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Kunstnernes Hus

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The Shadow of War: Political Art in Norway 1914–2014

Summer 2014 was the centennial of the first shots being fired in Sarajevo and the subsequent outbreak of the First World War. In art history, this momentous war marks the transition from a heroizing war iconography to one that focuses on the human suffering and futility of armed conflict. The avant-garde and polemical art that followed in the war's aftermath proved highly influential Norway as well. In the exhibition *The Shadow of War: Political Art in Norway 1914–2014*, curator Kari J. Brandtzæg shows how artists from various epochs have rebelled against established norms, depicted dramatic, collective experiences, and envisioned future utopias. The exhibition's 150 pieces give the public a unique opportunity to see the departures and continuities in the history Norwegian political art for themselves.

The exhibition theme of art's relation to war and society is more current than ever. How should we view the wars and suffering of our own time? And do artists have a special obligation in this regard? By exploring a new source material, including several paintings, photographs, and drawings that have never previously been exhibited, the exhibition will shed light on the importance of war and upheaval for the role of the artist and the development of modern art. The exhibition focuses on three periods: the interwar period (1920–40), the postwar period (1960–70), and our own time (2000–2014).

The atrocities of the First World War, which left millions of soldiers dead in the endless trenches, form a part of modernity's experiences and memory. The war changed the iconography of war art from heroizing portrayals of the nation to an emphasis on the suffering and senselessness of war, something that influenced the development of avant-garde art and paved the way for the political message of the polemical form of art known in Norway as *tendenskunst*

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(lit. “tendentious art”). Henrik Sørensen (1882–1962) believed ^{aasd}the artist was particularly obligated to denounce injustice and suffering, but in the 1930s his pacifistic zeal was seen as naïve, utopian daydreaming. Several of his anti-war pieces from the interwar period figure prominently in the exhibition, such as the large-scale tableaux *Street Fighting* (1930) and *The Field of Glory* (1931) and his sketches for the mural painting *The Dream of Eternal Peace* at the Palace of Nations in Geneva (1939). The exhibition also includes paintings by Per Krohg (1889–1965), Reidar Aulie (1904–77), Willi Midelfart (1904–75), Kai Fjell (1907–89), and Arne Ekeland (1908–1994), as well as photographs of the slum in Kristiania (modern-day Oslo) taken by the activist Nanna Broch (1879–1971) and posters from the Østkantutstillingen (the Eastern Oslo Exhibition) at Ankertorget.

The title of the exhibition, *The Shadow of War*, does not refer solely to war itself, but also to how the cultural ramifications of war influenced art and social change. Several of the exhibited works allude to collective and individual utopias that are envisioned in the wake of unsettling events. Similar to the First World War, the Vietnam War and the wave of protests in 1968 also constituted such an unsettling moment in history. As was the case with the “tendentious” artists of the 1930s, the artists in the GRAS group wanted to communicate with the grassroots of society and were part of the political Left. Works by Per Kleiva (1933–), Willibald Storn (1936–), Victor Lind (1940–), Morten Krohg (1937–), and Elisabeth Haarr (1945–) are featured in exhibition, along with works by the Gruppe 66 collective in Bergen with Elsebet Rahlff (1940–) and the project *Living Together* from 1977.

Today’s art has developed new aesthetic strategies to communicate and explore contemporary life. Artists seek to involve and inspire the public, but no longer under the motto “art to the people”, and as a rule the art remains within the reassuring confines of the art institution. The Internet lets us glimpse revolutions, terror, and catastrophes in an entirely new way. The mass of information has not made reality easier to comprehend, however, and the complexities of modern life are explored through conceptual strategies rather than through overtly political messages. At the same time, many artists insist on being ethically committed, and similar to *tendenskunst* and the art of the Gras collective, these artists reflect injustice, war, and suffering. *The Shadow of War* will feature works by Thomas Kvam (1972–), Anders Eiebakke (1970–), Andrea Lange (1967–), Shwan Dler

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Qaradaki (1977-), Ane Hjort Guttu (1971-), Lene Berg (1965-), Vanessa Baird (1963-), Toril Goksøyr (1970-) & Camilla Martens (1969-), Matias Faldbakken (1973-), Marte Aas (1966-), Ivan Galuzin (1979-), and Knut Åsdam (1968-), including works that have been commissioned especially for the exhibition.

Curator Kari J. Brandtzæg (1966-) is a PhD candidate in art history at the University of Oslo, with a dissertation titled “Henrik Sørensen og tendenskunsten i et transnasjonalt perspektiv: En sosial avantgarde?” (Henrik Sørensen and *tendenskunst* from a transnational perspective: A social avant-garde?). She has curated a number of exhibitions both in Norway and abroad, including *Kiss the Frog! The Art of Transformation* for the National Museum at Tullinløkka in Oslo (2005), which was seen by 120,000 visitors.

All external funding has been obtained by the curator from the Fritt Ord Foundation, the Arts Council Norway, and the Relief Fund for Visual Artists (BKH). Sven Oluf Sørensen has covered the costs of the technical conservation of his father’s iconic anti-war painting *The Field of Glory* (1931) at the National Gallery of Denmark in Copenhagen. Thomas Kvam’s installation *The Chosen Ones* (2014) and Marte Aas’s movie *La Défense* (2014) have received funding from the exhibition.

For the exhibition around 150 works by twenty-seven artists have been taken on loan from the National Gallery of Denmark in Copenhagen; Malmö Konstmuseum; Trondheim kunstmuseum; KODE Art Museums of Bergen; Stavanger Art Museum; Holmsbu Art Gallery (Drammen Museum); the National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design; the Munch Museum (the Stenersen Collection); the Labour Party; the Dagbladet/Berner group; private collectors; and the artists themselves.