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Hans Ulrich Reck

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Survival in Marseille: Varian Fry, Surrealism and a Note on Refugee Aid



Max Ernst, Jacqueline Lamda, André Masson, André Breton, Varian Fry (f. l. t. r.) in the 'Bureau du centre américain du secours', Marseille, 1940-41 (Photo Ylla/Camilla Koffler, Fondation Chambon, Collection Fry)

From a technical perspective, style labels are often helpful in art history yet, with regard to content, they tend to obscure the view of the essentials.

Epistemologically, they are not usable anyway, since they amount to nothing more than a 'chronic' model that is not able to accommodate any insight into the conditions of art. But, as stated above, as a marker and index for technical identification they may be used without doing any harm.

Inevitably however, there are some paradoxes: with the prevailing success of a label, there will be a growing, yet unnoticed, belief that there was a corresponding, verified corpus of work. Again, this would not be such a problem if only individual cases at the margins were excluded or went unnoticed initially. However, if a label is applied not only to decades, historical positions, artists groups and other countable and objectified elements but also to both methodical and thematic concerns of the artistic articulation itself, then we are, indeed, faced with a serious problem, because then the label affects the substance and becomes misleading. The label of 'Surrealism' has always been such a particularly lamentable case in point. Just think of all the different artists and issues that are considered part of this 'movement' or 'style', especially since, in German, there is an almost inevitable danger of misunderstanding by mixing up 'Subrealism' and 'Suprarealism'. Just think of all the educational circumstances, problems, cooperations and issues that are insistently being linked to this punchy designation.

For the dogmatists, 'original' or 'true' Surrealism ends with Antonin Artaud's exclusion from the movement, so after only a few years of actual programmatic truth. For others, Surrealism ends in the 1930s when the trivial enters the art of Dali, who was – allegedly – suddenly corrupted by commercial considerations. Yet others, judging by the nature of the matter, also include artists such as Paul Klee or René Magritte, who, although there were some weak personal ties, had few-to-no programmatic relationships to Surrealism and are better known for their sharp rebuttals and for distancing themselves from it. Hence, internal

settlements of group membership, just like retrospectively validated 'style', neither provide certainty in differentiation nor an appropriate semantic – i.e. meaningful with regards to the nature of the matter – attribution.

This is all the more true for Surrealism, which, strengthened by Duchamp's return that was motivated, in turn, by the New Realism and Pop Art of the early 1960s, maintained its tradition of exhibition but was subsequently reduced to the historical singularity of a faded avant-garde on the one hand and, on the other, was debased by mass culture into some magical imagery positioned outside of art. And yet, beyond value statements and labelling and regardless of the controversial debate relating to true, authentic, genuine or 'original' Surrealism, there was a period of the most intense surrealist movements and articulations. A period that – with a certain degree of justification and an even higher degree of plausibility given the particular circumstances – has not been noticed as a special situation for the surrealists, especially since this period was not a privileged situation for them.

We are talking about 1940 and 1941, a period of exile and ostracism where countless opponents of the Nazi regime and many artists and intellectuals were forced to flee their country. It was no coincidence that this also included a large number of surrealists who, fleeing from persecution, were first stranded in France, from where, faced time and again with border closures, most of them tried to get to the USA, a country that attempted to seal itself off by only accepting ridiculously – even scandalously – low numbers of refugees. And so, a group of surrealists entered a force field facilitated by a great man who, without orders or authority and, sadly, also without support of any note, achieved something beyond compare and yet never received any acknowledgement for his courageous deeds.

We are talking about the American national Varian Fry (1907 - 1967), a man who – with a great deal of civic courage, integrity, natural bravery and with his mere personal commitment as a journalist – managed to set up a help centre in Marseille that, over a period of less than 18 months, saved the lives of more than

2,500 people by helping them to escape to Spain, Portugal and the USA. He did that only to be abandoned by the Americans after only a few weeks of operation, to have his activities stymied by the French, to be hunted by the Nazis and, later, to be persecuted in his home country as a communist supporter, even to the extent of accusations that he was one of the main people responsible for 'contaminating infiltration' and 'endangering homeland security' as the McCarthyite hysteria of the time would have it. These views were supported by Fry's apparent 'choice' of the following list of intellectuals, who were decidedly unwelcome in the USA, and who, for the most part, were labelled as 'left-wing'. Taking into account that only some of the most prominent names are mentioned here and that Fry did not favour anyone, nor did he make his willingness to assist dependent upon the fame of the person being helped, among the people he saved were: Hannah Arendt, Ernst-Josef Aufricht, André Breton, Marc Chagall, Marcel Duchamp, Max Ernst, Lion Feuchtwanger, Leonhard Frank, Siegfried Kracauer, Wifredo Lam, Wanda Landowska, Jacques Lipchitz, Alma Mahler-Werfel, Golo Mann, Heinrich Mann, André Masson, Walter Mehring, Otto Meyerhoff, Soma Morgenstern, Max Ophüls, Hertha Pauli, Benjamin Péret, Alfred Polgar, Hans Sahl, Bruno Strauss, Franz Werfel and Paul Westheim. The list also included Fritz Thyssen, the only renegade among the Nazi-supporting German captains of industry who felt ashamed of having been one of them and who, with Fry's support, managed to flee via Marseille. After being forced to terminate his initiative and return to the USA and, therefore, condemned to inactivity, the journalist Varian Fry wrote many articles, for example 'The Massacre of the Jews in Europe', published in December 1942. In 1945, he published a book with the title *Surrender on Demand*, giving his version of the refugee aid initiative. After his return to the USA and before being scathingly denounced in the hysterical anti-communist America of the 1950s, Fry joined the civil rights movement and became a member of the International Federation for Human Rights.

A supporter of refugees and an outstanding example of civic courage, together with Lisa Fittko and many others who have remained anonymous Varian Fry managed, under the most difficult of circumstances and with unstinting effort, to act in a manner that is worthy of our utmost respect. Despite this achievement,

or maybe because of it, Fry has faded into obscurity. Impoverished, excluded from both the publishing and film businesses, with increasingly fewer jobs in the USA and, as stated above, ostracised for being one of the main agents in 'contaminating' the country with so many communist film makers and intellectuals during the McCarthyite hysteria of the 1950s, he never received any acknowledgement and was, instead, quite literally erased from the militant and neurotically overcharged public mind and so from the 'true identity' of the USA. Distraught, he saw no way out and eventually committed suicide.

An exhibition in Paris (Halle St. Pierre, 2 rue Ronsard, 75018 Paris, autumn 2007 to 9 March 2008) paid tribute to Fry in a fashion that was as convincing and touching as it was noteworthy and accurate, although it was unlikely to lift the veil of obscurity for good. Neither would the photographic homage commemorating the 100th anniversary of Fry's birth, which was presented in 2007 at the Berlin Academy of the Arts, change this state of affairs. The Paris exhibition took a more lavish and in-depth approach to its subject than the one shown in Berlin. The St. Pierre market hall-turned-cultural-centre focuses on special exhibitions and events. Located a little below Sacre Cœur and next to the 'official' Montmartre, but just enough removed from the tourist trail that no one who isn't actively looking will find it, Halle St. Pierre presented very rarely shown exhibits to an almost non-existent audience. On the afternoon of December 3rd, 2007, I counted only a handful of visitors over the course of three hours. There were fewer people in the exhibition than there were people using their mobile devices in the café located in the spacious foyer.

Had the exhibition curators used the rarely shown pieces to play the 'second spring' of Surrealism card, the exhibition would certainly have drawn the masses. But, for once, they wanted to do justice to Varian Fry and put his work centre stage. However, the curse of anonymity and invisibility that had clung to Fry also cast its shadow over this exhibition, since no-one immediately grasped or anticipated what treasures lay behind the rather sober title of 'Varian Fry. Marseille 1940 - 1941'. With Paris offering a multitude of crowd-pulling exhibitions, both permanent and temporary, it would have been easy to win the

audience over to the discovery of this particular brand of Surrealism, if only there had been the will to focus on the seemingly circumstantial issues.

It was, after all, no coincidence that Surrealism was able to attract so many subversive minds – and hence the politically persecuted – in those exposed times. Despite Breton's rigid and despotic authority and despite the occasional miasma of male bonding and sectarianism, what constantly remained as a substantial principle of Surrealism was the rejection of controlled order and, hence, a vehement and zestful embracing of the uncontrollability of the incidental, towards the unimportant and the opposed and, in particular, towards that which is taboo and ostracised. So, it is no coincidence that many surrealists gathered around Fry in Marseille and that many of them survived because of him, and also that many works were created in that context. However, the possibility of commemorating this intense period – this almost unique situation when so many aspects of life amalgamated into fate – with such an outstanding body of work was not due to accidental survival, but to the deep gratitude that motivated the descendants and friends of those saved by Fry's initiative to loan rare and highly treasured pieces for this exhibition.



André Masson, Novalis, Mage d'Amour – 'Flame', playing card from 'Jeu de Marseilles', 1941, Marseilles

Not only did the exhibition provide an opportunity to learn about the legendary *Jeu de Marseille*, a card game that had André Breton as the gamesmaster and that

was played to while away the time at the Villa 'Bel Air' refuge, you also had the chance to study many other works by the people who met and worked there, who came and went and who hid there and at other places between Provence and the Pyrenees. There were also works that had been auctioned in Marseille to contribute to the costs of running the refugee centre. And, incidentally, you would also learn that this particular surrealist art, devoid of any vitalist vanities and avant-garde affectations, had always been a way of organising oneself in real life, as opposed to the mythical, and that it was not a form of mere representation or even poetic glorification or denial. This kind of Surrealism rarely happened as evidently as it did during these two years in Marseille. And rarely has Surrealism so evidently proven itself as survival training. But, again, it was no coincidence that there were so many surrealists among the refugees, who stood out with their brave aesthetic and political actions in order to keep a level head, faced as they were with the insanity that defined the period. And they did this true to the maxim of the automatism of the unconscious, on the basis of the inscrutable logic of the deviant, of the convulsion of the uncontrollable, of the importance of an extended form of reason that would undermine each claim of truth with the belief that each truth was first and foremost a hitherto undiscovered error and that those errors were dispersed singularities that must not hastily be forced into a worldview or into any other form of coherence.

This kind of survival exercise and a relaxed, *en passant* subversiveness, which must have been increasingly focused on nothing less than mere existence while simultaneously understanding that, when your life is at risk, then survival alone is not enough, was documented in various ways in the exhibition, through works by Hans Arp, André Breton, Victor Brauner, Camille Bryen, Marc Chagall, Frédéric Delanglade, Oscar Dominguez, Marcel Duchamp, Max Ernst, Jacques Hérold, Wifredo Lam, Jacqueline Lamba, Jacques Lipchitz, Alberto Magnelli, André Masson, Roberto Matta, Ferdinand Springer, Sophie Täuber and Wols, as well as through collective works ('*cadavre exquis*', collective drawings). In their specific ways, almost all the great names of the European visual avant-garde of the time participated in this surrealist survival exercise, which did not use art as an instrument but, rather, just the opposite: life became a corresponding force

for the artistic organisation of a lifetime and, hence, this exercise both maintained, and in itself corroborated, a subtle correspondence.

European culture and, even more so, European civilisation have yet to realise how much they are indebted to Varian Fry. For once, however, this statement is not flavoured with desperation but with great, life-embracing cheerfulness, because Fry's work, which was never to become 'a work' as such, cannot be diminished by ignorance. It served only that which it effected and no other sign beyond that. And thus it remains as solid as a rock in the turbulent waters of the unleashed malice that marked the last century, like everything else that compares to it, be it on a small or large scale, important or ignored.

Fry's achievement and veracity are not dependent upon their reception. He did not spend a single moment of his life caring about any form of attention other than that which would help to alleviate the plight of refugees. In this respect, the exhibition was impressive, not only for the great care with which it was put together but, first and foremost, for the fact that it managed to touch the visitor with a sense of humanity whose future is best described today with an uplifting, rather than crushing, melancholy and with a kind of positively fuelled scepticism inspirited by example. From late autumn 2007 to March 9th 2008, visitors had the chance to see this wonderful exhibition on Fry's lifework. After that, many exhibits vanished again from the public eye, presumably for good, to arrive again at that place where the all-too-rare practice of honouring Fry's memory remains alive: among the grateful relatives and descendants of those whose lives he saved.

Appendix / Outlook

Refugee Aid – On the Scandal and Motive of a Life Beyond Borders / Concept for a Radio Programme

Today, refugee aid is a predominantly dirty business: compensation of collateral damages from colonialism, arms trade and human trafficking. But, on the other hand, there is refugee aid as a crystal core of the human willingness to help, a

commitment based upon and effected solely by individual decision. A living, practiced utopia on the one hand and a poignantly cynical business where human beings are degraded to worthless raw material. This dialectic, by which we pay the price for the fact that globalisation both means and effects the worthlessness of human life, provides the framework for a reflection on forced or prevented exile, but also on exile that was made possible. Timeframe: the last 200 years.

This would have to include several distinct features: the most pressing one would be a homage to – in fact, an enforced rediscovery of – Varian Fry and Lisa Fittko, who, along with thousands of 'ordinary' European citizens, also saved dozens of members of the artistic, philosophical and cultural intelligentsia from the old continent and who have thus provided an invaluable service to the preservation and development of civilisation. And not forgetting Fritz Thyssen, the industrial magnate who, after initially contributing to bankrolling the Nazi project, turned Nazi opponent, had his wealth expropriated and fled to the USA, where he wrote his book *I Paid Hitler* (1941, even today, no German translation exists), and who survived due to Fry's courageous help.

Besides those they saved, very few have come forward to thank these two exemplary people, neither in Europe nor in the USA and, most definitely, not in Germany. Defamed as the organiser of the communist fifth column that undermined Hollywood during the McCarthy era, an impoverished Varian Fry died in 1967 by his own hand. Lisa Fittko passed away at the age of 95 a few years ago in Chicago. In Germany, both Fry and Fittko are almost completely forgotten: in the USA his activities only became known with the publication of Mary Jayne Gold's 1980 book *Crossroads Marseille 1940*. Gold worked with Fry in Marseille and was part of the rescue operation from its inception.

These two people will form one of the central themes of the programme. Other themes will include: the refugee business today, the failure of the UNO and the criminal activities of the Red Cross. Relevant stays in exile, places and forms of action – in no particular order and not listed by importance: WWII, Heine in

Paris. Also in Paris and starting from Paris: the persecution of Gustave Courbet after the uprising of the Commune and his exile in Baden-Baden and La-Tour-de-Peilz. As a special case: the German empire's absurd help in Lenin's escape from Switzerland back to Russia, proving that there is also such a thing as escaping to your home country with the help of your enemies who harbour malicious intentions. The persecution of dissident intellectuals during the Enlightenment, Voltaire & Co. Using the biographies of Samuel Beckett and Hannah Arendt, we will highlight refugee movements and both the breakaway and recovery of security in and for the 20th century.

However, the focus is not only on people portraits, places, themes, periods and movements, but also on an actual philosophy of escape and refugee aid. It is rooted in the idea of resistance and possibly also in a specific form of treason against the impositions dealt by the traitors and criminals, by the oppressors and persecutors. What drives people to act as if they did not need to consider questions of safety for themselves or their loved ones?

Heuristic profile: overall, the theme deals with the psycho-physiognomic characteristics of an existential philosophy between crime and humanity. The focus is on expulsion and exclusion, on criminalising and marginalising certain groups. These aspects accompany the light of enlightenment as a shadow, in the same way as selfless acts of help, where people unconditionally risk their own lives light up the dark times of war and annihilation.

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