

# ***documenta, or: Flight to Afar***

## Displaying the Exhibition's Nazi Continuities and Escapist Fictions at *documenta fifteen*

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Nanne Buurman

In 2019/20, it was revealed that a number of *documenta* founders – Werner Haftmann most prominent among them – had been members of the Nazi party (NSDAP) and the SA. When these memberships came to light, there was a palpable tendency to individualise guilt and responsibilities as ›the deeds of great men‹ and to relegate them to history. Indeed, by focusing on individual biographies and drawing a line after 1945, this historiographic framing tended to obscure the discursive continuities that the network of *documenta* founding fathers had reiterated from the 1930s to the 1950s and beyond. The rigour with which new findings were initially diminished or denied, primarily in the context of panels and conferences,<sup>1</sup> in order to uphold the heroic myth of *documenta* as a quasi-antifascist counter-exhibition to the Nationalist Socialist exhibitions of so-called ›degenerate art‹ almost felt like a re-enactment of the self-purifying art historical and curatorial practices of the *documenta* founding fathers, who turned *documenta* into a laundering machine for German (art) history in the 1950s.<sup>2</sup> The tendency to externalise responsibilities and point fingers at others also characterised the reactions to instances of antisemitism at last year's *documenta fifteen* (2022). Once

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1 During the discussions at the German Historical Museum Berlin's *documenta, Art, Politics* symposium in 2019, several prominent members of the audience relativised the findings of NS-backgrounds presented there, as did several of my co-panelists during the online symposium *Täter oder Opfer? (Perpetrators or Victims?)* at the Kunsthochschule Kassel in June 2021.

2 See Nanne Buurman: »The Exhibition as a Washing Machine? Some Notes on Historiography, Contemporaneity, and (Self-)Purification in *documenta*'s Early Editions«, in: Syrago Tsirara/Louisa Avgita (eds.): *Stasis. Taking a Stance. Catalogue of the Thessaloniki Biennale 2019*, Thessaloniki: Metropolitan Organization of Museums of Visual Arts 2020, pp. 103-111.

again, an othering of guilt and responsibility left the structural continuities of antisemitism *and* racism in the German cultural field unaddressed, with claims that at *documenta fifteen* »art had lost its innocence«.<sup>3</sup> By drawing attention to the ways in which documenta-related discourses in the 1950s and 2020s took flight in aesthetic escapism – similar to German post-war literature's redemptive and revisionist flights of fantasy<sup>4</sup> – to get far away from complicities and take refuge in a myth of the exhibition's immaculate conception following the bloodshed of the Shoah and World War II, this essay seeks to demonstrate how such fictions may be exposed in modes of writing and curating that address these very historiographic frictions reflexively.

Since I consider exhibitions neither as sanctuaries to protect the idea of art's innocence nor as hospitals to heal unhealable historical wounds but as political economies, where hegemonies are both upheld and challenged by cultural practices that in/voluntarily re/produce epistemological and social infrastructures,<sup>5</sup> in this paper I will problematise the redemptive functions of documenta as a quasi-religious site of salvation by revisiting my own contribution to *documenta fifteen*.<sup>6</sup> At the invitation of Atis Rezistans/Ghetto Biennale Haiti, I organised the »g/hosting the past« project, which took place in September 2022 at their *d15*-venue St. Kunigundis, a desacralised Catholic church in Kassel's east.<sup>7</sup>

3 Heinz Bude/Brittta Bürger: *Die Kunst hat ihre Unschuld verloren*, <https://www.deutschland-funkkultur.de/bilanz-der-documenta-100.html> [accessed: 29.09.2023]; see also Nanne Buurman: »Angels in the White Cube. Rhetoriken kuratorischer Unschuld bei der dOCUMENTA (13)«, in: *FKW/Zeitschrift für Geschlechterforschung und visuelle Kultur* 58 (April 2015), pp. 63-74.

4 For the shifts in scholarship on German post-war literature from initially affirmative to increasingly critical assessments of the author's false autobiographical and historical claims, see Neil H. Donahue/Doris Kircher (eds.): *Flight of Fantasy. New Perspectives on Inner Emigration in German Literature, 1933-1945*, New York/Oxford: Berghahn Books 2003.

5 See Nanne Buurman: »Wages for Networking? Curating as a Labour of Love, or: Canonization, Capitalization and Care«, in: id./Anna Schäffler/Friederike Schäfer (eds.): *Networks of Care. Politiken des (Er)haltens und (Ent)sorgens*, Berlin: nGbK 2022, pp. 30-35.

6 In their first statement after being nominated as artistic directors of *documenta 15* in 2019, ruangrupa asked, »if documenta was launched in 1955 to heal war wounds, why shouldn't we focus on today's injuries?«. For the ambivalent curatorial discourses of healing, see Nanne Buurman: »Un/heimliche Nachbarschaften? Zum völkischen Unbewussten in kuratorischen, kunsthistorischen und künstlerischen Diskursen«, in: *Kritische Berichte* 3 (2023), pp. 48-55; see also id.: »Vom Gefängniswärter zur Heilerin. Kuratorische Autorschaften im Kontext vergeschlechtlichter Ökonomien«, in: *Kritische Berichte* 4 (2016), pp. 114-121.

7 See <https://documenta-fifteen.de/en/calendar/g-hosting-the-past/> and, for a continuation of the project in 2024, see <https://ghettobiennale.org/> [accessed: 29.09.2023].



*Fig. 1: Installation views of »angels of history: gothic gowns/formless forms«, book display by Nanne Buurman in the context of the »Ghetto Biennale« at St. Kunigundis during »documenta fifteen« (2022). Left and right of the altar, figures by Jean Claude Saintilus. Mosaics of Queen Kunigunde and Heinrich II in the apse, by Walter Klocke (1942). Wooden sculptures in background, anonymous (Photo: Nicolas Wefers).*

Drawing on my research into the ways in which *völkisch*-nationalist networks, discourses and aesthetics continued to inform documenta on a personal, epistemological and economic level after World War II,<sup>8</sup> my individual contribution to the project dealt with documenta as a haunted house – haunted, as it is, by the undead Germanic spirits of the past that live on between the pages of books and the walls of exhibitions.<sup>9</sup> Titled »angels of history: gothic gowns/ formless forms«, my research materialised as a book display on the church altar

8 For instance, Nanne Buurman: »Northern Gothic: Werner Haftmann's German Lessons, or A Ghost (Hi)Story of Abstraction«, in: *documenta studies* 11 (2020), pp. 1-49; id.: »d steht für Demokratie? Die Politik der Abstraktion zwischen Arisierung und Amerikanisierung«, in: *Expressionismus* 17 (2023), pp. 97-117.

9 *g/hosting the past* was a follow-up of the exhibition *wir alle sind gespenster. haunting infrastructures* that I organised in 2021 at Kunstverein Kassel in the *Museum Fridericianum* as co-leader of the *dis\_continuities* research group; see <https://www.kasselerkunstverein.de/ausstellung/kkvexh/detail/kkv/wir-alle-sind-gespenster> and <https://kunsthochschulekassel.de/willkommen/news/dis-kontinuitaeten-/dis-continuities.html> [accessed: 29.09.2023].

(Fig. 1 & 2).<sup>10</sup> The arrangement of books as aesthetic objects allowed me to trace transhistorical material and textual relationships in an associative non-linear way that also takes into account their visual qualities. Since the whole constellation was pregnant with multiple meanings, manifold visual, historical and intellectual cross-references, which I cannot possibly disentangle in this short article, I focus on one exhibit that served as a secret key to the entire display: Alfred Andersch's novel *Flight to Afar* (orig. *Sansibar oder der letzte Grund*, 1957).<sup>11</sup>



Fig. 2: Installation views of 'angels of history: gothic gowns/formless forms', book display by Nanne Buurman in the context of the 'Ghetto Biennale' at St. Kunigundis during 'documenta fifteen' (2022). Focus on Wilhelm Pinder's 'Der Naumburger Dom und Seine Bildwerke' (1933, from the series 'Deutsche Dome'), featuring pictures of the donor figures Uta and Ekkehard, whose gowns, folds and draperies he describes in detail. Below: Franz Fühmann: 'Das Schlimme Jahr' (1963) with Barlach sculptures (Photo: Nicolas Wefers).

<sup>10</sup> The »angel of history« features in Walter Benjamin's »Theses on the Philosophy of History«, in: id.: *Illuminations. Essays and Reflections*, ed. by Hannah Arendt, translated by Harry Zohn, New York: Schocken Books 1968, pp. 253-264.

<sup>11</sup> Throughout this text I quote from the German language edition, Alfred Andersch: *Sansibar oder der Letzte Grund*, Zürich: Diogenes 1993. All translations into English are my own.

## Angels of History: Gothic Gowns/Formless Forms

This famous example of German literature about coming to terms with the past (Vergangenheitsbewältigungsliteratur) is as ambivalent as *documenta* itself. Like Siegfried Lenz' novel *German Lesson* (*Deutschstunde*, orig. 1968), *Flight to Afar* was/is not only canonical school reading but also shaped the West German perception of the Nationalist Socialist persecution of modern art. Moreover, both novels can also be read as fictionalisations of historical actions and retrospective literary recastings of Nazi collaboration into conscientious care. In my essay »Northern Gothic. Werner Haftmann's German Lessons or, a Ghost (Hi)story of Abstraction« (2020), presented on the pulpit of the St. Kunigundis in a reader with some of my other texts on *völkisch*-nationalist continuities by way of contextualisation, I speculated whether Lenz' novel might be a secret problematisation of Werner Haftmann's work for the German Military Protection of Art (Deutscher Kunstschatz) in Italy and a euphemistic resignification or 'laundering' of its acts of art looting into acts of protection and care. In a parallel way, I now suggest that the inglorious role of the German Protestant Art Service (Deutscher Evangelischer Kunstdienst) in the selling of art looted in the context of the campaign against 'degenerate art' (Aktion Entartete Kunst) may have made its way into Andersch's *Flight to Afar*, thus also referring to the Nationalist Socialist past of a lesser-known *documenta* founding father.

Whereas the so-called 'inner emigration' of the expressionist painter Emil Nolde is fictionalised in *German Lesson* as the story of an artist named Nansen, *Flight to Afar* centres on the wooden sculpture of a reading monk, which can be attributed to the expressionist sculptor Ernst Barlach (»Lesender Klosterschüler«, 1930). After the war, both artists were celebrated as prominent victims of Nationalist Socialist persecution despite the fact that they had *völkisch*-nationalist affinities themselves and were appreciated by many Nazis in the 1930s as prime examples of Nordic Abstraction and significant expressions of the German spirit. It is not unlikely that the display of the Barlach sculptures at the first *documenta* (1955) served Andersch as an inspiration for the novel, which appeared two years later in 1957, providing the same exculpating mythology of modernity that *documenta* had staged (Fig. 3). Like Nolde's paintings, Barlach's sculptures were often read, along the lines of Wilhelm Worringer's *Abstraction and Empathy* (orig. *Abstraktion und Einfühlung*, 1908), as an expression of the Northern peoples' spirit of abstraction, which Worringer saw incarnated in the

gothic gowns of medieval sculpture,<sup>12</sup> such as those of Uta von Naumburg, whose ›Aryan beauty‹ was celebrated in official Nazi art history by the likes of Pinder. (Fig. 2).<sup>13</sup> With this in mind, it is perhaps less surprising that in 1933/1934, works by Nolde and Barlach, among them the very reading monk later starring in the novel *Flight to Afar*, were exhibited at the German exhibition of *Modern Ecclesiastical Art* at the Chicago World's Fair (Fig. 4 & 5).<sup>14</sup> Hitler himself had commissioned the German Protestant Art Service to organise the show, and amongst its curators was the later documenta co-founder Stephan Hirzel.



Fig. 3: Emil Nolde's painting ›Der Herrscher‹ (The Ruler) and Ernst Barlach's sculptures ›Der Zweifler‹ (The Skeptic) and ›Der Berserker‹ at the first documenta (1955), on display at Museum Fridericianum (Photo: Hilmar Deist, Copyright: documenta archive).

12 For Worringer and the historical discourses of abstraction, see Buurman: »Northern Gothic« and »d steht für Demokratie?« (footnote 8).

13 Barlach's reading monk was most likely inspired by a medieval oak wood sculpture of the reading monk »Johannes the Evangelist«, produced in a Rostock workshop around 1430; see Friedhelm Niggemeier: *Begegnungen. Alfred Andersch und Ernst Barlach*, Norderstedt: self-published 2010, pp. 51-61.

14 The wooden sculpture of the reading monk was 1.15 meters high and owned by the industrialist Richard van Tongel. After Chicago it was also shown in an exhibition of ecclesiastical art during the 1936 Olympic games in Berlin. Von Tongel's widow kept the sculpture and sold it in the 1960s to the *Volkskammer* of the GDR. Several variants in bronze, plaster and wood, in different sizes, were made in the early 1930s.



Fig. 4: View of the German exhibit of Modern Ecclesiastical Art at the 'Chicago World's Fair' (1933) in the journal *Weltkunst*, 25 June 1933, Nr. 26, p. 4, with the mosaic 'Group of Angels' by August Babberger and Barlach sculptures. Der 'Sänger' (Singing Monk, left) was private property of Karl Gustav Heise bequeathed to St. Katerinen Church Lübeck. The sculpture 'Andacht' is also known as 'Lesender Klosterschüler' (Reading Monk, right).

*Flight to Afar* is set in 1937, three years after the show, in the north of Germany. A young underground member of the Communist Party named Gregor has business in Rerik, a small coastal town on the Baltic Sea, where he meets the nationalist conservative pastor and Verdun-veteran Helander, who asks him to smuggle away the church's modernist wood carving of the reading monk in order to protect the sculpture from capture by Nazi officials (Fig. 6). Because Gregor has lost his communist faith and exchanged it for a depoliticised aesthetic worldview, he agrees to take on this mission, considering desertion to Sweden himself. The novel not only celebrates the character's choice of desertion and his detached aestheticisation of political landscapes as abstract colourful tableaus to be morally adequate acts of emancipation, which replace adherence to restrictive party politics by an individualistic, disinterested, aesthetic asceticism or 'inner emigration'.

It also heroises the rescue of the artwork under threat of Nazi confiscation by comparing it with Gregor's decision to rescue Judith Levin, a young Jewish woman from Hamburg, who is stuck in the village on her flight to avoid deportation. This inappropriate comparison of the rescue of a Jewish woman, threatened by systematic Nazi mass murder, to the rescue of an artwork that is described in an animistic humanising way, sometimes evoking the impression that this wooden sculpture of a Protestant monk deserves rescue more than the »spoiled young girl from a well-to-do Jewish family«,<sup>15</sup> is typical of the German post-war art historiography staged at documenta.



Fig. 5: Article on the German exhibition of Modern Ecclesiastical Art at the 'Chicago World's Fair' (1933) in the journal 'Die Form' (later 'Schönheit der Arbeit'), Vol 6, 1933, p. 190.



Fig. 6: Cover of one of the many German paperback editions of Alfred Andersch's *Flight to Afar*, with still from the 1987 movie directed by Berhard Wicki.

<sup>15</sup> Andersch: *Sansibar* (footnote 11), p. 108 and p. 111, my translation from the German: »verwöhntes junges Mädchen aus reichem jüdischem Haus«



Fig. 7: Advertisement for the so-called 'Winter Aid' in the journal *Kunst der Nation* (1933-1935), featuring Barlach's sculpture 'Frierendes Mädchen' ('Freezing Girl, 1917).

In Werner Haftmann's introduction to the first *documenta*'s catalogue and in his writings on Nolde, which served Lenz as a blueprint for the novel *German Lesson*, the defamation of modern art as degenerate is time and again mourned as the Nazis' main crime, with no mention of the real human victims of German mass murder. This overemphasising of the dangers for modern art by art historians like Haftmann allowed its defenders after 1945 to stage themselves as resistance fighters, who heroically protected the 'innocent' modern art under threat, although a disagreement with the official art doctrine of Nationalist Socialist realism (which officially prevailed only in 1937) was by no means equal to political disagreement with the regime, much less a fight against it.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, art historians like Haftmann, a former member of the Nazi party and its paramilitary wing, the SA, who had not only praised Nolde and Barlach in the journal of the NS-Student-Union *Kunst der Nation* ('Art of the Nation', Fig. 7) but also participated in the persecution of resistant fighters

<sup>16</sup> See Buurman: »Washing Machine« (footnote 2) and »Northern Gothic« (footnote 8).

and the looting of cultural goods in Italy,<sup>17</sup> later used *documenta* to whitewash German art history and their own biographies by creating a fairy tale that juxtaposed ›good democratic abstraction‹ with ›bad totalitarian realism‹. The normative idea of art's autonomy from reality as a marker of freedom helped to depoliticise abstraction in the context of the Cold War to the degree that it became an empty signifier that not only made possible the bracketing out of its ambivalent histories but also morally safeguarded art's inviolable political chastity, making it literally unthinkable that defenders of modern art could be anything but ›good democrats‹.

## Conserving Nationalism: Recasting Collaboration into Care

The novel *Flight to Afar* follows this moral coding of modern art with a similarly puritanical division between ›good‹ and ›bad‹ characters. Due to their disidentification with their respective collectives, the protagonists (a Communist activist, a Jewish girl and a Protestant priest, together with a communist fisherman, his mentally ill wife and his apprentice) figure as representatives of the ›good Germans‹, who are contrasted with »the others« (›die Anderen‹), the novel's euphemism for ›the Nazis‹.<sup>18</sup> This chimes with Haftmann's naturalising othering of ›them‹ in his post-war writings that avoid explicit mention of ›the Nazis‹.<sup>19</sup> Both *Flight to Afar* and *documenta* thus provided exculpating narratives, according to which members of the German population that constituted the Nazis could then claim that they had nothing to do with ›them‹. As W. G. Sebald points out, *Flight to Afar* may be understood as an exculpatory revision of the author's biography: Contrary to the protagonist's rescue of the Jewish character Judith, the author Andersch, who had been a communist activist in early life, too, divorced his Jewish wife Angelika Albert in 1943 in order to get admitted into the Reich Chamber of Literature (Reichsschrifttumskammer), leaving her without legal protection against deportation in the midst of the ›Final Solution‹, while opportunistically reclaiming her as his wife when inter-

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. For his memberships and activities in Italy, see also Raphael Gross et al. (eds.): *Documenta. Politik und Kunst*, exhibition catalogue, Munich/London/New York: Prestel 2021.

<sup>18</sup> The word is used throughout the novel. See, for instance, Andersch: *Sansibar* (footnote 11), pp. 28-29.

<sup>19</sup> See Buurman: »Washing Maschine« (footnote 2) and »Northern Gothic« (footnote 8).

viewed as a prisoner of war in 1944 to convince the US authorities of his precarious status as a victim of Nazi persecution.<sup>20</sup>

The novel is a mash-up of true stories related to Barlach's works. Several of the artist's sculptures were taken from churches during the campaign against 'degenerate art' in 1937, despite the fact that he had fans even in the higher ranks of the Nazis, amongst them propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels.<sup>21</sup> Most famously the 'Floating Angel' (*Der Schwebende*, 1926), a sculpture of a flying angel, was taken from the Dome in Güstrow by Nazi officials in 1937.<sup>22</sup> The same year, a number of Barlach figures were removed from the Northern brick gothic façade of St. Katherinen church in Lübeck. Among them were 'Woman in the Wind' (*Frau im Wind*), 'Beggar' (*Bettler*) and the 'Singing Monk' (*Singender Klosterschüler*), which had been commissioned and acquired in 1932 by Karl Georg Heise, the director of Lübeck's art museum. Even though Heise was forced to step down from the directorship of the museum in 1933 during the Nazi synchronisation of social, cultural and political institutions known as *Gleichschaltung*, the sculptures were later restituted to him as his private property by an order of Goebbels. Hidden away during the war, they were reinstalled at St. Katherinen in 1947.

With this information in mind, the following excerpt from *Flight to Afar* is interesting. In the passage, a nameless cultural commissioner pays visit to Pastor Helander, persuading him to hand over the wooden sculpture of the reading monk:

You can rest assured, Father, that the figure will be *carefully stored*, the young man from Rostock had said. Helander was furious when he thought of the

<sup>20</sup> W. G. Sebald: »Der Schriftsteller Alfred Andersch«, in: id.: *Luftkrieg und Literatur* (1999), pp. 111-147. One could argue that with *Sansibar*, Andersch also ostensibly cut his ties with his earlier communist affiliations, presenting a literary version of theories of totalitarianism that were fashionable in the Cold War West in order to discredit Communism by equating it with Nazi totalitarianism.

<sup>21</sup> Goebbels was said to have owned several sculptures. The SS-journal *Das schwarze Korps* (*The Black Corps*) featured an obituary after Barlach's death in November 1938. See Hans Prolingheuer: *Hitlers fromme Bilderstürmer. Kirche und Kunst unterm Hakenkreuz*, Cologne: Dittrich 2001, p. 155 and p. 157.

<sup>22</sup> This was also mythologized in the GDR by Franz Fühmann's novel *Das Schlimme Jahr* (1966) and the DEFA-film *Der verlorene Engel* (1966), after Berthold Brecht had successfully defended Barlach's work in the formalism debates.

young doctor's visit last night. He was not one of *the others*, but rather, a careerist, a slick opportunist, who wangled his way ahead, someone for whom there were only tactics and who, incidentally, ›wanted the best‹. – You probably want to *preserve* [konservieren] the reading monk, Mr. *Conservator*, Helander had replied scornfully, but it's unnecessary to *preserve* him, he stays fresh anyway. – We want to protect him, Father. – You want to lock him up, Doctor. – He's on the list, and we have the order... – On what list? On the list of works of art that should no longer be shown in public. And therefore it's better ... – The ›reading monk‹ is not a work of art, Doctor, it is an object of utility. It is used, you see, used! A basic necessity, needed for everyday use in my church. – But understand, the old young man, who was as patient as an elderly man, had explained, if you don't give him to us, *the others* will simply take him out of the church the day after tomorrow morning. And what would happen to him then? – Perhaps he would have to be destroyed? Perhaps it is better for the ›reading monk‹ to die than – as you said earlier? – Oh yes, than *to be stored*. Do you believe in eternal life, Doctor? Even in the eternal life of a figure which died because it was not delivered? – But it was hopeless. – It will have very unpleasant consequences for you, Father, consequences from which *we* [this emphasis in the original, all others my own] will no longer be able to protect you. – The young man, the tactician, was incapable of thinking about anything other than what he called ›the consequences‹. – Tell them in Rostock that I would see to it that the ›reading monk‹ stays in the church!<sup>23</sup>

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23 Andersch: *Sansibar* (footnote 11), pp. 28-29. This is my own translation. The original reads as follows: »Sie können sich darauf verlassen, Herr Pfarrer, daß die Figur bei uns sorgfältig magaziniert wird, hatte der junge Mann aus Rostock gesagt. Helander geriet in Zorn, wenn er an den Besuch des jungen Herrn Doktor gestern Abend dachte. Keiner von den Anderen, sondern ein Geschickter, Wendiger, ein Karrierist, der sich durchschlängelte, einer, für den es nur Taktik gab und der im Übrigen ›das Beste wollte‹. – Sie wollen den Klosterschüler wohl konservieren, Herr Konservator, hatte Helander höhnisch geantwortet, es ist aber unnötig, ihn einzuhüften, er bleibt auch so frisch. – Wir wollen ihn schützen, Herr Pfarrer. – Sie wollen ihn einsperren, Herr Doktor. – Er steht nun einmal auf der Liste, und wir haben den Auftrag... – Auf welcher Liste? Auf der Liste der Kunstwerke, die nicht mehr in der Öffentlichkeit gezeigt werden sollen. Und da ist es besser ... – Der ›Klosterschüler‹ ist kein Kunstwerk, Herr Doktor, er ist ein Gebrauchsgegenstand. Er wird gebraucht, verstehen Sie, gebraucht! Und zwar in meiner Kirche. – Aber begreifen Sie doch, hatte der alte junge Mann, der geduldig war wie ein Greis, erklärt, wenn Sie ihn nicht uns geben, holen ihn die Anderen übermorgen früh einfach aus der Kirche heraus. Und was dann mit ihm geschieht? – Vielleicht müßte man ihn vernichten? Vielleicht ist es besser, der ›Klosterschüler‹ stirbt, als daß er – wie sagten Sie vorhin?

The opportunistic administrator serves »the Nazis« in bad faith, while at the same time explicitly distancing himself from them (»the others«), as many of the documenta founders did, stressing their own good intentions of care and protection. It is not unlikely that »Mr. Conservator« (»Herr Konserverator«), who wants »to preserve« (»konservieren«) the sculpture, is a member of the so-called conservative revolution (the obscure »we« above), as he claims not to be »one of the others« but still works for them, and the word conservative is emphasised in the passage repeatedly.<sup>24</sup> *Völkisch*-nationalist epistemologies were indeed preserved by conservative elites, critical of the mass-cultural »socialist« aspects of Nazism, later reframing their dedication to the protection of German culture as acts of opposition and resistance against the NS regime, while branding their individualist belief in the spiritual nobility of art's autonomy as bulwarks against totalitarianism.<sup>25</sup>

## Protestant Work Aesthetic: Good Form/Bad Form/German Form

I will conclude with my suspicion that the figure of the opportunistic curator could be an indirect portrait of the documenta co-founder and former Nazi party member Stephan Hirzel. Hirzel, who was director of the School of Art and Design Kassel (Staatliche Werkakademie, predecessor of today's Kunsthochschule) from 1949-1965 and a member of the German Design Council (Rat für Deutsche Formgebung, founded in 1953), had co-founded the German Protestant Art Service in Dresden in 1928. As deputy president of the Art Service, in 1934 Hirzel was promoted by Goebbels to Editorial Director (Hauptschriftleiter) of the journal *Kunstkammer* (Art Chamber), published by the Reich Chamber of Fine Arts (Reichskammer der bildenden Künste). In

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– ach ja, als daß er magazinisiert wird. Glauben Sie an das ewige Leben, Herr Doktor? Auch an das ewige Leben einer Figur, die gestorben ist, weil sie nicht ausgeliefert wurde? – Aber es war hoffnungslos gewesen. – Es wird sehr unangenehme Folgen für Sie haben, Herr Pfarrer, Folgen, vor denen wir Sie dann nicht mehr schützen können. – Der junge Mann, der Taktiker, war unfähig, an etwas anderes zu denken als an das, was er die Folgen nannte. – Sagen Sie in Rostock, ich würde dafür sorgen, daß der Klosterschüler in der Kirche bleibt!«

24 For connections between documenta and the so-called conservative revolution, see Buurman: »Un/heimliche Nachbarschaften« (footnote 6).

25 Note that monks feature as examples of self-reliance, autonomy and quasi-protestant »innocent« male bonding in Andersch's *Sansibar* and Ernst Jünger's novel *Marmorklippen*.

addition, Hirzel became an ›administrator‹ (Referent) of the Reich Chamber of Press, Periodicals and Publications (Reichskammer für Presse Zeitschriften und Veröffentlichungen), and a member of the Reich Chamber of Literature (Reichsschrifttumskammer), the very organisation whose membership was so dear to Andersch that he divorced his Jewish wife to be able to join.<sup>26</sup> Besides co-curating the German exhibit at the Chicago World's Fair in 1933, Hirzel was also co-curator of the Art Service exhibitions in Bern in 1934, in Lyon in 1938 and at the World's Fair in Paris in 1937, all of which served to propagate a modern image of Nazi Germany internationally.

Propaganda Minister Goebbels also strategically commissioned the Protestant Art Service to take care of the art looted in the 1937 campaign against so-called degenerate art by selling the confiscated works abroad in exchange for foreign exchange/currency.<sup>27</sup> A non-public sales exhibition was organised in the exhibition spaces of the Art Service in the castle of Niederschönhausen in Berlin, to which international art dealers were invited (Fig. 8).<sup>28</sup> When Alfred Rosenberg's anti-modernist Militant League for German Culture (Kampfbund für Deutsche Kultur) pushed to burn the ›degenerate art‹ conserved in the depot in 1939 to make space for the storage of food conserves, more and more art works were also sold under the table and, to this day, it is not clear if and how many images were actually destroyed.<sup>29</sup> After the German occupation of France, Hirzel was employed in the Office of the German Plenipotentiary at the French Military Command (Dienststelle des Bevollmächtigen der Auswärtigen Abteilung beim Militärbefehlshaber Frankreich) and worked for the German Institute (Deutsches Institut), the cultural department of the German embassy in Paris. His boss, the German

<sup>26</sup> See Hirzel's biography in Dieter Kusske: *Zwischen Kunst, Kult und Kollaboration. Der deutsche kirchennahe »Kunst-Dienst« 1928 bis 1945 im Kontext*, Bremen University 2012, pp. 355-356, <https://katalog.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/cgi-bin/titel.cgi?katkey=69112106> [accessed: 15.01.2024].

<sup>27</sup> See Prolingheuer: *Hitlers fromme Bildstürmer* (footnote 21), p. 119. In 1938, the lootings had been legalised retrospectively so that the confiscated art was now officially property of the state.

<sup>28</sup> Gertrud Werneburg supervised the exhibition and was instructed to look away, should members of the German elite, such as Hitler's personal physician, ›borrow‹ works, as Prolingheuer notes, *ibid.*, p. 64.

<sup>29</sup> Werneburg had to register all works that were supposed to be burned in March 1939, but it remains unclear if they were really burned or sold, as she was not there to witness; see *ibid.*



Fig. 8: Barlach's *»Magdeburger Ehrenmal«* and *»Das Wiedersehen«* on display together with a Nolde painting at the storage of the Protestant Art Service in the Hohenschönhausen castle Berlin (around 1939) (Photo: Günther Ranft, Nachlass Gertrud Werneburg, Copyright: bpk).

ambassador in the foreign office, Otto Abetz, who was responsible not just for the Aryanisation of Jewish art in France, but also for the deportation of Jews,<sup>30</sup> was also associated with the German Protestant Art Service president Gotthold Schneider and the Barlach estate manager/art dealer Bernhard Böhmer. After the war, the Red Army found in the Güstrow storages, which Goebbels had given to the Art Service as a refuge from the Berlin bombings,

<sup>30</sup> In 1942, he wrote: »Gegen die Abtransportierung von 40.000 Juden aus Frankreich zum Arbeitseinsatz in dem Lager Auschwitz bestehen seitens der Botschaft grundsätzlich keine Bedenken.«, cited ibid., p. 241.

not just works by Barlach (who used to have his studio there) and other artists declared degenerate, but also looted French art. Hirzel, who also was an ›administrator‹ (Referent) in Albert Speer's Reich Ministry of Arming and Munition after 1942, was a central node in this network.<sup>31</sup>

What did Alfred Andersch know about this backstory? I have not yet been able to do serious research on this or on potential biographical connections between Hirzel and Andersch, but there are a few hints to follow.<sup>32</sup> Is it a coincidence, for instance, that the fictional estate manager who takes care of the property and artworks left behind by Judith Levin after the suicide of her mother is called Heise, just like the actual Lübeck museum director, who owned and protected many of Barlach's sculptures at the time? And what about Pastor Helander's insistence that »the ›reading monk‹ is not a work of art, Doctor, it is an *object of utility* [emphasis mine]. It is used, you see, used! A basic necessity, needed for everyday *use in my church*«?<sup>33</sup> It resonates with a 1944 report in which the Reich Chamber of Fine Arts defended the German Protestant Art Service against the charges of being un-German by claiming that »its special mission was aimed at the renewal of *ecclesiastical objects of utility* [emphasis mine]. Here, the Art Service took a stand against the traditional kitschy designs and *forms of use* [emphasis mine].«<sup>34</sup> This quote, by the way, also sounds exactly like the post-war dissociation of ›good form‹

<sup>31</sup> For more on the relationships of the Barlach circle, the Art Service, the German Institute and the dealer Gurlitt, see also Meike Hoffmann: »Von Kunsthändel bis Propaganda. Hildebrand Gurlitt und das Deutsche Institut in Paris«, in: id./Dieter Scholz (eds.): *Unbewältigt. Ästhetische Moderne und Nationalsozialismus. Kunst, Kunsthändel, Ausstellungspraxis*, Berlin: Verbrecherverlag 2020, pp. 158–179, see p. 169. See also Isgard Kracht: *Inszeniert und Instrumentalisiert. Expressionismus im Nationalsozialismus: Ernst Barlach, Franz Marc, Emil Nolde*, Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter 2023, which came out after this text was finalised.

<sup>32</sup> It would also be interesting to further research the connections between Andersch and Haftmann, who both served the Wehrmacht as translators/interpreters in Northern Italy during the war.

<sup>33</sup> »Der ›Klostschüler‹ ist kein Kunstwerk, Herr Doktor, er ist ein *Gebrauchsgegenstand* [emphasis mine]. Er wird gebraucht, verstehen Sie, *gebraucht*! Und zwar in meiner Kirche.«, Andersch: *Sansibar* (footnote 11), p. 137. My translation into English does not capture the subtleties of the original and the direct semantic resonances with the following quote from the Reich Chamber's report, to which I compare it.

<sup>34</sup> »Seine besondere Arbeit galt der Erneuerung der *kirchlichen Gebrauchsgüter* [emphasis mine]. Hier hat der Kunstdienst Front gegen die überlieferten kitschigen Gebrauchsformen gemacht.«, cited by Prolingheuer: *Hitlers fromme Bilderstürmer* (footnote 21), p. 218.

from the bad taste and Nazi kitsch that allegedly dominated Nationalist Socialist design.<sup>35</sup> Such puritan (hi)stories of design resemble the art historical fairytale of good abstraction vs. bad realism, with the same ›lotus‹ effect of self-exculpation for the advocates of ›good form‹ (›Gute Form‹), who, like Hirzel, promoted the same ›protestant work aesthetics‹ before and after 1945.<sup>36</sup>

Obviously, art and design historians used the very same self-purifying strategies as authors of literature. Turning historiography and biography into quasi-religious fairy tales of good and evil, aesthetics becomes a site of salvation, where the fictitious accounts of the passions endured by the ›martyrs of modernism‹ serve redemptive stories of self-victimisation. Andersch always claimed he was imprisoned in the Dachau concentration camp for three months in 1933 as a communist activist, but there is no empirical evidence of this. Moreover, there are serious doubts about the autobiographical renderings of his demission from the Wehrmacht in 1941 and his desertion in Italy in 1944, which therefore also have to be regarded as self-victimising fictions.<sup>37</sup> The author's lover and later wife Gisela Groneur, who encouraged Andersch's creative work ever since they met in 1940, had good connections to Nazi party functionaries, who enabled several exhibitions for her in 1943.<sup>38</sup> Historian Axel Schildt highlights Andersch's own national-neutralism and his ›bizarre third front‹ (›bizarre Querfront‹)<sup>39</sup> with conservative revolutionaries, documenting the author's decades-spanning friendship and correspondence with Ernst Jünger and his secretary Armin Mohler, whom Andersch invited to collaborate on his journal titled *Texte und Zeichen* (*Texts*

35 See Amelie Ochs: ›Vom Paradigma der guten Form. Deutsch-Deutsche Geschmackserziehung und Kontinuitätskonstruktion(en)‹, in: *Artium Quaestiones* 32 (2021), pp. 80-82.

36 He, for instance, edited the *Deutsche Warenkunde* before 1945 for the Reich's propaganda ministry and after 1945 for the German Design Council. See also his ›Grundsätzliche Anmerkungen zur Ausstellung ›Deutsche Wertarbeit‹ im Kunstgewerbemuseum Zürich‹, in: *Das Werk. Architektur und Kunst* 30 (1943) 12, pp. 390-393.

37 See Felix Römer/Jörn Dörig/Rolf Seubert: *Alfred Andersch Desertiert. Fahnenflucht und Literatur* (1944-1952), Berlin: Verbrecher Verlag 2015 and Felix Römer: ›Alfred Andersch abgehört. Kriegsgefangene Anti-Nazis im amerikanischen Vernehmungslager Fort Hunt‹, in: *Vierteljahrsshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 58 (2010) 4, pp. 563-598.

38 See Sebald: ›Der Schriftsteller Alfred Andersch‹ (footnote 20), p. 124.

39 See Axel Schildt: *Medienintellektuelle in der Bundesrepublik*, Göttingen: Wallstein 2020, p. 457, my translation into English.

*and Signs, 1955-1957)*.<sup>40</sup> Erhard Schütz compares the journal's significance to that of documenta.<sup>41</sup> Its cover was designed by Gisela Andersch, néé Groneur, whose artworks would later be featured in *documenta 6* (1977). But this is a story I will follow up on elsewhere.

In sum, the *g/hosting the past* project set out to expose the historiographic f(r)ictions within documenta's escapist stories of distraction and denial by displaying counter-evidence to the exhibition's proclaimed innocence. Intervening into the founding myth of art's unsullied resurrection from the ashes left behind by the German crimes against humanity, the altar of St. Kunigundis became an archaeological site that welcomed visitors to participate in excavating layers of the show's compromised past. Browsing through the historical materials on display and combining clues that reveal links between past and present, spectators were bound to get their hands dirty investigating this ›crime scene‹ instead of washing them in innocence and pointing fingers at others who are ›afar‹ in time or space.<sup>42</sup> Rather than providing a pure conscience by simply convicting individual documenta figures, the goal of this curatorial intervention into the exhibition series' sanitised and sanctified self-understanding was to problematise the orthodoxy of ›good‹ and ›evil‹ form by calling attention to the messy complexities, contradictions and complicities within moralising (hi)stories of art's autonomy. At St. Kunigundis, Atis Rezistans generously set the stage for exposing the structural continuities of racism and antisemitism in the cultural field. In doing so, the Ghetto Biennale provided a space within *documenta fifteen* to critically confront the undead spirits of *völkisch*-nationalism that not only haunt German post-war art, design, and literature but keep haunting the political economies and epistemologies of contemporary art exhibitions such as documenta to this day.

40 See *ibid.*, pp. 395-397.

41 Erhard Schütz: ›Alfred Andersch (Hg.): Texte und Zeichen (1955-1957)‹, in: Elena Agazzi/Erhard Schütz (eds.): *Handbuch Nachkriegskultur: Literatur, Sachbuch und Film in Deutschland (1945-1962)*, Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter 2013, pp. 581-583.

42 For more on this, see Nanne Buurman: ›g/hosting the past, or: Presenting the History of documenta in the Context of its Fifteenth Edition. Reflections on the Exhibition as a Site of Salvation‹, in: Beatrice von Bismarck et al. (eds.): ›Beyond Orientalism(s). Towards New Infrastructures. Artistic, Curatorial and Educational Negotiations‹, online publication, forthcoming July 2025.