

BREKER REVISITED

THE SCHWERIN EXPOSITION IN RETROSPECT

by Bernhard Kramer

In the art competition of the Berlin Olympics of 1936 the German sculptor Arno BREKER (19.07.1900-13.02.1991) won the silver medal for his *Decathlon Athlete*. A slightly altered statue (holding a towel in his right hand) of enlarged size (3,25 m, with pedestal 4,65 m) is part of a program of sculptures which can still be found close to the redesigned Berlin Olympic Stadium. Few visitors knew about their origin, still less took any notice of them - until a few weeks before the opening of the Soccer World Championship in just this stadium the controversy came to the fore. Author Ralph Giordano inveighed against BREKER: "The bronzes are ugly and mendacious. I demand: Away with these things at the Olympic Stadium. They should be quickly pulled down tracelessly and scrapped."¹ Upon this the Austrian painter Ernst Fuchs, who together with Salvador Dali and Breker had founded (in 1974) the so-called 'golden triangle' retorted:

"To pull down Breker wouldn't be better than the burning Of the books by the Nazis. Breker's statues are not NS-art but documents of an epoch. This style can be found in Paris, Moscow or Ankara. In addition to that Breker was not an 'Obernazi'. On the contrary: He has helped lots of victims of persecution."

Serious scholars, like the film historian Hilmar HOFMANN argued, the statues at the Berlin Stadium ought not only to be veiled by canvas but to be scrapped in order to avoid offending visitors when the world was staying with friends in the summer of 2006. Gunter GRASS, Nobel Prize winner for literature, a few weeks before his late SS-confession spoke in favor of the Schwerin exhibition saying "that it could answer the nagging question of how talented artists and thinkers could accept such a government."²

To understand this highly emotional controversy and destructive rage of normally sensitive people is not easy, especially for non-German art-lovers. The key lies in the artist's life and his contribution to Nazism.

Unlike e.g. the conductors Herbert von KARAJAN and Karl Böhm or the actor and stage-director Gustav GRÜNDGENS - BREKER could not conceal his involvement and make a splendid after-war career. After the war the

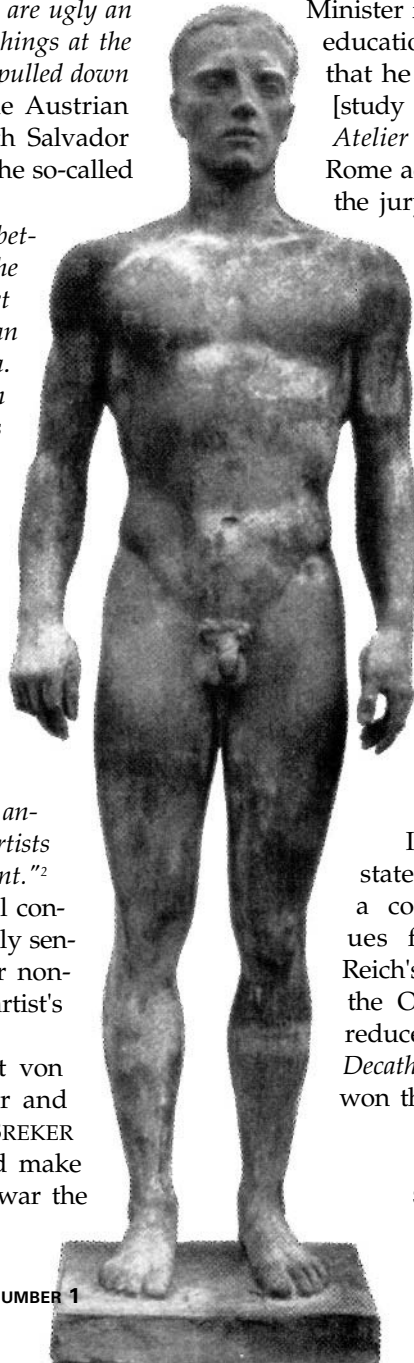
pampered star the Nazis and HITLER'S favorite artist became a bogeyman of the democrats. Especially in the German art-scene he was completely ignored by art historians, galleries and museum.

Arno BREKER was born in Elberfeld, now part of Wuppertal. After studies in Düsseldorf he moved to Paris, for the first time in 1924, then from 1927 until 1932, sharing rooms with the experimental artist Alexander CALDER and making the acquaintance of Jean COCTEAU, Aristide Maillol and Robert Delaunay.

On August 5th, 1932 the *Preußische Minister für Wissenschaft, Kunst und Volksbildung* [Prussian Minister for sciences, arts and national education] informed the young artist that he was one of the *Studiengäste* [study guests] who could use the *Atelier der Deutschen Akademie* in Rome academic year. One member of the jury for the scholarship-holders had been Käthe KOLLWITZ. SO

BREKER spent one year in the *Villa Massimo* in Rome. Her he saw MICHELANGELO'S *David* for the first time - a revelation for the artist. It is interesting that one of the other students was Joachim KARSCH (1897-1945), winner of a bronze medal in the art competitions of the Los Angeles Olympics 1932 and whose art had later been regarded as 'degenerated' by the Nazis. Joseph GOEBBELS himself visited the Villa and is said to have encouraged BREKER to return to Germany.

In 1936 he received his first state-order when he had won a competition for two big statues for the *Reichssportfeld* [The Reich's Sports Field] in Berlin. For the Olympic Art Competitions he reduced one of these works, the *Decathlon Athlete*, to normal size and won the silver medal. This was the



Arno Breker's Decathlon Athlete, Silver Medal Berlin 1936 (Mindt, E., Olympia 1936, Berlin 1936, p. 254)

breakthrough. He, who before had sometimes been criticized a 'Frenchman', attracted the Führer's attention. After the Olympiad Hitler invited all the prize-winners. On that occasion BREKER met HITLER for the first time.

From then on the rise of Arno BREKER could not be stopped. In 1937 he created the sculptures for the German pavilion (architect: Albert SPEER) at the Paris World Exhibition and was himself member of the international jury. From 1937 until 1945 he was a professor at the *Hochschule für Bildende Künste* [High School for Fine Arts] in Berlin, Bernhard HEILIGER (1915-1995) being his best-known student.

In addition to that HITLER placed a huge large-scale studio in Berlin-Dahlem at his disposal and included him in his megalomaniac plans for the extension of Berlin.

For his 40th birthday HITLER'S present was a castle-like manor house, the *Landschloß Jäckelsbruch* near Wriezen (approximately 50 km east of Berlin) with park and studio "in thankful recognition of his creative merits for the German art".

In the *Arno Breker Steinbildhauerwerkstätten* [Arno Breker Stone Sculptor Factory] in Wriezen under the administration of Albert SPEER French prisoners of war had to transform BREKER'S statues - with the help of copying apparatuses - into monumentality. Breker himself only supervised the realization.

Speer, Breker and Hitler in front of the Eiffel Tower, 22. April 1940 (Conrades, Diskussion, fig. 78)



On June 23rd, 1940 he is one of the few who were allowed to accompany HITLER on his macabre sightseeing-tour through the depopulated occupied capital. Some telltale photos show the 'visitors' with their tourist guide Arno BREKER in military outfit.

In 1944 when Berlin lay in ruins Leni RIEFENSTAHL made her film BREKER and the artist himself delivered

a radio address in which he said that he had only been able to create his art because "he was obsessed with the fanatic belief that Germany was eternal and was approaching a great future."³

In January 1945 the Brekers escaped to Wemding in Bavaria. In spite of his privileged position in the denazification trial he was only classified as a *Mitläufer* [nominal member] because he could present documents proving that he had more than once stood up for those persecuted by the regime, e.g. actor Jean MARAIS or the German publisher Peter SURKAMP.

In 1960 he established a studio in Paris where he worked as a sculptor and graphic artist.

In 1976 he worked on an *Olympia Zyklus* [Olympic Cycle] in which he formed life-size statues of German sports-stars like Ulrike MEYFAHRT (Olympic Gold Medal High Jump Munich 1972 and Los Angeles 1984) or the decathlon athlete Jürgen HINGSEN (World Record in 1984).⁴

In 1981 an invitation to an exhibition in Paris Centre Pompidou *Paris 1937-1957* was revoked because of massive protests against BREKER'S participation.

In 1991 Arno BREKER died in Düsseldorf.

In Germany his name was forgotten; the *Brockhaus Kunstlexikon* not even mentions his name.⁵ No exhibition of his works. He had become a non-artist.

BREKER? Never heard. No wonder. Upon the invitation of the Vichy-government the last exposition had taken place in the orangery of the Tuileries in Paris in 1942. In Nazi Germany between 1942 and 1944 BREKER had been in the center of three expositions in Munich, Cologne and Potsdam.

In 1974 there was an exposition in Frankfurt/M *Art in the Third Reich*. Here BREKER'S (and THORAK'S) works were only present in black and white photos. The originals were kept away from public presentation and history of art. Outside Germany exhibition-makers were more courageous. In 2001 there was an exhibition-project *Taking Positions*, which bad



Arno Breker, 1942 (Conrades, Diskussion, fig. 1)

been outlined in the *Henry Moore Institute* in Leeds and which was also shown in Berlin and Bremen. Central works of ten German sculptors had been chosen by the curator Penelope CURTIS, among them Wilhelm LEHMBRUCK, Gerhard MARCKS, Georg KOLBE, Hermann BLUMENTHAL - and also Arno BREKER.

Reactions on this project were manifold. German critics mostly saw their prejudices confirmed. LEHMBRUCK, MARCKS and KOLBE were highly esteemed whereas the 'inferior quality' of BREKER'S works was obvious. Critics from abroad took a completely different view. For the American critic Phyllis TUCHMAN the show

*"provided a rare opportunity to assess the merits of this maligned German period. Breker stole the show.[...] He turned out to be a tour-star, albeit conservative talent, as gifted in his field as filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl was in hers. [...] The three Brekers were literally head and shoulders above the rest."*⁶

This appreciation of BREKER'S art was a rare exception, which was only possible outside Germany. Here his name was ostracized, his works undiscoverable, destroyed, hidden from the public. Only few had actually viewed any work by HITLER'S favorite artist.

Now - seventy years after his Berlin silver medal - the Schwerin exposition filled the breach. The *Schleswig-Holstein-Haus* in the capital of Germany's most easterly country of Mecklenburg-West Pomerania, from July to October presented a highly controversial exposition. *Put up for discussion: the sculptor Arno Breker*. As the curator writes in his catalogue, the exhibition was neither meant as a Breker-Apology nor a BREKER apotheosis. The aim was not to minimize let alone glorify anything. CONRADES and his team aimed at giving an interested public the possibility to build their personal opinion based on their own impression of the works.

Before the opening on July 22nd the press turned heavy guns on the project: *big scene for Nazi art*,⁷ *shameless exposition*,⁸ *a contribution to minimizing*,⁹ *blow in the face of ostracized artists and mediocre provincial farce*.¹⁰ Breker was called the *monumental decorator of barbarism*.¹¹

One of the fiercest critics was Klaus STAECK, president of the Berlin Academy of Arts, called the exposition an *irresponsible minimizing*.

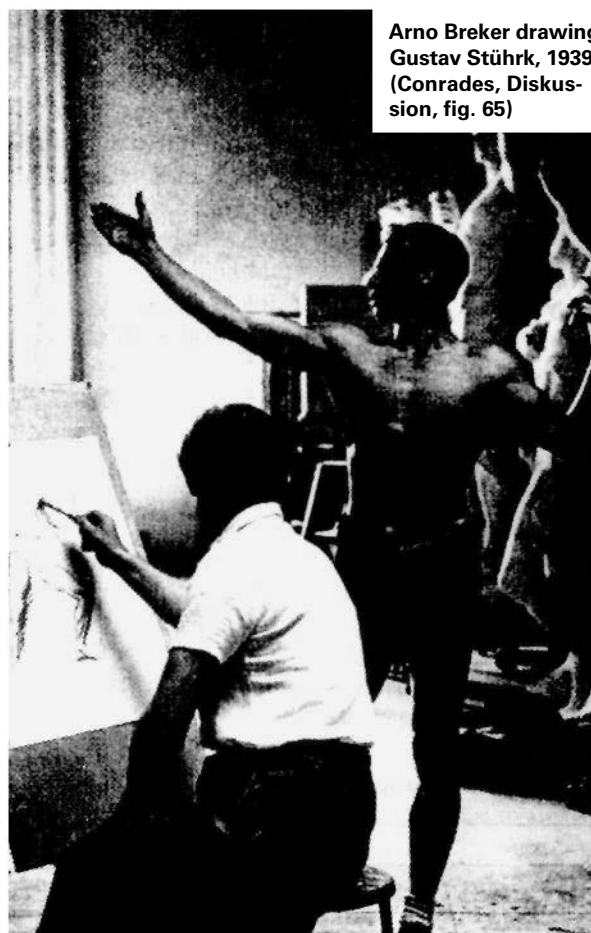
In spite of these controversies from the first day on masses of visitors came to see the exposition and the first edition of the catalogue was out of print immediately. No wonder - it was the first public presentation of the artistic output of an artist, who - at least in Germany - had been regarded as unacceptable to a democratic post-war public and so had consequently been passed over in silence for more than half a century

To bring together the exhibits must have been extremely difficult. During and after the war 90

percent of BREKER'S lifetime output had been "either destroyed, confiscated by the allied, or taken to the Soviet Union".¹² So this first public exhibition of Breker's works after the war was wholly dependent on loans from the artist's widow, Charlotte.

The exhibit consists of 70 works representing three periods of Breker's artistic life: *Pre-Nazi*, *Third Reich* and *After the War*. The front page of the folder shows these three sections: *Seated Woman*, Extract from *The Comrades* and *Cocteau as a Prophet*. Unfortunately the medal-winning *Decathlon Athlete* from 1936 is not among the works presented, although - according to Volker KLUGE - the statue is "private property of the Breker family in Düsseldorf".¹³ The decathlete's partner from the Berlin arcades, *The Victor* is there. In this classical work the female winner, holding a laurel branch in her right hand, resembles more an antique Venus than a thoroughly-trained sportswoman. The missing of the *Decathlon Athlete* is a pity, because it is far from being tainted by Nazi color. It breathes the modest decency that especially BREKER'S later works of that kind lack. The artist's model was the Gustav STÜHRK. We are lucky to have a picture showing BREKER drawing the German decathlete.

The statement of the catalogue that BREKER had won his Olympic medal with two sculptures



Arno Breker drawing
Gustav Stührk, 1939
(Conrades, Diskussion,
fig. 65)

Decathlon Athlete and *Victor* is definitely wrong. It is true - the two have been peacefully standing almost side by side at the Jahnplatz-Portico in the *Sportforum Berlin*. But in the Olympic Art competitions the athlete fought alone - and won the silver medal.

What is the upshot of the exposition?

All in all the Schwerin exposition was necessary to exemplify the deplorable descent of a highly talented artist, who of his own free will devoted himself to the Nazi ideology, accepting the benefits they offered him, thus becoming an extremely successful profiteer of an evil system. One, who after the war re-developed to a minor artist who had to be content with modelling busts not only of famous sportsmen and -women, but also outstanding VIPs from

the cultural or political life like e.g. Ezra POUND, Salvadore DALI, Anwar AS-SADAT, the German chancellors Konrad ADENAUER and Ludwig ERHARD, the pianists Wilhelm KEMPF and Alfred CORTOT, the poet Gerhard HAUPTMANN.

But obviously BREKER could not overcome his own convictions. He remained inveterate and believed until his old age that he had kept his personal and artistic integrity.

In 1976 German swimming champion Walter KUSCH (World champion 100-m breaststroke in 1962) posed for an Olympic sculpture. Three years later he did so for a second time. The work shows the winner with his bands close to his private parts. But not enough. In 1980 BREKER added a crazy change to the statue that beat all: he replaced the sportsman's head by a sideward-looking eagle and called the monster *Young Europe*.¹⁴

Right-wing phantasmagoria? An old man's foolishness? Freedom of the artist?

Curator CONRADES (in his introductory essay "*Why Breker*") held "*If there is anything that is dangerous about Breker, it is our fear of him.*"

He is right. There is really no need to be afraid of a man, who was gifted with a unique talent, devoted his soul to the devil and after the nightmare was over wanted to annihilate the deal.¹⁵

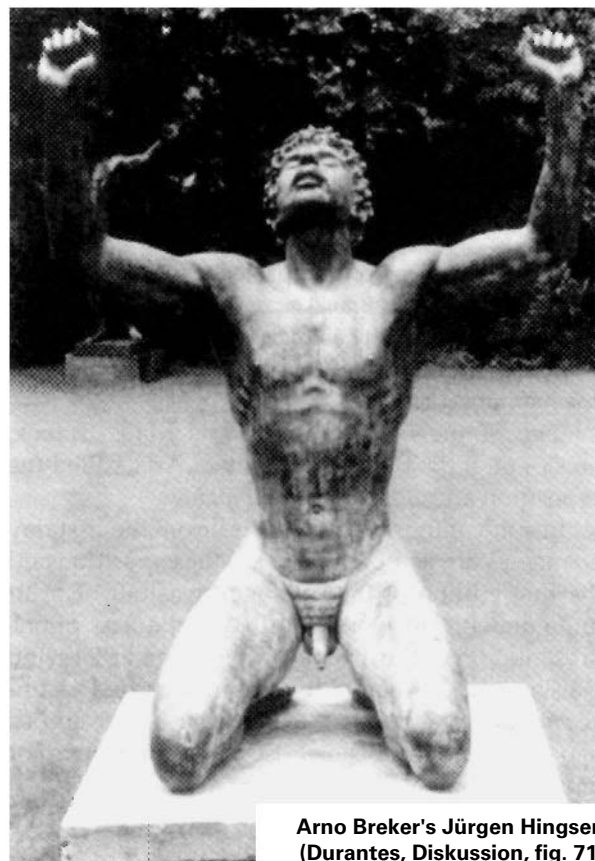
The end is of Shakespearian dimension. It is the melancholy clown Jacques in *As You like it*, who presents the corresponding comment: *sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything*. Or in the language of sportive competitions: dis = disqualified and dnf = did not finish.



Folder for the Schwerin
Exhibition 22nd July - 22nd
October 2006

Notes

- 1 CONRADES, Rudolf (ed.), *Zur Diskussion gestellt: Der Bildhauer Arno Breker*, Schwerin 2006, p. 4.
- 2 *New York Times*, (24.07.2006). [All Translations B.K.]
- 3 WITTMERS, Dagmar, *Arno Breker. Deutsche Lebensläufe*, Film Saarländischer Rundfunk 2002, Edition Marco Bonn 2003.
- 4 The Hingsen figure from 1984 seems to anticipate the moment, when he realized that he had been eliminated from the decathlon competition at the Seoul Olympics in 1988 because of three false starts.
- 5 *Der Brockhaus Kunst, Künstler, Epochen, Sachbegriffe*. Leipzig/Mannheim 2001.
- 6 TUCHMAN, Phyllis, *Taking Positions. Figurative sculpture in the Third Reich at the Henry Moore Institute Leeds*, in: *Art in America*, July 2002. Cited after CONRADES, *Diskussion*, pp. 23/24.
- 7 *Schweriner Kurier* (15.07.2006).
- 8 *Schweriner Volkszeitung* (15./16.07.2006)
- 9 *Schweriner Volkszeitung* (26.07.2006)
- 10 *Schweriner Volkszeitung* (01./07.2006)
- 11 *Schweriner Volkszeitung* (08./09.07.2006)
- 12 STANTON, Richard, *The Forgotten Olympic Art Competitions*. Victoria BC 2000, p. 270.
- 13 KLUGE, Volker, *Olympische Sommerspiele. Die Chronik I. Athen 1896 bis Berlin 1936*, Berlin 1997, p. 920.
- 14 In connection with this photo the catalogue gives a discreet notice that for this publication one was dependant on a book of a right-wing editor.
- 15 Breker's autobiography appeared in 1972 under the title *Im Strahlungsfeld* [In the radiation field], Preußisch Ohlendorf 1972.



Arno Breker's Jürgen Hingsen
(Durantes, *Diskussion*, fig. 71)