

**At One Table:
Breker, Klimsch,
Kolbe, Göring, Hitler,
and Mrs. Himmler
Coteries, Circles,
Dependencies**

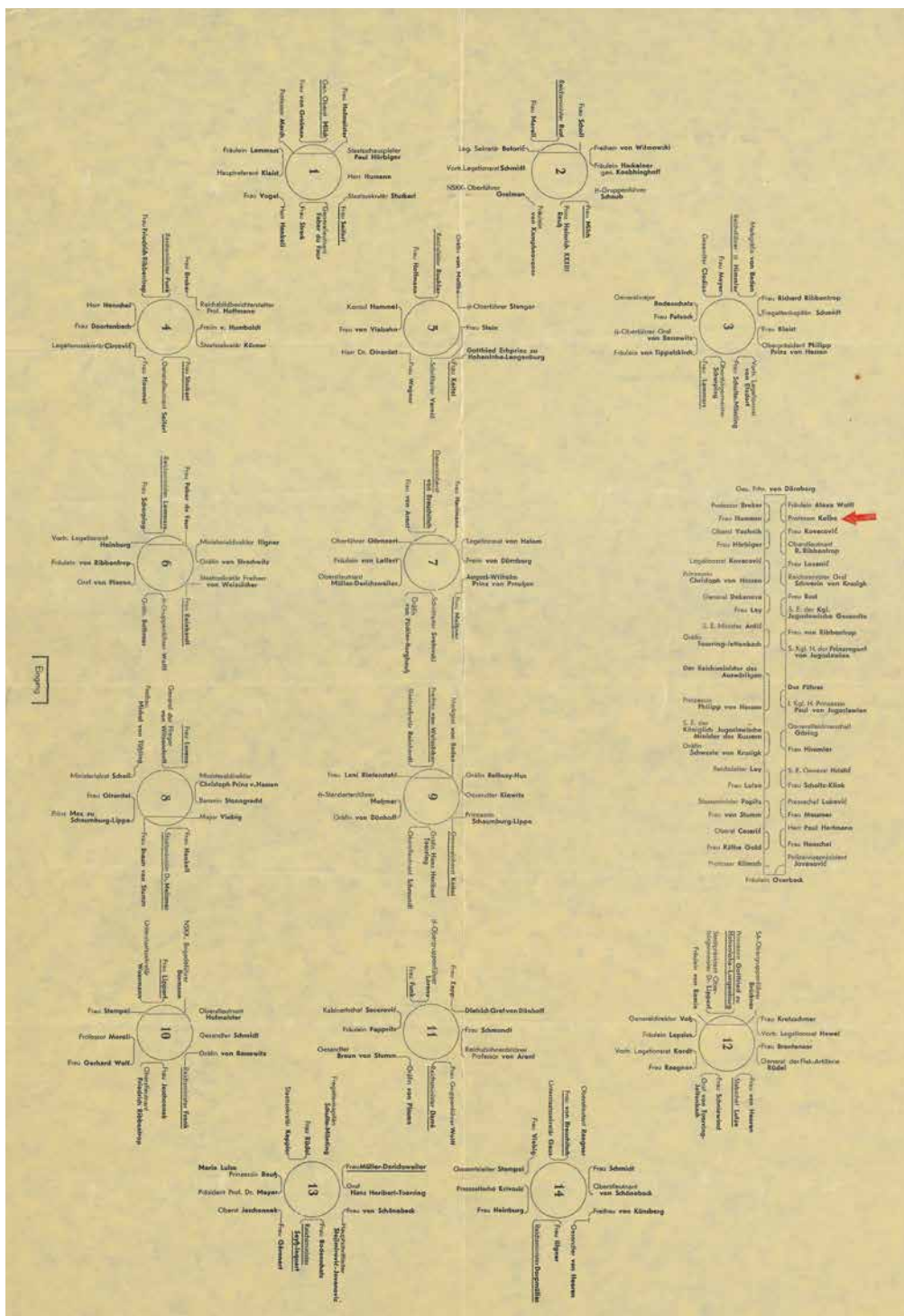
In the fall of 2021, the Georg Kolbe Museum issued an invitation to a workshop to be held on December 11, 2021, to provide insight into the artist's "second" estate, which had arrived in Berlin in the spring of 2020. Although it has already been mentioned on several occasions, the eminently discursive nature of this process, which is highly interested in scholarly exchange, should be emphasized here once again. For it is not a matter of course to discuss with colleagues, in a self-critical, cross-institutional, and open-ended manner, the latest findings and evaluations of sources and the resulting possibilities of interpretation. But the further unfolding of events—up to this conference volume—has clearly shown how absolutely right the courageous decision was to proactively integrate the new material into the research discourse in this way, instead of first reviewing, cataloging, evaluating, and researching it in-house, and then presenting or publishing it after several years.

In December 2021, in her cursory overview of the documents transported in some 100 moving cartons, Elisa Tamaschke of the Georg Kolbe Museum also showed a seating plan (fig. 1) that immediately electrified me—if only because the ephemeral character of seating arrangements and menus is diametrically opposed to both private and state traditions of storage and transmission. Yet it is praxeological-performative manifestations such as plans like these that, I argue, convey an idea of historical processes, structures, reference systems, and networks of players that correspondences and manuscripts do not allow in the same way—and neither do the artworks themselves. The seating plan reveals an internal logic that usually operates only in the background; we peer into the "gears of operation," or the infrastructural fabric that frames and accompanies discourses but which rarely comes to the fore, and whose nature and implications are even more rarely addressed.

We see a floor plan that can also be read as an experimental arrangement for a meticulously planned meeting of the top echelons of National Socialist society: people are deliberately and consciously placed—that is to say, in each case selected and combined with one another—like the ingredients of a dish, a medical prescription, or an experiment in a chemical laboratory. In this setting, the functionary elites of the state, the party, the government, the military, and the administration (and their wives) meet selected artists (and their wives—with the exception of Leni Riefenstahl, who did not follow the couple principle).

We see one long rectangular table and fourteen round tables as they were set for the dinner at the Hotel Kaiserhof (Wilhelmsplatz 3–5, opposite the Reich Chancellery) on June 3, 1939, on the occasion of the visit of Their Royal Highnesses Princess Olga and Prince Regent Paul of Yugoslavia to the Reich's capital, Berlin. The aristocracy is strongly represented—probably also in order to maintain the etiquette befitting their status vis-à-vis the royal couple.

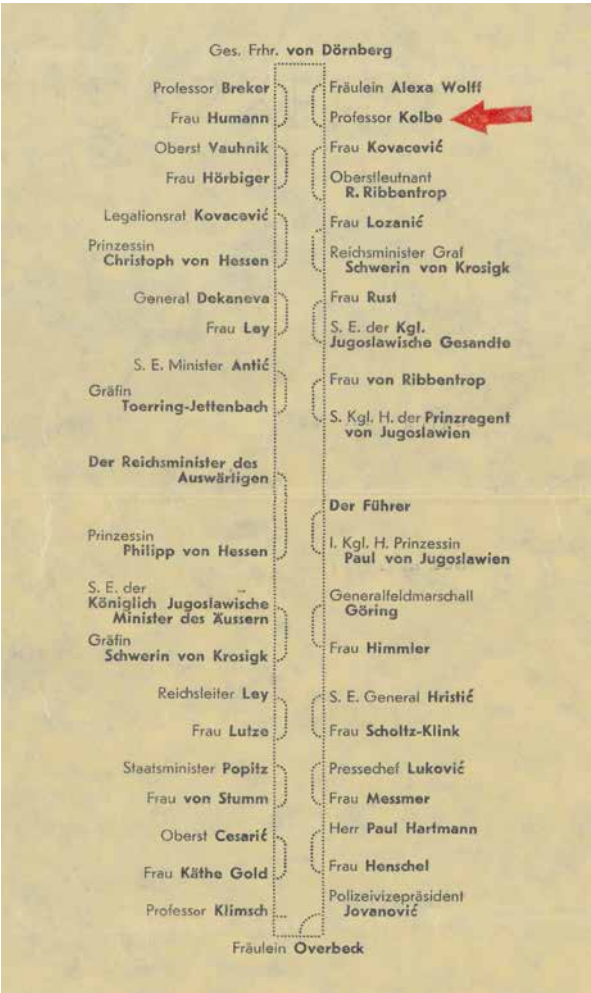
But we also see a scheme and a model, a visualization, and a codification. Regardless of the concrete purpose, we can speculate on the question of whether this ideal image of a social configuration follows imperial-era models. If so, the modern, efficient, economically powerful, and militarily well-equipped NS dictatorship would have returned to



1 The seating plan for the dinner at Hotel Kaiserhof on June 3, 1939, on the occasion of the visit of Their Royal Highnesses Princess Olga and Prince Regent Paul of Yugoslavia to Berlin (overall view), Georg Kolbe Museum Archive, Berlin

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2 The detail of the seating plan shows Adolf Hitler's central placement; the red arrow points to Georg Kolbe's seat, Georg Kolbe Museum Archive, Berlin



the construct of the “royal court” for an evening. It can be assumed, however, that the protocol conventions, specifications, or even constraints for selection and arrangement were decisive for this spatiotemporal codification of a state visit.

For our context—*Georg Kolbe and National Socialism. Continuities and Breaks in Life, Work, and Reception*—this source seems important to me. For it allows us to look at and into the close relationship between art and politics in the NS state. The precise determination of this relationship is crucial for a holistic understanding of detail and totality, micro and macro, point and panorama, document and narrative, source and context, individual work and oeuvre, circumstantial evidence/relic/trace and overall picture.¹ Thus, we face the challenge, also methodologically, of developing a coherent, plausible, and consensual interpretation.

The only table which is rectangular rather than round stands out on the plan of the room. This is where the *crème de la crème* gathers—or are lined up (fig. 2). One quickly

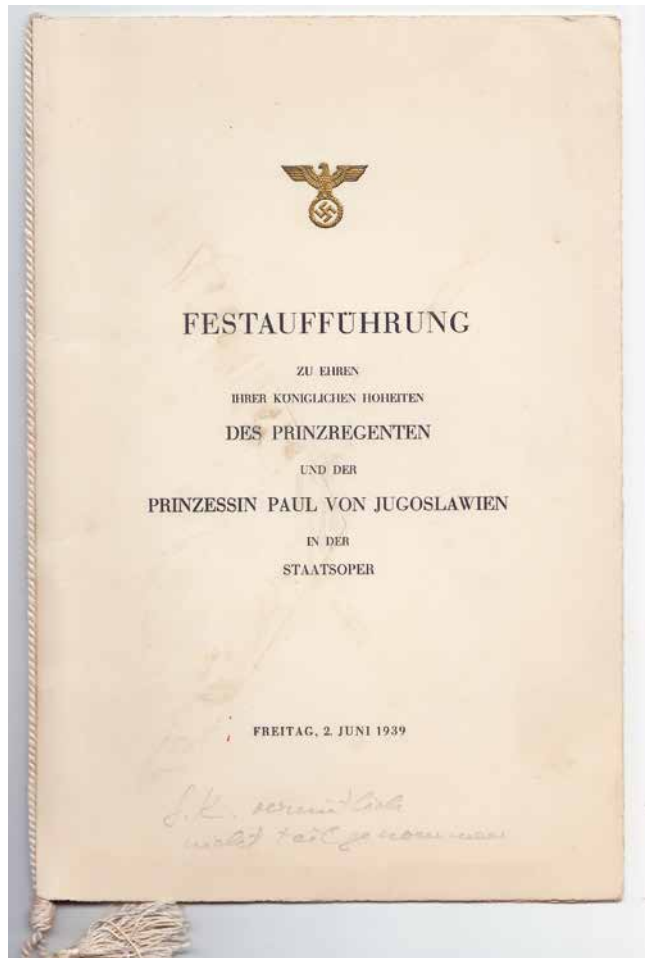
recognizes the pairings of the dinner partners, such as that of Kolbe with a “Miss Alexa Wolff”—who probably cannot be identified with Alexandra von Wolff-Stomersee, since she had already been married twice, nor with the daughter of SS-Gruppenführer Karl Wolff (table 6) and “the wife of Gruppenführer Wolff” (table 11, paired with Reich Minister Darré), since the daughter’s name was Helga and she had only been born in 1934.

On the one hand, it is clear that the small Yugoslavian delegation was faced with, or rather seated opposite, a large number of German participants, and on the other, that both artists and women were placed next to or opposite the National Socialist functional elites in a contrasting manner. Nevertheless, these distinct pairing processes can be summarized in three categories that can be understood as dichotomous: gender (male–female), nationality (German–Yugoslav), and, with gray areas, occupation or primary field of activity (art/culture–politics/state). For our context, this seating plan—this case study of the dialectics of art and power—raises some questions, even in the visual evidence of the dotted lines of connection: What can (only) art overtly achieve for politics and propaganda? If the totalitarian dictatorship has the power to direct an unrestricted creative sovereignty, why are these steering impulses not implemented directly? What is this (uncanny?) spectacle of which we, the post-born, become aware eighty years later? Why do so many sculptors, but no painters or graphic artists, participate in this social event? Or are all these questions completely misplaced, because it is about the tangible geopolitical interests of the Reich, i.e., a kind of gift-wrapping for truly strategic negotiations and agreements? Would the cultivated conversation of this National Socialist “salon” thus be a lulling tactical maneuver to impress the trading partner and potential ally in the Balkans?

Let us draw an interim conclusion. At the long table, at which the forty-four most important guests are seated—including the two Royal Highnesses and the “Führer” Adolf Hitler, the Reich Minister of Foreign Affairs Joachim von Ribbentrop, the Field Marshal General and Reich Commissioner for the Four-Year Plan Hermann Göring, the Reich Minister of Finance Johann Ludwig Graf Schwerin von Krosigk, the Reichsleiter of the NSDAP and the German Labor Front (DAF) Robert Ley, and many others—the German sculptors Arno Breker, Georg Kolbe, and Fritz Klimsch are also seated. At no other of the fourteen tables with their twelve to sixteen participants (altogether 180, making a total of 224 people at this state banquet) are so many artists seated as here, in the actual immediate vicinity of the Reich leadership—a proximity that can hardly be classified as other than an appreciation of the three so different artists (Kolbe is fifty-two, Klimsch sixty-nine, and Breker only thirty-nine years old).

The dinner on June 3 was preceded by a festive performance at the State Opera on June 2 (fig. 3). From the fact that the phrase “G. K. presumably did not attend” has been noted in pencil on the opera program (presumably by Kolbe’s granddaughter, Maria von Tiesenhausen, due to missing entries in the appointment diary), it can be inferred in reverse that Georg Kolbe attended the dinner. Even for an artist as successful as he was under National Socialism (uninterrupted presence at the *Große Deutsche Kunstausstellung* [Great German Art Exhibition] in Munich from 1937 to 1943 with at least one exhibited figure, and in 1939 with three exhibits), the invitation to this representative social program

3 Program for the gala performance at the Staatsoper on June 2, 1939, on the occasion of the visit of Their Royal Highnesses Princess Olga and Prince Regent Paul of Yugoslavia to Berlin, Georg Kolbe Museum Archive, Berlin



must have been something special; a more significant statement of appreciation is hardly imaginable, if one disregards the state studios for Breker and Thorak.

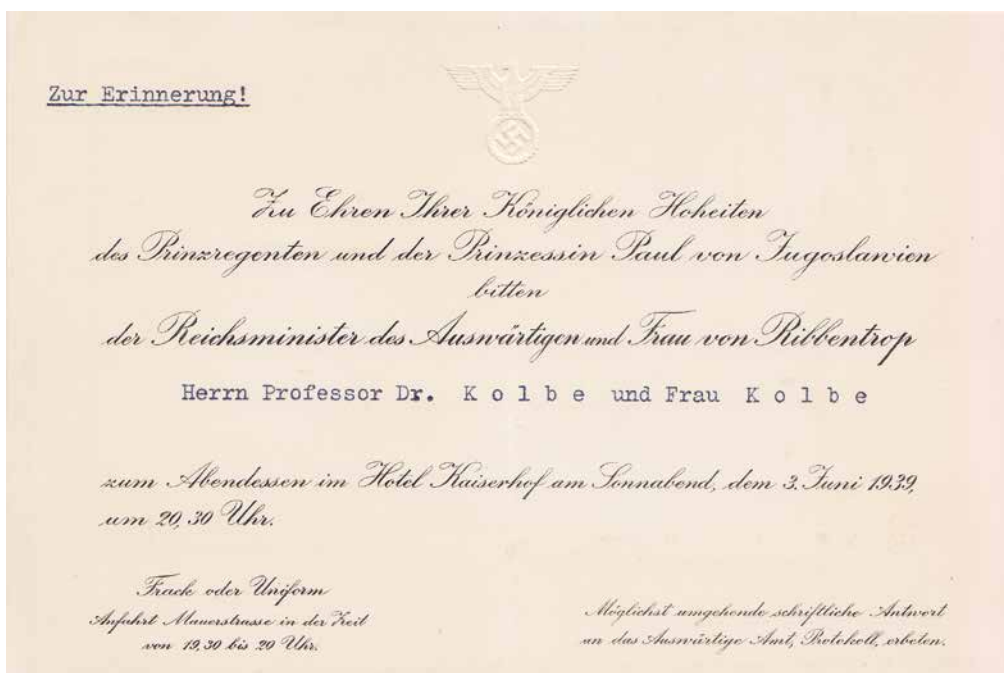
It is characteristic of Kolbe research, as well as of German art history in general, that this event in the summer of 1939 has nevertheless not yet received any attention. This is primarily due to the source situation (although at least 250 plans were probably printed), but also to the specific *déformation professionnelle* of the discipline, which Christoph Luitpold Frommel defined in a lecture in 1998 as the “linguistically adequate consummation of an aesthetic masterpiece.”² For as indispensable as this analysis of form and work is—the concrete examination of the artifact and the elaboration of its layers of meaning—the narrowing and fading out of the context is equally problematic, and the tunnel-vision view of figures, statues, and statuettes without consideration of the conditions of their production, distribution, and reception is limited in the truest sense of the word. The seating plan is thus a message in a bottle that sheds a flash of light on the context in which many works of the late 1930s were created.

In the 2018 study “‘Einseitig künstlerisch.’ Georg Kolbe in der NS-Zeit” (“Unilaterally Artistic.” Georg Kolbe in the NS Era) by Ursel Berger,³ we encounter a different line of argumentation regarding the matter under discussion here. “Kolbe’s formal language” had changed “in the late 1920s,” “independently of political implications.”⁴ A change is thus conceded, but at the same time a decidedly internal artistic development is claimed or made responsible for the—in part considerable—modifications. This is followed by the statement that Kolbe’s works, “even after 1933, were understood in the press as works of art and not as interpretations of NS ideology.”⁵

The fact is that even the nearly 3,000 landscape depictions in the *Große Deutsche Kunstausstellungen* (GDK) in Munich from 1937 to 1944—by far the most common motif or theme—were not direct “interpretations of NS ideology,” but were part of the established tradition of bourgeois ideas about art. Precisely for this reason, as Hans-Ernst Mittig was able to convincingly explain in discussions and conversations, these images had a system-stabilizing function, because they simulated a free space in the face of a dictatorship of surveillance and conformist media, or, dialectically speaking, they made possible the illusion of the absence of control and propaganda. Accordingly, the work of art contributes in an affirmative way to the continuation of the dictatorship precisely when it evades a blatant ideological indoctrination and servicing.

Basically, we can only make progress in the question of affirmation and criticism, approval of and distance to the regime, if we take into account the high volatility, the dynamics and thrusts of radicalization. The ideology and worldview of National Socialism, in particular, were not static, but were always performatively and praxeologically adapted to concrete conditions, as shown by the example of the Fraktur typeface, which was initially enforced but then abandoned for pragmatic reasons; similarly, the *Volksempfänger* (people’s radio receiver) replaced the *Thingstätten* (open-air theaters), which had sunk into complete irrelevance by the end of the 1930s. In examining Kolbe’s attitude toward National Socialism, we must therefore assume from the outset a latent state of tension, ambivalence, and ambiguity due to developmental processes on the part of both the artist and the system. The congruence or divergence can only be determined with a certain degree of precision on a case-by-case basis, not across the board and in general.

The *conditio sine qua non* for such an investigation—different, new, and in part even first-time—of Kolbe’s relationship to National Socialism is, on the one hand, the willingness to revise comfortable, simplistic, or relativizing perspectives of interpretation, and on the other hand, a further intensification of the study of sources. For the modeling of art-historical work to date, which has disregarded or even consciously ignored contemporary historical contexts and asymmetrical power relations, was due not least to an often solipsistic focus on questions of form. As indispensable as the autopsy of sources is, there is a certainty that the results will conflict with art-historical tendencies towards canonization—indeed, with the paradigms and traditions of value attribution themselves. A sculptor like Kolbe, who witnessed and in part helped to shape the crucial developmental processes of German modernist sculpture, inevitably runs the risk of being appropriated by simplistic narratives or becoming a pawn in bipolar and dichotomous patterns of



4 Invitation to the dinner on June 3, 1939, from Joachim von Ribbentrop to Georg Kolbe with the request to the invited to wear “tailcoat or uniform”

interpretation. Nevertheless, there is no alternative to a reevaluation; the need for this—of Kolbe and his work—is inescapable.

With regard to our case study, the seating plan, the question is not only “tailcoat or uniform” (fig. 4); we need to understand the spatiotemporal configuration and the network of relationships of this dinner. The fact is that various important players—a classification that is rather an understatement for Hitler, but applies to the Reich ministers Bernhard Rust (science, education, and national education) and Walther Funk (economics), as well as to the photographer and politician Heinrich Hoffmann—had a very concrete relationship with Kolbe: they were buyers of his works. In 1938, for example, Hitler purchased the almost life-size statue *Junges Weib* (Young Woman, 1938) for 18,000 RM; Rust bought *Hüterin* (Guardian, 1938) in 1939; Funk purchased the figure *Herabschreitender* (Descending Man, 1936) in 1940; and a private individual bought *Flora* (1939/40)—each of the latter three also sold for the handsome price of 18,000 RM, as if this amount were Kolbe’s standard price. Three figures were acquired by Charlotte Rohrbach and the *Flora* by Heinrich Hoffmann, the impresario of a photographic dynasty, Reich photojournalist, and influential intimate of the Führer’s inner circle.⁶

The seating arrangement thus represents, at least in part, a coterie, a network, even a cartel or oligopoly: people knew each other, they appreciated each other, and of course they also competed with each other, which is especially true for the three sculptors. In any case, all the protagonists of this evening were part of the National Socialist system, and

some also of the NS “operational system of art.” At the same time, the actual occasion, namely the state visit, must be regarded as quite precarious, since it falls into a phase in which the Gestapo, consulates, and legations, as well as secret and intelligence services, meticulously observed and reported on the mood toward the German Reich.⁷ The extensive documentation of the preparation and execution of the visit⁸ allows the diagnosis of a deliberately orchestrated campaign of deception when Hitler claimed in his toast that “the German people” had “no other goal than to move toward a secure future in a pacified Europe.”⁹ A few days later the State Secretary at the Foreign Office, Ernst von Weizsäcker, described the visit as “quite satisfactory.”¹⁰

The press coverage documented the participants of the dinner in the form of long lists: “Present on the German side were: a number of Reich ministers and Reich leaders, Reich governors as well as other leading personalities of the state, the party, and the Wehrmacht, the members of the German honorary service and the honorary escorts of the Yugoslav guests, as well as renowned representatives of business and art with their wives.”¹¹

What remains? Two aspects characterize this attempt to come to a conclusion. On the one hand, the seating plan retains its power of irritation as a historical source: How fundamentally osmotic must we conceptualize the relationship between the NS state and art, when the spheres of art and power were so close to each other, and even manifestly converged? Can we now, on the basis of this evidence, interpolate those other cases that have not been handed down in the same way? And which theory-based tools from which discipline seem appropriate for an argument? The seating chart opens a window that allows views whose meaning and significance have yet to be explored.

On the other hand, it can be said that the exclusive focus on the work of art itself is only conditionally useful, and only conditionally resilient, when it comes to determining Kolbe’s relationship to National Socialism. Precisely because we are accustomed to conceiving of work and context as separate spheres, the consideration of historical realities of life even requires, in a certain sense, a methodological reorientation of the subject of art history. Only this increase in complexity can do justice to the inevitably systemic character of artifacts. The wealth of documents, both written and visual, now available at the Georg Kolbe Museum is therefore both an opportunity and a mandate to further specify the precarious relationship between modernism and National Socialism as an examination of the structures of the analysis of the production, distribution, and reception of art in relation to intra- and extra-scientific factors, contexts, and power relations. This history of entanglements—that much is certain—is in turn multilayered and needs to be opened up and interpreted.

Notes

- 1 More on this line of thought in: Christian Fuhrmeister, "Punkt und Panorama, Kunstwerk und Kunststadt, Mikro und Makro," in: *Kunst und Leben 1918 bis 1955*, ed. Karin Althaus, Sarah Bock, Lisa Kern, Matthias Mühling, and Melanie Wittchow, exh. cat. Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus und Kunstbau München, Munich (Berlin and Munich 2022), pp. 20–35.
- 2 In the context of the so-called "Small Art Historian Conference" at the ZKM | Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe on the theme "Art History—Self-Diagnosis of a Discipline," July 3/4, 1998.
- 3 An earlier version of this text from 2013—with only a few small-format illustrations—was entitled "Georg Kolbe in der NS-Zeit. Tatsachen und Interpretationen" (Georg Kolbe in the NS Era. Facts and Interpretations); I thank Elisa Tamaschke, GKM Berlin, for the kind reference. This older version is still available online at <https://www.yumpu.com/de/document/view/21308335/ursel-berger-georg-kolbe-in-der-ns-zeit-georg-kolbe-museum>. In the revised and retitled version from 2018, there are more and larger illustrations; the text has been modified, but Ursel Berger argues very similarly; <https://web.archive.org/web/20190508074534/https://www.georg-kolbe-museum.de/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Einseitig-künstlerisch-mit-Bildern-Titel-1.pdf> [both sites last accessed June 11, 2023].
- 4 Ibid. (2018 version), p. 19 [translated].
- 5 Ibid. [translated].
- 6 See: Sebastian Peters, *Heinrich Hoffmann. Hitlers Fotograf und seine Netzwerke zwischen Politik, Propaganda und Profit* (in preparation), <https://www.ifz-muenchen.de/forschung/ea/forschung/heinrich-hoffmann-hitlers-fotograf-und-seine-netzwerke-zwischen-politik-propaganda-und-profit> [last accessed June 11, 2023].
- 7 See, for example: PolAAA, RZ 211/103371, sheets 67 and 148; BArch R 43 II/1456b, sheet 87.
- 8 BArch R 43 II/1456b, sheets 93–140.
- 9 POLAAA, R 103324, sheets 16–17 [translated].
- 10 POLAAA, R 103324, sheets 53–54 [translated].
- 11 From press clipping from the Deutsches Nachrichtensbüro, the press agency of the Reich, June 5, 1939, in: BArch, R 43 II 1456b, sheets 147 VS and RS.

