Vandalized poster from the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) party’s campaign for the 2019 European Parliament election. Featuring Giuseppe Arcimboldo, Winter, 1563 (oil on panel. 26.2 in. × 19.9 in. [66.6 × 50.5 cm]. Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna, Gemäldegalerie); and Giuseppe Arcimboldo, Four Seasons in One Head, ca. 1590 (oil on panel. 23.8 × 17.6 in. [60.4 × 44.7 cm], National Gallery of Art). Berlin, Germany, April 30, 2019. Credit: imago images / Stefan Zeitz.
On November 11, 1933, on the eve of the first parliamentary elections in Nazi Germany and its referendum vote to exit the League of Nations, a group of academics gathered at the University of Leipzig to participate “in the political life of the nation.” Prominent scholars—the philosopher Martin Heidegger, the anthropologist Eugen Fischer, and the theologian Emanuel Hirsch among others—took the stage to deliver speeches. Their audience was broad: to an international community of university professors, they declared that the production of knowledge was a “nation-unifying power” and that intellectual work would henceforth contribute “to the striving German nation”; to their own internal community, they demanded that German scholars “become a useful link in the healthy whole” and take part in “the total structure of national life”; to Adolf Hitler, they offered—freely, unconditionally, without compulsion—a “vow of allegiance.” Jewish colleagues went without note: they had been removed from their university posts in April.

Halfway through the event, the art historian Wilhelm Pinder stood to give his own speech. “Thousandfold responsibility rests upon him who has learnt to consider history,” Pinder declared, and then proceeded to mobilize the concepts of form, beauty, and style to secure the unity of the German race. “Nations are living beings,” he proposed. Against the “egotistic purpose” served by art since the Middle Ages, Hitler, in Pinder’s eyes, promised a renewal of style—that “inseparable union of the community to produce form.” “That is health,”
in Pinder’s diagnosis, an artistic and social form secured by “the Führer and his followers.” He ended his talk with an energetic “Heil Hitler!”

When the series of speeches was subsequently gathered and published as a pamphlet—translated into English, Italian, French, and Spanish—some fifteen additional art historians added their names to this “appeal to the intelligentsia of the world” and its pledge of loyalty to the National Socialist state. As the Third Reich continued, art historians participated in plundering European museums, looting the collections of Jewish patrons, and cataloging and appraising the results. They honed their research to narrate a history of Germanic greatness, of a Volk tied to the ancient Greeks and Romans, providing scholarly defenses of imperial conquest and racial superiority. Where does such an episode fit within the history of art history, within our narratives of the discipline’s development and its critical promises? This special issue of Selva is dedicated to examining “Reactionary Art Histories.” At a moment when global Far Right movements are once again turning to the history of Western art for their iconography, when avowed “respect” for both art and history provide rhetorical protection for the monuments of racial capitalism, when art museums in Poland are being purged of “neo-Marxism” and “gender ideology,” this collection aims to hold a disquieting mirror up to the discipline of art history, to reconsider its moments of complicity and outright collaboration. By no means a comprehensive survey of conservative art history nor strictly centered on Nazism, “Reactionary Art Histories” instead offers a series of cases in which the discourses of art were mobilized against democratization in its most radical sense. Focused on the years leading up to World War II and its immediate aftermath, this issue of the journal examines moments when art history broadly conceived—academic art history, aesthetic theory, art criticism, museum collecting and curating, and architectural planning—lent itself enthusiastically to Far Right politics and the preservation of hierarchy. The issue, as a whole,

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4 Wilhelm Pinder, untitled statement, in Bekenntnis der Professoren, 41–42. Christopher Wood characterizes Pinder as “one of the most incisive and original” German art historians of his day, though a “vitriolic reactionary.” Wood notes that Pinder, like other art historians under the Third Reich, “took advantage of the illiberal climate to amplify the chauvinistic, racist, or primitivist aspects of their projects, often winning large readerships.” Christopher S. Wood, A History of Art History (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019), 329.

5 The pamphlet was signed by the following art historians and educators: Hermann Beenken, Leo Bruhns, Werner Burmeister, Fritz Fichtner, Oscar Gehrig, Josef Giesen, Eberhard Hempel, Theodor Hetzer, Carl Horst, Erich Parmitzke, Gustav Pauli, Wilhelm Pinder, Paul Schubring, Kurt Steinbart, Karl Friedrich Suter, Friedrich Wachtsmuth, Ferdinand von Werden, and Hugo Wippler.


is thus geared to reckoning with the many ways in which the history of art as a discipline historically accommodated Fascist regimes, while this introductory essay dwells on the ongoing necessity of this task for our contemporary moment.

On Reaction

What is the diagnostic value of the term reactionary? The use of the word as a political characterization dates to the late-eighteenth century, when various writers appropriated and adapted the term reaction from Isaac Newton's third law of motion—"to every action there is always opposed an equal reaction"—to describe the political animus against the French Revolution. The sociopolitical origins of the term are thus intimately tied to a backlash against the extension of democratic principles, the continually unfulfilled promises of equality, self-determination, and basic civil rights for all. In contemporary usage, this antidemocratic foundation has stayed with the term. Hence, the Oxford English Dictionary defines the adjectival form of reactionary as "opposing political or social progress of reform." Political theorist Corey Robin likewise characterizes reactionary politics as part of "the history of conservative opposition to emancipation," driven by an "animus against the agency of the subordinate classes," whether confronting the politics of 1789 or the contemporary Movement for Black Lives.

Reactionaries, then and now, have rhetorical range at their disposal. They may arrogate to themselves the stance of the radical critic or the voice in the wilderness, the iron-clad ideologist set against weak relativism, the disillusioned skeptic of comforting fantasies (the "red-pilled"), the conscience of history set against presentism, the moral crusader against the contravention of nature, and the staunch defender of classical liberalism against the so-called incursion of "identity politics." The reactionary thus comes in many guises, from liberal to Fascist to proudly unaligned. They may be economistic, patriarchal, "race realist," atavistic, technocratic, techno-utopian, scientistic, pragmatic, or spiritual in their rhetoric. Though their particular obsessions may vary in emphasis, the reactionary intellectual of whatever breed

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9 Oxford English Dictionary Online, s.v. "reactionary" (n. and adj.).

10 Corey Robin, The Reactionary Mind: Conservatism from Edmund Burke to Donald Trump, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 28, 7. Elsewhere in the book, Robin characterizes reactionary politics as "a broad-based movement of elites and masses against the emancipation of the lower orders," an organized opposition to the "emancipatory movements of the left" (xi, xvi). See also Hirschman, The Rhetoric of Reaction, for an analysis of reactionary waves in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries against the democratic promises of civil rights, universal suffrage, and social welfare respectively.
always provides a rhetorical defense of hierarchy. For the reactionary, even symbolic challenges to the mythic foundations of race, gender, nationhood, sexuality, or class threaten to unsettle the whole edifice of power.

Like Pinder’s description of the nation as a “living being,” the reactionary impulse in its most basic form naturalizes an existing distribution of social power, conceiving it as a primordial equilibrium, a harmonious whole, or an integrated and healthy body. Faced with the political claims that the “balance” is no such thing, that the center cannot hold, that the norm depends upon the penury of some for the enrichment of others, the reactionary perceives symptoms of sickness, derangement, and disequilibrium. Key to the reactionary worldview is the illusion of prior order: the projection of a specific image of the past, a fantasy of tradition, a return to “the natural order of things”—an order that is at once claimed as inheritance, promoted as truth, and invoked as a call to arms.11

The reactionary, in short, does not believe in equality. Exemplifying this tendency, the political and aesthetic theorist Edmund Burke warned that the aim of revolution is “to break all those connexions, natural and civil, that regulate and hold together the community by a chain of subordination.”12 “It is in vain,” one of the Nazi academics at Leipzig likewise declared, “if single individuals want to extract themselves from this compound which is the link of the whole.”13 The basic threat of revolution or reform, in the eyes of the reactionary, is not simply that it shifts power from one group to another but that it breaks the stable links that secure the place of the human being in the world, the chains extending from man to woman, from white to Black and Brown, from parent to child, from master to slave, from employer to employee, from human to animal. For certain reactionary thinkers, including the Austrian art historian and Nazi Hans Sedlmayr, each of these are but links in a “chain of subordination” extending from “Man” to God. From such a perspective, the weakness of a single social link in this hierarchy has cosmological consequences.

Sedlmayr’s book Verlust der Mitte (translated as Art in Crisis: The Lost Center), drafted during the Third Reich and published to great popular success in 1948, stands as perhaps the most concerted attempt of the twentieth century to argue for the role of art in maintaining this order of subordination. For Sedlmayr, art was at once a diagnostic tool and a corporeal ideal. An integrated and unified social body would produce a healthy art almost as a natural byproduct, while a disordered and fractured society would produce but a “morbid analogy” (analogia morbi). If art functioned as a barometer of social cohesion and vigor, art historians had a central social role to play, Sedlmayr believed, as professional bearers “of the intuitive understanding, of the ability to grasp a thing in its wholeness, of the physiognomic sense and of the sense for symbols.”14 Sedlmayr thus felt authorized to export criteria of judgment from

11 “Natural order of things” is Edmund Burke’s phrase, cited by Robin, The Reactionary Mind, 8.
13 Hirsch, untitled statement, 38. Neumann’s speech was just as emphatic: “National Socialism demands Unity of the People. It places the personal will of the individual at the disposal of the entirety in order to create a homogeneous style of the people.” Neumann, untitled statement, 49.
the aesthetic to the political register. Like the formal composition of an artwork, the social world was holistically and hierarchically structured in relation to a “center” or “mean” (*Mitte*). The “center,” in this worldview, is “Man,” whose ideal proportions and relation to the material world are ordered by God. By putting his art history in service of Fascism, Sedlmayr believed, aesthetics and politics would be reconciled and brought back to the mean: just as the body politic would be given form by the Führer, healthy images of “Man” would again prevail over bodily “degeneration.” While these ideas might seem eccentric and extreme today, Sedlmayr’s work nevertheless developed perennial motifs of reaction within the most rigorous traditions of art history as a discipline.

Given his paradigmatic status, we anchor this special issue of *Selva* with a dossier of texts by and about Sedlmayr. The accompanying newly commissioned essays and translations likewise focus on the ideological and institutional role accorded to the history and theory of art during Fascism’s ascendancy in the first half of the twentieth century. The need we have felt to return to this moment is unambiguously related to our growing sense of urgency about the proliferation of neo- and post-Fascisms today. Accordingly, this introductory essay tracks the status of art and its histories for contemporary antidemocratic movements both within and outside the state: as a storehouse of images from which to construct and circumscribe racial and national identities; as cultural centers from which the state may manage historical memory; as an academic discipline conducting business as usual amid the hollowing out of universities by austerity; and as a series of institutions, from the museum to the market, in which art as public good and private investment converge to confer cultural legitimacy and financial returns to the global billionaire class. Ultimately, this issue takes for its subject the ideological and material service that art and its discourses can provide to reactionary agendas, then and now. It thus contributes to a history of art history’s appropriation by, and its collaboration in, the political project of the Far Right.

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15 For more on this topic, see our “The Chaos of Total Decay’: Sedlmayr’s Diagnosis,” in this issue.

16 Enzo Traverso differentiates between contemporary “Neofascisms,” which explicitly seek to renew the projects of twentieth-century Fascism, and “postfascisms,” in which the radical Right has reorganized to oppose the “post-ideological,” globalized, neoliberal capitalism represented by Emmanuel Macron, the Clintons, or the technocrats of the European Union. Postfascism, from Donald Trump to Marine Le Pen, thus presents “the contradictory coexistence of the inheritance of classical fascism with new elements that do not belong to its tradition.” Enzo Traverso, *The New Faces of Fascism: Populism and the Far Right*, trans. David Broder (London: Verso Books, 2019), 32.
Appropriation, Control, Assent: Reactionary Art Histories Today

Contemporary Far Right movements—from those wielding state power to the online alt-right—are once more in search of visual forms to serve as proof of and emblems for the purported reality of racial difference. And, as they have always done, they have overwhelmingly turned to the icons of something called “Western art”: a supposedly unbroken lineage stretching from the statuary of Ancient Greece to the modern period, a mythic construction that at once creates and naturalizes a shared cultural heritage of whiteness.

In the wake of the 2016 presidential election in the United States, Identity Evropa—an alt-right white supremacist group—began a flyer campaign across university campuses. Images including the Apollo Belvedere (ca. 120–140 CE), the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Marble Statue of a Youthful Hercules (69–96 CE), Nicolas Coustou's Julius Caesar (1696–1713), and Michelangelo’s David (1501–1504) were emblazoned with slogans inveighing white college students to “PROTECT YOUR HERITAGE” and “SERVE YOUR PEOPLE” and, drawing a line from Caesar to Donald Trump, pleading “LET'S BECOME GREAT AGAIN.” The group's narrative of “European Roots / American Greatness” appropriately culminated in a “national conference”-cum-protest outside the Parthenon replica in Nashville in March 2018.

The latter event attempted to capitalize on the infamous “Unite the Right” rally, held over two days in August 2017 on the University of Virginia campus and the streets of Charlottesville. There, amid chants of “Blood and Soil,” “Jews will not replace us,” and “White Lives Matter!,” the preferred iconography on banners and shields was a mishmash of medieval, Norse, and pagan symbolism: alongside the swastika and Confederate flag flew the Othala rune, the Tyr rune, Celtic crosses, red crosses, black eagles, the slogan “Deus vult,” variants of the saltire, and the Black Sun.

To focus only on the farcical qualities of this American-inflected Fascism is dangerous (after all, white supremacists took the life of Heather Heyer and left DeAndre Harris, among

17 Here we refer to what Karen Fields and Barbara Fields have called the “race-racism evasion,” in which the political force of racism produces the social objectivity of race, rather than the reverse: “Race belongs to the same family as the evil eye. Racism belongs to the same family as murder and genocide. Which is to say that racism, unlike race, is not a fiction, an illusion, a superstition, or a hoax. It is a crime against humanity.” Karen E. Fields and Barbara J. Fields, Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life (London: Verso Books, 2012), 103, 101.

18 The flyers appeared at various schools nationwide, including the University of Chicago, the University of Washington, Indiana University Bloomington, and the University of California Los Angeles, and pictures of the posters quickly circulated on social media and news outlets.


20 Fausset and Feuer, “Far-Right Groups Surge.”
others, hospitalized in Charlottesville), as is taking much comfort in the apparent decline and disorganization of these particular white nationalist factions (a result not only of vigilant anti-Fascist activism but of the mainstreaming of their ideas under Trump and the proliferation of leaderless online conspiracy movements from QAnon to the Boogaloo). In Europe, similar strategies have brought electoral success. Marine Le Pen’s Rassemblement National (National Rally) party continually invokes Joan of Arc as both a source of French “roots” and a “symbol of resistance” against immigration, using a nineteenth-century bronze statue of Jeanne d’Arc at the Place des Pyramides as a site for annual rallies targeting foreigners and trade unionists. In the lead-up to the 2019 European Parliament election, Germany’s Far Right anti-immigrant party, Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), which became the largest opposition party in the Bundestag in 2017, launched “Learn from Europe’s History,” an advertising campaign that appropriated images from the history of Western art.

1. Vandalized poster from the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) party’s campaign for the 2019 European Parliament election. Featuring Jean-Léon Gérôme, Slave Market, 1866 (oil on canvas. 33.3 × 24.9 in. [84.6 × 63.3 cm]. The Clark Art Institute, Berlin, Germany, May 1, 2019. Film still from “Kunst missbraucht—U9-Museum protestiert gegen AfD-Plakat,” Euronews Youtube video, May 1, 2019.

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One notorious example from this campaign used Jean-Léon Gérôme’s *The Slave Market* (1866), an Orientalist scene of Arab men inspecting a light-skinned feminine woman, enslaved, stripped nude, and offered for sale in a public courtyard (fig. 1). To the image, cropped so as to focus on the violation—a turbaned man tilting the woman’s head back, inserting two of his fingers into her mouth—the party added their political message: “So that Europe doesn’t become Eurabia! Europeans vote AfD!” The slogan makes use of the term *Eurabia* (also used by Norwegian Far Right mass-murderer Anders Breivik), a reference to an Islamophobic conspiracy theory that immigration from Muslim-majority nations will dilute European purity, collapsing “Europe” and “Arabia” into one muddled entity. An AfD party spokesman told news outlets that “the German public has the right to find out about the truth about the possible consequences of illegal mass immigration.” He added, “The picture shows clearly where a multicultural society could lead.”

This trope culminated in a billboard featuring Pieter Bruegel’s *The Tower of Babel* (ca. 1568, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen) with the text “So that Brussels does not become Babylon . . . Europeans vote AfD!” (fig. 2). As though drawing ekphrastic inspiration straight from Sedlmayr, the AfD conscripted Bruegel to picture a multicultural nightmare in which the European Union’s Common European Asylum System would result in the disintegration of discrete national identities and their replacement by a linguistically and culturally fragmented chaos. Proud of their engagement with the history of art, AfD Berlin’s Twitter

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23 The AfD used the image a second time with the caption, “Silvesternacht, Köln, 2015/16” (New Year’s Eve, Cologne, 2015/16), a reference to the series of mass sexual assaults that occurred in Germany on December 31, 2015.


account boasted, “With the help of numerous motifs from European art history, this campaign is intended to point to common values that need to be defended now more than ever.”

Since obtaining state power, various contemporary Far Right governments have also demonstrated a keen interest in reorganizing cultural institutions. In Italy, when Alberto Bonisoli, a member of the Movimento 5 Stelle (Five Star Movement, or M5S) party, was appointed director of the Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Activities, he announced to the press that he would prefer the directors of all Italian museums to be native-born Italians, echoing populist chants of “Italians First.” The yoking of cultural institutions to nationalist

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agendas has been even more extreme in Brazil, under the presidency of Jair Bolsonaro. In January 2020, Cultural Minister Roberto Alvim made headlines when his office published a recorded speech announcing the creation of a $4.8 million program for national arts funding. Seeking to promote “a culture that does not destroy but rather saves our youth,” Alvim proclaimed,

Culture is the basis of the nation. When culture is sick, people become sick too. This is why we want a dynamic culture, but at the same time one that is rooted in the nobility of our founding myths. The nation, the family, the people’s courage and their deep connection to God support our efforts in the creation of public policy. Faith, loyalty, self-sacrifice, and the fight against evil are virtues that will be connected to the sacred terrain of art... Brazilian art of the next decade will be heroic and it will be national. It will be endowed with great capacity for emotional engagement and it will equally be imperative, given that it will be profoundly linked to the urgent aspirations of our people, or else it will be nothing... We seek a new national art that can symbolically embody the yearnings of the vast majority of the Brazilian population, with artists endowed with sensitivity and proper academic training, capable of looking deeply and recognizing the movements that grow from the heart of Brazil, transforming them into powerful aesthetic forms.  

Throughout the address, Alvim invoked “the harmony between Brazilians, our homeland, and its nature” and called for “a new and thriving Brazilian civilization.” The entire address, in short, was filled with the aesthetic rhetoric of Fascism. A crisis was identified (a sick culture), a remedy offered (a sacred, noble, and enlivening one). Unity was performatively established between the nation, its terrain, the spirit of its people, and the divine. Art was summoned to be nationalistic, harnessed to the pursuit of a new Brazilian civilization, and artists who followed suit were to be awarded with a series of new grants. Upon the broadcasting of


30 “Brazilian Culture Secretary Declaration Citing Goebbels.”
Alvim’s announcement, concerned listeners soon realized that a portion of his address paraphrased a speech made by Joseph Goebbels, the Reich Minister of Propaganda under Nazi Germany. Alvim later confessed that he had instructed aides “to search on Google for speeches about ‘nationalism and art.’”\(^3^1\) While Alvim soon lost his post, he nevertheless insisted that the connection to Goebbels was a “rhetorical coincidence” and that “there was nothing wrong” with his own phrasing.\(^3^2\)

Meanwhile, in Poland, where the populist, right-wing Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (Law and Justice, or PiS) party won the parliamentary elections in 2015 and again in 2019, the leadership of the nation’s state-funded museums and cultural institutions has rapidly been changing. These shifts are the result of PiS Minister of Culture and National Heritage Piotr Gliński’s aggressive interventions and reorganizations: Paweł Potoroczyn, director of the Adam Mickiewicz Institute, an organization dedicated to the international promotion of Polish culture, was fired; Dorota Monkiewicz, feminist curator and director of the Wroclaw Contemporary Museum was dismissed; Magdalena Sroka, head of the Polish Film Institute, was let go; Paweł Machcewicz, director of the Museum of the Second World War in Gdansk, was removed from his post; the contract of Dariusz Stola, director of the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews, was not renewed; Katarzyna Wielga-Skolimowska, the director of the Polish Institute in Berlin was ousted, allegedly for programming too much “Jewish content.”\(^3^3\) Agnieszka Morawińska, curator of the seminal Polish Women Artists exhibition,

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\(^3^1\) The text had been lifted from a recent biography of Goebbels written by the German historian Peter Longerich, quoting an address Goebbels made to theater directors on May 8, 1933: “German art in the next decade will be heroic, steely but romantic, factual without sentimentality; it will be nationalistic, with great depth of feeling; it will be binding and it will unite, or it will cease to exist.” Peter Longerich, *Goebbels: A Biography*, trans. Alan Bance, Jeremy Noakes, and Lesley Sharpe (New York: Random House, 2015), 222. The plagiarism is more apparent when comparing the quotations in Portuguese. Goebbels’s “A arte alemã da próxima década será heroica, será ferreamente romântica, será objetiva e livre de sentimentalismo, será nacional com grande páthos e igualmente imperativa e vinculante, ou então não será nada” was modified by Alvim to, “A arte brasileira da próxima década será heroica e será nacional. Será dotada de grande capacidade de envolvimento emocional e será igualmente imperativa, posto que profundamente vinculada às aspirações urgentes de nosso povo, ou então será nada.” See “Em vídeo, Alvim copia Goebbels e provoca onda de repúdio nas redes sociais,” *Folha de S.Paulo*, January 17, 2020, https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/ilustrada/2020/01/em-video-alvim-cita-goebbels-e-provoca-onda-de-repudio-nas-redes-sociais.shtml (accessed August 26, 2020).


eventually resigned from her eight-year directorship of the National Museum in Warsaw due to “the persistent lack of effective communication with the Ministry [of Culture and National Heritage].”

Her PiS-approved replacement, Jerzy Miziołek, made headlines when he censored the work of three feminist artists in 2019.

Most recently, Małgorzata Ludwisiak, director of the Ujazdowski Castle Centre for Contemporary Art (CCA) in Warsaw, one of the country’s leading institutions of contemporary art, was informed by the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage that her five-year contract would not be renewed. Abandoning the traditional open-call process for her replacement, Gliński announced that the right-wing Piotr Bernatowicz would instead serve as the CCA’s director for the next seven years. As a curator and radio programmer, Bernatowicz was known for promoting works with explicit antisemitic, misogynist, and homophobic content. Upon his appointment to lead CCA, he issued a statement to the New York Times declaring that most “contemporary art galleries look like left-wing ideological ghettos. This is what I want to change.” According to Bernatowicz, the art world is dominated by “extreme identity movements” and “a left-wing, precisely neo-Marxist ideology,” adding that “artists who do not adopt this ideology are marginalized.” Having canceled the programming of his predecessor, Bernatowicz now works to provide a platform for nationalist and conservative artists, offering them free-speech protections so as to “reveal the hypocrisy of the art world.”


Poland, in effect, is in the midst of producing its own reactionary art history as a crucial component in the rewriting of its national history. The PiS, which in 2018 sought to legislate consensus over Poland’s Fascist history by criminalizing the phrase “Polish death camps” and any verbiage referring to Nazi crimes as “Polish,” clearly perceives the threat of independent cultural institutions in constructing and sustaining collective memory. The directors who have been targeted are ones who have dedicated their programming to international artists, to feminist and queer art, to Jewish history and remembrance of the Shoah. Their replacements—as Miziołek and Bernatowicz demonstrate—are committed to a nationalist, antisemitic, and masculinist narrative in which shadowy foreign influences and forces of sedition from within threaten the cohesion of the Polish nation. “Poland is the future,” *Artforum* warned the international arts community in 2017: “Poland can be seen as both a case study and a warning—portending the dire conditions of culture in the age of ultra-nationalism.”

Control over the politics of memory also motivates state regulation of culture in the United States, where the Trump administration has declared the destruction of Confederate monuments to be an attack on “our common inheritance,” one that “belong[s] to generations that have come before us and to generations yet unborn.” In response to the toppling of monuments to slave-holders during the Black Lives Matter uprisings for racial justice in 2020, Trump ordered the production of new public sculptures of “American Heroes” in an explicitly figurative style, a “lifelike or realistic representation... not an abstract or modernist representation.” At the proposed National Garden of American Heroes, visitors might contemplate a falsified vision of American history in which Frederick Douglass and Billy Graham, Polska, “A Cultural Emergency in Warsaw”: “Bernatowicz redeployes the terminology of exclusion and marginalisation to legitimise reactionary positions in a country with a far-right ruling party that has the support of at least 40 percent of Poles.” On Bernatowicz’s changes in CCA curation and programming, see Dorian Batycka, “Right-Wing Director Begins Overhaul of Warsaw Contemporary Art Centre,” *Art Newspaper*, February 25, 2020, https://www.theartnewspaper.com/news/fears-for-future-of-warsaw-contemporary-art-centre-as-right-wing-director-takes-charge (accessed August 26, 2020); and Dorian Batycka, “The Director of a Major Polish Museum Is Under Fire for Using Public Money to Acquire a Homophobic Artwork,” *Artnet News*, September 11, 2020, https://news.artnet.com/art-world/poland-acquisitions-1907310 (accessed September 20, 2020).


Harriet Tubman and Ronald Reagan, exchange stony smiles. The administration has also considered issuing an executive order to “Make Federal Buildings Beautiful Again,” a mandate that, at least in its draft form, attacks modernist aesthetics and would require that all future federal buildings be constructed in a neoclassical style. While the targeting of abstraction and modernism carries belated whiffs of twentieth-century Fascist cultural policy, more troubling is the project of reinscribing monuments to settler colonialism and enslavement in the public sphere using the visual language of “Western heritage,” complete with “healthy” figurative form and enshrined by classical marble pillars.

While such gestures have been met with strong critique from art and architectural historians, professional complicity is what made them possible in the first place. Consider that the “Make Federal Buildings Beautiful Again” order was drafted by the National Civic Art Society, a private, nonprofit organization founded by an architectural critic, that seeks to advance “the classical tradition.” The Trump administration similarly found like-minded architectural professors and practitioners who were willing to promote neoclassical style to the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts, an independent federal agency that advises Congress and the president on the aesthetics and design of government memorials, medals, coins, and buildings. A third example of such architectural complicity took place the morning after the 2016 presidential election, when Robert Ivy, the executive vice president and chief executive officer of the American Institute of Architects (AIA), issued a press release stating, “The AIA and its 89,000 members are committed to working with President-elect Trump to address the issues our country faces, particularly strengthening the nation’s aging infrastructure.” Identifying design and construction as “a major catalyst for job creation,” the statement ended with the claim that “It is now time for all of us to work together to advance policies that help

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43 These members are Duncan Stroik, a practicing architect, promoter of classical architecture, and professor at the University of Notre Dame; and James McCreery, another practicing architect who works in the neoclassical style and is an assistant professor at the Catholic University of America.
our country move forward.”

Architects, the AIA suggested, should put political beliefs aside and play their part in making America great again. Each of these examples serves as an instance of what Ananya Roy calls “the infrastructure of assent,” her language for describing the narrow-minded forms of professionalism in design and planning that ultimately consent to and help build regimes of power, whether they be militaristic, colonial, nationalist, or white supremacist. Yet this “infrastructure of assent” is not limited to architecture alone; it structures academic life in ever-intensifying forms within the neoliberal “entrepreneurial” university. If one searches for the contemporary existence of reactionary currents in the public writings of academic art historians, one will search in vain. Yet, the terrain itself is controlled and shaped by reaction, which gathers power in the form of boards of trustees, secretaries and ministers of culture and education, brutal job markets, and universities that operate as “hedge funds with schools attached.”

Observers have long remarked that the academy—particularly for adjunct and junior tenure-track professors—promotes and rewards a culture of silence, political evasion, and careerism. While increasingly burdened with administrative work, academics are encouraged to publish ceaselessly, culminating in what Lindsay Waters describes as a concern for “quantity” and “productivity” as inherent goods, regardless of scholarly reception. Junior academics are told “to keep your mouth shut,” to “be selfish, keep your head down, and get

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through the [academic] year." The professionalism of academic disciplines, that is, often relies on the professionals quietly acquiescing to the status quo so as to obtain individual advancement. Meanwhile, the Association of American Universities issues press releases advocating for $23.5 billion dollars in Department of Defense research funding; three-quarters of American faculty members work off the tenure track; universities across the country continue to invest in fossil fuel and for-profit prison industries, compelled by the ironclad logic of increasing their endowments; reactionary student groups such Turning Point USA, Campus Watch, and the Intercollegiate Studies Institute continue to grow their presence on college campuses; and the nation’s fifty-two “land-grab” universities—like so many institutions of higher learning—struggle to acknowledge the violent histories of their origin, to recruit Indigenous students and faculty, and to support Indigenous communities—to say nothing of ceding stolen land.

When academics do engage in political and public writing—say, in critiquing the use of ancient and medieval art to ground white identity claims—they are now met with voracious forms of online harassment and death threats, placed on “watch lists,” and, under varying conditions of precarious employment, face

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The situation is equally dire in the other traditional institution of art history, the museum. The world’s wealthy elite now drive not only art fairs, auction houses, gallery shows, and representation, but museum governance, budgets, exhibition programming, and acquisitions—amounting to an art world so structured by economic disparity that Andrea Fraser deems it a “plutocracy.”\footnote{Andrea Fraser, “2016 in Museums, Money, and Politics: Introduction,” in \textit{2016 in Museums, Money, and Politics} (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018), 13.} In David Joselit’s formulation, “toxic philanthropy” reigns within American art institutions, which, in their current form, cannot disentangle themselves from the vast resources of figures such as the Sackler family, the Koch family, Warren Kanders, Rebekah Mercer, Steven Mnuchin, Carla Sands, Steven Cohen, and Larry Fink.\footnote{David Joselit, “Toxic Philanthropy,” \textit{October} 170 (fall 2019), 3–4. See also Fraser, “Introduction,” 23; Andrea Fraser, “L’1%, C’est Moi,” \textit{Texte zur Kunst} 83 (September 2011), 114–27, reprinted online, \texttt{https://whitneymedia.org/assets/generic_file/805/_22L_1__C_est_Moi_22.pdf} (accessed August 26, 2020); and Andrea Fraser and Eric Golo Stone, “Philanthropy and Plutocracy,” \textit{October} 162 (fall 2017), 35–37.} As Fraser’s recent work demonstrates, across the majority of art museums in the United States, 42.5 percent of individual board members made political contributions in the 2016 election, raising questions about how the political and economic agendas of museum trustees conflict with the very mission of many nonprofit art organizations.\footnote{Fraser, “Introduction,” 14.} The direction many of those donations are going is clear, however: low taxes on wealth mean more money for private art collections and public gestures of cultural philanthropy. According to Fraser, the current structure of American art museums thus perpetuates the growth of economic inequality, at once legitimizing “extreme concentrations of wealth and influence in public life” while discrediting “democratic government and democratic process,” defunding the public sphere, and fueling political extremism.\footnote{Fraser, “Introduction,” 31, 23, 15. See also Fraser and Stone, “Philanthropy and Plutocracy,” 33.}

The contemporary art market, in turn, benefits from this plutocracy: art prices have been shown to rise not with gross domestic product but with increases in income inequality.\footnote{Fraser, “L’1% c’est moi.” She writes, “What has been good for the art world has been disastrous for the rest of the world.” For Sven Lütticken and others, then, contemporary art itself is “part of the problem—part of an international, urban-cosmopolitan elite that has for too long been factually complicit in the extreme inequality that fuels the fascist success.” Sven Lütticken, Julieta Aranda, Brian Kuan Wood, Stephen Squibb, and Anton Vidokle, “Editorial—The Perfect Storm,” \textit{e-flux}...}
Hito Steyerl states the problem simply: “Authoritarian right-wing regimes will not get rid of art-fair VIP lists.”

Steven Mnuchin buys paintings by Willem de Kooning, and his father owns a blue-chip gallery that shows David Hammons; Wilbur Ross collects René Magritte; Ivanka Trump hangs works by Christopher Wool and Garry Winogrand on her walls; and Betsy DeVos paid to put her family’s name on an Institute of Arts Management at the University of Maryland. Rather than focus exclusively on Far Right attacks on modern and contemporary art (as in, say, the Entartete Kunst exhibition, the attack on the National Endowment for the Arts during the 1990s culture wars, or the acts of censorship against Robert Mapplethorpe and David Wojnarowicz), we need analyses of how the institutions of art have been reorganized to generate returns on investment, stabilize power, and “artwash” capital.

Barbara Kruger’s riff on the Nazi writer Hanns Johst—“When I hear the word culture I take out my checkbook”—seems relevant now more than ever as a diagnostic of the current situation. The philanthropist’s love of art annexes culture as investment (investment in that almost mystically volatile commodity—the artwork—and in one’s own prestige) while disinvesting in art as a public good alongside education, healthcare, and housing. Unlike the outright forms of cultural repression in Brazil and Poland, the American form of reactionary politics operates affirmatively, co-opting art and the discourses of artistic freedom in its bid for power—a model that may in fact prove more sustainable, as headlines like “Why Brexit Is 

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63 The term—a descendent of whitewashing, greenwashing, pinkwashing, and so on—has gained traction in activist circles in recent years to signal how corporations use sponsorship of the arts to cleanse their reputations, how real estate developers use art to sustain gentrification, and how settler-colonial states deploy art to project a unified national identity. See Mel Evans, Artwash: Big Oil and the Arts (London: Pluto Press, 2016); and, for its relevance to decolonial struggles, MTL Collective, “From Institutional Critique to Institutional Liberation? A Decolonial Perspective on the Crises of Contemporary Art,” October 165 (summer 2018), 192–227.
a Golden Opportunity for the U.K. Art Market” attest. Major museums of modern and contemporary art, in turn, passively accept this state of affairs. Even as they scramble to demonstrate their commitment to collecting and displaying the work of Black, women, queer, and Latinx artists, they leave untouched the overwhelming whiteness of their leadership (from directors to curators), to say nothing of transforming their economic models.

This strategy of repressive tolerance also has the benefit of stoking a perpetually raging culture war in the United States, one that, as Fraser argues, has effectively convinced a large section of the population to identify “class privilege and hierarchy with cultural and educational rather than economic capital” and in turn to vote for “conservatives who [run] as populists—in order to rule as plutocrats.” While the Right continues to accrue cultural capital, it has nevertheless succeeded in persuading large swaths of the voting public that their disenfranchisement stems from a museum-going, university-educated liberal elite that is indifferent to their concerns and is wasting tax dollars on fantastical whims. As oligarchs, weapons manufacturers, and private equity managers enjoy art fair VIP parties and museum board seats, we must recognize what becomes impossible within an art world thus constituted: increased public funding for the arts, the diversification and democratization of the management of art institutions, freeing access to art, and rearticulating it as a public right rather than a commodity (Joselit invites us to imagine the obscenity of a public library charging $25 for admission).

We are today thus witnessing the flourishing of various reactionary art histories: from the alt-right’s appropriation of Western artworks to ground white identity claims and anti-immigration rhetoric to ascendant Far Right formations using their power within various states to usurp cultural institutions and promote a national art while constructing their own narratives of Western “art history” that fuel noxious political programs. These actions take place amid the many “structures of assent” and forms of “career-oriented accommodation” that underlie the very professionalism of our fields—in the academy, in architecture, design, and planning, in museums and cultural institutions, undergirded as they are by deep forms of economic inequity, gender and race inequality, and the violence of settler colonialism.

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67 “Career-oriented accommodation” is the phrase Wolfgang Bialas and Anson Rabinbach use to describe the activity of many humanities scholars under National Socialism. See Bialas and Rabinbach, “Introduction,” xiii.
Toward an Ethics of Disavowal

What, then, is the art historian to do? In her essay condemning the “structure of assent” and professional complicity within architecture, Roy calls upon her colleagues to fashion instead “an ethics of disavowal” based in “practices of refusal and resistance.” Against the totalizing tendencies of Fascism, theorist Rosi Braidotti likewise proposes cultivating a “non-fascist ethics,” one that critiques “the naturalization of inequalities” (Burke’s chains of subordination) and that introduces “heterogeneity and heterogenesis” into what is conceived at any given conjuncture as the Center—be it Nature, Land, Blood, Soil, Race, Nation, or Art. The activist and author Natasha Leonard advocates a similar ethos: If we recognize Fascism as “a developed tendency”—a habitual practice based in the desire for domination—then anti-Fascism likewise becomes its own praxis, a continual “working to create nonhierarchical ways of living, working to undo our own privileges and desires for power.” How might such an “ethics of disavowal” operate in art history? How can we—as writers, researchers, teachers—construct a field that is open to heterogeneity, anti-hierarchical, conscious of power and its attendant privileges, and geared toward practices of resistance, self-reflection, and critique?

In this spirit, it is worth asking why the founding myths of art history as a discipline lend themselves so easily to the politics of reaction. Recent accounts of the discipline’s formation have inextricably tied art history to restoration, in disparate senses of the word. Michael Ann Holly, for example, argues that art history is, at its disciplinary heart, a melancholic practice: the art historian faces, before a work of historical art, a material remnant that has outlived the culture to which its meaning was bound. She cites Erwin Panofsky, writing in 1955, as an exemplar of the art historian’s saturnine consciousness: “The humanities . . . are not faced with the task of arresting what would otherwise slip away, but of enlivening what otherwise would remain dead.”

Melancholy, as the reigning affect of our discipline, is in itself politically neutral and may manifest in both Left and Right variants. On the Left, melancholia mourns the failures of revolutions prior, preserving their utopian memory as an unattainable ideal, while denigrating the struggles of the present as insufficient and bound for ruin. It is, in short, demobilizing. Conversely, on the Right, conservative malaise is a powerful affect for

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72 Erwin Panofsky, as cited in Holly, The Melancholy Art, 95.
summoning and politically mobilizing those who feel dispossessed of a seemingly natural hierarchy. As Robin argues, “all conservatism begins with loss,” and the reactionary is geared to “recovery and restoration.”74 Others, describing the “militancy” of this nostalgia, have framed the reactionary as guardian of a mythic past: “Where others see the river of time flowing as it always has, the reactionary sees the debris of paradise drifting past his eyes.”75 While the Left melancholic ruefully mourns what could have been, the reactionary actively agitates for reclaiming what, in their mind, had once rightfully been theirs.

In Sedlmayr’s writings, the combination of a melancholic disposition of art history (as described by Holly) and the politics of reactionary nostalgia leads to toxic results. For Sedlmayr, the discipline of art history emerged from “the great funerary cults, the cults of the dead,” and it is “in this museum urge [im Musealen Trieb] that our learning shows a face turned toward the things of death.” The Austrian art historian, as we discuss elsewhere in this issue, argued that the restorative powers of art history were more urgent than ever in the wake of Nazism’s defeat, as he faced what he perceived to be a postwar order of technocratic multiculturalism destructive to all “organic” values, with the capacity to reduce “man” to “dead matter,” a “thing utterly withered away.” Surveying the wreckage of modernity, Sedlmayr declared, “It is only now that we can speak of anything that is really dead at all in the absolute sense of that term, for in all the earlier stages of history there has always been some kind of life, even in death.”76

But what, precisely, has died in this scenario? What is this reactionary art history truly grieving? While bemoaning the destruction of figurative traditions in art and the disenchantment of the world more broadly, Sedlmayr’s lament is rooted in one of the founding myths of art history since Johann Joachim Winckelmann: that art is a manifestation of the collective character of a nation and people. As Éric Michaud notes, “Once Winckelmann had established this intimate and organic link between a people and its art, it became customary to see art not simply as a social activity (as it was for [the Comte de] Caylus), but as a peculiarly natural function of the body of a people, i.e., as a sort of bodily secretion of the nation as a whole.” In the formation of our discipline, the melancholic affect of restoration was conjoined with a taxonomic model derived from the life sciences so as to reconcile culture to “nature” through the conflations of “national style” and “racial style.”77 What the art

74 The “All conservatism begins with loss” quotation is from the Catholic conservative writer Andrew Sullivan, cited and discussed in Robin, The Reactionary Mind, 56–57.

75 The formulation is from liberal critic of “identity politics” Mark Lilla, who elaborates, “Every major social transformation leaves behind a fresh Eden that can serve as the object of somebody else’s nostalgia. And the reactionarions of our time have discovered that nostalgia can be a powerful political motivator, perhaps even more powerful than hope. Hopes can be disappointed. Nostalgia is irrefutable.” Mark Lilla, The Shipwrecked Mind: On Political Reaction (New York: New York Review of Books, 2016), xiii–xiv.

76 Sedlmayr, Art in Crisis, 31–32, 161–162. See our discussion of how Sedlmayr characterized the postwar era in “The Chaos of Total Decay,” in this issue.

historian of Sedlmayr's ilk thus mourns and seeks to resuscitate, in company with the new cultural bureaucrats of Brazil, Poland, and Trump's America, is a mythic “body of the people” that would secrete art as a function of its “organic” health, national belonging, and racial cohesion.

Questions begin to proliferate: If melancholy truly is inherent to the practice of art history, how can its restorative impulse be reimagined to evade the political trap of melancholias Right and Left? How might the study of art, to echo Enzo Traverso citing Douglas Crimp, practice “mourning and militancy,” preserving and animating historical memory for its transformative potential? How can art history be globalized and diversified without replicating the essentialist taxonomies of race and nation that formed our discipline? What would it mean to teach “Western art history” against reactionary nostalgia at a moment when the Apollo Belvedere and Michelangelo’s David appear on Identity Evropa posters, when Bruegel’s paintings are summoned to work for AfD’s political campaigns, and when a neoclassical style is harnessed to “Make America Great Again”? What might be the role of “Western art history,” if any, in this contemporary moment, amid the urgent calls to decolonize and to dismantle white supremacy?

One thing is clear: the introductory survey to Western art—that old bastion of the discipline, key to the formation of the field—must again be rethought, and done so continually. To teach that course as it has been traditionally construed—that is, without being fundamentally transformed by critical reflections on race, gender, sexuality, class, and the politics of nationality—is to teach it within a reactionary mode. That said, proposals to end the traditional introductory survey seem ill-timed when the Far Right continues to mobilize “Western art” for its purposes and when members of the college-educated alt-right are targeting university classrooms, hallways, libraries, and the minds of their student peers with their propaganda. For neither the sheer absence of this introductory course nor its

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79 Michaud concludes his “genealogy of art history” by arguing that “the deeply essentialist belief in the absolute and long-lasting continuity of distinct peoples and their cultures has persisted with tenacity.” See Michaud, The Barbarian Invasions, 199. A similar question animates Darby English’s critique of the process by which the work of Black artists is “uniformly generalized, endlessly summoned to prove its representativeness (or defend its lack of same) and contracted to show-and-tell on behalf of an abstract and unchanging ‘culture of origin.’” Against the reification of race, English’s “critical mythology” seeks a state of affairs in which “the given and necessary character of black art—as a framework for understanding what black artists do—emerges as a problem in itself.” Darby English, How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 7.

80 We are thinking here not only of Yale’s Introduction to the History of Art: Renaissance to the Present course survey but also the Western Civilization curriculum debate at Stanford University, the continued debates surrounding Columbia University’s Art Humanities core curriculum, and recent protests surrounding the Humanities 110 course at Reed College, among others. For an excellent survey of recent debates about the art history survey, see Dushko Petrovich, “Where Should Art History Go in the Future? As Survey Courses Change, the Past Evolves,” ARTnews, July
replacement by focused regional surveys will prepare students to understand and confront how the “West” was mythically constructed, how its art was enlisted as a cultural apology for violence and theft, and how these processes continue today. If reimagined—made diverse, transnational, self-reflexive of power dynamics, situated within broader curricula and course offerings—these introductory classes could possess more relevance today than ever. The point is not to “excise” Western art history from the humanities curriculum but, in the words of Achille Mbembe, for it to be “expanded,” positioned alongside and opened to “the different archives of the world” under the aegis of a “planetary curriculum.”

The history of Western art is ultimately a history of how power operates and how it may be challenged: of how capitalism, nationalism, colonialism, and Fascism work, of the forms they invented for themselves, and of the forms produced against the seeming permanence and inevitability of those isms. Its teaching, therefore, can join the awareness of those operations with modes of critical analysis and imagining otherwise.

Against those on the Far Right who turn to the Western canon for their myths, teachers and historians of Western art can not only propose factual correction but deploy countermyths; for example, Willia Marie Simone, the fictional narrator of Faith Ringgold’s *The French Collection* (1990–1997), who travels to Paris in the 1920s and, as a Black expatriate woman, takes inspiration from the galleries of the Louvre and the studios of Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse to become an artist in her own right. A similar aesthetic reimagining can be found in Lorraine O’Grady’s reading of Charles Baudelaire and her mythologizing of Jeanne Duval; in Mickalene Thomas’s version of Édouard Manet with her *Le Déjeuner sur l’herbe: Les Trois Femmes noires* (2010); and in JaTovia Gary walking through the gardens of Claude Monet’s Giverny. If the Fascist art critic Waldemar George has his Raphael, so, too, do Kehinde Wiley and Kerry James Marshall. If the Fascists have their classical antiquity, so, too, does Frantz Fanon, who writes, “I am a man, and in this sense the Peloponnesian War is as much mine as the invention of the compass.”

These artistic and discursive rereadings tell us the truths of art history without melancholia or nostalgia: they trace the stories of exclusion and exploitation but also render the persistence of creative energies that have for too long been forced below the thresholds of history.

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Further still, art historians can offer readings of the canon that shatter the singularity of interpretation, the centered foundation that the Far Right so desperately tries to maintain. Against Sedlmayr’s appropriation of Rubens to ground his own white supremacism, Shawon Kinew proposes in her contribution to this issue that “The answer... is found in Rubens, whose paintings are so slippery that they are made anew with each generation.” To teach these layered readings—from feminist, queer, and Marxist interpretations of Rubens to those of “critical race studies” and “decolonization,” as Kinew writes—is to introduce into the Western canon itself the “heterogeneity and heterogenesis” called for by Braidotti.

What would an art history look like that conceived culture as irreducible to any center or mean, whether biological or national? It might be an art history that would heed Édouard Glissant’s call for a poetics that “makes every periphery into a center; furthermore, it abolishes the very notion of center and periphery.” This is not quite the same as a “global art history” that replicates the logic of empire, placing the “art of all nations” within a language and framework “of the West,” a gesture Kaira Cabañas diagnoses as “the monolingualism of the global.” Such an art history, following Glissant, results in “a culture that [is] projected onto the world (with the aim of dominating it) and a language that [is] presented as universal (with the aim of providing legitimacy to the attempt at domination).” Counter to the imperial project, an art history of irreducible heterogeneity would tell the story of the violence of inventing and enforcing a center (in the colonial project), as well as promote proliferating peripheries unbound to any center (in Black, Indigenous, Queer, and Latinx futurities among many others). Recent examples of this latter project include Huey Copeland and Krista Thompson’s tracking of Afrotropes, visual forms that “materially transform as they circulate, appear, disappear, or remain latent in response to the differing social, political, and institutional conditions that inform the experiences of black peoples as well as changing historical perceptions of blackness”; or, the Wood Land School’s experiment in Indigenizing the museum, governed by the question, “What does it mean for a settler-colonial institution to unknow its power?”

These projects outline a double task for the history of art: to expand the discipline’s ambit beyond the circle drawn by myths of European cultural supremacy and to work through the history of art history’s complicity with hegemonic power structures, including those of Fascism, colonialism, and white supremacy. Out of a conviction that these projects

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87 Glissant, Poetics of Relation, 28.
are complementary, this issue of *Selva* contributes to the latter task by offering a selection of primary-source materials and new essays that examine reactionary currents in art theory, history, and museology in Belgium, Brazil, Austria, Italy, and France.

At the head of the issue, we present a dossier on Hans Sedlmayr, beginning with our own analysis of his politics and aesthetics centered on his anti-modernist book *Verlust der Mitte* (*Art in Crisis: The Lost Center*). This is followed by a series of English translations paired with critical prefaces. The first of these is an essay by Evonne Levy, introducing Sedlmayr’s exchange in 1930–1931 with Jewish German art historian Rudolf Wittkower, newly translated for this issue by Daniel Spaulding. Sparked by a book review in the pages of *Kritische Berichte*, the debate sees Sedlmayr advocating for his method of *Strukturanalyse* (structural analysis) and Wittkower denouncing him as a “dogmatist.” Levy frames the exchange with Wittkower as one that registers political as much as methodological differences; indeed, the correspondence marks “an ideological battle over how much mystification was in Sedlmayr’s art history.” Asserting that Wittkower sensed the “deeper prejudice” of Sedlmayr’s reactionary worldview, Levy contends that contemporary readers should have more sympathy for Wittkower’s “positivist groundedness” against Sedlmayr’s willful mystification.

In “Sedlmayr’s Mother-of-Pearl: Further Notes on Rubens and Flesh Color,” Shawon Kinew offers a preface to a new translation of the Austrian art historian’s essay, “Notes on Flesh Color in Rubens” (1964). Spaulding’s translation features Sedlmayr musing on how “white” skin tones within Rubens’s oeuvre are pantochromatic—articulated as “as the epitome of all colors”—thus visually according “the human being a central position in the chromatic cosmos of the world.” In her text, Kinew examines how Sedlmayr’s formal analyses and imagistic writing are tied to a “metaphorics” of racialization undergirded by racist ideology. Stating that Sedlmayr’s scholarship reflects a “chasm” in the history of the field—pointing to a Vienna School art history that continued to develop on the European continent while figures like Panofsky wrote their foundational work in exile in the United States—Kinew reminds us that the origins of Anglophone art history are rooted in genocide.

The Sedlmayr dossier concludes with Jean-Claude Lebensztejn’s essay, “The Lost Center” (2012), translated into English by Trevor Stark. Ranging widely across the histories of art, criticism, and poetry, Lebensztejn sets Sedlmayr’s anti-modernism within the context of modernity’s multiple “epistemological decenterings.” By tracking the emergence of the concept of “eccentricity” as an aesthetic criterion, Lebensztejn articulates the gravitational pull of reactionary aesthetics toward “the center that maintains the norm.”

In Waldemar George’s “Aphorisms on Dictatorship,” a 1933 essay newly discovered, translated, and prefaced by Emilie Anne-Yvonne Luse, the French-Polish art critic meditates on the formal powers of dictatorship through a reading of Raphael’s *School of Athens* as a Fascist cohesion of harmonized individuals. In what Luse deems a “nonconformist” adoption of Fascism, George, a Jewish intellectual originally from Łódź, calls for dictatorship to reconcile a Catholic “universalist” whole with his own “ethnic singularity.” Famed art dealer Paul Guillaume chose to publish George’s text in his journal *Les Arts à Paris*, thereby giving his apology for Fascism a modernist art-world public.

This attention to the politics of French art criticism continues in the first of the main essays. In “This Is the Future Liberals Want: The Crisis of Democracy and the Salon des Indépendants in Interwar France (1918–1939),” Luse traces the rise of Fascist thought in art-
critical responses to the eponymous Republican institution. Targeting the salon as rife with foreign influence and given over to the disorderly masses, these art writers, Luse argues, used their journalistic commentary as a means of proposing various models of “autocratic statecraft.” Against France’s so-called hideous democracy, art critics such as George, Henry Lapauze, and Philippe Besnard advocated for an absolutist leadership that would produce a stronger, more robust national art—calls that became all the more pressing with the ascendance of Far Right leagues and their attacks on the Third Republic.

Ian Balfour and Tatiana Senkevitch’s contribution examines a 1948 essay by Paul de Man on Paul Valéry’s drawings, an unusual instance in which the rising literary theorist turned to visual art. Attuned to the complexities of each figure’s fraught politics, Balfour and Senkevitch argue that de Man, in dialogue with Valéry’s mode of sketching, offers a phenomenological prose that privileges aesthetic autonomy and “withdraws” from history—from politics, from ideology, from ideas of the nation, and from de Man’s own past of collaboration with the Nazi occupation of Belgium and France. Detached from the world, enwrapped in a phenomenological present, an “ideological work trying hard not to be ideological,” de Man’s essay stands as a pivot between the opportunistic accommodation of Fascism in his youthful journalism and the deconstructivist work that was to come, and served as a means to present himself “to a public for publication” three years after the war had ended.

In “The Via della Conciliazione (Road of Reconciliation): Fascism and the Deurbanization of the Working Class in 1930s Rome,” Laura Moure Cecchini turns our attention to Fascist Italy. Her essay examines the demolition of the Spina di Borgo, a working-class neighborhood adjacent to St. Peter’s Basilica, as part of a Fascist project to “disembowel” urban rebellion by forcibly relocating proletarian residents to the outskirts of Rome. Intervening in the scholarship on Fascist urbanism, which largely focuses on surveillance, spectacle, and ritualized theatricality, Moure Cecchini argues that the systematic displacement of wage workers from the city center prior to the destruction of the Spina was one of Benito Mussolini’s “key strategies to disarm class struggle by breaking the bonds between the working class and urban space.” The Via della Conciliazione that replaced the Spina di Borgo stands as a historical example of a literal “infrastructure of assent” constructed by architects for the Fascist state.

At a contemporary moment when the Trump administration seeks strategic alliances with Bolsonaro’s Brazil and the M5S party of Italy, Ana Gonçalves Magalhães’s contribution offers an analysis of the transnational spread of Fascist culture in the mid-twentieth century. Her essay focuses on the figure of Margherita Sarfatti, an art writer and collector who abandoned her early socialist leanings to join the National Fascist Party, eventually becoming Mussolini’s mistress and biographer. As a Jewish feminist intellectual, she left Italy in 1939, moving to South America. In Brazil, Magalhães demonstrates, Sarfatti played a foundational role in establishing the collection of the Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo, which features some seventy paintings related to the Novecento Italiano school, a group of artists working in an Italianate classicizing tradition whom Sarfatti actively theorized and promoted as representative of Italy’s Fascist regime. While Sarfatti sought the expansion of Italian propaganda, the Brazilian elite were eager to affirm their country’s Latinate (rather than Indigenous) roots, nurturing connections to “the cradle of European culture.” The result led to
one narrative of Brazilian modernism that is grounded in a classical tradition, a marked contrast, as Magalhães shows, to the institutionalization of modern art in the United States, where the exercise of North American soft power created an avant-garde narrative that celebrated Futurist paintings divorced from Fascist politics.

In excavating these reactionary histories of art, our ultimate hope is for a discipline in which melancholia dissolves into disillusioned praxis: unafraid of toppled monuments and ceded territory, such an art history would neither mourn the corpse of the “West” nor make art history into its mausoleum. It would not, to take one of Sedlmayr’s metaphors, preserve the seeds of art past in anticipation of once-more fertile soil, but welcome instead the gust of wind that disperses them.