



Exhibition «Art and Power. Europe under the Dictators, 1930-1945»  
27/02/1996 - 05/05/1996

## The Aestheticisation of Politics and the Politicisation of Art

Walter Benjamin said that fascism sought to aestheticise politics in order to hold greater sway over the masses, and that, in response, communism politicised art. The exhibition *Art and Power* is presented today from such a distance, far from the ideological barricades of the thirties, that we can see the way in which opposite poles finally come together. And they come together at one point: kitsch, as the concealment of worthless rubbish. Fascism seeks to aestheticise politics and finds the extolment of war and strength. Communism builds edifying Arcades of everlasting governors and workers united by a path which takes them in one permitted direction. As Danilo Kiš writes: “in the same way that communism is accessed by overcoming the inferior phases of evolution and social organisation, art, and above all, literature, as a particular system of signs, progresses towards its supreme state, towards a kind of promised land or earthly paradise, towards realism”.

*Art and Power* is an exercise in memory: the intolerable face of the extolment and simulation of totalitarianisms in search of the accomplishment of voluntary servitude. However it is also a call to reflect on the sensitive points of art, at a time when, as Benjamin said, “the work of art becomes a creation with entirely new functions, among which the one we are conscious of, the artistic function, later may be recognised as incidental”.

Art is concerned with taste and beauty. It has been written about, criticised and chosen from this viewpoint. However, art is also a function which has been performed in different ways throughout history, but also with an established role: the assignation of the symbolic. The century which has accepted that ugliness also has a presence in the work of art and that the beautiful and sinister often come together, is able to recognise, better than any other, the role of art at the service of power.

The relationship between art and power is concerned with function. The more the work of art owes to the established symbolic, the more indistinct it becomes. Because what is inherent to art is its radical singularity, no matter how much it can be reproduced on an infinite scale. However, the relationship between art and power is not a determining factor in the value of the work of art. The majority of the key works in the history of mankind have been produced at the behest of the powerful. Nevertheless, when the aestheticisation of politics or the politicisation of art become a watchword for obligatory fulfilment, art directly becomes an instrument for concealment. It transfers its magic to serve the sinister.

This exhibition speaks about this adventure. About those who, one day, decided to follow the call of the avant-gardes and afterwards, in their own name or renouncing it, enlisted in the symbolic army of the collective harangue, to instil war or revolution into contented men; about those who never had within their creative grasp other prospects than to mimic images of power; and also those who used art to resist, to remember that there was another world, the world of men—not the world of *new men*—, which was the only truly possible world.

The aesthetic of *new men* could be another title for this exhibition. When politics appeal to art in order to wipe the slate clean in terms of violence and to convince people that this is the way of the future. Paradoxically, in order to do this, there is only one solution: to appeal to the aesthetic forms of the past. *Art and Power* provides proof of this.