Helena Capkova

Czech Surrealism

The Surrealist Group of Czechoslovakia was a group of fine artists and literary authors founded in 1934. The goals of the group were shared with the international surrealist movement lead by Andre Breton. His second manifesto published in 1929 and his visit to Prague in 1935 were of particular importance for the Czechoslovak group that operates until today. Important members of the original group included: K.Teige, K. Biebl, Toyen, B. Brouk, J. Štyrský, V. Makovský, J. Ježek, J. Honzl. The history of the group is coloured with terminations and new beginnings usually determined by dissagreements amongst the leading members. In 1938 the founder, poet Vítězslav Nezval dismissed the group in protest against the anti-Soviet ideas of the majority of its members. Some of the remaining members ignored Nezval’s action and continued their activities until 1939. Jindrich Št**ý**rský’s death in 1942 marked the completion of the decline of the group during which time it was deserted by many members who emigrated abroad and the remaining group included only Teige, Toyen and a newer member, the young artist and protégé of Toyen, Jindřich Heisler.

Yet the new generation of Czech surrealist artists had already formed. The group Ra edition formed in 1937 by younger generation artists such J.Istler, L.Kundera, Z.Lorenc, M.Miškovská and O.Mizera. This diverse group shared the same point of reference of the established theorist Karel Teige. Their activities, including publishing, continued during WWII and in 1947 Ra Group was formed and introduced in an exhibition, catalogue and an edited volume of texts. The members of Ra Group include two poets (L.Kundera, Z.Lorenc) and six artists (J.Istler, M.Koreček, B.Lacina, V.Reichmann, V.Tikal a V.Zykmund). Their approach left behind some of the key concepts of surrealism, such as psychic automatism, and aimed instead to focus on creative processes which continue to resonate with contemporary art movements, such as informal or abstract expressionism. They sympathised with Communist party ideals and aimed to connect with similar groups abroad as exemplified by their attendance at the International Conference of Revolutionary Surrealism in Brussels in October 1947. After the dramatic change in the Czech political landscape in 1948 which resulted in power landing in Communist hands, the artists were strictly prohibited from contacting other artists abroad and the group was disbanded. However, Teige’s group was able to re-establish itself in 1950 and the wider art scene also became home to some solitary surrealist artists such as Marie Pospíšilová, Emila Medková, Karel Hynek and Vratislav Effenberger, who later replaced Karel Teige as the leading theorist of the Surrealist group.

Until his death in 1951 Teige tirelessly tried to re-new the surrealist activities he had started before the war failing, however, to find a likeminded group. Eventually he contacted the Spořilov (a neighbourhood in Prague) Surrealists who together with a few others accepted him into their fold. This group published ten volumes of the journal Zodiac Signs, and eventually, under the totalitarian government, the Spořilov Surrealists morphed into an illegal, underground movement.

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