Dictating Art Around 1939: Art, Democracy/Fascism and Communism

In early 1939, as perhaps a defensive sign, Superman and Batman appear for the first time in comic book form. They arrive in the mind of the American public while Hitler is invading Czechoslovakia and while Madrid falls into the hands of Franco. This painful re-organization of Europe along with the neutrality of the U.S. and the possibility, according to Einstein, of an atomic attack while New York is organizing and celebrating the international 1939 World Fair, shows the intensity of debates occurring during that year.

By investigating these harsh discussions around 1939 in Europe and in the United States, by analyzing the different artistic strategies populating a western culture in eruption, the seminar in studying this crucial moment, will also be an occasion to reflect on our time, a period where so many people are wondering again about the dysfunction and disintegration of the traditional model of western democracies.

Starting with the Breton/Rivera/Trotsky manifesto about independent art, and the famous article by Clement Greenberg “Avant-Garde an Kitsch”, the seminar will compare works produced by traditional Avant-Garde groups to other esthetic forces actively challenging them.

The seminar will investigate and compare multi-cultural spheres (art, Jazz, world fairs, fashion, theatre and literature) confronted with the upcoming war. The concepts of alienation, modernism, populism will be discussed as well as contemporary texts about democracy.

Art works by De Kooning, Gorky will be compared with Surrealist works (after their famous exhibition in Paris in 1938), with Vieira Da Silva, Hans Hartung new abstraction and Julio Gonzales, Bram Van Velde etc...without forgetting the imprisonment, already by 1939, of artists in the Concentration Camp des Milles in Provence (Bellmer, Wols, Ernst).

Acéphale 1936-1939.


Denis Hollier: Against Architecture: The Writings of Georges bataille , MIT Press, 1989


Yves Michaud: Violence et politique. 1978


