

The Atomic Age

Artists put to the test of history

11 October 2024 – 9 February 2025



The Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris is inviting visitors to take a new look at the history of modernity in the 20th century via the imaginary world of the atom.

The exhibition is an opportunity to explore the artistic representations sparked by the scientific discovery of the atom and its applications, in particular the nuclear bomb, whose devastating consequences changed the fate of humanity.

Bringing together some 250 works – paintings, drawings, photographs, videos and installations – as well as documentation that has often been previously unpublished, the exhibition shows, for the first time in a French museum, the widely differing different stances adopted by artists in the face of scientific advances and the controversies they have given rise to.

Dealing with a subject now more topical than ever, the exhibition is in keeping with the museum's desire to reflect contemporary cultural and social concerns in its programming.

PRESS RELEASE

Director
Fabrice Hergott

Curators
Julia Garimorth, Head curator, Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris

Maria Stavrinaki, professor of the history of contemporary art, University of Lausanne

Specialist advisor
Kyveli Mavrokordopoulou, teacher-researcher in modern and contemporary art and environmental studies, Free University of Amsterdam

Assistées de
Sylvie Moreau-Soteras, research and documentation officer, Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris

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Charles Bittinger
Late stage of Baker
1946
Oil on canvas
68,5 x 78,5 cm
Naval History and Heritage Command
Photo: Navy Art Collection, Naval History and Heritage Command

Practical informations
Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris
11 Avenue du Président Wilson
75116 Paris
Tel. 01 53 67 40 00
www.mam.paris.fr

Open Tuesday to Sunday, 10am–6pm

Late closing: Thursday 9:30pm

Admission
Full rate: 15€
Concessions: 13€

Cultural activities
Information and bookings
Tel. 01 53 67 40 80

Press officer
Maud Ohana
maud.ohana@paris.fr
Tel. 01 53 67 40 51

1- The disintegration of matter:

At the dawn of the twentieth century, scientific discoveries regarding the composition of the atom and the radioactivity it emanated radically changed the relationship to matter underpinning art's representations of reality. Matter was henceforth understood as energy, making it possible to imagine an art liberated from gravity and from the opacity of nature as it appeared to us. Two approaches emerged: the mystical abstraction sought by Vassily Kandinsky and Hilma af Klint on the one hand, and the conceptual art of Marcel Duchamp, inspired by infra-sensible phenomena, on the other.

2- The bomb :

The invention of the atomic bomb and its devastating use against Japan by the United States in August 1945 marked a tipping point in the modern history of the atom, ushering in a new "Atomic Age". Artists in the West offered a wide range of interpretations: some opted for aesthetic neutrality and a fascination with the unknown worlds revealed by physics, others criticised the "spectacularisation" of nuclear explosions, and still others attempted to depict this new irruption of the tragic into the human condition. The greatest artists of the second half of the twentieth century – Francis Bacon, Salvador Dalí, Lucio Fontana, Gary Hill, Pierre Huyghe, Asger Jorn, Yves Klein, László Moholy-Nagy, Barnett Newman, Sigmar Polke, Jackson Pollock, Thomas Schütte and others – delved deeply into the idea and history of the destructive atom and a new cosmogony.

After the War, the explosion symbolised by a giant mushroom became a ubiquitous image, emblematic of the globalisation of conflict and communications. Channelled through popular culture, these depictions fuelled American imperialism, technoscience and the rise of global capitalism in the 50s and 60s.

At the same time the Communist bloc was conducting its own propaganda campaigns for nuclear domination, while in Japan the first artworks oscillating between realism and Surrealism were followed by collectives leading "Anti-Art" demonstrations that challenged American colonialism and the new form of Japanese militarism.

3- The nuclearisation of the world:

From the 1970s onwards, new forms of political commitment began to emerge, often linked to a heightened ecological awareness of the threat posed by nuclear energy. Humanity lost the central place it had previously occupied, becoming part of a tragedy in which man was both oppressor and victim. Since the Chernobyl accident (1986) in particular, it is now the living world in its entirety that is at the heart of artistic concerns.

Pacifist, anti-nuclear and counter-cultural movements are shaping a political critique of nuclearisation. Echoing other political movements emerging during this period, such as feminism and anti-colonialism, these voices offer a new reading of the history of modern and contemporary art.

The Atomic Age is unique in that it is a narrative of no return, with radioactivity continuing into the indefinite future. More than ever rooted in our immediate present, this is a story that is still being written. The exhibition offers a multifaceted journey through modern and contemporary history, in which art, science and politics have become inseparable.

The works brought together for the exhibition come from numerous public and private collections including The Art Institute of Chicago, Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum, Hungarian National Gallery (Budapest), Maison Européenne de la Photographie (Paris), Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia (Madrid), The Museum of Modern Art (New York), Centre Pompidou (Paris), National Museum of Modern Art (Tokyo), Tate Gallery (London), Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers University (New York), Fondazione Piero Manzoni (Milan), Peggy Guggenheim Collection (Venice), Pinault Collection (Paris) and the Ringier Collection (Switzerland). They are accompanied by archival material – historic photographs, audiovisual documentation – from the Académie des Sciences, the Bibliothèque Kandinsky, the Bibliothèque Nationale, the Institut Curie and the Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle in France, together with the Niels Bohr Archive (Copenhagen), The New York Public Library and other international sources.

The catalogue, which includes numerous essays by specialists – philosophers and historians of art, architecture and science, etc. – explores the subject from the three angles of art, science and politics. It also gives a voice to present-day artists and writers, and brings together documentation and images in many cases on public display for the first time. Last but not least, a comprehensive chronology shows the sequence of scientific, political, cultural and artistic events that have shaped our "Atomic Age".

Artists: Kenneth Adam, Horst Ademeit, Ant Farm, Francis Bacon, Enrico Baj, Robert Barry, Hélène de Beauvoir, Charles Bittering, Erik Boulatov, Chris Burden, Alberto Burri, Miriam Cahn, Valdis Celms, Julian Charrière, Bruce Conner, Gregory Corso, Salvador Dali, Gianni Dova, Marcel Duchamp, Friedrich Dürrenmatt, Jaan Elken, Bonita Ely, Lucio Fontana, Loïe Fuller, General Idea, Guy Debord, Vidya Gastaldon, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Hans Grundig, Brion Gysin, Richard Hamilton, Isao Hashimoto, Raoul Hausmann, Shigeo Hayashi, Inārs Helmūts, Justino Herrera, « Hibakusha » (atom bomb survivors), Hi-Red Center, Gary Hill, Jessie Homer French, Pierre Huyghe, Tatsuo Ikeda, Isidore Isou, Motoharu Jōnouchi, Asger Jorn, Jugnet + Clairet, Vassily Kandinsky, Kikuji Kawada, On Kawara, György Kemény, Kiyonori Kikutake, Yves Klein, Hilma af Klint, Susanne Kriemann, Barbara Kruger, Tetsumi Kudo, Yayoi Kusama, Wifredo Lam, Mikhaïl Larionov, Jean-Jacques Lebel, Le Corbusier, Francesco Lo Savio, Piero Manzoni, Yoshito Matsushige, Roberto Matta, Herbert Matter, Gustav Metzger, Boris Mikhaïlov, László Moholy-Nagy, Henry Moore, Minoru Nakahara, Natsuyuki Nakanishi, Jürgen Nefzger, Barnett Newman, Natacha Nisic, Isamu Noguchi, Yoko Ono, Kiyoji Otsuji, Wolfgang Paalen, Eduardo Paolozzi, Claude Parent, Gaetano Pesce, Raymond Pettibon, Otto Piene, Giuseppe Pinot Gallizio, Sigmar Polke, André et Jean Polak, Jackson Pollock, Richard Pousette-Dart, Grant Powers, Margaret Raspé, Nathalie Rebholz, Stefan Rinck, Thomas Schütte, Jim Shaw, Vladimir Shevchenko, Kazuo Shiraga, Amy Sillman, Mimi Smith Sisters Of Survival, Nancy Spero, Viatcheslav Syssoev, Atsuko Tanaka, Koichi Tateishi, Diana Thater, Shōmei Tōmatsu, Hiromi Tsuchida, Luc Tuymans, Peter Watkins, Ray Wisniewski, Wols, Yōsuke Yamahata, Vladimir Yankilevsky, Alexander Zhitomirsky, etc.

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