

BUT LIVE HERE? NO THANKS. SURREALISM AND ANTI-FASCISM

"When we are told that our age has other worries than writing poems, we reply: 'So do we!'"

So declared the members of the Surrealist poetry and resistance group *La Main à plume* in 1941 in one of their typically ambiguous manifestos. They had indeed other things to do than write poetry, because as Trotskyists with connections to the French Resistance, they were exposed to great danger. In German-occupied Paris, they nonetheless wrote poems (often jointly), published in underground journals on philosophy and visual theory, discussed the role of the material in the photographic process, and circulated pamphlets with texts by their members. At the same time, they forged documents for others, provided hide-outs, carried out acts of sabotage, and organized escape networks.

The younger members of *La Main à plume* argued that the very moment that asserts itself as supremely "real," and where all else seems secondary, is when idiosyncratic art joined to collective political action is most necessary. *La Main à plume* and many other Surrealists did not regard art as a political message in disguise: on the contrary, in their art, they insisted on their own imagination and denied access to the intrusive daily business of politics. Georges Henein from the Egyptian group *Art et Liberté* summed it up: "A literary work is not an election poster." Surrealism was a political movement with an international reach and internationalist conviction. While its beginnings lie in art and literature, it far exceeds both. Reality was for the Surrealists insufficient: they wanted to rethink the world and alter bourgeois society fundamentally, "if necessary against ourselves."

At the same time, Surrealism is a paramount example for the process of a bourgeois historiography that canonizes what is has thoroughly depoliticized beforehand. Our aim in this project is to make Surrealism once again visible as a militant, internationally connected and politicized movement, which is how many of its representatives understood it. In their art, the Surrealists insisted on an absolute "freedom" that was to infect the rest of society. The Surrealists' understanding stood at odds with fascist freedom: the freedom to command and obey. For the surrealists, it meant a way of life whose rhythm was not that of wage labor and whose goals were larger than nation and profit. The Surrealist "freedom," in contrast to the fascist one, was not based on the unfreedom of others.

Surrealists joined anti-fascist resistance groups, showed their solidarity with poets in colonized countries, fought in the Spanish Civil War against the Falangist militias under General Francisco Franco, called on soldiers in the German army to commit acts of sabotage, were imprisoned and persecuted, fled from Europe, and died in the war against the national socialists. Surrealism opposed the atrophy of imagination in a society in which art and poetry had become eccentric pursuits. Not least because of the vital but open relationship between art and politics, later movements repeatedly invoked Surrealism. As a method that naturally allies itself to emancipatory concerns, it was, for example, taken up during the 1968 protests, by post-colonial theory, and by representatives of the Black Liberation Movement. A century after its official founding in 1924, Surrealism remains nonetheless trapped in narrow definitions, aesthetically (Surrealism as a style), and geographically (Paris as the center with "offshoots" elsewhere) as well as temporally (1920s to 1940s).

Even though attention has been given in recent years to lesser known Surrealist artists and the global reach of the movement has been emphasized, in the wider public perception, Surrealism remains almost synonymous with a small group of prominent protagonists (André Breton, Max Ernst, René Magritte, Salvador Dalí). Major exhibitions and coffee-table books propagate a version of Surrealism in which the cult of stardom goes hand in hand with a pinch of sex, anecdotes of partner swapping, and a superficial lay-Freudianism; a toothless semblance of the movement which our art institutions have eagerly propagated.

Undeniably, some of the Surrealism's protagonists contributed to this now predominant image. The goal of shaping a "different" art was not always pursued rigorously, and not by all participants. As well, in the period after the Second World War, a few central figures of the movement showed their affirmative business acumen. A tendency for (self)mythologization and esoterism cannot be denied. This can be seen, for example, in the exhibition *Le Surréalisme en 1947* in the Parisian Galerie Maeght with topics like tarot, myth, and superstition, in which André Breton (returned from his exile in the U.S.) as well as Victor Brauner, Marcel Duchamp, Jacques Hérold, Joan Miró, and Toyen participated.

However, Surrealism cannot be reduced to the period and place of its beginning, namely Paris in the 1920s and 1930s: the young members of *La Main à plume* continued to formally develop the group's principles during the WWII period; the group around Aimé and Suzanne Césaire on Martinique and their journal *Tropiques* strengthened its anti-colonialist principles; and immediately after the war, in 1947, the *Surréalistes-Révolutionnaires* criticized the silence of the established Surrealists in the face of a capitalism that "encircled free Europe." Later, Ted Joans put it much more harshly when he made fun of the Swiss bank accounts of the "Surrealists of yesteryear-yawn!" while at the same time insisting on the validity of Breton's notion of Surrealism. The fact that Breton's critics still invoked him supports our view of Surrealism not as a style, nor art-historical period, but rather a process that to this day has not been completed. We see our project as bringing together attempts to revise a Surrealist canon that is still too narrowly defined, and which has rendered the Surrealist movement politically innocuous, and to try once more to answer the question: What is Surrealism?

War-Surrealisms and Anti-fascism

Surrealism emerged roughly concurrently with fascism between the First and Second World Wars during a time of continuing conflict and colonial war. In 1942, for André Breton, Surrealism could "be understood historically only in relation to the war, I mean-from 1919 to 1938-in relation at the same time to the war from which it issues and the war to which it extends." Early theorists of Surrealism like Maurice Nadeau also stated the trauma of war coursed through Surrealism. Many early members had been at the front in the First World War and had returned as committed opponents of nation and fatherland. They countered the frenzied nationalisms of their time with derision and anti-patriotism, a conviction that remained for decades to come: "To affirm one's fatherland is to insult the totality of man," we read in the "Manifesto of the Arab Surrealist Movement."

Surrealism was also united in its rejection of colonialism: from the very moment of its founding in the mid-1920s, Surrealists denounced European colonial politics. They campaigned against the imperialist

goals of the Third French Republic that conducted a war in the Moroccan Rif region-a "war of bankers," as the 1925 manifesto put it. Surrealism's horizon was that of a life liberated from nationalism, racism, and capitalism. Thus, for them, the catastrophe didn't lie in the future, but rather existed in a present where humans ruled over and exploited other humans.

In order to research and present the political stance of Surrealism, we have worked with the term of anti-fascism that became central for Surrealism from the 1930s onwards. This was also used as a synonym for the other isms: imperialism, colonialism, capitalism, racism. The Surrealists recognized that fascism was unthinkable without capitalism and a notion of class, and that it had, to use the words of Aimé Césaire, returned from the colonies to Europe as a boomerang.

However, anti-fascism in Surrealism cannot be reduced to a mere polemical term, just as Surrealism must not be interpreted as an escape from political reality into irrationality. The prefix "sur" does not signify disengagement and being above the fray; on the contrary, it means an engagement with the affects, emotions, and repressions which also constitute reality (or truth, as the Surrealists would say). Surrealism sees itself as an expanded or heightened perception of reality, a new perspective on the world which dreams and the imagination can provide. The theories of Sigmund Freud and Marxism led to the realization that consciousness is shaped socially, and informed by the reality of political economy- and conversely, that society needed to change to create a different imaginative world. The Surrealists assumed a feedback effect of the dream and of artistic work on reality; analogously, the "poetic act [could be understood] as a means to influence reality." If we relate this concretely to fascism, it could be said that the collective repression of unpleasant truths (tacit collaboration, murder, the entanglement of the capitalist form of government and fascism) is confronted by processes such as the dream, automatic writing, or collective drawing, which are capable of bringing these truths to light, and far exceed them at the same time. Viewed materialistically, the dream allows the „misery of desire" which informs the present, to be taken into account and to imagine a different world where emotions and desire are as concrete as objects or architectures. Thus, Surrealist anti-fascism would also allow for the ambiguity of the irrational and the rational.

Essential for the continuing interest in Surrealism as an art form as well as a political tool is precisely this indirect and dialectical relationship between artistic form and political desire. Surrealism demands space for the autonomy of artistic processes and forms, and postulates that working on society also means working on the modes and forms of the production of art. Toyen's abstract Specters and Object-Phantoms in rocky landscapes attest to the conflicts of their era, but don't represent them, just as the title and form of Max Ernst's *L'ange du foyer* (*The Angel of Hearth and Home*) or Joan Mir's *Nature morte au vieux soulier* (*Still Life with Old Shoe*) don't reveal that they refer to the Spanish Civil War.

With Nazi rule in Germany, and subsequently the Spanish Civil War, the situation changed: violence and struggle became more concrete. Exile, resistance, hiding, and imprisonment formed the reality in which many Surrealists were now living. Acting with manifestos alone was no longer possible. Numerous Surrealists, among them Eugenio Granell, Wifredo Lam, André Masson, Kati Horna, Mary Low, and Juan Bréa, as well as Carl Einstein campaigned and worked for the Second Republic in Spain.

Conflicts and Alliances

While Surrealism's beginnings lie in the 1920s, the movement is continuing until today. It encompasses numerous artists and writers whose work cannot be subsumed under a shared aesthetic or political project, let alone under a single figurehead, as which Breton has mostly been regarded. Quite on the contrary. Surrealism has always been characterized both by a great ability to form alliances, as well as by factional struggles and ruptures. These discussions and debates, for which Breton's *Second Manifesto of Surrealism* (1929), the subsequent expulsions, and the "dissident" group around Georges Bataille are oft-cited examples, are more than petty disagreements.

There is no serious political activity without argument and conflict.

Leftist movements especially have always questioned the logic of majority rule of antagonisms and orientations. To understand the urgency with across political differences, emphasizing instead the value of the differentia-which political and aesthetic questions were debated in the Surrealist environment, it helps to remember how much more possible a significant political upheaval seemed after the October Revolution in Russia, but also between the two world wars and directly afterwards. Especially in post-war France, the future seemed wide open: the French Communist Party (PCF) and the Resistance groups, despite of their differences, both advocated a nationalization of resources and were opposed to a return of the ruling "Two Hundred Families." General Charles de Gaulle's program, on the other hand, represented a "state capitalism" that wanted to go easy on former collaborators from the financially influential families and companies.

Two incompatible political plans.

The conflicts within Surrealism, carried out with considerable vehemence, took place before the background of great opportunities and disappointed hopes. Thus, also the relationship of the various Surrealist groups to the Communist parties was by no means untroubled. While the Marxist-Leninist principles, for example, of the PCF in France-solidarity with colonized countries, anti-imperialism, anti-capitalism, internationalism-corresponded to the views of many Surrealists from the early 1930s onwards at the latest, when it came to specific debates, there were important differences. Surrealists and Party Communists had (often justified) doubts that the other side was capable of mastering fundamental practical or aesthetic tasks. The attitude of many Surrealists, which tended towards a form of libertarian Trotskyism, was to believe neither in change through art alone, nor in a reactionary party machinery. The Moscow trials from 1936 to 1938 intensified the dispute over the relation with Stalinism, which led to rifts in some of the decades-long friendships among Surrealists. The debates about the diverging notions of idealism and aesthetics of Breton and the circle around Georges Bataille concerned nothing less than the relationship of "Western civilization" to the rest of the world. Despite all the debates, it was clear for Surrealists who the real enemy was. Fascism did not provide enough love." It was only logical then that the members of *La Main à plume* advertised in occupied Paris with the sentence "If you love love, you will love surrealism."

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