Facing the Future

Art in Europe 1945 - 1968

Facing the Future Art in Europe





THE PUSHKIN STATE MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS

1945 - 1968



After the liberation of the Auschwitz concentration camp by the Red Army, children show photographers the prisoner numbers tattooed into their arms, February 1945. © BPK

1945

27/01/1945

Liberation of the surviving prisoners from the Auschwitz concentration camp Auschwitz-Birkenau was the biggest German death camp during the Nazi era. It was located near the Polish town of Oświęcim, which was renamed Auschwitz. The name "Auschwitz" has become a byword for the Holocaust. There were over 5.6 million victims of the Holocaust, of whom around 1.1 million people, including a million Jews, were murdered at Birkenau. Most of the victims came from Belgium, Germany, France, Greece, Italy, Yugoslavia, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Austria, Poland, Romania, the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia and Hungary.



View of the ruined centre of Warsaw after the retreat of the German troops, January 1945 © BPK

Jan 1945

Warsaw, Poland, in

ruins, January 1945



British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, US President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Soviet leader Joseph Stalin during the Three Power Conference at Yalta, February 1945. Photo: Samary Gurary @ MAMM/MDF COLLECTION, MOSCOW

04-11/02/1945

Yalta Conference The three main Allies of World War II (USA, UK, USSR) discuss the denazification, demilitarization, democratization and partition of Germany, along with the distribution of power in Europe after the end of the war.

timeline | 1945-1950 ►



Poster from the Fantasten exhibition, Galerie Gerd Rosen, Berlin, February 1946 © BPK

1945



Európai Iskola (1945-1948), a group of Hungarian art critics and artists, publishes its "Manifesto of the European School"







The Spanish painter Pablo Picasso holds a skull in his hands, Paris, 1944. Photo: Robert Capa © ROBERT CAPA © INTERNATIONAL CENTER OF PHOTOGRAPHT/MAGNUM PHOTOS



13-15/02/1945

Dresden, Germany, in ruins, February 1945 British/American aerial bombing of the city of Dresden 24/03/1945

Pablo Picasso: "What is E an artist?", *Les Lettres*, Paris, 1945

25/04/1945 Elbe Day

25/04/1945

Signing of the Charter of the United Nations in San Francisco

07-08/05/1945

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The capitulation of Germany / End of World War II in Europe

29/05/1945

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Speech by Thomas Mann, "Deutschland und die Deutschen" (Germany and the Germans) at the Library of Congress, Washington D.C.

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20/11/1945-14/04/1949 1945-1949

Nuremburg Trials

Munich Central Collecting Point



Lettrism founded by Isidore Isou in Paris



Ivo Andrić's novel, *Na Drini* ćuprija (The Bridge on the Drina), Belgrad, 1945



Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phénoménologie de la perception* (Phenomenology of Perception), Paris, 1945



Isaiah Berlin and Anna Akhmatova meet in Leningrad

9

1945

Sarah Wilson

Writing the Disaster

Trauma and Reconstruction in Post-war France



Whoever is tortured, stays tortured. The torture is indelibly branded into him. (...) He who has succumbed to torture can no longer feel at home in the world. The shame of destruction cannot be erased. The collapse of trust in the world that starts in part with the first blow, but is fully realized in torture, is not a loss that can be recovered. To experience one's fellow Man as an anti-Man is a horror that stays stuck tightly jammed within the tortured: Moreover, none looks on into a world in which the principle of hope prevails. The martyred are surrendered, unarmed, to fear.

- JEAN AMERY¹

Shortly after the end of World War II, which came for some in occupied Germany as a "liberation", and for others as a "collapse", the need and interest for an upswing in the economy supplanted the work of mourning and remembering the horrors of the past. The war had left 55 million dead, 35 million wounded, and over three million missing, not counting the millions of displaced persons and refugees. In West Germany, however, the new era was defined, significantly, not in terms of "before or after liberation", but "before or after the currency".² With the currency reform and the beginning of the Cold War, artists and writers saw the end of their hopes for a socially just new beginning. With the arrival of the new currency, shop windows were fitted from one day to the next with hoards of consumer products, to the cost of many magazines and small publishers who needed to change their appearance and their production because of a lack of buyers.³ The poet Johannes Hübner stated, "As great as the euphoria had been in the first three years after the war, the disappointment now was just as black. A desperate nihilism took hold of me."4

Just a few years after the war and the liberation of the concentration camps, there was no great desire – not even in the new dictatorships to the east of the Iron Curtain that proclaimed themselves "antifascist" – to see artists continually focusing on the infinite suffering and the crimes of the past. In early 1947, Friedrich Wolf declared in a letter to Lion Feuchtwanger that raising the question of guilt was considered "something approaching treason".⁵

In October 1948, at a meeting of socialist artists and writers in Kleinmachnow, near Berlin, Walter Ulbricht complained about artists being too occupied with their concentration camp and emigration experiences to support the struggle for land reform and the building of socialism: "In the meantime, the struggle for a new order is underway, but it's lagging three years behind and is now beginning now to face problems that should have been faced long ago."⁶

Against War — Against Fascism: the Arsenal Exhibition in Warsaw, 1955

In Poland, the situation was similar. Contrary to the needs of young artists who wanted to get to grips, directly and inexorably, with the causes and consequences of Nazism and the war, in 1949 the Polish United Workers' Party called for the adoption of Socialist Realism following the model of the Soviet Union, with a view to the future and the anti-imperialist struggle for peace.⁷ Here again, young artists refused to continue with the "passive" traditions of Polish colourism (Kapism) of the prewar period. It was Andrzej Wróblewski, in particular, and the members of a student group who withdrew from their professors to form a Self-Educational Group at the Krakow Academy of Fine Arts, who went in search of a new empathetic realism for the victims of the war.



ill _037

Andrzej Wróblewski Rozstrzelanie surrealistyczne - Rozstrzelanie VIII [Surrealist Execution -Execution VIII], 1949 OIL ON CANVAS, 130 X 199 CM NATIONAL MUSEUM IN WARSAW

On the occasion of the 1st Exhibition of Modern Art at the Krakow Kunst Palast in 1948, Wróblewski wrote, "We want you to remember war and imperialism, the atomic bomb in the hands of the wrong men. We paint unpleasant pictures like the smell of a corpse. We also paint those that make you feel the presence of death".⁸ Between 16 January and 4 August 1949, Andrzej Wróblewski painted a series of eight paintings on the theme of "Executions" (*Surrealist Execution: Execution VIII*), and two pictures featuring, respectively, a dead mother and child, and a mother with a dead child [see the texts by Anda Rottenberg and Daniel Bulatov]. They originated in the course of preparing an anti-war exhibition that Wróblewski

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was planning with his group at the Krakow Academy of Fine Arts in the spring of 1949. It went ahead, but only as an independent part of the *Polish Festival of Art Schools in Poznan* exhibition, which ran from 22 to 28 October 1949. The Party invited all the students from the art academies to take part, and had not expected the exhibition to be looking back on the war, but to be staging a demonstration of Socialist Realism by addressing issues like anti-imperialism and the struggle for peace.⁹

In a self-criticism,¹⁰ Wróblewski admitted in 1950 that he and his group had failed to make the connection between the last war and the current imperialist aggression and racial discrimination of the American fascists, and declared, "Our exhibition ... was dominated by pessimism and the horrors of war provoking fear."¹¹

After a short period between 1951 and 1953, in which he practiced Socialist Realism, Wróblewski laid claim once again, in his essay "On Deformation" in 1955, to a modern form of Social Realism, working with the means of montage, cubism and distortion of the body.¹² Just six years after the failed anti-war exhibition, the *All-Poland Exhibition of Young Art: Against War – Against Fascism (Ogólnopolska Wystawa Mlodej Plastyki)* was held at the Warsaw Arsenal, in 1955, within the framework of the *Fifth World Festival of Youth and Students*, and signalled the end of Socialist Realism in Poland.¹³

The exhibition showed works by young artists, such as that by Bartlomiej Kurka with the original German title of An Lungenentzündung gestorben (Dead from Pneumonia), and Izaak Celnikiers' Ghetto, from 1949, which had long been hidden from public view. Something all the paintings had in common was the sense of an existential purgatory, a painted arte povera. This effect can still be experienced in the Lebuser Jan-Dekert Museum (Museum Lubuski) in Gorzów (formerly Landsberg an der Warthe, where the East German author Christa Wolf had experienced her Patterns of Childhood in the Nazi era). It was here in 1977 that the Arsenal 1955 collection was put together, which retained large parts of the earlier exhibition from the Warsaw Arsenal.¹⁴ Three typical works were exhibited for the first time in a pan-European context. Born in 1925 in Czestochowa, Stefan Gierowski painted Still Life with Picture Frame in 1954. Once again, the fundamentals of painting are brought into question: the empty frames, the beer bottle as a profane object, and the magnifying glass as a visual aid. By the mid-1950s, Gierowski abandoned painting as a means for the representation of objects, and went on to work with concrete material and light.¹⁵

Born in 1922 in Szcerzec near Lemberg (Lvov), Marek Oberländer died in Nice in 1978, and was, along with Jan Dziedziora, Jacek Sienicki and Elzbieta Grabska, an initiator and organizer of the exhibition, *Against War – Against Fascism*. His pale, almost colourless painting, with its ugly, rotten, decaying objects, is directed against both the optimism of Socialist Realism and the Polish colourism of the pre-war era.

In works such as *The Branded* (1955), he deals intensively, as a Jew, with the topic of the Shoah. In 1955, this painting aroused the most controversy in Warsaw. It was painted from a photograph taken from the archives of legal documents on Nazi crimes. The 1961 painting *Silhouette on a White Background* shown here has a similar theme. We see a completely enervated body, with its chest opened outwards like a cage and a head twisted around the wrong way, which resembles an alien more than a human face. In the words of Primo Levi, one wonders, "Is This a Man?"¹⁶

Teresa Mellerowicz-Gella was born in Lomza in 1929 and painted in a figurative and abstract style. *The Stone World*, from 1955, shows the insensitivity of men and women, with a regalia of refined culture – the violin on the table and the wine glass in the hand – in stark contrast to the misery of those being deported on a truck with their pale, greenish faces, who seem to exist in some other, far-off, distant world.

Guilty landscape

Constant Anton Nieuwenhuys was born in Amsterdam in 1920 and died in Utrecht, the Netherlands, in 2005. His 1951 painting *Refugees* is also dedicated to the theme of flight and displaced persons in Europe.¹⁷ He did this with the deliberately crude and coarse means of the kind of "Primitivism" that Jean Dubuffet had introduced into art in 1945 [see "Writing the Disaster", by Sarah Wilson].

The Dutch painter Karel Appel (born in Amsterdam in 1921, died in Zurich in 2006) saw a Jean Dubuffet exhibition in Paris in 1947, as well as a show of visual art by the mentally ill, and on 2 October 1947, he wrote to Corneille, his colleague in Amsterdam, "I'm doing really primitive work, stronger than Negro art and Picasso. Why? So I can overcome the 20th century..., throw everything overboard."¹⁸ Appel, whose painting Paar (Pair, 1951) is exhibited here, and Constant together founded the Dutch Experimental Group in 1948, from which the artists' group CoBrA emerged in Paris in November of that same year. The name comes from the first letters of Copenhagen (home to Asger Jorn and others), Brussels (Christian Dotrement and others), and Amsterdam (Karel Appel, Constant, Corneille), while also playing on the association with the poisonous snake, the cobra.





OIL ON CANVAS, 61 X 103 CM - STEDELIJK MUSEUM AMSTERDAM

Constant, Vluchtelingen [Refugees], 1951



-050 Karel Appel, Paar [Pair], 1951 OL ON CANVAS, 81 X 100 CM - STEDELLJK MUSE UM AMSTERDAM In 1948, in the group's manifesto, Constant promoted a new folk art, which in contrast to the category of folksy tradition in Socialist Realism, is "an expression of life that is exclusively fed by a natural and consequently general drive for expressing life."¹⁹

Armando was born in Amsterdam in 1929, lived in Berlin after 1979 and more recently in Potsdam. He greatly admired Appel and Constant, who had established the link between the CoBrA group in Holland and post-war international Modernism, invoking the horrors of war in forms that bring to mind the naïve optimism of children's drawings (e.g. Karel Appel's painting Questioning Children, 1949, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam). During the German occupation, Armando spent his youth in the shadow of the police transit camp in the city of Amersfoort, also known as the Boskamp (Forest Camp).²⁰ The inmates were put to work clearing the forest and sawing trees. Being so close to this mysterious, forbidden place surrounded by barbed wire became the starting point for his artistic work. He did not paint what we know about today, the cruelties and the torture that took place there, but rather what concerned him at the time, his naive questions about the trees that have seen so much injustice and yet say nothing: are they guilty accomplices? Criminal Landscape (Paysage Criminel, 1956), Accused Landscape (1972) and Guilty Landscape (from 1976) were the names he gave to a series of images in which he tried to express how "the most gruesome performances often take place within landscapes, within the beauty of nature. Shacks. Places for torturing defenceless creatures. The landscape never gives a care, and has even been so shameless as to simply carry on growing; it's a scandal."²¹ This natural beauty was as eerie to him as the beauty of art. Nature's beauty, which became the indifferent witness to so many crimes, compelled him to transfer evil into "the guiltless, amoral domain of art. And look: evil is no longer evil, it is art."22 Art compels him to aestheticize violence, and to excuse it. In the tradition of Protestant doubt in paintings, Armando is tormented by the ambiguity of beauty, which he loves, and which at the same time holds him in its power. How can he, as a painter, do justice to the entanglement of beauty, shame and guilt, without "affirming the despicable way of the world as unshakeable nature"?23

Given the insurmountable gap between objective knowledge and subjective certainty, reflection and sensory intuition, and morality and aesthetics as the experience of modernity, it is "pointless to call nature guilty, but art is also useless, and therefore indispensable. And without conscience. Giving meaning to the meaningless."²⁴ The painted skulls of *Tête Noire II* (on show in the exhibition) and *Homo homini lupus* appeared in 1956, at around the same



ill _038

Karel Appel Vragende kinderen [Questioning Children], 1948 Studded wooden elements on wood panel, Painteo in oil, 85 x 96 cm musée national d'art moderne, centre pompidou, paris

time as *Criminal Landscapes*. These two paintings, with their thick pastose mix of sand and oil paint, which forms a relief-like surface, have already moved on from the representation of objects and are en route to Matter Painting.

Together with Henk Peeters (1925-2013), Kees van Bohemen (1928-1985), Jan Hendrikse (born 1937) and Jan Schoonhoven (1914-1994), Armando formed the Dutch Informal group in 1958, from which Gruppe Nul emerged (without Kees van Bohemen) in 1961.²⁵ With monochrome matter paintings and objects made of sheet metal and plastics, they rebelled against the subjectivism of Informal Art and the CoBrA group. It was in this context that Armando's 1962 object Black Barbed Wire on Black 1-62 appeared,²⁶ which took the barbed wire that he had stood in front of as a boy in Amersfoort and applied it to a black-painted panel or sheet, like an Informal drawing composed of superimposed lines.²⁷ After the dissolution of the group in 1965 (closely followed by the disbanding of ZERO in 1966), Armando took a break from his art and spent two years working intensively on an interview project with former members of the Dutch SS, to find out what motivates young men to get involved with these brutal orders of men. 28



It was not until the late 1960s that Armando slowly found his way back to painting, in the form of overpainted photographs and drawings. He reducing his pictures to black-and-white, focusing on simple objects like trees and flags, which he had investigated in West Berlin within the framework of his extensive Feindbeobachtung (Enemy Observation) project after receiving an invitation from the DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service) artists' programme. This no doubt had something to do with his strict abstinence from painting during the years of his membership in the Nul group, and it contributed to a fundamental renewal of his painting. Abandoning the "Nul-diet" therefore felt like a liberation, "because I had the feeling of being just a skeleton. I longed for colours, I wanted to make something with my hands again".29

The starting point for Armando's artistic quest was not knowledge, but that "which lies between knowledge and understanding. A little hint, perhaps an inkling, a suspicion, nothing more, and that's already quite a lot."³⁰

The dialectic of perpetrators and victims

The painting of HAP Grieshaber, Willi Sitte, Werner Tübke, Gerhard Richter and Georg Baselitz, all of whom, with the exception of Grieshaber, emerged between 1959 and 1965, tackle the issue of collective amnesia within each of the two German states. Once the Allies had given up the process of re-education in the fields of politics, economy and culture, and left the processes of denazification in the hands of the West Germans, the resounding hush of a "telling silence" spread across the whole of the country,³¹ which was barely disturbed until the trial of the UIm *Einsatzgruppe* (an SS "task force"), which, after a ten-year pause in criminal prosecutions, began to address the countless crimes that took place in Central and Eastern Europe.³²

HAP Grieshaber, who was born in 1909 in Rot an der Rot and died in 1981 in Echingen unter Achalm, is one of the great outsiders of German post-war art. He consistently avoided the compulsion at the time toward Informal, non-representational painting and stuck to figurative positions. He became famous for his woodcuts composed from several printing plates in the form of large-format panel paintings. Taking the Expressionist idiom as his base, he developed a woodcut technique that was a synthesis of line and surface cutting. The large-scale prints look like the coloured, leaded panes of stained glass.

The diptych *Schmerzensbild* (Picture of Pain, 1952) was Grieshaber's first large-format woodcut. The two parts of the diptych are, on the left, the major theme of the mother and child in the tradition of representations of the Madonna associated with the infant

Jesus, and on the right, the world of man and the military. Here, the Madonna is strongly stylized, an angry mother who holds a child, enveloped by her long black hair, against her upper body, while the child reaches out with one hand toward her breast. The right half of the picture shows the face-on, frontal view of a man, as if behind bars, with medals on his chest to indicate his status as soldier. All that can be seen of his face are the threatening, narrowly spaced eyes. Man and woman live in hermetically separate worlds.

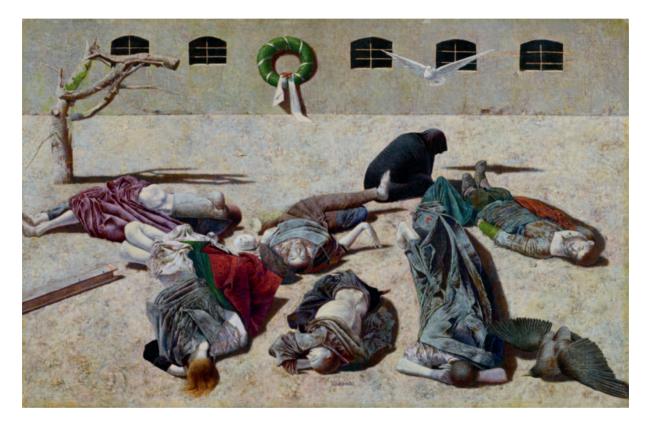
Thanks to Margarete Hannsmann, his companion in later life, we know that Grieshaber was inspired in this composition by the fate of his then future wife, the painter Riccarda Gohr. She arrived as a refugee from the Red Army, from East Prussia to the Bernsteinschule, a former monastery in Sulz am Neckar, which had been turned into a free art school where Grieshaber was working as a teacher. Fleeing with her daughter, Nani, who was less than a year old, she had been subjected to multiple rapes.³³ For Grieshaber, the biographical is always an opportunity, and as he himself said, "a basis for the exploration of form".

Willi Sitte's Massacre II (1959) painting belongs to his Lidice series, created between 1956 and 1960.34 On the surface of the picture, the events in Lidice are layered over his own traumatic war experiences as a Wehrmacht soldier. "What plagued me the most was the (...) story of our advance into Russia, which as infantrymen, constantly had us panting here and there, chasing the front, and one day, as soon as we arrived into a small town, we realized straight away that bad things had happened there. The windows of many houses had been destroyed, and when we looked into an apartment, we saw people shot and strewn all over the room, with lunch still on the table. We later learned that a motorized SS unit had raged through here before us. This scene forms the starting point for the massacre painting."35

The image is vertically divided into two unequal areas by a wooden pillar with nails in it. It is an indication of the destruction of the house. It is divided horizontally between the group of soldiers smoking in the background while being photographed by a comrade, and the chaotic scenes taking place in the centre and the foreground. The drama of the image is based on the harsh contrast between the dark, faceless soldiers, who, like a rabble of soulless robot soldiers, a dehumanized killing machine, seem almost disembodied, silhouetted in the background, and the women lying dead on top of and next to the table in the foreground, the victims of brutal aggression, assault and violation. Their

Werner Tübke, Requiem, 1965

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Willi Sitte, Massaker II [Massacre II], 1959



white dresses are symbolic of their innocence, like the portraits of martyrs. Sitte was clearly painting his memory of the war, the attack on a family at mealtime. He chose the moment just after the massacre. There is a man lying on the ground beneath the left edge of the table, a plate, a fork, a wheel from a pram, the pleading, upstretched hands of a woman in the background. The twisted body and the deathly staring eyes are the evidence of the massacre that has just taken place. The female victims are characterized as Jewish, though this is represented by a Star of David wrongly depicted as a pentagram instead of a hexagram.

Sitte was clearly inspired by Picasso's epochdefining Guernica, which was discussed as an anti-fascist work in a Picasso debate published in the journal Bildende Kunst (1954-1956): he adopted the position of the corpses lying on the ground; the cartwheel that is visible in the centre of Picasso's last sketch of 9 May 1937 appears here at the front right, in the form of a pram wheel; but above all (and now on the left-hand side instead of the right) the woman emerging from the window, her left hand reaching for help, eyes wide open in terror and her right hand holding on to her head in a gesture of despair. Brutal soldiers' hands appear out of the background to grab her around the shoulders in an attempt to prevent her from escaping through the window. Instead of the handheld lamp that we see in the work by Picasso, a glass lantern is shown at the corner of the house.

On Werner Tübke's small painting Requiem, from 1965, which is similar in type to the depiction of a burial in the predella of an altarpiece, we glimpse into the silent, numb world of the death camps, hermetically sealed from the world outside.³⁶ From a bird's-eye view, enclosed within the strict geometry of an anonymous warehouse or prison yard, bodies are lying on the ground, twisted, maimed and dressed in rags. Mourned by a squatting figure shrouded in black, they each lay claim to their own space as individuals, between a withering tree at the top left of the picture and a black bird of death at the bottom right. In the style of the old masters, Tübke lends the dead additional dignity through his use of a hard, crystalline reproduction of the highly artificial folds in their poor clothes, whose cold decaying colours shimmer between greenish, bluish-grey, violet and crimson tones. The white dove hovering as a sign of life above the dead, and the ancient grave decoration of the "Roman wreath" as a symbol of eternal life represent the overcoming of death in the Christian sense. The cold light and the shadows are reminiscent of the metaphysical painting of Giorgio de Chirico.

At the same time as the Auschwitz trial was taking place at the city courthouse of the Frankfurt Römer – the first major concentration camp trial to be held in the Federal Republic of Germany, from 20 December 1963 to 19 August 1965³⁷ – Gerhard Richter was taking on the seemingly unremarkable, but more lasting taboo of "The Murderers Among Us".³⁸ His fear about accusations of moralizing, his sense of the difficulty of trying to paint a portrait of a suffering victim and a perpetrator hiding beneath the mask or guise of a good, honest citizen, led him to reach for a photographic artefact. Uncle Rudi (1965) was to be a suitable choice of anonymous protagonist. We see the artist's maternal uncle, Rudolf Schönfelder, as an officer of the German Wehrmacht, dressed in his elegant uniform coat. In the eyes of Richter's mother, he was a hero: "a charmer, a musical, elegant, brave and handsome man. And my father, he was worth about as much as a tuneless whistle."³⁹ In contrast to the image of his father (Horst with Dog, 1965), who is portrayed as a somewhat scruffy, slightly drunk civilian with his hair sticking out, Uncle Rudi, who fell in 1944 in the name of "Führer and Fatherland", is shown in impeccable posture. The full-length picture in the tradition of an aristocratic portrait leaves it open as to whether this family member, whom Gerhard Richter understood better than the glorifying stories of his mother, was a victim or a perpetrator in World War II.



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Gerhard Richter Horst mit Hund [Horst with Dog], 1965 OIL ON CANVAS, 80 X 60 CM AGNES GUD COLLECTION, NEW YORK 057



Alexandra Danilova

In the Gap between Art and Life



Pop Sensibility in European Art 1950–1960s¹





IRON TRIPOD WITH WOODEN WHEELS, METAL, RUBBER STRAPS, ELECTRICAL ENGINE, 50 X 70 X 30 CM, MUSEUM TINGUELY, BASEL

Jean Tinguely, Méta-Matic No. 6, 1959

_152 Christo, Package, 1963

TIED UP PACKAGE OF FABRICS, IN ARTIST'S FRAME, 57.5 X 51.5 X 13 CM (FRAME INCLUDED) – AHLERS COLLECTION

