accept the idea of collective guilt. Haftmann is identifying with an innate skepticism of mass media advertising that was typical of both the modernists that the Nazis despised (e. g. Adorno) as well as the academics that they tolerated (e. g. Heidegger). For Haftmann and most cultural liberals in Germany at this time the truth of national destiny was to be found in the profundity of cultural accomplishments and not in the delusions of political or commercial

³⁸ Theodor W. Adorno, *The Jargon of Authenticity*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1973.

³⁹ Werner Haftmann, *ibid.* p. 20.

⁴⁰ Werner Haftmann, *Painting in the Twentieth Century*, Vol. 2, Praeger, New York, 1967, p. 9.

⁴¹ The most prominent figure representing this outlook was the Freiburg philosopher Martin Heidegger, who was the subject of the scathing critique of the “jargon of authenticity” published by Adorno. While the escape from the “actual” is expressed on the macrocosmic level in Haftmann’s writing, Heidegger retreats into the inner world of the contemplation of being, self-existence, or Dasein; on what he calls meditative thinking as opposed to calculative thinking: “It is enough if we dwell on what lies close and meditate on what is closest; upon that which concerns us, each one of us, here and now; here on this patch of home ground; now, in the present hour of history.” Martin Heidegger, “Memorial Address” (1955), in *Discourse on Thinking*, trans. by John M. Anderson and E. Hans Freud, Harper and Row, New York, 1966. The fact that Heidegger was forgiven his enthusiastic support of Nazi regime is an indicator of the ideological impact of his outlook and the language through which it is expressed.

⁴² Werner Haftmann, introduction to the catalogue for *Documenta: Kunst des XX. Jahrhunderts*, 1955, p. 17. The relevant section in the original German text reads as follows: “Sie wurde durch den massierten Einsatz der Betörungsmittel der Massenglücksdogmen gerade aus jener Kontinuität des Denkens herausgeschreckt...” English translation by Marcus Kreuzer.

⁴³ Frederic V. Grunfeld, *The Hitler File*, Random House, New York, 1974.

hucksterism.

But closer to the immediate political situation of the mid-50s that stood as a backdrop to the first Documenta, was the phenomenal success in West Germany of the “economic miracle” of Conrad Adenauer of the Christian Democratic Party (CDU) who defeated the socialists by a slight majority in the first post-war elections of 1949. Adenauer’s finance minister, Ludwig Erhard, along with the help of the Marshall Plan, was able to restore economic health back to West Germany, quickly surpassing the performance of the Nazis, who had been partially legitimated in the late ‘30s for their economic policies. After Adenauer subsequently won a landslide victory over the Social Democratic Party (SDP) in the election of 1953, Germany moved irreversibly towards the west – that is, towards Europe and away from Berlin, Berlin standing for a painful memory which the socialists wanted to return to in order that it not return as reality.

In the fall of 1955, Adenauer went to Moscow to seek the unification of Germany, but instead was forced to diplomatically recognize the Soviet Union in order to secure the release of 10,000 German prisoners of war still held by the Russians. This diplomatic recognition set the stage for the apparently irreversible separation of East and West Germany. The next year the Bonn government outlawed the Communist Party, and proceeded full steam towards developing the consumer society.⁴⁴ This move involved a definitive turn towards abstract art as a design motif for a new consumer ideology. “Style” became politics, as it was in the fascist period, but the style and the politics were now modernist and internationalist. In the new society oriented towards the West, the design motif of abstraction entered the “inner being” of all consuming desirers; so that the formerly tortured shapes of Fritz Winter’s paintings, such as his 1944 abstracts, turned into relaxed, tumbling, exciting colors and shapes that resonated with the mood of cheerful pleasure and gratification which dominated the mood of all advertising at this time. Abstract art linked up with product design to create the distinctive style of the ‘50s, one that identified modernism with the materialistic goals that guaranteed “mass happiness.”

At one point in his introductory essay in the Documenta catalogue, Haftmann obliquely refers to Adenauer’s vision of a united Europe, or his own vision of a world federation established by the common language of art, when he refers to the dream of Jean Jaures “in which art became reality, in which European nations can become a bouquet, in which each flower preserves its own smell and color yet still fuses into a bigger whole.”⁴⁵ The multi-colored bouquet-like pulsations of color that characterize Ernst W. Nay’s new painting beginning in 1955 are the most telling emblem of this emphasis upon aesthetic pleasure and internationalist pluralism. We might also recall that the first Documenta was the artistic afterthought to a major international garden show. Documenta was that “utopia” that was recuperated in an international context and in the language of modern abstract art, that “other” earlier despised as a degeneration of the species: not hard, like the sinewy muscles of Arno Breker’s ideal “party man”; but soft and malleable, like the buttery forms of Baumeister’s paintings, those enigmatic ideograms which now informed the language of everyday life.

On the cover of the January 1956 issue of *Die Kunst und das schöne Heim*, a magazine dedicated to linking the latest in interior decoration to the latest in modern art, Baumeister’s work provided design motifs for domestic fabrics, kitchen curtains, and drapery in the latest modernist style. This tendency, exemplified by Baumeister’s work, for modernist abstraction to lose its autonomy and become absorbed into the

⁴⁴ Gordon A. Craig, *The Germans*, G. P. Putnam’s, New York, 1982, p. 47.

⁴⁵ Werner Haftmann, *ibid.* Haftmann was fond of repeating this quote and it appears in a number of other essays as well.

everyday, the vernacular language for consumer society, was not necessarily the destiny for all modernist art of the period. It was quickly reversed by the radical tendencies of the late '60s, when the questions of memory, society, and tragedy were reintroduced in the work of Joseph Beuys. But for a brief period of euphoria needed by a generation that had suffered so much during the previous few decades, the liberation promised by the modernist avant-garde was the freedom from memory and guilt. The first Documenta was the culmination and result of this need.

In summary, we can describe the function and effect of this exhibition as an act of redemption, reconciliation, and reintegration. It was a closing of the wound. And the tone of this endeavor was not pessimistic in the least. Instead, the rather optimistic mood of the new abstraction allowed for an indeterminate and enigmatic language that promised both depth of feeling and an obscuring of the painful memories of the past. But this required for the public of the post-war period a re-recognition of the language of modernism and a re-enacting of the spectacle of public judgment that recalls the function of the "Entartete Kunst" exhibitions of 1937–38.

Although much of the modernist work of the early twentieth century took place in the private domain as a connoisseurship of the specialized audiences of an educated or artistic elite, some aspects of the public salon culture carried on over to the large independent salons which endeavored to introduce modernism to the general public, the Armory Show of 1913, and the Dresden Exhibition of 1927, are major examples. But when the ceremonies of public judgment were enacted in the Nazi "House of German Art" exhibitions (and the "Entartete Kunst" exhibitions) of 1937 they created an exaggeration of the habits of ideological over aesthetic viewing, or more accurately a collusion between the two.⁴⁶

This prepared the public (the mass audience, or at least the bourgeois sector that looked to art for its ideological self-determination) for the habit of viewing post-war abstract art in ideological terms; to seek in the work not merely aesthetic satisfaction, but a reflection of social, ideological, political values and a reaffirmation of values assumed by the dominant class, in this case new (modernist) values for a new middle class rising from the social ruins of the Nazi period. This presents an aesthetic judgment in terms that are simultaneously ideological. The implication of this argument is that by virtue of the (usually unspoken) theme of redemption as the backdrop to this spectacle of value and judgment, the mass public of Documenta was given the opportunity to publicly share in the demonstration of judgment, and thus partake in the public spectacle of redemption; in the recuperation and rectification of a fundamental mistake, that being the previous scourging of modernism in the "Entartete Kunst" exhibitions. The public could display to each other their part in this process through the enactment of the exercise of judgment. In an article from 1959, on the occasion of the second Documenta, Haftmann wrote: "For I would wish that Documenta should not only be a convenient pretence for aesthetic discussions and information, but equally a means of becoming acquainted with inner proceedings and their solution – as a kind of self-interrogation for the public as well as the artist."⁴⁷ This is what Documenta gave the public in the summer of 1955.

⁴⁶ Hitler was in the habit of giving long violent speeches at the openings of the annual House of German Art exhibitions in Munich. Peter-Klaus Schuster, *ibid.*

⁴⁷ Werner Haftmann, "On the Content of Contemporary Art," *Quadrum*, VII, 1959, p. 22.