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Conceived in Space
Georg Kolbe's Exhibition
Participations 1933–42

There is hardly an important exhibition in Germany after 1933 in which Georg Kolbe was not involved. His works were included in all editions of the *Große Deutsche Kunstausstellungen* (GDK, Great German Art Exhibitions) at the Haus der Deutschen Kunst in Munich. Kolbe represented Germany at the Venice Biennale in 1934 and at the Exposition Internationale in Paris in 1937. He had solo exhibitions in Germany and abroad, participated in numerous annual and salon exhibitions, had gallery shows, and was represented in a number of presentations entitled *Plastik der Gegenwart* (Contemporary Sculpture) or *Meisterwerke deutscher Plastik* (Masterpieces of German Sculpture)—one such exhibition took place in Warsaw in 1938 under the artistic direction of Arno Breker.¹ Without a doubt, Georg Kolbe was an integral part of the exhibition system of the National Socialist era. In the early 1930s, he was still mentioned in the same breath as his former companions and colleagues Wilhelm Lehmbruck (died 1919) and Ernst Barlach (died 1938); but this changed in 1936, and even more so in 1937 after the *Erste Große Deutsche Kunstausstellung* (First Great German Art Exhibition) at the Haus der Deutschen Kunst and the *Entartete Kunst* (Degenerate Art) exhibition opposite it in the Hofgarten Arcades in Munich. From this staged turning point onwards, one finds in the collection of newspaper clippings in the archive of the Georg Kolbe Museum the names Georg Kolbe, Josef Thorak, and Arno Breker. Added to this grouping are occasionally Richard Scheibe and Joseph Wackerle, as well as, very often, Fritz Klimsch—contemporaries, in some cases considerably younger than the already established Kolbe.

The exhibition participations alone do not say anything about the artist's position within the dictatorship.² The institutions, contacts, and cultural-political and political interventions of the regime are too different, as are Kolbe's works, some of which were from the 1920s and some of which were new productions characterized by a clear change in style. In the following, it will therefore be a matter of recognizing the nuances and finding words for them. Thus, although no clear positioning of Kolbe can be discerned, there are indeed slight differences between the NS regime's demands on representative art and Kolbe's own interests. Kolbe undoubtedly saw himself as German in the national sense and as a modern sculptor in the artistic sense. Moreover, no anti-Semitic or nationalist statements by him are known to date. Were his exhibition participations a non-verbal endorsement of the NS regime?

Where Does Kolbe Stand?

Kolbe was involved not only in representative exhibitions of the National Socialist regime, but also in several scandalous shows that represent milestones of the erratic and by no means straightforward NS cultural policy. The regime responded to these exhibitions with bans and censorship. In this context, the exhibition *30 Deutsche Künstler* (30 German Artists) by the National Socialist German Students' League at Galerie Ferdinand Möller in Berlin in July 1933 is notorious.³ Here, in addition to Ernst Barlach, Wilhelm Lehmbruck, Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, August Macke, and Franz Marc, Georg Kolbe was to be presented

as an example of artistic freedom and cultural renewal through National Socialism. In this commitment to artistic modernism as genuinely National Socialist, the Students' League received the support of Joseph Goebbels, Reich Minister of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda, who thus opposed Alfred Rosenberg's national-racial *Kampfbund für deutsche Kultur* (Militant League for German Culture) and other representatives of the national-racial camp. Kolbe was represented in the exhibition with two works from the late 1920s.

Three days after its opening, the exhibition was closed, and it reopened only after significant changes had been made—a victory for the national-racial opponents of Expressionism. Nevertheless, as Arie Hartog has noted, “Kolbe was mentioned in every review of the exhibition but was never the bone of contention.”⁴ The situation was similar in other exhibitions that sought to firmly establish Expressionism and other modern art movements. Kolbe was not the object of criticism, even in exhibitions for which he was jointly responsible for the organization, such as *Berliner Kunst* (Berlin Art) in Munich in 1935 and the exhibition *Malerei und Plastik in Deutschland 1936* (Painting and Sculpture in Germany 1936), organized by the Kunstverein Hamburg together with the Deutscher Künstlerbund, of which Kolbe was a member of the board.⁵ In contrast to many artists whose notoriety during the Weimar Republic stood in the way of continuity into National Socialism, for whom even the slightest abstract or expressive tendencies in their early work were enough to destroy their professional existence, and for whom advocacy of free autonomous art was interpreted in an extremely negative way, this surprisingly did not apply to Kolbe.

Only once did the debate over his works and person divide opinion, and that was when the organizers included a work by Kolbe in the exhibition *20th Century German Art* at the New Burlington Galleries in London in 1938. This exhibition presented German exile art one year after the *Entartete Kunst* exhibition in Munich. Kolbe's portrait *Paul Cassirer*, which was included in the exhibition, came from the Paris estate of Hugo Simon—to the displeasure of many anti-fascists who denounced Kolbe's prominent position in official NS art.⁶ And to the displeasure of the National Socialist press. The newspaper *Völkischer Beobachter* reported extensively on the counter-exhibition after Adolf Hitler incited against it in his speech at the opening of the *Große Deutsche Kunstausstellung 1938*.⁷ It was precisely on Kolbe that the National Socialist press made the case that the London show was “lying,” because no works by Kolbe had been included in the *Entartete Kunst* exhibition. No art-critical judgment led to this commitment to the sculptor, but rather only the fact that his name was not to be found on the lists of the ostracized.⁸ This scandal also seems to have had no direct consequences for Kolbe.

Meanwhile, Joseph Goebbels transferred the Secessionist artists' associations to the Reichskammer der bildenden Künste (Reich Chamber of Fine Arts), which, from 1935 onwards, had to approve all exhibition activities in advance.⁹ From that point on, the exhibition system was under state control. In Berlin, Goebbels additionally installed the *Ausstellungsleitung Berlin e. V.* (Berlin Exhibition Direction) with Hans Herbert Schweitzer as “Führer,” who had sole authority over the exhibits rather than a jury being involved. In terms of content, Schweitzer was close to the national-racial camp. However, he was



1 Exhibition view of the 1937 Exposition Internationale in Paris with Georg Kolbe's *Große Verkündigung* (Large Proclamation, 1937, bronze, h. 165 cm) in the entrance hall of the German House, historical photograph

supported by Goebbels and thus politically strengthened, and his exhibitions competed with the traditional salon exhibitions such as the academy exhibition and the *Große Berliner*—a tradition in which Kolbe had successfully participated and with which he identified. Despite the increasing political control and centralization of the liberal artists' association and exhibition system, he did not withdraw from any of the survey exhibitions.

There is only one circle in which one searches in vain for Kolbe's name. He was absent from the first exhibitions organized by Alfred Rosenberg's national-racial *Kampfbund für deutsche Kultur* and his *NS-Kulturgemeinde* (Cultural Community). Exhibitions such as *Die Auslese* (The Selection) in Berlin in 1934 and *Heroische Kunst* (Heroic Art) in Munich in 1936 were intended to place the national-racial concept of art, which referred to the perception of artistic and thus racial values inherent in the blood, at the forefront of National Socialist art policy. Kolbe's works were not included in these exhibitions. Accordingly, at the beginning of the NS regime, they were not yet considered suitable for national-racial use.

The 1937 Exposition Internationale in Paris is also informative with regard to the question of Kolbe's status within National Socialist art policy (or rather policies). His work *Große Verkündigung* (Large Proclamation, 1937; fig. 1) was placed there in the entrance hall of the *Deutsches Haus*, the "crematorium," as the emigrated author Paul Westheim bitterly referred to Albert Speer's monumental German architecture.¹⁰ Kolbe's sculpture stood prominently in the entrance area of the pavilion, welcoming the international



2 Exhibition view of Georg Kolbe's special exhibition on the occasion of his sixtieth birthday, Preußische Akademie der Künste, Berlin, 1937, historical photograph

audience. But compared to the works of Josef Thorak, its appearance shrank to a marginal, albeit artistically fine, gesture. Thorak's martial figures were installed in the outdoor area of the pavilion, symbolically embodying National Socialism, statically directed against the Soviet movement, which confronted the German pavilion in the form of the Soviet pavilion dynamically striving forward. Thorak's giants, in a formal hardening of Wilhelmine historicism,¹¹ displayed that steely physicality that made the militant-looking, architectural gesture seem like a continuation of the national monument. Kolbe, on the other hand, seems to have been on a different terrain. His work, adorned with floral arrangements in the Secessionist tradition, seemed like a salute to the nineteenth century, which was coming to an end and turning toward modernism.

Thus, on the one hand, Kolbe was right in the very middle of the representative cultural-political events of the NS state; on the other hand, his position was clearly different from that of someone like Josef Thorak. The difference lies both in the artistic statement and in the placement granted to Kolbe and conceded to him by the regime. The fact that Kolbe was not averse to monumentalizing, large-scale sculpture, and that he even turned increasingly to this form in the 1930s, is shown by photographs from the academy exhibition in the spring of 1937, which was extended by a special exhibition in honor of Kolbe's sixtieth birthday (fig. 2). The fine human figures of his previous work seem like a different

species when compared with the coarse, broad-shouldered, and steadfast fighters of the National Socialist environment. These include the *Krieger-Ehrenmal* (War Memorial) in Stralsund from 1934/35 and the kneeling *Wächter* (Guardian) for the anti-aircraft barracks in Lüdenscheid-Buckesfeld from 1937, the latter reaching a height of approximately 225 centimeters. The figures were conceived as monuments, and Kolbe applied for further state and public commissions with them. With few exceptions, however, these were not realized, while the younger artists Josef Thorak and above all Arno Breker developed into artistic celebrities who, in factory-like structures, provided works for the new large-scale projects of the NS state.

Trapped in His Own Self-Image

In this phase of National Socialist cultural consolidation around 1937, the artistic director of the Badische Kunsthalle Karlsruhe, Kurt Martin, planned a sculpture exhibition for the Kunsthhaus Zürich.¹² Unlike other foreign exhibitions such as the Venice Biennale, this show was not organized by the state, although it was indeed supervised, censored, and also financed by ministerial authorities and placed under the honorary patronage of the German legation in Bern.¹³ According to Martin's correspondence with the participating artists, Joseph Goebbels personally approved the selection of works on the basis of photographs.¹⁴ Nevertheless, the exhibition was to be understood as a purely institutional undertaking and as a means of promoting the German state abroad. The German Consul General reflected the expectations of the exhibition to the Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda in Berlin, leaving out the mixed reaction of the press, saying that the exhibition's "deliberate renunciation of propagandistic accessories has touched the local public in a pleasant way."¹⁵

Caught between two stools, it was the task of the curator Kurt Martin to comply with the official censorships of Goebbels's ministry on the one hand, and the artistic demands of the Kunsthhaus Zürich on the other. The director of the Kunsthhaus, Wilhelm Wartmann, initially reacted coolly to the prospect of exhibiting contemporary German sculpture: "The Swiss [were] obviously not interested in a propaganda show."¹⁶ He agreed to the proposed selection only after Martin assured him that Germany would pay for the cost of packing and transporting the works to the Swiss border. Despite the very short lead time, Martin managed to make a selection for each of the six exhibiting artists: Georg Kolbe, Karl Albiker, Christoph Voll, Gerhard Marcks, Wilhelm Gerstel, and Otto Schliessler. Ernesto de Fiori, Edwin Scharff, and Ernst Barlach, who were originally scheduled to participate, were vetted out by the National Socialist authorities.¹⁷

On January 14, 1937, the exhibition opened under the title *Deutsche Bildhauer* (German Sculptors). One room was dedicated to each artist. Kolbe's selection in the main room subsequently traveled to the Kunsthalle Bern. On display were works by him from the previous ten years, including the sculpture *Große Nacht* (Large Night, 1926/30), which had been in the basement of the Haus des Rundfunks in Berlin since 1933. Apart from

this exceptional work, the selection corresponded to those of Kolbe's exhibitions that toured Germany unperturbed by National Socialist cultural policies. Whether at the Westfälischer Kunstverein in Münster in 1935 or at the Städtisches Museum in Hagen one year later, it was still possible to exhibit his classics of the 1920s, and in a way that honored the individual work as autonomous. Only the *Junge Streiter* (Young Fighter) from 1935 can be classified differently. The bronze had already been sold before the trip to Switzerland, and from there it went to the first *Große Deutsche Kunstausstellung* in Munich, where it was installed in the large Sculpture Hall.¹⁸

In his correspondence with Kurt Martin, the Kunsthaus Zürich, and the Kunsthalle Bern, Kolbe's self-image can be discerned in almost every line. He saw himself as one of the most important German artists, as a representative both of the state and of German art. It is this self-image that perhaps makes it understandable why an artist who was financially secure and had already established a successful career, despite both the protected, inferior competition of artists in National Socialist Germany and an apparent lack of conviction, could always be found in the vicinity of political leaders, sent his stylistically new works to exhibitions that could obviously be exploited for propaganda purposes, and granted his image rights even for political magazines of the SS or the national-racial circle. He considered his work to be so important that there was no question of withdrawing it. At the same time, his success in Switzerland, which was approved by the Ministry of Propaganda, shows that it was precisely his moderate sculpture that could positively promote Nazi Germany, because it was not actually propagandistic, but rather served, as it were, the autonomous concept of art, which continued to have priority abroad.

Although Kolbe was politely interested in the Zurich exhibition, he was quick to point out that not all of the works would be available. His special exhibition at the Prussian Academy of Arts in Berlin in the summer of 1937 was clearly more important to him. Kolbe let Kurt Martin know: "I also consider the show in Bern to have been undertaken in the public interest of German art, and I expect that it will not cause me any personal effort or expense."¹⁹ Martin thus also organized Kolbe's one-man show in Bern, took care of transport, packing, and the assumption of costs, and assured him that his works would be returned in time for the academy exhibition. Still, Kolbe was not satisfied. The reviews in Switzerland were not what he had hoped for: "We German sculptors are not very impressed by it."²⁰ In view of the low purchase volume in Zurich and despite the great initial interest, Kolbe was disgruntled: "After this cooling off, however, I am not very happy about the forwarding of my bronzes to Bern. After all, I was missing important pieces for my special show at the academy."²¹ It was to be the first academy exhibition after the political restructuring of the institution, under the new patronage of Hermann Göring, and the "curator" was now the Minister of Culture, Bernhard Rust.²²

Linking Up with Tradition at Haus der Deutschen Kunst

Contrary to the custom of competing with colleagues in such annual exhibitions, Thorak and Breker presented their works only to a limited extent in this context.²³ They preferred the *Große Deutsche Kunstausstellung* which, within the now centralized exhibition system, was to present official NS art as a propagated “spearhead.” This was the platform on which Kolbe’s works were juxtaposed with the models and designs for state commissions by the sponsored artists. In the first years of the mass exhibition, the state-sponsored art formed a sculptural canon that identified the regime as a self-affirming system. The schematic “companion piece hanging” in the strictly axially symmetrical architecture of the Haus der Deutschen Kunst always produced the same prominent hanging surfaces per wall, per room, and across different age groups.²⁴ The adjacent works were subordinate to the axially emphasized, central works. The prominent hanging surfaces included both end walls of the Sculpture Hall, the middle position of the two side walls, and the center of the hall, which was only occasionally occupied. The state commissions and monument designs of the sponsored artists were emphasized by their prominent positioning as special artistic contributions and thus stood out from the mass of other works.

Georg Kolbe’s greatest success was probably the *Große Deutsche Kunstausstellung* 1939, where he presented three female nudes on one of the aforementioned prominent end walls of the Sculpture Hall (fig. 3). On display there were *Amazone* (1937), *Hüterin* (Guardian, 1938), and *Auserwählte* (The Chosen, 1939).²⁵ Opposite them on the other end wall was Josef Thorak’s bronze model of a horse (fig. 4), which, in a greatly enlarged ensemble of figures, was to crown the “Fuehrer’s grandstand” of the March Field on the NS party rally grounds in Nuremberg.²⁶ On the side walls, Arno Breker’s *Bereitschaft* (Readiness, 1939) on the one side and *Dionysos* (1936–37) on the other were accompanied by a large number of subordinate figures. The presentation of Kolbe’s bronze nudes as a triad follows the axially symmetrical hanging customary at the *Große Deutsche Kunstausstellung*. *Hüterin* was emphasized by a pedestal that extended beyond the wall cladding otherwise considered as a yardstick. The architect, Paul Ludwig Troost, had deliberately set the wall cladding high enough to force the exhibition organizers to achieve “clarity” and to avoid overcrowding the wall surfaces.²⁷ Only in a few cases was this line abandoned, mostly in order to emphasize the relationship between moderate emphasis and lateral subordination. Elevated by the pedestals above eye level into the white space above the wall cladding that extended up to the ceiling, the three female nudes stood as a closed group in a pyramidal composition. The visitor viewed the sculptures from below, thus shifting the slightly larger-than-life format of Kolbe’s figures into monumentality. The pedestals of the three figures were placed directly in front of the wall and in a line—as were the rest of the pedestals, which ran along the outer edge of the room like a ribbon. Together with the height of the pedestals, the resulting view from below, and especially the otherwise undecorated design of the large exhibition spaces, this proximity to the wall made the sculptures appear flat, like architectural ornaments. The



3 Exhibition view of the Sculpture Hall of the *Große Deutsche Kunstausstellung 1939* in Munich with Georg Kolbe's bronze figures *Amazone* (Amazon, 1937), *Hüterin* (Guardian, 1938), and *Auserwählte* (The Chosen, 1939), h. each ca. 220 cm, between paintings by Otto Albert Hirth, historical photograph

fact that the passageways were often accentuated by busts on pedestals to the right and left further emphasized this effect. Kolbe's female nudes appear as if they were "art in architecture" oriented to a façade.

Under the heading "From the Greeks to the Reichsautobahn," the reviewer Ludwig Eberlein wrote about the Sculpture Hall:

"It was a good idea on the part of the exhibition organizers to hang between the sculptures mainly such pictures that take their motifs from architecture [...]. In this way, one is always reminded that sculpture today works again for architecture, for the monumental buildings and squares that are being built in Berlin, Nuremberg, Hamburg, Munich, and not, as in the past, for museums."²⁸

The programmatic agenda of the third year of the *Große Deutsche Kunstausstellung* was thus grasped. In Hall 1, the prelude to the exhibition took the form of a large portrait of Adolf Hitler as a master builder: *Bildnis des Führers* (Portrait of the Führer, 1939) by Fritz Erler. Hitler is depicted in front of a fictional ensemble of a monument in front of temple-like buildings with both Nordic national-racial and antique influences. He is depicted as the uniformed "builder" of a new society and its monuments, flanked by the classical sexes as a reinterpretation of Adam and Eve: an *Amazone* by Paul Scheurle and



4 Exhibition view of the Sculpture Hall of the *Große Deutsche Kunstausstellung 1939* in Munich with Josef Thorak's *Pferd* (Horse) at the front and Arno Breker's *Bereitschaft* (Readiness, 1939) centered on the left wall, historical photograph

a *Wettkämpfer* (Athlete) by Alfred Sachs. Within the uniquely consistent structure of the Sculpture Hall in 1939, Georg Kolbe's figures then assumed an important role. The *Völkischer Beobachter* thus discovered in Kolbe's "triad of nude girls with deer-slender limbs and high pure foreheads" a "ripley blossomed classicism."²⁹

For the so-called Third Reich, the idiosyncratic reference to antiquity had a stabilizing effect on authority. When viewed together with the views of architecture or ruins by Otto Albert Hirth and Hermann Urban, Kolbe's works, as well as the other sculptures in the hall, entered into a dialogue that promised the monumental character of National Socialist art productions. The construction of the Haus der Deutschen Kunst, the procession for the annual opening on the "Day of German Art," and the emblem of the *Große Deutsche Kunstausstellung* with Pallas Athena were all influenced by Hitler's belief that the Teutonic and the ancient Greek were racially related. Architecture—and with it sculpture—was to be an eternal monument to the new order. The motifs of the paintings thus elevated Breker's sculptures, which were centrally emphasized on the side walls, to expressions of antiquity, which, however, they only feigned to be in their quotational setup.³⁰ The two discus throwers, in turn, to the right and left of the entering visitor, invoked the propagandistically successful 1936 Olympic Games. As with the medialization of the games, it was all about an ideologically guided, idealized physique, which the reviewer Walter Almon-Gros described in its suggestive power as follows:

“Here [in the Sculpture Hall], everything is large and free and uplifting. Noble statues rise up here, ideal images of a detached humanity. And by ushering oneself into their taut, noble figures, one rises up to their majesty oneself.”³¹

Pyramid versus Circle

Yet for all the suggested coherence of the Sculpture Hall, there was a crucial difference between the sculptures elevated above the masses: Thorak’s and Breker’s figures “were not made to be viewed on their own, but rather to develop their political effect in the context of buildings, texts, and images”—or in the context of an exhibition, as Magdalena Bushart points out.³² They are not autonomous works, but rather state commissions, created within the paradigm of their dependence on architecture, which was repeated like a mantra by the press.³³ Their power to convey—indeed, to embody—the hymnic veneration of ideological proclamation, as well as politically subdued power, emerged only in the context of large National Socialist buildings. It is therefore hardly surprising that these figures were also linked to the architecture of Haus der Deutschen Kunst. Equal to them in presentation and narration, however, were Kolbe’s three nudes, which were by no means intended as architectural decoration for monumental buildings. They were created in the context of the personally pursued, long-term project *Ring der Statuen*, an ensemble of which various design stages exist in sketches and models (fig. 5) and which was not to be installed in Frankfurt am Main until after the war.³⁴ Male and female nude figures are arranged alternately on a circular ground plan, separated by slender stelae set against the organic-figural form as a cubic-architectural element. A gap in the circle of figures invites the viewer to enter. The center is lowered by steps. The viewer can either enter the horizontally organized row of spiritually and physically idealized figures as an equal, or encounter and view them from below in the center. The educational and uplifting effect presupposes the identification of the person entering with the figures, which correspond to the National Socialist ideal of the body.

Nevertheless, there is not inconsiderable difference to the National Socialist ideology as manifested in the *Große Deutsche Kunstausstellung*. While in these art exhibitions the sexes were presented to the “Führer” as the prototypes of Adam and Eve, with the *Ring der Statuen* Kolbe developed a constellation in which the equality of the sexes also plays a role. The supersign of the arrangement of the figures is decisive for the impact of the work as a whole.³⁵ At the *Große Deutsche Kunstausstellung 1939*, the *Amazone* and the *Auserwählte* were subordinated to the *Hüterin* in a pyramidal arrangement. The constellation of three banally follows the idea of the Führer principle, in which only one unit can stand at the top. In contrast, the figures in the circular supersign in the *Ring der Statuen* are presented as equals as part of an idealized community of higher beings. In contrast to this is, for example, Josef Thorak’s fountain design *Das Urteil des Paris* (The Judgment of Paris, 1941; fig. 6), which is circularly organized but is by no means egalitarian. *Das Urteil des Paris* is characterized by an imbalance of power and voyeurism, emphasizing the principle



5 Georg Kolbe, draft model for the *Ring der Statuen* (Ring of Statues), 1936, plaster on wooden frame, 18 × 60 × 60 cm, realized in Rothschildpark, Frankfurt am Main, 1954, Georg Kolbe Museum, Berlin

of selection—or, in NS parlance, *Auslese*. The goddesses are exposed to the judging gaze of Paris, their arms outstretched in a strained manner, through which the sculptor attempted to make their otherwise barely discernible difference recognizable. The fact that Paris does not choose from among equals is again dictated by the supersign formation of the pyramidal constellation of three: The central female nude has a slightly raised pedestal that sets her apart. She also has a relatively symmetrical body layout in relation to the other two figures, as her arms are angled like two wings on either side, touching her breasts. This posture thus earns the figure its central position.

The same can also be said of Kolbe's *Hüterin*. In contrast to the two figures subordinate to her, the *Hüterin* has a different posture, with her arms reaching up to her plait as if by chance. She thus lacks the formal counterpart for the strict “companion piece hanging.” According to the logic of the *Große Deutsche Kunstausstellung*, the three nudes, which were submitted together, could only be presented focused on the *Hüterin* as a central point, as long as the figures were to remain together.³⁶ That this did not necessarily correspond to the artist's idea, who preferred a knee-high pedestal, is shown by installation views of other exhibitions as well as by studio photographs. The viewer's gaze at hip level seems to have been ideal, allowing the figures to appear in a human, rather than monumentalizing, scale. For example, the two figures the *Junges Weib* (1938) and the *Hüterin* were both on view in the academy's spring exhibition in 1939, presented in a row with busts including Kolbe's portrait of Franco. The pedestals were knee-high and had been placed slightly away from the wall. The resulting spatial structuring counteracted the otherwise threatening decorative effect.



6 Exhibition view of the *Große Deutsche Kunstausstellung* 1941 in München, Hall 8, with Josef Thorak's model for the fountain *Das Urteil des Paris* (The Judgment of Paris, 1941), historical photograph

How differently the *Ring der Statuen* functions in comparison to the presentation in the *Großen Deutschen Kunstausstellung*, despite the pathos, despite the idea of the superior man, despite the overwhelming of the person entering, who rises to become a “majesty” as in the art exhibition—therein lies the difference between Kolbe’s works and the ideologies of National Socialism, which is difficult to determine. The overlap was large enough for Kolbe to submit his figures to NS exhibitions, where they could stand for a racial reference back to the “great age” of Greek antiquity, as well as for the “new man.” At the same time, beyond their circular arrangement, the isolated figures could be overwritten with the narrative of being bound to architecture. They did not inherently resist the pyramidal arrangement, nor did they in any way challenge the racialized interpretation as “taut, noble figures.” The classical ideal of human scale embodied by Kolbe’s nudes, on the other hand, lent itself to the tradition-building narrative of the *Große Deutsche Kunstausstellung* 1939, grounding Thorak’s mannered physicality and Breker’s theatricality.

The slight difference to the ideologies of National Socialism positioned Kolbe behind the two state artists. It is thus hardly surprising that the prominent placement of his works in later editions of the *Große Deutsche Kunstausstellung* was not repeated. The regime-legitimizing reference to antiquity was increasingly replaced by the glorification of war. Kolbe’s figures were relegated to the row of subordinate works, into the side rooms, or even onto the upper floor, which the sculptor experienced as declassification. In 1940,

he exhibited the nude *Flora* (1939/40) in the large Sculpture Hall and commented: “For my part, I have hardly anything to report. Only that the gr. K.A. [*Große Kunstausstellung*] is a terrible setback.”³⁷ There was no more room in the front row for Kolbe’s human scale. In his monograph *Deutsche Plastik unserer Zeit* (German Sculpture of Our Time), the author Lothar Tank thus accordingly judges that Kolbe was “the greatest sculptor of this transitional period.”³⁸ Nevertheless, it is clear that the younger generation, “if it is to fulfill its historical mission, must not follow Kolbe, but seek its own expression.”³⁹

Architecture of Sculpture

The link to tradition that Kolbe’s work offered to large-scale National Socialist sculpture was also evident in other, regime-stabilizing exhibitions. The exhibition *Meisterwerke der Plastik* (Masterpieces of Sculpture) at the Künstlerhaus in Berlin in 1940 had a canonizing effect—also with regard to Tank’s publication. It can be seen as Rosenberg’s attempt, after his initial failure in the field of exhibition policy, to achieve interpretive sovereignty through large-scale exhibitions. With this particular exhibition, Rosenberg’s office for the supervision of the entire intellectual and ideological training and education of the NSDAP, in this case the Main Office of Fine Arts, took up the canon that had become apparent at the *Große Deutsche Kunstausstellung*.

“Reichsleiter Alfred Rosenberg opened the exhibition in the presence of representatives of the Wehrmacht and the Party, as well as the sculptors Kolbe, Breker, and Scheibe themselves,” wrote the newspaper *Berliner Lokal-Anzeiger* on July 3, 1940.⁴⁰ A photograph of the opening ceremony shows Kolbe sitting in the front row, with Richard Scheibe seated behind him (fig. 7). What significance *Meisterwerke der Plastik* played in his cosmos cannot be judged from the surviving sources.⁴¹ Only the catalog and the newspaper clippings that he routinely had sent to him document the exhibition in the archive of the artist’s museum. On view were works by Karl Albiker, Fritz Klimsch, Georg Kolbe, Richard Scheibe, Josef Wackerle, Josef Thorak, and Arno Breker.⁴² There was a clear focus on the work of the latter. Cut out on a black background, the head of the plaster model of his grim figure *Bereitschaft* adorned the cover. In his introductory text to the catalog, Robert Scholz sees the exhibited works as the result of the new start brought about by National Socialism, for the “new flowering of sculpture” had been triggered by architecture, the “mission of the state,” and the new ideological ideals of the body.⁴³ The emphasis on ideology as the actual creative force identifies him as a loyal disciple of Rosenberg. Scholz distinguishes the older generation with Klimsch, Kolbe, Scheibe, Wackerle, and Albiker from the “future-oriented expression” of Thorak and Breker.⁴⁴

On display by Kolbe was, among others, the bronze *Großer Kämpfer* (Large Fighter, 1938), referred to here only as *Kämpfer*. In the first hall, which was the main one, it had to assert itself against the large, gilded sculptures *Künder* (Proclaiming Nude, 1939–40) and *Bereitschaft*, which flanked the large plaster relief *Auszug zum Kampf* (Departure for Battle), under which Rosenberg’s opening speech was delivered (fig. 7). On the right side of the



7 Alfred Rosenberg's opening speech on July 3, 1940 for the exhibition *Meisterwerke der Plastik* (Masterpieces of Sculpture) at the Künstlerhaus Berlin; in the background: Arno Breker's *Bereitschaft* (Readiness, 1939); on the right wall in the back: Josef Thorak's *Fahnenträger* (Standard Bearer, ca. 1937); and in the front: Arno Breker's *Dionysos* (Dionysus, 1936–37), historical photograph

hall stood Breker's dark monumental sculpture *Dionysos*; next to it were Josef Thorak's *Fahnenträger* (Standard Bearer, ca. 1937) and *Schwertträger* (Sword Bearer, 1940).⁴⁵ Opposite the *Fahnenträger*, Fritz Klimsch's *Olympia* (1937) can be identified, which was purchased by Rosenberg. Kolbe's *Kämpfer* was positioned to the left of it—corresponding to the *Dionysos* opposite. Breker's large reliefs *Der Wächter* (Guardian, 1941) and *Kameraden* (Comrades, 1940) were also on display, although it is unclear exactly where. On display in another room were a self-portrait by Kolbe, as well as his *Hüterin*, *Auserwählte*, und *Amazonen*, now again on knee-high pedestals rather than in a pyramidal structure.⁴⁶

The thirty or so works are “symbolic images [...] of a new time, of a new and greater Germany, far beyond anything aesthetic,” was the verdict of the reviewer Felix A. Dargel.⁴⁷ In the reports, the formulated generational sequence is copied:

“In the works of these older masters [Klimsch, Kolbe, Wackerle], the atmosphere is one of restrained lyricism, a gentle music of forms. The youngest artist in the exhibition, Arno Breker, has a completely different manner of presentation. [...] Here, a new expressive will seeks its way in direct connection with the National Socialist experience of force.”⁴⁸

The extent to which the large sculptures were oriented to the standards of state architecture—the degree to which they achieved overarching power and monumentality—seems to have been the yardstick of evaluation. The main hall in particular did not miss its effect. Robert Scholz, now writing for the *Völkischer Beobachter* and without disclosing his authorship of the catalog, thus explains: “In the masterpieces of this hall, the intention of the new sculptural style, oriented towards the monumental and heroic, finds a particularly clear expression.”⁴⁹ In contrast, the author Walter Reichel in the *Neue Leipziger Zeitung* is astonishingly open in his criticism of Breker’s works exhibited here as slick and exaggerated, only to then justify their sharply contoured, “radiant nakedness”:

“How else could these forms, the swelling and steely taut limbs, hold their own in the glistening light of a gilded bronze, struck by the sun where their proper place is—on the pillars and portals of great state buildings!”⁵⁰

Reichel distinguishes Kolbe’s figures from Breker’s *Dionysos*, which is permeated by an “electrified power, almost increased to drunkenness [...]. A power that shows itself, that plays the role of the hero as if on a high stage.” In contrast, Kolbe’s figures are “like a warm breath” that beats against one. For Reichel, the “proud strength” of the *Kämpfer* came from within and found a noble balance in “the mastery of their possibilities.”⁵¹ Mannered expression tied to architecture is thus set against autonomous measure. The critic Carl Linfert also formulated the comparison that the exhibition designers provoked by juxtaposing the works. For him, Breker was “in possession of the expression that makes his triple-life-size figures suitable for state buildings.”⁵² In contrast, Kolbe’s “slowly advancing ‘Kämpfer’” lacked the polished gesture “that seeks the sparse edges of architecture as a willing setting.”⁵³

The old master Kolbe thus won the comparison with the younger state artist.⁵⁴ Few would have noticed the difference between his works and the narrative of architecture-bound sculpture, which Linfert named: “Kolbe’s figures are built for themselves; they can stand free and then, in their relationship to one another, perhaps form an ‘architecture’ of sculpture.”⁵⁵ He makes this observation on the basis of the nude female figures from the *Ring der Statuen*:

“Those who have noticed how quietly, almost indistinguishably, and without any decisive gesture, they point to each other, will immediately experience the profundity of such a mutable physiognomy, of which only the most delicate means of the sculptor can be certain.”⁵⁶

The idea of an architecture of sculpture is decisive for the classification of Kolbe’s work. It is spatially organized and not flat; it can be walked through but is difficult to photograph; it poses questions in sculptural language and offers solutions; it is idealized and spiritually interwoven, yet is not ideological or imperialistic; it is utopian in the sense that it cannot be located but it exists only as an ideal concept; and it appears temporarily, in a specific



8 View of Georg Kolbe's solo exhibition in the Preußische Akademie der Künste, Berlin, 1942, historical photograph

constellation that need not be permanent. The architecturally bound and symbolically superelevated monumental sculpture of National Socialism in its eternal memorial character is a different sculptural problem than the questions of space, column, and statue that occupied Kolbe, as they did in his 1927 Glaspalast exhibition, and which he played through in his sculpture court in Berlin-Westend as well as in the *Ring der Statuen*. In 1932, he described his understanding as follows: "Sculpture is not a decorative element of architecture—but rather an independent work of art. [...] What I demand of the architect is not the surface of a wall, but rather space."⁵⁷

In his second solo exhibition at the Prussian Academy of Arts in 1942, Kolbe showed how this space could be filled with an architecture of sculpture (fig. 8). The photographic documentation of the arrangement reveals his real interest. The pairs of slightly larger-than-life figures stand in relation to each other in space, their movements seeming to react to each other. Visitors would walk through them, encountering them with their own bodies, seeking their own physical relationship to them, unsettled, perhaps also strengthened. This spatial structure does not correspond to the flat, strictly hierarchical constellation of three figures in the *Große Deutsche Kunstausstellung*, which orders and assigns, defines a viewpoint for the viewer, and dominates those standing there in the monument.

Notes

- 1 Josephine Gabler, *Die Skulptur in Deutschland in den Ausstellungen zwischen 1933 und 1945*, PhD diss. Freie Universität Berlin, 1996, pp. 133–140; idem, “Deutsche Bildhauer der Gegenwart’ – Eine Ausstellung 1938 in Warschau und Krakau und ihre Vorgeschichte,” in: Eugen Blume and Dieter Scholz (eds.), *Überbrückt. Ästhetische Moderne und Nationalsozialismus. Kunsthistoriker und Künstler 1925–1937* (Cologne 1999), pp. 247–254.
- 2 Martin Papenbrock and Gabriele Saure (eds.), *Kunst des frühen 20. Jahrhunderts in deutschen Ausstellungen*, vol. 1: *Ausstellungen deutscher Gegenwartskunst in der NS-Zeit. Eine kommentierte Bibliographie [Schriften der Guernica-Gesellschaft, vol. 10]* (Weimar 2000), p. 479.
- 3 Hildegard Brenner, *Die Kunstpolitik des Nationalsozialismus* (Hamburg 1963), pp. 66–71; Gabler 1996 (see note 1), pp. 30–31; Dieter Scholz, “Otto Andreas Schreiber, die Kunst der Nation und die Fabrikstellungen,” in: Blume/Scholz 1999 (see note 1), pp. 92–108.
- 4 Arie Hartog, “Äußere Anmut oder innere Schönheit? Der erfolgreichste deutsche Bildhauer und seine Kritiker 1920 bis 1934,” in: *Georg Kolbe 1877–1947*, ed. Ursel Berger, exh. cat. Georg Kolbe Museum, Berlin and Gerhard-Marcks-Haus, Bremen (Munich and New York 1997), pp. 78–86, here p. 84 [translated].
- 5 See, with the exemption of the criticism by the radical, national-racial art historian Edgar Schindler: Kirsten Baumann, *Wortgefechte. Völkische und nationalsozialistische Kunstkritik 1927–1939* (Weimar 2002), pp. 383–285; see also: Gabler 1996 (see note 1), pp. 52–60.
- 6 Stephan Lackner and Helen Adkins, “Exhibition of 20th Century German Art, London 1938,” in: *Stationen der Moderne. Die bedeutenden Kunstausstellungen des 20. Jahrhunderts in Deutschland*, ed. Eberhard Roters and Bernhard Schulz, exh. cat. Berlinische Galerie – Museum of Modern Art, Berlin, 1988–89 (Berlin 1988), pp. 314–337, here p. 325.
- 7 “Dokument 10, 10.7.1938. ‘Das Bekenntnis des Führers zu Kunst und Künstler.’ Rede zur Eröffnung der Großen Deutschen Kunstausstellung in München,” in: Robert Eikmeyer (ed.), *Adolf Hitler. Reden zur Kunst- und Kulturpolitik 1933–1939* (Frankfurt am Main 2004), pp. 179–187, here p. 179; Robert Scholz, “Der Kunstschwandel von London,” in: *Völkischer Beobachter*, Berlin, August 1, 1938, p. 9.
- 8 The author for the *Entartete Kunst* exhibition, Wolfgang Willrich, railed against Kolbe in the context of Galerie Flechtheim, whereby, in his opinion, Kolbe was the only one who had “remained healthy.” Wolfgang Willrich, *Säuberung des Kunsttempels. Eine kunstpolitische Kampfschrift zur Gesundung deutscher Kunst im Geiste nordischer Art* (Munich and Berlin 1937), pp. 53 and 73; for more on the inconsistencies regarding Kolbe’s classification, see also: Paul Westheim: “Geistige Führung. Hin und Her um Kolbe und Breker,” in: *Pariser Tageszeitung*, July 21, 1937, p. 4.
- 9 Baumann 2002 (see note 5), pp. 376–378.
- 10 “And as for the entrance hall of the German pavilion, it is not such an enticing place to stay anyway. If there was a draught in it too, you’d really think it was a meeting room for the waiting mourners.” Paul Westheim, “Geistige Führung. Hin und Her um Kolbe und Breker,” in: *Pariser Tageszeitung*, July 21, 1937, p. 4 [translated].
- 11 See the essay by Bernhard Maaz in this volume, pp. 24–78.
- 12 For more on the history of the exhibition, see: Gabler 1996 (see note 1), pp. 80–89. For the exceptionally kind provision of personal notes, copies, and the manuscript, the author expresses her sincere thanks to Josephine Gabler.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 82.
- 14 Letter from Kurt Martin to Georg Kolbe, November 25, 1936, MvT Estate, GKM Archive, Berlin; letter from Kurt Martin to Karl Albiker, November 25, 1936, Kunsthau Zürich; State Archive Karlsruhe GLA dept. 441, no. 101.
- 15 Quoted in: Gabler 1996 (see note 1), p. 87 [translated].
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 83 [translated].
- 17 The attempt of the Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda to prevent the opening of the exhibition because of Christoph Voll’s participation was unsuccessful because the show had already opened; *ibid.*, p. 85.
- 18 Copy of a letter from Ernst Henke to Haus der Deutschen Kunst, November 26, 1937, Kunsthau Zürich; State Archive Karlsruhe GLA dept. 441, no. 101; GDK Research, <https://www.gdk-research.de/de/obj19400411.html> [last accessed April 6, 2023].
- 19 Letter from Georg Kolbe to Kurt Martin, February 9, 1937, Kunsthau Zürich; State Archive Karlsruhe GLA dept. 441, no. 101; copy of the letter in the MvT Estate, GKM Archive, Berlin [translated].

- 20** Letter from Georg Kolbe to Kurt Martin, April 20, 1937, Kunsthaus Zürich; State Archive Karlsruhe GLA dept. 441, no. 101 [translated].
- 21** *Ibid.* [translated].
- 22** Baumann 2002 (see note 5), p. 388.
- 23** Josephine Gabler, "Arno Breker – Von Paris nach 'Germania,'" in: Wolfgang Benz, Peter Eckel, and Andreas Nachama (eds.), *Kunst im NS-Staat. Ideologie, Ästhetik, Protagonisten* (Berlin 2015), pp. 73–88, here p. 80.
- 24** See: Marlies Schmidt, *Die "Große Deutsche Kunstausstellung 1937 im Haus der Deutschen Kunst zu München." Rekonstruktion und Analyse*, PhD diss. University of Halle, 2012, available online at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.25673/823> [last accessed April 6, 2023].
- 25** In addition to the photographic views of Hall 2 of the *Große Deutsche Kunstausstellung 1939*, the GDK Research database provides detailed information on the individual works: <https://www.gdk-research.de> [last accessed April 6, 2023].
- 26** Two other models of the horse were positioned on the garden side of the Reich Chancellery in 1939, so that they could be seen from Hitler's study. See: Magdalena Bushart, "Sensationslust und Geschichtsvergessenheit. Bildhauerei aus dem 'Dritten Reich,' heute," in: *vermacht. verfallen. verdrängt. Kunst und Nationalsozialismus*, ed. Christian Fuhrmeister, Monika Hauser-Mair, and Felix Steffan, exh. cat. Städtische Galerie Rosenheim (Petersberg 2017), pp. 26–36, here p. 31.
- 27** Schmidt 2012 (see note 24), p. 23.
- 28** Ludwig Eberlein, "770 Künstler – 1300 Bilder und Plastiken. Erster Rundgang durch die 'Große Deutsche Kunstausstellung 1939' in München," in: *Das 12 Uhr Blatt*, Berlin, July 15, 1939 [translated].
- 29** Wilhelm Rüdiger, "Deutsches Leben in deutscher Kunst. Aus der Großen Deutschen Kunstausstellung im Haus der Deutschen Kunst in München," in: *Völkischer Beobachter*, July 15, 1939 [translated].
- 30** Max Imdahl, "Pose und Indoktrination. Zu Werken der Plastik und Malerei im Dritten Reich" [1988], in: *Artige Kunst. Kunst und Politik im Nationalsozialismus*, ed. Silke von Berswordt-Wallrabe, Jörg-Uwe Neumann, and Agnes Tietze, exh. cat. Kunstsammlungen der Ruhr-Universität Bochum, Kunsthalle Rostock, and Kunstforum Ostdeutsche Galerie, Regensburg (Bielefeld 2016), pp. 17–23.
- 31** Walter Almon-Gros, "Große Deutsche Kunstausstellung 1939. Deutsche Graphik und Plastik," in: *Der Führer*, Karlsruhe, July 27, 1939 [translated].
- 32** Bushart 2017 (see note 26), pp. 26–36, here p. 30 [translated].
- 33** For more on the context of their creation, see: *ibid.*, pp. 30–34.
- 34** See the essay by Ambra Frank in this volume, pp. 136–151.
- 35** For more on the concept of the "supersign," see: Felix Thürlemann, "Vom Einzelbild zum hyperimage. Eine neue Herausforderung für die kunstgeschichtliche Hermeneutik" [2004], in: Gerd Blum, Steffen Bogen, David Ganz, and Marius Rimmel (eds.), *Pendant Plus. Praktiken der Bildkombinatorik* (Berlin 2012), pp. 23–44.
- 36** All the works submitted by Kolbe were exhibited. See the index card on Georg Kolbe, Haus der Deutschen Kunst in the archive of Haus der Kunst, Munich. The author thanks Sabine Brantl for this information.
- 37** Letter from Georg Kolbe to Kurt Meinhardt, August 30, 1940, in: Maria Freifrau von Tiesenhäusen (ed.), *Georg Kolbe. Briefe und Aufzeichnungen* (Tübingen 1987), no. 230, pp. 165f. [translated].
- 38** Kurt Lothar Tank, *Deutsche Plastik unserer Zeit* [edited by Undersecretary Wilhelm Bade and with a preface by Reich Minister Albert Speer] (Munich 1942), p. 48 [translated].
- 39** *Ibid.* [translated].
- 40** Felix A. Dargel, "Sinnbilder der Zeit. Rosenberg eröffnet eine Plastik-Ausstellung im Künstlerhaus," in: *Berliner Lokal-Anzeiger*, Berlin, evening edition, July 3, 1940 [translated].
- 41** There is no entry for this in his appointment diaries'. A few days before the opening, "Scholz" and later "Rittich" called, possibly Rosenberg's employees, Robert Scholz and Werner Rittich. On the day of the opening, "Prof. Scheibe" called. No written correspondence with the organizers is known. The diaries of Kurt von Keudell, who was not in Berlin at the time, reveal nothing. The photo album with exhibition views from 1920 to 1946 shows a break after 1937. The last two exhibitions are no longer entered in red crayon, but rather in ballpoint pen: the academy exhibition in 1942 and the presentation at the Städel Museum in Frankfurt am Main in 1946.
- 42** Exh. cat. *Meisterwerke der Plastik*, Künstlerhaus Berlin, July–August 1941, pp. 7–8.
- 43** *Ibid.*, p. 4 [translated].
- 44** *Ibid.*, p. 5 [translated].
- 45** See: Robert Scholz, "Große Kunst im großen Schicksal. Ein Gang durch die Ausstellung im Künstlerhaus," in: *Völkischer Beobachter*, Berlin, July 4, 1940.

- 46 Ibid.; see the installation view in: “Neue deutsche Kunst. Plastik-Ausstellung im Berliner Künstlerhaus,” in: *Solinger Tageblatt*, July 25, 1940.
- 47 Dargel 1940 (see note 40).
- 48 Edgar Schindler, “Meisterwerke der Plastik, Berlin,” in: *Das Bild*, Karlsruhe im Breisgau, July 1940 [translated]; cf. Bruno E. Werner, “Meisterwerke der Plastik, Berlin,” in: *Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung*, Berlin, evening edition, July 4, 1940.
- 49 Scholz 1940 (see note 45) [translated].
- 50 Walter Reichel, “Meisterwerke der Plastik. Gang durch eine Berliner Ausstellung,” in: *Neue Leipziger Zeitung*, Leipzig, July 14, 1940 [translated].
- 51 Ibid. [translated].
- 52 Carl Linfert, “Berliner Bericht. ‘Meisterwerke der Plastik,’” in: *Frankfurter Zeitung*, Frankfurt am Main [Montag Morgenblatt, Reichsausgabe], July 8, 1940 [translated].
- 53 For Linfert, Breker’s figured faces contained “the utmost tension of will,” “often to the point of a screaming grimace”; *ibid.* [translated]. Linfert’s equally blatant criticism in 1941 became his undoing. Breker complained to Goebbels: Gabler 2015 (see note 23), pp. 73–88, here pp. 87f.
- 54 See: Josephine Gabler, “‘Das Monumentale [hat] nicht erst von bestimmten Größenmaßen an Geltung’ – Großplastik im Nationalsozialismus,” in: Wolfgang Ruppert (ed.), *Künstler im Nationalsozialismus. Die “deutsche Kunst,” die Kunstpolitik und die Berliner Kunsthochschule* (Cologne, Weimar, and Vienna 2015), pp. 231–243, here pp. 236f.
- 55 Linfert 1940 (see note 52) [translated].
- 56 Ibid. [translated].
- 57 Georg Kolbe, “Neues Bauen gegen Plastik?” in: *Wasmuths Monatshefte, “Baukunst und Städtebau,”* no. 8, August 1932, p. 381, quoted in: Gabler 1996 (see note 1), p. 46 [translated].