

Reihe: Wolfgang Paalen

Autor: Christian Kloyber

Datum: 2019

Paalen in Exile in Mexico

Christian Kloyber

May 1942 marked the publication of the first issue of *DYN*, the art and culture magazine founded by Wolfgang Paalen. This coincided, not unintentionally, with Mexico's entry into the Second World War; as a leitmotif, Paalen contributed the following remarks to its preface: "All totalitarian tyrannies banished modern art. They are right. For as a vital stimulus to imagination, modern art is an invaluable weapon in the struggle for freedom."ⁱ After the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor (on December 6 and 7, 1941) and the USA's declaration of war on Japan, Germany, and Italy, Mexico abandoned its neutrality and entered the conflict in May 1942.

From 1939, the year of his arrival in Mexico, Wolfgang Paalen's view of the world had changed. The external political circumstances of the war were not the only factor to contribute to this. His personal relationships and the understanding previously shared with his Surrealist fellow travelers appeared to break down, or rather, were broken by Paalen himself. He wrote: "In the darkest hour of the night, prudent friends counsel, if not howling with the wolves, contorting the face into a grimace, as if preparing to do so. The moment has not yet come, they say. On the contrary! This special moment has arrived, but not for howling with the wolves; now is the time for doing what is right and necessary."ⁱⁱ With that, Paalen consciously withdrew and, from his exile in Mexico, he searched for new contacts. He had broken with Surrealism and fallen out with André Breton. Even the first Surrealist exhibition in Mexico, in 1940, which was initiated by André Breton and organized by Paalen and César Moro, had made little impact in Mexico and opened up no new perspectives. Thus the

DR. CHRISTIAN KLOYBER

[c.kloyber|at|gmail.com]



decision was consolidated, the break with Surrealism completed during the war years, and Paalen wrote: “*DYN* is beyond all economic or political compromises. *DYN* does not belong to a ‘school’ or an ‘ism,’ nor does it wish to found one.”ⁱⁱⁱ In the magazine, Paalen presented himself, describing no less than his own position as an artist and critic. The exchange with Mexico’s intellectual avant-garde, which Paalen embraced, despite his self-imposed isolation, but especially the linking-in of pre-Hispanic art^{iv} as the pictorial language for a new concept of space (“The New Image”^v), defined the years to come, was central to his development, and stayed with him until the end of his life.

The journey to Mexico, a country that at the time—to adopt the expression of the Mexican philosopher and historian Enrique Krauze—was standing on the edge of the volcano,^{vi} had prompted decisions that would change Paalen’s life, as well as his artistic work. Paalen sensed that Europe would soon be very different to how it had been before 1938, and that the world of the Austro-Hungarian Empire pre-1918, so familiar to him from childhood, was vanishing beyond the horizon. The hope offered by a life in Mexico, Paalen postulated, lay in the unbridled potential of his imagination. *DYN* was the magic word and also a reference to the Aristotelian philosophy forming one of the intellectual cornerstones of his search: *katà tò dynatón* (“being according to possibility”).^{vii}

However, let’s tell the story in a different order.

Mexico – the paradigm of Surrealism?^{viii}

The journey to and through Mexico by the French poet and leader of the Parisian Surrealists, André Breton, between April and August 1938^{ix} paved the way for the *International Exhibition of Surrealism* in Mexico. Wolfgang Paalen took on the task of its organization, along with the Peruvian poet César Moro.

Through this journey, Breton was able to establish himself as the leading figure of the Surrealists in Mexico too, although his particular interest was also to meet Leon Trotsky, who had found asylum in socialist post-revolutionary Mexico under the protection of President Lázaro Cárdenas.^x This interest in Leon Trotsky, as well as in the key figure of Mexican art, Diego Rivera, and his wife Frida Kahlo, led to the joint *Manifesto for an Independent Revolutionary Art*.^{xi} Surprisingly, the invitation to Mexico had come from Isidro Fabela, the Mexican diplomat and politician, Mexico’s representative at the

DR. CHRISTIAN KLOYBER

[c.kloyber|at|gmail.com]



League of Nations in Geneva in 1938, and intellectual originator of the Mexican protest against the annexation of Austria by the Nazis.^{xii}

Isidro Fabela had invited André Breton to Mexico as early as spring 1938 to deliver a series of lectures at the National Autonomous University of Mexico. In so doing, Fabela wanted to promote a direct exchange between the artists and intellectuals of the Mexican avant-garde and Breton. However, at the insistence of the Mexican Stalinists and instigated by the French Surrealist Louis Aragon, Breton was denied access to the university. In response, the university magazine (*Revista de la Universidad*, no. 29, 1938) published an appeal, the *Manifiesto al Pueblo de América Latina*, calling upon the university to open its gates to Breton. The supporters of this manifesto included established and aspiring artists and intellectuals such as the composer and first director of the National Institute of Fine Arts, Carlos Chávez, the photographer Manuel Álvarez Bravo, Guadalupe, Jesús and Francisco Marín, the writers Salvador Novo and Carlos Pellicer, as well as the avant-garde of Mexican painting, Diego Rivera, Frida Kahlo, and Rufino Tamayo. Thanks to the direct initiative of this group, Breton was able to deliver two of his lectures on the significance of Surrealism at the recently constructed Palacio de Bellas Artes.

Breton's visit to Mexico smoothed the way for the *International Exhibition of Surrealism*, albeit not without resistance.

Paalen in Mexico

On September 7, 1939, Wolfgang Paalen and his wife Alice landed at the airport of the Mexican capital, along with their Swiss friend Eva Sulzer. They were greeted by Frida Kahlo, Diego Rivera, and the Mexican painter and architect Juan O'Gorman.^{xiii} A few days after his arrival, Wolfgang Paalen appeared in public. His future wife Isabel Marín (fig. #7), the youngest sister of the renowned Lupe Marín, the confident, influential second wife of Diego Rivera, recalled in an interview: "I met Wolfgang Paalen at a cocktail party for the opening of the university gallery. That was only three days after his arrival in Mexico. It was an exhibition of photographs by Manuel Álvarez Bravo. I soon noticed a group of three people I did not recognize, a man and two women. They were talking to Julio Castellanos, who was the director of the museum at the time. Julio came up to me and said: 'May I introduce the painter Wolfgang Paalen. He noticed you and simply had to meet you.'"^{xiv}

DR. CHRISTIAN KLOYBER

[c.kloyber|at|gmail.com]



On January 17, 1940, the *International Exhibition of Surrealism* opened at the Galería de Arte Mexicano. Together with the Peruvian poet and painter César Moro,^{xv} Paalen was responsible for preparing the exhibition and organizing the evening's main event, the "appearance of the Great Sphinx of the Night." In 1989, speaking in the garden of the house she had shared with Wolfgang Paalen, Isabel Marín recounted: "Later, in January 1940—and I knew the preparations for the great exhibition of Surrealism were in full flow—the director of the Galería de Arte Mexicano, Inés Amor, paid me an unexpected visit. She asked me to come with her straight away: Paalen was one of the lead organizers and he thought that I might like to play the part of the Sphinx of the Night."^{xvi}

For several weeks, the newly founded Galería de Arte Mexicano^{xvii} became a place for free art and also for clear statements against fascism and racism. In addition to the European artists who were persecuted and disparaged in Nazi Germany, the show also placed a sudden spotlight on the young avant-garde artists of Latin America and Mexico, among them Agustín Lazo, Manuel Rodríguez Lozano, Carlos Mérida, Guillermo Meza, Moreno Villa, Roberto Montenegro, Antonio Ruíz, and Xavier Villaurutia. The inclusion of Mexico's fledgling avant-garde was a particular mission of the gallery's owner Inés Amor, who in this matter was able to count on Wolfgang Paalen's support from the very beginning. The young artists promoted by Wolfgang Paalen and Inés Amor over the ensuing years included the aforementioned painter Guillermo Meza, and in particular the artists Gunther Gerzso, Pedro Coronel, Fernando Ramos Prida, and his sister Ana Luisa Ramos Prida. Worth mentioning in this context is the fact that Inés Amor and her sister Caroline had already attempted in 1935 to create a space for contemporary art, as a countermovement to the dominant "muralismo." As part of these efforts to challenge the prevailing understanding of art, which was heavily promoted by the state, the Galería de Arte Mexicano had been chosen—or purposefully brought into play by Inés Amor.^{xviii} For the stateless exiles in Mexico, however, another factor was also significant: Wolfgang Paalen traded on his name as an Austrian artist. He consciously referenced Mexican foreign policy, which had never recognized Austria's annexation and had openly protested against the disappearance of Austria from the League of Nations in 1938. A statement, too, on the status of Surrealism: "in exile."

From the beginning, Paalen avoided contact with German-speaking politically involved exile groups in Mexico.^{xix} He had no contact with the Free Germans and their cultural organizations, such as the

DR. CHRISTIAN KLOYBER

[c.kloyber|at|gmail.com]



Heinrich Heine Club, nor with the Free Austrians, all of whom were members of the predominantly Communist Acción Republicana Austriaca de México (ARAM; Austrian Republican Action in Mexico). Paalen's anti-Stalinist stance was known in Mexico from the outset. In the second issue of his magazine *DYN* he affirmed his critical position in his survey "Inquiry on Dialectic Materialism."^{xx} Any form of relationship with the predominantly Communist exiles in Mexico was rejected by Paalen.

Paalen's meeting with the exiled writer Gustav Regler

Wolfgang Paalen did not see himself as a refugee in Mexico, nor did he feel like someone living in exile. He viewed himself as a citizen of the world; in the best and idealistic sense, he considered himself a cosmopolitan. He had envisaged Mexico as his new permanent residence from 1940 onward and was given Mexican citizenship on February 14, 1947. While the various political groups in Mexican exile were rife with conflict, hostility, and even acts of violence, Paalen avoided all contact—with one exception. From 1941, Alice Paalen (Alice Rahon) and Wolfgang Paalen maintained a close friendship with Mieke (Marie Luise) and Gustav Regler.^{xxi} The German writer had been a key leader of the International Brigades (political commissar of the XII Brigade) during the Spanish Civil War and, together with his wife Marie Luise Vogeler-Regler, had sought exile in Mexico via France. Having made no secret of his critical views of Stalinism, he was considered *the* traitor in the battle against the Nazis by the exiled Communist party faithful. His wife had been one of the founding members of the Wirtschaftliche Vereinigung Worpsweder Künstler (Economic Union of Worpswede Artists) in 1925, having worked in Worpswede, first as an applied artist and then, from 1929, in the artists' group Die Kugel. In 1933, she and Gustav Regler fled to Strasbourg and then to Paris. The couple married en route to Mexico. Mieke died from cancer on September 21, 1945, in Mexico.

In his autobiography,^{xxii} Regler describes the existential significance these "new unbidden friends" had for them. While Mieke was preparing her first exhibition of new pictures in their rented house close to Paalen's home, "the painter [arrived] on the morning of the opening and brought me a magnificent clay god of the Guerrero tribe; affecting a princely tone he said: 'In Polynesia, when a woman gives birth to a child, her husband receives gifts. Here! For the husband of the woman who has accomplished such an exquisite exhibition.'"^{xxiii} Regler's interest in Paalen was piqued, and several days later he visited him in his studio. It was known that Paalen's studio had been designed by the German architect Max Cetto. Cetto himself had fled Germany in 1938, working first in San

DR. CHRISTIAN KLOYBER

[c.kloyber|at|gmail.com]



Francisco (with the Viennese architect and student of Adolf Loos, Richard Neutra, among others), and from 1939 in Mexico. Regler's description of Paalen's studio corresponds with one of the famous photos by Walter Reuter.^{xxiv} "I visited his studio to take a look at his pictures. There was something of Moby Dick in this high space, one wall of which was completely covered by a ritual Eskimo panel painting; beneath the ceiling hung an awe-inspiring elongated whale penis. [...] Yet then everything also had the uncanny character of the visionary. I recall one picture, painted in 1938, around the time of the Munich Agreement.^{xxv} Paalen had given it the title *Battle of the Saturnian Princes*; it was apocalyptic lightning!"^{xxvi}

The group of artists lived in the southern part of the city, in the Coyoacán and San Ángel quarters, not far from the studios and homes of Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo. Everyone took an interest in the fortunes of the others, especially Eva Sulzer and Alice and Wolfgang Paalen. Together with other friends they also attended to Mieke Regler when she was dying: "The string orchestra was tuning up their instruments. Walter Stein [Franz Steiner^{xxvii}] from Vienna was conducting the orchestra. [...] The friends, almost forty of them, were sitting crouched around the music stand in the garden [...] the musicians had chosen Mozart and Haydn [...]. In that hour, Marie Luise left us. [...] Alice [Paalen] had written a poem and read it out to me under a starry landscape by Paalen that seemed like Marie Luise's new home."^{xxviii}

A little later, Gustav Regler published a monograph about his friend, based on the "notes biographiques" compiled by Paalen himself. To this day, the small volume, published in English in 1946 by the New York publisher Nierendorf Editions, remains one of the most valuable sources of information on the artist Wolfgang Paalen.

ⁱ *DYN*, no. 1, April/May 1942, p. 3.

ⁱⁱ Cf. Wolfgang Paalen, "Suggestion for an Objective Morality," *DYN*, no. 1 (April/May 1942), p. 17.

ⁱⁱⁱ *DYN*, no. 1 (April/May 1942), p. [4].

^{iv} While in exile in Mexico, Paul Westheim also wrote his groundbreaking work *Arte Antiguo de México* (Mexico City, 1950).

^v Wolfgang Paalen, "The New Image," *DYN*, no. 1 (April/May 1942), p. 7.

^{vi} Cf. Malcolm Lowry, *Under the Volcano* (New York, 1947).

^{vii} Cf. Ernst Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, 3 volumes (Berlin, 1954–59). See also Ernst Bloch, *Avicenna und die aristotelische Linke* (Leipzig, 1949).

^{viii} Fernando Lobo, "Breton, Péret y el Carpintero," *Avispero*, yr. 3, no. 9 (2014), pp. 12–16.

^{ix} Fabienne Bradu, *André Breton en México* (Mexico City, 2012).

^x Jean van Heijenoort, *With Trotsky in Exile: From Prinkipo to Coyoacán* (Cambridge, Massachusetts / London, 1978), pp. 121–29.

^{xi} Cf. Maurice Nadeau, *Geschichte des Surrealismus* (Reinbek near Hamburg, 1965; revised edition 1986).

^{xii} Isidro Fabela submitted his official objection against the annexation of Austria to the General Secretary of the League of Nations, Joseph Avenol, on March 19, 1938.

^{xiii} Juan O’Gorman was one of Mexico’s most influential architects and became known for his design for the university library (National Autonomous University, Mexico City). The studio-cum-home of Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo was one of his early commissions (1935).

^{xiv} Isabel Marín in conversation with Christian Kloyber, Tepoztlán, Mexico, 1989, tape recording in the private collection of the author.

^{xv} César Moro (Alfredo Quispez Asin), together with Emilio Adolfo Westphalen, had already organized the first Surrealist exhibition in Latin America, in Lima in 1935.

^{xvi} See note 14.

^{xvii} Dafne Cruz Porchini / Adriana Ortega Orozco, “The 1940 International Exhibition of Surrealism: A Cosmopolitan Art Dialogue in Mexico City,” *Iowa Research Online*, no. 21 (2017), <http://ir.uiowa.edu/dadasur/vol21/iss1/> (accessed on April, 17, 2019).

^{xviii} Jorge Alberto Manrique / Teresa del Conde, *Una mujer en el arte mexicano: Memorias de Inés Amor* (Mexico City, 1987).

^{xix} *Österreicher im Exil – Mexiko 1938–1947: Eine Dokumentation*, ed. Documentation Centre of Austrian Resistance (Vienna, 2002).

^{xx} *DYN*, no. 2 (July/August 1942), p. 49.

^{xxi} Gustav Regler was forced to flee after Hitler seized power in Germany. From November 3, 1934, he was listed as “enemy of the state no. 19” by the Nazis.

^{xxii} Gustav Regler, *Das Ohr des Malchus: Eine Lebensgeschichte* (Cologne, 1958).

^{xxiii} “[kam] der Maler Paalen am Morgen der Eröffnung und brachte mir einen majestätisch tönernen Gott eines Guerrerostammes, sagte mit prinziplicher Ironie: ‘Wenn in Polynesien eine Frau ein Kind gebiert, bekommt der Mann Geschenke. Hier! Für den Mann der Frau, die solch eine delikate Ausstellung zustande brachte.’” Regler 1958 (see note 22), p. 485.

^{xxiv} The Berlin-born photographer Walter Reuter had fought in the Spanish Civil War and had been a war correspondent for the Spanish Republicans. In 1942, he and his wife fled to Mexico.

^{xxv} This refers to the Munich Agreement of September 29, 1938, in which the United Kingdom, France, and Italy forced Czechoslovakia to cede the Sudetenland to Hitler and the German Reich. On October 1, 1938, the Wehrmacht marched in.

^{xxvi} “Ich besuchte sein Atelier, um mir seine Bilder anzusehen. Es war etwas von Moby Dick in diesem hohen Raum, dessen eine Wand völlig bedeckt war mit einem kultischen Eskimopaneel; unter dem Dach aber schwebte der achtungsgebietende langgestreckte Phallus eines Wals. [...] Dann aber bekam alles wieder den beunruhigenden Charakter des Seherischen: ich erinnere mich eines Bildes, das 1938 um die Zeit des Münchner Paktes^{xxvi} entstanden war. Paalen hatte es *Combat des Princes Saturniens* betitelt; es war ein apokalyptisches Wetterleuchten!” Regler 1958 (see note 22), p. 485.

^{xxvii} The chamber singer Franz Steiner was one of the most prominent interpreters of Richard Strauss’s works; in 1938 he fled from Vienna to Mexico, where he made a significant contribution to the development of the new Mexican opera.

^{xxviii} “Das Streicherorchester stimmte die Instrumente. Walter Stein [Franz Steiner^{xxviii}] aus Wien leitete das Konzert. [...] Die Freunde, beinahe vierzig an der Zahl hockten im Garten, um die Notenpulte herum [...] die Musiker hatten Mozart und Haydn gewählt [...]. In dieser Stunde ging Marieluise. [...] Alice [Paalen] aber schrieb ein Gedicht und las es mir vor unter einer Sternenlandschaft von Paalen, die wie Marieluisenes neue Heimat anmutete.” Regler 1958 (see note 22), p. 505.

