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### Beyond Nationalism? Blank Spaces at the documenta 1955 – The Legacy of an Exhibition Between Old Europe and New World Order

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# Beyond Nationalism? Blank Spaces at the documenta 1955 – The Legacy of an Exhibition Between Old Europe and New World Order

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## Abstract

Was the first documenta really beyond nationalism? documenta 1955 has been widely regarded as conciliation for the fascist legacy of the exhibition “Degenerate Art” (1937), and as an attempt to reintegrate Germany into the international arts community. This article employs published and archival sources in order to understand if and how documenta was impacted by the legacy of nationalism in post-fascist Germany. A biographic sketch of Antonio Corpora (1909-2004) shows how the purportedly “universalist” selection criteria employed by documenta erased cultural specificity and solidified nationalist conceptions of center and periphery.

## Résumé

Überwand die erste documenta wirklich den Nationalismus? Die documenta 1955 wurde als eine Wiedergutmachungsgeste für die Ausstellung “Entartete Kunst” (1937) angesehen und als Versuch der Reintegration Deutschlands in die internationale Kunstwelt. Anhand veröffentlichter und archivalischer Quellen, fragt dieser Artikel ob und wie die documenta vom nationalistischen Erbe in der post-faschistischen BRD betroffen war. Die Biografie Antonio Corporas (1909-2004) zeigt, wie angeblich “universale” Auswahlkriterien der documenta kulturelle Bedingungen ausklammerten und so nationalistische Konzeptionen von Zentrum und Peripherie aufrechterhielten.

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In 1955 an international exhibition called “documenta - art of the 20th century” opened its doors in Kassel, Germany. Arnold Bode (1900-1977), a professor for painting at the local art academy, had recruited the exhibition's organizers, who included his academy peers, a number of businessmen, cultural and political dignitaries, museum directors, and the art historian and best-selling author Werner Haftmann (1912-1999).<sup>1</sup> Their aim was to provide the first survey of international art in Germany after WWII in an impartial and educative manner for the German youth.<sup>2</sup> The exhibition project struck a chord: with about 130,000 tickets sold, the exhibition was extremely well visited for its time and widely reviewed in press articles in local and regional newspapers as well as national and international journals. The success begged for repetition and, since 1959 the documenta has become a recurring exhibition. From its inception, actors in the art-world have attributed to documenta an enormous power on the global art market as a maker of artistic and curatorial careers.<sup>3</sup> Yet, the basis on which this exhibition has been labeled “world art exhibition” - or an “international” or “global” exhibition and, thus, the very terms on which documenta's fame is based - is one of the most under-researched areas of historical investigation of the documenta.<sup>4</sup>

What was the organizers' vision of internationality and globality? What did these terms mean for their respective documenta(s)? In this article I will focus

largely on the first documenta, which has provided a point of reference to which later curators would return and from which they would set their exhibitions apart.<sup>5</sup> Thus far, most research on international aspects of the early documenta exhibitions has focused on documenta's role in the consolidation of a post-WWII world order as a token for Western Germany's increasingly strong integration into the Western power bloc.<sup>6</sup> The post-war period saw a willful turning away from the ambiguity of poly-centered colonial era perspectives towards a single unifying narrative that eschewed analyzing specific geographical and historical genealogies of thought. One of the most fervent and influential proponents of universal applicability of supposedly purely aesthetic selection criteria in the art world was Werner Haftmann, the “chief ideologue” of the early documenta exhibitions.<sup>7</sup> Favoring the abstract paradigm of art as a globally applicable “World language” aided a problematic persistence of racism and sexism in post-WWII Germany as well as the entire Western bloc. In light of recent public debates on the continuities of German colonialism as well as the National Socialist legacy I will focus here on examining to which degree the continuity of nationalistic, imperialist and colonial discourses have underpinned the thinking behind this exhibition and its contributors. To this end, I will begin by situating the exhibition historically with regard to the German discourse about the colonial period; I then offer a re-reading of the essays and

<sup>1</sup> All translations are mine. I will try to focus on providing literature available in English throughout the notes. The bulk of scientific literature, however, has been written in German and to a certain extent also in French and Italian.

A thorough discussion of the individual founding fathers (and mother) of documenta and how the documenta project functions within their biographies remains a gap in the existing research literature. I discuss the scattered literature available along with unpublished source materials from the German Federal Archives in Berlin in an article on the lives of documenta collaborators during the Nazi-regime: Mirl Redmann, “Das Flüstern der Fußnoten: Zu den NS-Biographien der documenta Gründer\*innen,” *documenta-Studien*, <https://documenta-studien.de/text>. (2019).

<sup>2</sup> “This exhibition ... is conceived for the upcoming youth. For their still unknown painters, poets and thinkers, in order to recognize which ground has been prepared for them, what is to maintain and what is meant to be overcome. Justification and dignity of our modern spirit is always the conscience of our freedom ahead.” *Gesellschaft Abendländische Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts e. V.*, ed., *Kunst des XX. Jahrhunderts: Internationale Ausstellung im Museum Fridericianum in Kassel*, Unchanged reprint of the original 1955 catalog (München: Prestel, 1995), 25.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Green and Anthony Gardner, *Biennials, Triennials and documenta: The exhibitions that created contemporary art* (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2016), 9-14. documenta Archive, “about the documenta,” documenta und Museum Fridericianum gGmbH, accessed September 15, 2019, <https://www.documenta-archiv.de/de/documenta/51/ueber-die-documenta>.

<sup>4</sup> For a brief general overview of “Cultural difference in the globalization context of documenta” from documenta 1 through 12, see: Katrin H. Sperling, *Nur der Kannibalismus eint uns: Die globale Kunstwelt im Zeichen kultureller Einverleibung*

*Brasilianische Kunst auf der documenta*, Image Band 22 (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2011), 246-275. While Sperling lays out the changing discourses about the globalization of the art world based on a case study of Brazilian artists, my forthcoming dissertation “*Momentaufnahmen: Arabische Künstler\*innen auf der documenta 1-14*” focuses on documenta's institutional and societal discourses and networks surrounding the inclusion of artists from the eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East.

<sup>5</sup> My forthcoming dissertation “*Momentaufnahmen: Arabische Künstler\*innen auf der documenta 1-14*” traces the purpose of references to the context of the first documenta against the background of changing attitudes towards internationality. It takes as its leitmotiv, the recurrence to documenta as being born from trauma. A host of publications deal exclusively with the context of documenta 1955. A broad overview of sources currently employed as state of the art research are provided by: Simon Großpietsch and Kai-Uwe Hemken, eds., *documenta 1955: Ein wissenschaftliches Lesebuch* (Kassel: Kassel University Press, 2018).

<sup>6</sup> For some excerpts of key texts translated into English see Minna Henriksson, “Abstracta: Online Archive about the political nature of the early documenta exhibitions,” <http://abstracta.documenta-studien.de>. (2018); Catherine Dossin, *The Rise and Fall of American Art, 1940s-1980s: A Geopolitics of Western Art Worlds* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2015), 14-21; Heather E. Mathews, “Making Histories: The exhibition of postwar art and the interpretation of the past in divided Germany, 1950-1959” (Doctoral dissertation, Art and Art History, University of Texas, May 2006), <https://repositories.lib.utexas.edu/bitstream/2152/3457/2/mathewsh42492.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> Barbara Paul, “Schöne heile Welt(ordnung): Zum Umgang der Kunstgeschichte in der frühen Bundesrepublik Deutschland mit außereuropäischer Gegenwartskunst,” *Kritische Berichte*, Ulmer Verein, Marburg 31, no. 2 (2003).

catalog-data on artists provided by the first documenta in order to open up a perspective on the outer fringes of the modernist center-periphery conception of the (art)world. Antonio Corpora (1909-2004) was the only participant in the first documenta who came from a colonial context. By means of this example, I sketch out how his immersion in the post-war universalist discourse led to a complete lack of scholarly engagement with his pre-war biography. However, as I argue in the second part of this article, both his figurative art and writing of the pre-war period as well as his post-war oeuvre were shaped considerably by his colonial background.

### The Common Strive for Empire: German Colonialism, German Fascism, German Universalism?

Local public discourse until very recently has largely ignored academic discussions on Germany's colonial history.<sup>8</sup> Yet, as I argue here, the unmarked discursive space of colonialism in the history of documenta is intimately intertwined with memory of traumatic history in Germany that serves to obliterate the still persistent nationalist underpinnings of German international relations. Public commemoration culture in Germany is famous and yet it has been focused almost entirely on the memory surrounding the Shoah and, lately, the suffering of (German) civilian victims of WWII.<sup>9</sup> It is common knowledge in Germany that the country had colonies in the classical sense "only" for a very short period of time; and yet colonial

epistemes run deep through the German society on a subliminal level.<sup>10</sup> German (colonial) forces have been involved in the very creation of the term genocide not only once, but three times: first, through the massacre on the Herero and Nama population between 1904-1908 in German South West Africa, then, a decade later, when largely the same personnel advised the High Porte in Istanbul on the genocide of the Armenians and, lastly, in the most radical remnants of this army, which resisted disarmament after WWI and formed a proto-fascist movement (the so called "Free Corps"), many of whose members were integrated into the National-Socialist party (NSDAP) and held pivotal positions in orchestrating the Shoah.<sup>11</sup> Overshadowed by the monstrosity of the Shoah, many violent histories surrounding the National-Socialist regime have been brushed over in German public memory culture. In terms of the prevalence of colonialist and imperialist thinking, the most shocking and explicit of these were the plans to establish a neo-feudal system in the annexed Polish territories.<sup>12</sup> When the Allied forces defeated the National-Socialists in 1945, Germany's eastern and western borders were re-drawn. Poland received back parts of its original territories and parts of former German territories and the remainder of Germany was split up, the different sections governed under the tutelage of the Allied forces, imperial aspirations were no longer tolerable (for the moment). Only in May 1955 - just weeks before the opening of documenta - the Allied occupation ended with the ratification of the Bonn-Paris conventions and Germany became a sovereign nation-state again.

<sup>8</sup> The planned Humboldt Forum in Berlin has become the catalyst of the discussions, with Bénédicte Savoy's resignation from the advisory board of the Humboldt Forum in 2018 and her report for the French president Emmanuel Macron on the restitution of cultural heritage from French Museums, also in 2018. Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy, "The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage: Toward a New Relational Ethics," [http://restitutionreport2018.com/sarr\\_savoy\\_en.pdf](http://restitutionreport2018.com/sarr_savoy_en.pdf).

documenta 11 (2002) has provided important impulses for the conception of this project, while documenta 14 (2017) was pivotal in developing a public awareness of the applicability of the term "restitution" not only in the context of artworks stolen or coerced from Jewish owners during the National Socialist era, but also in colonial contexts. Obviously, both topics were present in specialist circles well before, as, for example, in: Viktoria Schmidt-Linsenhoff, "Das koloniale Unbewusste in der Kunstgeschichte," in *Globalisierung/Hierarchisierung: Kulturelle Dominanzen in Kunst und Kunstgeschichte*, ed. Irene Below and Beatrice v. Bismarck, Schriftenreihe des Ulmer Vereins Bd. 1 (Marburg: Jonas, 2005), 19-38.

<sup>9</sup> Aleida Assmann, *Das neue Unbehagen an der Erinnerungskultur: Eine Intervention*, Beck'sche Reihe 6098 (München: C.H.Beck, 2013), 9 ff.

<sup>10</sup> See on the concept of epistemic violence: Gayatri Spivak in "Can the Subaltern speak?" 1985, who expands on the concept of epistemes (i.e. a pre-condition of

knowing in ones head/blind spots). Cf. Anke Bartels et al., *Postcolonial Literatures in English: An introduction* (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler, 2019).

<sup>11</sup> "Im Schatten des Holocaust - Armenien, Herero und Nama: Genozide im frühen 20. Jahrhundert," in Aleida Assmann, *Formen des Vergessens*, 1. Auflage, Historische Geisteswissenschaften. Frankfurter Vorträge 9 (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2016), 134-156.

<sup>12</sup> While the NS-regime did not last long, it seems to be clear that Germany, in the case of victory, had intended to act as an imperial power in Eastern Europe that would fulfill all criteria required to be called colonial. The Polish population served as the primary "testing-ground" for many of the atrocities that characterize the historical memory of the same NS-regime that relied on extensive medical experiments on humans. For a summary of the topic: Frank Grelka, "Zur Transformation des polnischen Nationalstaates in einen kolonialen Rassenstaat: Die Nationalitätenpolitik der deutschen Besatzungsbehörden in Ostpolen 1941-1944," in *Polen unter deutscher und sowjetischer Besatzung 1939-1945*, ed. Jacek A. Młynarczyk, Einzelveröffentlichungen des Deutschen Historischen Instituts Warschau 20 (Osnabrück: Fibre, 2009).

The mechanics of re-feudalization during the fascist regime are aptly described in an exhibition catalog by Georg Bussmann, ed., *Kunst im 3. Reich: Dokumente der Unterwerfung* (Zweitausendeins: Frankfurt a.M., 1979). In particular, the chapters on the depiction of farmers and on the depiction of women are pertinent to this question.

As researchers in this day and age, we are socialized into a genealogy that comes forth from this legacy of nationalism gone wrong as well as discourses stifled by guilt and avoidance. It is well known that save for some high-ranking war criminals and public figures efforts to “denazify” and “re-educate” the German people, however, largely fell flat. By the 1950s, the former elites were ruling once again.<sup>13</sup> I was astonished that to this day, almost 70 years after the first documenta and almost 80 years after the demise of fascist Germany, no sustained critical reflection has been attempted regarding how the founders of the exhibition conceived of the concept of internationality in light of the nationalism gone wrong just a decade before. Even the most in-depth and most critical introductory text on documenta to date has largely avoided situating the exhibition historically beyond the context of post-war destruction (rather than focusing on the persistence of the thought that caused this destruction).<sup>14</sup> This is not to say that no attention has been focused on a critical engagement with the fascist background of documenta and/or aspects of its internationality at all.<sup>15</sup> Yet, only two studies come to the conclusion that, at its root, documenta is underlain less by international cooperation than international competition. While large scale periodic exhibitions have long been associated with nationalistic underpinnings, it is telling that neither of the authors who point to nationalist tendencies in documenta specifically were educated in Western German academia; where discourses surrounding documenta are geared towards

understanding the exhibition as a conciliatory gesture, and where, as shown above, the academic tradition until very recently has been reluctant to take on the continuities of colonialism and fascism. In her 2005 doctoral dissertation, Luana Lovisetto conducts a comparative quantitative analysis of the national representations at the Venice Biennial and documenta.<sup>16</sup> She concludes that, after WWII, both exhibitions served a double purpose: re-integrating the respective local art scenes into an international community, as part of an aspiration to position their own country as prominently as possible. The Eastern German art-historian Gabriele Ivan went even further in her doctoral thesis on documenta at the Humboldt University in Berlin (1985), noting that the ingratiating shown by the organizers of the first three exhibitions towards the United States went hand in hand with a denigration of other European countries.<sup>17</sup> I would like to dwell on Ivan's argument which, if one looks closely, is substantiated by quite a number of instances that have been noted previously. For example, the organizers of documenta quickly began to distance their exhibition-concept from the competitive character of the Biennial in Venice; they criticized the concept of national pavilions as outdated and denounced the system of prizes handed out by the Biennial as too competitive.<sup>18</sup> In an unpublished communication with the mayor of Kassel, Arnold Bode also explicitly stated that money was needed for a new exhibition in order to bring out the fact that the German contribution to contemporary art

<sup>13</sup> Willi Winkler, *Das braune Netz: Wie die Bundesrepublik von früheren Nazis zum Erfolg geführt wurde* (Berlin: Rowohlt Berlin, 2019).

<sup>14</sup> Harald Kimpel, *Documenta: Mythos und Wirklichkeit, Schriftenreihe des Documenta-Archivs 5* (Köln: DuMont, 1997).

<sup>15</sup> Walter Grasskamp, “Becoming Global: From Eurocentrism to North-Atlantic Feedback-documenta as an “International Exhibition” (1955 - 1972),” *On Curating*, no. 33 (2017). The author comes to the conclusion that the first documenta was provincial rather than nationalistic, 97-99.

The question of the degree to which documenta could be read as a gesture of reconciliation with regards to artists and art movements slurred by the fascist NS regime as “degenerate”, for example, has received analytical attention. For an overview and re-evaluation of literature on this topic, see the forthcoming dissertation by Liza Weber, Sussex University Centre for German-Jewish Studies. Other readings have noted the early absence and later inflation of U.S.-American artists in the context of the aforementioned integration into the West. For example: Kimpel, *Documenta*, 274 ff.

Furthermore, it has been noted that the École de Paris was quite well represented in the selection of artists: Ulrike Wollenhaupt-Schmidt, *Documenta 1955: Eine Ausstellung im Spannungsfeld der Auseinandersetzungen um die Kunst der Avantgarde 1945-1960, Europäische Hochschulschriften*. Reihe 28, Kunstgeschichte 219 (Bern: Lang, 1994). And Martin Schieder, *Im Blick des Anderen: Die Deutsch-Französischen Kunstbeziehungen 1945-1959*, Passagen 12 (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2005). Chapter “Station der Moderne: Werner Haftmann und die erste documenta,” 144-150.

<sup>16</sup> Luana Lovisetto, “L'arte contemporanea: confronto tra XXVII e XVIII Biennale di Venezia (1954-1956) e documenta di Kassel (1955)” (Doctoral dissertation, Facoltà di Lettere e Filosofia Corso di Laurea Specialistica in Storia delle Arti e Conservazione dei Beni Artistici, Università Ca' Foscari di Venezia, 2005), 261.

<sup>17</sup> Gabriele Ivan, “Kunstpölitische und kunsttheoretische Fragen der Konzeption der documenta-Ausstellungen in Kassel 1955 bis 1972” (Dissertation, Gesellschaftswissenschaften, Humboldt Universität, 1985), 1. (While Eastern German voices have been consistently ignored or attacked by Western German authors as being blinded by ideology, I found the directness and ease with which she is pointing towards a fact that has been so consistently ignored by Western German scholarship revealing.) When visiting the Hotel Hessenland in the inner city of Kassel, visitors to the historic building that opened in 1953 can still admire a wall-sized black and gold lacquered map of the world that features plenty of wild animals, religious symbols and some tribal people wielding primitive weapons and riding horses, characterizing the world's regions in a brazenly patronizing and racist manner. Most revealing is the fact that only two built architectural structures exist on this map, somewhere in Germany and on the East coast of North America, which are connected by airplanes and a steamboat.

<sup>18</sup> Franziska Völz, “Biennale Venedig und documenta - versteckte Beziehungen? Zu Konzepten, Künstlern und Organisatoren,” in *Beziehungsanalysen. Bildende Künste in Westdeutschland nach 1945: Akteure, Institutionen, Ausstellungen und Kontexte*, ed. Gerhard Panzer, Franziska Völz and Karl-Siegbert Rehberg (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2015), 229-256.



was superior to Italy's.<sup>19</sup> Was this just ordinary fund-raising banter for a concept that the organizers saw fit to represent a new Europe and effectively reduced national competition? Or should we take it at face value? As a claim to equal (Lovisetto) and even greater (Ivan) importance of the German artistic contribution to modern and contemporary art at the expense of their European neighbors? Revisiting the primary materials provided by documenta as well as archival sources sheds some light on this question.

While the exhibition received no funding from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, however, for the second and third editions of documenta counselor Dr. Helene Münscher, second secretary at the Foreign Ministry in Bonn, supported the organizers by warranting toll procedures demanded by the Italian embassy and by counseling with regards to the diplomatic protocol in their bid to secure an international patronage for the event.<sup>20</sup> The catalogs of the first exhibitions all contain opening pages dedicated to credits introducing the organizing board, the lenders and an honorary board. For the first documenta this honorary board comprised local, regional and federal state-representatives along with representatives of the former allied forces and several neighboring countries that had been occupied under the National-Socialist regime, namely the ambassadors to Germany from France, the Netherlands, the United States, Belgium, Britain and Italy, as well as envoys from Norway and Sweden.<sup>21</sup> Presiding over the list of honorary board members was the German president, who occupied a ceremonial position dubbed the “protectorate” of the exhibition, a direct invocation of the vocabulary used by European colonizers overseas. Placing the

exhibition's guests under the “protectorate” of the German president and putting the ambassadors of countries (which had, in part, been occupied by Germany just ten years earlier and/or acted as occupational forces in Germany just weeks before, or both consecutively) on equal terms with the mayor of Kassel and the state (not federal) minister for education was a bold step, which merits scholarly attention.<sup>22</sup> From the point of view of the international community, what was it that they supported? As has been noted by several authors, the entire direction of some rooms was geared towards enhancing the position of rather outdated and provincial German artists' as equal or superior among international artists. One prominent example in the context of the first documenta is the juxtaposition of a work by Picasso with a mural painted by Fritz Winter, a local painter and professor at the art academy.<sup>23</sup> Even though Arnold Bode, the initiator of documenta and the one responsible for its scenography, clearly and repeatedly stated his aim to display art purely for art's sake and to entirely steer clear of politics,<sup>24</sup> his project was constantly trapped in his own nationalistic thinking (he himself organized entire halls and passages of the exhibition according to “national schools”);<sup>25</sup> And its supposed anti-nationalism was clearly contradicted by his peers. Werner Haftmann, the art historian on whom the practically inclined Bode relied for many representative tasks, wrote in the introduction to the first documenta: “We will now be able to compare, for the first time, how the European countries relate to each other in their artistic expressions.”<sup>26</sup> To Haftmann, the nations of Europe formed a “bouquet of flowers, each with their

<sup>19</sup> Documenta archive, file 20\_d1 P. 2 (of 5), preserved as well in file 44\_d2 P. 2 (of 5): “It has to be accomplished that the highest value judgment shifts from Italy to Germany which seems possible to who is acquainted with the increasing weakness of the Italian exhibition.” The letter is addressed to the mayor of Kassel, Lauritz Lauritzen, November 4<sup>th</sup> 1956. The files attribute it respectively to Werner Haftmann and Arnold Bode, due to the militaristic phrasing I would assume Haftmann wrote the draft and possibly Bode sent it.

<sup>20</sup> PA AA B95 Nr. 627.

<sup>21</sup> Honorary board d2: France, Netherlands, U.S., Belgium, Britain, Italy, Norway and Sweden plus: Denmark, Mexico, Cuba, Brazil, Canada, Japan, Austrian, Spain, Switzerland as well as the Head of the Israel-Mission.

<sup>22</sup> The reaction of the German press to the first documenta was, in part, characterized by extensive critique of a perceived over-representation of Italian artists. Ulrike Wollenhaupt-Schmidt, *Documenta 1955: Eine Ausstellung im Spannungsfeld der Auseinandersetzungen um die Kunst der Avantgarde 1945-1960*, Europäische

Hochschulschriften. Reihe 28, Kunstgeschichte 219 (Bern: Lang, 1994), 109. The French reaction is summarized in Schieder, *Im Blick des Anderen*, 149-150. Aspects of the German-language response have been analyzed for d1-11 by the local cultural journalist Dirk Schwarze, *Die Expansion der documenta-Kritik: Eine Ausstellung im Spiegel der Presse, Schriften zur Kunstkritik (AICA, Köln) Bd. 16* (Nördlingen: Steinmeier, 2006). The documenta archive houses an extensive collection of press-clippings in several languages.

<sup>23</sup> Wollenhaupt-Schmidt, *Documenta 1955*, 83-85; Kimpel, *Documenta*, 233. See also: Schieder, *Im Blick des Anderen*, 145.

<sup>24</sup> Kimpel, *Documenta*, 260.

<sup>25</sup> Grasskamp, “Becoming Global,” 99.

<sup>26</sup> Werner Haftmann, “Introduction,” in *Kunst des XX. Jahrhunderts: Internationale Ausstellung im Museum Fridericianum in Kassel*, ed. Gesellschaft Abendländische Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts e. V., Unchanged reprint of the original 1955 catalog (München: Prestel, 1995), 25.

individual color and scent.”<sup>27</sup> He also used the artists in this essay as metonyms for their nation states and reflection of nationalistic stereotypes, “French ‘clarté’”, the “passion, sturdiness and mysticism of the Spanish”, the “pathos and archaism of the Italians”, the “hallucinatory fervor of the Northerners” and, whatever this means, “The whispered legend of the ‘peintres juifs’”. Only artists identified elsewhere in this catalog as being “German” are characterized as individuals: we learn that Paul Klee was a “cool romantic” and Wassily Kandinsky’s art an “abstract pantheism ... in which the Russian is swinging towards the West”.<sup>28</sup> While the foreword employs every trope of nationalism available, Haftmann avoids the brazenly militaristic vocabulary that he used in his seminal introduction to painting in the 20th century (first published in 1954, translated to English in 1960).<sup>29</sup>

Drawing up lists was a routine matter for the organizers of documenta during the process of finalizing invitations. Interestingly, these lists grouped artists according to the nationalities they ascribed to them and not, as one might imagine, where possible loans might come from.<sup>30</sup> Figure one shows a double page of the catalog that immediately follows Haftmann’s introductory essay on how these lists were transposed for the public [fig. 1]. The double page shows how the authors grouped 146 of 148 artists as having one of seven “nationalities”. Each country has a column of its own, in order of appearance: Germany (58), France (42), Italy (28), Holland [sic.] (2), Switzerland (6), England (8) and the United States (3). Thus, about two-thirds of the artists participating in documenta were distributed

among Germany, France and Italy. Considering that about half of the artists in the French section of this list were émigrés living in Paris, many of whom were of German origin, makes clear, in numbers, the extent of the documenta’s organizers’ German-centric thought and might explain why the German reviewers and organizers felt that the Italian influence on future exhibitions should be further diminished (rather than the French or the German). While the list’s French column strongly reflects that Paris, the artistic melting-pot throughout the 19th century, had survived two world wars to retain this status,<sup>31</sup> the German and Italian sections of the list contain very few artists from other countries, a telling fact, given that both countries had been magnets for artists from abroad from the 19th century up to the end of WWII. A note on the lower-right part of the page (Fig. 1) further illustrates the thought behind this list:

The individual countries part-take through the artists in the chart above. Due to political immigration from Germany and Russia the national belonging of a number of artists has become dubious; they have been sorted according to the degree of their activity in their home respectively host countries.<sup>32</sup>

As Haftmann mentioned in his foreword to the catalog, he considered emigrating from Russia after 1921 and from Germany after 1933 politically motivated.<sup>33</sup> Through this selection all artists currently producing in member-states of the USSR were omitted, leaving only a handful who had migrated to the Western bloc, or as it became known, “The Free World”. Out of 146 listed artists, 58 were categorized as German, though several

<sup>27</sup> Haftmann, “Introduction,” in *Catalog documenta 1955*, 24.

<sup>28</sup> Haftmann, “Introduction,” in *Catalog documenta 1955*, 16.

<sup>29</sup> Haftmann, “Introduction,” in *Catalog documenta 1955*: “Whenever the problem of the contemporary became burning and pointed towards the supra-national it became the quest of the German spirit to account for it on a broad front” (p. 15) and regarding the contemporary artists participating he notes: “The selection is concise (knapp) and hard and geared only towards quality of the topmost tier...” (p. 24). Also Haftmann had used the word “tier” (Rang) in his publication Werner Haftmann, *Painting in the twentieth century*, with the assistance of Transl. by Ralph Manheim (New York, NY: Praeger, 1960) in order to assign places to men in an artistic social order using a phrasing resonant of the national-socialist slogan “Jedem das Seine”, which he rephrased for the 1956 reprint, switching from “tier”, which was obviously too open for debate, to “spiritual position”. The militaristic overtones are both present in the image of the avant-garde, in addition to being one of the key defining linguistic features of post WWII texts, especially in the arts, as Christina Rothenhäusler remarked in her paper “Heldenmacher. Kuratoren der Moderne nach 1945” at the

colloquium: *Unbewältigt? Ästhetische Moderne und Nationalsozialismus. Kunst, Kunsthandel, Ausstellungspraxis*. May 16th-18th, 2019. Berlin.

For a reconstruction of Haftmann’s career during the NS state I point to my article Redmann, “Das Flüstern der Fußnoten”, which traces the scattered literature on the topic of the early documenta organizers NS-biographies and also discusses previously unpublished materials from the state archives.

<sup>30</sup> Pertinent examples of these lists are preserved for example in maps 12\_d1, 43\_d2 and 44\_d2 at the documenta Archive in Kassel, which will be discussed in depth in my forthcoming dissertation. Collectors though were grouped by their location in the organisational lists and by surname in the catalogs’ acknowledgements.

<sup>31</sup> Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel, “Provincializing Paris: The Center-Periphery Narrative of Modern Art in Light of Quantitative and Transnational Approaches,” *Artl@s Bulletin* 4, no. 1 (Spring 2015); Wollenhaupt-Schmidt, *Documenta 1955*, 103.

<sup>32</sup> *Gesellschaft Abendländische Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts e. V., Kunst des XX. Jahrhunderts*, 26.

<sup>33</sup> Haftmann, “Introduction,” 22.

Beteiligte Länder			
Deutschland		Frankreich	
Bargheer	Marcis	Arp	Rouault
Barlach	Mataré	Bozaine	Rousseau
Baumeister	Meistermann	Beaudin	Schneider
Beckmann	Mettel	Bissière	Séraphine
Blumenhof	Modersohn-Becker	Bombaïs	Singier
Camaro	Muche	Braque	Souloges
Compendonk	Müller	Chagall	Tal-Coat
Dix	Münter	Delbony	Vasarely
Fassbender	Nizy	Detain	Vieira da Silva
Feininger	Nasz	Despiou	Villon
de Fiori	Nolde	Duchamp-Villon	Vivin
Fuhr	Pechstein	Dufy	Vlaminck
Gilles	Purrmann	Ernst	Wals
Grieshaber	Ritschl	Gonzalez	
Hartung, Karl	Roeder	Gris	
Heckel	Rohifs	Hartung, Hans	
Heiliger	Scharff	Herbin	
Heidt	Schlemmer	Kupka	
Hofer	Schmidt-Rottluff	Laurens	
Jawlensky	Schwitters	Léger	
Kandinsky	Stadler	Maillol	
Kasper	Trier	Manessier	
Kirchner	Trökes	Masson	
Klee	Uhlmann	Matise	
Kokoschka	Vordemberge-Gildewart	Miró	
Lehmann	Werner	Mortensen	
Lehmbruck	Wimmer	Pevsner	
Macke	Winter	Picasso	
Marc	Wolff	Pignon	

Italien	Holland	England	U. S. A.
Afro	van Doesburg	Armitage	Albers
Balla	Mondrian	Butler	Calder
Biralli		Chadwick	Roesch
Boccioni		Hepworth	
Campigli		Moore	
Capogrossi		Nicolson	
Carrà	Schweiz	Scott	
Cosarati		Sutherland	
Cossinari			
de Chirico	Auberjonaïs		
Corpora	Bill		
Crippa	Clarner		
Loderer	Meyer-Amden		
Magnelli	Taeuber-Arp		
Marini	Wiemken		
Mirka			
Modigliani			
Morandi			
Moreni			
Marloti			
Music			
de Pisis			
Santomaso			
Scipione			
Severini			
Sironi			
Vedova			
Viani			

Die einzelnen Länder sind mit den in der vorstehenden Übersicht aufgeführten Künstlern beteiligt. Durch die politische Emigration aus Rußland und Deutschland ist die nationale Zugehörigkeit bei einer Reihe von Künstlern unsicher geworden; sie wurden je nach dem Grad ihrer Wirkung ihren Heimat- bzw. Gastländern zugeordnet.

Figure 1: Pages 26 and 27 from the documenta catalogue (1955, Prestel Verlag, Munich, reprint 1995) with list of artists dealing with "national belonging".

other artists who were no longer living and working in Germany at the time were categorized mainly as belonging to the French and US American presence at the exhibition. A wide variety of German artists were thus forcefully put back on the map of the international artistic landscape. Both in their representing the vast majority of artists and in their dominance in migrant communities abroad,<sup>34</sup> this disproportionate German presence was not, as mentioned earlier, seen as a problem, while criticism was expressed in the press regarding the exaggerated importance attached to the Italian contribution to the exhibition.<sup>35</sup> The naming and not naming of nationalities in favor of highlighting mainly the German contribution is further accentuated in a section of the catalog dedicated to short biographies of the participating artists (Fig. 2). This second list is not ordered by nationality, but alphabetically, and provides their full names, date

and place of birth and death, as well as some art-historically relevant additional data. This gives a far more nuanced idea of the artists' personal trajectories. Apart from the politically motivated change in the "national belonging" of German and Russian-born artists (to whom the note in the margins of the list in Fig. 1 draws attention), there is reason to question the "belonging" of many more artists: the silence on the nationality of Spanish artists Julio Gonzales, Pablo Picasso, Juan Gris and Joan Miró, who in 1955 were refugees to Paris from the continuing fascist dictatorship in Spain is glaring in the setting in a post-fascist Germany.<sup>36</sup> Artists from the European periphery, however, like the Danish artist Richard Mortensen and the Portuguese artist Marie Hélène Vieira da Silva fell off the grid of national representation and were subsumed under the label of more powerful nations, in this case France.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>34</sup> "Ein deutsches Ausstellungswunder und die deutsche Kunst." Manfred Schneckenburger, *Aushäusig: Kunst für öffentliche Räume*, Statement-Reihe 7 (Regensburg: Lindinger & Schmid, 1994), 222-239.

<sup>35</sup> Wollenhaupt-Schmidt, *Documenta 1955*, 103.

<sup>36</sup> The absence/underrepresentation specifically of Spanish artists was noted by the press and ameliorated for *documenta 2* (1959) as mentioned in Wollenhaupt-Schmidt,

*Documenta 1955*, 103. However, as is typical for the time the argument remained strictly art-historical and did not touch upon politics in the least.

<sup>37</sup> Grasskamp ("Becoming Global," 97-98) analyzes the same material, calling it "surreal." However, he comes to the same conclusion as Wollenhaupt-Schmidt (*documenta 1955*, 103). They both assert that the disproportionate German representation and the lack of internationality on the ground were largely due to



<p><b>CAPOGROSSI, Giuseppe</b></p> <p>98 <i>Superficie Nr. 3</i>, Amphitheater, 1951. Öl, 170x96 cm Galleria d'Arte del Naviglio, Mailand</p> <p>99 <i>Superficie Nr. 114</i>, 1955. Öl, 130x56 cm Galleria d'Arte del Naviglio, Mailand</p> <p>100 <i>Superficie Nr. 115</i>, 1955. Öl, 195x130 cm Galleria d'Arte del Naviglio, Mailand</p> <p><b>CARRA, Carlo</b></p> <p>Geb. 11. 2. 1881 in Quargenta (Piemont). 1900 Reise nach Paris und London. 1909 Treffen mit Marinetti und Boccioni. 1917 Zusammenreffen mit de Chirico, »Pittura Metafisica«, seit 1919 Archaischer Realismus. Lehrer an der Akademie in Mailand.</p> <p>101 <i>Die rittende Kutsche</i>, 1911. Öl, 52x67 cm Herbert M. Rothschild, Kitchawan, N.Y.</p> <p>102 <i>Das Begräbnis des Anarchisten Galli</i>, 1911. Öl, 199x299 cm</p> <p>103 <i>The Museum of Modern Art</i>, New York Lillie F. Bliss Stiftung</p> <p>103 <i>Die Galleria von Mailand</i>, 1912. Öl, 51x91 cm Gianni Mattioli, Mailand</p> <p>104 <i>Die Straßenbahn</i>, 1911/12. Öl Frau Teresa Ventura, Florenz</p> <p>105 <i>Das verzauberte Zimmer</i>, 1917. Öl, 153x65 cm Dott. Emilio Jesi, Mailand</p> <p>105 <i>Oval der Erscheinungen</i>, 1918. Öl, 58x90 cm Dott. Riccardo Jucker, Mailand (Tafel 62)</p> <p>107 <i>Die Tochter des Westens</i>, 1919. Öl, 70x90 cm Commendatore Carlo Frua de Angeli, Mailand</p> <p>108 <i>Die Geliebte des Ingenieurs</i>, 1921. Öl, 40x55 cm Gianni Mattioli, Mailand</p> <p>109 <i>Margen am Meer</i>, 1928. Öl, 64x54 cm Gianni Mattioli, Mailand</p> <p>110 <i>Der Bootmann</i>, 1936. Öl, 105x85 cm Frau Amelia Peccorelli-Zemler, Mailand (Tafel 64)</p>	<p>111 <i>Der Sommer</i>, o. J. Museo Civico, Mailand</p> <p>112 <i>Der letzte Bodende</i>, 1938. Öl, 105x82 cm Galleria d'Arte del Naviglio, Mailand</p> <p>113 <i>Frauen am Meer</i>, 1954. Öl, 40x75 cm Im Besitz des Künstlers</p> <p>114 <i>San Lorenzo al Mare</i>, 1954. Öl, 70x90 cm Im Besitz des Künstlers</p> <p><b>CASORATI, Felice</b></p> <p>Geb. 4. 12. 1886 in Novara. Zuerst Studium der Rechts, dann Besuch der Akademien in Padua, Neapel, Verona. Seit 1919 in Turin, als Lehrer an der dortigen Akademie.</p> <p>115 <i>Schießbude</i>, 1918. Tempera, 120x130 cm Im Besitz des Künstlers</p> <p>116 <i>Anno-Maria de Lisi</i>, 1919. Tempera, 140x143 cm Im Besitz des Künstlers (Tafel 66)</p> <p>117 <i>Eier auf dem Tisch</i>, 1955. Öl, 50x60 cm Im Besitz des Künstlers</p> <p><b>CASSINARI, Bruno</b></p> <p>Geb. 29. 9. 1912 in Piacenza. Studium in Mailand. 1946 Gründungsmitglied der »Fronte Nuovo delle Arti«. Lebt in Mailand.</p> <p>118 <i>Die Mutter</i>, 1952. Öl, 174x123,5 cm Emilio Jesi, Mailand (Tafel 72)</p> <p>119 <i>Fest im Hafen</i>, 1954/55. Öl, 97x130 cm Im Besitz des Künstlers</p> <p>120 <i>Figur in Rot</i>, 1955. Öl, 37x110 cm Emilio Jesi, Mailand</p> <p><b>CHADWICK, Lynn</b></p> <p>Geb. 1914 in London, lebt in Gloucestershire.</p> <p>121 <i>Drei stehende Figuren</i>, 1955. Eisen, H 52 cm Im Besitz des Künstlers</p> <p>122 <i>Encounter</i>, 1955. Eisen, H 68,5 cm (Tafel 100) Im Besitz des Künstlers</p>	<p><b>CHAGALL, Marc</b></p> <p>Geb. 7. 7. 1889 in Witebsk. 1907 auf der Akademie in Petersburg. 1910-14 Paris. 1914 Ausstellung in Berlin. 1917 Gründung einer Kunstschule in Witebsk. 1922 Berlin, 1923 Paris, 1941 Emigration nach U.S.A. 1947 Rückkehr nach Paris. Lebt in Vence.</p> <p>123 <i>Der Tote</i>, 1908. Öl, 69x87 cm Privatbesitz</p> <p>124 <i>Sabbath</i>, 1909. Öl, 90x95 cm Wallraf Richartz-Museum, Köln, Sammlg. Houbrich</p> <p>125 <i>An meine Verlobte</i>, 1911. Öl, 194x112 cm Roland A. Penrose, London</p> <p>126 <i>Der heilige Droschkenkücher</i>, 1911. Öl, 148x118 cm Frau Mildred Cross-Lange, Krefeld</p> <p>127 <i>Rabbiener</i>, 1912. Öl, 122x73 cm Frau Kreh-Lange, Krefeld</p> <p>128 <i>Der Engelsturz</i>, 1923/33/47. Öl, 148x166 cm Privatbesitz</p> <p>129 <i>In der Dämmerung</i>, 1928-43. Öl, 100x73 cm Privatbesitz Paris</p> <p>130 <i>Die Dächer</i>, 1952/54. Öl, 240x210 cm Privatbesitz (Tafel 38)</p> <p>131 <i>Sonntag</i>, 1953/54. Öl, 173x149 cm Privatbesitz Paris</p> <p><b>DE CHIRICO, Giorgio</b></p> <p>Geb. 10. 7. 1888 in Volo (Griechenland). Zuerst Ingenieurstudium, dann Medizinstudien in Athen und München. 1911-15 Paris. 1917 mit Carrà in Ferrara. 1924 Übersiedlung nach Paris, Zusammenarbeit mit den Surrealisten. 1935-38 Paris. Lebt in Rom.</p> <p>132 <i>Wohnen eines Dichters</i>, 1913. Öl, 69,5x86,3 cm The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Lillie F. Bliss Stiftung</p> <p>133 <i>Jüdischer Engel I</i>, 1915. Öl Roland A. Penrose, London</p>	<p>134 <i>Jüdischer Engel II</i>, 1916. Öl Roland A. Penrose, London</p> <p>135 <i>Turiner Melancholie</i>, 1915. Öl, 33x55 cm Commendatore Carlo Frua de Angeli, Mailand</p> <p>136 <i>Zwei Masken</i>, 1916. Öl, 146x55 cm Dott. Emilio Jesi, Mailand</p> <p>137 <i>Zwei Masken</i>, 1917. Öl, 35x54 cm Dott. Riccardo Jucker, Mailand</p> <p>138 <i>Metaphysisches Interieur mit großem Fabrikbild</i>, 1917. Öl, 74x96 cm Commendatore Carlo Frua de Angeli, Mailand (Tafel 61)</p> <p><b>CORPORA, Antonio</b></p> <p>Geb. 15. 8. 1909 in Tunis. Studium an dortiger Akademie. 1930-37 Aufenthalt in Paris. Seit 1939 in Rom.</p> <p>139 <i>Offenes Meer</i>, 1952. Öl, 130x99 cm Achille Cavellini, Brescia</p> <p>140 <i>Mittelmeerlandschaft</i>, 1953. Öl, 114x136 cm Achille Cavellini, Brescia (Tafel 79)</p> <p>141 <i>Gelbe Lagune</i>, 1955. Öl, 130x96 cm Im Besitz des Künstlers</p> <p><b>CRIPPA, Roberto</b></p> <p>Geb. 1921 in Mailand. Studium an der Akademie Brera Mailand, u. a. bei Carrà.</p> <p>142 <i>Ngada</i>, 1954. Öl, 70x80 cm Im Besitz des Künstlers</p> <p>143 <i>Souvenir Igorrotes</i>, 1954. Öl, 200x200 cm Im Besitz des Künstlers (Tafel 81)</p> <p>144 <i>Terra di Anheim</i>, 1955. Öl, 128x180 cm Im Besitz des Künstlers</p>
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Figure 2: Pages 38 and 39 from the *documenta* catalogue (1955, Prestel Verlag, Munich, reprint 1995) with artist names and short biographies in alphabetical order (CAPOGROSSI-CRIPPA).

In summary, the organizers focused on putting Germany back on the map of the international artistic scene. As we have seen, they attempted to minimize ambiguity in the national identities of artists and ascribed nationalities around centers. In terms of number, the two major points of reference were France and Italy; the only other countries included were either former occupational forces (England and the United States) or immediate neighbors (Netherlands and Switzerland). Other international artists, who were not central to this conception of Europe, were marginalized by mentioning them only with regard to the urban center they had migrated to (in most cases France/Paris). The German position was initially enhanced through a massive participation of German artists, which was then further elevated in many subtle ways, from the exhibition's scenography to the subjugation of artists to national stereotypes in the catalog. Along the way,

any kind of cultural specificity that could not be immediately connected to German interests was effaced. The artist database assembled since the late 1980s by the *documenta* archive helps connect the participants of the first *documenta* to an astounding total of 38 nations, rather than the seven mentioned by the organizers in their catalog.<sup>38</sup> The internationalist discourse of the first *documenta* exhibition, thus, paradoxically admitted a greater degree of diversity than it officially presented, as has been shown above with regard to the French contribution. However, in light of Gayatary Spivak's provocative question of whether or not the Other can speak, the early *documenta* exhibitions give a clear answer that was not uncommon at the time: No, not even remotely. In this exhibition, where even immediate neighbors and political allies were marginalized to the extreme, the cultural, non-occidental "Other" was not represented at all.<sup>39</sup>

organizational/logistic reasons which is plausible and can be substantiated with much material from the *documenta* archives but is not the focus here.

<sup>38</sup> The database has been assembled since 1987 (interview with the academic staff of the *documenta* archive, June 2018) and is preserved in its original form in: Florian Matzner, *Bildarchiv Foto Marburg and Documenta Archiv, Künstlerlexikon mit Registern zur Documenta 1-8* (Kassel: Weber & Weidemeyer, 1987). An expanded

format was devised in parallel for the artists participating in *documenta 9* in 1992: Karin Stengel, Jan Hoet and Documenta, *Künstlerindex zur Documenta IX* (Ostfildern: Cantz, 1995), Lebensdaten, Künstler- und Galerieadressen, Werkbibliographien, Themenregister, Literaturverzeichnisse.

<sup>39</sup> On the contrary, the first *documenta* presented objects mediated through photographs, that had inspired (and continued to inspire) primitivist and orientalist

## Universalism: How it worked and how to wriggle a biography out of its grip

The reason why documenta could become known as a world-art exhibition, regardless of its efforts to assert German superiority, was that the post-war-era art world of the 1950s was by no means “global”, but rather dominated by the confrontation between the so called Eastern and Western bloc, both vying for global hegemony. In artistic terms, the confrontation between the blocs found its expression in wildly different approaches to figuration: Eastern-bloc socialist realism claimed that it was content, and not form, that had made fascist art fascist. In the Western bloc, contextual abstraction demonstrated a conscious discontinuation of the fascist re-academization of painting.<sup>40</sup> Abstract art reigned supreme in the Western art-world and was proclaimed to be of “universal” applicability (much like universal human rights and other enlightenment discourses).

Especially in Germany, abstraction became the mode of choice to demonstrate an unflinching alliance with the Western power-bloc: the absence of content matter, so it was perceived, demonstrated the freedom of art not to bother with politics; after the instrumentalization of art as propaganda by the fascist regime, this position seemed “natural” to many. And yet, today, in hindsight, this inclination is highly political in its reduction of the complexity of world-wide developments in the arts and societies to a question of pledging allegiance to one of the two blocs, while in 1955, the year of the first documenta the Bandung conference, the first substantial step towards the formation of the Non-Aligned Movement of former and current colonies of the

Western (European) powers took place.<sup>41</sup> Not only was abstract expressionism championed by the CIA as a propaganda tool in the Cold War throughout the 1950s;<sup>42</sup> it also served to marginalize voices in German post-war debates who cautioned that abandoning content matter would prevent a true addressing of Germany’s NS trauma or who were not willing to abandon figuration, (whether for aesthetic preferences or political inclination).<sup>43</sup> The alignment of Western Germany with the US came at the cost of a powerful myth construction, that of a merciless and undifferentiated persecution of art and artists from the Modern tradition during the NS-regime, a myth that aided the reintegration of Nazi partisans and collaborators on a large scale.<sup>44</sup> The organizers of the first documenta exhibitions belonged to the strongest proponents of abstraction in Germany, so much so, that documenta has repeatedly been suspected of CIA sponsorship.<sup>45</sup> The selection of artists was determined by this cultural and political background and the above quoted comparison between the artistic expressions of different European nations, proclaimed by Werner Haftmann as the aim of the exhibition, could only be made on these grounds.

The artists’ register of all exhibitions, published by the documenta archive and the artistic director of documenta 9 in 1992, revealed not only many more nationalities among participants in the first documenta than what had been acknowledged by the organizers, it also shows that at least one of the participating artists came from a colony. Antonio Corpora, born in Tunisia to Italian parents, was labeled by the organizers of the first documenta as Italian (cf. Fig. 1). While most publications on him stress his *italianità*, his colonial background played

artworks by European artists. Walter Grasskamp, *André Malraux und das imaginäre Museum: Die Weltkunst im Salon* (München: Beck, 2014). Specifically: “Das imaginäre Museum der documenta I,” 134-138.

For a critical evaluation of the legacy of primitivism in German artistic discourses through the 1980s, see Kea Wienand, *Nach dem Primitivismus? Künstlerische Verhandlungen kultureller Differenz in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, 1960 - 1990*; eine postkoloniale Relektüre 21 (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2015).

<sup>40</sup> Clea Catharina Laade, *Die Ausstellung “Das Menschenbild in unserer Zeit” und das erste “Darmstädter Gespräch”* (Berlin: Logos Verlag Berlin GmbH, 2016).

<sup>41</sup> Natasa Miskovic, Harald Fischer-Tine and Nada Boskowska, eds., *The Non-Aligned Movement and the Cold War: Delhi - Bandung - Belgrade*, 1st edition (London: Routledge, 2017).

<sup>42</sup> David Craven, ‘A Legacy for the Latin American Left: Abstract Expressionism as Anti-Imperialist Art,’ in *Abstract Expressionism: The International Context*, ed. Joan M. Marter (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 67-81.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Interjection Theodor W. Adorno in the concluding round to a three-day symposium that was a seminal focal point of post war discussions about figuration in: Hans Gerhard Evers, *Das Menschenbild in unserer Zeit* [Ausstellung: Veranstalter von der Neuen Darmstädter Sezession, 15. Juli - 3. September. 1950] 1 (Darmstadt: Neue Darmstädter Verlagsanstalt, 1950), 215-216.

<sup>44</sup> Bernhard Fulda, Christian Ring and Aya Soika, eds., *Emil Nolde: Eine deutsche Legende der Künstler im Nationalsozialismus Essay- und Bildband* (München, London, New York: Prestel, 2019).

<sup>45</sup> Dirk Schwarze, “Im Zeichen der Amerikaner: Ein Text von Dirk Schwarze über die documenta 2,” <https://www.documenta-archiv.de/de/documenta/92/2/>; Heiner Mühlmann, *Der Kunstkrieg: Das Haus der Deutschen Kunst, die documenta und die CIA-MoMA-Connection* (Paderborn: Fink, 2014); Frances Stonor Saunders, *Who Paid the Piper? The CIA and the cultural Cold War* (London: Granta Books, 2000).

an important role in the reception of his oeuvre, both before and after the abstract paradigm peaked during the Cold War. As diversity and globality became increasingly important topics, both the documenta 9 registry as well as, recently, the Centre Pompidou listed Corpora's nationality as Tunisian.<sup>46</sup> Many questions remain open for future research regarding the scope and direction of cultural transfers in Antonio Corpora's life and oeuvre, yet it is worthwhile to look at what pieces of information were provided by the first documenta about this artist born and raised in a colonial setting. In Corpora's biography, one can clearly see the constructed character of a concept of nationality that shifts with the life choices of individuals and the tides of political and societal discourse.<sup>47</sup>

Today Corpora is mainly known for the abstract canvases he painted from the 1950s onward, which were lauded up to and through the 1980s, mainly for their interesting use of color.<sup>48</sup> Only faint traces of his Tunisian-Italian upbringing remained through the titles he gave to his paintings and later water-colors that frequently invoke memories of places far away, both in distance and imagination, like the repeated invocation of Saladin's tent or other places pertaining to the orientalist imaginary. Following the traces of his early oeuvre as an artist and writer illustrates how his shift towards the abstract paradigm first muted and later uncritically romanticized his cultural background. Ultimately, Corpora's biography is a clear example of how diverse backgrounds were pressed into the formative paradigm of abstraction as a world-language which could, for a long time, be presented as being a mainstream, central, universal artistic position undisturbed by politics, historical developments and personal ethical decisions.

Antonio Corpora (1909-2004) was born to and raised in an Italian family living in Tunisia under French colonial rule, where the cultural life in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was dominated by French and Italian actors. As the power of the High Porte in Istanbul slowly ceded throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the governments of France and Italy became locked in a continuous struggle to dominate this Ottoman province. In 1878, the Italian government had been trumped at the Congress of Berlin where it was decided that Tunisia would belong to the French sphere of interest. Though Italy had leveled objections, as a latecomer to the "Scramble for Africa" it found itself in a weaker position than France.<sup>49</sup> After the Treaty of Bardo in 1881 had made Tunisia a protectorate, the French authorities created a pretext to establish direct rule by force, staging a number of Bedouin raids which they claimed would destabilize the border to their colony Algeria.<sup>50</sup> From 1883 to 1956, the fate of the Arab population (that was far larger than any of the European populations) lay in the hands of European power-politics. The Italian community to which Corpora belonged had established itself in the Ottoman empire's province of Tunisia starting from the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. By the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Italian minority in Tunisia, in fact, was far more ancient, numerous and wide spread than the colonial French population.<sup>51</sup> When Benito Mussolini took over power in the Kingdom of Italy in 1922, he began to consistently claim Tunisia's belonging to Italy. The so-called "Tunisian question" became both one of Mussolini's favorite battlegrounds in his propagandist efforts to make Italy the dominant power in the Mediterranean as well as a surface for the projection of colonialist expansion in the years leading up to WWII.<sup>52</sup> Italian settlers in Tunisia

<sup>46</sup> Centre Pompidou, "Antonio Corpora,"

<https://www.centrepompidou.fr/cpv/ressource/cg49zB/rhqARc7>.

<sup>47</sup> Benedict Robert Anderson, *Imagined Communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983). In his book Anderson dissects national narratives in the face of colonial settings, emphasizing the important role those colonies played for their motherlands in terms of inventiveness.

<sup>48</sup> Unfortunately, the gallery holding the archive of Antonio Corpora as well as the rights to reproducing his pictures did not respond to my attempts to establish a contact and neither did his heirs. Under current copyright laws it is thus not possible to reproduce any of the installation shots of his works from the documenta archive nor the catalogs, or any reproductions of his work that are not stock photos. See for a description of the archive's holdings: Assunta Porciani and La Quadriennale di Roma, *Guida agli archivi d'arte del '900 a Roma e nel Lazio* (Roma: Palombi, 2009), 83.

<sup>49</sup> Steven Press, *Rogue Empires: Contracts and Conmen in Europe's Scramble for Africa* (Harvard University Press, 2017), 197 ff.

<sup>50</sup> Habib Boularès, *Histoire de la Tunisie : Les grandes dates de la préhistoire à la révolution*, Nouvelle édition (Tunis: Cérès, 2011), 493-511. And Boularès, *Histoire*, 674-682.

<sup>51</sup> Juliette Bessis, *La Méditerranée fasciste: l'Italie mussolinienne et la Tunisie*, Collection Histoire africaine (Paris: Editions Karthala, 1981), 11.

<sup>52</sup> All the while he was leading a ferocious war against the Arab population in Libya. Ali Abdullatif Ahmida, *Forgotten Voices: Power and Agency in Colonial and Postcolonial Libya* (New York, London: Routledge, 2005): CH 4 "Italian Fascism – Benign? : Collective Amnesia Concerning Colonial Libya," 35-54.

were mainly poor peasants from Sicily (like Corpora's ancestors) who worked on farms and in factories, but also included merchants from traditional trade-centers, as well as, mainly in the 20th century, people who fled the over-populated capital, Rome.<sup>53</sup> Corpora attended the Italian school in Tunis and was apparently encouraged to take up art, first as a hobby, before getting professional training as an artist. Though his background might have been modest, this did not prevent him from pursuing a career in the arts and from extensive travel throughout the 1930s, even though the subjects of his early pictures indicate that he was dependent on selling his art in order to make a living. The rising tensions between the French authorities in Tunisia and an older Italian population that was increasingly agitated by fascist politics formed the background in which Corpora developed his work.<sup>54</sup>

Browsing auction results or the catalogue raisonné of Corpora's works (published after his death by his gallerist between 2004 and 2009) provide an overview of the dazzling breadth of Corpora's artistic oeuvre, from his very first steps as a self-taught painter of ships in La Goulette harbor in Tunis in 1926<sup>55</sup> through his studies at the academy in Tunis with the French academic painter Armand Vergeaud between 1928 and 1930, until his settling in Rome in 1945.<sup>56</sup> Corpora's early career with its experiments in impressionist and cubist forms has received some scholarly attention from the editor of his catalogue raisonné, Floriano de Santi, in

exhibitions held in 2004 and 2005. While Corpora's frequent stays in Italy and France gave him an overview of the art developments in European centers up to the end of WWII, he exhibited more in Tunis than everywhere else and there were as many texts by or about him published in Tunis as there were in Italy and France.<sup>57</sup> Traversing between a colony and motherlands, Corpora experimented widely with all the different styles of painting he encountered and acted as a mediator/translator of ideas between different places. As early as the 1930s, long before he would experiment extensively with the stylistic visual vocabulary he inherited from avant-garde artists, he had interviewed and published writings about many of them in the Tunisian-Italian newspaper *L'Unione*.<sup>58</sup> Up to the end of WWII, he assembled and sold a prolific oeuvre of mainly academic paintings including Tunisian cityscapes, harbor scenes, boats, flower bouquets and the occasional portrait in different styles varying from academic orientalism, to experiments with impressionism, cubism, and even neo-classicist forms that fit well with the fascist aesthetics of the time.

Corpora's reflections in his allegedly largely autobiographical novel *La Légende de Masino Girgenti* (published in French translation in 1937 by the Éditions de Barbarie and re-published in Italian by the Rome-based publisher Rettangolo d'oro in 1944 under the title *Amazonda*) might help situating his self-positioning with regards to colonial Tunisia and the political situation he grew up in.<sup>59</sup> The

<sup>53</sup> Bessis, *La Méditerranée fasciste*, 13. Notably Mussolini made the same argument with regards to the Mediterranean and especially the "Tunisian question" as his ally Hitler with regards to the annexation of "Eastern territories" when he claimed that the Italians are "a people without space".

<sup>54</sup> A number of photographs and facsimiles of rare materials from this time are preserved in Galerie Günther Franke München, ed., *Antonio Corpora: Die Grenze des Unendlichen* [Antonio Corpora] (Roma: Edizioni Mediterranee, 1973).

Ample examples for his early work can be gleaned from the internet. For example: <http://www.artnet.com/artists/antonio-corpora/velieri-a-la-goulette-U-WqWGuSbZZP1lvhXcFdbA2>  
[http://www.artnet.com/artists/antonio-corpora/paysage-de-tunisie-lz8K-dPSo9p3lwh4n7l7\\_A2](http://www.artnet.com/artists/antonio-corpora/paysage-de-tunisie-lz8K-dPSo9p3lwh4n7l7_A2)  
<http://www.artnet.com/artists/antonio-corpora/femme-assise-%C3%A0-la-terrasse-uCi6Tox1zF37kCCVctq0A2>  
<http://www.artnet.com/artists/antonio-corpora/composition-4mhlIXtj2P99wS8-QCvG2>  
[http://www.artnet.com/artists/antonio-corpora/natura-morta-ivaY59z\\_KrFhOKCOTztcgQ2](http://www.artnet.com/artists/antonio-corpora/natura-morta-ivaY59z_KrFhOKCOTztcgQ2)

<sup>55</sup> Biography in Pier L. Siena and Andreas Hapkemeyer, eds., *Antonio Corpora: Zu den den Dingen im Licht* [March 7. - May 18.1997] (Bolzano: Museion, Museum für Moderne Kunst, 1997), unpaginated.

<sup>56</sup> Carla Schulz-Hoffmann, ed., *Corpora* (Baierbrunn bei München: Wort und Bild, 1981). Biography, 13 ff.

<sup>57</sup> Nine in total, just as nine abroad, eight of them in Italian newspapers and one in Paris, in *Les Nouvelles littéraires* by Charles Brabant.

At the time, he exhibited with the Association des Elèves du centre d'Art de Tunis (1928/29) in the "Salon Tunisien" at the Institut de Carthage in 1929 and in Tunis with the Association des Elèves de l'École des Beaux-Arts (1930). Augusta Monferini, ed., *Corpora: Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna, Roma* [5 dicembre 1987 - 4 febbraio 1988] (Segrate: Mondadori, 1987), 132/133, as well as the table of writings by Antonio Corpora; Siena and Hapkemeyer, *Antonio Corpora*, unpaginated; also reported in the biography in the catalogue raisonné 2004.

<sup>58</sup> The influential French painter André Lhote (see in this same issue of the *Artl@s Bulletin* the paper by Katrin Nahidi), Kurt Seligmann and Giorgio de Chirico who were both essential for the surrealist movement. Massimo Campigli/Max Ihlenfeld, journalist for the *Corriere della Sera* and painter who was deeply influenced by "archaic" forms he found in the Egyptian wing of the Louvre. Massimo Campigli (Max Ihlenfeld) and Giorgio di Chirico were, just as Antonio Corpora, exhibited at the first and second documenta.

Antonio Aniante: Author, magical realist, novelist and journalist associated with Curzio Malaparte.

Kurt Seligmann (part of the surrealist group since 1934, one of the most prominent proponents at the first surrealist exhibition in 1939, emigration to New York the day after Germany mugged Poland on September 1st, 1939) was one of the controversial omissions at the first documenta.

<sup>59</sup> Antonio Corpora, *Amazonda*, with the assistance of Daniele Occhipinti, and Carlo Belli 1 (Roma: Rettangolo d'oro, 1944) (See introduction, p. 10, for autobiographical claim); Antonio Corpora, *La légende de Masino Girgenti*, with the assistance of Armand Guibert (Tunis: Les amis des Cahiers de barbarie, 1937). Introduction by Armand



historical circumstances and actors involved in publishing and republishing the novel point to a very conscious political stance: at the time, publishing in French was seen as treason by the majority of Tunis' increasingly pro-fascist Italian population.<sup>60</sup> The book's publication by Armand Guibert, a polyglot teacher, poet, translator and editor of the Senegalese poet and politician Léopold Sédar Senghor, situates Corpora within an anti-colonialist, pro-communist milieu that flourished in Tunisia on the colonial margins of the increasingly illiberal European motherlands.<sup>61</sup> Yet, the novel did not fall prey to the censorship of the fascist regime when it was re-published without major alterations in Rome in 1944. Stylistically, Corpora's novel might best be situated within the fascist literary movement of *strapaese*, which romanticized the Italian landscape and life in small communities as the true fascist Italian way of life.<sup>62</sup> In the case of Corpora, it is not the Italian countryside that is idealized, but an unnamed island in the Mediterranean. The book can, in large part, be read as representing an anti-war stance: it begins with a run-down former army officer (Masino Girgenti) suffering from amnesia, who selfishly uses and abuses people throughout the first half of the book. In the first chapter, he is picked up and treated by a former subordinate.<sup>63</sup> After he wins the lottery, in chapter two, Masino aimlessly drifts through the city Madinat Hamra, an orientalist fantasy located on an island called Amazonda, which is owned by an aging American woman. An orgiastic and violent feast at the home of his landlord and benefactor provides a cathartic moment in which he decides to flee the island together with Alba, his landlord's pious wife. They are then stranded on an island where Masino flourishes in his new role as a settler, while Alba craves a different life and abandons him with their

host. Masino assumes the position of "lord of the valley" and, under his leadership, the isolated settlement becomes a thriving city to which refugees from Madinat Hamra start to flock. As an authorial narrator, Corpora repeatedly destabilizes his heroes' actions and thoughts through critical side notes as Masino stumbles through his life making bad decision after bad decision. Paradoxically this ironic distance reaches its greatest intensity in the second half of the book, when Masino, after having fled Madinat Hamra, acts more and more saintly for fear of being unworthy of Alba. The narrator is critical of Masino's increasingly authoritarian leadership and the final decision to go to war with a neighboring settlement in a fight over water. Corpora's narrator clearly sympathizes with the predatory, aimless Masino in the early chapters, yet he does so cautiously, hiding behind a plot that, on the surface, tells a coming of age story about learning to assume responsibility.

Much like in his later paintings, the affectionate descriptions of nature play an important part in Corpora's novel. The island on which the last part of the story is set, is pristine and its progressive destruction through the settlers' activity clearly preoccupies not only Masino Girgenti, but also the narrator. Towards the end of chapter three the return of falcons to the valley announces the demise of the settlement through drought and warfare with the neighboring settler colony. In this, a thoroughly colonial mindset reveals itself: the foreign land, being portrayed as pristine nature devoid of human activity, is presented as a testing ground for a young culture unencumbered by the shortcomings of the old world while, through the older migrants who crave the comforts of the old world, the community's integrity is compromised. At a time in which liberation movements in Libya

Guibert recounts his upbringing as "turbulent" and "in the streets of Tunis" (P. 10), calling Masino and Antonio "brothers in spirit" and "doubles" of each other (P. 9).

<sup>60</sup> Bessis, *La Méditerranée fasciste*.

<sup>61</sup> Alessio Loreti, "Armand Guibert : Une Jeunesse et des liens fraternels entre Tunisie et Italie (1929-1945)." Unpublished paper, uploaded to the author's page on the research network academia.edu (accessed May 27th, 2019).

In 1935, Edmond Humeau remarked on the Éditions de Bavière that they have "nothing in common with the sad vogue for all things Latin heaped on us by an exported fascism. One can see it in the extreme liberty ... where very different forces of origin, expression and sensibility find an equilibrium. Their homeland is not nostalgic, nor desire for sweetness or inheritance. They completely ignore the exaltation of a race or class. They base themselves in a presence and necessity of a

spirit that reflects a country of the heart. Every poet will recognize the inspiration in it. Mediterranean, the first expansion of imprisoned countries." Edmond Humeau and Armand Guibert, "Cahiers de Barbarie," *Esprit* (1932-1939), vol. 3, no. 35/36 (1er Septembre 1935), 810-811.

<sup>62</sup> Manfred L. Weichmann, *Literatur im ersten Jahrzehnt des Faschismus: "Stracittà" und "Strapaese"*, Doctoral thesis at the University of Regensburg 1989 (Weiden: Verlag Schuch, 1991), 4ff. See also: Ch. 4 "Magischer Regionalismus" I: Antonio Aniante. Corpora interviewed Aniante for the Italian newspaper in Tunis.

<sup>63</sup> Ahmida (*Forgotten Voices*, 21) mentions the many refugees from Libya to Tunisia due to the colonial war/genocide that Italy waged against the Arab and Berber populations between 1922 and 1932.



and Algeria were fighting Italian and French colonial forces and entire tracts of land were being burned to the ground with their civilian populations starved to death in camps, neither the author nor his reviewers acknowledge any cultural activity pre-dating the settlers' relocation to the isolated island in the novel. Corpora's book has been repeatedly referenced as testimony to a colonial cultural utopia. To Daniele Occhipinti, in his introduction to the 1944 Italian edition of the novel, the colonial background seems, in retrospect, like a "paradise lost" in which Arabs, Berbers, Jews and European settlers lived together, creating a common Euro-African culture that has been gradually destroyed through "Americanism" and rising nationalism among the European colonial powers.<sup>64</sup> Eventually, when Corpora was at the height of his fame from the 1960s onward, exhibiting all over Europe as well as in the United States, the mention of his colonial heritage would become a nostalgic gesture to evoke a bygone era without in any way alluding to the political or social realities of colonial wars against indigenous people or the power-struggle between fascist and colonial empires in the Mediterranean.<sup>65</sup>

Hardly any information exists on the time between 1939 and 1945. In 1939, Corpora had apparently been appointed professor for stage design in Bologna, but he left the position after only a few months and returned to Tunis, where he lived during the war.<sup>66</sup> In 1945, he was registered as a refugee in Rome, where Corpora settled and started to develop his practice as a painter. In Rome, he was invited by his pre-war acquaintance, the painter

Renato Guttuso, to share a workspace. He also invited Corpora to become a member of the newly founded artist group *Fronte Nuovo delle Arti*. By joining the *Fronte Nuovo*, Corpora again affiliated himself with a group of people who, like his French editor in Tunis, were part of left-leaning progressive circles. The *Fronte Nuovo* was comprised of artists who had been participating in a wave of strikes against the Italian fascist government under Benito Mussolini in 1943, many of whom had successively taken up arms and joined the Italian partisan movement. Thus, Corpora became the only artist affiliated with the *Fronte Nuovo* who had not been in the Italian resistance, at least certainly not in Italy itself. After the Italian Communist Party had left the government in 1947, aligning itself with Soviet politics, the *Fronte Nuovo* slowly dissolved.<sup>67</sup> During this time, Corpora left figuration behind him. In the future, only the choice of colors and titles, horizon lines and abstracted grid-like structures reminiscent of masts and riggings would recall his favorite subjects, harbors and landscapes. This definitive shift in his aesthetics prompted in 1952 the eminent Italian art critic Lionello Venturi to include Corpora when he invited several artists who had previously been members of the *Fronte Nuovo delle Arti* to form a group, with the explicit intention of providing a brand that would help forge connections for an Italian art world that was lagging behind other nations' efforts to join the growing international art market.<sup>68</sup> The *Gruppo degli Otto* existed only for two years and, today, most of its artists are little known. Yet, at the time, the group served well the individual artists' interests, who were invited to

<sup>64</sup> Introduction, 9-18, especially p. 17. On page 18, he even equates the colonial period with a paradise lost: Erich Steingraber, "'Riverberi': oder Poetische Erinnerungen eines Malers," in *Antonio Corpora: Zu den den Dingen im Licht* [March 7. - May 18.1997], ed. Pier L. Siena and Andreas Hapkemeyer (Bolzano: Museion, Museum für Moderne Kunst, 1997).

The introduction and preface to the 1944 edition in Italian by Daniele Occhipinti has largely set the tone of the discussion about this book and had been accepted as a stand-in for actually reading the entire text, as in Erich Steingraber's introduction to the 1997 exhibition in Bolzano "Zu den Dingen im Licht": "Read Corpora's early novels [sic.] and poetry, especially "Amazonia" [sic.], which has far ranging auto-biographical traits (1957) [sic.] or "Alta è la Luce" (1942), both edited in Italian and French, in order to be able to estimate how strongly Corpora had been influenced by this Euro-African culture, in the literary circles of which he already participated as a student at an Italian gymnasium." It appears clear from this quote that Steingraber has not read the novel, neither was it published or republished in 1957.

<sup>65</sup>The colonial past as a paradise lost is evoked several more times. The director of the Bavarian state painting collections, Erich Steingraber, who supported Corpora both personally and institutionally from the 1970s onward, emphasized Corpora's African and Mediterranean heritage especially eagerly: Erich Steingraber, "Antonio Corpora zwischen Natur und Poesie," in *Galerie Günther Franke München, Antonio Corpora,*

9;12: "The memory of the youth in Tunisia, the Italian descent, the encounter with the Ecole de Paris (1930-1937) are the sources from which Corpora's art draws. Grammar and syntax are simultaneously French and Italian. Mediterranean-Italian is the devotion to beauty by means of a humanist apparatus ruled by simple structures, creating blindingly bright light. ... The painter has remained faithful to his pictorial humanism in the sense of true *italianità* and ancient Mediterranean lore to this day." Schulz-Hoffmann, *Corpora*: Preface, 5: "Having grown up as a son of Sicilian parents in Tunis, he develops his unmistakable painting style from the background of this polyglot, Euro-African mix-culture that has to be defined in a supra-national sense as Mediterranean."

<sup>66</sup> Floriano de Santi, "L'astrazione lirica di Corpora," in *Corpora: Catalogo generale ragionato*, ed. Floriano Santi (Roma: Galleria Di Summa, 2004-2009), 9-10.

<sup>67</sup> Juan José Gómez Gutiérrez, *The PCI artists: Antifascism and communism in Italian art, 1944-1951* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015). For the rupture with the PCI see p. 180 ff.

<sup>68</sup> Their first exhibition organized by Lionello Venturi, took place under the name: *Otto pittori italiani*, De Luca Editore, Roma, 1952. It comprised the artists: Afro Basaldella, Renato Bionelli, Antonio Corpora, Mattia Moreni, Ennio Morlotti, Giuseppe Santomaso, Giuseppe Turcato and Emilio Vedova.

participate in a great number of high-profile international exhibitions like the São Paulo Biennial, the biennials in Torino and Venice as well as in the first, second and third editions of documenta in Kassel.<sup>69</sup> Through their connection to the Fronte Nuovo, the members of the Gruppo probably profited both from a flair of opposition to fascism as well as from their conscious break with communist politics in joining the commercially oriented Gruppo degli Otto. Given the specific situation in Germany and its complete alignment with the Western power bloc, as discussed above, both were probably important tokens for the organizers of documenta who were at considerable pains to distance themselves from fascism and communism alike in their quest to show allegiance to the Western bloc. Yet these questions were never discussed explicitly in a climate where abstract art had been declared to be an un-political, purely aesthetic and universal language.

While no detailed accounts of the selection process of artists for the first documenta are available, the organizers were probably familiar with Corpora as a member of the Gruppo degli Otto who had been exhibited in 1953 as part of a touring exhibition at the Kestnergesellschaft in Hanover, directed by Will Grohmann, a member of the documenta organizing committee and board.<sup>70</sup> In February 1955, Werner Haftmann sent a letter to Antonio Corpora, along with a number of other invitations to Italian artists.<sup>71</sup> Just as all available short artist biographies of Corpora from the 1950s onward, the documenta also geared Corpora's life stations to emphasize his deep connection to the art world centers analyzed above and included his name as part of the Italian contribution, as shown in [Fig. 1].

<sup>69</sup> Carla Schulz-Hoffmann, "Antonio Corpora und der 'Fronte Nuovo,'" Anmerkungen zur Abstrakten Malerei in Italien," *Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen* (Baierbrunn bei München, Verlag Wort und Bild 1981), 11 (10-12).

Schulz-Hoffmann remarks that the artists of the Gruppo had only one stylistic commonality, namely, that they had all stylistically and politically departed from the realism preferred by communist ideologues, though none of them saw the gestural abstraction that was becoming dominant in Europe and the U.S. from the 1950's onward as the only logical direction.

Nancy Jachec traces their demise to their involvement with a communist politics, which prevented them being able to fully embrace abstraction and accordingly led to their falling out of sync with mainstream aesthetic developments from the mid-50's onward. The middle ground they were seeking was, however, a pertinent question during the early-50's, on which many of them would later capitalize. Nancy Jachec, "The Gruppo degli Otto: Communisms in 1950s Italian Painting," *Third Text* 20, no. 2 (2006), 134.

In the more detailed, various short biographies dedicated to Corpora in the catalog to documenta, his biography is sketched as follows: born in Tunis in 1909, sojourned in Paris from 1930 through 1937, settled in Rome in 1939 (Fig. 2). As we have seen, these biographical cornerstones are not entirely wrong, yet imprecise. With his shift to non-figurative painting, the concrete historical and political location of Corpora's biography has also largely been overlooked and, consequently, the question of how his colonial background might have influenced his oeuvre. Still, in 1947, Corpora's Tunisian roots mattered a lot to his peers. In the first catalog of the Fronte Nuovo delle Arti, his host and friend Renato Guttuso wrote; "He, the African, is the most European among us" and went on to assert that one could not overstate the cosmopolitan ease that the well-traveled Corpora brought with him to Rome at the time.<sup>72</sup> Yet neither Corpora's Tunisian, nor his Italian, French or German environments were the post-racial, post-religious utopias that have been evoked with regards to his work.<sup>73</sup> They were part of the (post)colony, they had been born and raised into belief systems steeped in racism, classism and misogyny. No one to this date has noted the stereotypes that reduce people to race and nationality which are perpetuated by Corpora's novel: "The negro servant", the "German woman", "the Arab" who populate the world of Masino Girgenti. And no outcry ever followed the publication of a poem by Corpora in 1973, when he wrote in a catalog:

La peinture comme l'amour... l'amour est une femme  
belle toute nue, une femme nue est en dehors du

<sup>70</sup> Kestner-Gesellschaft, *8 italienische Maler: Afro, Birolli, Corpora, Moreni, Morlotti, Santomaso, Turcato, Vedova* (Hanover, 1953), Exhibition from April 19.- May 17. 1953.

<sup>71</sup> Personal communication with Evelyn Haftmann, the widow of Werner Haftmann (January 28th, 2019). Having spent time in Italy as a post-graduate researcher at the German art historical institute in Florence in (1936-39), just months before he had met Arnold Bode, who according to legend had traced him down in a Venetian trattoria, Haftmann seemed predestined to preside over the selection of Italian artists.

<sup>72</sup> "Egli, africano, è tra noi forse il più europeo." Quoted from the essay by Augusta Monferini in: Monferini, *Corpora*, 10.

<sup>73</sup> Erich Steingraber, "Riverberi" oder poetische Erinnerungen eines Malers, in Siena and Hapkemeyer, *Antonio Corpora*, unpaginated: "Born and raised as a descendant of Sicilian ancestors in Tunis he is thus rooted in this Euro-African mix-culture of which one can speak since about 120 years in the North African countries of the Maghreb, Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco. The multi-cultural climate was characterized equally [!] by Berbers, Arabs, Jews, Italians, French, Spanish and Maltese people." (He forgets Libya with its concentration camps by Italians for Berber and Arab populations...).

temps, échappe à notre connaissance, elle n'a pas de conscience humaine. (...)

Et voilà cette toile blanche mystère hostile elle se défend, elle ne veut pas être violée. Mais elle se donne, comme une femme douteuse et fausse, elle se donne.<sup>74</sup>

On the contrary, some of the most powerful art world dignitaries from Germany, France and Italy lauded the artist and author in their texts accompanying the publication, affectionately calling Corpora “naturally sensuous” due to his Mediterranean roots.<sup>75</sup> In the same publication, the eminent French critic Pierre Restany, a supporter of the Letterist and Situationist artistic movements of the 1960s and 1970s, remarked that their shared Mediterranean origins were the catalyst that accelerated their friendship.<sup>76</sup> Despite Corpora's association with progressive de-colonial circles in Tunis and Paris, both in his work and its reception the reality of the colonial order and Corpora's perspective has been over-looked at every stage; be it in his writing or in painting, be it by his editors in Tunis and Rome, by his Italian peers of the post war period or in the reception of his later works from the 1960s onward. Be it politely or inadvertently, this gap can only be grasped within its time and cultural context that noted neither the absence nor abuse of non-white, non-male subjects negatively.

## Conclusion

The persistent silence on issues of colonization and decolonization has meant ten editions of documenta in which voices of artists from colonized populations were relegated to the margins of discourse on art and globality, while the voices of the colonizers became subsumed under their motherlands' nationalities. Yet, by looking

into these scattered biographies and the networks that sustained their careers, stories come into view that help make visible the semi-conscious erasures and rewritings of biographies done in the name of universalism. While Antonio Corpora's colonial background has consistently been written out of his biography, in this article, I have explored why his Tunisian origins mattered. Tunisia was to him a refuge and an inspiration for his work as well as an intellectual space that he set out to alter and that offered him a basis for the first 15 years of his career. Through Corpora's biography and the blank spaces in it, we have been able to glimpse how it was molded for a Western universalist discourse. In addition, a broader picture emanated that speaks of silences, romanticization and non-engagement with the larger problems and injustices that accompany a skewed nationalistic lens.<sup>77</sup> The persistence of such self-told myths and their perpetuation by contemporaries come into view, adopted by and large with their gaps and silences by following generations of researcher and curators alike. While the cohesive of documenta's internationality, which the exhibition's early organizers wanted to promote, was much more diverse and porous than what they had intended to present, the rereading attempted in this article also reveals a deep connection between colonial and fascist legacies – the unpacking of which has only begun.

<sup>74</sup> *Die Grenze des Unendlichen* (1973), 74, 78. “Painting as love... love is a beautiful naked woman, a naked woman is out of time, escaping the horizon of our knowledge, she has no human consciousness. (...) See, this hostile, mysterious blank canvas defends herself, she doesn't want to be violated. But she gives herself, like a false and doubtful woman, she gives in.”

<sup>75</sup> “La vision d'Antonio Corpora est naturellement sensuelle: elle est le fruit sensible de ses origines méditerranéennes, de sa jeunesse tunisienne, de sa formation culturelle italo-française.” Pierre Restany, “La couleur et le destin,” in Galerie Günther Franke München, *Antonio Corpora*, 45.

<sup>76</sup> “C'est à cette époque que j'ai connu Antonio et nos origines méditerranéennes communes ont été le catalyseur d'accélération de notre amitié.” Restany, “La couleur et le destin,” 45-46.

<sup>77</sup> An interesting case to examine would be Giorgio de Chirico, who was born in Greece to Italian parents and went on to study arts in Munich. While Greece was not officially a colony of any European power, the Monarchy established after the wars for independence from the Ottoman state was Bavarian first and later the ruling house was of Oldenburg in Northern-Germany. I trace the legacy of thinly veiled colonial politics from the 19th through the 20th century in the context of the Greek art-scene in a forthcoming article on the self-representation of the Greek National Museum of contemporary Art EMST at documenta 14. (In: *Space Oddities: Die Homerische Irrfahrt in Bildkünsten und Populärkultur vom ausgehenden 18. Jahrhundert bis in die Gegenwart*. University of Gießen, April 04.-06.2019. To be published with transcript, Bielefeld 2020).