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Interregnum: Artistic Practices of the Immediate Postwar Era in Eastern and Western Europe



This project explores the artistic practices and aesthetic ambiguities of the early postwar period, bracketed by the end of the Second World War and the beginning of the Cold War. Using the notion of interregnum, defined by Antonio Gramsci as a time when old forms become invalid, yet are still active as new ones are in the process of emerging, the study focuses on three main issues.

Firstly, it examines art made by artists marked in profound yet different ways by the experience of the war: survivors of concentration camps, like Boris Taslitzky, Jeannette L'Herminier, as well as those like Wols, or Hans Bellmer who were interned in France due to their nationality. Their practices occupy a grey area between art and testimony, forcing us to rethink established categories.

Secondly, the project analyses how the narrative of the war was shaped by exhibitions such as "Crimes hitlériens" (Grand Palais in Paris, 1945) and "Warszawa

oskarża" [Warsaw Accuses] (National Museum in Warsaw, 1945), each of which had an explicit political agenda and employed radically new display strategies to restage war destruction with a combination of non-art objects and artworks. Therefore these exhibitions emphasised the authoritative role of museums as producers of legible facts and evidence in the midst of the uncertainty of the postwar period.

Lastly, the research recognises and examines the transnational presence of surrealist aesthetics during this period, across both Eastern and Western Europe. For many artists in Eastern Europe surrealism was a fitting aesthetic to capture the experience of the war, thus it was understood as a form of 'realism' for the postwar. Given the postwar popularity of the movement and its international networks, also spreading throughout Eastern Europe, it is vital to ask why so many artists turned to this aesthetic at this particular moment in history.

Poster for the exhibition "Les crimes hitlériens", Grand Palais, Paris, June 1944

Display of artworks during the exhibition "Warszawa oskarża" [Warsaw Accuses], National Museum in Warsaw, 1945, photo by Zofia Chomętowska via The Museum of Warsaw [Muzeum Warszawski]

Exhibition history
Surrealism
Transnational art history
Testimony

Max Weber
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