

# From a safe distance?: Reflections on an exhibition of surrealist art

## Surrealism 1919-1944: an exhibition in Düsseldorf

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Surrealism 1919-1944, *an exhibition at the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, 20 July-24 November, 2002*

The largest exhibition of surrealist art ever assembled is presently to be seen in the German city of Düsseldorf, at the state museum of North Rhine-Westphalia. The organizers have gathered, from many museums and private collections, an unprecedented number of paintings, collages, photographs, films, sculptures, illustrated books and *objets trouvés* [found objects] by surrealist artists.

Many of these works have rarely been shown before. The early wall paintings by Max Ernst, for example, are on view together for the first time. They come from the house of Paul and Gala Eluard and had been covered by wallpaper for decades after the house was sold. Following their rediscovery in the 1960s, they were sold to various collectors and had not been on display together since.

The presentation of works by so many artists is so extensive that it could easily provide sufficient material for several exhibitions. The works by Ernst alone, taken from the most varied periods of his artistic development, make the exhibition worth seeing. The first hall displays his “Rendezvous of Friends,” a painting that depicts the surrealists (and others) sitting and standing against the background of a bizarre mountain landscape, their heads placed loosely upon their bodies as if cut out of a newspaper, and their figures frozen in strange gestures reminiscent of sign language. Among them are Raphael, Giorgio de Chirico, Fyodor Dostoevsky and Gala, the wife of Eluard and lover of Ernst, who later lived with Salvador Dali.

Other renowned surrealist artists such as René Magritte, Joan Miró and Salvador Dali are represented by many well-chosen works. Picasso’s contribution to surrealism is documented in an assiduous manner. The exhibition also contains several well-known sculptures by Alberto Giacometti, Yves Tanguy’s dream landscapes, Hans Bellmer’s fear-evoking dolls, drawings by Kurt Seligmann, the apocalyptic images of Wolfgang Paalen, as well as drawings and paintings by André Masson, Viktor Brauner, Wilfredo Lam, Roberto Matta and others.

Even some of the *cadavres exquis* [exquisite cadavers] are on display. These fanciful figures resulted from a popular game of the surrealists, in which one figure was drawn by several people. The paper was successively folded over or covered so that each participant could not see what his or her predecessor had done. The exhibition also includes the weird objects with which the surrealists would shock their contemporaries, such as the famous fur-covered cup by Meret Oppenheimer (*Breakfast in Fur*) and her stilettos, tied together and decorated with paper cuffs, entitled: *My Nurse*. There is the bottle-drier by Marcel Duchamp, as well as many book illustrations.

The experimental photographs and collages by Brassai, Man Ray, Dora Maar, André Kertész, Claude Cahun and Manuel Alvarez Bravo, and Luis

Buñuel’s films, demonstrate that modern photographic and cinematic art, especially in the field of advertising and video-clips, would be unthinkable without the surrealistic models. Indeed there is probably no area of modern art that has not been affected by the systematic overthrow of conventions, rules and taboos and the unleashing of creativity championed as a principle by the surrealists. In this respect, the generally positive critiques of the exhibition in the press are undoubtedly correct.

Another positive quality of the exhibition lies in the fact that the organizers have refrained from any one-sided emphasis on certain “modern” or “post-modern” aspects of the surrealists’ work, e.g. on their depiction of sexuality or their somewhat dubious admiration for the Marquis de Sade. Such an approach had characterized the London exhibition entitled “*Surrealism: Desire Unbound.*” (1) The Düsseldorf exhibition, on the other hand, is arranged in relatively strict chronological order, which works well because it illustrates very vividly how, during different periods, new artists were attracted by the group and in turn gave it a new impetus.

While their contributions differ greatly, the surrealists regarded themselves not as individual artists, but as a socially active group, and their continuous existence over a relatively long historical period is a rare phenomenon in the history of art. Again and again, they would intervene in politics, even though the group was characterized by passionate conflicts which resulted in a considerable turnover. This continuity and the continuous renewal of attempts to achieve their aims were only possible because the group was bound together by a more or less common social perspective and by their conception of art as an indispensable instrument in the struggle for human emancipation. Most of them had no doubt that this could only be brought about on the basis of a socialist perspective. However, their relations with the Communist Party and the Communist International (Comintern) were tense from the very beginning, when both organisations fell victim to Stalinist degeneration shortly after the initial formation of the group of leading surrealists in 1924.

André Breton writes in the *Second Manifesto of Surrealism*: “Man, who would wrongly allow himself to be intimidated by a few monstrous historical failures, is still free to *believe* in his freedom. He is his own master, in spite of the old clouds which pass and his blind forces which encounter obstacles. Doesn’t he have any inkling of the brief beauty concealed and of the long and accessible beauty that can be revealed? Let him also look carefully for the key to love, which the poet claimed to have found: he has it. It is up to him and him alone to rise above the fleeting sentiment of living dangerously and of dying. Let him, in spite of any restrictions, use the avenging arm of the idea against the bestiality of all beings and of all things, and let him one day, vanquished—but vanquished only if the world is the world—welcome the discharge of his sad rifles like a salvo fired in salute.” (2)

While many of the works shown in Düsseldorf still startle an audience to this day, it is notable that the exhibition leaves the visitor with a peculiarly muted, stolid and somewhat museum-like impression. Even the fascinating wall from Breton's atelier, which had never been displayed outside of Paris before—an exhibition in itself, with pictures by Picasso, Kandinsky and with surrealist works, fetishes, African and Indian masks, strange cult objects and objects from everyday life, things found in nature—even this wall appears, in the context of the Düsseldorf exhibition, like a somewhat outmoded gallery of curiosities. One reason for this impression may be the fact that the literary, critical-minded aspect of surrealism is noted only in passing. The books of surrealist authors are only shown in terms of their illustrations. Even more important, however, is the slant suggested to the visitor by the whole conception of the exhibition.

“We look back from a safe distance on one of the most important and momentous intellectual movements of the 20th century.” This is how Werner Spies, the outgoing director of the Centre Pompidou and curator of the exhibition (which was shown in Paris earlier this year before it moved on to Düsseldorf) opens up his introduction to the catalogue.(3) This brief sentence illuminates why, despite its extraordinary completeness, this exhibition does not really convey the essence of surrealism to today's visitor with an interest in art who, after all, has been quite used to a variety of shock effects by contemporary artists.

How safe, really, is the distance from which we can view the surrealists' art today? The surrealists wanted to tear down the barriers between life and art, in order to find a way out of social fetters, the paralysis of creativity and the crippling of human thinking. Have these barriers not been reinforced more strongly than ever before?

What is it that continually draws young artists to examine this movement? Would it not have been an obvious line of inquiry to consider the extraordinarily enduring attraction of the surrealists and why many trends in modern art appear merely as pale imitations in comparison? Was the surrealist effort merely a break with traditional aesthetics and the *conscious* inclusion of the *unconscious* into the creative process, the attempt to use Freud's psychoanalytic theories for the benefit of art, as expressed in the works on display? Was it not rather the question of how art—in which, of course, the unconscious and intuition play an indispensable role—could make an independent contribution towards the formation of a progressive social consciousness?

After all, the group had formed on the basis of an intellectual reckoning with Dada nihilism and consciously gravitated toward the revolutionary socialist movement in the mid-1920s. While Dadaism limited itself to the radical denunciation of all previous art, surrealism placed itself in the tradition of various historical trends in art and defined itself specifically in relation to its predecessors in the age of romanticism (19th century) and, above all, to French poet Arthur Rimbaud. As a young man, Breton was also fascinated by Hegel's dialectics, which certainly played a role in his later convergence with Marxism. “‘Transform the world,’ Marx said; ‘change life,’ Rimbaud said. These two watchwords are one for us.”(4) These famous words by Breton could serve as the motto of the surrealist movement and characterized its most important stages of development, notwithstanding the occasional excursions into highly idealistic, even spiritualistic realms of thought.

The most interesting works and critical theoretical texts of surrealism were created precisely in the field of tension between political, social engagement and artistic creativity. Breton's critiques and philosophical essays, regrettably relegated to a subordinate role in the exhibition, would surely have rendered the works of his companions more accessible to today's viewer.

Precisely because surrealism was not merely a trend in art, but an extremely complex, multi-layered artistic and intellectual movement, it retained its international significance and cast a spell over many artists for

more than two decades, in spite of violent internal controversies and external hostility. It was a movement among a large layer of intellectuals who were drawn towards the socialist perspectives of the workers' movement. Breton opposed opportunism and adaptation to the powers-that-be. Without hesitation, he broke with anybody who capitulated to the bourgeois establishment or the Stalinist bureaucracy.

It is certainly an enormous aesthetic experience to view the products of the surrealists' artistic activities, but because their critical spirit is all but hidden from the audience, the viewer is robbed of the most important impetus which an examination of this movement could provide us with today. After all, we are living in an epoch in which all the unresolved problems of the 20th century are recurring with explosive force, with only a minority of artists seriously trying to grapple with social reality using the means at their disposal.

As Maurice Nadeau noted, surrealism began with ten people in Paris, but within a few years its influence had extended all around the world. What accounted for this very special attraction? It was the issues addressed by the group: What caused the carnage of the First World War? What can be done to prevent future wars? What specific contribution can artists and intellectuals make to social progress? They were not content with mere sympathy for the revolution.

“To study the movement of ideas without attending to what preceded or followed it, ignoring the social and political situation that nourished it and on which, in its turn, it may have acted, is a futile effort. Surrealism, especially, is deeply embedded in the period between the two world wars. To say as some have that on the level of art it is only a manifestation of the period oversimplifies materialism: surrealism is also the heir and extender of the artistic movements which preceded it and without which it would have not existed. Hence we must consider it in both aspects at once.”(5)

Later on, Breton and his followers raised questions such as: Why did the Communist Party and the Comintern not succeed in creating a socialist society? Why were the fascist movements in Italy, Spain and Germany able to inflict decisive defeats on the working class, take power and thrust the world into another, even more terrible world war? Why is the freedom of art suppressed both in the Soviet Union and in Nazi Germany? Is it necessary to subordinate to the dictates of the Stalinist bureaucracy in order to fight Hitler?

The latter questions led to irrevocable splits within the surrealist movement and, in 1938, prompted Breton to join Leon Trotsky in writing the manifesto “Towards a free revolutionary art,” which proclaimed at the end: Our aims: *The independence of art—for the revolution. The revolution—for the complete liberation of art!*(6)

There are many extensive passages in the manifesto which make clear that the surrealists' priority was not merely to promote the role of the unconscious in their art, to shock or extol irrationality or even establish man's dominance of the unconscious. With regard to Freud's theory of the unconscious the manifesto makes clear that the artist is the natural ally of the revolution:

“The process of *sublimation* which here comes into play and which psychoanalysis has analysed, tries to restore the broken equilibrium between the integral ‘ego’ and the outside elements it rejects. This restoration works to the advantage of the ‘ideal of self,’ which marshals against the unbearable present reality all the powers of the interior world, of the ‘self,’ which are *common to all men* and which are constantly flowering and developing. The need for emancipation felt by the individual spirit has only to follow its natural course to be led to mingle its stream with this primeval necessity—the need for the emancipation of man.”(7)

This passage recalls—with significant differences, attributable to the influence of Marxism and Trotsky—the *First Manifesto of Surrealism* (1924) in which Breton celebrates “psychic automatism,” which he

describes as complete freedom of thought without “any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern.” Surrealism “is based on the belief in the superior reality of certain forms of previously neglected associations, in the omnipotence of dream, in the disinterested play of thought.” Or: “I believe in the future resolution of these two states, dream and reality, which are seemingly so contradictory, into a kind of absolute reality, a *surreality* [sur = “on”, “above” in French].(8)

Notwithstanding his emphasis on the unconscious and his attempts to use it for the benefit of the creative process, Breton knew that there could be no valuable work of art without serious and conscious intellectual exertion. Therefore, the discussion and the collective efforts of the group were aimed at the furthering of artistic modes of expression; they wanted to overcome traditional barriers and conventions. However, their concerns were not limited to their individual self-realization as artists. Rather, they wanted to explore the social function of art, its influence on peoples’ consciousness and actions.

“Beauty will be CONVULSIVE,” declared Breton at the end of his novel *Nadja*, “or will not be at all.” This approach implied the rejection of any form of aesthetics involving mere contemplation of beauty as a flight from reality.(9)

This position of Breton led to his break with Dali. Dali, whose early paintings had met with great enthusiasm from the surrealists, later confessed his admiration for Hitler and at the same time succumbed to unrestrained commercialism in his art. Dali’s pictures are very predominant in the Düsseldorf exhibition, no doubt in order to attract more visitors. Probably for the same reason, his leaping tigers of *One Second Before Awakening from a Dream by the Flight of a Bee Around a Pomegranate (1944)* are shown on the poster announcing the exhibition and also on the cover of the catalogue.

The exhibition is obviously guided by the conception that the exhibits speak for themselves, and thus largely refrains from historical or art-historical explanations. But the chronological arrangement and the very scarcity of programmatic quotations on the walls leave the visitor somewhat lost in the wealth of the material on display. One is left with the impression of a very powerful but disparate trend in art that is difficult to comprehend in its totality.

The question arises: why was there no comparable artistic movement in the second half of the 20th century? While the exhibition may implicitly pose this question, it does not attempt to answer it.

#### Notes:

1. <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2001/surr.n30.shtml>
2. André Breton, *Second Manifesto of Surrealism*, in *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, 1994, p. 187
3. *Surrealismus 1919-1944*, Werner Spies, Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf
4. Breton, *Speech to the Congress of Writers*, in *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, p. 241
5. Maurice Nadeau, *The History of Surrealism*, 1987, p. 43
6. Leon Trotsky and André Breton, *Manifesto: Towards a Free Revolutionary Art*, in *Art and Revolution, Writings on Literature, Politics and Culture*, 1972, p. 121
7. *ibid*, pp. 118-119
8. Breton, *Manifesto of Surrealism*, in *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, p. 14
9. Breton, *Nadja*, 1960, p. 160



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