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2.1/ Art of the People

/1 POPULIST ART BY THE STATE

/1.1 THE QUEST FOR MASS ACCEPTANCE

/1.1.1 THE ISSUE OF ART FOR THE PEOPLE

The issue of art for the people was the primary ideological motivation for reconfiguring the relationship between traditional and modern art during the Depression. For the art policies of the three totalitarian states, it was fundamental from the start. In democratic France, it surfaced only as late as 1936 under the government of the Popular Front. Tightened state management of the arts followed from increased state support. It was aimed at making them boost the popular allegiance claimed by all regimes, in an inverse proportion to their oppressive governance. Thus, in the Soviet Union and in Germany the idea of an art for the people became an enforceable guideline, while in Italy and France it was more mildly tied to fascist and republican ideologies respectively. True to the ambivalence of populism—that is, the dressing up of imposed policies as responses to the demands of the people—the ideology of an art for the people claimed to be giving the people the art they had wanted all along. It followed the age-old ambition for art to be successful with large publics, either as propaganda or as merchandise. What was new was the mission for art to promote social cohesion.

Since the turn of the century, the claim to represent the views and tastes of common people had been a rallying cry for the traditionalist opposition to modern art. In response, modern artistic culture often advanced its own hyperbolic claims for an elementary understanding whenever it strove to transcend its upper middle-class market base and appealed for state support. In 1918, Vladimir Mayakovsky linked traditional art to the disempowered ruling class and exhorted workers to embrace modern art instead. In 1924, Paul Klee conceded in a speech before a museum public⁽⁴⁴⁾ that “the people don’t support us,” asserting nonetheless that modern artists at the Bauhaus, where he taught, were “seeking a people,” not addressing the people as they were. In 1937, finally, Hitler, in a speech at the opening of the House of German Art in Munich, settled the alternative to the detriment of modern art with a standard populist decree: “An art that cannot count on the most joyful and most heartfelt assent of the healthy broad mass of the people, but depends on small cliques—partly with a stake in it, partly blasé—is unbearable.”⁽⁴⁵⁾

However, it was one thing to discredit modern art because of the incomprehension it encountered within large parts of the populace, and quite another to frame an art of popular acceptance that would not just relapse onto the traditional themes and forms of old but would be refashioned to fulfill the task of conveying ideologies to the masses in a modernized environment. None of the totalitarian regimes quite succeeded in framing an art for the people any more than they succeeded in securing total popular support for the policies they still had to enforce. Rather, the notion of an art for the people became the contested yardstick for a supervised artistic culture, designed to cast their ideologies of change and renewal into accustomed forms of facile understanding. In the process, modern art had its disingenuous claims for an elementary appeal disproved, most painfully in the Soviet Union, where its representatives—with Mayakovsky in the lead—initially had enough political clout to frame institutional debates about the issue of an art for the people on their own terms. It took almost a decade to disabuse them of their claims.

/1.1.2 **TOTALITARIAN MASS ART**

By invoking a supra-constitutional mass support—the proletariat, and later the classless people (*narod*) in the Soviet Union, the people (*Volk*) in Germany, and the nation (*nazione*) in Italy—totalitarian regimes claimed to represent a unified popular base over and above social divisions, which they presented as a challenge to democracy's legitimacy as a mere majority rule. The vehement enforcement of such claims in the Soviet Union and, to a lesser degree, in Germany gave a new political urgency to the alternative between elitism and populism as a validation for artistic culture. An art enjoined to be responsive to an undivided populace, rather than to any social segment, had to abide by political prescriptions rather than heed the experience of acceptance or rejection. The Fascist regime stayed clear of any apodictic correlation between art and the people, because its ideology of a unified nation was founded on the corporative coordination of diverse economic and social interests recognized as such. This is why it refrained from any effort to define the populist appeal of Fascist art in exclusionary, let alone oppressive terms.

Only in the Soviet Union and in Germany did the popular acceptance of government-supported or government-approved art become the unqualified premise of public pronouncements and professional debates. The underlying ideologies of class or race were so fundamentalist that any deviation could be denounced not merely as lacking artistic merit, but as politically detrimental. Since the launch of the First Five-Year Plan in the fall of 1928, a monolithic concept of the proletariat as the recipient of traditional art was held up against the equally monolithic idea of the 'bourgeoisie' as patron of modern art. As a result, the preference for traditional over modern art became part of the renewed class struggle justifying the violent enforcement of the

Plan. In his speech of September 1, 1933 to the Nuremberg Party Rally, where he outlined the guiding ideas of his art policy, Hitler asserted a pre-established harmony between an unerring aesthetic instinct of the common people and a timeless art capable of transcending historic change. Such an art, he said, was biologically rooted in the Aryan race and had to be shielded against modern art as an alien threat.

In all three totalitarian states, the structural contradictions between populism and dictatorship inherent in their concepts of a state-ordained art for the people could cause divisions of opinion or policy adjustments in the pursuit of state art projects. The more populism gave way to autocracy, the less an art for the people would be sufficient for the exaltation of state power. Throughout the first half of the decade, in Italy and the Soviet Union the balance between popular representation and acclaim to authority kept shifting to the detriment of the former. Only Hitler, overriding short-lived populist aspirations of some Party circles, opted for a monumental art of power from the start. Four years into his regime, he recognized that populist art could not deliver on this expectation. When that moment came, in the spring of 1937, Hitler's personal oversight of art policy facilitated a swift decision on the shortcomings of such an art. In the other two totalitarian states, the protracted, conceptually overdetermined pronouncements on art policy made for contrived equations between the popular will and the authority of state or Party.

/1.1.3 **PEOPLE'S ART WITHOUT DEMOCRACY**

Because their constitutional legitimacy flowed from the popular vote, democratic governments had, before the First World War, never attempted to define an art for the people preempting their diverse constituencies. Whenever they wished to broaden the popular appeal of artistic culture, it was by making the extant art accessible to a larger public. Such policies pre-dated democracy. Since the early 19th century at the latest, ever-larger social segments were drawn into museums and academies. Toward the end of the century, cultural agencies of worker's unions and leftist parties sought to popularize academic art as a medium of social acculturation. Their ideal of an aesthetic education was to appreciate its standards. As late as 1936, efforts by the Popular Front government in France to let a working-class public partake of the arts abided by that earlier tradition, but also included an unsuccessful public revalidation of modern art beyond its class limitation. Yet, unlike totalitarian governments, the Popular Front never sought to fashion an art for the masses different from the art at hand.

The anti-democratic impetus inherent in the ideology of art for the people emerged most fiercely during the last four years of the Weimar Republic. A newly-founded 'Combat League for German Culture' aggressively demanded government support for traditional art in the name of the people, merely as an argument for denouncing the Weimar governments' support of modern art. In his campaign speech

“National Socialism and Art Policy” of January 26, 1928 (see Chapter 1.1/3.1.2), Hitler extended the political franchise of the electorate to include a quasi-plebiscitary right to determine the art policy of an elected government. This hypothetical demand was part of his tactics to undermine Weimar democracy by exposing its supposed failure to satisfy the people’s aesthetic preferences. Less than five years later, now heading his own government, he made good on this demand. In his first ‘Culture Speech’ at the Nuremberg Party Rally of September 1, 1933, he invoked the people’s “most natural, instinctive world view” as an aesthetic criterion. He promised to “take care that from now on the people will be summoned to be the judges of their art.”⁽⁴⁶⁾

The intent to fashion an art that could address masses of people, to win their ideological assent along with their aesthetic appreciation, and thereby to be of use as a propaganda tool, was inherently totalitarian. It required incessant efforts at definition, supervision, vigilance, and oppression, which were most rigorously pursued in the Soviet Union, and, at least verbally, in Fascist Italy. Since their revolutions of 1917 and 1922 respectively, inconclusive programs of a state-directed art aimed at a mass public had been under constant consideration. It is only since the launch of the First Five-Year Plan in late 1928 and the start of the Depression in late 1929 that such programs were framed coherently enough to produce tangible results in distinctive styles. Only in National Socialist Germany was the ideology of an art for the people proclaimed with no program whatsoever, merely as a slogan for the combat rhetoric of system change. By 1937 it had proved so hollow that the government had to own up to its failure of sanctioning the mere preference for traditional art as a starting-point for an art of National Socialism.

/ 1.2 **ART BY AND FOR THE PEOPLE**

/ 1.2.1 **POPULAR ART AND PROFESSIONAL ART**

During the first five years of the Depression, when the Soviet regime reorganized its artistic culture and the German regime followed suit in 1933, both qualified their demand for a popular art overriding class divisions by insisting on professionalism against the ideologically overzealous but dilettante art promoted by the cultural organizations affiliated with their parties. At issue was not only how clearly government-supported art was apt to be understood by mass audiences in order to effectively convey ideological messages to them. More fundamentally, it was how firmly a newly-framed artistic culture could be anchored in the social fabric by developing it out of a traditional artistic practice to which people were accustomed. Although both regimes were smart enough not to hand art policy over to amateurs, they were so keen on refashioning a populist artistic culture that they made the people’s preferences a criterion for acceptance, in disregard of art-critical conventions, but not at the

expense of academic professionalism. In this regard, the Soviet art administration was more successful than its German counterpart.

In the early years of the Soviet regime, the Proletkult movement, organized to sponsor lay art, had been suppressed because spontaneous, self-sufficient art-making eluded ideological supervision by the Commissariat of Education. However, with the First Five-Year Plan, encouragement of lay artistic practice returned with a vengeance, this time under the Party's organizational control. In November 1930, the Education Ministry licensed numerous workers' associations of so-called "self-taught artists" whose works were shown in separate sections of professional artists' group exhibitions. In 1931, even the Tretyakov Gallery acquired some of these works. Under the slogan "connection to the masses," those associations linked up with organized professional artists, albeit as separate entities. Soviet art policy reached the high point of non-professional populism when on July 18, 1931, the second round of the Palace of Soviets competition was opened to all Soviet citizens regardless of professional status. Most of the submissions dwelt on pictorial shapes—a man raising a torch to the sky, a map of the Soviet Union—in disregard of functional and technical requirements.

Hitler, on the other hand, dispatched party-sponsored lay art organizations united in the 'Combat League for German Culture' within a year of his accession. He revalidated traditional artists precisely because of what he deemed to be their professional superiority over the supposed dilettantism of modern art. Nonetheless, for several years, he and Goebbels had to excuse low quality with ideological good will. Four years later, during the festivities of the first 'Day of German Art' in Munich, the rhetoric of the folk community, as applied to artists and their audience, transfigured economic recovery measures into a show of popular art, even though academic artists organized the event. The four-day pageant was reported to have provided employment for 33,821 persons working 690,000 hours in all. The restoration of a late 19th-century practice of pageantry on this occasion was ideologically updated with the racist notion of an artistic creativity rooted in the people's biological heritage. Modern art, by contrast, was branded as biologically deviant from natural norms. Still, when Hitler severely juried the submissions to the First Great German Art Exhibition, it was for their lack of academic skill.

/1.2.2 **PEOPLE'S JUDGMENT**

While the Fascist regime, relying on the corporative self-regulation of the arts for ensuring their popular appeal, refrained from any plebiscitary pressure on the arts, the Soviet and National Socialist regimes, whose artists' organizations were directly supervised by the party or the government, made the common people pose as arbiters of art policy at crucial moments of its state enforcement. It was

the principled alternative of traditional versus modern art that guided the enactment of such measures. In both regimes' anti-modern diatribes, the charges that modern art remained inaccessible to the Soviet masses and made a mockery of the German people were commonplace. Both charges had been fully developed before, but it is only after 1930 that they were turned into policy. These policies had different premises. In the Soviet Union, the common people were enticed to dispute modern artists' claims that their recondite abstractions best conveyed Bolshevik ideology to a spontaneous aesthetic sensibility. In Germany they were encouraged to "judge" what was presented as the fraudulent posturing of modern artists and expose their work as a subversive cultural sham.

When in 1918 Lenin, in pursuit of what was billed as a 'Monumental Propaganda' program, had plaster "models of new monuments" to the victorious revolution installed all over St. Petersburg, it was in order to submit them to a "judgment by the masses" about whether these monuments should be installed. Yet such a judgment was never recorded, and none of the models was ever cast in bronze or carved in stone. Thirteen years later, the Palace of Soviets competition revived this charade of popular judgment. In November 1931, the international entries to the second round were exhibited in the Stalin Automobile Factory in Moscow to 2,500 workers who duly rebuffed them. The propagandistic publication of the event added to the subsequent anti-internationalist turn of the competition. On March 13, 1932, soon after the final competition had been decided, Le Corbusier wrote a protest letter to former Education Commissar Lunacharsky where he dismissed the relevance of popular judgment. "But what should the thinking leaders of the Soviet Republic do," he wrote, "move forward, or patronize and cultivate tastes that only attest to human frailty?"⁽⁴⁷⁾

When in July 1937 the German government staged the twin shows of approved and banished art in Munich, both opening speeches—Hitler's at the 'Great German Art Exhibition,' and Reich Chamber of Art President Adolf Ziegler's at the 'Degenerate Art' show—asserted that the German people were invited to pass judgment on the alternative between traditional and modern art. While on July 18 masses of visitors were herded as a fictitious community into what was billed as a "temple of art" for paying homage to government-approved art, one day later they were called as an equally fictitious jury into a non-museum environment to which modern art had been relegated, as if to verify that the government's anticipated judgment had been carried out on their behalf. "I also know, therefore, that the German people, in perambulating through these rooms, will acknowledge me here, too, as their speaker and counselor," Hitler asserted in his opening speech at the 'House of German Art.'⁽⁴⁸⁾ "As their speaker," Hitler claimed to enact the German people's will, and "as their [...] counselor" he claimed to have shaped it. Such a reciprocal self-legitimization characterized totalitarian leadership.

/1.2.3 THE DEMOCRATIC ALTERNATIVE

In 1935, heeding the Comintern's new democratic coalition policy, Communists in the Popular Front movements of France and Spain started to substitute the term 'people' for the term 'class' in their ideological rhetoric. French Communists backed the substitution up with a constitutional vocabulary derived from the Republic's revolutionary origins.⁽⁴⁹⁾ Once in office, both Popular Front governments embarked on multiple initiatives of art instruction for lay persons, educational programs for museums, and other popularizing ventures of artistic culture. Their basic policy of improving working-class life, with its emphasis on leisure time along with education, included aesthetic acculturation. The Popular Front venue of mass debates about artistic issues seemed to enhance public impact on art policy-making, but merely served to make government institutions appear responsive to popular interests. To preempt the decisions of such institutions by plebiscitary mandates would have jeopardized the rules of democratic governance.

Participation of artists in the 'street art' of demonstrations and rallies was the first step towards forging an activist community with the people, an axiomatic demand of Popular Front culture. However, the making of banners and placards in clearly readable modes was incidental for these artists' professional self-understanding and their contribution to an artistic culture of the people. In their public pronouncements and interventions in debates, artists and art officials professed their openness to the people's concerns just as assiduously as they insisted on shielding their work from political interference. In art, there would be no "people's commissars," education ministry official Jean Cassou reassured them in the *Dispute on Realism*,⁽⁵⁰⁾ expressly drawing the line against Soviet practice. Modern artists, newly enfranchised by the Popular Front's inclusive art policies, would rather reaffirm the unbridgeable gap between their work and public understanding, a commonplace in modern art criticism, than regard the lack of popular response to their work as a political liability, as happened in the Soviet Union. Whenever the issue arose, they turned defensive.

Le Corbusier's inscription on his 'Pavilion of Modern Times' at the Paris World Exposition (see Chapter 1.3/2.3.3)—"Dedicated to the people to understand, judge, and reclaim"—contradicted the self-assurance of inclusive cultural policy by the government proclaimed in Valéry's golden-lettered inscriptions on the four façades of the Palais de Chaillot (see Chapter 1.1/3.1.3). The utopian message of his largely artless makeshift structure, visualized in urbanist blueprints and statistical graphs which never stood a chance of being followed through, prioritized social well-being, especially housing, not only over the arts-and-techniques idea propagated by the Expo, but also over the government's concurrent rearmament drive. Ironically, the "conversation room," a space for viewers to read and discuss the issues raised, was left bare for

lack of funds. Its sole contents were four large painted screens by Fernand Léger and others, depicting the four essential venues of social life in an ideal city—lodging, work, transport, and recreation—in a photo-collage technique, the opposite of the artistic heritage extolled by Valéry.

/1.3 **TRADITIONAL ART FOR THE PEOPLE**

/1.3.1 **TRADITIONAL ART RIGHT AND LEFT**

It was the revalidation of traditional over modern art during the Depression which, more than any other issue, determined the ideology of art for the people. The professional majority status of traditional art, its long-established popular appeal, and its proven capacity for ideological stabilization promised to suit all governments' cultural policies that were aimed at mass assent. The revalidation extended across the political spectrum from Right to Left. Just as in pre-Depression times, Labor movements pursued it just as did government authorities or social segments intent on upholding the economic and social status quo. All four political systems shared it, no matter how diverse their arguments. Only its oppressive enactment distinguished totalitarian from democratic governments. Although popular preference for traditional over modern art during this period is hard to verify, it cannot be dismissed as a self-validating ideological precept of its imposition. Rather, it was an appropriate expectation of public response which all four states heeded in their political recalibration of the arts, borne out by an un-enforced if stage-managed appreciation.

An art "of the people" could never be their own, impoverished as their majority tended to be, during the Depression in particular. It could only be offered to them for admiration in public places designed for mass attendance, such as government or party buildings, museums, or exhibitions, and it could be mass-reproduced in books and journals affordable to a public with limited means. In any event, the arts took a relatively minor place within comprehensive visual propaganda cultures dominated by the mass media of press photography and cinema. They had to rehearse the technically produced imagery provided by those media, yet to be elevated over them by their hand-crafted artistry and their emulation of the arts of the past. The resurgence of traditional art as a populist ideal thus contradicted Walter Benjamin's contention, first advanced in a lecture of June 1936 at the Maison de la Culture, that photography and film were the most suitable media of an art for the people. The arts, in their traditional shape, managed to retain their mass appeal as components of monumentalized environments and propaganda venues.

Such an art with a mass appeal, however, was not to be automatically obtained from the traditionalist artists' profession such as it was. Totalitarian regimes sought to contrive it by leapfrogging over their academic establishment and seek out earlier

traditions, which they partly revalidated and partly updated for the purpose. In the Third Republic, traditional art was recast in a modernized look. At a time when photography had become technically fit for producing images of reality that could be selected and manipulated to suit any ideology, mere academic traditionalism from the turn of the century lost any representational advantage. As a result, art in traditional modes had to be aesthetically elevated over mere pictorial accuracy. This is what the debates about the limits of realism were about. The need to strike a balance between the two sides of mass assent—the identification of the common people with an art that seemed to mirror their social self-experience, and their admiration for the superiority of an artistic achievement credited to the sponsoring authorities—prompted simultaneous efforts at making art both accessible and distant.

/1.3.2 **TOTALITARIAN TRADITIONALISM**

It was only during the second phase of the Depression, starting in 1932, that totalitarian regimes began to promote traditional art as an art for the people. Their reorganized artistic cultures, designed for aesthetic appreciation by mass publics just as much as for ideological indoctrination, were meant to illustrate an absolute political stability that grounded social security in state power. For such purposes, a mere return to the ideologically neutral standards of academic or commercial art from the turn of the 20th century would not do. Traditional art had to be adjusted to display the style of the new dispensation. Therefore, hostile critics who charged the revalidation of traditional art with anachronistic regression were missing the point. Only Soviet and German art policy had to tackle the question of how mass acceptance of traditional art could be ideologically activated by re-focusing it on the canonized art of the remote past. In Italy, on the other hand, erstwhile modern artists who turned to Antiquity and the Renaissance on behalf of the regime's historic self-legitimation needed little guidance about where to look for paradigms.

Socialist Realism was to some extent promoted on the precedent of late 19th-century Russian painting, particularly of the 'Itinerants' group. The reconstitution of the Leningrad Art Academy in 1934 canonized the populist style of that movement, although its leading artist, Ilya Repin, had refused Soviet entreaties to return from Finnish exile as long as he lived. In 1936, the Party Committee on the Arts commissioned the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow with developing a national propaganda program of research, publications, congresses and exhibitions for popularizing Repin and other late 19th-century Russian painters. The program culminated in a mammoth show traveling through numerous Russian cities, featuring no less than a thousand of Repin's works. Toward the end of the decade, populism and traditionalism were merged in the new concept of *narodnost* ("national character"). This term invested the notion of the people with a historic pedigree. It was amplified with an array of precedents for

the development of ‘Socialist Realism,’ reaching far behind the ‘Itinerants’ tradition to include artists and periods from Rembrandt back to classical Greece.⁽⁵¹⁾

Why didn’t German art politicians likewise promote a school, or a single artist, from the realist tradition of German 19th-century painting as historic models? If Wilhelm Leibl did not lend itself to such a role because of his politically indifferent themes, Adolph von Menzel, the painter of Frederick the Great’s military exploits, surely would have filled the bill. That no such grand tradition was even attempted to be forged may have been due to the inept cultural policy, particularly regarding art academies, which so incensed Hitler when he discovered the low quality of submissions to the Great German Art Exhibition of 1937. Here his prediction that a new art would naturally grow from the people’s community, unspoiled by academic schematism, stood disproved. When, as a result of the 1937 art-political crisis, a new elitist turn of state patronage disowned the populist ideology of an art by and for the people, its protagonists—Albert Speer, Arno Breker, Werner Peiner, and some others—drew not on any tradition from the German past, but to the remote historic arts of Greece, Rome, and even the Orient, all of them devoid of populist credentials.

/1.3.3 **POPULAR FRONT TRADITIONALISM**

In democratic France, it took the ascendancy of the Popular Front to make popular preference for traditional art the ideological tenet of a revised art policy moving beyond academic convention. It abided by the Comintern’s cultural policy change of 1934, aimed at reanimating national heritages for a class-transcending political culture, apt to homogenize left-liberal constituencies. The Popular Front government’s initiatives of making the French ‘patrimony’ accessible to a working-class public, part of its mass acculturation programs, culminated in the huge exhibition ‘Masterworks of French Art,’ initiated by Prime Minister Léon Blum himself, with which the newly-built Museum of Modern Art was incongruously inaugurated on June 1, 1937. However, its less than two-year term in office did not give the Popular Front time to foster a traditional art of its own design. It was powerless to steer the long-term teaching of traditional art by state institutions, starting with the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, toward a politically progressive alternative to historicism. And the realist artists who flocked to it never influenced art policy.

In a programmatic lecture entitled “Socialist Realism and French Realism,” delivered on the occasion of the inaugural show at the Museum of Modern Art in Paris, Louis Aragon declared realism to have been a characteristic of French painting since the 16th century, an apt historical foundation for a “true” realism of the present time which would speak to the common people. The speech revised what Aragon had written two years earlier in his collection of lectures, published in 1935 under the title *For a Socialist Realism*. Here he had still limited his invocation of earlier French traditions

to non-academic 19th-century painters such as Daumier, Courbet, and Manet, relating them to John Heartfield's photomontages in a 'revolutionary' short circuit. Finally, on June 1, 1938, Communist Party leader Jacques Duclos adopted Aragon's amplified traditionalist posture in a speech on "Communism, Science, and Culture," delivered at the Centre Marcelin-Berthelot to nearly a thousand intellectuals and artists.⁽⁵²⁾ Aragon had organized the event in his capacity as general secretary of the 'Maison de la Culture.'

During the Popular Front government's two short terms in office, no populist art derived from French tradition according to Aragon's or anybody else's ideological prescriptions could be initiated, much less accomplished. In its commissions for the Paris World Exposition, the government fell back on the networks of academic artists on whom the Fine Arts Administration had long relied. In the Pavilion of Solidarity, six leading academic painters, selected along with six modern ones according to Popular Front coalition custom, illustrated six set themes from the traditional repertoire of the labor movement in a didactic fashion, unaffected by the grand tradition of French realism. Their idealist detachment from everyday experience enhanced their propaganda appeal. Even more monolithically, the communist-dominated CGT trade union commissioned for its Pavilion of Labor six murals with themes of labor history from one academic painter, André Hervault. These epitomes of idealization adhered to the long-established half-historic, half-allegorical imagery taught at French academies. Thus, even communist patronage remained immune to Aragon's prescriptions.

/ 2 **NATIONALIST VERSUS INTERNATIONALIST ART**

/ 2.1 **NATIONALIST ART IN A CLASSICAL STYLE**

/ 2.1.1 **COMPETITIVE CLASSICISM**

During the second phase of the Depression, since 1932 at the latest, nationalism and the classical tradition became ideologically aligned throughout European art. This alignment made some of the monumental projects of democratic and totalitarian states look similar, so that the Paris World Exposition of 1937 gave the four states concerned an opportunity to measure up against one another. The classical tradition had long conveyed two distinct ideologies. The paradigm of ancient Rome had been drawn upon to shape an art of power since the times of Charlemagne. On the other hand, the art of classical Greece had since the 18th century been drawn upon to visualize upper middle-class ideals of subjective independence. Henceforth both variants coexisted uneasily. During the Depression, classical styles were promoted to affirm a nationalist political stability. All four political systems devised ideological platforms that

championed classical art as an art of the people whose standards of corporeal beauty could be shared by everyone. Such standards emphasized individual physical strength over hierarchical subordination.

A principled difference between the art of France and that of the three totalitarian states on this issue is that only the latter construed fundamentalist ideological equations between antiquity and their underlying populations. In France, on the other hand, classicism was revalidated on the grounds of an unbroken tradition of republican ideals dating from the Revolution of 1789. In Soviet art, 'proletarian classicism' was only one of several options, advanced in 1925 and in 1933 by several artists, but without official endorsement. In German art, Hitler's racist idealization of ancient Greece construed an 'Aryan' blood tie between Greeks and Germans. In Italian art, the classical ideal guided a nationwide physical education drive to re-fashion the people into a Fascist 'New Man'. Those distinct mass classicisms were anchored in distinct paradigms of ancient art for an idealized humanity. Compared to academic realism, they would have jarred with the people's life experience. But they were used to align ideals of corporeality with age-old schemes of exalting power. All four states, including France, applied them within the different parameters of their nationalist political cultures.

The three thematic venues of classical transfiguration were at first work and sports, and later war. Whereas the classical tradition in the imagery of sports and war, rooted in the convergence of both in the Olympic art of ancient Greece, was of long standing, its application to the imagery of work dates from the late 19th century. In the art of the Depression, it was enhanced in all three venues. Louis Berthola's metope relief *Metal* on the north-west wall of the Palais de Chaillot shows a nude, muscular giant in the midst of a composite industrial plant. His physical strength enables him to hold a steel-cooking kettle in full blast, balanced between his thighs, which form the anatomical equivalent of a pouring winch, subordinating mechanical equipment to manual labor. The exaltation of labor by means of classical figures with an exaggerated physique, pursued in the art of all four states, was rooted in the propaganda art of the 19th-century labor movement, where classical forms were used to express the quest for self-empowerment against the ruling class. In the art of the Depression, it was appropriated to convey a merely ideological dignification of labor.

/ 2.1.2 **POWER CLASSICISM**

In democratic France, the adaptation of classical styles during the Depression drew on an unbroken tradition in which the dominating power figure was that of the French Republic. In the three totalitarian states, on the other hand, it was newly conceived for invoking ancient national epochs of state power, whose world-historical standing they claimed to have re-attained. Those epochs—Imperial Rome, the Russian

empire of Peter and Catherine the Great, the Prussian and Bavarian kingdoms after the Wars of Liberation—had all been shaped by monarchies that totalitarian regimes, for all their emphasis on absolute leadership, were loath to emulate in order not to compromise their claims of being empowered by the people. All three regimes promoted a monumental architecture in classical or classicizing shape, designed to stage manifestations of people's assent through mass assemblies, be they sovereign, as in the Roman republic, or authorizing dictatorship, as in the Roman empire. The corresponding political behavior maximized enthusiasm and minimized obedience.

Already in 1925, Hitler, in the first volume of *My Struggle*, had called for a public architecture on the model of Greek and Roman cities as the hallmark of a strong state. In 1926, he sketched sixteen such public buildings in a classical style. After his ascendancy, he presided over the most reckless version of populist power classicism in the architecture of the Depression. One of the ideological sources of this version of populist classicism was Arthur Moeller van den Bruck's book *The Prussian Style* of 1916, which founded the ideal of monumentality on a populist ethics. "The unity of artist and people builds itself, [...] and a rule of its forms will expand, which is, above all, self-rule and can become world-rule," Moeller van den Bruck had written.⁽⁵³⁾ When Albert Speer adapted two of Hitler's sketches of 1926—a domed assembly hall and a triumphal arch—for his design of a power center in the reconstructed capital of Berlin, one—the People's Hall—was to dwarf the 'Führer's Palace' at its feet, the other—the Triumphal Arch—was to be inscribed with the names of millions of German casualties of the First World War. Both buildings exalted the people over the leader.

In Italian and German sculpture of the time, power figures of classical pedigree were predominantly male figures in action, derived from Greek and Roman images of athletes and warriors, guided by female personifications or allegories of national ideals. Since 1936 at the latest, their form foregrounded Hellenistic emphasis on muscular strength over classical restraint. Led by Mario Sironi, Italian artists expanded this kind of muscular classicism to include representatives of the people in the pedestals and walls of public buildings. When, on the other hand, German sculptors Josef Thorak, Arno Breker, and Georg Kolbe attempted to devise a similar imagery, they stopped short of any multi-figure grouping. Since Soviet iconography excluded mythology as a matter of principle, Soviet artists did not draw on any thematic substance carried by the classical tradition. Artist's impressions of entries to competitions for huge public buildings were peopled by an abundance of multi-figure sculpture groups in classical form, depersonalized representations of the 'masses.'

/ 2.1.3 **POPULIST CLASSICISM**

Starting in 1925, Soviet architects Ivan Fomin and Ivan Zholtovsky invoked the political ideal of ancient Greek citizens' democracy for a "proletarian classicism"

cleansed of "aristocratic elements."⁽⁵⁴⁾ In 1927, Aleksandr Matveyev styled his iconic bronze group *October*, comprising the proletarian triad of worker, peasant, and soldier, as classical nudes, incongruously decked out with caps and arms. In 1931, the minutes of the jury for the second stage of the Palace of Soviets competition, of which Zholtovsky was one of the winners, stipulated: "We think that no architect can conceive the Palace of Soviets otherwise than in the most perfect and hence most classical forms."⁽⁵⁵⁾ Mass gatherings watching over Party delegates were likened to citizens' assemblies in the agora of ancient Athens. Even after Socialist Realism had subordinated the classical tradition to an enhanced expression of contented life experience, Soviet art literature maintained the ideological reference to Greek democracy. "We want the Acropolis to be on our territory, we are its heirs," stated *Arkhitektura SSSR* in 1937,⁽⁵⁶⁾ long after the sobriety of 'proletarian classicism' had been discarded.

In his annual speeches on art policy pronounced between 1933 and 1937, Hitler, heeding Party ideologue Alfred Rosenberg on this point, hailed the ideal of Greek art as an instinctive mastery of organic form, 'biologically' rooted in the 'Aryan' race which Greeks and Germans had in common. In this most populist, and most emphatic adaptation, the Greek ideal was stripped of any historic substance. In his speech of 1933, Hitler recalled the Olympic Games held in Berlin the year before. Werner March's stadium complex had been designed by analogy to the original site at Olympia with its grooves and scattered sanctuaries. In her documentary about the games, Leni Riefenstahl interlaced Greek sculptures with live athletes. Yet the brutalist sculptures on the stadium grounds had nothing classical about them. Already in his speech of 1933, Hitler had called his party's power struggle during the Weimar Republic a 'heroic' endeavor comparable to Greek battles. Since 1937, this belligerent version of the classical ideal moved German state art toward the corporeal pathos of Hellenistic sculpture as the bearing of a people ready to fight, no longer rooted in the classical ideal of equilibrium.

The Fascist program of shaping the nation into political conformity included a nationwide sports organization, the Opera Nazionale Balilla (ONB), for which architect Enrico Del Debbio was commissioned to design a huge training and administration center on the model of the Roman *palestra*. Construction began on February 5, 1928, and the first segment was inaugurated on November 4, 1932. The core of the complex was the so-called 'Stadium of Marbles,' ringed by no less than 130 giant athlete statues. These had been selected from a national competition in which sculptors submitted half-size models to be enlarged by marble craftsmen of the Carrara quarries. Each one was inscribed with the name of the designing artist and the name of the province sponsoring its making. The resulting schematization of the ensemble did not elude the selection committee. Not only did the repetitious depictions fail to characterize the

sponsoring provinces, they also let the specific corporeal postures of each sport disappear behind their would-be classical bearing. Athletic diversity appeared submerged in a mass-produced, populist classicism.

/ 2.2 INTERNATIONALISM UNDER ATTACK

/ 2.2.1 RESURGENT ANTI-INTERNATIONALISM

In all three totalitarian states, as well in democratic France, the nationalist revaluation of traditional art, in classical or any other form, was argued as an ideological defense against the principled internationalism of modern art. As all four states became more protective of their national economies, modern art was denounced as adverse to the national interest. The argumentative reciprocity of nationalism and internationalism had long been an ideological ingredient in the competition between traditional and modern art. But when shrinking markets made artistic culture aim for increased state support, it tended to align itself with government and party politics, and modern internationalism became an even greater liability. In 1931, *Izvestija* denounced entries by modern architects to the Palace of Soviets competition for their "Americanism and Corbusianry [...] hostile [...] to us."⁽⁵⁷⁾ In 1934, a French right-wing critic hailed the selection of a traditionalist design for the Museum of Modern Art in Paris as a defeat of "the fervent adherents of integral cubism, so dear to certain architects of recent import."

Because business in early 20th-century Europe subscribed to an internationalist ideology of trade, unfettered by national limitations, the upper-middle-class looked favorably on the internationalist cachet of modern art. Political elites advocating strong states, in turn, defended traditional art for the sake of national autarky. In Germany, a veritable "Struggle for Art" was fought out in 1911 on those terms. When the First World War confronted France and Germany, whose modern artistic cultures had fraternized before, nationalist opposition against modern art on both sides gained the upper hand. In both states, attempts at upholding the internationalist affiliations of modern art were denounced as cultural treason. Numerous modern artists expediently turned nationalist themselves. Although the decade after World War I brought a limited rebound of modern internationalism, in tandem with the governments' and ruling elites' need for international accommodation, it was often contested by domestic nationalism. Likewise, state-supported foreign promotion of Soviet constructivism under the catchword of an 'International of Art' incurred anti-Bolshevik hostility.

The relapse to anti-internationalist ideologies in the art of the Depression was fanned by the growing confrontation of political systems. The farther the three totalitarian states went in politicizing their artistic cultures, the more stridently did they brand modern art as a deviation from, or even as a threat to, the political cohesion of their underlying societies. In democratic France, which lacked a one-party ideology of

governance, anti-internationalist attacks on modern art, though rampant in the public sphere, stopped short of being carried over into politics. In Italy, where the Fascist movement had been launched in opposition to the Left, they were limited to denunciations of Bolshevik influence in debates about architecture. It was in the Soviet Union and in Germany, with their relentless enforcement of monolithic ideologies in mutually hostile terms, that anti-internationalist polemics against modern art were used to back up the enforced development of an art to suit their political systems. In Italy and France, where the nationalist credentials of artistic culture were not tied to foreign confrontations, such polemics were scarce.

/ 2.2.2 **ANTI-IMPERIALISM, ANTI-SEMITISM, ANTI-BOLSHEVISM**

The Soviet charge of internationalism against modern art was cast in anti-‘imperialist’ terms. It pertained to the ideological confrontation with the alliance of capitalist states which refused admitting the USSR into the world trade system. Although the First Five-Year Plan depended on US and German technical assistance, its flanking political culture was fiercely nationalist. After Germany turned National Socialist in 1933, the Politburo responded by framing the ‘Third Period’ assessment of international relations. According to its long-term forecast, the Depression would eventually prompt capitalist states to confront “socialism in one country” by force of arms, a replay of their military intervention in the Russian Civil War of 1918-1919. It was in accord with this assessment, that Osip Beskin, head of the critics’ section in the Moscow Artists’ Council and editor of its two art journals, *Iskusstvo* and *Tvorchestvo*, in his book *Formalism in Painting* (see Chapter 3.2 / 2.1.3) argued his rejection of modern art with the interrelated terms “internationalist,” “bourgeois,” and “imperialist.”

Unlike the Soviet ideological correlation of internationalism in art with imperialism in world politics, the National Socialist branding of modern art as one of the tools of a Jewish world conspiracy to sap the cultural health of the German race was an imaginary proposition, part of the regime’s rabid anti-Semitism, based on neither historical experience nor political assessment. Already in a speech of 1923, Hitler had addressed rampant German anti-Semitism when he said: “Everything international in the arts and sciences is tantamount to kitsch: we only need to look at these so-called artistic creations of the cubists, futurists, and the like in order to recognize at once that here we deal with the corruption of art by Jewish, alien spirits.”⁽⁵⁸⁾ Thirteen years later, addressing the Nuremberg party rally of 1936, he warned that “the tale of an ‘internationalism’ of art is [...] just as stupid as it is dangerous.”⁽⁵⁹⁾ “We all know that it is the goal of Bolshevism,” he said earlier in the speech, “to eradicate existing national leaderships based on the organic blood community and to replace them with [...] the Jewish element.”⁽⁶⁰⁾ Hitler overlooked that Soviet art policy was just as anti-internationalist as his.

The approximation of anti-Semitism to anti-Bolshevism was uniquely German. Since 1936 at the latest, the regime inserted the anti-internationalist campaign against modern art into the mounting political confrontation with the Soviet Union. Thus, the national tour of the 'Degenerate Art' exhibition was paired with anti-Bolshevik and anti-Semitic propaganda shows (see Chapter 1.2/1.3.3). Anti-Bolshevism was a common ingredient in the nationalist opposition to modern art in all three capitalist states. Thus, during the debate on the first Palazzo del Littorio competition in the Italian Chamber of Deputies on May 26, 1934, former party general secretary Roberto Farinacci condemned modern architecture as Marxist, Bolshevik, and "German" all at once. The anti-Bolshevik polemics against the internationalism of modern art was a belated response to the earliest Bolshevik government's support for the promotion of an 'International of Modern Art,' which, during the years 1919-1922, was linked to the Comintern's strategy of international subversion. By 1923, after Communist uprisings in Germany had come to nothing, it was abandoned.

/ 2.2.3 SPECIOUS CHARGES

The anti-internationalist charges against modern art which the Soviet and German regimes advanced after 1932, were politically obsolete, since modern art had long abandoned its claims to spearhead revolution. Now they branded modern art as unfit to partake of a national, or nationalist, culture because of its lacking popular acceptance, the ideological allegiance of modern artists notwithstanding. Although Soviet architects and artists such as Ivan Leonidov and Kasimir Malevich played down the internationalist underpinnings of their early work, which for a while had suited a cultural policy that was now discarded, emphasizing instead its 'proletarian' substance, their refurbished ideological conformity did not make up for their political obsolescence. Similarly, although German modern artists and their supportive critics tried to vindicate the national character of their work with contrived references to German art of centuries past—in 1934 a short-lived journal named *Kunst der Nation* (Art of the Nation) was launched for just this purpose—the regime rebuffed them, all the more harshly the less it was able to specify its own prescriptions.

The internationalism issue was raised with a vengeance in the viciously competitive debate culture of Soviet art of that time. On January 8, 1935, architect Mikhail Okhitovich delivered a speech at a conference of the Moscow architects' association entitled "The National Form of Socialist Architecture," intended as a critique of the prevailing nationalism.⁽⁶¹⁾ Calling constructivist architecture "a-national," Okhitovich defended it as a revolutionary achievement which had brought Soviet building up to European standards, hailed its lack of "hierarchy"—that is, of traditionalist decorous symmetry—as egalitarian, and likened its current rejection on nationalist grounds to Fascist and National Socialist practice. The assembled architects denounced him

for Trotskyism. Chairman Alabian—whose trend-setting Red Army Theater, currently under construction, was a paragon of everything Okhitovich had attacked—presided over his expulsion and subsequent official denunciation to the NKVD. Okhitovich was arrested and seems to have perished in a prison camp.

Unlike the nationalist ideologies of artistic culture in France and Italy, which entailed no principled rejection of modern art in general but merely flanked professional quarrels, those of the Soviet Union and Germany had a trenchant political significance. As they were fitted into the propaganda of both states against one another, they became ever more specious. Compared to the National Socialist phantom of a Jewish world conspiracy in league with Bolshevism, the Soviet dread of capitalist encirclement and its 'fascist' advance to the threat of an imminent war was politically more to the point, even though its connection to modern art was no less imaginary. For artists to be curbed, these doctrines were framed as beyond appeal. Ironically, at the Paris World Exposition of 1937, the traditionalist make-up of the Soviet and German Pavilions was so compatible, not just between the two but also with the French Palais de Chaillot, that all three could be viewed as monumental achievements of a truly international art in a fleeting panorama of peaceful world relations.

/ 2.3 THE FRENCH EQUATION

/ 2.3.1 LIMITS OF INTERNATIONALISM

In 1929 academic painter Léon Bérard became President of the 'League for the Defense of Art' (*Ligue pour la défense de l'art*), which was "to protect the French tradition, in artistic matters, against international influences."⁽⁶²⁾ This goes to show how easily, even within the culture of the Third Republic, opposition to modern art could be advanced on nationalist grounds. Under Bérard's two tenures as Minister of Education between 1919 and 1924, modern art, in recognition of its prominence on the international art market, had received some state support, limited, to be sure, in proportion to its minority status within the totality of diverse tendencies due to be recognized by the Third Republic's even-handed art policy. Here, however, the issue of national versus international art was not related to the antagonism between traditional and modern art, as heatedly as the press tended to debate it in those terms. When the issue was raised in the contest for funding at the start of the Depression, it was in the nationalist terms of French superiority, not of popular response.

Seven years later, the emphatic internationalism of the Popular Front should have surpassed the timid efforts of preceding arts administrations at reconciling democratic pluralism with cultural nationalism in their recognition of modern art. However, its recalibration of the balance between the alternatives of traditional versus modern art and nationalism versus internationalism remained limited. Léon Blum's new

government drew on the working-class-based internationalism of the Second and Third Internationals to fashion a new, ambitious cultural policy whose ideological mass support was focused on the irreconcilable issues of pacifism and the Spanish Civil War. Under the coalition premise, traditional as well as modern art were encouraged to address both issues. The first International Congress for the Defense of Culture, held in Paris on June 21-25, 1935, had set the ideological terms for backing up the Popular Front's interrelated goals of combating 'fascism' and fostering a class-transcending culture. Here, some sympathizers of modern art changed course towards revalidating traditional art in order to address 'the people.'

It was the inherent contradiction of French Popular Front culture that it claimed to be internationalist and national—albeit not nationalist—at once. For propaganda, to be sure, the government would rely on the international credentials of modern art. Domestically, on the other hand, with Comintern encouragement, it promoted traditional art of a national pedigree for the sake of popular appeal. That the two lengthy debates on painting in 1935 and on realism in 1936 should have addressed the alternatives of traditional and modern art in terms of popular response, without resorting to nationalist arguments, was due to the movement's internationalism as a tenet of conviction. It was the conservative opposition in the public sphere which took up such arguments again. However, ideological controversies had little if any impact on public art policy, which, because of its long-term pluralist premises, stayed clear of any principled controversy. It was no different under the conservative governments, which in 1938 replaced the policies of the Popular Front but kept Education Minister Jean Zay and Fine Arts Director Georges Huisman in their posts.

/ 2.3.2 **AGGRESSION OR COOPTATION**

Even within the culture of modern art in France, anti-internationalism had been rampant since the early twenties, spearheaded by modern art critics Camille Mauclair and Waldemar George. Since the start of the Depression, it gained in popularity. Now both writers drew on anti-Semitic, anti-Bolshevik and pro-fascist arguments in 'defense' of French art, yet without turning on modern art per se. Mauclair's and George's rightist stance did not prevent incoming Education Minister Anatole de Monzie from appointing both to his newly-created, large commission charged with overseeing state purchases in 1932, nor Fine Arts Director Huisman from appointing them to the art selection committee for the Palais de Chaillot at the Paris Expo in 1937. In both assignments, Mauclair and George surely worked to keep French art policy preponderantly traditional, but committee pluralism tempered their ideological intransigence. Neither did their public resonance through the art press net them the kind of political backing that it would have taken to steer official art policy toward a more traditionalist course.

The concurrent staging of the two first state-sponsored exhibitions of modern art in Paris during the summer of 1937 was tailor-made to squelch the debate on internationalism in modern art criticism. The exhibition at the Petit Palais was limited to artists of French nationality. In response, the exhibition in the Orangerie was devoted to foreign artists practicing in Paris. That Jean Cassou, Education Minister Jean Zay's Fine Arts representative, should have served on the boards of both shows suggests official support for the pairing. It acted as an institutional self-correction of a potentially exclusionary nationalism that would not have suited the culture of modern art. Thematically, both shows were kept devoid of politically controversial works. A concurrent exhibition of modern French art in the Berlin Academy of Arts, jointly sponsored by the Popular Front and National Socialist governments, did not heed this balance. It was focused on established masters such as Matisse and Braque and excluded immigrant and Jewish artists. The generic internationalism of modern art in France was diplomatically elided.

Only with its commission of Jacques Lipchitz, an immigrant Lithuanian sculptor of Jewish descent, to create the Prometheus figure over the entrance of the 'Palais de la Découverte' as its most ambitious symbol at the Paris Expo did the Popular Front government provoke a nationalist backlash against modern art, whose ascendancy coincided with its fall from power (see Chapter 1.3/3.3.3). The temporary placement of the makeshift, albeit giant, plaster figure of deliberately raw appearance, smack into the middle of a continuous string of graceful gilt bronze statues from the turn of the century that covered the façade of the old Grand Palais, could not but fuel the anti-modern resentment of the conservative press. Lipchitz, a veteran of modern sculpture, must have been aware of the inevitable provocation. When plans transpired to place *Prometheus* on the Champs-Élysées after the closure of the Expo, the right-wing newspaper *Le Matin* launched a petition against what it called a "specimen of an art as the Popular Front conceives of it."⁽⁶³⁾ Although the petition received few signatures, it stirred up enough public sentiment for the Seine Prefect to have the sculpture discarded.

/ 2.3.3 **SURREALIST INTERNATIONALISM**

The most internationally-minded artists' group active anywhere in Europe, the Surrealists in France, subscribed to the ideology of internationalism without reference to any social or political base. They refused to serve the interests of the working-class and rejected the efforts of both the Second and Third Internationals to forge an electoral majority for the Popular Front. In his speech to the 1935 Congress for the Defense of Culture in Paris, Breton denounced the Communists' accommodation to electoral politics as a replay of the *Union Sacrée* at the start of World War I, which had broken the international organizations of working-class parties in their pacifist fraternization and the international community of writers and artists in their quest for modernism.⁽⁶⁴⁾ Three years later, the Surrealists' proclamation *Neither Your War Nor*

Your Peace, written by Breton, restated this categorical denunciation in view of the approaching war. Denouncing the “scandalous complicities of the Second and Third Internationals”⁽⁶⁵⁾ as a betrayal of the working-class, Breton in effect dismissed all operative forces of the Left.

While the Popular Front, keen on revalidating national traditions for an enlargement of its cultural constituencies, never assembled artists in any internationalist project, the Surrealists staged two exhibitions—1936 in London and 1938 in Paris—with the term “International” in their titles. Both shows were unique in featuring artists from all over the world. Although both shows lacked any political message, Breton wrote that it was an ominous, historic synchronicity that the London exhibition should have coincided in time with a general strike in France, during which the surrealists called for armed workers’ militias and for a violent takeover of power. He made it appear as if both events had an analogous political significance. In a scathing critique of the London show, Anthony Blunt, at that time a committed Communist, contrasted what he rated as an anti-rational, anarchist, marginal art on view with a hypothetical “new art [...] beginning to arise, the product of the proletariat, which is again performing its true function, that of propaganda,”⁽⁶⁶⁾ as envisaged by the Popular Front.

Breton’s attempt in late 1938 to unite his few remaining adherents with several other artists and writers in a minuscule ‘International Federation of Revolutionary Artists’ (FIARI), which fizzled away even before the start of World War II, no longer envisaged a popular response. The founding manifesto he had written in far-away Mexico, together with Lev Trotsky (see Chapter 4.2), was only concerned with artists. If Diego Rivera, co-signer of the Manifesto, had participated in the writing, his long-lasting, successful efforts at using his public murals to win over peasants and workers for revolutionary politics could not have been ignored. However, the text ignores the common people, and this at a time when totalitarian regimes boasted mass popularity of their state-sponsored art in traditional form. In signaling a deliberate detachment of revolutionary art from any public impact, the Manifesto marks the point in time when the ideology of revolutionary art stood defeated, while that of an art for the people stood triumphant. More generally, it unwittingly acknowledged the political irrelevancy that its class-based marginality had bestowed on modern art at the end of the Depression.

/ 3 **TOTALITARIAN ENFORCEMENT**

/ 3.1 **MASS BASE OF ART POLICY**

/ 3.1.1 **COMPARATIVE OVERVIEW**

“Art for the People” as a policy meant art for the people to view rather than to own. It was promoted to make up for the decline of private art markets catering to

middle-class buyers, as the purchase of art fell to the public domain—most severely in the Soviet Union, inconsistently in Germany, and even less in Italy. “Art for the People” became a synonym for art of the state. Claiming to represent their underlying populace in its entirety, totalitarian regimes sought to foster art not just as an aesthetic medium of government propaganda, but as a binding paradigm for a national culture no longer diversified by educational privilege. Because the people were meant to be politically homogeneous, their art was supposed to be appreciated by all. The achievement of this goal depended on the enforcement of a classless society. Because the Soviet regime went farthest in this regard, it stressed the populist appeal of Socialist Realism. Because the German regime did not, its promotion of traditional art as popular art yielded no socially relevant results. And because the Fascist regime merely politicized extant class structures, it did not push the idea.

The different terms for a mass art public—“the masses” in the Soviet Union and “the people” (*Volk*) in Germany, with no corresponding term in Italy—suggest the different social structures and educational levels of their populations, which both regimes had to consider in their attempt to prescribe forms for a general acceptance of the ideologies art was to convey. While the ruthless doctrinal logic of Socialist Realism pertains to the campaign for a renewed struggle to do away with class divisions, which started with the First Five-Year Plan and lasted until the end of the Great Terror in 1938, the tentative imposition of an unspecified traditionalism by the National Socialist regime pertains to a social policy which did not envisage an alternative social order. The Fascist regime, by contrast, never construed the relationship between artistic culture and the populace as discrepant enough to require any political adjustment, because it allowed a pluralist art market to obviate the style of official commissions. As a result, neither the party nor the government preempted art policy as heavy-handedly as in the other two totalitarian states.

Enforcement of populist art policies by both the Soviet and German regimes followed totalitarian strategies of incremental coercion, extending a perceived majority support by segments of the populace into the semblance of a total mass acceptance which allowed for no more dissent, and was subsequently invoked in institutional measures of state intervention. This seemingly social cohesion of style is what so impressed the author of a critical reportage about the Soviet, German, and Italian pavilions at the Paris World Exposition of 1937 in the French Catholic newspaper *Etude*, titled “Images of Totalitarian Civilizations,”⁽⁶⁷⁾ in contrast to what he perceived as the social disparity weakening French democracy. The author took the mobilization of enthusiastic masses by their governments at face value. Ignoring the political oppression, to which it was due, he credited it with the cultural self-assurance the totalitarian pavilions exuded. He could not hold back his grudging admiration for the spontaneous commitment to a common cause, a unity of political will that a democratic government could no longer inspire.

/ 3.1.2 USSR

In the propaganda drive for the First Five-Year Plan, Soviet art was enjoined to address itself to an artless mass of peasants and laborers nationwide, far away from the cultural centers at Leningrad and Moscow. The pictorial journal *USSR in Construction* (*USSR na Stroike*) was launched to promote the required acculturation drive, which the regional Party leadership was judged unqualified to lead. The social ascendancy and political empowerment of this kind of leadership had long been the goal of an educational policy which included the arts, and which had motivated their initial subordination to the Commissariat of Education. Modern art had proved incapable of serving such tasks because of its lacking mass acceptance. Modern artists, such as Rodchenko and El Lissitsky, soon switched to photography. When in 1929 the Party organized its own, propagandistic art programs for the enactment of the First Five-Year Plan, the service of the arts for political education was made the foremost goal of art policy. The rise of realism, underway for several years, became a matter of political practicality, not just of ideological preference. It shaped art for the people as a means of indoctrination.

Art policy was now reassigned from the Education Commissariat, newly headed by Andrei Bubnov, a minor official, to the Party's Central Committee and its Secretary, Andrei Zhdanov, a man of higher rank, who made it part of his quasi-populist campaign of mobilizing the regional rank-and-file for self-assertion against their entrenched but ineffectual leadership. Under Zhdanov, art policy was redefined and activated to suit a newly-ascendant, educated intelligentsia, graduates of party schools, polytechnics, military academies and other institutions of higher learning. These so-called 'cadres' were to spearhead the interrelated processes of fictitious democratization of the populace in all the Soviet Republics. For such a purpose, the people's aesthetically unencumbered appreciation of government-sponsored art had to be secured in a binding fashion, so that it could be addressed with ideological consistency. Art came to be charged with projecting an inspiring image of the social and political environment shaped by the Party, which validated art itself as a Socialist accomplishment.

Zhdanov's achievement was to pool his competencies as enforcer of an obedient 'party democracy' and as overseer of an artistic culture that had to be essentially populist. In the latter function, he pressed for programs of an art whose message was exhortatory and triumphant at the same time, praising the masses for their accomplishments and glorifying Party leadership. When Zhdanov, in his opening speech to the first Congress of the Writer's Union in August 1934, officially launched Socialist Realism as a "true and historically concrete depiction of reality in its revolutionary development, [aimed at] educating the workers in the spirit of Communism,"⁽⁶⁸⁾ he charged the arts with an educational mission far exceeding their role under the Education Commissariat. Henceforth, the significance of Socialist Realism was elaborated in a host of conferences,

journal articles, and books, yet it was never officially spelled out in any binding form to guide the ever more rigorous political regulation of the arts. It did not have to do so because it was enforced through a personal policy of party purges which engulfed art institutions and artists' organizations, the sole venues of artistic practice.

/ 3.1.3 **GERMANY**

Fundamentally different from the Soviet situation, Hitler and his cultural politicians applied the term "people" to a society whose cultural education they found fully formed. This precondition guided first their pursuit of voting majorities during their rise to power and later their formulation of art policy when they governed. It prevented them from framing any binding paradigm of style. Most segments of German society, from working-class through middle-class to aristocracy, no matter how diverse, had at least a superficial familiarity with, and preference for, traditional art in all its forms. Meanwhile, representatives of modern art, who fancied themselves as a closely-knit elite ahead of their times, tacitly recognized this majority preference. Therefore, during the Weimar Republic, the National Socialists' opposition to modern art could count on the assent of these social groups. Pertaining to their appeal as a catch-all party with no socially circumscribed constituency, it contributed to enlarging their voting base between 1928-1932, when they rose to become a class-transcending mass party. Mass rallies devoted to art policy were part of their campaigns.

Because Hitler, once in office, was sure of this pre-existing mass base for his art policy, he put a stop to efforts by the Party official in charge of artistic culture, Alfred Rosenberg, to subject the arts to a narrow doctrine. Instead, he assigned art policy to Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels, who took care not to overcharge art with ideology, his title notwithstanding. On January 24, 1934, Hitler adjudicated the ensuing power struggle between the two cultural politicians by appointing Rosenberg to the newly-created 'Office for the Supervision of the Entire Intellectual and Ideological Schooling and Education of the NSDAP.' Such a restriction of authority to party culture was the opposite of the Bolshevik Party's expansive mission aimed at the Soviet people. Some marginal exhibitions and cultural events, launched during the following two years by Rosenberg's office and affiliated organizations, advanced what he took for paradigms of National Socialist art but failed to attract any significant resonance. Meanwhile, Goebbels' Ministry, promoted traditional art in a flexible fashion with an eye on majority acceptance.

By 1937, mass attendance at the first Great German Art Exhibition confirmed a lasting majority support for traditional art in its government-approved versions. Although some party stalwarts deemed this art politically irrelevant, Goebbels never jeopardized its success by strict demands for ideological contents, although this and every subsequent show included a smattering of propaganda works. Without the

assurance that traditional art would count on majority approval, Hitler and Goebbels would not have risked inviting “the German People” to “judge” modern art at the concurrent ‘Degenerate Art’ show. Although the invitation was a mere rhetorical ploy to ratify a pre-ordained policy judgment, the overwhelming mass attendance of the show seemed to deliver the expected response. Christian Zervos, editor of the *Cahiers d’Art* in Paris, acknowledged this much in a two-part article in April 1937, entitled “Reflections on the Third Reich’s Attempt at a Guided Aesthetics.”⁽⁶⁹⁾ Despite the tentative title, he took the National Socialists’ claims for a mass acceptance of their art at face value, resigning himself to the minority status of modern art as the price to pay for its superiority.

/ 3.2 **PROPAGANDA ART**

/ 3.2.1 **FUNCTIONAL MISSION**

The pursuit of art policy as a priority of totalitarian governments was due to their expectation that the ideological appeal of an artistic culture with guaranteed mass acceptance would contribute to the populist assent they sought and claimed. Only the reliance on such an artistic culture would stand a chance for making art into a propaganda tool, for converting aesthetic appreciation into political concurrence. This reciprocity of assent and propaganda was at the heart of totalitarian art policy. While its political intention was to make art fit for service as an instrument of indoctrination, its ideological rhetoric maintained that the government was giving the people the art they had wanted all along. This contradiction was part of the totalitarian doctrine asserting that the people want dictatorship. It was not just a question of how art works should look and what they should show. For maximum political impact, all three totalitarian regimes publicized their management of artistic culture as a whole—competitions, exhibitions, prizes, speeches, publications—to create an atmosphere of popular participation. High attendance statistics were regularly published to confirm it.

However, totalitarian cultural officials would not have spent as much effort as they did on the professional management of artistic culture just for making art into a propaganda tool on a par with other media. The assignment of art to propaganda depended on debates and decisions that weighed the relationship between art and propaganda as a critical issue to calibrate. All three regimes took care to allocate artistic culture its distinct place within a wide array of visual propaganda techniques. They were aware of its professional conditions and political efficacy compared to the mass media of photography and cinema, both of which they recognized as having a much wider public appeal than traditional visual arts could ever attain. The aesthetic standards these regimes wished to see upheld and developed for the arts were meant to preserve their essentially idealist determination. Only in Soviet art of the First Five-Year Plan were paintings and posters officially aligned. With the switch

to Socialist Realism, the Party returned to keeping the visual arts above the look of mass publicity.

Between 1929 and 1932, when both the Bolshevik and the National Socialist parties embarked on campaigns for sweeping political change, they were ready to determine what kind of art could be made operative for their propaganda objectives: implementation of the First Five-Year Plan in the USSR and winning the fast-repeating elections of the Weimar Republic. Both campaigns excluded modern art. However, while Soviet art authorities staged a pre-determined contest between various artists' groups in order to decide upon the most effective propaganda, National Socialist politicians, unable to draw on any artistic accomplishment by members of their party, merely exploited popular aversion against modern art for their efforts to delegitimize the Weimar 'system.' While the ruling Bolsheviks could rely on a panoply of institutions capable of organizing artists and steering their work toward their goals, the National Socialists, still in opposition, had no institutional clout and counted no artists of any standing among their ranks. As a result, they had to fall back on attack politics by their affiliated cultural organizations, which offered no positive paradigms.

/ 3.2.2 **THE FIVE-YEAR PLAN FOR THE ARTS**

In the Soviet Union, the transfer of political responsibility for the arts from the government to the Party in 1929 was prompted by the determination to activate the arts as functional components of an all-out cultural mobilization drive to promote the premature fulfillment of the First Five-Year Plan. To that end, a special 'Five-Year Plan for the Arts' was drawn up. Soviet artists and intellectuals, as well as Western European sympathizers such as Louis Aragon and Walter Benjamin, viewed the propagandistic concentration of Soviet art upon the Five-Year Plan as the ultimate political vindication of artistic engagement with social progress. It seemed to them to vindicate the avant-garde ideal of making art move into life. In the competition between Soviet artists' groups to outdo one another in compliance with their new mission, the 'Association of Revolutionary Artists' even replaced the catchword "Art to the Masses" by "For a Proletarian Art." The change suggested that artists were ready to reduce their work from an offering to the people to a mouthpiece for the people's aspirations.

The most consequential undertaking of the new policy consisted in nationwide programs of sending 'artist brigades' to factories and agricultural combines. By listening to workers and their party representatives on location, they were to work out a tailor-made propaganda art. Although these 'brigades' were established by a government decree on July 15, 1929, their oversight fell to Party agencies. The collective organization of artists for close cooperation with industry and agriculture at minimal fees was aimed at aligning the economics of art production with the planned

economy in general. The political control of art production at the source made it appear as if artists worked directly for the people, their sole source of support after the abolition of a private art market. In an article entitled “Proletarian Artistic Culture and the Bourgeois Reaction” of 1929, Pavel Novitsky, head of the Moscow State Art School, called the art of the Five-Year Plan “production practice,” cancelling its distinction as a productive activity of its own. Reviving the productivist turn of constructivism eight years earlier, he elevated the artist into an “artist-engineer, leader and organizer-propagandist.”⁽⁷⁰⁾

In the course of this political subordination, artists working in traditional media faced the question of how to measure up to tasks better served by films, posters and other mass-reproduced propaganda media. In numerous debates about how traditional arts could be reframed to suit the objectives of the Five-Year Plan, the crucial issue was their reproducibility. In 1931, the Central Committee’s ‘Resolution on Posters’ transferred the oversight of poster production from the Education Commissariat to the Party’s own Department for Agitation and Mass Campaigns. The poster format was set up as a paradigm for both painting and photography, and the commissioning of works was made dependent on how they would come across in print. The mechanized weaving of colorful textiles with images and emblems of the Five-Year Plan was the ultimate fulfillment of a reproducible art, not just to be seen, but to be worn. Made into personal apparel, these textiles turned the people into a live propaganda medium. The pictorial stylization of their workday became the pattern of their Sunday best.

/ 3.2.3 THE NATIONAL SOCIALIST ELECTION CAMPAIGN OF 1931

The closest the National Socialists came to the populist propaganda drive in Soviet art during the early phase of the Depression was the staging of mass rallies devoted to art policy in their 1931 national election campaign. Speakers exploited their audience’s resentment against modern art as part of their attacks on the political culture of the Weimar Republic. In June 1930, the Party’s cultural organization, the ‘Combat League for German Culture,’ had adopted architect Paul Schultze-Naumburg’s (see Chapter 1.3/1.2.2) broadside on modern art and architecture, advanced in his book *Art and Race (Kunst und Rasse)* of 1928, as its art-political platform. In 1931, the Party featured him as principal speaker on a nationwide propaganda tour. Schultze-Naumburg delivered his lecture ‘Struggle for Art’ at mass rallies in six German cities, chaired by the Party’s cultural official, Alfred Rosenberg (see Chapter 2.1/3.2.3). Here he denounced modern-style housing projects as Bolshevik and juxtaposed slides of modern paintings with photographs of asylum inmates. Yet Rosenberg fell short of advocating any art policy of his own.

The enthusiastic response triggered by these rallies was out of sync with Hitler’s own take on art policy in the public speeches he delivered after 1929, which

were also aimed at garnering electoral majorities, though still with less success. Here he denounced the Weimar government's support of modern art as yet another instance of their unresponsiveness to the people's needs and wishes. Hitler now put aside the ideological charges of biological degeneracy, Jewish conspiracy, or Bolshevik subversion he had leveled against modern art in earlier years, both in his book *My Struggle* of 1925 and in his public speeches—charges still echoed in the pamphlets and journals of the 'Combat League for German Culture' and in Schultze-Naumburg's speeches. Instead, he advanced the hypothetical demand for a direct accountability of art policy to electoral majorities, which he found lacking in the Weimar governments, to the detriment of traditional artists and their public, which he held to be in the majority. Thus Hitler replaced an ideological line of argument with a political one, which pertained to his appeal for economic justice.

The populist resurgence of National Socialist negative art policy during the four years before 1933 pales beside the Soviet 'Five-Year Plan for the Arts,' because it lacked any programmatic practicality. Not only was it launched from opposition rather than authority and hence remained without any tangible achievement, it also could not attract a single artist of some standing to embody what it preached. The conservative, nationalist, and racist clichés lacing Rosenberg's and Schultze-Naumburg's denunciations of the pro-modern art policies of Weimar governments may have had some resonance with their audiences, but their demands for change were not founded on professional considerations, only on ideological precepts for reshaping national culture. No wonder then, that the ideological divide between Hitler and the 'Combat League' was tantamount to an alternative between resentment and practicality, which Hitler immediately decided once in office as he barred the 'Combat League' from the conduct of art policy. Yet, until 1937, his government, with Propaganda Minister Goebbels in charge, proved unable to foster an ideologically articulate, representative art for the people.

/ 3.3 **POPULISM ENFORCED**

/ 3.3.1 **FROM AGITATION TO GUIDANCE**

Between 1932-1933, all three totalitarian regimes enlarged their political mass base by drawing high numbers of new members into their parties and the parties' subordinate organizations. In Germany and Italy, party membership was expanded; in the Soviet Union, repeated purges replaced older members with younger ones. Here they were groomed for a modernized economy in tandem with ideological indoctrination. It was mainly for these new, indoctrinated constituencies, not just for nondescript publics, that the three regimes envisaged a politically charged artistic culture. As was to be expected, part of this culture was devoted to overt propaganda. But

another part was exempt from such tasks, dwelling on enjoyable subject matter in traditional styles, solely for aesthetic satisfaction. This encouragement of an art without political function responded to the longing for a better life in the general societies after the hardship of the first Depression years. Particularly in the Soviet Union, the Party gave up on its attempts at a collectivist social transformation of the working populace and came around to accepting, though not fulfilling, its wishes for a petty-bourgeois lifestyle.

The April Decree of 1932 had established the unified organizational network for framing Socialist Realism as a triumphalist array of pictorial and decorative forms expressing—or pretending to express—people’s contentment with their ostensibly improved living conditions. Its ubiquitous sense of cheerful elation ran concurrent with tightened measures of police terror. At the first All-Soviet Architects Congress in Moscow, which opened on June 16, 1937, people’s delegations from across the nation demanded in unison an architecture designed beyond utility. “The proletariat does not only want to have houses; it does not only want to live there in comfort; it also wants these houses to be beautiful,” Politburo member Lazar Kaganovich asserted in his speech.⁽⁷¹⁾ While committees of construction combines sent messages such as “Create for us the great art of socialism!” to the assembled architects, the congress never addressed the enduring housing shortage. It extolled instead the affective merits of traditional styles, which were mostly applied to official buildings. The populist demand for beauty really meant eliciting admiration for the regime.

In the internal speech of November 26, 1937, to members of the Reich Chamber of Art, where Propaganda Minister Goebbels declared National Socialist ideas as “not yet ripe” for being adequately conveyed by artists (see Chapter 1.2/3.3.1), he resigned himself to downgrading the task of the arts to a non-political enjoyment for the common people, which should not be ideologically overtaxed. “The people,” Goebbels maintained, “want to see and enjoy the beautiful and the sublime. [They want to see] what life so often and so stubbornly withholds from them. Most often we hardly get a proper idea of what a joyless course the life of the people generally takes [...], a world of wonder and sweet appearance is to open up [in art] before its amazed eyes.”⁽⁷²⁾ A joyful art was not to illustrate but only to stage-play a joyful life. With this separation of political indoctrination from aesthetic appreciation, Goebbels took the opposite position to the fusion of the two in Socialist Realism, which was aimed at extolling the political preconditions of the people’s happy life. Given their actual discrepancy, what would Zhdanov have said in a similar internal assessment?

/ 3.3.2 **POLICY CONSOLIDATION**

Between 1938-1939, both the Soviet and the German government adjusted their policies regarding the issue of art for the people to their current social policies

and the attendant propaganda, albeit in different ways. While the USSR had an ideologically persuasive art for the people in place, German art authorities allowed for a popular art without an express ideological message. In the Soviet Union, artists, deprived of a private market, had no choice but to work for government or party agencies, the military, and their associated organizations. These ubiquitous institutions stood for the people whose life they were meant to manage. They were in a position to ensure the popular appeal of art production at the source. Themes and styles were under control. In Germany, by contrast, government commissions now went mostly to elite artists, while ordinary artists, all organized in the Reich Chamber of Art, were dispatched to the open market to make a living. Their work had to be ideologically nondescript in order to sell. It was placed under secret surveillance only to monitor the degree of its adherence to government-approved quality standards.

The Party's new articles regarding the attainment of a classless society, approved by its XVIII Congress in March 1939, endowed the ideology of *narodnost* (from *narod*, i.e. "people") with an enhanced political mission. The term, which had been invoked in the debates on Socialist Realism since 1934, sealed the totalitarian uniformity of the populace, as if their social distinctions had disappeared. Within artistic culture, *narodnost* mandated an overriding orientation of the arts toward the supposed needs and preferences of the people, which meant a thematic focus on ordinary social life under Party guidance. A decorous and realistic appearance of art and architecture, elaborated over and above functional and thematic requirements, was to convey a contented lifestyle soaring over the fulfillment of basic needs. The concept entailed an inclusive appropriation of past traditions, national traditions first and foremost, but also other European traditions, making Socialist Realism look familiar. The widened scope of style paradigms was balanced by the narrowed scope of themes. As a result, the variety of traditions drawn upon did not prevent Socialist Realism from looking uniform.

Hitler's government, at first unable and then unwilling to coax organized artists into producing work to suit its representative or propagandistic needs, desisted from similarly setting the terms for what they produced. However, starting in early 1938, it placed the entire artistic culture, artists and public alike, under surveillance by the SS Security Service (SD) so that it could adjust its art policies to the popular mood (see Chapter 1.2/1.3.3). The *Reports from the Reich*, compiled by the SD, not only recorded how artists and the public reacted to the art policies of the regime, but also submitted assessments of their economic, social and ideological success or failure. Propaganda Minister Goebbels assiduously studied them in order to fine-tune the relationship between art policy and social policy. From the start, SD agents registered artists' complaints about the lack of government commissions and supportive measures. Unconcerned about political control, artists were missing political guidance.

Their dissatisfaction implicitly touched upon the elitist turn of National Socialist state art now in the making (see Chapter 1.2 / 3.3.1), which discarded the ideal of an art by and for the people.

/ 3.3.3 POLITICAL ASSESSMENT

Since 1938, the ideology of *narodnost* replaced the rhetoric of class struggle which had flanked the large-scale, murderous repression, now attenuated, if not suspended, after the last show trial in Moscow had been settled. Socialist Realism was no longer to be a projection of future accomplishment, but a celebration of current achievement. This is what the Soviet art show at the New York World Fair of 1939 (see Chapters 1.1 / 3.1.2, 3.3.3, 4.2 / 2.2.2) purported to display. "Soviet painting is optimistic, it speaks of joyous feelings," said the catalog. "Landscapes show the changing aspect of the country. Portraits show its new people."⁽⁷³⁾ Such a peaceful vision covered up for the lagging arms production, for which the Hitler-Stalin Pact had bought a two-year respite. Still, when the Stalin Prizes in art were newly created in the same year, none of them went to work depicting the contented lives of ordinary people. Familiar icons of government acclamation such as Sergei Gerasimov's *Stalin and Voroshilov in the Kremlin*, Vasilii Efanov's *Unforgettable Meeting*, and Sergei Merkurov's Stalin statue at the All-Union Agricultural Exhibition monopolized the awards.

The surveillance reports by the SD on the German art scene, which likewise started in 1938, suggest that art authorities were less interested in fostering political propaganda than in ensuring quality in the rendering of ordinary themes. They were concerned with maintaining professional standards for a recovering art market, by now in steady expansion. Accordingly, though Goebbels and his officials had to read complaints recorded by SD agents from visitors to the Great German Art Exhibitions, about the scarcity of political imagery, they never attempted to encourage an ideological focus of submissions, at least not until 1941, when war propaganda was in demand. It was the ever-growing number of visitors alone that counted for success. That nothing was done to correct the predominance of quasi-idyllic subjects at the trend-setting Great German Art Exhibitions of 1938 and 1939, goes to show that Goebbels rated those shows as venues of popular taste rather than of political indoctrination. It was sufficient for them to confirm the people's likings to be in sync with official preference. Works commissioned by the government were shown in separate rooms.

In both states, the unrelenting suppression of modern art during the five preceding years had readied art production for a match between approved offerings and public approval. This success of art policy was pre-conditioned by a spontaneous, if not loudly voiced, ideological conformity on the part of a majority which had been spared political oppression. While the published attendance figures for the Great German Art Exhibitions, which attained upwards of several hundreds of thousands,

seem to bear out the government's assertion of overwhelming public acceptance, comparable Soviet assertions of mass acceptance were not backed up by any numbers. It may be for this reason that they sound more hyperbolic than their German counterparts. Both the Soviet and the German regimes invoked the will of the people to justify their severe if different clampdowns on artistic culture. Were their claims to have accomplished an art for the people borne out by 1939? It seems so, but since in totalitarian cultures the balance between imposition and demand is hard to calibrate, the question remains open.