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The New York Times

A Nazi Design Show Draws Criticism. Its Curator's Comments Didn't Help.

The exhibition's detractors say that a man who derided museums as too feminine and politically correct may not be taking the right approach to overseeing the sensitive items on display.



“League of German Girls Dancing During the Reich’s Party Conference,” a photograph by Hugo Jaeger, featured in “Design of the Third Reich” at the Design Museum Den Bosch. Credit Credit Hugo Jaeger/The LIFE Picture Collection, via Getty Images

By Nina Siegal

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DEN BOSCH, the Netherlands — What do the Volkswagen Beetle, Germany’s autobahn highway system and oak trees all have in common? They were all used as symbols of German strength and ingenuity, part of Adolf Hitler’s propaganda machine intended to market Nazi ideology.

A new exhibition at the Design Museum Den Bosch in the Netherlands, “[Design of the Third Reich](#),” which runs through Jan. 19, 2020, presents those and other elements of National Socialist-era German design as examples of a moment in 20th-century history that the museum’s officials say we would do well to grasp more fully.

“All our art history books run from 1890, when modernism started, to 1939 or 1940, and begin again in 1945,” Timo de Rijk, the museum’s director and the curator of the exhibition, said in an interview last week. “We’ve skipped something: A large part of what existed there, which is crucial to understanding what happened afterward — and also what came before — is not understood. I want to change that.”

Mr. de Rijk may be an unlikely agent for that kind of change, since he has recently cast himself as more of an instigator than an educator. In [an interview with De Volkskrant, a Dutch newspaper, last year](#), he positioned himself as a renegade, describing the Dutch museum world as “too feminine” and “destructively politically correct.”



A 1932 election poster for the Nazi party reading, “That’s enough! Vote for Hitler.”CreditMünchener Stadtmuseum, Sammlung Reklamekunst

Mounting an exhibition containing swastikas, propaganda posters, photographs of Nazi rallies and clips of Leni Riefenstahl films, along with such jaw-dropping items as a hand-drawn outline of the Warsaw ghetto and architectural designs for the Auschwitz gas chambers, was bound to generate controversy. Museum officials made the decision to add extra security cameras and personnel for the duration of the show, and to ban photography inside the exhibition.

Mr. de Rijk said he didn’t want visitors taking selfies with swastikas and posting them on social media, out of context, because he said it would send “the wrong message” about the aims of the show.

The exhibition, which opened on Sept. 8, has already proved extremely popular, with tickets almost entirely sold out for the coming weeks. Opening day was sold to capacity, and protesters came, too.

Ralph Posset, a local artist, laid down a swastika-shaped red carpet in front of the museum in an act of impromptu performance art and invited visitors to wipe their feet on it as they entered. About a dozen members of a Dutch antifascist group held a small demonstration; officials offered them a few free tickets.

Critics have expressed concern that the show lacks proper social context at a time when far-right ideologies are once again on the rise.



A film from the Nazi period at the Design Museum Den Bosch, with explanatory text. The curator said that the presentation of the show made it impossible to take such images out of context. Credit Ben Nienhuis, Design Museum Den Bosch

In the Netherlands, populist politicians such as Geert Wilders, the leader of the Party for Freedom, and Thierry Baudet, the leader of the Forum for Democracy, have gained traction in the political arena, using xenophobic rhetoric to promote nativist values and anti-immigrant policies. Across Europe, nationalist forces have resurged and [anti-Semitic attacks are increasing](#).

Maria Hlavajova, the director of BAK, a contemporary art space in the Dutch city of Utrecht, said, “We tend to think fascism is behind us, but it is a kind of underground stream that emerges in certain circumstances.” A long-term project at BAK, [“Propositions for Non-Fascist Living,”](#) includes art along with training programs and community outreach activities.

“There is a real danger that a beautiful exhibition about the ugliness of fascism might contribute to the normalization of such discourses in the public space, and therefore, the neutralization of those dangers,” Ms. Hlavajova said.

In response, Mr. de Rijk said by email that the show in the Design Museum Den Bosch gave enough explanation to make it impossible to disconnect the imagery from its original, “evil,” context. Radical right-wing movements of today, he

added, “are hardly interested in Nazi aesthetics and symbolism, but they have developed a completely new visual vocabulary for some time. I find that really frightening.”



A poster for the 1936 Berlin Olympics, a propaganda triumph for the Nazi regime that also brought important contributions to graphic design, architecture and documentary filmmaking. Credit Münchner Stadtmuseum, Sammlung Reklamekunst

Controversy has been brewing around the exhibition since February 2018, when Mr. de Rijk gave the [interview to De Volkskrant](#) to announce the show. He began by characterizing Dutch design in museums generally as “too feminine.”

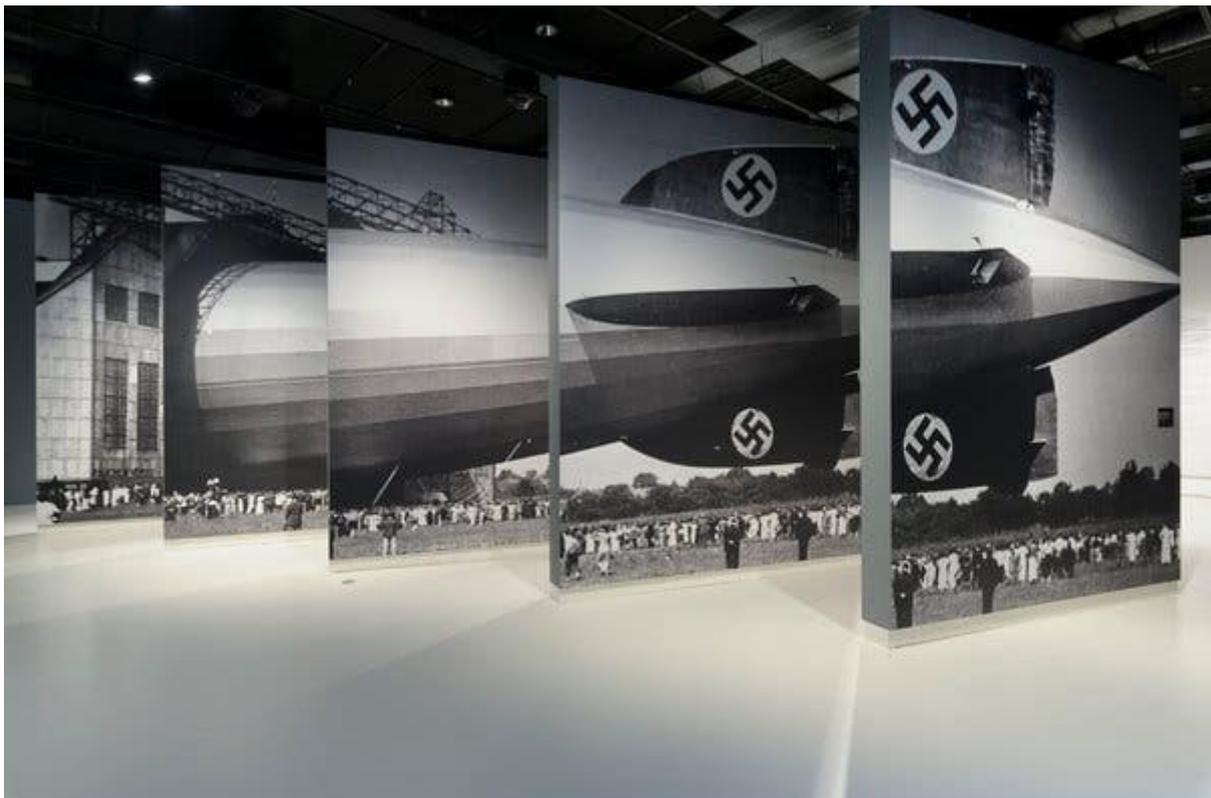
“Apparently, more women work in the design departments, and homosexuals, by the way,” the Volkskrant quoted Mr. de Rijk as saying. “That is of course a cliché, but the museum world seems to repeat those clichés,” he added.

He went on to discuss his plans for the Third Reich exhibition, saying that Nazi design was “a good example of a subject that you cannot discuss in an art museum.”

Jonas Staal, a Dutch visual artist and author of the coming book, “[Propaganda Art in the 21st Century](#),” declined an invitation to participate in a public lecture program during the “Design of the Third Reich” exhibition to protest Mr. de Rijk’s remarks.

“His comments framed this exhibition completely in an alt-right vocabulary, using antifeminist, misogynist, and bordering on homophobic language,” Mr. Staal said in an interview.

Mr. de Rijk responded in an email, saying: “I find it incomprehensible that my plea for a balanced representation of perspectives in the design museum is interpreted as antifeminist or homophobic. In the Netherlands, almost all design curators have been women over the past decades. I simply argue for a more diverse discourse.” He added, “What that has to do with alt-right is completely unclear to me.”



The exhibition brings together more than 270 objects from Germany and the Netherlands as well as films and media installations. Credit Ben Nienhuis, via Design Museum Den Bosch

Mr. Staal, who had not seen the exhibition, said, “I don’t oppose by definition presenting art or design from this period.” But, he added, “it should be shown in a critical context in order to create propaganda literacy. What is mandatory in

these kinds of engagements is that you can't show these kinds of works without making critical links to the present."

More than 270 items in the exhibition, mostly on loan from museums in Germany as well as some Dutch institutions and private collections, are accompanied by wall texts that explain the underlying racist and anti-Semitic ideologies. (Oaks, by the way, were identified by the Nazis as quintessential German trees, and they were planted throughout occupied Poland.)

The museum also offers an audio guide, personalized tours and a special route for families "which focuses on intergenerational learning and dialogue," according to the museum's website. A series of lectures and a symposium for museum professionals are also part of the ancillary program. Mr. de Rijk said that it was his goal to open up the dialogue on the objects on show and that he welcomed all perspectives.

"We didn't organize the exhibition as a warning, but it can function as a warning," he added.

"You should be face to face with this material to understand the culture and the witchcraft of that era," he said. "Never hide something away and deny it. Understand it. That's my message."