



WALLTEXTS

Kunsthalle Vogelmann

Introduction

Surrealism – Worlds in Dialog

Exactly one hundred years ago, on October 15, 1924, author André Breton in Paris published the first Surrealist Manifesto. The act marked the foundation of a new cultural revolutionary movement whose ideas and practices spread around the world and continue to have an impact today. Influenced by the violence and traumatic experiences of the First World War and in the rising face of fascism, the Surrealists questioned not only the existing system but also the long-established and rational ways of thinking associated with it. They based their work, among other things, on Sigmund Freud's theory of psychoanalysis and his interpretation of dreams. In their search for what Breton called an "absolute reality", the Surrealists set out to explore the unknown and what was not accessible to the rational mind. The goal was to free life and thought from the old familiar shackles and expand the suppressed and irrational into an absolute reality. The Surrealist avant-garde sought a radical break with structural constraints and bourgeois conventions and wanted to encourage people to change their way of thinking.

Today, a century later, the Surrealist idea has taken on a contemporary relevance. In a phase of upheaval and great unrest we are confronted with opposing views of reality. Social and political instability, waves of crises and wars, an ever-faster pace of change and the uncertainty about the future associated with these factors are shaking up our view of the world. The focus is once again shifting to questioning our own perception of reality: In the search for new answers, old questions are being asked again. In this context, it is worth taking a look at Surrealist works of art from the last 100 years, especially as they continue to provide the basis for alternative perspectives.

The exhibition examines the concepts underpinning Surrealism and their impact from the 1920s to the present day. Works of art by the original Surrealist movement are juxtaposed with works by subsequent generations. The dialog illustrates that Surrealism is not a closed movement but continues to have an impact today. It is a mindset, an unfinished constantly changing idea.

The themes and motifs of the Surrealist avant-garde appear more relevant than ever in the interplay of the decades. The search for identity, transformations, irrationality, the questioning of reality and perception all continue to be addressed in Surrealist works today. Divided into six sections, the exhibition shows how Surrealist practices have served across the generations to question the present and future in ways that are both critical and humorous. Featuring over 120 paintings, prints, objects, photographs, and films the exhibition demonstrates the fascinating diversity of Surrealist art.

The exhibition was created in cooperation with the Institute for Cultural Exchange in Tübingen.

EG 1

The Collective Dream

In our dreams, we can process what we have experienced during the day. The unconscious intertwines with what is real. Fears, desires, and conflicts merge into subjective, imaginary worlds. From the very start, dreams were important to the Surrealist movement as a gateway to the unconscious and they remain a fascinating topic of study today. The *interpretation of dreams* and *psychoanalysis* as established by medical doctor *Sigmund Freud* represent an important point of reference. Various aspects of dreams are explored as an ongoing theme in Surrealist magazines and publications. This includes dream protocols by key figures of Surrealism such as *André Breton*, *Giorgio de Chirico*, or *Antonin Artaud*. They were interested in the search for authenticity and the direct expression of the inner self, but also in coming to terms with the trauma so many people had experienced in the First World War. In André Breton's Parisian studio, they held communal séances aimed at delving into the unconscious and entering a dreamlike state. Their goal was to break with the familiar, to eliminate causality, encourage the crossing of boundaries and to communicate their experiences in their artworks. By interpreting their dreams, the artists developed a new visual language, which among other things generated Surrealist landscapes whose attraction lies in the indecipherable nature of their opposing elements. Examples of this include the deserted landscapes of *Yves Tanguy* or *Salvador Dalí*, whose endless expanses have become the archetype of Surrealist motifs and are repeatedly cited as the vocabulary of the Surrealist aesthetic – for example in the immersive augmented-reality work of *Lauren Moffatt*. This language has long since become part of popular culture as is impressively demonstrated by the Hollywood movie “The Cell,” in which a psychologist enters the subconscious of her patients.

EG 1b

Surrealist film

From the very outset, *film* played a key part in the Surrealist movement. The champions of the Surrealist avant-garde were primarily writers, but there were people within the circle who had all sorts of different backgrounds. This was very much in line with how the group explicitly saw itself: Surrealism was considered an attitude that was not confined to any particular medium and consciously operated in an interdisciplinary vein. The movement's journals contained articles on the opportunities in literature, film, and photography, in painting and in theater offered for Surrealist expression. The debate over whether the Surrealist idea could be applied in the various fields was anything if not controversial and fierce.

Many of those involved were themselves active in the field of film. Central figures in the Surrealist avant-garde wrote treatises on and reviews of film, for example poet and author *Louis Aragon*, fine artist *Salvador Dalí*, or writer and journalist *Robert Desnos*. *Antonin Artaud*, author and one of the movement's main protagonists in the early years, also worked as an actor and wrote his own scripts. He was not alone in this regard as among others, polymaths *Man Ray* and *Salvador Dalí* both wrote screenplays and directed films. The latter created the famous dream sequence for Alfred Hitchcock's psycho-thriller *Spellbound* (1945), a Surrealist film set consisting of a multitude of painted eyes. Some of the titans of 20th century film moved in Surrealist circles, including film director and critic *Germaine Dulac* and filmmaker *Luis Buñuel*.

The importance of film to Surrealism can be explained from the technical opportunities that it afforded. By means of *editing*, *fade-overs*, *collages* and *experimental techniques*, film can unhinge reality, imaginatively undermine natural laws and logic, and create grotesque hallucinatory effects. Today, three iconic films are emphatically referred to as Surrealist: *The Seashell and the Clergyman*, (Dulac; Artaud, 1928); *An Andalusian Dog* (Buñuel, Dalí, 1929); and *Age of Gold* (Buñuel, Dalí, 1930). The

influence of Surrealist elements, in particular in the context of psycho-thrillers and horror movies, is to be felt in cinema to this day. The film sequences and film stills to be viewed in the exhibition will give you an idea of this fascinating world of images.

EG 2

The Playfully Irrational

The Surrealist avant-garde of the 1920s and 1930s decidedly rejected middle-class notions of reason, Christian morals and traditional aesthetic norms. They addressed topics that had been suppressed by society such as dreams, the unconscious, the repressed, and the instinctive.

Their artistic actions and self-image also reflect this in an emphasis on playful methods and collective experience. The intention was to create works unencumbered by tradition and intellectual categories. Cadavre Exquis, for example, was a popular game among the Surrealists in which the person sitting next to you continued the sentence or picture that had been started but without knowing what it was. Opposing aspects collide and form bizarre, enigmatic but also insightful constellations. Consequently, collage remains a preferred technique of Surrealist works that can be used to combine opposites and playfully forge new links. To this day, Surrealist works are characterized by the so-called combinatorics of elements and shapes that were originally alien to one another. In the digital age, it has become a matter of course to reassemble independent pictorial elements and to shift contexts. Text-to-image services and AI-generated images exploit the infinite possibilities that are made possible by such combinatorics.

The Techniques of Surrealism

Arguably no previous artistic movement had used aesthetic means as deliberately as did the first-generation Surrealists. The Surrealist avant-garde sought new methods and techniques with the declared intention of liberating artistic creation from rationally controlled action, so as to come closer to a truer reality. They wanted to unleash the creative power of the unconscious to break with deeply engrained visual habits and modes of perception. For this reason, a mastery of the academically trained artistic genius was irrelevant.

The method of Écriture Automatique or automatic writing which the Surrealist writers loved to practice was further developed into visual art techniques such as the rubbing techniques of frottage and grattage or fumage produced with the assistance of a candle flame. What these techniques all have in common is the element of chance, which is the basis for the further development of the pictorial motif. The artists also employed random gestural techniques and variations of (semi-) automatic drawing or painting, an approach that would later pave the way for Abstract Expressionism, a prime example being Jackson Pollock's Drip Paintings. The Surrealists also established experimental techniques in the medium of photography and film, including the photogram or superimposition and montage.

EG 3

Get Involved!

Crossing traditionally established boundaries has been a driving force for the Surrealist movement from the very start. In order to be accepted into the circle of the Parisian avant-gardists or into groups in other cities, it did not matter what occupation you pursued or what training you had undergone. What was more important was a common attitude and an interest in the topics of Surrealism. This receptiveness is also reflected in the techniques and methods Surrealists embraced, where the focus is not on artistic mastery, but often on playing with chance and unconscious as well as a shared experience.

And true to the Surrealist spirit, you can become active in this part of the exhibition yourself: Draw along on a Cadavre Exquis or follow the instructions of artist Erwin Wurm.

Cadavre Exquis

Cadavr Exquis – this is the name the early Surrealists gave to a game that many of you are probably familiar with. This collective process creates a mixture of contradictions, surprises, and coincidences. It was already a popular game amongst Surrealists in the avant-garde and began with literary texts before drawings were also added. One of the first results provided the name: Le cadaver exquis boira le vin nouveau (The delicious cadaver will drink new wine).

It is a game requiring no previous knowledge and in which all creations are considered to be of artistic value. This is what made it particularly appealing to Surrealists, as art “does not belong to artists alone.” To demonstrate the creative principles of chance, the unconscious and collaborative work, we have set up a station for you to play and collaborate on your own artwork. So let’s bring together what doesn’t really belong together and fill the Kunsthalle with our own Surrealist works of art.

OG 1

The Boundless Metamorphosis

To this day, metamorphosis as a process of transformation from one state to another remains a recurring theme in Surrealist works. Characterized by the flowing transition, the duality in the fusion of contrasting aspects, it engenders the creation of ambiguous pictorial compositions. For René Magritte, it represented a delightful enhancement of the pure combination of different elements or combinatorics, as is the case with collage. Unlike purely additive procedures metamorphosis is a way of gradually merging things together

Fluid spaces without any breaks or boundaries open up for the interpretation of what is depicted. This openness enables new perspectives on the familiar and is intended to encourage a mental shift. Metamorphosis can serve to inscribe the unfamiliar into the familiar and consequently to expose outdated ways of thinking. So it is hardly surprising that metamorphosis has been a recurring element of Surrealist works over the decades that aim to break with visual habits. Metamorphosis makes it possible to negotiate open-ended themes and represent different perspectives simultaneously.

Playing with the Self

The mindset of the Surrealist avant-garde was a response to the changing times between the two world wars. People were to be made conscious of the repressed fears and aggressions of an entire era. The Surrealists aspired to combat existing taboos, ideological shackles, and the rationality of the Enlightenment. Instead, they sought unadulterated expression without the filter of societal norms and rationality. This is why they addressed the unconscious and repressed. In the context of this liberation from constraints, not only did they explore the search for identity but also the libidinal, the erotic and sexuality. The sex talks published in 1928 by the Paris circle around André Breton portray a strongly heterosexual perspective. The authors boasted shamelessly about their virility, degraded women as objects of lust and glorified rape.

However, even back then some members of the Surrealist circle were already taking decisive action against this attitude, most notably the lesbian photographer Claude Cahun, who was already addressing her own sexual identity in the 1920s. With her iconic self-portraits, in which she photographed herself in an androgynous manner, she played a pioneering role for the following generations of artist: Cindy Sherman, Sarah Lucas, ORLAN or Penny Slinger are representative in this exhibition for artists who take up similar issues, and in doing so utilize Surrealist aspects.

OG 2

The Object of Desire

As a result of Sigmund Freud's research into our libidinal drives, topics such as eroticism, desire, and love were favored among the Surrealist avant-garde. Desire in the context of dreamt-of longings is expressed in numerous Surrealist works that are considered iconic today. Through explicit representations of sexuality, the artists deliberately turned away from the rational middle-class world of Christian conventions. The main focus is on the male gaze, i.e., the gaze of heterosexual men on the female. Man Ray's photograph of a female nude seen from the rear on which he painted two f-shaped holes of a stringed instrument is one of the best-known works of Surrealist art. Hans Bellmer's disarticulated dolls also shape the Surrealist pictorial aesthetics and in their artistic fetishization of the female still serve as a point of reference for numerous later artists. For example, Cindy Sherman's photo series featuring mutilated plastic medical dolls can be linked directly to Bellmer's figures. Less well known are the homosexual artistic positions of Toyen, Claude Cahun or Pierre Molinier, who were part of the Surrealist avant-garde or had a direct connection to it. They clearly demonstrate the sexual openness that had been established within Surrealist circles since the 1920s and 30s. It built a foundation for subsequent generations of artists using Surrealist practices to subversively address sexuality to build on. Contemporary artists like Penny Slinger or Renate Bertlmann draw firmly on the Surrealist visual vocabulary and utilize it from a feminist perspective.