

TECTONIC SCULPTURE

Autonomous and political sculpture in Germany Bernd Nicolai

“Of course,” he thought, “it could only be about this figure.” Gregor could well understand why the others did not want to let the young man go on sitting and reading. Anyone who sat reading like that was a menace.

Knudsen, too, looked at the figure. “That thing there?” he asked in amazement. “What’s that supposed to represent?”

“The figure is called *Monastery Schoolboy, Reading*,” explained Helander.’ (Alfred Andersch, *Sansibar oder der letzte Grund*, 1957.)¹

“The commitment to the laws of architecture and the experience of the supra-individual substance of the political message of our era has extended Breker’s will-to-form to monumental dimensions . . . Every last feature of the artistic style represents a total fusion of form and content.” (Robert Scholz on Arno Breker, 1942.)²

The triumphal progress of abstract sculpture since 1945 has tended to make us forget the diversity of figurative sculpture in the preceding decades. Under the respective headings ‘tectonic’ and ‘architectonic’, the opposing polarities of autonomous sculpture, on the one hand, and sculpture intended for a particular setting on the other, dominated the artistic and art-historical debate in this field from the beginning of the twentieth century onward. Under the National Socialist regime in Germany, these differences became manifest. Sculptures that looked comparatively similar could be evaluated quite differently, in ideological terms, on the basis of their ‘inner conception’. The question at issue was this: to what degree could sculpture be politically instrumentalized? On one side stood political, racially determined sculpture, conceived in close collaboration with architecture; on the other the autonomous, timeless figure, sufficient unto itself.

Our attempts to clarify the criteria involved are complicated by the fact that both categories of sculpture are ultimately based on a conception of antiquity – or rather on two very different conceptions of antiquity, which are too often lumped

together. If we free ourselves from the categories of abstract and realist sculpture, then ‘a work by Kasper (or by Marcks or Blumenthal) stands infinitely closer, intellectually, to the so-called “abstract” sculpture of, say, Brancusi than to the sculptural muscle men that paraded in front of the buildings of the Third Reich’.³ Why this should be the case will be explained in this essay, by reference to individual sculptors from the National Socialist era. But first a brief summary of the ‘tectonic’ debate.

In the context of architecture the word *tectonic* has been used since the Neoclassical era to describe the clearly articulated, formally and symmetrically composed structures represented in Germany by the works of Friedrich Gilly and Karl Friedrich Schinkel. The term was first appropriated for sculpture by Adolf von Hildebrand in his polemical text *Das Problem der Form in der bildenden Kunst* (1893), in which he described ‘the architectonic’, or ‘the inner construction’, as a constituent quality that goes beyond the merely ‘imitative’ and transforms the work of sculpture into an ‘independent whole, able to assert itself beside and against nature’.⁴ This interpretation, based on the theories of Hans von Marées, led Hildebrand to produce sculpture intended to be viewed – like a relief – from one side only. The figure was to emerge out of the plane and be comprehensible at a glance.

This theory was opposed by a model derived from the classical Greek principle of free-standing sculpture. As Aristide Maillol put it: ‘I seek architecture and corporeal volumes. Sculpture is architecture, equipoise of masses, tasteful composition.’⁵ And, according to Julius Meier-Graefe, it was Maillol who instilled ‘a more rigorous attitude’ into ‘lyrical’ sculptors such as the young Georg Kolbe or Karl Albiker. Hermann Haller worked variations on this theme; others, such as René Sintenis or Ernesto de Fiori, found a tradition already established for them.⁶

After the First World War, Neoclassicists and the avant-garde converged towards the notion of the ‘simple plastic constellation’. Eventually,

writing in 1923, Paul Westheim united archaic Greek and modern sculpture in a way that emphasized the autonomous character of art. The Hera of Samos, he wrote, ‘can appear in no other way than as the brilliant realization of a discipline, the discipline of spiritual consciousness. This Hera is a construction, if you will, with the logical consistency of a modern bridge structure; one that has not become an intellectualized abstraction but has sought to project a Poussinesque or Cézannesque spirit into the realm of the expressive and the sensuous. This process of construction – which at the same time is a process of forming – this incarnation of sculptural energy is to be understood as the architectonics of the plastic art.’⁷

For Westheim, monumentality lay in substance and in the ‘inner dimension’, rather than in scale. He thus established a theoretical basis for the approach to archaic Greek sculpture, which could accommodate autonomous and abstracting elements with equal ease. This was in contrast to the approach based on the classical canon of Polyclitus, which had been a constant component of the Berlin sculptural tradition ever since Schadow and Raich, but which had been installed afresh in Munich through the influence of Hildebrand. In this respect, modern sculptors like Kolbe, Scheibe, Marcks, and even Thorak were tied to a form of naturalism that imprisoned their work in a time-specific, almost modish aspect.

Under National Socialism, alongside the general deprivation of social rights, and the persecution of such diverse ethnic groups as Jews and Gypsies, artistic freedom was curtailed in a surely unique manner. Following an initial period of a few years in which no coherent cultural policies were apparent, the 1936 Olympic Games were followed by the exhibition *Entartete Kunst* (Degenerate Art), held in Munich in 1937, and the anathematization of the avant-garde (including those elements of it which were thoroughly nationalistic). Concurrently, in the parallel *Grosse Deutsche Kunstausstellung* (Great German Art Exhibition), Hitler proclaimed a new,

1 Alfred Andersch, *Sansibar oder der letzte Grund* (Zürich, 1970 [first edition 1957]), in reference to a fictional sculpture by Ernst Barlach during the ‘Degenerate Art’ campaign in Germany, 1937.

2 Robert Scholz, ‘Die Sendung der neuen deutschen Plastik: Zur Arno Breker-Kollektivausstellung in Paris’, *Kunst im Deutschen Reich*, no. 6 (1942), 172.

3 Werner Haftmann, *Der Bildbauer Ludwig Kasper* (Munich, 1978), 25.

4 Adolf von Hildebrand, *Das Problem der Form in der bildenden Kunst* (Munich, 1893; 10th ed., Baden-Baden and Strasbourg, 1961). Included in Harry Mallgrave and Eleftherios Ikonomou, ed. and tr., *Empathy, Form, and Space; Problems in German Aesthetics 1873–1893* (Santa Monica, 1994), 227ff.

5 Quoted by Eduard Frier, *Bildbauertheorien des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Berlin, 1971), 53.

6 Julius Meier-Graefe, *Die Entwicklungsgeschichte der modernen Kunst*, 2nd ed. (Munich, 1927), 3:547–51.

7 Paul Westheim, *Architektur und Plastik* (Berlin, 1923), 9f.

8 Adolf Hitler, speech at the opening of the House of German Art, Munich, 1937, quoted in German and in English in Stephanie Barron, ed., exh. cat. *‘Degenerate Art’*, (Los Angeles, 1991), 384. Quoted here in the translation made by John Willett for the present volume.

racially motivated, classicizing ideal of the body, which was to be imposed as the new norm:

‘Never was Mankind closer than now to Antiquity in its appearance and its sensibilities. Sport, contests and competition are hardening millions of youthful bodies, displaying them to us more and more in a form and temper that they have neither manifested nor been thought to possess for perhaps a thousand years . . . This human type, which we saw appearing before the whole world last year at the Olympic Games in its proud, radiant physical power and fitness, this human type (O you prehistoric art stutters!) is the type of the New Age.’⁸

Hitler thus laid down an official, and utterly superficial, definition of the ideal sculptural image. Works of sculpture were to be symbols of the new society, one that admitted only the healthy and the racially pure. In this respect, the sculptural modelling of the outer surface of the skin – the external limits of the body – played an absolutely critical role. At the same time, there was a total rejection of those ‘reflections on reality’ (*Wahrbilder*) that took as their theme the inner condition of man.

The identity crisis of the Weimar Republic had found clear expression before 1933 in the controversy over the war memorial made by Ernst Barlach for Magdeburg in 1928–29. This was a fundamental confrontation between reactionary and liberal forces about the way in which the First World War should be remembered: it was all about avenging humiliation on one side, all about grief and understanding on the other. With his memorial, Barlach broke a taboo by allegorically representing the horrors of the poison-gas war, of death and despair. These soldiers were not radiant victors but men marked down to die. Barlach had created a ‘reflection’ of the reality of war, and thus a ‘pure expression’, which denied any ulterior purpose or instrumentalization.

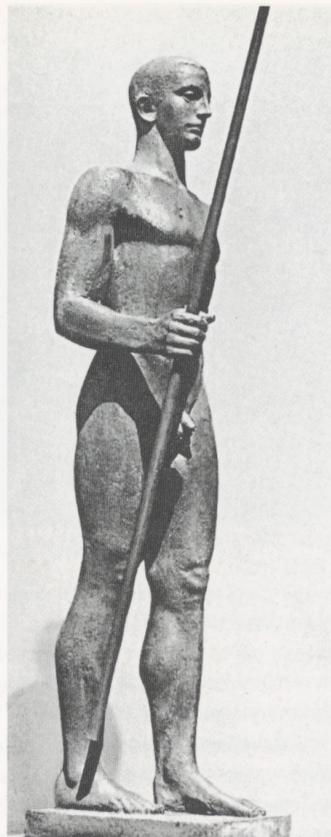
As soon as the work was unveiled, the three soldiers were reviled as ‘cross-eyed, half-witted Territorials’, who stood side by side looking ‘dull and imbecilic’. In 1934 the memorial was taken down and sent to the auction of ‘degenerate’ art held in 1938 at Lucerne, where it was bought by Barlach’s sponsors Hetsch and Böhmer and in this way preserved.⁹ In its weight and gravity, Barlach’s sculpture can

be compared with that of Käthe Kollwitz. Yet Kollwitz had a greater didactic intention and invested her work with an *a priori* social function.

The absolute opposite might be said of Beckmann’s figures. These are private allegories of the forlornness of exile. *Man in the Dark* and *Adam and Eve* go back to existential or archetypal themes. In the case of Beckmann, one can see in the recourse to historical formats – as in the triptychs and self-portraits – a specific imagery of exile, which in his sculptures runs counter to every tradition. Beckmann’s pessimism leads to a primitivism that might be compared – if with anything – with the figures of Ernst Ludwig Kirchner.¹⁰

These works of Beckmann’s represent an unequivocal rejection of the human type demanded by the National Socialist authorities; sculptors like Toni Stadler or Ludwig Kasper continued to make classicizing references, but strictly as formal experiments. In their archetypal stylization, the resulting works are definitely not ‘expressive figures’ but rather meditative focuses. As Werner Haftmann wrote in 1939, in a monograph on Kasper that was banned by the regime: ‘This sculpture is intentionally impersonal. It is neither impressionistic nor expressionistic. It stands outside the general realm of human receptivity and expressivity. The object and the impression it makes are important, insofar as within this object the imaginary figure is able to develop the inner logic of its own beauty. It is inexpressive, in that it is not the vehicle of an emotional experience but rather creates a new, self-sufficient existence.’¹¹

This quality is manifest even in a public sculpture like Kasper’s *Spear Carrier*, made in 1938 as a commission for a Luftwaffe base. Through its reference to the classical *kouros*, the figure remains hermetically closed.¹² It is not an expressive figure in an affirmative sense – as are, for example, Kolbe’s war memorial in Stralsund (1933–35) or his *Great Guardian* for the anti-aircraft barracks in Lüdenscheid (1936–37). In addition to Kasper and Stadler, Joachim Karsch and, in particular, Hermann Blumenthal belong to the group of sculptors that doggedly worked on in the ‘Berlin exile’ of their shared studio in Klosterstrasse. In his *Roman Man* (1935) and *Stargazer* (1936), Blumenthal created two of the



Ludwig Kasper, *Spear Carrier*, 1938

Ernst Barlach, *War Memorial*, Magdeburg Cathedral, 1938



9 Kristine Pollack and Bernd Nicolai, ‘Kriegsdenkmale, Denkmäler für den Krieg?’, in exh. cat. *Skulptur und Macht*, (Berlin, 1983), p. 68, cat. no. 3.23; Ernst Piper, *Nationalsozialistische Kunstpolitik: Ernst Barlach und die ‘entartete Kunst’* (Frankfurt am Main, 1987), documents 5–19.

10 See Cornelia Stabenow, ‘Metaphern der Ohnmacht: Zu den Plastiken Max Beckmanns’, in exh. cat. *Max Beckmann Retrospektive* (Munich, 1984), 140ff.

11 Haftmann (as note 3), 8. For a critique of Haftmann’s book and of Kasper’s art, see *Deutscher Wochendienst*, 15 January 1943, quoted in Otto Thomae, *Die Propagandamaschinerie des 3. Reichs* (Berlin, 1978), 494. *Deutscher Wochendienst* complained that the ‘anonymity and generality of the object . . . is taken too far’.

12 See exh. cat. *Archaisk und Moderne: Statuarische Plastik im 20. Jahrhundert* (Berlin, 1982); Bruno E. Werner, *Deutsche Plastik der Gegenwart* (Berlin, 1940), 126, 129–31.

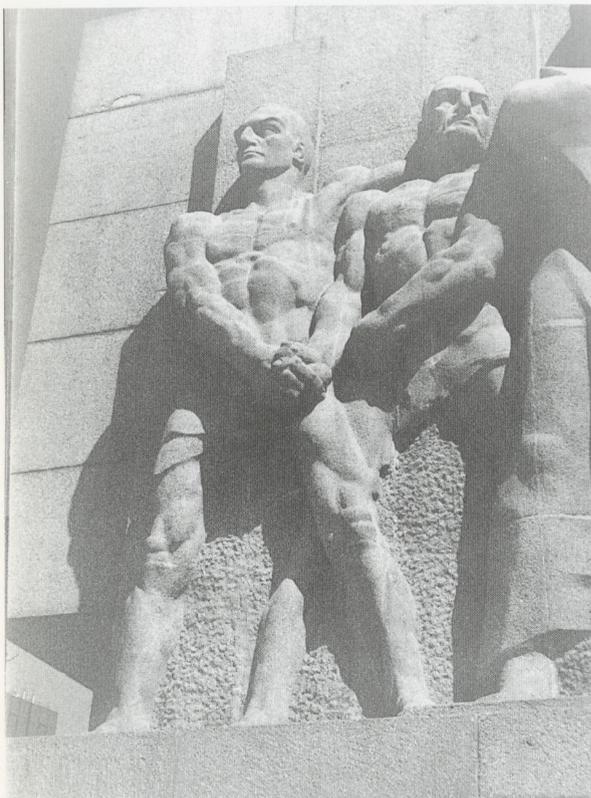


Josef Thorak, *Monumental Group*, German Pavilion, Paris 1937

principal works of this classicizing tendency.

Such cerebral images mark, if indirectly, an insistence on the private sphere, and the attempt to escape from the external world of total control. In their timeless, archetypal form, they do nothing to confront the naked embodiment of the racist ideal; and yet they could never be exploited or put to use by the National Socialist authorities.

Josef Thorak, *Monumental Group*, Security Monument, Ankara 1934–36



While 'tectonic sculpture'¹³ in one sense had affirmed the autonomy and modernity of sculpture, a second tendency interpreted tectonics primarily in terms of the nexus of architecture and sculpture. The critics Sauerlandt and Hentzen had already characterized sculpture as a 'not entirely free art', which they felt was at its most effective in conjunction with architecture.¹⁴

In 1942 Kurt Lothar Tank celebrated Josef Thorak as a 'master of architectonic sculpture': this in order to argue that 'The new German man, the warrior as portrayed by Thorak, is produced by a mighty spiritual movement. For this reason, massive dimensions are not a danger to Thorak; we must imagine them set in the context of the new state architecture.'¹⁵

Even before the enormous state commissions that began in 1937, Thorak was working 'architectonically': as in *Penthesilea*, a terracotta high-relief figure for the Kleist School in Berlin (1928–29), and in the Security Monument, erected in Ankara (1934–36) for the new Turkey of Kemal Atatürk. In the latter project, Thorak worked out in the greatest detail some figure groupings that were subsequently to make him famous. In contrast to Anton Hanak's bronze figures on the front side of the monument, Thorak's muscular figures of Atatürk's attendants are more strongly stylized and reduced to essentials, without losing their terse expressiveness. They recall the classical motif of armour in the form of a muscular torso, as revived in 1906 by Louis Tuaillon's equestrian statue of Kaiser Friedrich III in Bremen. Thorak took this a step further – as did his colleague and rival Arno Breker – by fusing together the classical armour and the surface of the skin to create an armoured body.

This inflated the athlete into the warrior, the emblem of personal and ideological invulnerability.¹⁶ This became the hallmark of political sculpture in Germany during the 1930s.¹⁷ It was the pair of figures on the left-hand side that formed the prototype of the group *Comradeship*, which in 1937, augmented by a third figure, flanked the German Pavilion at the International Exhibition in Paris. However, in Germany itself Thorak never again tied his figures to architectural form.

The sculptures made for the Olympic



Karl Albiker, *Discus Throwers*, Olympic Stadium, Berlin 1936

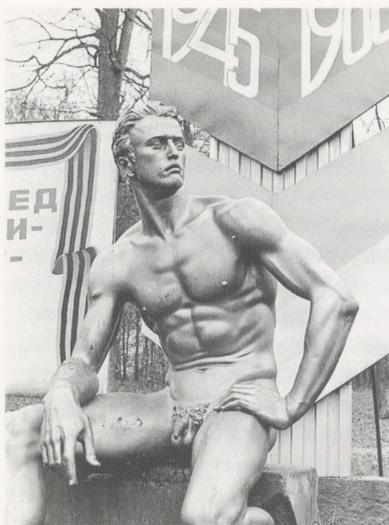
Games site in 1936 – such as Karl Albiker's *Discus Throwers* or Josef Wackerle's *Horse Leaders* (p. 265) at the Marathon Portal – represented the last attempt to build limestone figures into architectural structures. The classical norms proclaimed by Hitler demanded the abandonment of the tectonic stone sculptural tradition that had flourished in Germany since 1905 or so. After 1937, giant bronze sculptures had to be produced to stand in front of architecture. In formal terms, these works followed Hildebrand's notion of a single viewing point. As a result, they complemented their architectural backgrounds almost like reliefs. The example of the German Pavilion at the International Exhibition in Paris makes clear the new function of sculpture: the clumsily assembled groups of three figures were intended to emphasize the architectural form of the pavilion.

The question was thus posed: how substantial could such sculptures actually be? In them, apart from generalities like power, strength, health, and vehement gesture, there are very few specific qualities to be discerned: only formal elements. The sculptures of Breker and Thorak drew their significance from specific ideological usage rather than from their function as images.

Until 1933, Arno Breker had been influenced by a quite different sculptural tradition, derived from Rodin and Despiau; he radically changed his conception of sculpture in response to the new opportunities afforded by the National Socialist regime: 'He had heard the call of the Reich as an inner appeal, and this appeal – which struck his will – also changed his style.'¹⁸ Setting out from his still very archaic-looking figures of the (female) *Winner* and the *Decathlete* in the House of German Sport on the 1936 Olympic Games site, Breker embarked, with the allegories of *The Party* and *The Wehrmacht* for the New Reich Chancellery in Berlin, on a series of figures that could be described as political. Central to these works is the fact that, for Breker, artistic and political conviction were one and the same: 'An "uncompromising embodiment of a new artistic will" can be recognized in these works – a concept of beauty in which, "besides Nordic racial feeling, the substance is visibly penetrated by the inward emanation of a significant will".'¹⁹

For the benefit of those engaged in 'art reporting' – art criticism was not allowed – Goebbels stressed the inseparability of political patronage and artistic form. Breker accordingly turned out his sculpture on an industrial scale at the factory premises of 'Steinbildhauer Werkstätten Arno Breker GmbH' (Arno Breker Statue Workshop Ltd), at Wriezen, which came under state ownership in 1941 under the aegis of Albert Speer's General Building Inspectorate (see Wolfgang Schäche's essay, above). The actual content of its products was so non-specific that a figure like *Preparedness* was earmarked for a total of three different sites. Even individual body parts, such as heads and limbs, were interchangeable.²⁰

In formal terms, the classical references and gestural language of Breker's sculptural figures are quite different to those of works by Kolbe and

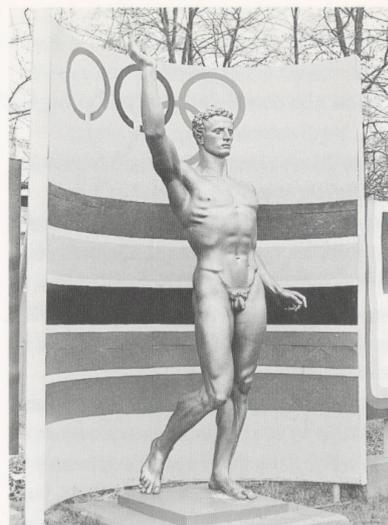


Arno Breker, *Vocation*, 1940; *Harbinger*, 1941, both seen at Eberswalde

Scheibe. *Contrapposto* is a motif, rather than a compositional device designed to pay homage to the antique. The torsos of Breker's figures, beginning with *The Party* and *The Wehrmacht* and moving on via *Preparedness* to *Harbinger* and *Vocation*, are markedly frontal in alignment, and convey an impression of rigidity and inflexibility – the image of the armoured breastplate. Horizontal hip and shoulder lines emphasize the rigidity of the composition. The gestures turn the always naked figures into shells for an ideological function.

The sculptures extract their specific meaning exclusively from the architectural or propagandistic space in which they are located: *The Party* and *The Wehrmacht* in the courtyard of the New Reich Chancellery; *Vocation* on the fountain in the square in front of the Great Hall; *Preparedness* as the crowning element of the proposed Mussoliniplatz in Berlin (p. 260), or else on the parade ground in Nuremberg. (Yet they contain contemporary elements as well: the haircuts are generally fashionable ones for the period, and it is not difficult to date them to the 1930s or 1940s.)

As Magdalena Bushart has shown, as soon as these figures are removed from their intended site and located in a different context – for example, on the Soviet Army sports arena in Eberswalde – they entirely lose their original significance.²¹ In defiance of the National Socialist propaganda purpose that loaded these works with meaning and ideological imperatives, the forms themselves turn out to be extraordinarily devoid of content, amounting to no more than the



cliché of a combative sporting figure.

This emptiness was, of course, necessary for the initial 'loading' of the figures with political meaning.

When compared with such works as these, the ostensibly 'inexpressive', autonomous, archaic figures of a sculptor like Kasper, with their avoidance of the accidental or contingent, take on a distinctly subversive weight of meaning.

Translated by Iain Boyd Whyte

Arno Breker, *The Party*, New Reich Chancellery, Berlin 1939



16 On the equestrian statue in Bremen, see Gert-Dieter Ulferts, *Louis Tuaillon* (Berlin, 1933), 99f., cat. no. 22; on the body as armour see Klaus Theweleit, *Männerphantasien* (Reinbek, 1980); on the Security Monument, built under the direction of Clemens Holzmeister to mark the entrance to the government quarter in Ankara, see Hermann Neumann, 'Der Bildhauer Josef Thorak', doctoral dissertation, T.U. Munich, 1989, 592–94; and Bernd Nicolai, 'Moderne und Exil: Deutschsprachige Architekten in der Türkei 1925–1955', professorial dissertation, T.U. Berlin, 1995, 39ff.

17 See Pollack and Nicolai (as note 9), 61–92, cat. no. 3.10.

18 Tank (as note 15), 113.

19 Werner Rittich, 'Zu einigen neueren Werken des Bildhauers Arno Breker', *Kunst im Deutschen Reich* 7 (1943): 236.

20 See Magdalena Bushart, 'Arno Breker: Kunstproduzent im Dienst der Macht', in *Skulptur und Macht* (as note 9), 179–82.

21 Magdalena Bushart, 'Überraschende Begegnungen mit alten Bekannten: Arno Brekers NS-Plastik in neuer Umgebung', *Kritische Berichte*, 17 (1989): 31–50.