

But Live Here? No Thanks: Surrealism and Anti-Fascism

October 15, 2024 – March 2, 2025

“The human soul is international.”

(Bulletin international du surréalisme [Mezinárodní Buletin Surrealismu], Prague, April 1935)

“We know where we stand in Martinique. ... From among the powerful war weaponry the modern world now places at our disposal, our audacity has chosen surrealism, which offers the greatest chances of success.”

(Suzanne Césaire, "1943: Surréalisme et nous", in: *Tropiques*, No. 8–9, 1943)

Surrealism was a highly politicized art movement with international reach and internationalist convictions. Surrealists denounced European colonialist policies, organized against fascist movements, fought in the Spanish Civil War, and called on German soldiers to commit sabotage; they were imprisoned and persecuted, fled from Europe, died in war. They wrote poems, honed the deconstruction of a supposedly rational language, worked on paintings and collective drawings, took photographs, and made collages, organized exhibitions.

The government and occupation by fascist parties in Europe and throughout the world, as well as the World Wars and colonial wars, politicized Surrealism at the time of its emergence, and forced the lives of its protagonists into unpredictable trajectories. These developments were accompanied by remarkable encounters and international solidarity, whose connecting links ran from Prague to Coyoacán in Mexico City, from Cairo to republican Spain, from Marseille to Fort-de-France on Martinique.

Surrealist thinking and action, then as today, happened in various places simultaneously. Instead of presenting a didactic, linear narrative, the exhibition is structured by several episodes, arranged like an abstracted map.

The goal is to make Surrealism visible as the disputatious, internationally interconnected, and highly politicized movement its protagonists understood it to be, while simultaneously foregoing a functional and illustrative notion of art. In order to research and present the political self-conception of Surrealism, we are working with the concept and practice of anti-fascism that is central to it. If the Surrealist movement is of special interest today, it is because it rejected simple correlations between political goals and aesthetic form. “The superfluous presupposes the necessary,” a member of the Paris Surrealist group La Main à Plume wrote about the dialectic nature of poetry and militant action.

Not least because of this constitutive but open relationship between art and politics, Surrealism was repeatedly invoked by political movements: as a stance and method that often links itself quite naturally to emancipatory goals, it was taken up in the Black Civil Rights Movement, the international movements of 1968, and by representatives of Pan-Africanism. The exhibition at Lenbachhaus is conceived as a bundling of attempts to revise a still narrowly defined Surrealist canon whose political stance is often trivialized. The aim is to answer the question anew, What is Surrealism?

Curated by Stephanie Weber, Adrian Djukić, Karin Althaus

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