

Art creates utopias

'Tools for Utopia'. Selected works from the Daros Latinamerica Collection

Art breaks with the familiar and opens people's eyes to new visions of the future: art creates utopias. Every utopia starts with a dystopian reality. 'Tools for Utopia' tells the story of political and social oppression, but also of a cultural spirit of revolution. Innovative artists developed abstract art with which they wanted to contribute to a radical reshaping of society. 'Tools for Utopia' shows how art became the tool of cultural, social and political change in Latin America. The exhibition takes as its starting point the tradition of abstract and concrete art in countries including Brazil, Argentina and Uruguay from the 1950s until the 1970s, and presents an insight into the artistic work of Latin America.

'Works of art can be practical tools for the realisation of utopias. Utopia activates our ability to dream and thus becomes both a weapon and a form of resistance.'

Marta Dziewańska, Curator, Kunstmuseum Bern

The title of the exhibition deliberately uses the term of the 'tool'. It refers to the history of works of art which attempt, in various social and political contexts, to overcome figurative representation and seek space beyond the picture frame in order to become active participants in the reshaping of society. 'Tools for Utopia' encompasses, from paintings and sculptures, via installation works to film and photography, a broad spectrum of artistic works. The approximately 200 works play with our perception, invent new languages or allow us to feel the assault on human bodies, where they are debased and where violence leaves its mark. The exhibition provides a glimpse into the diverse artistic creation of Latin America and the themes that move the continent even today.

'While we consider this chapter of art from a historical perspective, we want to show how artistic movements in Latin America acted as stimuli to the cultural, social and political imagination of that time. We would like to ask what remains of those political ambitions and what they may stand for today.' Nina Zimmer, Director, Kunstmuseum Bern – Zentrum Paul Klee

Art as laboratory – breaking the frame

Art must stop 'representing' in order to 'become reality', demanded the Brazilian *Grupo Ruptura* in their manifesto, taking a position against 'hedonistic figurative art that seeks the mere excitement of pleasure'. In 1944 the Uruguayan artist Rhod Rothfuss was the first to address the role of the picture frame in contemporary art: he declared that a painting should 'begin and end in itself', while the 'edge of the canvas plays an active role in the work of art'. Rothfuss drew the eye to the edge of the work of art and – consequently – beyond the frame, thus laying the foundation for Concrete Art in Latin America. In this spirit artists engaged with similar inquiries and organised themselves into movements that experimented with new visual experiences. They criticised the prevailing pictorial language which simply depicted historical events, and defended art as a means for the acquisition of knowledge and a stimulus for innovative thought. Traditional means of expression such as painting, sculpture and drawing were deliberately ignored or further refined.

The Brazilian artist Hélio Oiticica, for example, moved painting from two-dimensionality into the realm of three-dimensions. His 'Spatial Reliefs' (1960) hang freely in space and can be viewed from all sides. A series of so-called Op-Art works also play with the senses. They literally show us: what we see is not objective. Repetitions, precise geometric patterns and harsh lighting effects unsettle

human perception. The exhibition is devoted to this phenomenon and shows an art that seeks to interrogate and shape reality rather than merely depicting it. The works of prominent representatives of Op Art such as Carlos Cruz-Diez or Julio Le Parc not only produce optical illusions but include the viewer's whole body. In the case of Julio Le Parc's works, visitors physically plunge into an experience of light. The play with the senses is more than just a playful exploration of the relationship between perception and reality; instead it can be read politically. For Le Parc, the aim of the optical effects is not to deceive the viewer. Instead they should act as a laboratory in which viewers have new experiences and are willing to experiment.

From artistic innovation to social revolution

The basis of the exhibition consists of works made by artists from countries including Brazil, Venezuela, Uruguay and Argentina between the 1950s and the 1970s. The works were made at a time when many Latin American countries were torn apart by national and international conflicts and governed by corrupt and authoritarian rulers. The Brazilian artist Antonio Dias had himself fled to Paris from the military dictatorship in his homeland in 1966. His works from that period address the experiences of repression in Brazil as well as the student unrests in Europe. His series of cobblestones cast in bronze, 'To the Police' (1968) is an ironic commentary on the state powers in both Brazil and in Europe. The call to action is even clearer in 'Do It Yourself: Freedom Territory' (1968), in which a floor marking consisting of indicated boundaries and openings sets out a path for visitors. The human body becomes part of the art and a tool of resistance – but also a means to self-determination. Regina José Galindo uses her body as a metaphor for the collective mass and repeatedly exposes herself to extreme situations such as water-boarding. Ana Mendieta's self-portraits are an expression of her refusal to correspond to the expectations of the male gaze. Visibility is granted in art to marginalised groups or wounded bodies – whether they be undocumented people, women in traditional (patriarchal) societies, trans people or indigenous peoples. Artists like the Chilean Paz Errázuriz enter into dialogue with people who have been rendered invisible and, in her photographic essays, she sensitively presents us with the fragility of the people she portrays.

The **Catalogue with 6 selected manifestoes and 5 contemporary interviews** with artists from Latin America complements the exhibition and establishes a connection with the present. The exhibition tries to show the extent to which the Latin American art movements of the 20th century acted as catalyst for the cultural, social and political imagination, and asks the question of what these ideas and hopes stand for today. The goal of the exhibition and its catalogue is to connect with the visions of art, politics and subjectivity. The interviews with the artists allow access to their voices.

Programme accompanying the exhibition

In February and March 2021 the Kunstmuseum Bern, along with the Institute for Studies on Latin American Art (ISLAA) in New York and the Zentrum Paul Klee, is organising an academic online programme, 'Interactions'. The programme combines talks and podium discussions with renowned academics, authors, curators and artists on the exhibition's theme of art as tool. Detailed information is available via kunstmuseumbern.ch/daros.

On four tours of the exhibition, themes concerning artistic strategies for the overcoming of norms, the relationship between art and politics, the analysis of neo-colonial interrelationships and the gender roles in the male-dominated culture of Latin America come under discussion. The tours are led by Eduardo Jorge de Oliveira (Zurich University), Sara Alonso Gómez (curator), Denise Bertschi (artist) and Tomás Bartoletti (ETH), as well as Jorge Flores Real (PhD, social worker for sex workers).

Daros Latinamerica Collection

The Zurich-based Daros Latinamerica Collection is one of the most significant private collections of contemporary Latin American art. The collection includes over a thousand works by more than one hundred artists: single works and groups in every medium and genre, made primarily between the 1950s and the early 2000s. The leitmotif of the collection is not encyclopaedic completeness, but the significance of the individual works. Daros Latinamerica brings together artworks which can be read on different levels, and which meaningfully combine content and medium. Detailed information is available via daros-latinamerica.net.

On **Tuesday, 27 October 2020 at 10.00 a.m.** there is a **Media tour** at Kunstmuseum Bern with the curator Marta Dziewańska.

You are cordially invited. Applications requested via press@kunstmuseumbern.ch.

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Live media tour in English at 11:30 am (CEST) via facebook.com/kunstmuseumbern. Curator Marta Dziewańska will be happy to answer your questions.

Please find press images and further information on the [media website](#) of the Kunstmuseum Bern.

The exhibition at a glance

Duration: 30 October 2020 to 21 March 2021

Standort: Kunstmuseum Bern

Number of works: Around 200 works and groups of works by 43 artists

Curator: Marta Dziewańska, Kunstmuseum Bern

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