



EXHIBITION TEXT

Never Again Art against War and Fascism in the 20th and 21st Centuries

August 30 – November 17, 2019

opening: Aug 30, 7 pm

Museum on the Vistula
Wybrzeże Kościuszkowskie 22

The exhibition *Never Again: Art against War and Fascism in the 20th and 21st Centuries*, organized on the 80th anniversary of the outbreak of World War II, relies on three precisely determined focal points – Guernica and the 1930s, the “Arsenal” exhibition and the 1950s, contemporary art and (post-)fascism – to present the singular and distinctive tradition of anti-fascist art.

Although the exhibition features primarily historic materials and iconic artworks that shaped the form of anti-fascist and anti-war resistance, the questions posed by the show concern the contemporary era.

We search the rich anti-fascist history for answers to the question about the significance and force of this tradition today. We ask why anti-fascism – as a universalised experience and a peaceful foundation of social life – has lost its consolidating power? Do we no longer fear wars and violence as a fundamental threat to our existence? Did anti-fascism come to an end with communism, with which it was closely linked both in the 1930s and in the 1950s? And can it therefore be successfully pursued further within democratic traditions: liberalism, social democracy? Or is the struggle with fascism (neo-fascism, post-fascism) identical to the struggle with capitalism, which is the essence of the leftist anti-fascist tradition? Finally, how to recount the history of anti-fascism so that it inspires today’s social movements that aim to counter violence?

The exhibition concentrates on three moments in history. The first is the decade of the 1930s: we look at the most renowned anti-war painting, Pablo Picasso’s *Guernica* from 1937, presenting the history of its creation and reception, which reflects in a distinctive and dramatic way the entanglement of art and politics since the 1930s. We also depict the international anti-fascist movement prior to the outbreak of World War II and its ties with the workers’ movement on the example of artists from the Weimar Republic, the Krakow Group and leftist movements in the United States. The second discussed period is the communist era in Poland, when anti-fascism and pacifism were given official prominence – this section of the exhibition concentrates primarily on the “Arsenal” – Polish National Exhibition of Young Visual Arts Against War, Against Fascism, held within the 5th World Festival of Youth and Students in 1955. The harnessing of anti-war stances by the communist propaganda apparatus of that era resonates until the present day in discussions concerning the traps and duties involved in the civic – or even downright political – engagement of artists. The third focus of the show embraces today’s approaches to fascism, which ceases to be treated exclusively as a historical ideological formation responsible for genocide, but is evoked in the context of the modern-day racist, misogynistic and violent narratives that prepare the ground for the catastrophes of the first half of the 20th century to happen again. A major role for that

matter is also played by the crisis of the European Union, the greatest peace project in the history of the continent (a response to the events of World War II, driven by faith in humanism and universalism in the new political order), and by the sprawling wave of populisms.

Never Again. Art against War and Fascism in the 20th and 21st Centuries identifies iconic images and key aspects of the anti-fascist tradition throughout the above moments in history. We use images as a prism through which to portray the complexity of the anti-fascist stance and the variety of approaches to the problem: from political satire and testimonies of atrocities, to apocalyptic forecasts and visual propaganda, to more ambiguous abstract articulations of pro-democratic and anti-authoritarian content. We highlight the moments of self-reflection, the self-awareness of the entanglements of the anti-fascist movements, which are visible in seminal artworks, such as Guernica, or at moments of crisis, such as the "Arsenal" exhibition. We embrace studies on the history of images that accompanied the anti-fascist movements as a tool to understand today's stances and activities that define themselves as egalitarian and pro-democratic. We look at works by contemporary artists, such as Hito Steyerl, Nikita Kadan and Wolfgang Tillmans, in search of evidence of the continuity of the anti-fascist tradition, we ask about its effectiveness in the face of such phenomena as the acceptance of hate speech, post-truth, the escalation of acts of violence, the return of aggressive nationalism and populism. At the same time, we discern the weaknesses of such "safety fuses" of peaceful order as liberal democracy and the European Union.

What images are able to affect the imagination, organise resistance, initiate constructive community projects? Is it the language of critical art? Are these strategies that deploy the iconography of popular culture, fashion, enter the mainstream? We also ask about the role of propaganda – as a manner in which the work affects the viewers' emotions and attitudes, but also as a tool of civic pro-democratic mobilisation. We reconsider the very definition of fascism. Highlighting the differences between historical circumstances, aware of the deficits of the anti-fascist tradition, we seek contemporary, communicative and effective art that speaks against war, against fascism.

The exhibition presents works by such artists as – in the 1930s: Maja Berezowska, Alice Neel, Dora Maar, George Grosz, John Heartfield, Jonasz Stern, Leopold Lewicki, Sasza Blonder, Adam Marczyński, Bolesław Stawiński, Bronisław Wojciech Linke, Stanisław Osostowicz; – in the 1950s: Izaak Celnikier, Alina Szapocznikow, Jerzy Tchórzewski, Erna Rosenstein, Marek Oberländer, Jan Dziędziora, Jerzy Tchórzewski, Tadeusz Trepcowski, Waldemar Cwenarski, Wojciech Fangor, Andrzej Wróblewski, Xavier Guerrero; – today: Alice Creischer, Nikita Kadan, Forensic Architecture, Jonathan Horowitz, Goshka Macuga, Mario Lombardo, Mykola Ridnyi, Hito Steyerl, Marta Rosler, Raymond Pettibon, Wilhelm Sasnal, The Society of Friends of Maxwell Itoya and Wolfgang Tillmans.

I

Guernica and the anti-fascism of the 1930s

The keynote of the exhibition is the most renowned anti-war painting in the history of visual culture: Guernica by Pablo Picasso. We unpack the dilemmas involved in its making through a documentation of the stages of painting the piece at the studio in rue des Grands-Augustins in Paris, created by the then partner of Picasso, the artist, photographer and anti-fascist activist Dora Maar, who documented the progress of the works between May 1 and June 4, 1937. This allows us to trace the efforts behind representing a new type of modern tragedy and commemorating the anonymous victims of the first carpet bombing unleashed by German and Italian fascists on April 26, 1937 in the Basque town of Guernica. We may follow the creation of an image of the apocalyptic tragedy whose monstrosity defies the imagination of what is human and which the artist seeks to convey without losing out of sight its public and historical dimension. At the same time, we witness the crystallisation of the political message of the painting. The anti-war canvas initially features symbols of political struggle, the clenched fist emblematic of the anti-fascist workers' movements. Yet, gradually, with the rise in Soviet influences in the

young Spanish Republic and with the murder of the leaders of Spanish anarchists and the local communist movement by Soviet agents, the symbols of workers' struggle dominated by Soviet propaganda disappear. What remains is a purely existential anti-war protest. As T.J. Clark states in his classic essay published in the book *Picasso and Truth: From Cubism to Guernica*, "All its politics – all its response to Fascism and Communism and the new face of war – were in the picture". *Guernica* appears as an extraordinary painting, both interventionist and universal at the same time, anticipating the paradoxes and the tragedy of the functioning of the left and anti-fascism in the 20th century".

Guernica features in the exhibition two more times: as an exact yet significantly smaller replica by Wojciech Fangor, an element of the propagandistic anti-fascist decoration of Warsaw, a city still in ruins, during the Festival of Youth in 1955, and in a tapestry by Goshka Macuga which represents an image of the painting at the United Nations headquarters at a time when it became an official and slightly faded icon of anti-war politics. We thus highlight the complex and variously manipulated reception of Pablo Picasso's painting throughout more than eighty years since it came into being.

Yet, *Guernica* is preceded by an extremely rich history of anti-fascist representations, merely signalled at the exhibition through a selection of works by artists hailing from a number of milieus. We present drawings, graphic prints and paintings by the leftist Krakow Group, whose pieces concentrate on class struggle, demonstrations, humiliations and arrests of workers (Sasza Blonder, Leopold Lewicki, Adam Marczyński, Stanisław Osostowicz, Bolesław Stawiński, Jonasz Stern). We depict social tensions in the face of the economic crisis in the 1930s (Bronisław Wojciech Linke). A similar spirit informs the paintings of demonstrations against the Nazis and portraits of the American workers' movement heroes by Alice Neel. John Heartfield and George Grosz tapped into techniques that made reproduction in high-circulation press possible, creating iconic satirical anti-fascist images.

A sort of coda of this exhibition section is the showcase with works by Maja Berezowska, who created anti-fascist caricatures in the 1930s, which landed her in a concentration camp during the war, and whose camp drawings bear testimony to her will to survive and preserve humanity. In turn, the post-war works by Erna Rosenstein introduce the topic of the Holocaust, documenting it in an extremely personal, intimate way, while adding an aspect of private drama to the anti-war narrative.

II

The "Arsenal", or an attempt to reclaim the anti-fascist narrative

The years of Socialist Realism in the Stalinist period bring about a corruption of the anti-fascist narrative. It is harnessed at the service of current political struggle with "capitalist imperialism", i.e. stoking the Cold War conflict. These paradoxes of anti-fascism in Socialist Realism are well illustrated by the "Arsenal" exhibition in 1955, titled "Against War, Against Fascism" and organised in the context of the 5th World Festival of Youth and Students – a mass propaganda event hosting delegations from 114 countries in Warsaw, which aimed to build the consciousness of "proletarian internationalism", closely linked with the conviction that the sole antidote to the threat of the return of fascism could be found in communist humanism.

The festival and the exhibition open one year before the political "Thaw", at a time of the strengthening of the conviction that communism, tainted by Stalinist atrocities, has lost its moral legitimacy. It is humanism in the sphere of ideas as well as Realism and the human figure at the level of form that become a field of struggle between Socialist Realism, its legitimacy on the decline, and young artists seeking a subjective articulation of their anti-war statements. At stake here was the attempt to "defend the ordinary human being" and to depict reality differently from the socialist authorities, which also invoked humanist categories and the good of humankind. In the exhibition, Marek Oberländer undertakes the task of representing the realm of the Holocaust, glossed over in silence under Stalinism, within a mission to speak on behalf of those who perished. In turn, Andrzej Wróblewski and Jan Dziędziora create grim existential portraits of ordinary people relegated outside the optimistic matrix of Socialist Realism. Those and other representations stood in stark contrast to the modern visual propaganda of the Festival of Youth, within which gigantic photomontages by Tadeusz Trepkowski and a replica of Picasso's *Guernica* featured on the ruined buildings of the capital city – they were supposed to establish Warsaw as an anti-

war symbol of the communist victory over fascism. What is more, the replica of Picasso's Massacre in Korea, which accompanied them, drew a line between German fascism from the period of World War II with American imperialism during the Korean War. According to the Minister of Culture and Art Włodzimierz Sokorski, responsible for those works, all artists participate in the war for peace, all are "soldiers in that war" and "we are essentially on the same front as the heroic Koreans and Chinese who fight against American imperialism, who fight for freedom".

For all the above reasons, the "Arsenal" exhibition illustrates the moment of passage in the anti-fascist narrative from the official rhetoric of the communist state to the language of human rights, which lies at the foundation of democratic societies. It marked a watershed also for modern art in Poland, since in the context of the political "Thaw" the "Arsenal" represented a reaction to Socialist Realism that was radically different from modern art. It mainly consisted in an attempt to refresh the formula of engaged art on the basis of Realism, which guaranteed legibility and broad social reach. Artists wanted to lend it a new humanist dimension, proclaiming the primacy of the artist's attitude to reality over their attitude to art. A different path was followed by the representatives of Modernism in painting, who chose the autonomy of art in the aftermath of the political "Thaw" and escaped socially-engaged topics. The exhibition features Modernist decorations of the Festival of Youth, emphasising the ties between Socialist Realism and modernity. It is from the sphere of design and architecture, and not painting, that a humanist proposition of Modernism will soon develop (Zofia and Oskar Hansen's Open Form).

The section devoted to the "Arsenal" embraces paintings by the participants of the exhibition, for instance the grim peaceful demonstration by Waldemar Cwenarski, which illustrates the doubt in the belief that fascism can only be defeated under the banner of communism. There is also a painting by Jerzy Tchórzewski which foregrounds the human figure and their drama over and beyond abstraction and the ultimate severing of painting's ties with references to reality. A similar formal dimension is manifested by Alina Szapocznikow's sculpture Exhumed, which recapitulates the artist's war experience and commemorates the re-evaluation within the communist movement during the "Thaw". This ambivalent piece juxtaposes the atrocities of fascism and communism. In turn, the painting by Xavier Guerrero offers an example of revolutionary Mexican art, which inspired the "Arsenal" artists in their search for a new Realist engaged art. Complementing the show are two works bearing reference to Socialist Realism: Andrzej Wróblewski's Attention, It's Coming! and Izaak Celnikier's Korea.

III. Contemporary art and (post-)fascism

The modern-day relations between art and (post-)fascism can be determined not through the question "what is fascism?", but rather "which fascism are we dealing with?". Artists draw attention to the "immortality" of fascism, which is not a historical phenomenon but a constant coordinate embedded in global politics and economy. It manifests itself through street and domestic aggression, violent relations in the workplace, homophobia, hate speech, extermination of other species, etc.

In the works of Nikita Kadan, an artist originating from Ukraine, war forms part of the contemporary experience, it is a recurrent imperative, a beast that awakens in the "good citizen". The drawings presented in the exhibition were created on the basis of documentation of the Lviv Pogrom of 1941. Jonathan Horowitz from the United States brings the Holocaust back to memory in relation to media images, contemporary historical politics as well as 20th century art, including Minimalism as a popular "martyrological aesthetics". The replica of the inscription "Arbeit Macht Frei" from the death camp in Auschwitz was created after the original was stolen and cut for a Swedish neo-Nazi in 2009. Alice Creischer, Hito Steyerl and Martha Rosler concentrate on the systemic conditions of contemporary fascism, mostly with regard to racism and misogyny as well as manipulated information in the press, on television and online. Hito Steyerl's film Babenhausen (1997) evokes the events of 1993, when the house of Tony Abraham Merin, the last Jew in Babenhausen, was burnt down. In Alice Creischer's work Kussbilder (1992/2018), the artist kisses with her lipsticked lips the pages of the Bild magazine, the most popular tabloid in Europe, during anti-refugee riots. In her canonical series of collages House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home, Martha Rosler highlights the way in which war permeates the private sphere, becoming "familiar" and forming part of everyday aesthetic and ethical experience.

Drawings by Wilhelm Sasnal and Raymond Pettibon depict systemic violence through the prism of subcultural aesthetics – both artists frequently illustrate album covers by punk rock bands as well as create posters and leaflets with anti-fascist content. Sasnal's paintings feature references to World War II and the Cold War era with consciously used quotations from the then language of propaganda and art. Struggle with fascism is never won once and for all, the artists emphasise that this threat compels constant vigilance and mobilising the persuasive potential of art.

A different path was chosen by the German photographer Wolfgang Tillmans, whose struggle with authoritarianism and populism relies on “corporate” aesthetics and popular distribution channels (social media, billboards). The artist becomes involved in political campaigns, particularly for the survival of universal values inscribed in the “peace project” of the European Union, which emerged as a consequence of the traumatic developments of World War II.

The riots in Chemnitz, the rally of Unite the Right in Charlottesville, the National Radical Camp marching hand in hand with Forza Nuova on the Independence Day in Warsaw – is this already fascism? The contemporary artists who engage with these issues are unanimous: when this question can be answered with absolute certainty, it will already be too late.