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Abstract
This essay looks at the work of the Californian artist Bruce Conner between 1957 and 1962. It provides a general historical context in which to place the work – looking for example at groups of artists, galleries and exhibitions in San Francisco in the period. It investigates Conner’s use of assemblage techniques, with reference to urban renewal and draws parallels to Walter Benjamin’s account of urban reform in Paris during the previous century. The nineteenth century is further referenced in close analysis of two works: CHILD and BLACK DAHLIA. Here use is made of psychoanalytical writings about the return of the dead and the femme fatale.

For many in the New York art world the exhibition The Art of Assemblage, curated by William Seitz at the Museum of Modern Art in 1962, came as a revelation. Galleries long dominated by large abstract paintings and clunking welded sculpture instead sparkled with the poetry of everyday objects shackled together. Although Bruce Conner had exhibited in New York before his inclusion in Seitz’s show, the exhibition made him part of the kind of rich narrative tale MoMA was so fond of telling. The story was largely one told through formal resemblance with Futurist, analytical Cubist and Surrealist pieces jostling with work by the likes of Robert Rauschenberg, Arman and Enrico Baj. In New York the recent work had been viewed under the heading neo-dada and it proved all too easy to assimilate the less familiar work from Europe and the West Coast under a similar rubric. The privileging of dada’s heritage was shown in the choice of artists invited to speak at MoMA’s accompanying symposium: Richard Huelsenbeck, Marcel Duchamp and Robert Rauschenberg. The exhibition was yet another example of the way in which legacies of surrealism were not only repressed in formalist accounts of modernism but also within the first phase of the neo-avant-garde, which instead chose to look to constructivist and dada precedents. If acknowledged at all, the place of surrealism within an American avant-garde context was given to painters such as Roberto Matta, Joan Miro and Yves Tanguy as precursors to the ‘triumph of American painting.’ As a movement firmly grounded in literary sources, surrealism was complete anathema to a form of Modernism that privileged the purity of the medium. For Conner’s New York contemporaries the lessons from the historical avant-garde came from Marcel Duchamp’s readymade rather than the surrealist objet trouvé – its seemingly indifferent selection suiting their turn away from the expressive and confessional attitude of the older
generation of painters. On the West Coast, however, artists like Jay de Feo, Wallace Berman, Wally Hedrik, George Herms and Bruce Conner used the example of the last great European avant-garde movement as a way of turning their eye 'on the American cities just as they began to become old.'

In North Beach San Francisco during the 1950s a small group of artists and poets embraced the literature of the romantic era, published their own periodical and explored the connections between creativity and the unconscious. The lack of any significant support structure for the visual aspect of such work in the form of museums, collectors or galleries meant that the achievement of these artists has been largely neglected since the 1950s. Recently, however, contemporary Californian practitioners such as Mike Kelley, Jim Shaw and Paul McCarthy have championed the San Francisco artists, while the last decade has seen an increasing interest in their form of visual poetry. The survey 2000 B.C.: The Bruce Conner Story: Part II at the Walker Art Centre in Minneapolis brought his work to a wider audience, yet largely ignored its debts to earlier artistic movements. In 1949, at East High, Wichita, Conner met Lee Streiff and Michael McClure. This pair of writers had, since meeting at Robinson Junior High, accumulated a group of friends interested in literature of the romantic period, surrealism, science fiction, geology and modern music. This small group, many of whom would move to San Francisco, later became known as the Wichita beats, immortalised in McClure’s 1970 novel The Mad Cub and Allan Ginsberg’s 1966 poem The Wichita Vortex Sutra. Isolated from the galleries of the big cities, Conner and his friends were hungry readers of anything they could get their hands on that told them about the avant-garde activities in New York and Europe. Conner remembers reading Robert Motherwell’s The Dada Painters and Poets as soon as it came out in 1952 and learning about Duchamp through Winthrop Sergeant’s Life magazine article, ‘Dada’s Daddy,’ the same year. Paradoxically, it seems Conner’s isolated situation actually provided the impetus for a much clearer understanding of his avant-garde forbears than that of his metropolitan contemporaries. Edward Kienholz, who grew up in Los Angeles, has commented that he had never heard of Kurt Schwitters until his Pasadena museum retrospective in 1962. Amongst the works avidly consumed by this group were the writings of several the nineteenth-century authors whose vision of the city had greatly influenced the Parisian avant-garde of the inter-war years –
Edgar Allen Poe, Charles Baudelaire and Arthur Rimbaud. In his second year of college at the University of Wichita in 1952 Conner took part in an unauthorized exhibition, in the hallway of the art department, of student work inspired by dada. In 1952 Conner went to study at the University of Nebraska – still staying in contact with his friends from high school and returning to Wichita in the holidays. In 1956, on graduation, Conner went east to New York, where he attended art classes and viewed the works that he had previously only seen in books and magazines. Having found representation with the Charles Alan Gallery in New York, Conner moved on again to Boulder, Colorado. At the University of Colorado he met the film makers Larry Jordan and Stan Brakhage, both of whom had strong connections to the artistic community of San Francisco. The works he created in Colorado – scraped back white oil works on battered masonite – only hinted at the objects he would feel free to make when he arrived in San Francisco the following year.

Michael McClure moved from Wichita to San Francisco in 1953 and often wrote to Conner. McClure told him about the growing community of poets and artists that had settled around North Beach and encouraged Conner to join them. Having moved to San Francisco, McClure had initially been disappointed by the city, finding it in many ways as provincial, paranoid and intolerant as the Wichita he was fleeing. In North Beach, however, he found a cosmopolitan haven just right for his artistic temperament. San Francisco’s relatively relaxed atmosphere in the cold war years was put down to its mixture of settlers. Founded by pioneers in 1776 and developed by prospectors following the discovery of gold at Coloma in 1848. It was a major west coast port throughout the nineteenth century, with sea links to the Asian continent. McClure persuaded Conner to move to the Fillmore district of San Francisco with tales of intellectuals and anarchists and whispers about peyote, perpetuating a myth that has lingered long in the American imagination – a myth that Conner would successfully mine.

When William Seitz travelled to San Francisco in 1962 in order to find artists for his forthcoming exhibition, it was Conner who showed him around. The kind of things he showed Seitz reveal some of his sources of inspiration:
I showed him the second hand store on McAllister Street run by a black man, who was a major inspiration to me. He called himself a minister, who had these objects ostensibly for sale in a little storefront, but he asked prohibitive prices. He would make these little environments of like an ice cream soda glass with a doctor’s mirror, with a doll’s head on top with its eye missing and a feather in its place.\(^{11}\)

Conner, however, wasn’t showing Seitz these things to give him background: he was actively trying to get him to show them in the MoMA exhibition, a show of serious ‘artists.’\(^{12}\) This reveals Conner’s attitude towards what could be described as ‘folk art,’ an attitude that raises it to the status of high art whilst at the same time lowers Conner’s own work to the level of a storefront trinket.

This attitude is one that was shared by artists like Wally Hedrick, George Herms and Wallace Berman, also active at this time in San Francisco. This shared aesthetic is firmly connected to the contemporary state of the art market. There were very few commercial galleries in San Francisco; The Dilexi and 6 galleries, both opened in the late 1950s, were exceptions.\(^{13}\) The collectors in San Francisco meanwhile were travelling Europe picking off Impressionist works or buying relatively safe modern works from New York (the collector Sally Lilienthal for example was buying work by Morris Louis in 1962).\(^{14}\) For those working in assembled sculpture the prospects looked bleak as far as making a living went and the work being created reflects this. Rather than making lasting commodities, as for example Edward Kienholz (Conner’s near contemporary in L.A.) would go on to do, they would create ramshackle pieces that would fall apart or only be seen once. Conner recalls early plaster pieces by Manuel Neri crumbling whilst on show at the San Francisco Museum, causing attendants to sweep up their mess on a daily basis.\(^{15}\) Wallace Berman took the group’s attitude towards impermanence to extremes. Berman arrived in San Francisco in the same year as Conner, having left L.A. following police censorship of an exhibition he had put together at the Ferus gallery some months before.\(^{16}\) In San Francisco Berman would continue to produce his collaged periodical *Sema*. In 1960 he moved to a shack in the marshes at Larkspur where he would hold exhibitions that opened for an hour and lasted one day, an
activity that continued until the shed sunk into the ground in 1961. There is no doubt that Conner had a similar attitude as Berman towards the necessity of exhibition,

Why have a show? Just have a party. And if you’re going to have a show, why even bother to take on all the trimmings and expectations of what art should be as a permanent work of art? I mean why spend your money on that if nobody is going to buy it? You really were doing it for yourself.17

Hal Foster, drawing on Peter Bürger’s analysis of the avant-garde, has suggested that ‘the first neo-avant-garde recovers the historical avant-garde … literally, through a reprise of its basic devices, the effect of which is less to transform the institution of art than to transform the avant-garde into an institution.’18 Foster’s view echoes that expressed at the time by the elder statesman of dada, Richard Huelsenbeck who remarked: ‘Neo-dada has turned the weapons used by dada, and later by Surrealism, into popular ploughshares with which to till the fertile soil of sensation-hungry galleries eager for business.’19 These views are clearly untenable in relation to San Francisco where the peculiar circumstances of the market dictated an alliance with an avant-garde called to Baudelaire’s definition of modernity as related to ‘the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and immutable.’20

This is not the only debt Conner had to Baudelaire, whose vision of the nineteenth century so conditioned the view of that epoch within surrealist circles. For Walter Benjamin, one of Baudelaire’s key motifs was that of the chiffonnier or rag picker, which Benjamin suggests he used as an ‘extended metaphor for the procedure of the poet,’ who picks his ‘rhyme-booty’ from the city streets.21 Conner has related the stuffed bag like structures that hang from a work like SNORE (1960) to the way the bin men would place garbage onto large stretched out tarpaulin before gathering it together and hanging it from the sides of their trucks. The same refuse collectors inspired the name for the loose society of artists and poets that Conner gathered around himself in San Francisco known as the Rat Bastard Protective Association, a play on the workers’ Scavengers Protective Society.22 The rag-pickers trade is conjured in the very materials of the pieces themselves as well as in their formal structure.
The piece entitled *RATBASTARD* from 1958 is fairly typical in terms of the materials used. Compared to other works from the same time this is a fairly simple composition: a two-inch-thick canvas covered in dirty nylon, incorporating a photograph of an autopsy in the top right hand corner that is veiled by the fabric. The reverse is covered in a newspaper page illustrating an image of torture, the medieval style costume giving away its status as a film still, whilst the fragmented headline at the top of the work – ‘Talks to his wife by carrier pigeon’ – adds to its disconcerting nature. It is held together by clumsily inserted nails, the unprofessional look playing into the idea that this is a work that resists commodification – like the second hand store window display with its extortionate price tags. Like many of the works from this period it incorporates a handle at the top, which, in exhibition, was often used to suspend the pieces from the ceiling to reveal both sides of the composition. As Conner explained: ‘[I] put a handle on it so I could carry it anyplace I wanted to. Part of the character of that work was that it wasn’t going anyplace except with my friends, with the artists that I knew.’

The second-hand store was not the only site in San Francisco that inspired Conner’s homage; the Playland and Sutro site at Point Lobos was also important. Rebecca Solnit writes, ‘San Francisco was in many ways like a European city of the past with its Italian cafes, its small pedestrian scale, and its charming Victorian architecture. For many artists, the swirling fog, innumerable vistas, and places like the decrepit amusement park Playland at the Beach gave it a particular magic.’ Playland at the Beach was opened by George and Leo Whitney in 1928 as a spectacular amusement park. It incorporated a fun house, diving bell, roller coaster, camera obscura and a merry-go-round, each constructed lovingly from wood, which by the late 1950s was beginning to warp in the ocean air. Above Playland on the cliffs at Point Lobos stood the Cliff House. This building was the third to stand on the site following on from two much more elaborate buildings that had been owned by the engineer and philanthropist Alfred Sutro, but which had been destroyed in mysterious fires. The Cliff House that stood in 1957 is the Art Deco diner building that still remains today, a streamlined casing added to the building when Sutro’s daughter Emma sold the Cliff House to the Playland creator George Whitney.
Also sold in 1952 were the baths that Sutro had built in 1863 for the people of San Francisco. This huge complex of glass and iron housed six different bathing tanks and had five hundred changing rooms. Built down on the rocks below Point Lobos several of the pools were filled with water flowing in from the Pacific. The baths were immensely popular with locals up until the late 1930s when Sutro’s grandson, realising the baths weren’t commercially viable, iced over the largest bath and turned it into an ice rink. After Whitney bought the baths they continued to deteriorate until they were sold to land developers in 1966, and burned to the ground a few years later. The planned condos were never built and the ruins still provide interest for tourists today. Housed also inside the complex was the Sutro museum, which Conner claimed had a great influence on his work. He recalled its mixture of Egyptian mummies, toothpick carnivals, mechanical dolls and the wardrobe used by Tom Thumb, a nineteenth century ‘freak;’ it too was destroyed in the fire.27

Conner was readily able to find material for his assemblages from the sites of demolition in the Western Addition area of the city and Salvation Army stores filled with old-fashioned junk cleared from the same place, remnants of a rapidly modernising society.28 The new process of urbanisation planned to alleviate the jumble of streets that had allowed certain isolated areas to develop into ghettos. This system of urbanisation was heavily resisted during the city's rebuilding after the great earthquake of 1906. In its aim of papering over the differences in class and racial identity the plan can be compared to the scheme carried out by Baron Haussmann in late nineteenth-century Paris, that formed a central focus of Walter Benjamin's *Passagen-Werk or Arcades Project*.29 The problems involved in such utopian schemes, Benjamin argues, are best evoked by the ruin – in his case the Parisian glassed in Arcades – which will act as an allegory for our current situation. The Arcades for Benjamin, as for Louis Aragon, were a symbol of an only just outmoded time; the lack of appeal of the dusty commodities displayed in the windows of the shops that lined these passages could reveal the lie of commodity fetishism. Susan Buck-Morss, interpreting Benjamin, writes: 'Because these decaying structures no longer hold sway over the collective imagination, it is possible to recognise them as the illusory dream images they always were.'30 Sutro's baths in particular, but also some of the other elements of the Point Lobos complex, act in precisely this way. The baths evoke a classical vision, also key for Benjamin, of class harmony through a public
space, just as did the rebuilding of the Western Addition. However the failure of Sutro’s project in Conner’s time was able to show up the utopianism of the new urbanisation and allow the Point Lobos complex to work as an allegory.

Conner’s materials themselves act as allegories for commodity fetishism. The grunge-covered items Conner incorporated into his assemblages evoke another era; the old leather suitcases, grimey furniture and fringed lampshades look back to the Victorian parlour and speak of ‘the mortification of matter which is fashionable no longer.’ The tawdry sequins and feathers too, which lie abandoned and filth covered in so many of Conner’s works, bring home the lie that Benjamin saw in the cult of the movie star: ‘The cult of the movie star … preserves not the unique aura of the person but the ‘spell of personality,’ the phoney spell of the commodity’ – so many trappings are all that is left when that cult of personality wears thin.

It is this concern with allegory that makes Conner’s work so different from that of his contemporaries. Ed Kienholz for example used objects that had reached the end of their useful lives in order to show the immense waste of industrial society whilst at the same time commenting on social issues like prostitution and abortion. Most of Conner’s materials never had a useful life in the sense that Kienholz’s clocks, engine parts and broken television sets once did, they were in a sense already waste, a commodity whose only value was the one imposed by the price tag.

Sutro’s museum with its mix of spinning dolls, scale models and Egyptian mummies may well have been the inspiration for an exhibition of 1960 at the Batman Gallery in San Francisco. Works made over the previous three years were displayed around the space, hanging from the ceiling, looming up from the floor. Works aesthetically united by the torn nylon covering them all and gently lit by the white candles that were inserted into the works themselves, the stubs of which remain as the crown of THE BRIDE (1960) and on top of RATBASTARD # 2 (1959). Alfred Frankenstein in the San Francisco Chronicle described the exhibition thus, ‘Some magic grotto, full of things that have been put under enchantment and left for years to the bats and spiders, but still alive and waiting to be revivified.’ The lack of distinction between the living and the dead expressed in Frankenstein’s review is of course pertinent to Sutro’s museum where mummies and automata collide and blur those same boundaries. The Egyptian mummy was an emblem that circulated widely within The Rat
Bastard Protective Association; Manuel Neri and Joan Brown both were creating works that resembled mummified animals whilst Conner’s works made from brown wax and nylon evoke the ancient bodies of the pharaohs. The display of the mummy, without its golden casing, reveals the fragility of the preservation process. Joan Brown called the mummy in the de Young Museum in San Francisco, ‘that one dumb, stupid, ratty, rotten mummy’ drawing attention to the travesty of exposing these bodies to the air. In the B-movies that fascinated Conner (he used handbills advertising them for an early collage and used clips from them in his 1960 film A MOVIE) drew upon the mummy as a figure disturbed, looking for his rightful burial ground. Slavoj Žižek has looked at the use of this motif in horror movies in order to throw light on some aspects of Lacanian psychoanalysis. He argues that through the funeral rite,

The dead are inscribed into the text of symbolic tradition, they are assured that, in spite of their death, they will ‘continue to live’ in the memory of the community. The ‘return of the living dead’ is, on the other hand, the reverse of the proper funeral rite. While the latter implies a certain reconciliation, an acceptance of loss, the return of the dead signifies that they cannot find their proper place in the text of tradition.36

The animation of the mummified corpse in the poses and attitudes, as well as the evocative setting, of Conner’s work seems to imply precisely this kind of return. Significantly, Žižek adds:

The two great traumatic events of the holocaust and the gulag are, of course, exemplary cases of the return of the dead in the twentieth century. The shadows of their victims will continue to chase us as ‘living dead’ until we give them a decent burial, until we integrate the trauma of their death into our historical memory.37
One way of honouring this memory for many Americans was the abolition of capital punishment, considered to demean the value of human life and as an insult to those who died in those ‘two great traumatic events’. The terms of the argument were often couched around the problems of totalitarianism and Conner’s work CHILD, inspired by the execution of Caryl Chessman, references this through the symbol of the mummy (Fig. 1).\(^{38}\) CHILD is a seated figure made from brown wax, evocative of the leather like bodies of the long dead, covered in a web of nylon. The piece was first exhibited in the de Young Museum highlighting its call to the past. Its seated position alerts us that this is no ordinary death, but an execution. Chessman spent eleven years on death row in a San Francisco prison pleading his innocence on charges of kidnapping. Many believed the charge had been invented as a response to his acquittal on a previous count of sexual molestation, dropped due to lack of evidence. The power of this work came not just from its contemporary relevance but also from the cries it whispered from beyond the grave, from Egypt, from Germany, from the Siberian wasteland.
Fig. 1: Bruce Conner, CHILD, 1959–60, assemblage, wax figure with nylon, twine, cloth and metal in a high chair, 87.7 x 43.1 x 41.7 cm. Museum of Modern Art, New York. (Photo: Michael Kohn Gallery, Los Angeles) © Bruce Conner.
Fig. 2. Bruce Conner, BLACK DAHLIA, 1960, mixed Media, 67.9 x 27.3 x 7 cm. Collection Walter Hopps, Houston. (Photo: Michael Kohn Gallery, Los Angeles). © Bruce Conner.
If Conner’s materials evoked the late nineteenth-century’s ruined philanthropy, whilst the figure of the mummy looked to that era’s feverish ethnographic collecting, a third reference to the period emerges when we examine his treatment of women. A number of box-like constructions from 1959 entitled SPIDER LADY, SPIDER LADY NEST, and SPIDER LADY HOUSE evoke the figure of the femme fatale through their titles that remind us of the Black Widow spider who eats her male counterpart. Each of the pieces uses nylon fabric to create an elaborate web across the front of the construction, masking in the case of SPIDER LADY a beauty pageant photograph and in SPIDER LADY HOUSE the head of a doll with a nail hammered through its forehead. The femme fatale is important elsewhere too, in BLACK DAHLIA (1960) for example, a work inspired by the notorious murder of Elizabeth Short in 1946 (fig. 2). The body of the beautiful drifter was discovered horrifically mutilated and drained of blood in an abandoned lot on Norton and 39th Street, just south of Hollywood. Eager for stardom the victim had mixed with hoodlums and call girls, adding a sleazy patina to long running and still unsolved Los Angeles Police Department investigation. Although a national scandal, it is significant for Conner’s appropriation of the killing that it took place in Los Angeles and that the horrific vision of the blood drained corpse left its stain on the sunshine state. The victim’s associations with prostitution and the pornographic image Conner uses to represent her, bring Short into the sexualised realm of the femme fatale.

Elaine Showalter has argued that the femme fatale arises as a symbol of misogyny in the 1890s. She relates this to the rise of women’s suffrage movements in the same decade and the resultant crisis in masculinity. Another symptom of this crisis can be seen in the hyper masculine sphere of ‘Clubland,’ the network of men’s drinking clubs that emerged at the end of the century. This sphere of society was completely devoid of women and, as Showalter argues, provided an extension of the public school system and a mirror of the government. The periodic returns of the femme fatale bear out Showalter’s reading; in Weimar Germany she comes as a response to the surrender in World War I, whilst in fifties America she is a symptom of a crisis in masculinity caused by the woman’s role as worker during the depression and the war years that had left the masculine role as breadwinner somewhat redundant. This feeling was only increased by changes in the economy from one of production to consumption, leaving jobs for men outside the realm of physical exertion and
founding the image of ‘organisation man.’ As a result we can observe similar consequences to the situation in the late nineteenth century in popular representations of women and in male bonding in the 1950s. The B-movies of the 1950s took the image of the femme fatale that had so fascinated interwar cinema goers and exaggerated it to grotesque extremes: *Attack of the Fifty Foot Woman* (1958), *The Wasp Woman* (1956) and *The Daughter of Dr Jekyll* (1957), are just a few examples of the genre. Artists, who had always suffered from an anxiety about the masculinity of their task, retreated into clubs and bars that, although admitting women, often left them ostracised or as tokenistic sexual talismans.

In visual representations of the femme fatale her role of showing up the ‘disparity between seeming and being, the deception, instability and unpredictability associated with the woman’ is often, as Mary Ann Doane has pointed out, visualised by the depiction of the veil. Doane notes that this visualisation is able to stabilise the ‘instability and precariousness of sexuality.’ This also seems to be the role of the veil in Jacques Lacan’s theorisation of the phallus, the veil acting to cover up the disparity between the penis and the phallus. In order for the veil to do its job of stabilising it needs to be blank, to signify nothing but its own opacity. Even when it overtly signifies the oriental it is used as an amplification of the veils opacity through the connotations of mystery. Conner’s use of the stocking, itself a privileged fetish object, denies this function. Acting itself as a replacement for the woman’s ‘lack,’ it initially acts against the threat of castration, as does the phallised woman behind it. Here the doubling of the fetish, both the woman and her veil, is, as Sigmund Freud wrote ‘a confirmation of the technical rule according to which a multiplication of penis symbols signifies castration.’ *BLACK DAHLIA*, with its phallic dimensions that seem to elongate the woman’s body, is a perfect illustration of this: the stocking’s seam that runs down its centre screams the veil’s true identity. *BLACK DAHLIA*, although representing a victim seems also to show a predator, the depicted woman wears a leather belt, a weapon of sadistic intent. The piece is studded with rusting nails that evoke the nail fetishes made in the Congo that are pierced so that they might release their hidden powers adding another level to the work’s meaning. The evocation of the Congo here, significantly the site of Joseph Conrad’s novel *Heart of Darkness*, again brings us back to the nineteenth century when ethnographic collectors brought back trinkets from the dark continent to be sealed behind glass. The conflation of the
‘primitive’ with the femme fatale creates a new figure, a new ‘danger’ returning from the past like the mummy with a message for the present: it references the old century’s belief in degeneration through miscegenation and the new era’s inability to let that belief go. It is the castrative feeling and the dangerous sexuality of ‘the dark continent’ that is conjured by BLACK DAHLIA that tells why she must die, yet it is the use of uncannily outmoded materials which allows the victim to remain in our realm – yet another figure unable to find her place in the text of tradition. The castrative woman is also evoked by the piece entitled MEDUSA. Freud argued that the snakes on the Gorgon’s head are multiple analogues for the missing penis and so again through ‘the technical rule’ mentioned earlier speak of castration. In the Medusa myth it is the gaze that has the power to kill, it is here the veil is needed, but Conner does not comfort us, he rips it aside leaving us face to face with the threat of castration.

In the reading of CHILD we have seen how Conner has used a surrealist vocabulary in order to investigate the trauma of war – an investigation familiar to us from Hal Foster’s influential reading of surrealism as concerned with compulsive repetition and traumatic shock. In Conner’s use of the femme fatale we see the return of a figure dear to the surrealist consciousness – Conner exchanging the recurrent motif of the praying mantis for the black widow – complete with the still unresolved connotations of misogyny and violence.

In examining the sources of Conner’s assemblages within the salvation army stores of the city we see reflected the trips Breton made to the Saint-Ouen flea-market in search of ‘objects that can be found nowhere else: old fashioned, broken, useless, almost incomprehensible, even perverse …’. For Conner, however, the era of the objet trouvé shining forth to its finder was long gone – the flâneur instead was crushed beneath the waste of a consumer society unconcerned with the grimy remains of the past. Conner has remarked of his materials:

These objects had an implied life of their own you know, like Victorian designs of wood grains, cloth patterns, images of some kind of nostalgic import. Objects have some kind of spirit in themselves. You know like claw footed stands sort of merging the animal and mineral; animate and inanimate objects.
Such a reading points, both in its reference to the living shapes of wood grain and in its ‘claw footed stands,’ to the work of Max Ernst. Ernst’s collage novels use the outmoded Victorian interior as a sign for both the spaces repressed by contemporary modernist architecture and, in turn, the phantom of the unconscious – represented by the birth place of psychoanalysis. Conner destroys these scenes of interior unrest – his works are much more clearly composed of fragments than Ernst’s unified images – and delivers them up as soiled bags of traumatic dreams. The repression of a non-painterly surrealism during the 1950s was ultimately what led to its revival in the work of Conner and his circle, just as the repression of the Victorian interior led to its use in Ernst’s collages, in a compulsive cycle which we see still in motion in Mike Kelley’s neo-gothic output or Jim Shaw’s thrift store bounty, and which shows no sign of stopping. Such work however makes use of the same ruins – the blackened monuments of the nineteenth century, so brilliantly illustrated by the crumbling remains of San Francisco. At the opening of a new century we are beginning to see the fruits of an artistic practice that hears Modernism’s death rattle and hastens to play its rag and bone man – has the time come for the capitals of the twentieth century to become the ruins of our own?

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2 This is a very rough generalisation which derives from Hal Foster’s account of the situation in the introduction to Hal Foster, Compulsive Beauty, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1993.


4 The phrase is Michael McClure’s from ‘Sixty-six things about the California Assemblage Movement’ (1992), published in Michael McClure, Lighting the Corners, Albuquerque, 1993, 181.


7 Forty Years of California Assemblage: UCLA Art Council Annual Exhibition, University of California, Los Angeles, 1989, 46.
See ‘Interview with Bruce Conner conducted by Paul Cummings in New York, April 16, 1973’, at http://artarchives.si.edu/oralhist/conner73.htm.

Conner had visited the city in 1952 – visiting friends who had moved there, however 1956 was the first time the artist spent an extended period of time there.

The beat vision of San Francisco popular at the time would later become cynically exploited in later years. Commenting on his experience of Haight-Ashbury Conner remarked ‘I got to see the whole beatnik phenomenon; how the media related to it, how the neighborhood [sic.] changed, how it was exploited and how it degenerated, decayed and turned into boutiques.’ quoted in ‘Interview with Bruce Conner by Paul Cummings’, 13.

Interview by Marc Selwyn, ‘Bruce Conner, Marilyn and the Spaghetti Theory’, Flash Art, 24: 156, Jan/Feb 1991, 94–7, especially 95.

Although The Art of Assemblage exhibition did include anonymous African tribal pieces and a Victorian valentine card it was ‘high art’ that predominated in the show.

See Forty Years of California Assemblage. The Dilexi Gallery was opened in 1957 and had strong connections to Walter Hopps’ Ferus Gallery in Los Angeles. The 6 gallery was a co-operative opened in 1955; many of Conner’s friends were members of it. Formerly it had been the King Ubu Gallery run by the artist Jess and the poet Robert Duncan.


Rebecca Solnit, Secret Exhibition – six california artists of the cold war era, San Francisco, 1990, 68.


Bruce Conner quoted in Anne Ayres, ‘Bruce Conner’, in Forty Years of California Assemblage, 130–1, especially 131.


Conner was inspired by the way Jay de Feo wrapped and hung Christmas presents from the ceiling, 2000 B.C: The Bruce Conner Story, Part II, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, 1999, 39.

Marc Selwyn, ‘Bruce Conner, Marilyn and the Spaghetti Theory’, 96.

26 See the Playland web site at, www.sonic.net/~playland/playland.html


28 ‘I’d go through those buildings and bring back objects and make them into collages. I’d go through thrift stores and second hand stores and find things which people had no value for; I thought they were beautiful; I’d bring them home. And I figured that one way at least of dealing with them was to make them into works of art.’ ‘Interview with Bruce Conner conducted by Paul Karlstrom in San Francisco, California, August 12, 1974.’ At http://artarchives.si.edu/oralhist/conner74.htm unpaginated.


30 Buck-Morss, The Dialectics of Seeing, 159

31 Buck-Morss, The Dialectics of Seeing, 159.


37 Žižek, Looking Awry, 23.

38 Philip Leider in a feature article for Artforum picked up holocaust references in Conner’s work writing, ‘He can visualise the loveliest flesh charred beyond recognition. The data which informs this work is that of the extermination camps … The data of the work [Child] is drawn from the greatest massacre of children in recorded history; that single charred body fixes a guilt which a dozen Disneylands cannot diminish.’ Philip Leider, ‘Bruce Conner, A New Sensibility’, Artforum, 1: 6, 1962, 30.


40 Elaine Showalter, Sexual Anxiety, Gender and Culture at the Fin-de-Siècle, London, 1992, 10. See also Bram Dijkstra, Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture, Oxford, 1986.

41 See Andrew Perchuk, ‘Pollock and Postwar Masculinity’ and Simon Cohan, ‘The Spy in the Grey Flannel Suit: Gender Performance and the Representation of Masculinity in North by
Mary-An n Doane, ‘Veiling Over Desire: Close-Ups of the Woman’, in Mary-Ann Doane, 


Sigmund Freud, ‘The Medusa’s Head’, written 1922, published posthumously 1940, 

Seitz exhibited an example of a two headed dog nail fetish in The Art of Assemblage, see 
catalogue p. 83.

See Marianna Torgovnick’s reading of Conrad’s Heart of Darkness that reads Kurtz’s 
downfall as a result of the African woman with whom the author implies Kurtz shared a sexual 

Showalter argues (against Freud) that the castrative element of the Medusa myth arises 
from seeing the hair as pubic hair and therefore the mouth as a vagina, the castrative vagina 
dentata. Elaine Showalter, Sexual Anxiety, 146. I however read the medusa myth as an act of 
blinding through the meeting of gazes that results into the viewer’s metamorphosis into stone. 
Blinding is referred to by Freud as an analogue for castration, see Sigmund Freud, ‘The 
Uncanny’ (1919) in Sigmund Freud, Art and Literature, Penguin Freud Library, volume 14, 

Hal Foster, Compulsive Beauty.

Conner has been the subject of endless accusations of misogyny – this may be valid in 
terms of the work (which he sees as a representation of the viewpoint of society rather than of 
the artist as its creator), but can certainly not be justified in terms of his personal and 
professional relationships with women, during the period covered by this essay and beyond 
into the next decade. The artistic milieu of San Francisco was renowned for its atmosphere of 
equality and respect in relation to differences of gender, race or sexuality in marked contrast 
to that of New York. The praying mantis was a recurrent symbol in surrealist work following 
the publication of Roger Callois’ essay ‘La mante religieuse’, Minotaure, 1: 5, 1934. For an 
inroad into the extensive bibliography of the mantis symbol see Rosalind Krauss, ‘No More 
Play’, in Rosalind Krauss, The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths, 
Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1985, 41–85, especially 68–73.
Visual Studies and Global Imagination

Susan Buck-Morss

Abstract

Why is Visual Studies a hotspot of attention at this time? Whose interests are being served? Is this inquiry merely a response to the new realities of global culture, or is it producing that culture, and can it do so critically? Thinking globally, but from the particular, 'local' position of the History of Art and through the medium of the visual image, a distinct aesthetics emerges, a science of the sensible that in our time accepts the thin membrane of images as the way globalisation is unavoidably perceived. How can theory learn from contemporary art practices engaged in stretching that membrane, providing depth of field, slowing the tempo of perception, and allowing images to expose a space of common political action? What does 'world opinion' mean in the context of global images? What are the implications for a critical Visual Studies that resists inequities by rubbing the global imagination against the grain? Can Visual Studies enter a field of negotiation for the move away from European hegemony toward the construction of a globally democratic, public sphere?

1. Introduction

Whatever the stated goals of Visual Studies, its effect is the production of new knowledge and its first challenge is to be aware of this. According to one well-established, critical tradition, this means questioning the conditions of its own production. Why is Visual Studies a hotspot of interest at this time? Whose interests are being served? In analyzing the technologies of cultural production and reproduction, can Visual Studies affect their use? Is this inquiry merely a response to the new realities of global culture, or is it producing that culture, and if the latter, can it do so critically? These questions are not academic. They are concerned unavoidably with the larger world, and with the inevitable connection between knowledge and power that shapes that world in general and fundamentally political ways.

I will be very bold. Visual Studies can provide the opportunity to engage in a transformation of thought on a general level. Indeed, the very elusiveness of Visual Studies gives this endeavour the epistemological resiliency necessary to confront a present transformation in existing structures of knowledge, one that is being played out in institutional venues throughout the globe.
Western scientific and cultural hegemony was the intellectual reality of the first five hundred years of globalization, lasting from the beginning of European colonial expansion to the end of the Soviet modernizing project. It will not remain hegemonic in the next millennium. Our era of globalisation, in which communication rather than coinage is the medium of exchange, presses technologically toward transforming the social relations of knowledge production and dissemination. We are at a cusp. Visual Studies exists within this transitional space as a promise and a possibility, capable of intervening decisively to promote the democratic nature of that transformation. Nothing less is at stake for knowledge. Trans-disciplinary rather than a separate discipline, Visual Studies enters a field of negotiation for the move away from Western hegemony towards the construction of a globally democratic public sphere.

The global transformation of culture that catches us in its midst is not automatically progressive. The technological possibilities of the new media are embedded in global relations that are wildly unequal in regard to production capacities and distributive effects. Their development is skewed by economic and military interests that have nothing to do with culture in a global, human sense. But there are forces now in play that point to the vulnerability of present structures of power. Images circle the globe today in de-centered patterns that allow unprecedented access, sliding almost without friction past language barriers and national frontiers. This basic fact, as self-evident as it is profound, guarantees the democratic potential of image-production and distribution – in contrast to the existing situation.

Globalisation has given birth to images of planetary peace, global justice, and sustainable economic development that its present configuration cannot deliver. These goals are furthered not by rejecting the processes of globalization, but by reorienting them. Reorientation becomes the revolution of our time.
2. Reorientation: The History of Art

I do not wish to overstate the role that critical intellectual practices can play on a global scale. We academics are participants in these global processes, nothing more, but also nothing less. Reorientation means precisely to be aware of this participatory status, which can mean in our case, not to narrow our vision to academic politics as if all that were at stake in the advent of Visual Studies were funding decisions and departmental hiring. And yet the debate over these very parochial concerns is where to begin, because reorientation occurs vis-à-vis particular positions, not some abstract universal. ‘Think global: act local,’ as the slogan has it, and in this context, the widely held view that Visual Studies is a recent offshoot of Art History deserves our scrutiny. What does reorientation entail in the local sense of one academic discipline, the History of Art, which has become central to discussions of Visual Studies? There is no facile or single answer to this question because this discipline, as a microcosm of the general situation, finds itself in a contradictory position: on the one hand, the History of Art as traditionally practiced is most vulnerable to the challenge of Visual Studies; on the other, as the most authoritative domain for the modern study of the visual, it can lay strong claim to be its legitimate home. How did the situation of this one academic locality arise?

The History of Art has in the past been content as a small discipline, approaching the development of, specifically, Western art (indeed, it has treated art and Western art as nearly synonymous). It adhered to an established canon of artists and works, only slowly allowing new names to enter sainthood. Within American universities, its greatest impact was the survey course that it traditionally offered undergraduates, who learned from large lectures and dual slide projectors what counts as art, and why. This is ‘art appreciation,’ and has been a staple of higher education, producing future generations of museum-goers. At the same time, and against all modest pretensions, Art History was unabashedly elitist in its presumptions of connoisseurship. With growing alarm, it defended the
boundary that separates culture, indeed, civilization itself, from the barbarous kitsch of an increasingly
invasive culture industry.

The attack came from within, however, from the artists themselves, who brought the
Trojan horse of commodity culture into the hallowed grounds of the museum. Andy Warhol’s
1962 *Brillo Boxes* were a defining moment, an invasion of the museum by commercial design
caus[ing, as Arthur Danto famously expressed it, nothing less lethal than the ‘end of art.’] Yet
since that pronouncement (two decades ago) the production of art has not only increased, it
has exploded, establishing its own global orbit as the ‘artworld.’

Although we now accept it as commonplace, the artworld is in fact a historically
unique phenomenon. Its precondition was the transformation of art patronage and art
purchases that occurred with the new global economy. The world trade in art intensified in the
1970s and 1980s as part of a general financial revolution, along with hedgefunds,
international mortgages, and secondary financial instruments of all kinds. The explosion of the
art market caused a reconfiguration of the History of Art: the Western canon (which now
included the art of a modernism-grown-obsolete) became only one of the founding traditions
of contemporary art that for its part, with the aid of corporate patronage, expanded globally
along an ever-increasing circuit of biennials and international exhibitions.

Whereas in Warhol’s art and Pop Art generally, corporate images provided the
content for art-interventions, now corporations are art’s entrepreneurial promoters. Their logos
appear as the sponsors of art events, the enablers of art and, indeed, high culture generally.
Within the confines of the artworld, everything is allowed, but with the message: THIS
FREEDOM IS BROUGHT TO YOU BY THE CORPORATIONS. Corporate executives have
become a new generation of art collectors (advertising and PR giant Charles Saatchi, for
example), connecting the business class directly to the class of art connoisseurs. But unlike
their predecessors (William S. Paley of CBS-TV, for example, whose beautiful collection of
small oil paintings was intensely personal), the taste of the new art moguls is special, particularly in regard to size. Corporate patronage encourages BIG ART – art that precisely cannot be privately housed and exhibited. Note that size is a formal characteristic that has nothing to do with art’s content. With Big Art, the authenticity of the original assumes its aura on the basis of sublime proportions.

There is something remarkable about this shift in the position of big business from being the visible content of Pop Art to being the invisible producer of global exhibitions, from being the scene to being behind the scenes. The profits that result from the advertising and packaging of products (value added to commodities produced by cheap labour globally) now gives financial support to the high culture of a new, global economic class.

But before concluding that globalization is the problem, we need to recognize the global artworld as itself a contradictory space – suggesting again that reorientation rather than rejection is the best political strategy. On the one hand globalization transforms art patronage into corporate financing of blockbuster shows and turns the art market into a financial instrument for currency hedging. On the other, its cavernous size allows ample opportunities for alternative art, a myriad of forms of cultural resistance. Moreover, the global artworld’s inclusion of the vibrant, new work of non-Western artists is quickly overwhelming the traditional story of art as a Western narrative. Non-Western artists are denied the luxury of imagining art as an isolated and protected realm. Reflection on the larger visual culture, the collective representations of which frame their art, is difficult, if not impossible to avoid. Even if the artworld’s financial motives for the inclusion of these new artists have been less than laudable – the establishment of market niches for culture produced by the exotic ‘other’ – the results have been so transformative that the History of Art as an inner-historical phenomenon can no longer contain it. Western Art History, once deeply implicated in the history of Western colonialism, has in turn become threatened, in danger of colonization by the global power that visual culture has become.
3. The Crisis of Art History

It is noteworthy that while departments of literature have also felt the onslaught of the new, global visual culture, they appear to be less threatened. Film studies, for example, can be absorbed within traditional literary categories of narrative, plot and authorial style. Movie genres replicate the narrative forms of written fiction: comedy, mystery, science fiction, melodrama, historical drama, and the like. Shakespeare as playwright and Shakespeare’s plays as cinema can be fruitfully compared. The critical methods of literature when applied to films not only work, they tend to reaffirm literature’s superiority. The techniques of filmmaking tend to get less attention than cinema’s narrative and textual qualities, which are culled as virgin territory for theories designed in other university venues: psychoanalysis, semiotics, queer theory, feminism, post-colonialism – with the unfortunate consequence that the visual is often repressed in the process of its analysis, blanketed over by thick, opaque layers of theoretical text so that, visually, only a few film-stills or video clips remain.

If the discipline of the History of Art is more profoundly affected, it is because unlike literary studies, it cannot avoid direct discussion of the visual. Visuality is the point of crisis at which the History of Art and the study of visual culture necessarily collide. To be sure, imagery (symbol, allegory, metaphor, and the like) plays a dominant role in literature. Language is full of images, and there is no way within literary studies that an analytical distinction between image and word can be sustained. But the image that is visibly perceptible is distinct. In it, the word participates as itself an image, as calligraphy or as print-material (in collage, for example), the meaning of which is tied to its visibility, and cannot be reduced to semantic content.

It was the advent of photography that allowed an experience of the image in its pure form, separate from both literary texts and works of art. Of utmost significance is the fact that the visual experience provided by the photograph is of an image collectively perceived. Unlike
the inner experiences of a mental image, dream image or hallucination, this image is not the product of individual consciousness.

Photographs were first conceived as a ‘film’ off the surface of objects. (Painting retreated from mimetic realism and moved into visual modalities where the camera could not follow.) Now, the History of Art as a discipline became indebted to the new technology of photography in ways largely unrecognized within the discipline’s own foundational stories, and without parallel in literary studies’ relationship to cinema.

In Europe’s early modern era, art appreciation depended on visiting the sites; the grand tour of the ancient art and architecture of Italy and Greece was the classic example. Later the national museums brought the masterpieces to urban capitals and lent to them accessibility beyond the aristocratic class, while art classes of national academies took place in the galleries themselves.

I do not know when coffee table books of art first became common and inexpensive enough to grace the homes of the middle classes. Books of plates of art masterpieces are much older, dependent on reproduction technologies of early printing. But since the end of the nineteenth century, Art History as a university discipline has relied on the technology of the slide projector, displaying images of masterpieces from those small, squares of film mounted in frames, called ‘transparencies,’ that enabled the transportation of art masterpieces to educational settings far apart from the original artworks’ museum home.

It is in the moment of the digitalization of art-slide collections that we are made aware of the extent to which the History of Art has been mediated by the photographic image, allowing art to be shown as slides. Transparencies do strange things to the art original: they destroy the sense of material presence, of course. But they also flatten out the texture of brushstroke, they play tricks on the luminescence of the original, and most strikingly, they distort scale. All images shown in the art history lecture hall (and also in the coffee-table art
book) are the same relative size, dependent, not on the size of the object (salon paintings and
gothic cathedrals are equivalents) but on the size of the book page, or on the focal distance
between projector and screen.

What I am getting at is that the History of Art has long been a visual study of images
as well as – and often more than – a study of present art objects. Hence the challenge of
Visual Studies is that it exposes the History of Art as having been Visual Studies all along.

4. The Mysteries of the Image

Visual Studies, for which the image is of central concern, begins with a dilemma. It
can be expressed in the juxtaposition of two modern judgments of the image. The first is by
Julia Kristeva from a recent interview in *Parallax*: ‘[I]mages … are the new opium of the
people … ’. The second is by Walter Benjamin from his 1928 essay on Surrealism: ‘Only
images in the mind motivate the will.’ Are images the inhibitor or are they the enabler of
human agency? Can these two, apparently contradictory claims be reconciled?

When Marx declared religion as the opium of the masses, he did not merely dismiss
it, but took religion seriously as an alienated form of collective social desire. Likewise,
Kristeva acknowledges that images do provide ‘a temporary relief’ from ‘the extinction of
psychic space;’ but she warns that insofar as they are substitutes for psychic representations,
they are themselves a symptom of the problem, which she sees as the decline of psychic
imagination in this ‘planetary age.’

Benjamin’s optimism is not irreconcilable with Kristeva’s critique, if what she sees as
our endangered ‘psychic representations’ are his surrealist-inspired ‘images in the mind.’ But
there is no easy equivalence in these two approaches – her psychic representations are
individual and internal; his images are collective and social. What is at issue is the
philosophical status of the image *tout court*, leading us to the mysteries of the image. What is
it? Where is it located? If non-mental images are a film off of objects, how does this record of the world become a psychic representation, an ‘image in the mind?’ What is the relation of non-mental images to mental ones? To causality? To reality? To sociality?

The political question is this: How can individual, psychic representations have social and political effect if not through the sharing of images, and how can these be shared if not through precisely that image-culture which threatens to overwhelm our individual imaginations that, Kristeva claims, need protection from it?

Let us consider more closely the mysteries of the image, which photography and cinema bring into sharp relief. If we can name anything as an object specific to Visual Studies, it is the image. It is a medium for the transmission of material reality. But it would be wrong to conclude that we should conflate Visual Studies with Media Studies, as if only the form of transmission matters. An image is tied to the content that it transmits. The traditional artwork is tied to content too, of course, but with this difference: the artwork is produced through the active intervention of a subject, the artist, who may be working realistically to render an object as an imitation of nature, or romantically to express an inner feeling, or abstractly to express the pure visual experience itself. But the artwork in all of these cases represents, whereas the image gives evidence. The meaning of the artwork is the intention of the artist; the meaning of the image is the intentionality of the world.

If the world as picture (Heidegger’s phrase) fits reality into a frame and gives it meaning in that way, the world as image takes intentionality from the object, as its material, indexical trace. The image is taken; the artwork is made. When I speak of evidence here I mean it in a phenomenological rather than legal sense – not juridical proof, but closer to Husserl’s description of the ‘schlagender Evidenz’ (‘striking evidence’) of sensory intuition. (Husserl and Bergson, philosophers of the era of photography and early cinema, have become central to discussions of Visual Studies.) The fact that photographic evidence is
regularly manipulated and can often lie, the fact that we ‘see’ what we are culturally and
ideologically predisposed to see, is not the point. False evidence is no less evident than true
evidence (the term refers to visibility, the ability to be seen at all). An image – its evidence – is
apparent; its adequacy is a function of that which appears, regardless of whether this is an
accurate reflection of reality. An image takes a film off the face of the world and shows it as
meaningful (this is what I am describing as objective intentionality), but this apparent meaning
is separate from what the world may be in reality, or what we, with our own prejudices, may
insist is its significance.

Note that in the case of a slide-transparency of a painting, the evidence provided is of
the artwork itself. Leaving the romantic idea of artist-as-image-creator behind, the image-as-
evidence that records the intentionality of the object points to the priority of the material world.
Of course, it takes artistic vision to produce a scene from which a filmic image can be taken.
But the scene itself is composed of objects (in Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí’s Un Chien
andalou, a dead donkey’s head on a grand piano). The distinction between subjective and
objective intentionality is not necessarily the same as that between art and photography: in
‘arty’ photographs, subjective intention dominates, whereas artists have produced ‘paintings’
in which the intentionality of the object is recorded (as in Picasso’s collages). Is a collage art,
or is it reality? Is a film reality, or is it art? Many of the early-twentieth-century artists and
filmmakers experimented in ways that cast doubt on the difference.

Walter Benjamin’s brilliant essay on ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological
Reproduction’ (the second variant, now available in English) is a milestone in realizing the
implications of this transformation of the significance of the image, now understood not merely
as representing the real, but as producing a new reality, a sur-reality: the image in its pure
form. The visual image as a film off of objects is recognized as having its own status, along
with its own material presence. What I find important for our own historical moment is that
Benjamin in his theorizing was inspired less by philosophers and art critics than by the practices of artists themselves – the Bolshevik avant-garde and surrealists most intensely. This theorizing of the image-world out of artistic practice, instead of fitting art practices into preexisting theoretical frames is, I want to claim, the approach that we need to take today.

Consider the surrealist project, *Un Chien andalou*, the short silent film shot by Buñuel and Dalí in 1928, at the dawn of the first sound film – hence the most mature, the twilight stage of silent film – and the same year Benjamin wrote his essay on surrealism. It in fact shows us a world consisting, as he wrote, ‘one hundred percent’ of images, film taken off objects as evidence of material reality. These images are not internal and psychic, but non-mental and collectively visible in social space. The objects in the images are real enough, but they do not represent reality. Visible space is legible, but incredible. The same is true of time. The film’s sequence jumps forward and falls backward (‘once upon a time;’ ‘eight years later;’ ‘sixteen years before;’ ‘in the spring’). [For stills of the film, please scroll down the pages of http://www.kyushu-ns.ac.jp/~allan/Documents/societyincinema-03.htm until you reach ‘Un Chien Andalou’]

The point is that the viewer quickly gives up trying to see the film as the representation of characters, or actions, or a place. Fetish objects: a necktie, a severed hand, a locked box, a dead donkey on a grand piano, ants crawling on an open palm – these images appear to us as full of meaning, while at the same time unmotivated by any subjective intent. Their meaningfulness, their intentionality is objective, not subjective. The filmed objects, while fully perceptible in an everyday way, appear estranged from the everyday. They are the day’s residues of dreams, but without the memory of the dreamer who could decipher them.

Benjamin compared surrealist thinking to the philosophical realism of medieval illumination, as ‘profane illumination.’ Not as representations of something else but as
themselves, these images enter the mind and leave a trace there. But how can such images provide a political orientation? The answer to this question, central to Visual Studies, implies a reorientation of aesthetics.

5. Aesthetics I, II, III …

I teach a graduate seminar in aesthetics – not in the Art History Department, but as Political Theory. The course concerns itself with the intersection of aesthetics and politics in Western critical theory. I have found it helpful conceptually to separate three strands of modern aesthetics (the word means literally the ‘science of the sensible’) because they have different origins, different premises, and different historical trajectories. I call them, plainly enough: Aesthetics I, Aesthetics II, and Aesthetics III (there could be more).

All of these develop out of Western modernity, where empirical experience is the basis of knowledge, and where aesthetics therefore takes on a heightened significance, because in lieu of religious revelation, sensory experience is called upon to yield the meaning of life; it is the source of value and existential truth. Western aesthetics has, however, taken very different forms, or better put, it has assumed different orientations. Note that these are not stages successively overcome, but related perspectives that have developed parallel to each other, if at different historical speeds and intensities, and all of them exist today.

Aesthetics I is concerned fundamentally with art. It finds a philosophical Urtext in Kant’s third critique, the Critique of Judgment, which became significant in the Romantic era to both artists and political theorists, and has remained a seminal text. The influential art critic Clement Greenberg privileged Kant’s self-critical method, justifying the development of modern art, culminating in abstract expressionism, as a working out of Kantian logic: the content of non-representational, or abstract art was visual experience itself in pure form. Moreover, he connected this art (produced by individuals, appreciated by the cognoscenti)
with the culture of democracy, at the same time condemning as kitsch both commercial art and political propaganda.

Aesthetics I has outgrown Greenberg’s grand narrative. It now includes philosophies of art from Hegel to Derrida. It has expanded creatively to encompass non-Western art and new media art, and it addresses the visual cultural context of artworks in a multidisciplinary way. Aesthetics I can be seen to encompass the most progressive methods and approaches of Departments of Art History that have embraced a certain meaning of Visual Studies, one for which art, however broadly defined, remains the central object of investigation.

Aesthetics II is the often gloomy brother. It is grounded in the Hegelian distinction between truth or essence (Wesen), that is accessible only through concepts, and appearance (Schein), that is available to sensory perception. While truth appears, it does so in illusory form – so much the worse for the image. For Hegel, art is logically and historically superceded by philosophy. The legacy of Hegel is to be suspicious of the senses, because they cannot grasp, as does the concept, the supersensible whole. Evidence of the world transmitted by the image is thus necessarily deceiving. Reification is a key concept here: the truth of the object lies behind its appearance. This is Marx’s lament: Commodities are fetishes worshipped by modern man, preventing knowledge of the true nature of class society.

Thinkers like Georg Simmel, Sigfried Kracauer, and Georg Lukács elaborated the further Marxian insight that the instrument of perception, the human sensorium, changes with the experience of modernity. The urban metropolis, the factory, the bourgeois interior, the department store – these sensory environments shape perception and determine the degree to which it can lead to knowledge. Aesthetics, no longer equated with art as it was for Hegel, becomes corporeal, or sensory cognition, criticized in its modern form as having the effect, rather, of anaesthetics (this was the argument in my article, ‘Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin’s Artwork Essay Reconsidered’). Aesthetics II infuses traditions of critical
sociology, practiced today by social theorists and geographers. The abundant literature criticizing the culture industry belongs here as well.

Postcolonial theory joins the tradition of Aesthetics II when it exposes the ethnographic imaginary of the ‘primitive’ as distorting perceptions that have their origins in Western modernity. ‘The world as staged,’ Timothy Mitchell has called it, placed on exhibition by the West as the representation of its own superiority. In Mitchell’s postcolonial critique, the need, again, is to see past the staged appearance of reality to the mechanisms of colonial control that underlie it. Aesthetics II embraces Visual Studies through the path of Visual Culture – Cultural Studies is the link between its critical theoretical heritage and its empirical, socio-political concerns.

Fig. 1: Anonymous photograph reproduced as an illustration for Benjamin Péret’s article ‘La Nature dévore le progrès et le dépasse,’ Minotaure, no. 10, Winter 1937, p. 20.
Aesthetics III is more sanguine about the image, approaching it as a key, rather than a hindrance to understanding. Like powerful binoculars, the image intensifies experience, illuminating realities that otherwise go unnoticed. (The content of figure 1 may be gloomy, but its cognitive power is affirmed.) Benjamin spoke of ‘unconscious optics,’ discovering in surrealism the ‘long sought-after image-space’ for a world of ‘actualities’ and action. He was referring not just to photography and cinema, but to the experience of the city that opens up to the flâneur, and that finds expression as well in Baudelaire’s poetry, Bolshevik constructivism and photomontage. Images, no longer subservient to the text as its illustration, are free to act directly on the mind. The collectively accessible assemblage of images is the antithesis of the cult of artistic genius that expresses a private world of meaning. With the affirmative orientation of Aesthetics III, one risks falling victim to the illusions of the society as spectacle, but the risk is worth the promise of illumination.

The image is the medium for Aesthetics I; it is the problem for Aesthetics II. In discussions of Visual Studies, Aesthetics III has received far less attention. What are the implications of an orientation of aesthetics that looks to the image for inspiration?

Aesthetics III does not search for what lies behind the image. The truth of objects is precisely the surface they present to be captured on film. As Gilles Deleuze writes, cinema helps him to think philosophically – and Deleuze is a theorist of Visual Studies oriented toward the image itself. The political implications of Aesthetics III are suggested by the singularity of the image, its ability to name itself, to propose its own caption, rather than fitting within pre-existing frames of meaning. Images, while collectively shared, escape the generalization of the concept, so that we need to come to them to decipher their meaning. In short, we need to see them.

But how, if not by submission to a text, does the image have political effect? Can the radical freedom discovered by the surrealists enable the politicization of the image-world
without turning it into propaganda? And how are we to relate the image’s political-effect to its
knowledge-effect? Can images be disciplined (as an object of Visual Studies) and still be
‘free’? Moreover, can this discussion be brought back to the claim made at the outset of this
essay that Visual Studies can contribute to the democratization of culture in the context of the
new globalization? Again, let us take the discipline of Art History as our point of departure.

6. Discipline

Otto Pächt describes the method of the art historian, for whom ‘there is always something
disquieting about the isolated work of art:’

In art history it is possible … to take an art object that has knocked around the world,
nameless and masterless, and to issue a relatively precise birth certificate for it … .

Errors and misjudgments quite often occur, but this does not seriously compromise
the value of the techniques employed … . In principle the equation holds good: to see
a thing rightly is to date and ascribe it rightly.

8

But the fact about images is that they do float in isolation, moving in and out of
contexts, freed from their origin and the history of their provenance. The superficiality of the
image, its transferability, its accessibility – all of these qualities render the issue of
provenance ambiguous, if not irrelevant. An image is stumbled upon, found without being lost.
Arguably most at home when it ‘knocks around the world,’ an image is promiscuous by
nature.

If Visual Studies is viewed simply as an extension of Art History, then its task would
seem to be to apprehend these images and return them to their rightful owners. On the other
hand, if Visual Studies is to live up to its democratic political potential, this is the point where
the methods of these knowledge-pursuits may need to go separate ways. In doing so Visual
Studies will take its lead, not from the discipline of Art History, but from the contemporary practices of the many artists, globally, who have made the wandering image the very content of their work.

A discipline (as Foucault argued) produces its object as an effect, telling the subject what questions it can ask of the object, and how; and telling the object what about it is meaningful to study (defining the object in ways that make it accessible to the questions posed to it). The confining aspect of a discipline is evident to any student who specializes in one or another of them. The world is not divided into the pie-slices that are created by the disciplines, as it is the same world studied in all cases; rather, the way it looks back at the viewer changes as disciplinary boundaries are crossed.

Unlike the other disciplines, an orientation of Visual Studies that has the image as its object is not a pie-slice, not a delineated sector of the world, but a film off the world's surface. The surface of the image is itself the boundary that allows a certain idea of Visual Studies to emerge. The image surface immediately sends out two lines of force, one toward the viewer, and one toward (any aspect of) the world. Both lines move away from the surface, so that the image boundary appears to disappear. Objects are in the image, not in their entirety, but as an intentionality, a face turned toward the perceiver. Lines of perception moving across the surface of multiple images traverse the world in infinite direction and variation. Cutting through space rather than occupying it as an object with extensions, image-lines are rhizomic connections – transversalities rather than totalities. These image-lines produce the world-as-image that in our era of globalization is the form of collective cognition (image-form replaces the commodity-form).
7. Possession and the Means of Production

Nothing gives a stronger sense of the promiscuity of the image, as opposed to the legitimate birth of the artwork, than dragging and clicking from a Google image-search onto your computer’s desktop – ’subject to copyright,’ to be sure, but no less available for the taking. What do you possess? Given the minimal labour of moving a computer-mouse, no labour value is added to the image by its procurement. Moreover, without the metadata necessary to interpret the image according to the intention of the artist (or photographer, or cinematographer) the formatting palette on your computer will never get it right. By the standards of the art-object, to be sure, the digital copy is irrevocably impoverished and degraded. But if this matters, and should matter, for the discipline of the History of Art, for another understanding of Visual Studies it does not. Benjamin applauded Baudelaire who, when confronted with the loss of aura of the artwork, was content to let it go. The reproduceability of the image is infinite (with digital technology it is instantaneous), and quantity changes the quality, allowing for the reappropriation of the components out of which our image-world is formed. The image disconnects from the idea of being a reproduction of an authentic original, and becomes something else.

Separated from its source, disposable, dragged to the trash at any moment, what is its value? And to whom does this value rightfully belong? A computer session is not a day on the beach. To see the value of the image in terms of information, standard in discussions of digital processing, is also misleading, just as referral to a computer menu does not mean that you get something tasty to consume. A computer is a tool.

Unlike the machines of the industrial revolution, however, this tool can be personalized: users may be multiple, but they are discreet; access demands a private password. Still, under present conditions, even if you own a PC, it is not quite the same as owning the means of production. The relation is more like out-sourcing. For if the work of
travel agents, bank tellers, sales clerks and check-out workers is presently being exported
(from the U.S.A. to India, for example), the ultimate savings of labour costs is when
consumers do the work themselves.

The word cybernetics (ancient Greek for the helmsman who orients a ship) was
chosen to refer to the capacity of the machine to mimic human thought, although much of the
present work demanded by computers is mindless. It demands attention and accuracy,
insisting on ‘auto-correct,’ hence an inhuman freedom from error, which is another way of
saying that it allows only strictly programmed responses.

The so-called information generated in the information age in fact consists largely of
instructions, whereby computer-users replace service workers by performing tasks that were
previously part of production. But if they try to use the computers imaginatively, innovatively,
in ways that produce value for them, they are just steps away from violation of copyright. They
are dangerous as pirates or hackers – net-criminals, all.

But in regard to this new means of production, the danger must be tolerated by the
global capitalist system. Indeed, the system benefits from the expansion of computer
technology worldwide (expansion is not synonymous with equitable distribution). In order for
profits to be made, the means of production – computers – need to be put into people’s
hands. In the process, they learn to appropriate the Internet for personal (and political) use,
which unlike appropriations of pens and paper from an office supply-room, entails taking from
sources that are inexhaustible – including music, DVDs, and images of every kind.

Granted, there are set-up costs that may be ongoing, but digital archives, web pages,
and data banks are socialized resources almost by definition. Pirates and hackers, unlike the
wreckers of old, do not throw a wrench in production, they accelerate it – to a point that
escapes the private property relations that undergird the copyright system. This trend sees
inevitable. The more anti-piracy legislation and the shriller the rhetoric on its behalf, the
greater the indication that the global computer system cannot sustain – and cannot be sustained by – the old bourgeois notions of commodity exchange, whereby the world and its wealth are divided and controlled by exclusive proprietors.

Against the model of Bill Gates, whose software copyrights bring in revenues larger than that of many nations and whose idea of redistribution is limited to personal philanthropy, a socialist ethic appears to evolve naturally from the free, productive use of computer power. Cyberspace is open by definition; private access is to a public good. It is plausible that sharing the inexhaustible resources of the computer will lead to a consciousness that exhaustible resources, too, are collective values that belong in the public trust. If the global monopolies of the culture industry stand to lose against the socializing tendencies inherent in the new technology, they should yield to their own sacred laws of the market and close down business. The music will be better for it.

But if music and movies are still entertainment, hence ruled to a certain degree by commodity logic even without infinite copyright income, the case of the image is different. The force of the image occurs when it is dislodged from context. It does not belong to the commodity-form, even if it is found – stumbled upon – in that form, as it is so powerfully in advertisements.

Images are used to think, which is why attribution seems irrelevant. Their creation is already the promise of infinite accessibility. They are not a piece of land. They are a mediating term between things and thought, between the mental and the non-mental. They allow the connection. To drag-and-click an image is to appropriate it, not as someone else’s product, but as an object of one’s own sensory experience. You take it, the way you take a photograph of a monument, or a friend, or a landscape. The image is frozen perception. It provides the armature for ideas.
Images, no longer viewed as copies of a privately owned original, move into public space as their own reality, where their assembly is an act of the production of meaning. Collectively perceived, collectively exchanged, they are the building blocks of culture. Collectors of images like Aby Warburg recognized this when in his ongoing work *Mnemosyne Atlas*, an archive of social memory, he placed images of ancient Greek figures-in-motion next to newspaper photos of women golfers because the folds of drapery of their dress were the same. Walter Benjamin wrote in 1932 that Warburg’s library was ‘the hallmark of the new spirit of research’ because it ‘filled the marginal areas of historical study with fresh life.’ (Gerhard Richter’s *Atlas* is a similar collection, and it provided the image-material for his paintings.)

These image-archives resemble the older print-archive that we know as the dictionary. Dictionaries, like databanks, have copyrights, but it would be absurd to claim that their publishers or compilers own the words listed in them. If I copy someone’s words, it is plagiarism. If I use the same words for different thoughts, it is not. Indeed, the power of the word-in-use, and what we value in a writer or poet, is the ability to infuse old words with new life. The same holds, or should hold, for images. Of course, a proprietary relationship to the word is exactly what is claimed by trademarks – I cannot type the word Xerox or Apple without the auto-correct software capitalizing it to indicate possession. But the moral concept that functions legitimately here is accountability rather than property. Trademarks not only have a marketing function; they hold the producer responsible to the public who can be deceived by falsely naming. As the importance of private property wanes, that of public accountability will need to intensify.

Images, then, are not art copies and they do not replace the art-experience. As tools of thought, their value-producing potential demands their creative use. Both in their original form and in what is made of them, this value requires, rightly, that we acknowledge those
artists, or others who made them – they deserve our credit (the word means faith, trust, approval, honour), not our cash.

Fig. 2: please click on http://haberarts.com/evans.jpg

Whose property is this (Fig. 2)? Is it Sherrie Levine’s from *After Walker Evans*, her series of photographs that she took from photographs that were taken by Walker Evans in the 1930s? Or is it Walker Evans’? Might it not as well be the property of the person whose face is depicted? Or is it my property, as I think, and ask you to think with me, about the image?

If I post my private photo on the web, is it public? Can I own a copyright on it, or does it have no value? Who decides?

As for the untitled image (Fig. 2), I took it from the web. I was looking in vain for Sherrie Levine’s photograph, until I realized that it would be posted under Walker Evans. His photograph, taken with government funds as part of the FSA project of 1930s, is ‘owned’ by the U.S. Library of Congress (and therefore by me as a tax-paying, American citizen?) Who is accountable for this image? Whom do I credit, if not the website from which I dragged it into this presentation?

8. The Sur-face of the Image

We have argued that the image does not represent an object. Rather, objects are in the image, not in their entirety but as an image-trace, at one unique instant when the objects are caught, taken, apprehended. They show a face, a sur-face. We have said that this surface of images is a boundary that shifts a certain idea of Visual Studies away from the discipline of Art History – a boundary that itself becomes the object of critical reflection. We can develop this idea of the image sur-face, describing its implications.
Even when they are accessed as streaming video, images are frozen perceptions. They can be manipulated, but the result is still a new image, a new perception. Once a perception is fixed, its meaning is set in motion. Manipulation occurs on the surface of an image, not its source. Only if we are concerned with the image as representation of an object are we deceived, or the object maligned.

The one-time-only, unique nature of this perceptual moment captured in the image contrasts sharply with its infinite reproduceability. An image is shared. As with a word, this sharing is the precondition for its value.

Images are the archive of collective memory. The twentieth century distinguishes itself from all previous centuries because it has left a photographic trace. What is seen only once and recorded, can be perceived any time and by all. History becomes the shared singularity of an event.

The complaint that images are taken out of context (cultural context, artistic intention, previous contexts of any sort) is not valid. To struggle to bind them again to their source is not only impossible (as it actually produces a new meaning); it is to miss what is powerful about them, their capacity to generate meaning, and not merely to transmit it.

The image establishes a specific relationship between the singular and the universal. An image can be taken off any object – landscape, human face, artwork, sewer, molecule, growing plant, a ghost, or an unidentified flying object. In an image, one particular face of a person, place or thing is fixed as a surface and set loose, set in motion around the world, whereas the person, place, or thing cannot itself move in this multiplying and speedy fashion.

Images are sent as postcards, satellite-transmitted, photocopied, digitalized, downloaded, and dragged. They find their viewers. We can observe people around the globe observing the same images (a news photo, a movie, the documentation of a catastrophe). The political consequences are not automatically progressive.
Meaning will not stick to the image. It will depend on its deployment, not its source. Hermeneutics shifts its orientation away from historical or cultural or authorial/artistic intent, and toward the image-event, the constantly moving perception. Understanding relies on empathy that mimics the look of the image. A new kind of global community becomes possible – and also a new kind of hate. People are in contact as collective viewers who do not know each other, cannot speak to each other, do not understand each other’s contexts. Mimesis can be ridicule as well as admiration, stereotype rather than empathic identification.

9. Conclusion(s)

Here are three variants of a conclusion to this essay (there could be more).

1. The Bubble Problem (Aesthetics II meets Aesthetics III): In the global image-world those in power produce a narrative code. The close fit between image and code within the narrative bubble engenders the collective autism of television news. Meanings are not negotiated; they are imposed. We know the meaning of an event before we see it. We cannot see except in this blinded way.

   Escape from the bubble is not to ‘reality,’ but to another image-realm. The promiscuity of the image allows for leaks. Images flow outside the bubble into an aesthetic field not contained by the official narration of power. The image that refuses to stay put in the context of this narration is disruptive. We have no more startling example of this than the image-event of Abu-Ghraib prison. With digital and video cameras, 1,800 images were produced, capable of instant, global circulation on the Internet. The images of American soldiers, both men and women, humiliating and abusing Iraqi prisoners were described by members of the Bush administration as ‘radioactive,’ and in fact their leak did not merely disrupt the official narrative, it caused a meltdown, exploding the myth of the American preemptive war as a moral struggle of good against evil. After all of the attempts at censorship and control, all of
the embedded journalism that characterized the war itself, this image-event, produced unwillingly by a few individuals acting under orders, exploded the entire fantasy, simply blew it apart. Its effect was no less deadly to the American war effort than a guerrilla attack on an oil pipeline or an army transport. In destroying the Bush regime’s credibility and undermining its legitimacy, it was arguably more destructive.

State terror is viscerally present in these photographs. As a film taken off the bodies of the prisoners and the perpetrators, terror continues to exist in these images. They do not represent terror; they are terrifying. The terror multiplies precisely because meaning will not stick to these images. (What in some circumstances allows for playfulness here multiplies the terror.) As they circulate, these images do harm. They must be made public to expose the dangerous despotism of the Bush regime. But their publication in fact delivers on the intended threat of the torturers: not just families and neighbours, but the whole world sees these beautiful young men humiliated, their bodies defamed. By viewing them, we complete the torture and fulfill the terror against them.

2. Art on the Surface (Aesthetics III meets Aesthetics I): The image-world is the surface of globalization. It is our shared world. Impoverished, dim, superficial, this image surface is all we have of shared experience. Otherwise we do not share a world. The task is not to get behind the image surface but to stretch it, enrich it, give it definition, give it time. A new culture opens here upon the line. We have to build that culture. We can follow the lead of creative practitioners who are already deploying themselves on the image-surface in art, cinema and new media – the great experimental laboratories of the image. Their work gives back to us the sensory perception of a world that has been covered over by official narratives and anaesthetized within the bubble. They lead the way for Visual Studies as an aesthetics, a critical science of the sensible, that does not reject the image-world but inhabits it and works for its reorientation.

‘Story of a Pyromaniac Photographer’ who produces postcards for the Ministry of Tourism until the 1976 Civil War in Lebanon destroys his studio. He rescues the negatives. He begins to damage them, burning them and ‘making them correspond to his shattered reality.’ The artists’ work gives evidence of this fictional account as a series of images that transform postcard clichés (Aesthetics III) into a moving documentation of the psychological experience of urban warfare. One of their images is the cover of my book, *Thinking Past Terror: Islamism and Critical Theory on the Left*. 
Consider also the video/performance piece by Elias Khoury and Rabih Mroué, *Three Posters* (2000), created after a video-cassette fell into their hands, a tape made by a Lebanese resistance fighter in August 1985, hours before he carried out his suicide attack against the occupying Israeli army. What draws the artists’ attention is the fact that this video is a series of takes, done three times before the camera: ‘I am the martyred comrade Jamal Satti ….’ Announcing his own being-dead, ‘his words betray him, hesitating and stumbling between his lips. His gaze is unable to focus, it wavers and gets lost.’ The artists intersperse the three takes with performers playing Satti, the Communist politician who acts behind him, and a performer as himself. The event becomes a laboratory for the analysis of the video image, exploratory, testing, slowing down the politics of spectacle, the time between life and death, and allowing the full play of repetitions to reveal ‘a desire for the deferral of death, in these depressing lands where the desire to live is considered a shameful betrayal of the State, of the Nation-State, of the Father-Motherland.’
3. A Global Public Sphere? (Aesthetics I, II and III as a place of politics): On February 15, 2003, an internet-organized global demonstration took place to protest the imminent American preemptive invasion of Iraq. Several hundred cities took part in this collective performance, producing a planetary wave of solidarity that moved with the sun from east to west. Evidence of this image-event was collected on the website: www.punchdown.org/rvb/F15. It created an archive of over 200 images showing the global desire for peace. It can be downloaded by anyone, anywhere – and it is free for the taking.

Fig. 5: Anti-War Demonstration in Halifax, Canada, February 15, 2003

As a final conclusion, this question: scholars have argued that the architecture of cathedrals, temples, and mosques creates a sense of the community of believers through the ritual practices of everyday life. Benedict Anderson has claimed that the mass readership of newspapers and novels creates an imagined community of the nation. What kind of community can we hope for from a global dissemination of images, and how can our work help to create it?
This is the transcript of a lecture given during a trip to the United Kingdom as the 2004 Visiting Scholar at The AHRB Research Centre for Studies of Surrealism and its Legacies. It was delivered at the Universities of Manchester and Essex as well as Tate Modern, London. For the webcast of the lecture and following questions at Tate Modern, please visit: http://www.tate.org.uk/onlineevents/archive/susan_buck-morss/

6 Benjamin, ‘Surrealism,’ 217.

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Giorgio de Chirico and surrealist mythology

Roger Cardinal

What is most modern in our time frequently turns out to be the most archaic.

Guy Davenport

It has long been a sore point in the history of surrealism that the poets of the early Paris group should have heaped praise on Giorgio de Chirico as the inventor of a revolutionary approach to painting, only to revile him as a traitor to their cause just a few years later. The deep disappointment caused by the artist’s supposed lapse from grace in around 1924–25, which André Breton voices in his pioneering essay on visual surrealism, Le Surréalisme et la peinture, is an index of the high stakes underlying the aesthetic debates of the time. Yet it is possible that the surrealists had misunderstood De Chirico from the very start, and that those elements of his art which he began to discard in the mid-1920s were in fact marginal to what could be seen as his uninterrupted original project, that of re-activating archaic myth in the modern period.

De Chirico’s election to the surrealist pantheon was certainly facilitated by the foremost critic of the early avant-garde, Guillaume Apollinaire, who befriended the Italian artist (and his musician brother Savinio) during his first Paris stay, provided him with ideas for titles for his pictures, and lent him support in exhibition reviews in 1913 and 1914. It was a year or two later, at one of those legendary Saturday soirées which Apollinaire held in his attic apartment on the Boulevard Saint-Germain, that André Breton, at the time a young medical student, first came across canvases by De Chirico, crammed amid the many accumulated novelties that had caught Apollinaire’s multi-faceted fancy. Breton at once succumbed to their hypnotic spell, ‘so much did they project of breadth and of depth onto the mental horizon.’ Breton’s devotion to De Chirico’s mysterious art was to be profound, and the superlative value he placed upon such paintings as The Child’s Brain (1914) or The Enigma of a Day (1914) would influence a whole surrealist generation.

Although one might guess that the prestige which Apollinaire enjoyed in Breton’s eyes helped to hasten the latter’s interest in De Chirico, it is curious to note how little there is in Apollinaire’s own published commentaries that could be described as unreserved advocacy. The most significant element in his appraisal is that he associates the strangeness of De Chirico’s style with that hallmark of modernism, the capacity to surprise: ‘It is surprise which is the most modern device to which one can have recourse in order to depict the fatal character of modern things.’

Yet the typical tone of Apollinaire’s observations is urbane and relatively non-committal. One anonymous notice he published speaks of the painter being exasperated by the planting of rows of trees on the Place de Rennes, since De Chirico is known to be ‘an enemy of trees and a devotee of statues.’ It is hard to take seriously Breton’s earnest report, in the Manifeste du
surréalisme of 1924, that Apollinaire had assured him that the artist's early paintings had been
inspired by migraines and colics. Another Apollinairean notice delivers a further feeble joke:

Monsieur Giorgio de Chirico has just acquired a pink rubber glove, one of the most
 impressive pieces of merchandise one could wish to see for sale. Once copied by the
 artist, it is destined to make his future works even more moving and fearsome than the
 pictures he has produced in the past. And if one quizzes him about the terror that this
glove might provoke, he immediately switches the subject to the even more terrifying
toothbrushes which have recently been devised by dentistry, that most recent and
perhaps most practical of all the arts.\footnote{1}

It would seem that, while sensing the power of De Chirico's work, Apollinaire was less
inclined to grapple with its deeper mysteries than to take refuge in ironic allusions to its surface
features, and more especially those which could be characterized as both modern and quaint.
There is evidence that, ultimately, Apollinaire felt uncomfortable about the Italian's artistry, as
witness the letters he wrote from the front line in 1915 which joke uneasily about the portrait De
Chirico had painted of him in the previous year, calling it a 'target-figure' ['l'homme-cible']. The
painting (which also exists in a woodcut version made to illustrate Apollinaire's \textit{Et Moi aussi je
suis peintre}) does indeed depict the poet in profile with a circle marked on his head which – to
the subsequent delight of the surrealists – corresponds to the position on the poet's cranium
where he was to wear a protective leather disc after his shrapnel wound of 1916. Other
elements in the picture are a fish and a sea-shell suspended beside a gloomy arch, and a
classical bust wearing dark glasses.

Now, there is a well-attested category of poetic reference which became indispensable
to the surrealist lexicon: that of enigmatic or otherwise striking industrial artefacts. I suggest that
one should add De Chirico's rubber gloves, dark glasses and tailor's dummies to the same
inventory as Comte de Lautréamont's sewing-machine, Alfred Jarry's bicycle, Apollinaire's
telegrams, Marcel Duchamp's bottle-rack, Francis Picabia's cog-wheels, Jacques Vaché's
revolver, and so forth, as forming a collection of talismanic embodiments of the twinned novelty
and absurdity of modern life. By deliberately fetishising the bric-à-brac of twentieth-century
urban culture, surrealism was able to draw up a formula for the surrealist Marvellous and to elicit
a striking mythology out of the banalities of the contemporary world.

Nowhere is the surrealist commitment to an explicitly modern mythology more
extravagantly articulated than in the programmatic meditations of Louis Aragon's 1926
masterpiece \textit{Le Paysan de Paris}. Insisting on the necessity of the link between fantasy and
concrete fact, Aragon broods interminably on the contents of shop-windows in the (by then
defunct) Passage de l'Opéra, finding in their incongruous accumulations of top hats, postage
stamps and walking-canes a kind of archaeology of the contemporary unconscious and an
implicit network of poetic allusion. Ruminating on these arbitrary collocations, he bathes in the
greenish light of the arcade, that privileged habitat of the urban stroller, and finds his thoughts
dissolving into what he calls ‘the vertigo of the modern’ ['le vertige du moderne'].

The surrealist predilection for decisive, because irreducible, collisions between separate orders of things finds further expression in Aragon’s subsequent description of a window display on the Rue Notre-Dame-de-Lorette, where an optician had seen fit to advertise his wares in the form of a small female bust, multicoloured and with hair done up in the 1907 style, and sporting a pair of eyeglasses. Aragon reveals the nickname (the talismanic motto-phrase) which the group gave to this figure: *The Beauty of the Future* ['*La Beauté future*']. One would be justified, I believe, in positing a link between this reference and such images by De Chirico as *The Serenity of the Scholar* (1914), with its huge pair of opaque spectacles (a dismantled shop sign?), or indeed the gnomic Apollinaire portrait already mentioned.

It is not hard to see why De Chirico’s technique of outlandish juxtaposition should have so impressed the surrealist generation in the 1920s. Breton especially was addicted to such surprises, experiencing them as visual correlatives to the stunning verbal imagery he admired in writers like Lautréamont and Apollinaire. In his essay *Giorgio de Chirico* (first published in 1920), Breton foregrounds the new mythology which is in the process of being created by the modern poetic sensibility, identifying De Chirico as the leading exponent of a myth-making process designed to ‘re-appraise the basic perceptions of time and space’ ['reviser les données sensibles du temps et de l'espace']. Henceforth, he writes, a peculiar light will fall upon such tell-tale objects as the public statue and the tailor's dummy ['le mannequin']. Breton’s prophetic conclusion admits no reservation: ‘I believe that a truly modern mythology is being formed. It now falls to Giorgio de Chirico to memorialize it in indelible form.’

In the circumstances, it is entirely understandable that Apollinaire and the surrealists, those conscious adepts of novelty and surprise, should have been inclined to isolate in De Chirico’s *pittura metafisica* those elements which struck them most deeply, while ignoring elements they found familiar or less seductive. Yet this loyalty to the spirit of modernity, which De Chirico’s early pictures appeared so perfectly to corroborate, led them to overlook the simple fact that his rubber gloves and dark glasses are only surprising and suggestive in so far as they are interpolated within a wider system whose fundamental axis of reference is the exact opposite of the modern: that is to say, the archaic. The impact of a painting like *The Song of Love* (1913) has to do with the spectacular anachronism of hanging a rubber glove beside a classical bust, just as in *The Philosopher and the Poet* (c. 1915) the painter balances a twentieth-century tailor’s dummy against the statue of a classical hero. As for placing dark glasses upon an antique bust, one might argue that De Chirico’s real point was not to create a giddy *beauté future* but to confirm a continuity of meaning, in so far as the implication of blindness is nothing less than a *classical* allusion (whether it be to Homer or Tiresias, or to the seer-poet Orpheus – with whom Apollinaire, after all, claimed an affinity).

It has to be said that, for all the surrealists’ desire to convert him to their Parisian viewpoint, De Chirico’s most characteristic locales remain undeniably Italian and classical. For all its fantasticality, the novel *Hebdomeros* is only a distant cousin to *Le Paysan de Paris*. And the paintings, despite an occasional tribute to landmarks like the Gare Montparnasse,
for us an imaginary city which has little connexion to those actual spaces where Apollinaire and Breton loved to wander. Within quite specific limits of architectural reference – the general tenor of his architecture is Italianate, and there are fairly explicit allusions to arcades and piazzas in Florence, to the Castello Estense in Ferrara, and to public statues typical of Turin – De Chirico orchestrates his emblems of modernity with a strong emphasis upon the archaic and the mythic. His atmosphere is Mediterranean and nostalgic, and his system of tacit implication presupposes a world steeped in the associations of classical mythology. Adapted from Heraclitus, his dictum that ‘the daemon in everything must be discovered’ occurs in a text entitled Zeuxis the Explorer (1918); and when in that same text he speaks of his Paris studio on the Rue Campagne-Première and consciously trails his surrealist coat by invoking a zinc shop-sign in the form of a great glove, or a papier mâché skull in a hairdresser’s window, we should be aware that, while he may be having fun mimicking the ultra-modern poet tracking through the Paris labyrinth, he remains deep down the nostalgic, ever eager to close the gap between contemporary life and the myths of antiquity. (We may recall that the paintings of the original Zeuxis were depictions of Zeus, Pan, Hercules, and the Centaurs.)

It can indeed be argued that, far from its being a later revelation, De Chirico’s susceptibility to classical impulses was decisive from the very outset of his work, as perhaps the early Enigma of the Oracle (1910) portends: for if oracles articulate the future, their obscure efficacy is a function of their origin in a tradition of belief dating back to the remote past. Within the cycle of the artist’s ‘metaphysical’ works, the mythic figure of Ariadne is surely one of the most potent presences. Invariably she appears in the form of a statue, that of the sleeping Ariadne, the Ariadne whom Theseus abandons on Naxos. Seeing her asleep, we may recall the Ariadne whose cunning use of a length of thread had enabled Theseus successfully to negotiate the Minotaur’s maze and return unharmed to the outer world; but now she is lost in fevered dreams, incapable of controlling her own destiny. Allegorically, she embodies a certain tragic fatalism; while the fact that she is a statue might correspond to the temporal distance of what has become for De Chirico a stylised memory, an uncanny passion for something with which real contact is absolutely denied. However we interpret it, I submit that the fundamental bearing of this familiar reference is more classical than it is surrealist. (One might note that, elsewhere in Le Paysan de Paris, Aragon makes a case for envisaging the dozens of statues dotted around Paris as an intrinsically surrealist phenomenon: but this is no doubt because of their erotic connotations and their haphazard placements, which make them seem unfamiliar).

We do not have to look very far in De Chirico’s work to find ample and assured mention of classical figures like Andromache and Hector, Odysseus and Calypso, Orestes and Electra, the Argonauts, the Dioscuri, and others. Equally, we would have to concede that, throughout, De Chirico’s classical allusions are, somehow, never quite without ambiguity. It is as though the mechanism of reference were itself shrouded in some sort of poetic uncertainty – as if voicing a long-loved name too distinctly might unleash negative forces. A certain wistfulness is perhaps inseparable from mythic thinking, and it may be that this is one of De Chirico’s most persuasive insights. Certainly it is a factor in the tonality of his novel Hebdomeros, a text steeped in
puzzlement and ill-defined yearning. Across De Chirico’s ‘metaphysical’ years, and even beyond, the drawings and paintings seem incapable of taking shape within a discourse of innocent reference, uninhibited and luminous. There must, it seems, always be a shadow falling across the brightest street; or if there is no shadow, then the explicitness of a reference must be qualified by indirectness, or by hints of a guardedness, a harbouring of second thoughts. When the artist draws up oracles and constructs enigmas, toying with ‘the signs of the metaphysical alphabet,’ it is as though he were at once confident of the archaic meanings he is gathering yet, embarrassingly, inclined to let them slip his grasp.

Arguably, it was these very qualities of nostalgic hesitancy and clumsy ambiguity which brought about the surrealist misunderstanding. And no doubt De Chirico himself was party to that misunderstanding, in so far as he willingly provided hints which the surrealists were eager to accommodate to their own system of reference. This is attested in the semi-apocryphal tale which Breton relates about De Chirico being asked to identify a young boy selling flowers one evening on the Place Pigalle: rather than turn his head, the painter examines the boy in a pocket-mirror and then solemnly declares that he is a phantom. Where De Chirico’s reading of Arthur Schopenhauer might confirm an attunement to the logic of evanescence and idealization, these are concepts strictly foreign to the surrealist sensibility, and notions of haunting must surely have meant something quite different to Breton for him to have been so keen to swallow this little mystification.

Surrealist support of De Chirico had collapsed by 1926, and this was signalled publicly when a reproduction of the artist’s Orestes and Electra (1923) was printed in La Révolution surréaliste [No. 6, 1 March 1926, 32] as an illustration to Breton’s essay Le Surréalisme et la peinture: the image was emphatically crossed-out. For his part, De Chirico claimed in his Memoirs that the surrealists had never understood his work and dismissed them as ‘the leaders of modernistic imbecility’. The curious fact is that, while the break was total and unforgiving, De Chirico’s actual paintings were to haunt the imagination of practically every surrealist artist thereafter. Perhaps one explanation for the depth of their frustrated passion is that, all along, the surrealists had idolized a chimera, or at least something which they had badly misconstrued. It is true that, from the very beginning, De Chirico had embraced enigma (the motto ‘ET QUID AMABO NISI QUOD AENIGMA EST?’ appears in a self-portrait of 1911): yet this enigma sprang not so much from a taste for the absurdist curios of modernity – the dark glasses, the shop signs, the tailor’s dummies – as from the poignant revelation of the irreducible distance separating contemporary reality from the golden age of antiquity. De Chirico’s true fixation was not on rubber gloves, but on the ancestral narratives of classical mythology which rubber gloves could never grasp – except in so far as they might serve to lay out a corpse too cold to be revived.

Yet if my interpretation is valid, it needs to be modified by a final thought: namely that, if only they had realized it, Apollinaire, Breton and the rest were themselves shaped by the same classical traditions which, ostensibly, they sought to deny or transcend. ‘In the end you are fed up with that ancient world,’ Apollinaire told himself in the poem Zone. Yet did not Apollinaire
deliberately choose his pseudonym in homage to the Greek god of the sun? Did he not delight in his image as a latterday Orpheus? And was not the myth of the Cretan labyrinth and Ariadne’s thread crucial to Breton’s understanding of his own poetic vocation? Even the ultra-modern sophisticate Aragon visualises Paris as an all-encompassing space of metamorphosis, basking in ‘a mythic nature which ceaselessly multiplied itself,’ a conception which strikes me as perfectly consistent with the spirit of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. And, almost inadvertently, Aragon confirms my suspicion when he lets slip the admission that, even if his modern myths refute those of antiquity, there is really no essential difference between them: ‘Though substituted for the natural myths of antiquity, [the new myths] cannot be truly opposed to them, for they derive all their strength, all their magic, from the selfsame source.’

NOTE: This is the hitherto unpublished English original of a text first published in French as ‘Giorgio de Chirico et la mythologie surréaliste’ in *Giorgio de Chirico et le mythe grec*, Turin and London, 1995.

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1 ‘tant ils reculaient, tant ils approfondissaient l’horizon mental’.

2 ‘Pour dépeindre le caractère fatal des choses modernes, la surprise est le ressort le plus moderne auquel on puisse avoir recours.’


4 ‘M. Giorgio de Chirico vient d’acheter un gant de caoutchouc rose qui est une des marchandises les plus impressionnantes qui soient à vendre. Il est destiné, copié par l’artiste, à rendre plus émouvants et effroyables que ne le sont ses tableaux passés, ses œuvres de l’avenir. Et si on l’interroge sur l’épouvante que pourrait susciter ce gant, il vous parle aussitôt de brosses à dents plus effroyables encore qu’a inventées récemment l’art dentaire, le plus récent et peut-être le plus utile de tous les arts.’ *Paris Journal*, July 1914

5 ‘J’estime qu’une véritable mythologie moderne est en formation. C’est à Giorgio de Chirico qu’il appartient d’en fixer impérissablement le souvenir.’

6 ‘À la fin tu es las de ce monde ancien’.

7 ‘une nature mythique qui allait se multipliant’.

8 ‘Substitués aux antiques mythes naturels, [les mythes nouveaux] ne peuvent leur être réellement opposés, car ils puissent leur force, leur magie à la même source.’
Claude Cahun’s Iconic Heads: from ‘The Sadistic Judith’ to *Human Frontier*

Katharine Conley

Abstract
This essay uses a photographic self-portrait by Claude Cahun as a focus for examining the ambivalences of photography and gender identity within surrealism. It sets Cahun’s striking photograph in the context of her texts on historical ‘heroines’ and in relation to other self-portraits within the framework of surrealist autobiography. The complexities of her lesbian identity are explored through her own strategies of both textual and visual ‘masquerade.’ Drawing widely upon photographic theory, the essay addresses the tensions between manipulation, indexicality and tactility in Cahun’s photograph, to suggest its fundamental instability of meaning. As a ‘surrealist counter-archivist,’ this essay argues, Cahun pursued a project which investigates the human condition and its very ‘frontiers.’

![Image of Claude Cahun's self-portrait](image)

Fig. 1: Claude Cahun, *Frontière humaine (Human Frontier)*, in *Bifur*, 5, 1930.
In the only photographic self-portrait published by Claude Cahun in her lifetime, *Human Frontier* from 1930, and in ‘The Sadistic Judith,’ one of the sketches collectively entitled ‘Heroines’ and published in different journals in 1925, Cahun puts into play the question of what is human and how a human being knows who and what she is. This question of knowledge is perhaps most significantly articulated in the photograph *Human Frontier* as photography would seem to represent a reliable medium with which to record what can be known because of the indexical way in which it captures what may be seen. A photograph constitutes a trace of the real, of a moment captured in time through light and chemistry. However *Human Frontier* puts into doubt what is seen - a human head - and thus questions the knowledge projected and suggested by the head itself, questions which carry over from Cahun’s story, ‘The Sadistic Judith,’ which also questions what and how we know. Consequently, this photograph also destabilises common assumptions about photography itself, its reliability and its indexicality, by seeming to capture not only what seems familiar to any human being but also the suggestion of what does not, of what seems to escape familiarity with a hint of the interference of otherworldly, even ghostly, elements in an otherwise familiar world.

**Judith at the Cutting Edge**

In 1925, at a time when Cahun was making multiple photographic self-portraits in myriad disguises, she also tried out alternative voices with a sequence of short verbal sketches. Entitled ‘Heroines’ and published in *Le Mercure de France* and *Le Journal littéraire* these texts took the shape of monologues by famous women from Eve to Helen, Sappho, Penelope, Salomé, and also Judith, in the tradition of Ovid’s ‘Heroides.’ Unlike Ovid, however, Cahun avoids reinforcing the myths attached to these iconic women; she also rejects the tragic passivity that characterises so many of them in Ovid’s treatment. Her stories desacralise these ‘heroines’ in an effort to humanise them, on the one hand, and to suggest that humanity is not heroic, on the other. Cahun’s distortions of these mythic stories make the reader realise how two-dimensional these women have become. What if, she asks, they could be declassified as icons of virtue, beauty, nobility, patience, tragic genius, or...
feminine whimsy, and seen anew as human, which, as Human Frontier will make clear five years later, is an open-ended category?

Cahun’s choice of Judith is of particular interest because, like Cahun, she was Jewish. (This choice would also find a later coincidence in Cahun’s resistance against the German occupiers of the isle of Jersey, just as Judith had defied an invading army.) She entered legend when chastity and bravery prompted her to save her besieged town by decapitating Nebuchadnezzar’s commander, Holofernes. What happened ‘off camera,’ so to speak, in Holofernes’s tent prior to his decapitation, however, remains a mystery that has tantalised artists and writers for centuries; the biblical chroniclers, unlike Cahun, and, later, Michel Leiris in his autobiography Manhood, which also takes on Judith’s story, make no mention of sexual relations. Judith is visually iconic as well in paintings by Mantegna, Botticelli, Michelangelo, Veronese, and Lucas Cranach, among others.

Cahun irreverently distorts the biblical Judith’s story in ‘The Sadistic Judith’ by making her ‘heroine’ into an involuntary serial killer. Cahun’s Judith would prefer not to kill Holofernes and deeply regrets her inability to prevent herself from doing so because she has fallen in love with him: ‘Am I truly condemned, a criminal since childhood, to destroy everything I love?’, she asks. With this Judith’s involuntary need to kill small animals, from her own dog to an infant bird, Cahun questions the assumption that a woman would not kill for pleasure. Cahun also questions the assumption that this heroic widow would not have felt love, even desire, for an enemy general. And she questions Judith’s piety by portraying her as disrespectful.

Rather than highlighting her righteousness, Cahun underscores the extent of Judith’s abjection in her desire for Holofernes by opening her sketch with a portrayal of him as an ugly man who despises women, detailing Judith’s enchantment with his head: his ‘receding hairline,’ ‘dead eyes,’ ‘bestial mouth,’ and the ‘reptilian folds’ of his neck. She also emphasizes Judith’s disdain for her own body when she has her comment: ‘I give what I have learned to cherish least,’ while thirsting, with her body, for the ‘crudest body’ of her victim: ‘Beware of this mouth, this nape, these ears - beware of all that can bite, tear, and suck until your foreign blood is exhausted - delicious!’ She is crestfallen when he allows himself to be killed: ‘It’s your fault! Why didn’t you see into me? Why didn’t you free me from my
executioners? I still loved you, I would have died happy. I wanted to conquer you and you let yourself be conquered!"

Cahun also questions Judith’s response to the applause she receives when she emerges from Holofernes’s tent holding his head, horrified at having killed the man she loves and by their response, which she experiences, at first, like ‘a baby whom one mistreats.’ ‘People!,’ she exclaims without much heroism, ‘What do we have in common? Who allowed you to [invade] my private life? To judge my acts and find them beautiful? To burden me (I who am so weak and weary, eternally hunted) with your abominable glory?’ How can we know for certain, Cahun seems to be asking, what Judith’s motivations and desires were, the only person in her town willing to enter Holofernes’s tent? How can we know that Judith lost interest in sex once she was widowed, that she became pious and chaste and shared her townspeople’s dislike and disdain for the enemy commander? Are not these assumptions based on clichés tied to sexuality?

In Cahun’s telling of the Judith story Holofernes is particularly bestialized before he is dismembered. Judith is portrayed as ‘terrible,’ although Cahun sees her also as abject. Leiris will later admiringly label her a ‘patriot prostitute,’ but Cahun sees neither patriotism nor prostitution in Judith’s desire, nor is Cahun’s Judith admirable. Nonetheless, Cahun empathizes with her, whereas Leiris empathizes with the fatally wounded Holofernes. Cahun’s ironic concern seems oriented towards the consequences of having been the author, not the victim, of violence - not only in the case of Holofernes, but throughout her life. She is a revered biblical heroine re-imagined as a twentieth-century ‘femme fatale.’ Cahun’s version of the Judith story lies literally at the ‘cutting edge’ of our own understanding and, as such, comes close to Mieke Bal’s reading of the biblical version of the Judith story which, she argues, challenges ‘our assumptions . . . about what it is and how it is that we can know.’ For the human condition is necessarily always fundamentally ambiguous, always at least double for Cahun, as her anti-heroic ‘heroines’ as well as her photographic self-representations suggest.
On the Human Frontier

Cahun has recently become famous for her fascinating and prolific self-portraits, which have earned her international recognition as an important twentieth-century artist.\(^1\) Her photographs are stunningly visible to us at the beginning of the twenty-first century because of the ways in which they anticipate contemporary investigations of sexuality, probably best articulated by Judith Butler, although they were contemporaneous with Joan Rivière’s essay, ‘Womanliness as a Masquerade,’ from 1929.\(^2\) Despite the multitude of photographic self-portraits she produced, however, particularly between 1915 and 1930, Cahun published only one, *Human Frontier*, in *Bifur* in 1930.\(^3\) This photograph stands alone as representative of the extensive body of work that mesmerizes audiences today. It is haunted by that work in a way that the head’s anamorphic distortion and its ghostly aura seemed to anticipate.

*Human Frontier* deflects the viewer’s gaze in a manner uncharacteristic of Cahun’s unpublished self-portraits where she usually looks directly into the camera lens. It is a bust shot that shows her upper body from just above her waist to the top of her head, which has been distorted by the camera so that the skull is elongated and its curves exaggerated - an exaggeration underscored by the fact that the head is shaved, putting into question the subject’s sexual identity. The effect is unsettling because it seems to be a straight photograph and yet it clearly is not. At once documentary, ‘straight,’ and manipulated through photographic style, the figure depicted is decidedly uncanny - strangely difficult to determine as animate or inanimate, male or female. It is both straight and not, two in one. The chest is flattened by the black cloth draped over it, as Laurie Monahan suggests, which highlights the three-dimensional roundness of the shaved head.\(^4\) The fact that it takes a bust as its stylistic model triggers an association with sculpture in the viewer’s mind, with three-dimensionality. Indeed, its curves and shadows texture it, causing it to extend beyond the flatness of the lower body and the medium itself to suggest another, more palpable dimension.\(^5\) The inclination of the head, the slight fuzz of the shaved skin, the figure’s patent vulnerability, all invite empathy through the fact that not only is this head touching, she (or he) seems eminently touchable.\(^6\)
Another way to see this figure’s vulnerability is through the elongated skull’s anamorphic quality and, through it, to catch an intuitive glimpse of the most famous historical anamorphic painting, Hans Holbein’s *Ambassadors*, with its reminder of human mortality in the shape of a distorted skull.\(^\text{17}\) Roland Barthes claims that we are always aware of mortality, at least subliminally, whenever we look at a photograph of a human being.\(^\text{18}\) In his study of Barthes’s *Camera Lucida*, Richard Stamelman summarizes Barthes’s argument about the photographic image: ‘whatever it represents, it mortifies.’\(^\text{19}\) The frontier of the ‘human’ for Cahun is thus at the limit of touchability, the edge of mortality. It is, to use Gayle Zachmann’s analysis of Cahun’s oeuvre, ‘grotesque’ in the sense of hybrid, open-ended.\(^\text{20}\) It is haunted in life by death, by other worlds, a sense heightened by this head’s egg-like fragility, its eerie resemblance to a baby’s head as well as to that of an old person.\(^\text{21}\)

This haunted sense, this touchability of the head in *Human Frontier* are also characteristic of photography itself as a medium, of the photograph that technologically documents what the head can see, interpret and know. In his memorial essay on Barthes, Jacques Derrida emphasizes the way in which photographs are haunted by the past moment when they were taken, because they take with them the trace of that moment.\(^\text{22}\) Derrida asserts: ‘Ghosts: the concept of the other in the same, the *punctum* [its piercing detail] in the *studium* [its commonplace element] the dead other alive in me. This concept of the photograph *photographs* all conceptual oppositions, it traces a relationship of haunting which perhaps is constitutive of all logics.’\(^\text{23}\) And, indeed, a photograph does constitute a physical trace of that moment in the past, as Geoffrey Batchen explains:

Photography is privileged within modern culture because, unlike other systems of representation, the camera does more than just see the world; it is also touched by it. Photographs are designated as indexical signs, images produced as a consequence of being directly affected by the objects to which they refer. It is as if those objects have reached out and impressed themselves on the surface of a photograph, leaving their own visual imprint, as faithful to the contour of the original object as a death mask is to the newly departed. On this basis, photographs are able to parade themselves as the world’s own chemical fingerprints, nature’s poignant rendition of herself as memento mori. And it is surely this combination of the haptic and the
visual, this entanglement of both touch and sight, that makes photography so compelling as a medium.²⁴

Combining touch and sight, photography entangles our understanding of the index and the icon, as delineated in the turn-of-the-century work of semiotician Charles S. Peirce to which most recent theoretical studies of photography refer. Peirce identified photographs as indices because they have a ‘physical connection’ to what they represent, as opposed to an icon, which ‘may represent its object mainly by its similarity.’²⁵ He summarizes the functioning of the index as follows: ‘Psychologically, the action of indices depends upon association by contiguity, and not upon association by resemblance or upon intellectual operations.’²⁶ For a photograph is indeed linked by contiguity, by touch, to the thing photographed, and yet it also represents the thing photographed by means of its a posteriori similarity to it, combining, as Batchen argues, both a sense of touch and a sense of the visual. Denis Hollier links index to icon in an article on surrealist shadows, in which he shows how the shadow, clearly indexical in reality, becomes iconic once it is transformed into a two-dimensional work: ‘Passing from index to icon, one passes from a three-dimensional to a two-dimensional art, from sculpture to painting,’ or, one could say, from the photographic moment to the photograph.²⁷ Photographs may be understood as both indexical and iconic, as linked both to the sense of touch and to the visual aftereffects of that touch, which transform index into icon – icons which retain their indexicality. Human Frontier is a particularly good example of this phenomenon since its association with portraiture identifies it as iconic and two-dimensional, while the form of the portrait as a bust together with its particular three-dimensional quality of touchability retains the clear imprint of indexicality.

Recent theorists have also problematised the photographic moment, particularly when the photograph would appear to represent a direct, straight, or documentary version of the reality photographed. Rosalind Krauss, in her influential essays on surrealist photography in L’Amour fou, seems to valorise a photography that had been manipulated according to George Bataille’s idea of the informe, thus rejecting the supposedly uncomplicated representation inherent in documentary or straight photography. Batchen, on the other hand, along with John Roberts and Ian Walker, insists, as Walker asserts, that: “surrealist
documentary" photography is in fact more disruptive of conventional norms than the contrivance of darkroom manipulation. Walker claims that Krauss’s *Amour fou* ‘failed to represent a whole other way of working with the medium: a Surrealist photography which, on the contrary, exploits its very “straightness,” its apparent realism, to Surrealist ends.’ In opposition to Krauss, he reads ‘the Surrealist use of straight photography as a simultaneous exploitation and subversion of the standard realist frame within which the medium was then primarily situated.’ For him the photograph is inherently double, as it is for Batchen, who sees it as ‘both an icon - a picture of something - and an index.’ Walker effectively rescues straight photography from dismissal within surrealist studies, even though he and Batchen both echo Krauss’s comparison of surrealist photography to automatic writing. ‘What the camera frames, and thereby makes visible,’ Krauss eloquently states, ‘is the automatic writing of the world: the constant, uninterrupted production of signs.’ Walker concludes the introductory chapter to his excellent book, *City Gorged with Dreams*, in terms remarkably similar to Krauss’s:

> [T]he Surrealists’ own use of both photography and the images made by photographers influenced by surrealism were manifestations of a desire to exploit the camera’s ability to simultaneously render the surface of the world *palpable* and render it marvelous - to reveal it as an hallucination that is also a fact that is also an hallucination.

As a work that is both documentary and manipulated, Cahun’s *Human Frontier* magnifies photography’s inherent doubleness through its style as much as in its content, and through how we attempt to categorize the image as well as how we interpret what it represents. First of all it does so through the ways in which it is representative of Cahun’s other work, which haunts this work, especially the photomontages she made for *Aveux non avenus* (‘unrealised avowals’), her fragmentary, autobiographical book, also from 1930. Various unpublished yet now familiar self-portraits were pasted together for some of these images, which Cahun created together with her partner Marcel Moore, particularly the final one.
However, the sheer abundance of these pasted portraits together with their collage-composition draw attention away from Cahun’s singularly arresting face. In these photomontages she often appears ‘disguised,’ as Dawn Ades has indicated, in ironic visual references to ‘the socially imposed shells of feminine or masculine identities.’ Cahun herself refers to these ‘faces’ as disposable ‘masks.’ In plate 10 of the book, a tower of self-portraits on a single neck rises from the lower left-hand corner, around which curves the line: ‘Under this mask another. I will never finish lifting up all of these faces.’ In contrast to this collage, *Human Frontier* suggests an ambiguity occurring within a single figure, which is paradoxically ‘masked’ by its nakedness.
The emphasis on the head in *Human Frontier* would seem to masculinise it, insofar as head, thought and gaze are stereotypically more masculine and Cartesian attributes than feminine ones. Yet this head’s tactile quality opposes any Cartesian tendency towards sublimation; its corporeality tends to feminize it, just as the bare upper body revealing fragile shoulders paradoxically suggests a woman’s body disappearing into the flat darkness below the shoulders. The bust seems to float in the center of the image, as though unattached to a human body — at the ‘frontier’ between humanity and sculptural representation. Although distorted and seen only partially, the body is at the same time intact, as Stamelman affirms about Cahun’s work overall: ‘The woman is never presented as nude or mutilated, never made the object of male desire, never reduced to one representative easy-to-appropriate sign.’

Masculine and feminine traits overlap in a manner typical of Cahun’s unpublished self-portraits, subtly suggesting a cross-dressing of the sort favored by Marcel Duchamp in his Rrose Sélavy disguise in Man Ray’s photographs from ten years earlier, in which Duchamp’s masculine self clearly shows through his performance of ‘womanliness.’ Like Duchamp but in reverse, Cahun performs masculinity not in order to ‘pass,’ but to let femininity visibly shine through. For Cahun as for Duchamp, dressing as a member of the opposite sex shows the extent to which dressing as a member of one’s own gender constitutes an equivalent ‘masquerade.’ For Cahun, all dressing was performative, including the undressing involved in shaving one’s head and in ‘cross-dressing’ femininity with masculinity, so as to refuse identifying clearly with either one or the other. As Monahan specifies: ‘it was precisely through this indistinct subject position that the coherence of the self was most vulnerable, and therein lay the revolutionary potential of subjectivity itself.’ Fifteen years later, in an unpublished autobiographical essay dedicated to Moore-Malherbe entitled *Confidences au miroir* (‘Secrets Told to the Mirror’) from 1945-46, Cahun declared: ‘Do signs have a sex? My multiple is human. A hermaphroditic sign would not render it (do it justice).’

Indeed, Cahun shows references to masculinity and femininity for what they are: cultural signs triggering unconscious attempts to categorise against which she explicitly struggles throughout her work. In *Aveux non avenus*, for example, she examines the
functioning of cultural signs within an everyday social context. Here in its entirety is the
dialogue she imagines:

Sappho.
- I’m going to buy some socks. – Do you really wear socks? - No… (what’s the
word?) some… stockings. Oh well, it's just a manner of speaking.

…Instinctively I reached for the buttons on my fly on the right-hand side (the men’s
side), but the tailor (you’ve really got to tell them everything!) had sewn them on the
left-hand side.46

This short self-contained scenario entitled ‘Sappho’ signals to the reader that the
narrator, like Cahun, is lesbian, and then proceeds to demonstrate the extent to which cultural
assumptions create practical difficulties for the woman whose needs do not fit the dominant
cultural heterosexual paradigm, the woman who refuses to be ‘classified.’47

In the 1920s, before women commonly wore trousers, the expressed desire to wear
socks could readily be misunderstood as a slip of the tongue - an accidental substitution of
socks for stockings. The phrase, ‘it’s just a manner of speaking,’ underscores the fact that
one phrase may be substituted for another depending on ‘the manner’ in which one speaks,
on the words one chooses, as in the parenthetical phrase ‘(what’s the word?).’ A lesbian
cross-dresser’s style, her ‘manner of speaking’ and dressing, would most likely involve
wearing not stockings but ‘socks.’ Similarly the speaker in Cahun’s dialogue had clearly
assumed that her tailor would custom-make men’s trousers for her, as she requested,
because that was her ‘style.’ Yet the parenthetical phrase ‘(you’ve really got to tell them
everything!)’ implies that the tailor has substituted his own understanding of what she wanted
- a man’s suit tailored for a woman - for and against hers: a man’s suit, sewn as if for a man to
wear.

This brief scenario underscores the tensions particular to the lesbian cross-dresser’s
place in society: namely, the degree to which her wishes, distorted by others and not readily
understood, challenge assumptions and do not fit into pre-determined categories. It posits a
strategy resembling Luce Irigaray’s idea of mimicry, according to which a woman may
‘recover the place of her exploitation by discourse’ through deliberate ‘play with mimesis’ just
as in the photograph *Human Frontier* Cahun deliberately plays with expectations about what both women and men should look like. With subtle exaggeration this sketch illustrates the fundamental lack of transparency of accepted social conventions, of society’s classifications, in a style that parallels Cahun’s photographic strategies. For, particularly in a pre-World War Two, pre-chemotherapy era, not all human beings with shaved heads, or who wear socks instead of stockings, are necessarily men. Nor are all human beings with vulnerable shoulders necessarily women. These social conventions cannot serve to classify humans as men or as women with any reliable consistency and, as Cahun suggests, should such categorization be desirable?

In *Aveux non avenus* Cahun asks the question: ‘Masculine? feminine? it depends on the situation. Neuter is the only gender which always suits me. If it existed in our language, my thought would be less nebulous.’ She enacts this resistance to categorization in *Aveux*’s collage-like narrative and in a multitude of textual masks, through which the narrator alternately loves a man - a barman named Bob - and a beloved woman. She anticipates Butler’s conclusion from *Gender Trouble* - namely that ‘the “coherence” and “continuity” of the person are not logical or analytic features of personhood but, rather, socially instituted’ - by situating her narrators in a series of different situations. Her undressing as a form of cross-dressing works because it enacts the kind of transvestism Marjorie Garber defines as ‘a space of possibility structuring and confounding culture: the disruptive element that intervenes, not just a category crisis of male and female, but the crisis of category itself.’ In this way, Cahun’s project is also pertinently surrealist and follows Elizabeth Wright’s idea that Bretonian surrealism aims at ‘the failure of the category’ in its subversive ‘disturbance of the structure of our old desires.’ Indeed, in the first *Manifesto* Breton wrote critically: ‘our brains are dulled by the incurable mania of wanting to make the unknown known, classifiable.’

The head’s distortion in *Human Frontier* casts doubt on the subject’s classifiability as human. Could this be a different sort of being? To what expanded frontier of human possibility has Cahun extended this head, which seems to illustrate what Elsa Adamowicz has called the ‘exploded space’ of the head within surrealism. In late-twentieth-century American popular culture, the shape of Cahun’s head in *Human Frontier* is immediately recognizable as a ‘cone head’ from ‘Saturday Night Live,’ the popular television show that
premiered in the 1970s. Elongated heads were used to identify the characters as ‘aliens’ in a
gesture not unlike Cahun’s. What exactly is familiar about this head, she seems to be asking,
and what is strange? It typifies Freud’s insistence on the conceptual and linguistic instability
of the notion of the uncanny. \(^57\) It certainly seems to illustrate Bataille’s idea of the *informe*,
which he defined in *Documents* in December 1929, possibly around the time Cahun was
shooting *Human Frontier*, as ‘a term serving to declassify’ the ‘academic’ impulse to see ‘the
universe take on a form.’ \(^58\)

Cahun’s head also appears to enact what Krauss has described as the ‘job’ of the
*informe* in photography: namely to challenge the illusion of ‘wholeness’ which, according to
Krauss, is promoted unproblematically by straight photography and which supposedly allows
a spectator to experience a moment of hallucinatory recognition where his or her own
subjectivity is perceived as illusory. \(^59\) In *Aveux non avenus* Cahun specifically embraces
Bataille’s push towards declassification. Using the verb *déclasser*, meaning ‘to downgrade’
but also referring to that which is not readily classifiable, she insists: ‘J’ai la manie de l’exception. . . . Ainsi je me déclasse exprès. Tant pis pour moi’ (‘I’m mad for exceptions. . . .
Thus I downgrade, declassify myself on purpose. Tough for me’). \(^60\)

*Human Frontier* is in fact exemplary of both styles of surrealist photography - the
manipulated (*informe*) and the realist (straight); it reveals aspects of Cahun as she actually
looked and yet masks this look through distortion. For it is not necessary to see *Human Frontier*
as exemplary of the *informe* to understand it as surrealist. Much surrealist
photography is straight - realist and documentary - and can be just as subversive as so-called
*informe* photography, particularly in the form of what John Roberts calls surrealist *counter-
archives*: ‘the archive of female sexuality, of the animalistic body, of the uncanny object,
and…of the city as a screen for desire.’ \(^61\) Cahun’s self-portraits could certainly be understood
as constituting a private and realist counter-archive of this sort. They resist all predetermined,
equivocal categories, including such a category identified as *informe*.

Cahun’s photographic play with styles and identities echoes the narrator’s frustration
with the tailor in Cahun’s ‘Sappho’ story and with those categories established by social
convention that restrict rather than expand understanding. Cahun clearly prefers social
behaviour that exceeds categorical definition, wherein one mode of conduct could double or
haunt another. Accordingly, she often wore disguises when she went out because, disguised, she was visibly both herself and another. She thus physically displayed the instability she wishes to institute in any unitary and bounded notion of the ‘self’: ‘One evening, thanks to a disguise, I was able to cross the threshold,’ she writes.\textsuperscript{62} Cahun seems most at ease when the phrase ‘it’s just a manner of speaking’ from ‘Sappho’ is apparent, when, that is, the fact that one is adopting a style, a ‘manner of speaking,’ of dressing, as a form of expression, becomes as obvious as a disguise worn and shown off to the world: a situation where the ghost of the persona one claims to be always hovers visibly over and beneath the display of alternate identities.

**Autobiographical Statements**

The question of autobiography haunts surrealism, beginning with the opening question of Breton’s *Nadja*, from 1928, with the question: ‘Who am I?’ with which he mediates his encounter with the mysterious woman who called herself Nadja.\textsuperscript{63} Hollier argues that the shadow of the real conveyed in autobiographical writing, distinguishing it clearly from fiction, makes it essential to the surrealist project: ‘Breton wants tales that would be more realistic than the novel … Breton gives both the names and the snapshots of the beings who enter his book.’\textsuperscript{64} In *Aveux non avenus*, Cahun stages autobiography’s lack of transparency through the use of reversal and negation. The book opens with the poetic image of an ‘invisible adventure,’ which may be imagined from the perspective of a photographer, who, seeing as opposed to being seen, can feel ‘invisible’ and whose ‘adventure’ involves capturing light on a negative.\textsuperscript{65} This idea of the photographic negative appears textually a little further into the book’s opening section with the word ‘no,’ an echo of the palindromic *non* at the pivotal center of the title *Aveux non avenus*: ‘No. I will follow the wake in the air, the trail on the water, the mirage in the pupil. . . . I wish to hunt myself down, to struggle with myself.’\textsuperscript{66} This initial ‘no’ haunts the affirmations that follow and reveals them for the shadows they are: a wake, a trail, a mirage: ‘I will follow the wake in the air, the trail on the water, the mirage in the pupil.’ What she seeks is elusive, ‘the mirage in the pupil,’ a glimpse of self in the eyes of another, in the ‘eye’ of a camera, seen as in a mirror, which is a reverse image as in a photographic negative. In fact, she prefers this shadowy double to her
own body, as she suggests: 'I am a terrible bother to my shadow and cannot escape it.'

It is the body that cannot be escaped, whereas the shadow double is bearable because it, like a photographic image, can be manipulated and shaped. Perhaps more importantly, the shadow bears witness to presence, to a person having been there and having existed.

A series of unpublished self-portraits from 1925 show Cahun’s head in a bell jar, not as a bust but as though decapitated yet very much alive. Unlike in Human Frontier, in three of the four shots published by Cahun’s biographer François Leperlier, Cahun looks directly at the camera with expressions that range from thoughtful to sad to confrontational. The shininess of the glass and the reflections which play on it counter any of the sense of touchability inspired by the shaved head in Human Frontier. These images double and render visible the glass separating photographer and model. For a camera lens, while transparent, distances, and can always distort what is seen through its rigidifying material and technology. That ‘mortifying’ quality of photography here is staged as a head separated from its body; yet it is belied by the vitality of this head’s lively and thoughtful gaze. Rather than looking as though she were from another world, the head in the version that looks most directly at the camera seems ready to depart in search of other worlds, like a scientist in a space suit. The sense is not at all one of death, but of a kind of renewed energy focused on intellectual keenness. The shiny glass adds sharpness to the head’s gaze and disconcerts the viewer who feels caught by the eyes and vulnerable to the capacity of glass to cut, to sever, to separate, to see one version of the self, one part, at the expense of the rest in a space created to form a vacuum in which objects might be preserved from life’s temporal degradations not in it. The bell jar’s glass, doubling the glass camera lens, isolates the head, making it unknowable and untouchable, unlike the empathetic bust in Human Frontier. These head shots tell a story about ‘the mirage in the pupil’ from Aveux non avenus through the lens that the photographer turns self-consciously upon herself in an autobiographical gesture that confounds more than it reveals.

The image of a head serves as a point of departure for the textual self-presentation of Leiris in Manhood, as well. It is not his own head that prompts these confessions in the unconventional autobiography he published in 1939, however, but that of Holofernes, from the story of the biblical Judith that Cahun retold in her ‘Sadistic Judith.’ ‘By detaching itself,'
writes Hollier, ‘Holofernes’ head indeed marks the point of departure of the autobiographical project.’\textsuperscript{70} Leiris identifies with Holofernes’s severed head and admits to an abject attraction to Judith: ‘Like Holofernes with his head cut off, I imagine myself sprawling at the feet of this idol.’\textsuperscript{71} He describes Judith as ‘a heroine terrible twice and three times over because, first a widow, she becomes a murderess, and a murderess of the man with whom, the moment before, she had gone to bed,’ who, once she emerges from Holofernes’s tent, seems ‘to ignore the bearded ball she holds like a phallic glans.’\textsuperscript{72} He is the one who is abject in this telling, not Judith, whom Leiris admires as much as he fears. The decapitated head that triggers Leiris’s autobiography, therefore, may be seen as specifically representative of a fear of castration. Leiris’s motivating fear has been interpreted by Hollier not as ‘a masochistic weirdness exclusive to a neurotic bourgeois male named Michel Leiris’ but as ‘an exemplary power that inaugurates and structures the self-representative exercise as such. A castrating mimesis: the mirror cuts. I recognize myself in a mirror that reduces me to a head.’\textsuperscript{73} This uneasy recognition of the self that is the head-in-the-mirror inspires the autobiographical impulse, suggests Hollier, and motivates the thinking head ‘to undertake the mission of rejoining his body’ through the binding process of autobiographical narrative.\textsuperscript{74}

However, in \emph{Human Frontier} Cahun does not separate the head from the body as she did in her bell jar photographs or as Leiris does. Nor does she seek to reconnect the head with the body as Hollier suggests. Neither acephalic, nor even, I would argue, phallic, Cahun’s head is anything but severed or disembodied, even though the figure’s ‘body’ disappears beneath the black cloth.\textsuperscript{75} Her \emph{Human Frontier} does not represent a head in search of its body because, through its hyperbolic exaggeration, it already is body. She distorts the thinking, Cartesian head by stretching and materializing it, and by refusing to give it clear gender identification. Her autobiographical image begins \emph{and} ends with the head, which, through the head’s distortion, already is clearly embodied. Cahun shocks her viewers into recognizing in her self-image a glimpse of ourselves - not of our ‘wholeness’ in the sense that Krauss suggests is encouraged by straight photography, but of our most poignantly touchable mortality, which we feel partially, not entirely. Cahun also seems to hint that this head has access to worlds other than the one represented by realism or reason, that in its
familiar strangeness it compels us to understand ourselves as less familiar and more partial than we might wish to think we are.

One might argue that for Cahun as well as Leiris autobiography starts with the head. That the photograph *Human Frontier* is autobiographical, since it is of Cahun as well as by her, presupposes a double reading that only her friends in 1930, knowing who she was and what she looked like, would have understood. The writing identifying the photograph’s title and subject - *Human Frontier* and ‘Claude Cahun’ - identify and mirror the image. The writing and the photograph together in mirror relation, with Cahun’s bust at the top and her name and the title below, reinforce the sense that a photograph is closer to writing, particularly surrealist automatic writing, as Krauss has argued, than to a painted or sculpted image, because it represents the graphic imprint of light on photosensitive paper. In *Human Frontier* text and image both identify Cahun as a person named Claude Cahun and as a living body representative of the human at its ‘frontier.’

For writing and photography may indeed be understood as parallel in terms of their indexicality. A photograph is ‘a photochemically processed trace causally connected to that thing in the world to which it refers in a manner parallel to that of fingerprints or footprints or the rings of water that cold glasses leave on tables,’ as Krauss puts it. Batchen, moreover, emphasizes the link between the photograph and the human hand by quoting a text by Henry Fox Talbot written in 1839, the year that photography was ‘conceived.’ Commenting on photographs of his house, Talbot declares that ‘this building, I believe to be the first that was ever known to have drawn its own picture.’ From the year of its conception, in other words, photography was recognized as hand-drawn reality not so far removed from automatic handwritten reality. Photography is thus always self-referential, always autobiographical, as if the real were self-consciously writing itself through light. As an image-text, *Human Frontier* may thus be seen as typical of all of Cahun’s work, in which she consistently blurs ‘frontiers.’

Cahun’s *Human Frontier* invites the viewer to see at least double: to look up, down, and behind the human head; to look at and with the head’s gaze; to imagine a man, to see the ghost of a woman; to wonder which is more human and to criss-cross the boundaries between them. This double vision distances Cahun’s work from Cartesian clarity, sublimation, transcendence and abstraction. It gives body back to thought and blurs the
subject’s singularity in the best surrealist tradition in which identity is anything but stable. *Human Frontier* suggests that seeing double, *feeling* double, is human, just as her ‘Sadistic Judith’ emphasized the fundamental ambiguity of the human condition. For Cahun, only images and texts that shed light on the invisible dimensions that haunt the visible come close to capturing the human experience in its full complexity, in its fully three-dimensional, tactile mortality. This iconic photograph of Cahun’s head enacts a haunting of the present by a past moment which literally touched the negative out of which the image emerged. It is also one of her most indexical photographs as a result, and thus most representative of the medium in which she worked. In the hands of this surrealist counter-archivist, photography, at once a technology of distance, rigidity, and archival objectivity, is restored to its most indexical, tactile, origins.


2 Carolyn Dean insists that ‘all of these figures . . . perform roles whose meaning they do not understand’ in a psychoanalytic reading that suggests that they all ‘eternally reproduce figures (the homosexual, the sinful woman) that justify witch hunts,’ ‘Claude Cahun’s Double,’ *Yale French Studies* 90, 1996, 85. I would argue that what they do not understand are the roles that history and legend have ascribed to them, not necessarily the roles they saw themselves as playing.

3 Although her story is generally believed to be a fiction, *The Encyclopedia of the Jewish Religion* claims ‘that a historical basis for the incident may be found dating from the late Persian Period in Palestine’(Dr R.J. Zwi Werblowsky and Dr Geoffrey Wigoder, *The Encyclopedia of the Jewish Religion*, New York, 1966, 219).

4 Cahun, ‘Heroines,’ 53.

5 Cahun, ‘Heroines,’ 52.

6 Cahun, ‘Heroines,’ 53.

7 Cahun, ‘Heroines,’ 53.

8 Cahun, ‘Heroines,’ 53, modified translation.

9 Cahun, ‘Heroines,’ 93.

10 Mieke Bal, ‘Head Hunting: “Judith” on the Cutting-Edge of Knowledge,’ *The Feminist Companion to the Bible*, Sheffield, 1995, 263. For Bal this is because the violence of her act seems anything but objective and also because the act itself takes place off camera, so to
speak, it constitutes an ‘invisible adventure’ (to quote Cahun) about which assumptions were made afterwards.


13 Apart from the fragmentary collaged self-portraits in Aveux non avenus, only one other self-portrait of her was published in her lifetime, in the form of a drawing. It was a sketched version of a staged photographic double self-portrait of herself with her head shaved that was included in Aveux non avenus and used on the cover of Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes’ novel from 1929, Frontières humaines, a title very similar to Cahun’s photographic self-portrait Frontière humaine, published in Bifur, for which Ribemont-Dessaignes was editor-in-chief.

14 My thanks to Laurie Monahan for our e-mail conversation of March 17, 2003.

15 It seems to contradict Roland Barthes’s assertion that photographs are flat (Camera Lucida, New York, 1981, 106). His discussion of this quality, of course, is framed in reference to straight photography.

16 Carol Armstrong has argued about André Kertész’s Distortions, from 1933, that photographic distortions of the body invite heightened empathy and self-reflexivity in the viewer. Armstrong, ‘The Reflexive and Possessive Nude: Thoughts on Kertesz, Brandt, and the Photographic Nude,’ Representations 25, Winter 1989, 67. Steven Harris insists that for Cahun, ‘the sense of touch was very important to the erotic dimension of the objects’ she made. Harris, ‘Coup d’oeil,’ Oxford Art Journal 24: 1, 2001, 97.


18 Barthes, Camera Lucida, 97.


21 My thanks to Barbara Kreiger and Keith Walker for discussing their impressions of this image with me.


23 Derrida, ‘The Deaths of Roland Barthes,’ 267. I borrow here from Stamelman’s definitions of Barthes’s terms as ‘the punctum (piercing detail) and the studium (commonplace element) of a photograph’ (Lost Beyond Telling, 256).


26 Peirce, ‘The Icon, Index and Symbol,’ 172.

28 Ian Walker, City Gorged with Dreams, Manchester, 2002, 3. Batchen complains that for Krauss, ‘reality continues to precede a photography that is “merely” its “faithful trace,”’ using Peirce to argue against “a division between photography and the real. . . . Real and representation, world and sign, must, in line with Peirce’s own argument, always already inhabit each other,’ (Burning with Desire, Cambridge, MA, 1997, 197-198); John Roberts reiterates this complaint: ‘Because the naturalistic or documentary image is constructed as truth, it is argued, then the relationship between the photograph and the pre-photographic event is considered irrelevant, or beside the point. . . . On the contrary, realism’s understanding and recovery of the world is based on the socially produced and self-qualifying nature of signification, in which things and their relations and representations are in dynamic movement and tension’ (The Art of Interruption: Realism, Photography and the Everyday, Manchester, 1998, 4-5).

29 Walker, City Gorged with Dreams, 3.

30 Walker, City Gorged with Dreams, 5.

31 Walker, City Gorged with Dreams, 10.


33 Walker, City Gorged with Dreams, 23, my emphasis. It should be noted that Walker’s final phrase rejects the oppositions upon which Krauss tends to rely. Batchen explains: ‘Notwithstanding the deployment of a certain amount of poststructural rhetoric, contemporary photographic criticism remains bound to a structuralist mode of thinking, with its phalanx of unacknowledged binary oppositions’ (Burning with Desire, 194).

34 Aveux non avenus has been translated as ‘Unavowed Confessions’ by Therese Lichtenstein; ‘Cancelled Confessions’ by Abigail Solomon-Godeau and Honor Lassalle (‘Surrealist Confession: Claude Cahun’s Photomontages,’ Afterimage 19, March 1992, 10-13); and ‘Confessions Null and Void’ by Solomon-Godeau (in ‘The Equivocal “I”: Claude Cahun as Lesbian Subject,’ in Rice (ed.), Inverted Odysseys, 111-125); Laurie Monahan suggests ‘Disavowed Confessions’ and ‘Voided Confessions’ (‘Radical Transformations: Claude Cahun and the Masquerade of Womanliness,’ Inside the Visible, ed. Catherine de Zegher, Cambridge, MA, 1996, 125-136); Harris proposes ‘Abrogated Vows.’

35 Cahun, Ecrits (ed. François Leperlier), Paris, 2002, 405. Born Lucy Schwob in 1893, Cahun chose her androgynous pseudonym when she was twenty-three years old (see Leperlier, Claude Cahun: L’Ecart et la métamorphose, Paris, 1992, 31). She spent her life with Suzanne Malherbe, the daughter of her father’s second wife, who became her partner and lover, adopted a male pseudonym, Marcel Moore, and collaborated with her on her photomontages. They lived first in Nantes, then in Paris for almost twenty years where they came in contact with surrealism, and later on the Channel island of Jersey where they survived imprisonment for ‘acts of Resistance’ during World War Two (see Leperlier, Claude Cahun, 273-278).

36 For an insightful study of Cahun’s photomontages see Lasalle and Solomon-Godeau’s ‘Surrealist Confession: Claude Cahun’s Photomontages.’


38 Cahun, Ecrits, 405.


41 In Bachelors Krauss calls this phenomenon ‘a kind of directional reversibility’ (Bachelors, Cambridge, MA, 1999, 47).

42 Rivière specifies that ‘Womanliness therefore could be assumed and worn as a mask, both to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if she was found to possess it’ (‘Womanliness as a Masquerade,’ 36).

43 Monahan, ‘Radical Transformations,’ 130.

44 Cahun, Ecrits, 586.

45 Dean, ‘Claude Cahun’s Double,’ 89. Elisabeth Lebovici also makes the point that there is no ‘original’ identity with Cahun’s theatrical play of images, with reference to Butler (‘I am in Training Don’t Kiss me’; Claude Cahun Photographe, Paris, 1995, 21).

46 Cahun, Ecrits, 333 (nothing left out, ellipses all included).

47 Abigail Solomon-Godeau accurately emphasizes the fact that even though Cahun did not explicitly identify herself as lesbian in her work, her lesbianism probably ‘facilitated if not fostered’ her ‘enunciative position’ (‘The Equivocal “I”,’122).

48 Luce Irigaray, This Sex Which is Not One (trans. Catherine Porter), Ithaca, NY, 1985, 76.

49 Gayle Zachmann skillfully illustrates this point: ‘Both woman and text emerge as hybrid creatures, analogous to the figures of the androgyne.’ She underscores Cahun’s play with both genders and genres and characterizes Cahun’s literary approach as equivalent to the ‘montage effect’ of her photographs (‘Surreal and Canny Selves’).

50 Cahun, Ecrits, 366.

51 Cahun, Ecrits, 185, 191.


53 Marjorie Garber, Vested Interests, New York, 1997, 17. Although not in terms of cross-dressing specifically, or with reference to Garber, similar readings of Cahun’s work as a ‘challenge to determinate meaning . . . as a challenge to stable, singular subjectivity’ (Dean, ‘Claude Cahun’s Double,’ 87) have been presented by Dean, Lasalle and Solomon-Godeau, and Lichtenstein, although in more psychoanalytical terms in the latter two cases - linking her work to the ‘unspeakable’ (Lassalle and Solomon-Godeau, ‘Surrealist Confession,’ 13) and with ‘that moment existing paradoxically before the symbolic, before the rationalization of language and image’ (Lichtenstein, ‘A Mutable Mirror,’ 67). Monahan also analyzes Cahun’s ‘desire to “dematerialize” the limits of the self’ (‘Radical Transformations,’ 131). Katy Kline analyzes ‘the absence of fixity’ in her writings and sees her overall achievement as stretching, permeating, and infiltrating ‘the established boundaries of gender definitions’ (“In or Our of the Picture”: Claude Cahun and Cindy Sherman,’ in Mirror Images ed. Chadwick, 73, 76).

similarly affirms that Cahun’s confounding of categories should be understood in the larger context of the ‘Surrealist, anti-fascist and anti-bourgeois politics she embraced’ (‘Uncanny Resemblances,’ Women’s Art Magazine 62, January-February 1995, 18).

55 André Breton, Manifestoes of Surrealism (trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane) Ann Arbor, MI, 1972, 9.


59 Krauss, ‘Corpus Delicti,’ L’Amour fou: Photography and Surrealism, eds Rosalind Krauss and Jane Livingston, Washington DC, 1985, 64, 95. Krauss postulates that such a spectator would ‘find unbearable a photography that effaces categories and in their place erects the fetish, the informe, the uncanny’ (‘Corpus Delicti,’ 95).

60 Cahun, Ecrits, 367.

61 Roberts, The Art of Interruption, 111, 106.

62 Cahun, Ecrits, 276. Leperlier describes her as frequently dyeing her hair exotic colours such as pink, gold and silver (Claude Cahun Photographe, 10). He affirms that her entire life, ‘Claude Cahun played with masks,’ which ‘she bought on a regular basis,’ and ‘liked to wear at home with friends or visitors’ (Claude Cahun Photographe, 111).


64 Hollier, ‘Surrealist Precipitates,’ 126.

65 Cahun, Ecrits, 177.

66 Cahun, Ecrits, 178.

67 Cahun, Ecrits, 395.


69 Interestingly, in ‘Surrealist Precipitates’ Hollier argues that it is a shadow that precipitates Leiris’s autobiography: ‘What Leiris called the literary equivalent of the shadow of the bull’s horn should propel the autobiographical text in the shared space of history,’ 124.

70 Hollier, Absent Without Leave, 108.


72 Leiris, Manhood, 51-52, 94.

73 Hollier, Absent Without Leave, 109.
Hollier, *Absent Without Leave*, 112. Leiris’s specific fascination with Holofernes fits into the more general fascination with headlessness of his friends, Bataille and André Masson, who started a journal entitled *Acéphale* in 1936. It succeeded *Contre-Attaque*, the short-lived anti-fascist group Bataille formed together with Breton and Cahun in 1935. *Acéphale* sought to revalorize humanity by other means than by the head by exploring drives, violence, sensuality, mortality. In the inaugural issue of *Acéphale* Bataille declared: ‘Man has escaped his head just as the condemned man has escaped from prison. . . . Beyond who I am, I have met a being who makes me laugh because he is headless. . . . He reunites in the same eruption Birth and Death’ (3). It was in the July 1937 issue that plans for a College of Sociology were laid.

I disagree here with Harris, after Bate, who sees this head as a ‘phallic distortion’ that ‘proposes an image of female desire that is also phallic’ (‘Coup d’œil,’ 99; see Bate, ‘The Mise en Scène of Desire,’ 10).

Krauss, ‘The Photographic Conditions of Surrealism,’ 110; see Batchen, *Burning with Desire*, 197. Barthes in Stamelman also appears to argue for photography as a kind of writing, despite his claim that it cannot ‘say’ what it shows (*Lost Beyond Telling*, 266; *Camera Lucida*, 106).


Unpacking Cornell: Consumption and Play in the Work of Rauschenberg, Warhol and George Brecht

Anna Dezeuze

Abstract
This article examines the contrasts and affinities between the works of Joseph Cornell and three artists working in New York in the 1950s and 1960s, Robert Rauschenberg, Andy Warhol and George Brecht. While Rauschenberg and Warhol explored the persona of the artist as consumer which Cornell’s practice as a collector and ‘fan’ had initiated, Brecht’s work highlights another significant innovation of the older artist’s objects: the use of play. The relations between consumption, collecting and play emerging from the dialogue between Cornell and these younger artists reflect more general questions about the ways in which meaning is constructed through assemblages of everyday objects and images.

In a 1981 article, artist Robert Morris listed Joseph Cornell as one of the four cornerstone figures of American art, along with Edward Hopper, Marcel Duchamp and Jackson Pollock. According to Morris, each artist embodied a distinct trend running from the 1960s to contemporary art, and Cornell’s work, he claimed, was representative of ‘an impulse to the decorative.’ While conferring significance to Cornell, Morris’s article clearly condemns his work and its ‘decorative’ impulse for being escapist and for refusing to tackle any of the serious ‘problematics’ characterising modern art such as ‘the redefinition and breakdown of forms, the reflexive stance, the role of the self, etc.’ In a sense, Morris’s opinion is representative of a widespread reading of Cornell’s oeuvre: dismissed as sentimental, conservative and undemanding, Cornell’s work indeed often emerges as the negative counterpart of Duchamp, who has regularly been heralded as the father of ‘postmodernism’ for the last forty years or so.

In order to question this reading, I wish to explore the affinities between Cornell’s works and those created, in the 1960s, by American artists of the first so-called ‘postmodern’ generation. Rather than rehearsing historical narratives of influence, I wish to analyse works by Robert Rauschenberg, Andy Warhol and George Brecht in relation to two themes which can be traced back to Cornell’s work: the conception of the artist as a consumer on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the spectator’s participation in the artwork through play. At the crossroads of these two themes, another broader question, central to all four artists’ works, arises concerning the ways meaning is constructed through the combination of objects and images. By addressing these three concerns, I will demonstrate how re-reading Cornell’s work through his legacies emphasises the very complexities that opinions such as Morris’s fail to acknowledge. In turn, a closer look at Cornell’s multiple legacies will help unpack the various processes involved in choosing, assembling, presenting and representing everyday objects in works sharing a common ‘assemblage,’ ‘junk’ or ‘Pop’ aesthetic.

**Portrait of the Artist as a Consumer**

Although Rauschenberg knew Cornell’s work since the 1940s, it was not until 1952, during his trip to Africa and Europe, that he produced works which could be really described as Cornellian: his series of *Scatoli personali*, or *Personal Boxes* (Fig. 2).
exhibited while the artist was in Italy, these works consisted of different kinds of small boxes, ‘ranging from a Victorian change-purse to Baroque crystal cases to the discard pile of any street,’ which were filled with natural objects, such as animal bones, insects, feathers, stones, shells and twigs, combined with found or purchased artefacts, including mirrors, engravings, beads, fabric and watch-parts. While the *Personal Boxes* lined with satin or velvet suggest the preciousness of Cornell’s homages to ballet dancers, the old-fashioned engravings and objects chosen by Rauschenberg ‘for the richness of their past,’ function, like the maps, reproductions and Victorian artefacts included in the assemblages of the older American artist, as embodiments of an exotically remote European culture.
As a crucial part of his early childhood, Rauschenberg built a small sanctuary within a shared room by using crates and planks to create a dividing wall for privacy. In the resulting compartments, he collected and arranged a great miscellany of things that were meaningful to him, obsessively adding jars and boxes and all sorts of found specimens such as rocks, plants, insects, and small animals.\(^7\)

This biographical detail reported by Walter Hopps evokes Cornell’s own collecting practice, similarly articulated through compartmentalisation, jars and boxes. Indeed, the words ‘privacy,’ ‘meaningful,’ and ‘obsessively’ chosen by Hopps would easily find a place in the critical vocabulary used to describe Cornell’s work and life, while the image of the ‘sanctuary’ is a recurrent trope in the artist’s own writings.\(^8\) Wandering through the Roman flea markets and gathering souvenirs, Rauschenberg the tourist created very ‘personal’ boxes permeated with the childhood collecting impulses which he so obviously shared with Cornell the imaginary traveller.

On his return from Europe, however, Rauschenberg was eager to distance himself from this Cornellian dimension of his work. Asked about his relation to Cornell’s work, he would later explain: ‘The only difference between me and Cornell is that he puts his work behind glass, and mine is out in the world. (…) He packed objects away, and I was unpacking them.’\(^9\) In his Combines, started in the mid-1950s, Rauschenberg indeed seems to be emptying out the contents of a bag of objects found in an attic or junkyard, apparently abandoning the compartmentalising device of the box in favour of what Leo Steinberg would call the ‘flatbed picture plane,’ a surface acting as a receptacle for random assemblages of objects.\(^10\) Rauschenberg’s statement concerning Cornell’s work embodies the ambivalent position of his Combines in relation to the dominant trend of Abstract Expressionism. While Cornell’s work served as a useful alternative to the Abstract Expressionists’ rejection of figuration and literary content, Rauschenberg nevertheless sought to maintain a validating connection between his Combines and their large-scale gestural paintings. And one of the means to achieve this was to contrast the brash, direct character of his works with Cornell’s smaller, more contained boxes.
Taking Rauschenberg’s ‘unpacking’ even further, Andy Warhol began in the late 1960s to hoard objects into his *Time Capsules*, cardboard boxes filled with objects, photographs and printed material (Fig. 3). When Cornell used the term ‘time capsule’ in a 1963 Christmas card,¹¹ he obviously had a more poetic image in mind than a miscellaneous array of photographs, envelopes, receipts, baseball caps and t-shirts thrown together into a box. The visual aspect of Warhol’s *Time Capsules* recalls the stacked boxes of Cornell’s studio, with their handwritten labels denoting their contents. In Cornell’s working process, these boxes contained parts to be used in the future, and their selection and categorisation constituted only one stage in an ongoing project. In contrast, Warhol’s *Capsules* are merely symptoms of the artist’s urge to acquire objects, a tendency which would turn into a full-blown frenzy once he had enough money to spend in the 1970s, cramming his house with collections ranging from space toys to art deco Cartier watches. The apparent absence of selection criteria in Warhol’s collectomania was also a characteristic of *Raid the Icebox*, the show he curated in 1969 at the Institute for the Arts in Houston by drawing on the collection of the Rhode Island School of Design museum. To the exasperation of one of the curators, for example, Warhol chose to exhibit the museum’s whole shoe collection, including duplications, along with randomly chosen paintings, umbrellas, and hatboxes.¹² In these instances, the drive to collect emerges as a continuous flow which can only be interrupted by arbitrary categories of classification.
In contrast with the male-gendered world of Abstract Expressionism, Rauschenberg and Warhol shared with Cornell the attitude of the consumer, a role traditionally associated with the feminine realm of domesticity and privacy. That both Rauschenberg and Warhol were gay, as some have also suggested about Cornell, or that Cornell and Warhol as adult men chose to live with their mothers, are biographical facts which may support the general argument that Cornell provided an alternative model for the artist within the aggressively heterosexual context of Abstract Expressionism. Rather than pursuing this kind of biographical connection, however, I wish to highlight how these three artists all investigated the acquisition of objects as a renegotiation of the relations between the public and the private. While Cornell hoarded objects in his basement and and often worked on the kitchen table, using the family house as a bastion for his privacy, Rauschenberg abandoned the intimacy of the *Personal Boxes* constructed in hotel rooms in order to situate his *Combines* at the boundaries between indoors and outdoors, public and private. Bringing together domestic objects and detritus found on street, the *Combines* exist in the liminal space of the yard.\(^{13}\)

Morris singled out the ‘family attic trunk’ look of these works when he described them as part of Cornell’s ‘decorative tradition.’\(^{14}\) The faded and crumpled fabrics, worn out domestic objects, torn scraps of newspapers and old family snapshots are indeed objects that can be found in the attic as well as in the cellar or the shed — domestic spaces set apart from other rooms in order to store discarded objects, in a limbo between past and present, use and obsolescence, meaning and irrelevance.

In his biography of Warhol, Wayne Koestenbaum argued that the impossibility of public expression led many gay men in the 1950s to throw themselves into consumption and home decoration, ‘amassing artworks, cleansers, masks, records, and receipts, with a curatorial intensity that Warhol would translate into an art of serial and repeated imagery, and into the collections … that were his signature.’\(^{15}\) Thus, in addition to a shared attraction to dime store items, souvenirs and popular magazines, what linked Warhol and Cornell was their exploration of the very processes of accumulation and repetition which make up the dynamics of shopping and collecting. Recurring imagery within a series, and repeated photographs within single works, are characteristics of their oeuvres that could be directly related both to their love of cinema and their obsessive fixations on specific images and objects.
The shift from the Abstract Expressionist notion of the expressive, emotive, ‘action painter’ – to use Harold Rosenberg’s phrase – to the conception of the artist as consumer, allowed Rauschenberg and Warhol not only to negotiate relations between public and private in radically new ways; it introduced an unapologetically passive stance in a discourse celebrating the active involvement of the artist in the ‘arena’ of the work.\textsuperscript{16} Cornell was attracted to Goethe’s Werther or Nerval’s narrator in \textit{Aurélia} because they shared his belief that ‘a passive attitude is required for sudden illumination.’\textsuperscript{17} However far away Rauschenberg and Warhol may seem from those Romantic models, they share with Cornell this receptivity to objects and experiences. As Rosalind Krauss has noted, ‘leaving things “open” has been Rauschenberg’s most frequently used expression in describing his artistic stance.’\textsuperscript{18} In his desire to ‘collaborate’ with objects, Rauschenberg conceived the surfaces of his paintings as simple receptacles for detritus whose material qualities are further highlighted by being pasted, creased and covered in paint. Warhol’s apparent passivity is even more extreme, as he produced series upon series of images depleted through mechanical repetition because, as he claimed, he wanted ‘to be a machine.’\textsuperscript{19}

‘Warhol was a fan all his life, beginning in Pittsburgh, where he filled in colouring books of stars while he was home from school,’ recounts Mathew Tinkcom.\textsuperscript{20} Discussing the activities of cutting out, pasting and colouring in images of stars as behaviour typical of ‘the sissy and the fan,’ Koestenbaum noted the kinship between Cornell’s homages to ballerinas, Rauschenberg’s assemblages and Warhol’s silk-screened portraits of Hollywood stars.\textsuperscript{21} Indeed, both Warhol’s 1963 \textit{Blue Liz as Cleopatra} and Cornell’s 1945-46 \textit{Untitled (Penny Arcade Portrait of Lauren Bacall)} were created around a glamorous portrait cut-up and ‘coloured’ in blue (Fig. 1). As such, they can be read as extensions of the fan’s domestic hobbies, all aimed at recapturing, and multiplying, the intensity experienced by the spectator sitting in the cinema’s anonymous darkness, waiting to be ‘illuminated,’ like Werther or Nerval, by an adored woman’s dazzling presence. Collecting memorabilia, ‘hoarding and sifting coincidences’ are poor, but necessary, substitutes for this originary experience, which is based on the simple premise that, as Koestenbaum has put it, ‘[f]ans have no minds of their own. They only figure as emanations of the diva’s will, as mind readers.’\textsuperscript{22}
Rebuses

Just as the fan gazes at the photograph of the star in order to be transported into another world, viewers of Cornell’s work are invited to imagine the kind of narratives that underlie the collections of objects in their boxes, in a process denigrated by Morris as an ‘unthreatening reverie.’ Cornell was indeed concerned with weaving what he once called a ‘tenuous thread’ which would hold together images, objects and evocations. Through imaginary shifts of scale, or formal analogies and repetitions, Cornell set up chains of associations which can transport the viewer into reveries spiralling out of the most fragile assemblages. Rauschenberg’s *Personal Boxes* explored similar kinds of chains of associations. A bell, for example, is attached to a bird skull ‘in reminiscence of her song,’ just as the fragments of musical scores in works by Cornell often conjure snatches of distant melodies. Cornell’s remark that, in his *Soap-bubble Sets*, the ‘fragile, shimmering globules become the shimmering but more enduring planets’ describes a poetic scale shift similar to Rauschenberg’s note that in one of the *Personal Boxes* a ‘bone on the stage of a box no bigger than a tube of lipstick becomes a miniature monument.’ Those kinds of mechanisms of association are precisely what Rauschenberg took great care to avoid in his *Combines*, as he sought to sever the ‘tenuous thread’ holding objects together. The viewer's gaze is condemned to wander aimlessly across the surface of these deliberately messy paintings in which, according to John Cage, ‘there is no more subject … than there is in a page of a newspaper.’ Like Cage, Rauschenberg rejected the Abstract Expressionists’ probing of subjectivity, by exposing the canvas to the random noise of everyday life, he sought to dismiss the potential emotional connotations which an object can carry. In that sense, Rauschenberg’s explicit rejection of what he called ‘clichés of association’ establishing ‘superficial subconscious relationships’ stands in stark contrast with Cornell’s ‘image-chains’ which, according to Carter Ratcliff, ‘often run along the lines of well-worn clichés,’ linking for example the image of the butterfly to that of the swan in order to allude to the dancing ballerina.

Yet, despite Rauschenberg’s claims, more than one critic has attempted to interpret the iconography of his *Combines*. While some have perceived allusions to his childhood, or coded references to his homosexuality, Charles F. Stuckey actually claimed, in 1977, to have
deciphered Rauschenberg’s *Rebus* by associating words with each group of letters, image and object in the work and stringing them into a sequence.³² This kind of interpretation seems to bring Rauschenberg’s work closer to Cornell’s, as the idea of the artwork as a rebus to be deciphered was dear to Cornell.³³ Rauschenberg soon came to realise that he could not control the chains of associations triggered by the juxtapositions of images, objects, words and colours.³⁴ As Helen Molesworth suggests, the narrative constituted by these associations is intimately associated with the notion of taste, and trying to avoid these ‘clichés’ can at best be a means to explore the very processes through which taste is constructed. Highlighting the tension between ‘Rauschenberg’s extremely visceral use of paint’ and the ‘extraordinarily erudite knowledge base of current events and historical subjects’ required to understand the *Combines* — ‘like the work of Joseph Cornell’— Molesworth concludes:

In Rauschenberg’s work, taste is offered as that which glues together, much like the glue that holds together the collages of the combines. One cannot be rid of taste, one can only hope to keep it plastic and viscous, preventing it from fossilising and hardening.³⁵

Warhol went one step further in following Rauschenberg’s desire to evacuate all ‘clichés of association.’ Explaining his use of repeated, identical images, he claimed that ‘[t]he more you look at the same exact thing, the more the meaning goes away, and the better and emptier you feel.’³⁶ Warhol’s serial repetitions of Marilyn Monroe’s photograph are indeed different from the framed portraits included in Cornell’s boxes (Fig. 1). The latter hover behind coloured veils signifying glamour, unattainability and mystery, while in Warhol’s work the face of Monroe is revealed as a decomposing construction of mass media. Nevertheless, both clearly draw on the photograph’s power as a receptacle for the viewer’s projections: it is difficult to read Warhol’s *Marilyns* independently from her suicide, a reference which inevitably darkens the artist’s avowed celebration of consumer culture, suggesting the other side of the American dream.

Indeed, I would like to argue that Cornell, Rauschenberg and Warhol grasped and explored, in different ways, what Roland Barthes described as the status of the photograph as a ‘message without a code’ whose ‘objective’ appearance could act as a springboard for the most varied connotations and associations.³⁷ Highlighting Cornell’s interest in Sigmund
Freud’s theory of ‘condensation’ in The Interpretation of Dreams, Michael Moon compared the relation between the artist’s boxes and his prolific writings to the discrepancy between the ‘laconic’ contents of the dream and the wealth of thoughts which dream-symbols bring together. Similarly, Barthes noted the kinship between the ‘rhetoric’ of the photograph and the mechanisms of dream images, a relation which Krauss suggests was being explored by Rauschenberg in his silk-screens, when he, like Barthes, realised the inescapability of the image’s ‘connotational swarms.’ With Warhol, the repeated and depleted photographs can no longer act as pathways into the mind’s workings — whether it is reverie, as in Cornell’s works, or memory, as in Rauschenberg’s. Images for Warhol act as screens masking traumatic experiences which sometimes disrupt the silk-screened surfaces in the form of cuts or ‘blips’ suddenly rupturing an image, a face, a perfect smile.

‘Since humans have an infinite capacity to invent properties, and to find similarities and differences in things, based on these properties, relations can be found between even an infinity of things.’ This note, written down by George Brecht in a 1959 notebook, shows the artist directly addressing the issue raised by Cornell’s, Rauschenberg’s and Warhol’s works. Brecht, who studied with Cage and would later go on to become one of the most prominent members of the Fluxus group, was working at the time as a chemist and reflecting on the relations between art and science, in particular in terms of philosophical structures of knowledge and perception. If humans can find relations between ‘an infinity of things,’ as Brecht suggests, it follows that any attempt to create random assemblages, like Rauschenberg, or ‘empty images,’ like Warhol, is doomed to fail. This was the conceptual starting point for Brecht’s first exhibition, the 1959 Toward Events at the Reuben Gallery in New York.

In this exhibition, Brecht showed three-dimensional containers filled with a variety of objects. The Cabinet, for example, was a medicine cabinet hung on the wall containing, amongst other objects, a magnifying glass, two porcelain cups, a yo-yo, a bottle filled with pink liquid, a container full of seeds, a bell, a clock, a large egg cup, a miniature statue of liberty, and a word-game (Fig. 4). The invitation to the exhibition urged visitors to open the containers and handle the objects ‘in ways appropriate to their nature’ and then put them back. ‘It is within the spirit of the work,’ Brecht would later explain, ‘that (as in life in general) parts may
be lost, broken, spilled, stolen, replaced, contributed, soiled, cleaned, constructed, destroyed. By providing spectators with the possibility of constructing their own narratives, Brecht is redirecting our attention away from any interpretation of the objects’ meaning for the artist. As we try constructing possible relations among objects and between the objects and their containers, there is no unifying ‘flatbed picture plane,’ no painterly trace, no artistic subjectivity to guide us. Impossible to trace back to a biographical context, the symbolic associations carried by the objects can only be attributed to individual viewers’ own projections. In order to avoid the condensation at work in the object-as-symbol, ‘Brecht’s work,’ as Henry Martin put it, ‘asks us to look at things more slowly and one at a time.'

Fig. 4: George Brecht, Cabinet, 1959 (destroyed). Photograph: Scott Hyde.
With no pedestal, no signature and no modifications to mark them out as artworks, each object remains resolutely faithful to its everyday use, and asks to be handled as such. Even the words included in *The Cabinet* mock all attempts to read a hidden meaning, as viewers can arrange the letters in the word puzzle indefinitely. Dream images can be analysed as condensations of desires and fears, photographs are caught up in complex rhetorical networks, but ‘sometimes,’ as Freud is said to have admitted, ‘a cigar is only a cigar.’ And works such as *The Cabinet,* so to speak, offer us only cigars.

The nature of Brecht’s relation to Cornell can be more specifically analysed through *A Christmas Play for Joseph Cornell* (Fig. 5), a work which stands out as one the most enigmatic and poetic of his text pieces, also known as ‘event scores.’ Asked about this work, Brecht said that it came from a dream which evoked the ‘atmosphere’ of Cornell’s work – indeed, the text seems to capture this in the title’s reference to Cornell’s favourite time of the year, as well as the stage description of a landscape including snow, sun and mist, and the choice of two children as characters. Brecht’s suggestive association of Cornell’s influence with a dream image, and the unusually literary dimension of *A Christmas Play* is, however, downplayed both by the exceptional nature of the score in the artist’s collected works and by the artist’s active resistance to interpreting his Cornell dream. ‘A dream just comes as something unusual and I accept it, just as I accept anything else,’ he explained. This acceptance is a crucial characteristic of Brecht’s supreme detachment, an attitude which urged him to reject not only symbolic interpretations of the objects included in his assemblages, but also direct comparisons between his work and Cornell’s. Although he was sensitive to Cornell’s boxes, and even seemed to wish to contact him at one point in 1961, Brecht distinctly sought to distance himself from the older artist, stating: ‘There is so much nostalgia in his work and I have a horror of nostalgia.’ Instead of the past captured in a box, Brecht invited viewers to interact with his works in the present. With every viewer, the work changes – according to the artist, it is ‘more in the nature of a performance (music and dance) than of an object.’
Forgotten Games

Like Rauschenberg’s disavowal of Cornell’s influence, Brecht’s focus on the older artist’s ‘nostalgia’ obscured another, more relevant aspect of his work. For Cornell had, before Brecht, explored the possibilities of introducing movement within static assemblages by inviting spectators to interact with them through touch. The tension between a fixed structure and mobile elements is a significant aspect of many of Cornell’s works and was embodied most dramatically in his 1950s series of white grids and Dovecotes, inspired by Mondrian’s geometric compositions.52 In these works, the quiet rigidity of the white grid is disrupted by small balls or blocks which move around noisily in each compartment when the work is shaken. This playful irreverence for geometry, I would like to suggest, reflects in fact Cornell’s more general preoccupation with the tension between order and chaos within his working process, as he constantly strove to control the drive to amass objects by arranging and classifying them.

As Dawn Ades has pointed out, many of Cornell’s works require the spectator’s intervention ‘before they can come alive.’53 Although the museum literally forbids these kinds of interventions, I believe that they are intrinsic parts of the works, and a recent DVD on Cornell which allows viewers to virtually open closed lids and drawers, or to listen to the rattling sounds made by the boxes when they are shaken around, successfully reveals the
different modes which these interactions can take.\textsuperscript{54} Firstly, finding hidden elements in the boxes multiplies the dialectic between visible and invisible, memory and discovery, which runs through the imagery and themes of the boxes. In objects such as Cornell's 1948 La Favorite viewers are invited to open the cabinet and take out a bisque angel or a velvet covered box, in much the same way as participants in Brecht's Cabinet are encouraged to handle everyday objects. In the dossiers of images, objects and texts such as The Crystal Cage (Portrait of Berenice) (c.1934-67) or GC 44 (c. 1944-70), the documents contained in the box can be taken out, looked at one by one, read and shuffled by viewers as they wish. In these works, the chains of associations which keep the assemblages together have clearly been dismantled, thus prefiguring Rauschenberg's questioning of the ‘taste’ which ‘glues’ together randomly collected objects. In these ‘dossiers’ by Cornell, as Don Quaintance has pointed out, ‘[m]anipulation by the hand linked to visual recognition by the eye is essentially a recapitulation of the creative process: the viewer becomes an active participant in the art-making.’\textsuperscript{55} This close relation between manipulation and creative process was, of course, what Brecht sought to highlight in his Toward Events exhibition.

The second kind of participation involved in Cornell's works involves shaking the boxes, so that rolling balls, rustling sand or tinkling bells suddenly introduce an important sound element to the assemblages. Similarly, the press release for Brecht's 1959 exhibition explained that ‘[t]he sounds of the components as they are manipulated by the viewer, their smells, as well as their visual, tactile, and symbolic values contribute to the effect of the experience.’\textsuperscript{56} Brecht's 1960 Play Incident is a continuation of this exploration – in it, viewers are invited to drop a ball which produces sounds as it hits nails concealed in the box. This device for creating sound is strongly reminiscent of works by Cornell in which balls can be inserted and hit bells as they roll down ramps: in Swiss Shoot-the-Chutes, for example, the sounds evoke the cowbells of pastoral Switzerland.

In Cornell's works, touching and handling small objects is not only associated with the activity of collecting: it triggers above all associations with the field of play. Cornell's work relates to toys both by direct references and by analogies. An early work such as the 1933 Untitled, for example, contains a children's game of jacks; later boxes include balls, marbles, dice, blocks, and spinning tops. Like Cornell, Brecht used games and toys in his works: his
1959 *Suitcase*, for example, includes a skipping rope, juggling sticks, balls and playing cards (Fig. 6). By taking these toys out of the framework of Cornell’s boxes, Brecht isolated the spontaneous impulse to play from Cornell’s complex network of symbolic associations. Moreover, by allowing viewers to handle and play with the toys directly, Brecht downplays the nostalgia which colours the toys in Cornell’s work.

Fig. 6: George Brecht, *Suitcase*, 1959, mixed media, 20 x 41 x 30 cms. Collection Reinhard Onnasch, Berlin.
We are unable to play with the jacks in the 1933 *Untitled* but we are invited to shake the box, whose sound is a faint echo of distant pastimes. Similarly, one cannot insert coins and play with the *Medici Slot Machines* — the toys included in these works seem to belong to the long-deceased Medici children under whose portraits they are placed. In a diary note, Cornell wrote that 'perhaps a definition of a box could be as a kind of “forgotten game,” a philosophical toy in the Victorian era, with poetic or magical “moving parts.”'\(^{57}\) The title of the work *Forgotten Game* thus evokes both children’s games, forever lost to adults, and the Victorian ‘philosophical toys’ of the past which brought together imagination and scientific invention.\(^{58}\)

Although they do not refer to the ‘forgotten games’ of Victorian times, Brecht’s toys are nevertheless also caught up in a network linking play, science and imagination. As the artist concisely put it, ‘games include everything: intelligence, intuition, imagination, science, theater.’\(^{59}\) Just as Cornell can be said to see games as containing ‘the first seeds’ of the child’s ‘ability to construct pattern and meaning out of chaos,’\(^{60}\) Brecht conceived of play as the site in which to explore the processes by which knowledge is constructed. ‘The appropriate question is not: what is being? but how do I know?’\(^{61}\) This remark was jotted down by Brecht in his notebook as he was attending a course about Ernst Cassirer’s *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, a study of symbols as the starting point for both science and art. As a result, Brecht started to classify the objects which he included in his works according to the way they are perceived. Maps, pictures, words and numbers are described as ‘symbols,’ for example, while objects such as a stone, shell or a piece of cloth are perceived directly ‘in their Suchness.’\(^{62}\) All these objects, presented in a non-hierarchical, non-structured way, are to be apprehended by viewers through play, thus triggering an increased awareness of the various processes of symbolisation at stake in aesthetic and everyday experiences alike.

Like play, Zen, according to Brecht, is a means of relating to experience directly, in a ‘non-symbolic’ way.\(^{63}\) Influenced by Zen, Brecht produced works in which knowledge and perception are explored through game-like exercises recalling Zen *koans*, pedagogical exercises, often in the form of riddles or paradoxes, used as tools for meditation. Is Cornell, then, also ‘a happy Zen master,’ as Morris described him?\(^{64}\) A work such as the *Untitled*...
(Penny Arcade Portrait of Lauren Bacall) (Fig. 1) seems to suggest quite the opposite: whether we conceive it as capturing the fleeting, but intense, experience of the fan communing with his star, or as a means to sublimate a dangerously erotic female figure threatening the innocent world of childhood, it suggests a complex nexus of desire and fear, longing and loss, quite at odds with the image of a detached Zen monk. What is Zen-like in this work, however, is the state of absorption which it encourages in the viewer as soon as he or she drops a small red ball through a small door in the upper right corner of the work. As we are invited to hear the ball roll down the glass ramps, catch a glimpse of it as it passes in front of Lauren Bacall’s face, and watch, mesmerised, as it finally arrives in the central, mirrored compartment in the lower part of the box, we are inevitably caught up in Cornell’s world. Placed in the space of play, which hovers between reality and illusion, we suddenly become more sensitive to both symbols and ‘things in their Suchness,’ fantasies and everyday life.

When Barthes sought to redefine the artwork as ‘Text’ in 1971, he turned to the concept of play. Opposing the activity of ‘consuming’ a text to that of ‘playing’ with a text, Barthes explained that the French verb jouer, to play, should be used in this case in its different semantic meanings:

the text itself plays (like a door, like a machine with ‘play’) and the reader plays twice over, playing in the text as one plays a game, looking for a practice which re-produces it, but … also playing the Text in the musical sense of the term.  

In Cornell’s work, the invitations to open doors, lids and drawers, and the movement of balls and cubes which momentarily disrupts the stillness of many carefully crafted arrangements, all seem to evoke the first meaning of ‘play’ singled out by Barthes. Moreover, the recurring references to games and toys as well as the tactile manipulation encouraged by the artist certainly invite viewers to play with them like children’s toys and games. To these two dimensions, Brecht added the third aspect of play by using the model of the score for his three-dimensional works and comparing the viewers’ interaction with the objects to a musical performance. If in Cornell’s work tactile participation serves to extend our perception of the work, Brecht’s three-dimensional objects cannot exist without the viewers’ activities, thereby demonstrating that ‘things do not exist separately from the relationships into which they
Nevertheless, a comparison between Cornell and Brecht reveals that a performative, participatory dimension can be found in the former’s work, as both rely on the gestures of the viewer to complete their assemblages, in the same way as the Text, according to Barthes, requires an active, rather than a passive, reader. Like Barthes’s readers, the viewer-participants in Brecht’s and Cornell’s work locate the hinges around which the assemblage plays, they play with its loose components, and perform the work as if they were playing a music piece on newly acquired instruments of imagination, meditation and knowledge.

Thus, however laboriously constructed and seductively presented, meaning is constantly undermined by Cornell through the introduction of play. Cases and Dossiers give the impression of being precariously arranged, contingent on the haphazard shuffling of miscellaneous pieces of paper (this precariousness is also highlighted by some museums’ policy of storing and transporting Cornell’s boxes in pieces, thus dis- and reassembling these objects every time). Very often, the strict order of the boxed assemblages is subverted by the random parasitical movements of rolling balls, shifting sand or tinkling bells. Bubbles are always on the point of bursting, the spectacle of the penny arcade inevitably vanishes once the ball has run its course, and play stops as soon as we break the absorption and illusion which it presupposes. In effect, acknowledging that we are playing with Cornell’s boxes means admitting that reality, with all its anxieties and complexities, can only temporarily be kept at bay.

In mapping out contrasts and affinities between the works of Cornell, Rauschenberg, Warhol and Brecht, I have suggested that Cornell’s work acts as a compass to navigate through the issues at stake in 1960s American artworks seeking to establish relations with the world of everyday objects. ‘Junk’ and ‘pop’ works explored the ways in which consumers negotiate their identities through the acquisition, storage and display of commodities. Rauschenberg and Warhol followed Cornell’s collecting practice through different routes: while the former abandoned his early fetishistic Personal Boxes for the Combines’s semi-public ‘yard’ or ‘attic’ aesthetic, Warhol’s works offer themselves as products of the fan’s passive mindset, interweaving the artist’s own personal obsessions with capitalist America’s collective adulation of commodities and stars alike.
Like Rauschenberg and Warhol, Brecht sought to ‘unpack’ Cornell’s boxes by moving away from the symbolic chains of associations contained in his assemblages. Brecht, however, went further than the two other artists because he incorporated their questioning of symbolic processes within the very structure of his works, by inviting an active participation on the part of the viewer. Paradoxically, Brecht was able to achieve this precisely by using a specific Cornellian device: play. Looking back at Cornell through his legacies, then, allows us to see how his boxes contain the seeds of their own ‘unpacking,’ thus establishing them as seminal works for generations to come.

FIRST CHILD: Do you see that dark figure behind the crèche?
SECOND CHILD: (Does not speak.)

The two main characters in Brecht’s *Christmas Play* (fig. 5) demonstrate that it takes two to create an illusion. Cornell’s works are poetic demonstrations that play can simultaneously conjure and dismantle narratives of taste and knowledge; Rauschenberg sought to escape from the clichés of taste through the noisy silence of junk; Warhol never ceased repeating the single narrative of the compulsive consumer. Refusing to give us symbols to decode, Brecht still remains silent to this day.

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3 Two landmark exhibitions signalled the emergence of the ‘assemblage’ or ‘junk’ aesthetic usually associated with the idea of a ‘neo-dada’ movement: *New Forms, New Media I*, held at the Martha Jackson Gallery, New York in 1960, and, one year later, *The Art of Assemblage*, at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Both exhibitions included Cornell’s work alongside
Rauschenberg’s and Brecht’s. That these ‘junk’ practices were precursors for Pop art in the 1960s is indisputable.


6 Branden Joseph’s recent discussion of Rauschenberg’s Personal Boxes is the first in-depth analysis of these works, destroyed in large part by the artist. Although Joseph refers to Walter Benjamin and the surrealists rather than to Cornell, he provides a very useful reflection on how Rauschenberg sought to negotiate his relation to history and the past in these and subsequent works. See Branden W. Joseph, Random Order: Robert Rauschenberg and the Neo-Avant-Garde, Cambridge, Mass. and London, 2004, 131–139.


10 See Leo Steinberg, ‘Reflections on the State of Criticism’ (1972), rep. in Branden Joseph, ed., Robert Rauschenberg, Cambridge, Mass., 27. This text is an excerpt from a larger essay, ‘Other Criteria,’ which was originally delivered as a lecture in 1968.


22 Koestenbaum, The Queen’s Throat, 26.


24 Cornell’s diary note on February 27 1945 reads: ‘A ‘link’— the ‘reassurance’ and ‘continuity’ of a thread so tenuous, so hard at times to keep hold of (or perhaps to communicate to others is what I mean).’ Cited in Carter Ratcliff, ‘Joseph Cornell: Mechanic of the Ineffable,’ 48.

25 Rauschenberg, Scatole e feticci personali, 232.

26 Cornell cited by Ashton, ‘Joseph Cornell,’ 64–65

27 Scatole e feticci personali, 232.


33 Dore Ashton explained that this was one of the reasons why Cornell admired Emily Dickinson’s conundrum-like poems. Ashton, ‘Joseph Cornell,’ 43.

34 This argument is cogently developed by Krauss in ‘Perpetual Inventory.’

35 Helen Molesworth, At Home with Duchamp, 219.

36 Andy Warhol and Pat Hackett, POPism: the Warhol ’60s, New York, 1980, 50.


According to the London Freud Museum, the source for this well-loved quotation has never been located. Cf http://www.freud.org.uk/fmfaq.htm


Brecht in Michael Nyman, ‘George Brecht: Interview,’ 121, note 22.

Notes on the shipping and exhibiting MEDICINE CABINET,’ n.p.

Diane Waldman claims that Cornell was directly influenced by Mondrian in Joseph Cornell: Master of Dreams, New York, 2002, 98.


Ades, 29.

Irmeline Lebeer, ‘An Interview with George Brecht,’ 88.


62 ‘Notebook III,’ 148.

63 ‘Notebook II,’ 123.

64 Morris, ‘American Quartet,’ 104.


66 ‘Notebook II,’ 137.

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The Art of Losing Oneself without Getting Lost: Brecht and Filliou at the Palais Idéal

Steven Harris

Abstract

The Fluxus-affiliated artists George Brecht (1926–) and Robert Filliou (1926–1987) lived and worked together for a time in the mid-1960s. Their artistic and intellectual concerns often coincide with surrealist concerns, yet surrealism was never available to them as an aesthetic option in the 1950s and 1960s. This essay explores some of the reasons why this was so, despite an awareness of surrealism implicit in their own artistic strategies. The type of organization represented by the surrealist group is rejected by Brecht and Filliou, in favour of a much looser notion of community encapsulated by their concept of the eternal network/la fête permanente.

Unlike André Breton or Guy Debord, neither George Brecht nor Robert Filliou ever made a pilgrimage to Ferdinand Cheval’s Palais idéal in the Drôme, either during their residence on the Côte d’Azur from 1965 to 1968, or at any other time. Arguably, the Palais idéal represented the same thing to both Breton and Debord – the popular imagination at work, a non-instrumental thought made visible – and Debord would make his own pilgrimage to this site in 1955, since the Lettrist International existed in an antagonistic though mimetic relationship with surrealism.¹ The way to the realization of poetry led through the interior pathways of the Palais idéal for both Breton and Debord.

For his part, Filliou established what he called the ‘mimetic territory’ of the Genial Republic in 1971, a sometimes virtual territory where genius was cultivated at the expense of talent, and which was realized on occasion at the Stedelijk in Amsterdam, in Filliou’s Volkswagen bus, or at his farmhouse in south-central France.² Brecht and Filliou shared a great many ideas and values with the surrealists, yet Filliou, despite his friendship with the surrealist painter Victor Brauner, never referred to surrealism, and Brecht only did so to make his differences with it clear.³ Such shared values include art considered as a means rather than as an end in itself; an anti-formal artistic practice that often utilizes ‘poor’ materials; a rejection of careerism, professionalism and specialization; a rejection of labour as a positive value, in favour of play; an interest in the creative organization of leisure; an extra-literary notion of poetry as a mode of thought, and thus as a spiritual activity that informs artistic practice; a language-oriented artistic practice resulting in the production of objects, which Filliou, like Breton, calls ‘poèmes-objets;’ intuitive research as an experimental method.
leading to the production of knowledge; and a shared interest in Chinese thought (both Taoist and Zen Buddhist), and in the thought of the utopian socialist Charles Fourier.  

Such a catalogue makes clear the many affinities between the surrealists and artists like Brecht and Filiou, although there are a number of important differences between them as well, not least Brecht and Filiou’s lack of interest in the psychoanalytic theory of the unconscious, and their rejection of the organized group as a means to advance their interests. It is the purpose of this paper to explore why surrealism was unavailable to such artists in the 1950s and 1960s, despite their overlapping concerns. It will be my argument that Brecht and Filiou’s reluctance to mention surrealism is not an instance of bad faith, or a refusal to acknowledge their intellectual sources, but is, rather, a consequence of surrealism’s impossibility in the postwar period, which leads to its virtual invisibility as a source of strategies and ideas. In part, this invisibility leads to a repetition of certain of its concepts and practices by Brecht and Filiou, in the absence of an understanding of their origins in surrealist art and thought. Even so, a general awareness of surrealism as an outmoded practice is evident in the parodies of surrealist games jointly published by the two artists in Games at the Cedilla in 1967, their compendium of scenarios and games invented in Villefranche-sur-mer at their shop called La Cédille qui sourit, or more often in the café across the street (Fig. 1). George Brecht claims the games at the Cedilla were made in a different spirit than surrealist forms of play; they remain poetic, but poetry here does not presuppose unconscious thought.
**Game of the Conditional**

The first player writes a phrase beginning with "If . . . ." Without seeing what the first has written, the second player writes a phrase beginning "then . . . ." The two parts are afterward combined.

For example (played by George and Robert)

If clocks were horse-turds, then I would buy a ticket to New York.

If lemons were sweet, the world would end, wouldn’t it?

If Robert were me, and I were Jesus Christ, women would be very distressed.

If ocean water were wine, and wine were ocean water, why go to the moon?

If mathematics were the woman I love, then that would be enough.

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While certain of these shared interests, such as that in Zen or Taoism, or in the writings of Charles Fourier, are only taken up by the surrealist from 1945, others – like the creative organization of leisure, or the practice of poetry as a mode of experimental research – were abandoned in the postwar period, with the crisis of conception experienced by the surrealist group, once it could no longer imagine how to achieve the synthesis of action and dream that had motivated its activities in the 1930s. The untying of the coupled terms of interior and exterior, revolution and poetry, or knowledge and action was implicit once the surrealists renounced their ties to the agent of social revolution, the international communist movement. If they continued to invoke the resolution of these terms poetically and alchemically, the turn to utopian socialism evident in surrealist thought from Breton’s 1944 book *Arcane 17* on is the most explicit sign that the question of a social agent for this revolutionary change had become an open one, and that the very concept of revolution needed to be re-imagined on terms other than and prior to Marxist theory and Communist praxis.
With this untying, the creative organization of leisure in a revolutionary society, which was a demand put by Tristan Tzara in 1931, was no longer on the surrealist table after World War II. Likewise, the notion of poetry as an experimental means of attaining knowledge of the unconscious mind – that is, as a form of research, through which the surrealists theorized a place for their activities beyond art as such, during the period when they were keen to establish an alliance with the Communists – this no longer made sense at a time when they were seeking not to abolish or supersede art, in a ‘poetry made by all,’ but rather to discover a different role for art in unchanged social circumstances, for instance in the kinds of ritual practices in evidence at the postwar exhibition Le Surréalisme en 1947.

In my view, one of the criteria for the relevance of surrealism in the postwar period is the group’s recognition that the avant-garde strategies that it helped invent in the 1920s were no longer viable in the political circumstances of the Cold War, though the clarity of this insight did not lead to a further clarification of what its future role as a group might be. Other groups, from the revolutionary surrealists in 1947–8 to the situationists, tried to refunctio this avant-garde model, and this I think is the significance of Debord’s own visit to the Palais idéal in 1955: the Lettrist International wished to continue the avant-garde project it believed the surrealists had abandoned. In each case, this model depended on a relation to the revolutionary agent of the proletariat, whether or not hope was invested in its self-declared representative the Communist Party. The surrealists themselves retreated from this kind of commitment, without indulging in resignation or political indifference; their history of involvement in political issues and causes in the 1950s and 1960s precludes any analysis of this sort.

Yet after 1947, surrealism was largely eclipsed as a movement of any relevance or concern to postwar artists and writers, at the very moment of its historicization, with the histories and accounts of Maurice Nadeau, Anna Balakian, Georges Lemaître, Michel Carrouges, Yvonne Duplessis and others, and at the moment of canonization of a handful of surrealist artists like Joan Miró, Jean Arp, Max Ernst and René Magritte. As the critic and sometime surrealist Robert Lebel noted in 1953, surrealism was made visible as an artistic and literary phenomenon, that is in conventional terms, at the same time as the surrealist group ceased to exist in the public eye, in spite of its continued existence as a collective entity
that organized exhibitions, published, and was involved in political struggle.\textsuperscript{14} Part of the explanation for this eclipse in the postwar period lies in intellectual fashion, which had moved on to other trends, and part of it lies in a turn by many artists and writers from the collective to the individual (a tendency which was particularly evident among those artists who chose the path of gestural abstraction). It is also true that in renouncing an avant-garde strategy, a strategy which claimed to be in advance of the others in both theory and practice, the surrealists relinquished a field that was taken over by others, who exercised less doubt and more conviction. In this reading, then, the criterion for the relevance of surrealism in the postwar period, the group’s recognition that an avant-garde strategy was played out in new political circumstances, is also, in part, what consigned it to oblivion.

Thus, Brecht and Filliou receive surrealism chiefly in artistic terms, as an historical movement without direct relevance to their own aims. Their influences, in fact, are different. Brecht became an artist largely through the impact of John Cage, whose class on composition he attended in New York in 1958–59, while working as a research chemist for Johnson & Johnson.\textsuperscript{15} As a consequence, his work depends on the Duchampian readymade as reconceived by Cage, and he understands surrealism chiefly through the medium of the 1936 Museum of Modern Art catalogue \textit{Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism}. Brecht refers to this source in a 1957 essay on chance procedures (the MoMA catalogue was one of the few sources on surrealism available in English at that time, but interprets it largely as an artistic movement).\textsuperscript{16} Brecht’s mentor John Cage had a more direct knowledge of surrealism through his friendships with Duchamp, Max Ernst and several of the abstract expressionist painters, but had turned away from the expression of inner necessity in 1950, in favour of a Zen-influenced notion of an outer-directed attention to nature.\textsuperscript{17} Cage, however, is a fundamental source for Brecht and Filliou’s own choice of artistic strategies, including those that bring them close to surrealist values, and we will return to some of those ideas in a moment.

There is no evidence that Filliou made even the cursory study of surrealism that Brecht undertook in the 1950s; he was exposed to Zen and Taoist thought while in Japan and Korea in the early 1950s, at the time he was working as an economist on a reconstruction plan for South Korea following the Korean War, but this was before he decided to opt out of a professional career and become an artist. Living in Paris from 1959, he met Daniel Spoerri by
chance that year, and Spoerri introduced him to the future nouveaux réalistes, as well as to a number of artists who would come to constitute Fluxus in and after 1962. Thus Filliou’s artistic formation, like Brecht’s, was primarily Duchampian and Cagean rather than surrealistic, given both the nouveaux réalistes’ revaluation of Duchamp’s readymade, and Fluxus’ debt to the performative element in Cage’s procedures.

Consequently, both Brecht and Filliou constructed objects with found or readymade materials, which were often performative in orientation and which are reifications of thought or language. Examples are Brecht’s Three Chair Events, shown at the Environments, Situations, Spaces exhibition organized by the Martha Jackson Gallery in 1961, or his Clothes Tree of 1960, both of which return the found or chosen object to its initial use. They each invert Duchamp’s strategy of recontextualization by means of Cage’s acceptance of and attention to the everyday, and call into question the difference between art and everyday objects from another angle than Duchamp had. Two Durations of 1975 is a realization in the form of an Italian flag of an event score from 1961, whose instructions are ‘red’ and ‘green;’ the score is thus realized as an object rather than a performance, though it would be language that brought it into being in either case. (Three Chair Events also exists in the form of a score.)

Filliou’s General Semantics of 1962 is a series of linked plaques correlating words and objects, in a manner not unlike Magritte’s language paintings of the 1920s and 1930s; a series of words are linked to each letter, but the associations of the words or letters to the objects and images collaged onto the plaques are only sometimes evident, and may also suggest less obvious and more poetic affinities. General Semantics is, at the same time, more ‘realist’ (or more ‘nouveau réaliste’) than Magritte’s language paintings or Breton’s poem-objects, in its adaptation of nouveau réaliste procedures to language, which sometimes results in a one-to-one correspondence between word and object, as in the collaging of a die for the word ‘dé,’ or a yoghurt cup for the word ‘yoghurt.’ In each case, however, Brecht and Filliou make it clear that their objects, irregardless of whether they are the product of event scores or are themselves a semantic field, are the result of a process of thought made visible, which can in turn lead to other thoughts and possibilities.

If, in the argument I am making here, one of the criteria of relevance of the postwar surrealist programme was its recognition of the impossibility of an avant-garde strategy it had
helped invent, for Brecht and Filliou too, the organized group was a thing of the past, on several grounds. One of these was a perceived decline of ‘-isms,’ which had once confidently communicated verities through the writing of manifestos, and advanced them strategically through collective action. Filliou noted in 1973 that, just as it was impossible any longer for one person to comprehend the whole of mathematics, it was impossible today to grasp the whole field of contemporary art, and with incomplete knowledge, who could say who was ahead, and who behind? The notion of an avant-garde was thus obsolete. (Note that Filliou equates art with knowledge here, and still retains a notion of art as research, which informs both his and Brecht’s artistic practice.) In his own activity, Filliou replaces the notion of communication with that of dialogue, in for example the central work of his career, the book *Teaching and Learning as Performing Arts* (1970), where pedagogy becomes dialogic and performative, rather than a one-way message from those who know to those who don’t.

Research, in this inverted perspective, becomes an activity of those who don’t know rather than those who do, a general way of conducting one’s life in a spirit of inquiry rather than a field for specialists. This preference for dialogue over communication, for a conspiracy of equals over a hierarchical organization of knowledge, comes directly from Cage, but it also resembles the arguments for poetry as an activity of research, rather than a means of expression, that were made by the surrealists in the 1930s. Such arguments had, however, disappeared by the 1940s, and were thus unavailable to either Brecht or Filliou.

Poetry is as central a category for Cage, Brecht and Filliou as it is for the surrealists, and if this is so, it is because poetry is understood by all parties to be a non-instrumental mode of thought, one capable of offering a viable alternative to a self-interested instrumental reason used to dominate nature and other human beings. In Brecht and Filliou’s idea of research, a poetic mode of thought will be an intuitive means of achieving a knowledge of what one did not know before, though in each case, as in Cage’s own experimental procedure, attention is paid more to the world outside than to the dictating machine of the unconscious. Yet only a non-interfering approach to nature or culture is capable of producing new knowledge, and this principle of non-interference is the basis of the attraction to Zen thought by the surrealists after 1950, for it resembles the principle of attention to the dictates of the unconscious that is the foundation of the method of automatic writing.
Both the former economist Filliou and the former research chemist Brecht hold onto research as a value, but it is now turned to poetic ends. Or perhaps this can be put in another way: once the production of useful knowledge is rejected, the notion of ends or goals is itself refused, in favour of poetic or artistic research as a way of life that is continuous and purposeless, with no end in sight. (The purposelessness of this activity is what situates it within notions of modern artistic activity.\textsuperscript{25}) The rejection of goals is a refutation of the avant-garde project, which is organized to achieve the goal of social transformation. If Cage’s and Filliou’s views and activities can nevertheless be described as utopian (though this is much less true of Brecht, who is uninterested in the social implications of his researches), it is because a new relation to the world, and thus a new way of organizing society, will be achieved through the shift in consciousness that is part and parcel of their experimental method, rather than through any more determinate reorganization of society achieved or sought by a vanguard of those in the know.

This shift away from an avant-garde orientation now believed to be obsolete is partly due to the values held by Cage and Filliou, but it also registers a shift in postwar society described by Branden Joseph, in which the proletariat that had once represented the agent of social change for anarchist and Communist alike, had been integrated into the social structure with the advent of consumer society and the universal extension of credit.\textsuperscript{26} The moment of this integration coincides exactly with the postwar era, the period in which the surrealists lost confidence not just in the Communist Party as the representative of the international working class, but in Marx’s own faith in the inevitability of proletarian revolution and a future classless society. It is at this point that they turn to Fourier and his notions of ‘absolute doubt’ and ‘absolute divergence,’ which were themselves products of a time in the early nineteenth century when the future could only be imagined in fantastic terms, rather than brought into being.\textsuperscript{27} The 1965 surrealist exhibition \textit{L’Écart absolu} (or ‘Absolute Divergence’) is constituted in part as a critique of consumer society, that same false promise of individual happiness through consumption that disintegrated the promise of proletarian revolution on which the avant-garde strategies of the 1920s and 1930s had been based. Absolute doubt and absolute divergence are maintained as principles at a time when the supersession of existing social relations has become extremely difficult to imagine, or can only be imagined. Indeed, the
emphasis on a magic or hermetic art by surrealist artists and writers in the postwar period is a way of countering the market in unchanged social relations (by keeping the public out), as well as situating art on another terrain than that of the marketplace, as ritual. While these notions are not altogether new in surrealist thought, they take on new meaning at a time when one no longer envisages a 'poetry made by all' (which, as a watchword, disappears from surrealist declarations after the 1930s), but seeks a meaningful role for art in a market economy.

The surrealists’ turn to Fourier also involved a critique of labour as a positive value, which had been an object of critique from the very beginnings of the movement, and which frequently got it into trouble with Communist militants. This aspect of Fourier’s thought is central to Filliou’s own approach to art, and this is evident in his research question, ‘How to go from Work as Toil to Work as Play,’ as well as in his 1970 construction *I Hate Work Which is Not Play* (Fig. 2), which incidentally acknowledges and refutes the nature of the art object as commodity, through its resemblance to the crates found at fruit and vegetable stalls, and through its use of poor materials.28
Filliou founds his own Principles of Poetic Economy, which he dedicates to Fourier, on Fourier’s critique of the division of labour, and proposes a new theory of value based on the principles of innocence and imagination, which are opposed to self-interest or the cultivation of individual talent. In two related works from 1969, the Permanent Creation Toolbox and the Permanent Creation Toolshed, innocence and imagination become the tools with which to construct a non-utilitarian worldview through which a society dedicated to work is replaced by a society of play, in which work becomes play. To this end, Filliou writes in Teaching and Learning as Performing Arts: ‘The point is that art and life should become essentially poetical. More specifically, I would define ‘poetic sense’ as the appreciation of leisure; and ‘poetry’ as the creative organization of leisure; and ‘poems’ as enlargements of the area of freedom.’ Poetry is defined here as a non-utilitarian way of life, rather than the production of a literary category, and Filliou is using this understanding of poetry, which he
shares with Cage and the surrealists, to rethink a society based upon the division of labour in terms of leisure, or the refusal of work.

*La Cédille qui sourit*, the shop that Brecht and Filliou established in Villefranche-sur-mer between 1965 and 1968, is a model of work as play, of the creative organization of leisure, at the same time as it is a parody of the market relations of art. The shop sold Fluxus multiples as well as those produced by Daniel Spoerri’s Editions MAT, and whatever else artists cared to make on consignment, but it was only open on request. The artists spent the greater part of their time inventing games and scenarios in the café across the street (including games, as we’ve seen, that bear a remarkable resemblance to surrealist games), which were published by Something Else Press in 1967 as *Games at the Cedilla, or the Cedilla Takes Off*. Games invented in the café, which is an already-existing site of leisure, become the model for leisure as a way of life, without any other end or goal.
After three years of continuous non-activity, La Cédille was liquidated when the artists could no longer afford to pay the rent. They registered this event with the production of a poster, which declared both their bankruptcy, and the establishment of what they called The Eternal Network (Fig. 3). This was translated into French as ‘La Fête permanente,’ a non-equivalent term. While the French term is closely related to the shift from work to play, the English one announces the substitution of the Eternal Network for the concept of the historical avant-garde, which is believed to be obsolete. A much looser network of like-minded artists, based on the model of Fluxus (with which both Brecht and Filliou were associated), is given as a more valid alternative to the tightly-organized avant-garde, which is no longer
sustainable given the dispersal of knowledge and power, and the disarming of the traditional revolutionary agent due to its integration. The cooperation of an international community of artists engaged in non-utilitarian activities is already a social fact, and can provide the basis for a new way of life conceived and practiced as permanent creation, rather than as exploitation. Artistic activity need not be centred in one place, but in a society in which contact between dispersed communities was no longer a problem, and where art was conceived more as research than as the production of objects for a market, it could occur anywhere, and assume the form of a network. If art were reconceived as poetry, which was a form of non-utilitarian research, it could become a way of life, without the necessity for violent revolution. And because Filliou no longer thought in the same political terms that had motivated the historical avant-gardes, he began to research biology as a form of permanent creation, and conceived of the social shift from work to play as a five billion year plan, rather than something practically realizable in his own time. In this sense, his thinking remained utopian; the Eternal Network was a concept taken up and in this way realized by correspondence artists, and by a number of Canadian collectives from General Idea in Toronto to the Western Front in Vancouver, but it was understood to be an alternative that would only become available to society at large with a general shift in consciousness from self-interest to imagination, attention and curiosity.

Art was then, for Brecht and Filliou, a form of research without end, pursued by those who had refused specialization. It is worth noting, in this regard, that Filliou had been the co-author of the UN plan for the reconstruction of South Korea following the Korean War, and that Brecht was the inventor of the tampon for Johnson & Johnson. Each of them turned away from this kind of useful, purposeful work, in 1954 and 1965 respectively, in favour of an intuitive approach to research as a purposeless way of life, without specific goals. Paradoxically – and I use this term ‘paradox’ deliberately, in relation to the function of paradox in Zen Buddhism, and to Brecht’s exploration of the subject in a 1975 book, Vicious Circles and Infinity – there is a coordination of means and ends in Cage’s, Brecht’s or Filliou’s approach to art that is also found in surrealism, but that is absent in that part of twentieth-century art that focuses on art as an end in itself. The means is a poetic mode of engagement with the world through language, the end the bringing into being of a world
without self-interested ends, whether this be through an investigation of unconscious thought, or an attention to the world as it is. It is, in Filliou's words, 'the art of losing oneself without getting lost.'

This essay was first given as a paper at *Surrealism Laid Bare, Even*, the third international symposium on surrealism held at West Dean College in Chichester in May 2003. I thank the organizers for inviting me to speak, and for prompting these reflections.

1 A photograph of Breton at the Palais idéal was included in his *Les Vases communicants* in 1932; see Breton, *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. II, Paris, 1992, 204. Snapshots of Debord's visit to the Palais idéal, which was made in the company of fellow lettrists Michèle Bernstein and Jacques Fillon, can be found in the situationist archive at the Silkeborg Kunstmuseum in Silkeborg, Denmark.


3 Filliou dedicated his play *L'Anniversaire d'une mouette*, written in 1958, to Braun er's memory when it was published in *Aa Revue* (Liège), 25–26, in 1971. (Brauner had died in 1966.) I would like to thank Sharla Sava for bringing Filliou's friendship with Braun er to my attention, and more generally for introducing me to Filliou's work and thought. Incidentally, Filliou does once refer to Ferdinand Cheval, the constructor of the Palais idéal, as a popular artist, but never to my knowledge to surrealism itself. See 'Robert Filliou in Conversation with Allan Kaprow', *Vanguard* (Vancouver), 6: 9, December 1977–January 1978, 20.

4 Filliou uses the term 'poèmes-objets' in a letter to Richard Tialans (18 February 1966), which is reproduced in Tialans' *Aa Revue*, 169-70, 2 December 1987, unpaginated.


7 When asked by Henry Martin in a 1967 interview whether his own procedures were related to surrealist ones, to the extent that they were unpredicated, Brecht replied:

Yes, I suppose you could say that, but I prefer to think that it’s a natural process that takes place. Many of what I accept as natural processes are simply a part of all the things that happen to me and of no special importance – dreams, accidental occurrences, etc. – were, I think, seen differently in surrealism. And I think that surrealist work looks very different from mine. When you see the book that The Something Else Press is bringing out on the *Cédille Qui Sourit*, you’ll see some experiments that Robert Filliou and I have done using the technique of the *cadavre exquis*, but you’ll also see that the spirit is very different from the surrealists’ experiments along the same line,
and I think that the spirit is important. As far as the making of my objects is concerned, it’s not, for example, like an experiment in having a blank mind scribbling or writing on a piece of paper more or less in a state of trance. I’m attentive to what’s happening all the time; I’m aware of the objects that I’m using and of the words that come to mind. I put them together ... carefully ... whatever that means. I think of what I do as the taking place of a natural process, and the objects that I work with come to me in a natural way. Once they’ve been assembled, it gives me the possibility of discovering relationships, meanings, associations.

‘An Interview with George Brecht by Henry Martin’ (1967), in Henry Martin, An Introduction to George Brecht’s Book of the Tumbler on Fire, Milan, 1978, 75. The procedures are similar, which explains in part the explicit reference to surrealist games in Games at the Cedilla. However, the intentions differ, and here intentions are important. Not only do surrealist games presuppose the unconscious as the source of the imagination, and of unpremeditated combinations of imagery such as those found in automatic writing or surrealist objects, but the images produced exercise a critical function in that they are a rupture with the given, which estranges the source materials from their initial function. While both surrealist games and those invented or reinvented by Brecht and Filliou are models for a generalized and non-professional creative activity, which anyone can practice, Brecht and Filliou see theirs as the unfolding of a natural process, rather than a critical and disjunctive one. It is not a question of a rupture with the given, understood as culture, but of an acceptance of the given, understood as nature – just as it is with Brecht’s mentor John Cage. For surrealist players, it is imperative that one’s questions and responses be unpremeditated, for this is the condition of their poetic value. Brecht and Filliou do not depend upon the psychoanalytic model of mental activity, and the questions and responses given in their own versions of surrealist games are arguably weaker than the ones found in the originals, because more conscious – although there are, of course, no objective criteria for this kind of evaluation.

8 For a discussion of the prewar period, see my Surrealist Art and Thought in the 1930s: Art, Politics, and the Psyche, Cambridge, 2004. Breton began reading Fourier seriously in 1945, and a reference to Fourier begins the preface Breton wrote in February 1945 for an exhibition of the work of Arshile Gorky at the Julien Levy’s gallery in New York. It is collected in Breton, Le Surréalisme et la Peinture, Paris, 1965, 199-201. There are numerous other references to Fourier in the 1940s and 1950s, and Breton published his long poem Ode à Charles Fourier in 1947; Fourier’s ideas also provided the conceptual basis for the 1965 surrealist exhibition L’Écart absolu. Zen Buddhism is mentioned in passing in José M. Valverde’s interview with Breton, first published in the Correo Literario (Madrid) in 1950 and reprinted in Breton’s 1952 book of Entretiens (1913-1952), Paris, 1969, 287-92. D.T. Suzuki’s Zen Doctrine of No-Mind, which Breton had just read in translation, is discussed in an open letter to Picabia which served (along with six letters by other writers) as the catalogue text for an exhibition of work by Francis Picabia at the Galerie Colette Allendy in Paris in December 1952. For this text, see Breton, Le Surréalisme et la Peinture, 224-5. Other references to Zen in Breton’s art criticism in the 1950s include ‘L’Épée dans les nuages’, his preface for an exhibition of Jean Degottex’s paintings at L’Étoile scellée in Paris in February 1955 (reprinted in Le Surréalisme et la Peinture, 341-3), and his 1957 preface to an exhibition of paintings by Yahne Le Toumelin in Le Surréalisme et la Peinture, 251-3). An essay by the third-century Taoist scholar, Wang Bi, is included in the Almanach surréaliste du demi-siècle, published as a special issue of La Nef in 1950. This is only the second text in the almanac, immediately following Breton and Péret’s ‘Calendrier Tour du monde des inventions tolérables’.

9 This break was consummated with the publication in August 1935 of the surrealist tract ‘Du temps que les surréalistes avaient raison’, which was extremely critical of the Stalinist régime in the Soviet Union. It was reprinted later that year in Position politique du surréalisme.

In his ‘Projet initial’, the invitation to participants sent out by André Breton and included in the exhibition catalogue, the author described the exhibition as a series of stages in an initiation process, as one passed through various rooms and up a staircase. The journey culminated in a room with twelve altars dedicated to various imaginary beings, and these beings were related, in turn, to the zodiac. The exhibition as a whole, and the altars in particular, were offered as ways to reconceptualize the role of art in contemporary society, and as concrete examples of ways in which to elaborate a new mythology. Breton, ‘Projet initial’, *Le Surréalisme en 1947*, Paris, 1947, 135-8. A brief description and several pages of photos of the exhibition can be found in Gérard Durozoi, *History of the Surrealist Movement* (1997), trans. Alison Anderson, Chicago, 2002, 466-72. A more extensive discussion of the exhibition can be found in Clio Mitchell, ‘Secrets de l’art magique surréaliste’: Magic and the Myth of the Artist-Magician in Surrealist Aesthetic Theory and Practice, Ph.D. thesis, Courtauld Institute of Art, University of London, 1994.


Max Ernst, Jean Arp and Joan Miró won the grand prizes for painting, sculpture and graphic arts, respectively, at the 1954 Venice Biennale, thus signifying the acceptance and recuperation of a few surrealist masters into modern art. Max Ernst, who was still loosely associated with the surrealist group, was expelled in 1955 for accepting the prize, though the other two artists were too far outside of the orbit of surrealism by this time to warrant the same treatment. (On Ernst’s expulsion, see the tract ‘À son gré’ in Pierre, *Tracts surréalistes*, vol. 2, 135-6 and 365-7.) René Magritte began to achieve commercial success after 1950 through his New York dealer Alexandre Iolas, which caused a break with his erstwhile comrades in the Belgian group.


The most comprehensive treatment of Brecht remains Martin’s *An Introduction to George Brecht’s Book of the Tumbler on Fire*, (see note 7).


For a reproduction of this work, see Martin, *An Introduction*, 40. Brecht’s event scores were first produced in a boxed edition by George Maciunas in 1963 as *Water Yam*, and in several versions since.
For a reproduction of this work, see the 1991 Pompidou catalogue Robert Filliou, 146. Each of the 26 panels of Filliou’s assemblage presents five objects in association with five words that begin with one of the letters of the alphabet. Not only is the correspondence of word and object made arbitrary here, as it is in Magritte’s paintings, but with a few exceptions it is unclear which of the five objects on each panel relates to which word. The field of possible relations between words and objects is thus enlarged. This semantic ambiguity stimulates an associative activity of a poetic nature precisely because a one-to-one relation of word to object is impossible to achieve, and this, I take it, is the significance of Filliou’s title: the relation between signifier and signified is released from precise determinations even within a field that remains that of language (as this is signified by the alphabet that is the framing device for the work). Magritte’s illustrative approach, which treats the arbitrary relation of word and image as an ‘object lesson’ such as one would find in a child’s schoolbook, and Filliou’s assemblage, itself constructed to resemble an elementary school lesson, are both explicitly anti-formal strategies derived from Belgian surrealism and nouveau réalisme, respectively, and each is opposed to the professional formalisms of their day. For a good discussion of this work, and of Filliou in general, see Sharla Sava, ‘The Filliou Tapes – from Political to Poetical Economy (caught in the word storm of May)’, Robert Filliou: From Political to Poetical Economy, Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, 1995, 16-49 (the discussion of General Semantics is found on p. 42).

Since writing these pages, it has come to my attention that two of Magritte’s Clef des songes paintings, including the 1927 version in the Staatsgalerie moderner Kunst in Munich and the 1935 version owned by Jasper Johns, also employ a one-to-one correspondence of word and image in the lower right quadrant of the painting—the same location, incidentally, where Filliou places his. Reproductions of the two paintings are found in David Sylvester, ed., René Magritte: Catalogue raisonné, vol. I, Houston / Antwerp, 1992, 239 (cat. 172), and in vol. II, 1993, 199 (cat. 370), respectively.


Fourier defines ‘absolute doubt’ and ‘absolute divergence’ in his Theory of the Four Movements (1808), ed. Gareth Stedman Jones and Ian Patterson, trans. Ian Patterson, Cambridge, 1996, 7-9. (Note that l’écart absolu is rendered as ‘absolute separation’ in this translation.)

This research question is found in ‘The Propositions and Principles of Robert Filliou’ (1977), reprinted in Robert Filliou: From Political to Poetical Economy, 86. This is the transcript of a video, Porta Filiiou, made with Clive Robertson and Marcella Bienvenue at Arton’s in Calgary, Canada.

For reproductions of these works, see The Eternal Network Presents, 164 and 47, respectively.

Filliou, Teaching and Learning as Performing Arts, 23.

The turn to nature is exemplified by his projects ‘Research on Pre-Biology’ of 1973 and ‘Research on the Origin’ of 1974, presented at the Galerie Multhipla in Milan and the
Kunsthalle in Düsseldorf, respectively, and discussed in ‘The Propositions and Principles of Robert Filliou’, 82-5; on the five billion year plan, see ‘Robert Filliou talks about the integration of “dharma” into his work as an artist’ (a 1982 interview with Louwrienn Wijers), in The Eternal Network Presents, 194.

Filliou was in Canada in July 1973, October–November 1977, September–November 1979, and November–December 1980, working at the artist-run centres Art Metropole (Toronto), the Western Front (Vancouver), Arton’s (Calgary), and Véhicule (Montreal). The impact of Filliou’s visits to Canada is indicated by the titles of Eternal Network: A Mail Art Anthology, ed. Chuck Welch, Calgary, 1995, and Whispered Art History: Twenty Years at the Western Front, ed. Keith Wallace, Vancouver, 1993. (‘Whispered Art History’ is a title of a poem Filliou recorded in 1963, which was reprinted in Teaching and Learning, 59-64.)

Patrick Hughes and George Brecht, Vicious Circles and Infinity: A Panoply of Paradoxes, Garden City, NY, 1975.

Filliou, Teaching and Learning, 24.

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Surrealism in the Plural: Guillaume Apollinaire, Ivan Goll and Devětsil in the 1920s

Matthew S. Witkovsky

Abstract
Through a series of examples from the Czech avant-garde group Devětsil, this essay aims to recapture the meanings that surrealism held in the 1920s for artists well acquainted with the official surrealist movement, yet operating at a distance from its Parisian headquarters. For Jindřich Honzl, director of the Devětsil drama wing, surrealism could animate ordinary objects and make them co-actors onstage, as proposed in Guillaume Apollinaire’s play *The Breasts of Tiresias*, subtitled a ‘surrealist drama.’ The makers of Devĕtsil’s ‘picture poems,’ a genre of photocollage, found their inspiration in Apollinaire’s admirer Ivan Goll, director of the short-lived periodical *Surréalisme* (1924) and one-time rival of André Breton. Indeed, Goll’s understanding of surrealism as cinematic, lyrical poetry with a political edge guided Devĕtsil members throughout their formative years (1922-1926). Photographer Jaromír Funke, meanwhile, understood surrealism as a kind of abstract, post-cubist visual art, epitomized for him (and for Devĕtsil leader Karel Teige) in the photograms of Man Ray. Funke’s ‘Abstract Photo’ series of 1927-29, conceived as a polemic with the Rayograms, elaborates new possibilities for the camera and for post-cubist art rooted in an idea of surrealism—one of several, as it turns out, that were in circulation during the 1920s, before an orthodox definition and a single, official chronology had yet been formulated for the movement.

Discussions of surrealism have long been guided by definitions and chronologies. One of the French group’s most memorable projects, for example, was the *Dictionnaire abrégé du surréalisme* (Concise dictionary of surrealism), published in 1938. Histories and memoirs of the movement, meanwhile, tend to be sectioned into developmental stages (1919-24, 1924-29, 1929-34) that curiously resemble five-year plans. The impulse to define and chronologise was there from the beginning, at least if one begins with André Breton. Breton wrote the movement’s founding manifesto, in 1924, as if it were an entry in the *Encyclopédie Larousse*, providing an etymology of the word ‘surrealism’ and a history of its usage in French literature from Jacques Villon and Jean Racine to the co-signatories of his manifesto. Indeed, the list of these latter names (Louis Aragon, Paul Éluard and others) figured within a mock dictionary definition: ‘Surrealism, noun, masc. ... pure psychic automatism by means of which one proposes to express, either verbally or in writing, or by any other means, the real functioning of thought. ... *Philos*. Surrealism rests on the belief in a higher reality ... in the omnipotence of dreams, in the disinterested play of thought.’

The understanding of surrealism as a definition linked to a timeline has given this movement a level of coherence unusual among the -isms of the historical avant-garde. For
several decades, surrealism’s common denominator was sought for in formal themes and elements of style. Since the early 1980s, ambitious writing on the movement has proposed unifying models that are grounded, like Breton’s foundational definition, in the realm of pure thought: semiotics, for example, or the Freudian concept of the uncanny. Czech surrealist work, the work that came out of the Devětsil group and the influence of Vítězslav Nezval, Jindřich Honzl, Teige and others in the 1930s, has figured marginally in international scholarship on this movement. The task facing historians today who are interested in Czech surrealism is, I believe, not just to find a place for the Czechs within Francocentric definitions and chronologies. It is more fundamentally to determine what Devětsilers and other Czechs themselves understood surrealism to be, and when they understood it.

This essay serves as an initial foray into that question. It is intended to suggest that the answer involves recasting surrealism as a movement that had not one but several productive definitions, at least in the 1920s, and that it advanced variously, along a timeline in which the year 1924 is not the equivalent of 1 A.D. Certainly, I believe that the members of Devětsil were ultimately eager to accept the Bretonian calendar, once they had aligned it with their own history of poetism. At issue for me here are acceptations of surrealism during what has come to be regarded, I think unfortunately, as the ‘prehistory’ of Czech surrealism, those years in the 1920s when the word circulated among Czech artists and writers without a dictionary definition attached to it.

Honours for the first conscious use of the term ‘surrealism’ go to Guillaume Apollinaire, who subtitled his 1917 play Les Mamelles de Tirésias (The Breasts of Tiresias) a ‘surrealist drama.’ The sense of that term, as Apollinaire developed it in the play, is a creative disruption of meaning whereby the ordinary connotation of words, objects and situations shifts onto the plane of the fantastic: in the first scene, for instance, a character picks up a bedpan and calls it a piano. To give another example, the play’s action takes place in front of a single stage setting, which we are told is in Paris and Zanzibar simultaneously, and at one point comes near the American state of Connecticut. Devětsil theater director Jindřich Honzl was extremely impressed with Apollinaire’s script. He studied it closely in 1924, transcribing most of the preface into his diary, and seems to have proposed staging it at the National Theatre that year. Honzl was particularly struck by Apollinaire’s lapidary explanation of his own
neologism: ‘When man wanted to imitate walking, he invented the wheel, which does not resemble a leg. In this way, he made surrealism without knowing it.’¹

In Honzl’s book-length manifesto on the theatre, Roztočené jeviště (The Spinning Stage, 1925) he paid tribute to Apollinaire’s notion of surrealism, but he modified it as well. ‘Just as the wheels of a motor car are not analogous to human legs (Apollinaire), theatre construction is analogous neither to a forest nor to a rococo salon. It is a work created by a human being,’ Honzl wrote.² Surrealism in Honzl’s view meant abandoning naturalistic imitation, as it did for Apollinaire, and both men wanted the stage to address modern life. Honzl’s approach, however, was to celebrate modern life as theatre. Where Apollinaire simply contrasted the human leg with a wheel, Honzl introduced ‘the wheels of a motor car.’ The automobile was a prop, an object that helped theatricalise daily life with its speed, its novelty, and its encouragement of fantasy (fig.1).

Fig. 1: Jindřich Honzl, Roztočené jeviště (The Spinning Stage). Prague: Odeon, 1925. Cover design by Jindřich Štyrský and Toyen (Marie Čermínová). Private Collection
Honzl produced *The Breasts of Tiresias* in 1926, during the first full season of the Devětsil theatre section, ‘Osvobozené Divadlo’ (‘The Liberated Theatre’). He greatly multiplied the number of props called for in the text, using everything from pistols and balloons to bedpans and photographs of Niagara Falls, and through their sheer excess these props took on the character of participants in the drama, becoming additions to the human cast. In the opening scene, where Thérèse becomes Tiresias, she loses her breasts with the cry: ‘fly away, birds of my weakness.’ A design for a half-human newsstand by Otakar Mrkvička, meanwhile, gave a consummate example of daily objects, in this case newspapers, brought to life in the theatre (fig. 2).

Fig. 2: Otakar Mrkvička, design for ‘Kiosk’ character in Guillaume Apollinaire, *Prsy Tiresiovy/Les mamelles de Tirésias*, Liberated Theatre, Prague, 1926 (from Věra Ptáčková, *Česká scénografie XX*. Století, Prague, 1982)
Honzl embraced orthodox surrealism around 1930, but it is important to see that he spent years working through his own version of the term, adapted from the example set by Apollinaire. The use of props, that is, inanimate objects, as co-actors, for example, was common to Honzl’s productions at ‘The Liberated Theatre.’ Honzl’s version of surrealism also served to express class struggle; in his staging of Methusalem by Ivan Goll, in 1927, for example, a crowd of rioting workers emerges in the final confrontation from behind an assortment of living room furniture, to suggest that the proletariat has liberated itself from the objects it normally labours to produce. This suggestion was in the play itself, which Goll wrote in 1922 under the title Methusalem or the Eternal Bourgeois (Methusalem oder der ewige Bürger), with costume illustrations by George Grosz.\(^3\) (Mrkvička reworked Grosz’s ideas for the Czech production.)

Ivan Goll was a terrific admirer of Apollinaire, and he particularly championed Apollinaire’s idea of surrealism. In fact, I would venture that it was Goll who brought surrealism as a phenomenon to the attention of Devětsil. In a eulogy to Apollinaire, written just after the poet’s death in 1918, Goll expressed his own understanding of surrealism as a literary model: ‘Guillaume, you gave the fact, proven through centuries of poetry - that the deepest melody pours out of the smallest daily experience - theoretical meaning and also the baptismal name: “surréalisme,” which has nothing in common with realistic naturalism.’\(^4\) As a definition, this was vague, but as an impetus to creativity it proved fertile, first for Goll and then for the Devětsilers. Goll’s witty and politically incisive poem, ‘The Chaplinade’ (‘Die Chaplinade’) of 1920, which describes a cinematic odyssey for Charlie Chaplin, likely inspired Vítězslav Nezval’s short film script ‘Charlie in Court’ (‘Charlie před soudem’), in 1922.\(^5\) Goll also wrote a pair of short plays in 1920 called The Immortals (Die Unsterblichen), which he subtitled ‘Überdramen’ or ‘sur-drames,’ again in homage to Apollinaire. Devětsil affiliate Jiří Frejka staged the first of the plays in 1925, and it was featured in the ‘Liberated Theatre’ repertoire one year later. Meanwhile, Honzl considered Methusalem one of his most important plays, in terms of its staging and its political message.

Goll’s first influence on Devětsil creations was not in theatre but in poetry and collage. Karel Teige first noticed Goll thanks to his poem ‘Paris is Burning’ (‘Paris brennt’), which appeared in October 1921 with the Belgrade journal Zenit. Although this precedent has never
been explored, it seems undeniable that the layout and style of ‘Paris is Burning’ had a direct effect on the development of the Devětsil picture poem (‘obrazová básně’). Alongside his verses, Goll reproduced postcards of popular attractions in Paris - the Eiffel Tower, the great ferris wheel, the Bal Tabarin music hall - as well as photographs of athletic competitions and a joyous Victory Celebration (Fête de la victoire) (fig. 3).  

Fig. 3: Ivan Goll, Paris Brennt (Paris is Burning), Belgrade, 1921 (from Johannes Ullmaier, Yvan Golls Gedicht ‘Paris Brennt’, Tübingen, 1995)
‘Paris is Burning’ is Apollinaire electrified; it is, to mate Apollinaire with his Czech followers, Zone (translated into Czech as Pásma) on wheels. In the very first lines, Paris is compared to a ‘Scarlet ship’; angels fly around the belfry of St. Sulpice Church in ‘invisible lifts’; ‘Apocalyptic freight trains / Slowly enter rainy stations / Bringing the golden oranges of sunrise / They are loaded onto the first buses / Headed for Châtelet.’ After steering us around Paris by ship, elevator and bus, Goll takes off on a round-the-world voyage that moves at the quickly edited pace of a cinema newsreel. In a stream of telegraphic, montaged observations, we get flashes from America (‘Three million dead arisen / Over New York’), from Madagascar and Gibraltar, and of course the racier sights and sounds of the French capital: ‘The pensioner’s whores / Dancing the tango to every two-franc song.’

Within weeks of its publication in Belgrade, the poem ‘Paris is Burning’ appeared in Czech translation in Červen, the first organ for Devětsil views, along with a lengthy editorial that stressed the imagistic quality and many postcard reproductions in Goll’s original layout. In July 1922, Teige and Seifert met Goll during a nearly month-long stay in Paris, and the contact between them strengthened. Fernand Léger’s illustrations for The Chaplinade appeared that fall in Devětsil Revolutionary (the anthology Revoluční sborník Devětsil) and a plan was announced in Devětsil’s second collection, Life (Život) to translate The Chaplinade in its entirety for a future ‘Devětsil book series.’ Goll was also named ‘Paris correspondent’ for the Devětsil journal Disk. Anyone familiar with the poetry and artwork of early Devětsil will recognize affinities with his text. The seeds of Nezval’s Message on Wheels (Depeše na kolečkách) are here, for example, as well as the fast-paced saga of his The Wondrous Magician (Podivuhodný kouzelník) which fellow poet Josef Hora called ‘something between a cabaret and a fairy tale.’

The Devětsil picture poems produced from 1923-26 seem especially close to ‘Paris is Burning’ in their themes and their composition. The mix of postcard images and slogan-like phrases, the celebration of exotic travel, dancing, sports, and fairground attractions - all of this appears in the picture poems with the same high-keyed lyricism as in the poem by Goll. Teige’s Travel Greetings (Pozdrav z cesty), from 1924, provides a filmic, montage-like experience of modern travel, for instance. Souvenir, by Jindřich Štyrský, from a year earlier,
navigates the same territory as Teige - both geographical and conceptual - but in a more disorienting way (fig. 4). An X marks the spot of my summer vacation on the Riviera, Štýrský indicates, and it also marks the girl I met unexpectedly on that vacation, as she posed coquettishly with her girlfriends on the beach. Each of the young bathers in this collage displays a strange patch, prominently, over some part of her body, with words that cannot be deciphered -- an unsettling detail. The collaged elements of aquatic and arboreal life, meanwhile, seem far from their native habitat, particularly the X-ray-like silhouette of a moonfish ('poisson lune') at bottom. One associates these elements of chance love, fragmentary remembrances, and poetic names for strange creatures (a moon underwater!) with André Breton’s notion of the marvellous. Like Honzl, Štýrský developed an increasingly strong orientation toward orthodox surrealism, and he showed in the 1930s a profound understanding of the aims and interests predominant in the French movement. But we should not forget that the imagery and themes of this and other picture poems of the mid-1920s also resonate with Goll and his adaptation of Apollinaire, which Goll proudly called surrealism as well.
One of the earliest mentions of the word ‘surrealism’ in Czech writing is in Karel Teige’s essay ‘Foto kino film,’ published probably in the spring of 1923, in the Devětsil anthology Life. Teige introduced Man Ray to a Czech audience with this important essay, in which he claimed that certain forms of photography held the key to an autonomous, revolutionary art practice. Writing about Man Ray’s recently published portfolio Delicious Fields (Champs délicieux), Teige claimed admiringly, ‘Photography acquires here its own, self-determining, autonomous speech…Photography can never leave reality, not even here, but it can become surrealistic (‘nadrealistická’). Surréalisme is the quality possessed by Man Ray’s photographs. It is the quality of modern painting. And thus Man Ray is the brother of Juan Gris.’

Man Ray did of course become a leading member of the French surrealist movement after 1924. At the time that Teige first championed his work, however, Man Ray was associated entirely with Dada, and Teige was one of the first, perhaps the very first, to call his work surrealist. This does not mean that Teige fits precociously into the chronology of
orthodox surrealism. On the contrary, with Teige, the term ‘surrealism’ gains yet another unorthodox valence. In contrast to Breton’s initial emphasis, and to the explanations of Apollinaire by Goll, Teige associated surrealism not with literature but with the visual arts. Surrealism, as he described it, was an agency of equivalence between photography and painting, and Teige implied that it was also a means to loosen visual signs from the objects to which they conventionally referred. His definition is expansive, like those of Honzl, Goll or Apollinaire. Surrealism seems to mean ‘reality set free,’ where reality, to judge by the examples of Man Ray and Juan Gris, signifies the world of daily experience and banal objects: cafés and playing cards, lampshades and drinking glasses.

Teige’s 1923 article was read with enormous interest by Jaromír Funke, a young and ambitious amateur photographer. Funke was evidently impressed by Teige’s description of Man Ray and the possibilities for surrealism in photography, and he returned more than once to this article in his own writing over the next several years. Funke differed from Teige, however, in his estimation of the photogram, that is, a photograph made by laying objects directly on photosensitive paper and exposing them to light. Eliminating the camera and the photographic negative, for Funke, meant abandoning the creative basis of photography, which he argued should always be rooted in the record of a pre-existing visual reality. Funke articulated this position precisely around the issue of surrealism. He disagreed that surrealism could apply equally in painting and photography, and stated as much in a 1927 article devoted to Man Ray. Answering Teige’s claims four years later, Funke wrote: ‘It is said that photography cannot abandon reality (which is correct), but that it can become surrealistic, or put more sharply, abstract (which is incorrect). This surrealism is a quality of modern art, but it cannot be a quality of photography, and Man Ray cannot compete with post-cubist painting.’

Surrealism for Funke thus signalled abstraction, yet a further shift in meaning for this term in Czech circles. Funke claimed to oppose this notion of surrealism or abstraction, but he was clearly impressed by Man Ray’s work. The very title of his series Abstract Photo (Abstraktní foto) of 1927-29, which completed half a decade of systematic experimentation prompted by Teige’s article, suggests the force of his competitive ambition regarding surrealism as he understood it. For these works, Funke took household objects, such as an eggbeater, or photographic supplies like glass negatives and mat board, and arranged them...
in the light of a bedroom window. Using the camera, which in his estimation constituted the basis of all ‘true’ photography, Funke then photographed the cast shadows as reflected still lives (fig. 5).

![Fig. 5: Jaromír Funke, *Abstract Photo*, 1927-29, gelatin silver print, 40 x 28cm, Museum of Decorative Arts, Prague (reproduction courtesy M. Rupešová, Prague)](image)

The resulting works follow Teige’s insight: they create a connection between experimental photography and cubist painting or, better yet, cubist collage. There is a game in cubist collage between real surfaces and planar representations of surface - an actual piece of wallpaper, for example, set next to an imitation of wallpaper in paint - and Funke transposed this game to the realm of shadow and light. The shadows are the subject of these still lives, and all shadows are cast by objects, but looking at the photographs, one has trouble deciding to what objects these shadows refer; more intriguingly still, there is a confusing equivalence between cast shadows and their imitations, constructed within the two-
dimensional plane of the still life. In one example, two triangular shadows balance each other in a symmetrical relation, one near the upper left, the other toward the lower right of the picture (fig. 6). The left-hand triangle is defined by the meeting points of three shapes of light, and it appears clearly to be an actual shadow. By contrast, the triangle at right breaks that plane of light and shadow; it is not a cast shadow but a hole, if you like, formed by the intersection of three pieces of paper. This juxtaposition of ‘real’ and ‘imitation’ shadows provides an eloquent thesis on representation, questioning the very nature of shadows, and by extension the process of photography as a means to depict the objects that cast them.

![Image](image_url)

Fig. 6: Jaromír Funke, *Abstract Photo. Composition*, 1927-29, gelatin silver print, 40 x 29.8cm, Moravian Gallery, Brno (reproduction courtesy M. Rupešová, Prague)

Funke’s innovative body of work certainly may be understood in terms of a surrealist dialectic between reality and a psychic imaginary. His preoccupation with cast shadows has many precedents in the avant-garde art of the period, most famously in the works of Giorgio de Chirico, Marcel Duchamp and, once again, Man Ray, and surrealists in particular returned obsessively to this theme.¹¹ Because Funke polemicised with the term surrealism, however, scholars of Czech photography usually make a point of distinguishing his work from the
movement as it developed in France or Czechoslovakia. At the same time, the Abstract Photo series frequently figures as a precursor to what are called the official beginnings of Czech surrealism around 1930. To oppose Funke to orthodox surrealism is misplaced, while to see in him a harbinger of Czech surrealism is limiting. Both positions fail to deal with Funke’s polemic, namely, the particular view he held of surrealism (borrowed from Teige) and his struggle to relate it to advanced painting on his own terms. Funke may have misunderstood surrealism, according to dictionary definitions of the term - but again, it seems unhelpful to keep referring to the dictionary. Instead, one should take account of the fact that, beginning in 1923-24, Funke was moved to define the parameters of photographic creation on the basis of an encounter with surrealism, in one of its many Czech acceptations.

To focus, in conclusion, on that fateful year of 1924: Goll and Breton clashed openly, at one point literally coming to blows over the rights to use their favourite word. In the end, Breton won the battle through tactical and numerical superiority. He effaced Goll entirely from his etymological account in the First Surrealist Manifesto, and disparaged Apollinaire as a writer who ‘only had the letter of surrealism, not yet perfected…’ but never possessed the spirit of the word. In the skirmishes that preceded this triumph, Breton’s group published a collective declaration to warn the press that they opposed ‘the literary wave imagined by Monsieur Goll.’ Charges followed from the enemy camp that Breton was a myopic, ‘fidgety little person,’ and then counter-charges that Goll and his associates amounted to ‘phonies and nitwits.’ In the lone issue of his quixotic journal Surréalisme, Goll published his own manifesto to attack the one by Breton: ‘And this falsification of surrealism that some ex-dadas have invented to bluff the bourgeoisie will disappear once more [...] Their “psychic mechanism based on dreams and the indifferent play of thought” will never have the strength to destroy our physical organism, which teaches us that reality is always right, and that life is more real than thought.’

Goll lost the battle, and not just because he lacked Breton’s erudition or force of character. Goll was sporadic and eclectic in his judgments, too accepting of variant ideas and personalities; Le Corbusier, George Grosz, Erik Satie were all on equal terms with him. He came from a region of multiple ethnicities, he was Jewish, he looked equally toward French and German youth culture, he was a socialist with a love of Charlie Chaplin and lyrical poetry.
His greatest aspiration was to be modern and international. Really, Ivan Goll could just as easily have been Czech.

This essay was first delivered as a paper at a conference on Czech surrealism organized by the Slavic Department of the Universität Potsdam in March 2003. I would like to thank the organizers of that conference, Prof. Herta Schmid and Dr. Birgit Krehl, for their invitation to participate, as well as the audience who responded generously at this reading. My appreciation goes as well to Dr. Donna Roberts and the staff of the AHRB, whose breadth of vision in surrealism matches and exceeds that of the movement’s founding members. As always, Janine Mileaf is to be commended for expert and excellent commentary on the manuscript. Translations are my own except where noted.

1 Guillaume Apollinaire, Les mamelles de Tirésias (1917); reprinted in Apollinaire, L’enchanteur pourrissant, suivi de Les mamelles de Tirésias et de Couleur du temps, Paris, 1957, 94. Honzl’s diaries are held in the Honzl family archive, Prague.
2 Jindřich Honzl, Roztočené jeviště, Prague, 1925, 100.
3 Methusalem oder der ewige Bürger, Potsdam, 1922; reprinted Berlin, 1966.
6 Thanks to Jindřich Toman for discussing this point with me.
8 Josef Hora, ‘V. Nezvalova Pantomima,’ Rudé právo (26 October 1924), 3.
9 K. Teige, ‘Foto Kino Film,’ Život, Prague, 1922 [1923], 74.
14 Goll, ‘Manifeste du surréalisme,’ Surréalisme 1 (October 1924); reprinted in German in Dichtungen, 186-187.

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Ballad of Fantomas

By Robert Desnos

Translated by Timothy Adès

Your attention, please! Pray silence
For the sad and sorry story,
All the grievous inventory,
Nameless acts of harm and violence,
Every one scot-free, alas!
Of the felon Fantomas.

First, his mistress, Lady Beltham,
Saw the day her husband caught them
Making flagrant love together:
On the spot the felon killed him.
Next he sank the good ship Leopard,
Sabotaged, submerged, and scuppered.

He commits his hundredth murder.
Juve and his assistant Fandor
Think to see this libertine
Punished by the guillotine.
But an actor’s crayoned face
Fills the basket in his place.

Lighthouse shattered, just like glass.
Storm-tossed, luckless ships go down
To the lowest depths, and drown.
Four heads bobbing on the tide:
Lady Beltham, golden-eyed,
Fandor, Juve, and Fantomas.

Yet the monster’s pretty daughter,
Helen, had a noble nature:
She was sweet, not taking after
Her appalling family,
For she rescued poor young Fandor,
Who had been condemned to die.

In the railway baggage-lockers
There’s a gory parcel, bleeding.
They’ve detained some gangster cove.
What has happened to the carcass?
Why, the stiff’s alive and breathing!
It is Fantomas, by Jove!

Bottled up inside a bell
Tolling for a funeral,
Death rubbed out his Number Two.
Blood cascaded from the skull,
Sapphires, diamonds as well,
On the gathering below.
Paris, one fine day in spring:
Suddenly, the fountains sing!
People listen in surprise.
Little do they realise
That the siren melodies
Cage a weeping captive king.

Vital military clues:
Secrets, destined for the Tsar.
Smartly turning similar,
Fantomas receives the news,
Personates the autocrat.
Juve arrests him, just like that.

He got La Toulouche to kill
An Englishman with monstrous bites.
She was a hag, a foul-eyed beast!
There was blood, he drank his fill,
Stashed his looted perquisites
In the guts of the deceased.

You recall that huge fracas -
Raiders took a motor-bus,
Rammed the bank, whose vaults they cleared,
Rifling safe and automat:
Terrible – I’m sure you heard…
He was at the back of that.

Epidemic of bubonic
Plague attacks an oceanic
Liner, caught far out at sea.
Horrid sights, what lunacy!
Agonies and deaths, alas!
Who’s the culprit? Fantomas.

Killed: one cabman plying for hire,
Knotted neatly to his post:
Going like a house on fire!
Let the inmates curse and swear:
They cannot dispute the fare,
Driven by a lifeless ghost.

Be afraid of jet-black roses.
They exhale a languid breath,
Murky vapours, dismal gases,
Enervating, dealing death.
Lamentably, one more time,
Fantomas commits the crime!

Next he killed the aged mother
Of Fandor, the valiant sleuth.
Fate miscarried altogether,
Sorrow has a bitter tooth…
Sure, he had no heart at all,
This notorious criminal!
Golden-domed, the Invalides
Was despoiled by nightly theft.
Fantomas devised the deed,
Carried out the greedy crime.
Having such a mental gift,
What a way to use one's time!

He assailed – what insolence!
The Queen of the Netherlands.
Gallant Juve was quick to bang
Up the rogue, with all his gang.
Even so, in the event,
He evaded punishment.

Just in case his dabs betrayed,
Fantomas had gloves, well-made
From a bleeding trophy's skin,
Hands of one he’d just done in:
And the dead man was arraigned
By the thumb-prints they obtained.

On the waters of the Seine
There’s a phantom takes a walk.
Juve’s enquiries are in vain.
Scaring spooks and older folk,
Fantomas is making tracks,
After one of his attacks.

Scotland Yard: the CID
Could not solve the mystery,
Till an overdue arrest
Saw him hanged and laid to rest.
Guess what happened. Need I say?
Still the ruffian got away.

Up across the Eiffel Tower
In the eerie midnight hour
Juve pursues the criminal,
Trails the shadow. All in vain:
With fantastic strength and skill
Fantomas escapes again.

Monte Carlo. Rouge, pair, passe.
Armoured gunboat mounting guard.
Captain with gigantic loss
Gives the order to bombard.
Who’s this captain mounting guard?
Clearly, it was Fantomas.

Out at sea a vessel founders.
Fantomas had been on board.
So were Helen, Juve and Fandor
And too many to record.
Since no bodies have been found,
No-one knows if they were drowned.
At the deeds of Fantomas
And his gang from Montparnasse,
(Pretty Boy Sarcophagus,
Bill the Beadle, Sniff the Gas),
Paris, Rome and London shook.
Were they ever brought to book?

For yourselves I wrote this song,
For the world, for everyone.
Everyone is tremulous
At the name of Fantomas.
May each one of you live long:
That’s my wish, and I am gone.

Finale

Spreading like a mighty pall
Over Paris, over all,
Who’s the ghost with sombre eyes,
Silently observed to rise?
Fantomas – a wild surmise:
Is that you, against the skies?

From Fortunes, 1942. © Editions Gallimard. A radio version by Desnos had been broadcast in 1933, in a ‘superproduction.’ All the stanzas were recited, many being amplified by sketches with several actors and elaborate sound-effects. Music was by Kurt Weill; radio production by Paul Deharme; Antonin Artaud directed, and took the title role. The original Fântomas books were by Pierre Souvestre and Marcel Allain, the silent films by Feuillade.

In Surrealism, the fire of art and the ice of science have met, and from the synthesis mankind has been endowed with a powerful new weapon for its combat against darkness and evil (James Gleeson).¹

In June 1939, James Gleeson exhibited The Attitude of Lightning towards a Lady-Mountain (fig. 1) at the Contemporary Art Society’s inaugural show in Melbourne, a Dalí-influenced painting that proved the exhibition’s succès de scandale. The CAS exhibition, at the prestigious venue of the National Gallery of Victoria, was an ideal showcase for Australia’s ambitious young modernists. Shortly before the Herald Exhibition of French and British Painting delivered European modernism’s full impact to an Australian audience for the first time, Gleeson appeared as surrealism’s advance guard.² Without the advantage of seeing surrealist painting firsthand, Gleeson nonetheless became Australian surrealism’s most eloquent spokesman and devoted partisan, declaring: ‘I was born a Surrealist.’³
Surrealism was a highly visible movement in Australia where its agenda – provocative, political, self-consciously modern and determinedly international – found fertile ground. While there was no Australian ‘surrealist circle,’ a wide range of artists including Sidney Nolan, Joy Hester, Albert Tucker, John Perceval, Arthur Boyd, Russell Drysdale and Peter Purves Smith all felt its lure and responded, often briefly, but in ways that were vital and deeply-felt. These artists, and many lesser known ones, are included in a remarkable private collection of over two hundred works whose intention is to survey the largely uncharted phenomenon of Australian surrealism. Sydney collectors James Agapitos and Ray Wilson commissioned critic Bruce James to assist them in their quest to buy exclusively surrealist art, and to document the collection in a book. A selection of the works comprise the current touring exhibition, *Australian Surrealism*. For the first time, the startling breadth and depth of Australian surrealism can be viewed as a movement in its own right.
The Attitude of Lightning towards a Lady-Mountain was the first surrealist work Agapitos and Wilson acquired at a Christie’s Australia auction in 1990. Gleeson’s painting, a crucial work in Australian surrealism’s history, garnered critical and popular attention during the CAS exhibition in 1939. It was reproduced in the Herald and the Sun, accompanied in the latter by Gleeson’s words: ‘the artist shuts his eyes to reality and paints creations of his subconscious mind.’ An ‘inquiring lady’ wrote to the Herald advising Gleeson to take ‘his picture to a psychiatrist.’ Writing in Art in Australia, Gino Nibbi sounded a circumspect note. Nibbi’s anti-fascist sentiments had made him quit Italy and settle in Melbourne where his Leonardo bookshop, with its splendid array of books, journals, records and modern art prints, became a focus. In Rome, Nibbi had been friendly with Giorgio de Chirico. A sophisticated commentator on cultural issues, Nibbi was concerned that Gleeson ‘appeared to follow, perhaps too closely, the vision ... of Salvador Dalí.’

Issues of influence and originality have always bedeviled non-indigenous Australian art. Until the late nineteenth century, the images of Australia recorded in landscape painting were dependent on European vision, and the Australian wilderness appeared as manicured as an English park. Post-impressionism’s reception in Australia was slow: it was not until 1913 that a group of Sydney art students created works influenced by Paul Cézanne, Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso. Public collections in Australia were singularly dull and conservative, masterminded by reactionaries and devoid of modern art. Dependent on secondary sources, artists left Australia in order to challenge and educate themselves.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, Australia came late to surrealism. Art and debate had emerged by 1932, the year that Sam Atyeo painted Surrealist Head (now lost). The following year Alleyne Zander, publicity officer for the Royal Academy in London, commented that ‘the younger generation of Australians appears to be interested in such abstract ideas as the principles of surrealism.’ The 1936 International Surrealist exhibition in London resounded in Australia and was reported in major newspapers. It displayed the talents of the French surrealist circle – Max Ernst, Salvador Dalí, Yves Tanguy, Joan Miró and André Masson – and to prove its global credentials, a total of fourteen nations were represented. No
Australians were among the artists included, however. Peter Purves Smith visited the International Surrealist exhibition and its impact shaped his oeuvre. *Woman Eating Duck* (1948, fig. 2), with its biomorphic distortions and vertiginous space, explores the formal exaggerations, wit and wonderful strangeness of the surrealist vocabulary. But Purves Smith was in the minority: most artists in the Agapitos/Wilson collection had to make do with haunting the Leonardo bookshop, or other local venues, for their surrealist awakenings.

![Woman Eating Duck](image)

*Fig. 2. Peter Purves Smith, *Woman Eating Duck*, 1948, gouache on paper, 45.7 x 61 cm, Agapitos/Wilson Collection*

Sidney Nolan, the only Australian artist who has had a significant career in England, fashioned a deliciously original response to surrealism. Though surrealism was a brief affair for Nolan, as it was for other major Australian artists like Hester, Boyd and Perceval, its humour and powerful visual dissonances shaped the imagery of his early work. *Girl with a Curly Line* (c. 1945, fig. 3) may take as a reference Picasso’s beach goddesses of the late 1920s, but it is Nolan’s own childhood at St Kilda beach that gives the painting its idiosyncratic charm. Nolan, an expert in creating lyrical, *faux-naïf* figures, uses Surrealism’s doodling automatic calligraphy to make the figure dance with a mad, playful energy. St Kilda beach, especially during the war years, was Melbourne’s favourite playground, a place for sun worshipping and socialising. Nolan combines the authenticity of autobiography with the
language of European modernism to produce an image that is both surreal and Australian. Making a canny connection, the Agapitos/Wilson collection also includes several of Nolan’s highly regarded drought paintings from the early 1950s, linking the dessicated forms of dead cattle to Nolan’s earlier surrealist essays.

Fig.3. Sidney Nolan, *Girl with a Curly Line*, c. 1945, oil and enamel paint on board, 61 x 91.5 cm, Agapitos/Wilson Collection

Bruce James, in his thorough account, believes ‘it was Melbourne that Surrealism chose as its Australian nerve centre.’ A preponderance of surrealists was grouped there, though Adelaide, with Ivor Francis, Dora Chapman and Jeffrey Smart, was also well represented. Max Harris, publisher and surrealist poet, should also be mentioned as an important member of the Adelaide *milieu*. But Melbourne, with its complex and often virulent art politics, combined with the intense, sexual imagery and tenor of tortured Expressionism chosen by several of its key painters, made it surrealism’s most fecund arena. To locate surrealism’s energy even more specifically, it was at the home of art patrons Sunday and John Reed, where the group – Nolan, Tucker, Hester, Boyd and Perceval – met as regular guests. Nolan created his first *Ned Kelly* series (1946–47) on the Reeds’ dining room table. Today the Reeds’ home and collection has become a public gallery, the Heide Museum of Modern Art, where *Australian Surrealism* was recently shown. In 1934, the Reeds bought a property in the lush Yarra Valley, some distance from Melbourne, and opened their doors to young
modernists. Named Heide after the suburb of Heidelberg, it became Australia’s Bloomsbury. Not only did the Reeds encourage, collect and financially support the artists mentioned above, they began a publishing house with Max Harris and jointly edited, again with Harris, a stylish art journal with the appropriately surrealist title of *Angry Penguins*. Published in its pages were Herbert Read, his follower the anarchist writer and poet George Woodcock, as well as Dylan Thomas, Henry Treece and Robert Penn Warren. James Gleeson’s poetry was also included. The Reeds’ library provided Nolan with Arthur Rimbaud and Hester with Jean Cocteau’s *Opium*, the latter inspiring a series of drawings, *An Incredible Night Dream* (c. 1946–7). The Reeds, both from wealthy, patrician backgrounds, were avowedly leftwing; Herbert Read’s *Art Now* was their Bible.

Joy Hester is one of Australian surrealism’s few female contributors. Indeed, she is the only woman member of *Angry Penguins*, the group of artists which took its name from the Reed-Harris journal, and which galvanised Australian art during the war years. *Fun Fair* (c. 1946, fig. 4) shows an eerie evening land- and seascape, where a girl’s body lies like an abandoned doll beneath the terrifying gaze and yawning maw of a monster decked with a crown reading ‘Fun Fair.’ In 1946, Hester was living near St Kilda beach and close to Luna Park. But her interpretation of the area is very different to Nolan’s. Luna Park’s two distinctive features – the enormous, painted mouth providing its entrance and the Scenic Railway’s wooden armature – are transformed by Hester into the voracious Fun Fair monster, that she contrasts with the abject vulnerability of the girl-doll. The monster’s square head directly quotes the abstracted helmet Nolan invented for Ned Kelly. A geometric version of the Scenic Railway forms the crown. Hester was a keen admirer of Nolan’s work but, on a deeper level, she registers the anxieties that feminine creativity can experience under the male gaze, where the ‘body’ of female enterprise literally wilts and is infantilised. Interestingly, in Sunday Reed, Hester sought a mentor, prized audience and chief support until the latter’s death in 1960, underscoring the need by a woman artist for a receptive female gaze. Other works by women artists in the Agapitos/Wilson collection include Freda Robertshaw’s delicate abstract *Composition* (c. 1947), Inge King’s marble sculpture *Animal Shapes in Space* (1948) and Vera Rudner’s scarifying *Sacrilege* (1942).
Gleeson’s quotation that opens this review indicates Australian surrealism’s political and historical context: it was viewed as a language of freedom and a weapon against fascism. It was largely a wartime movement that enjoyed its most lively impact and discourse among a generation of younger artists between 1939 and 1945, though Gleeson remains Australian surrealism’s lone standard bearer. But the Agapitos/Wilson collection draws attention to just how profound that experience was for Australian art.

Janine Burke
Melbourne
1 James Gleeson, ‘What is Surrealism?’, Art in Australia, November 1930, 30.

2 The Herald Exhibition of French and British Painting was commissioned and funded by Sir Keith Murdoch, the newspaper’s director, and selected in Europe by Herald art critic Basil Burdett. It opened in Melbourne in October 1939. 217 works were exhibited, mainly French paintings. Paul Cézanne, Paul Gauguin, Vincent Van Gogh and Pablo Picasso made the central contribution, while Henri Matisse, Georges Braque, Amedeo Modigliani and Marc Chagall were also included. De Chirico, Max Ernst and Salvador Dali’s L’Homme fleur (the talking point of the exhibition) represented surrealism.


4 Gleeson, The Sun, 7 June 1939.

5 Anon, The Herald, 8 June 1939.

6 Nibbi brought several modernist paintings to Australia including de Chirico’s Horses on the Beach (now lost). From de Chirico’s later period, this work was not considered to be one of the artist’s strongest pieces, but it had been a personal gift from the artist. See Gino Nibbi, ‘Some Modern Masters’, Stream, 1:2, 1931, 8.

7 Gino Nibbi, ‘Ideas Behind Contemporary Art,’ Art in Australia, August 1939, p. 17.


In 1953 Cy Twombly returned to New York after a year’s travel fellowship to Europe and North Africa. He brought back homemade sketchbooks of stapled-together drawings, many inspired by tribal objects he had seen in the Pigorini ethnographic museum in Rome. Intended for use rather than exhibition, these books combined sketches and notations on semi-transparent paper, the underlying pages partially visible through each densely worked sheet. They formed a repository of overlaid marks to which Twombly would return in his search for expressive immediacy – whilst simultaneously recoding the museum display’s ‘primitive’ mise-en-scène. At once a memory aid, a point of origin, and the reproduction of an existing categorization, Twombly’s sketchbooks formed a layered archive of graphic impressions. They seem a fitting introduction to his work, which investigates both the production and effacement of the trace, and the classificatory function of the proper name.

Cy Twombly: Fifty Years of Works on Paper draws on a much broader archive – the artist’s personal collection of works on paper from 1953 to 2002. It is thus doubly ‘private’: as works on paper some of these pieces are speculative experiments, not intended for sale or exhibition. Others are larger and more ‘finished,’ but have been retained by Twombly until this show, which marks his seventy-fifth birthday. This sense of an intimate disclosure is heightened by the enigmatic presentation of the pieces, with minimal documentation. We are forced to encounter this eclectic array of works on its own terms: to extrapolate upon gaps in the chronological sequence, the function of particular pieces and the meaning they hold for the artist. It is an experience akin to rifling though an archive, and is likewise both fascinating and frustrating.

The exhibition begins with Twombly’s return to New York in 1953, when he devised a number of strategies to thwart his skill as a draftsman and access the ‘simple directness’ he perceived in ‘primitive’ art. Whilst this quest for unmediated expression has been likened to Dubuffet and Art Brut, in Twombly it seems to be tempered with an awareness of the repetitive and referential nature of the mark. One drawing is a direct quotation from his ‘North African’
sketchbook, miming its look of scribbled immediacy through careful reiteration. The same ‘primal’ forms are reproduced in a painting of 1953 entitled *Tiznit* – not in reference to the North African village, but because Twombly liked the sound of the word. This emphasis on the materiality of the signifier, as a mark or a noise produced by the body, remains evident throughout his practice. Drafted into the army in 1954, Twombly began to draw in the dark, producing lines that scratch and stutter across the page like the uncoordinated daubs of a primary-school child. Reminiscent of surrealist ‘automatic’ drawings, they are concerned less with yielding ‘unconscious’ imagery than with disengaging the skill of the draftsman through a series of bodily impediments. Alternatively drawing at oblique angles, or as though with his left hand, Twombly explored the mark as the material product of the body, or more specifically the body under duress – its habitual modes of functioning disrupted.

There is a gap of ten years between the first room and the 1969 *Bolsena* drawings that follow. During that time Twombly had settled in Rome, where he moved in 1957, and the open scribbles of his early drawings had tightened into a vocabulary of scatological and pornographic graffiti. By 1969, these scabrous marks were being filtered through his concurrent preoccupation with the Apollo space landing – so that the scattered components of the *Bolsena* pieces suggest vectors and compartments more than breasts, buttocks and vulvae. The omission of two 1961 drawings exhibited in St. Petersburg (and reproduced in the catalogue) thus has the effect of ‘cleaning up’ the Serpentine show, and making Twombly’s development from 1959–69 difficult to comprehend. This problem is compounded by a distinct lack of information, both in the exhibition itself and the glossy colour catalogue. The latter contains a gushing appreciation by historian Simon Schama, but no catalogue entries for individual works, most of which were previously unpublished. This becomes particularly problematic when regarding some smaller studies, which hint at a preparatory status without making their function explicit.

Twombly’s friends Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns are often credited with reintroducing Modernism’s repressed terms – language, temporality, the image and the body – to American art of the fifties and sixties. In recent years there has been a sustained attempt
to relocate Twombly within this American counter-tradition, with a retrospective of the paintings at the Museum of Modern Art, New York (1995), and the sculpture at the National Gallery of Art, Washington (2001). The introduction to the Serpentine exhibition – supported by the US Embassy – declares Twombly ‘one of the greatest living American artists.’ Yet in the 1960s his work fell out of favour with American critics, seeming to embody the decadent grandiloquence of European culture to eyes attuned to Minimalist pragmatism. It was only towards the end of the decade, with a series of grey-ground works made in New York that Twombly began to rebuild his reputation amongst his compatriots. Four of these pieces are on show at the Serpentine. Made in wax crayon on dark grey house paint, each layered surface is a tissue of lines and smudges tracing the duration of the mark-making process. In some, this stratification in depth is offset by sub-legible waves that move from left to right across the paper – retrieving the physical act of writing from its customary, narrative function. These pieces recall the ‘Scene of Writing’ described by Jacques Derrida: a palimpsest of traces on which every mark is always already a transcription, the archive of its own event. And yet these lines are not quite yet writing. Instead it is the field of drawing that is worked and reworked – scratched and smudged and incompetently erased, so that each past action remains compressed on its surface. Despite the house paint, it is undoubtedly drawing that is at stake here: the grey washes function as a ground to be inscribed rather than covered. Each line is scuffed and broken by the friction of the crayon against the surface, an effect that is utterly distinct from the fluid skeins of Pollock, however linear they may be. Unlike the painterly mark, the drawn line relies on this process of abrasion for its existence. These ‘works on paper’ recall Twombly’s early insistence that he had a greater sense of that material – the grainy surface that draws forth the line – than he had of the physicality of paint.

In this sense, Twombly’s work prefigures recent debates surrounding the medium, and whether the term can be rescued from a particular reading of Greenberg that locates medium-specificity solely in the physicality of the support. In ‘A Voyage on the North Sea’: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition, Rosalind Krauss argues that the medium should be understood as a set of differential relations that can never be collapsed into pure materiality: a complex layering of conventions through which specificity is generated. Whilst Twombly might
appear less radical in this respect than Johns or Rauschenberg – with their wilful disregard for traditional categories – he operates a subtle exploration of what it means to draw, casting the conventions of the medium out towards colour and texture, and reeling them back through a series of draftsmanly devices. This kind of improvisation in relation to a relaxed set of principles is something Krauss identifies in younger artists like William Kentridge and James Coleman, who resist the ‘post-medium condition’ of installation art. Yet it has been active in Twombly’s practice since the early 1950s, not necessarily as a rejection of modernism, but as a working loose of its perceived rigidities.

Another of those rigidities was the absolute exclusion of language from the visual field of modernist painting. By naming his paintings and drawings after people, places, and mythological figures, Twombly jeopardised their autonomy. But by inscribing those names on their surfaces, he insured that they could never be viewed in optical terms alone: the spectator is persistently enticed into the conceptual (and temporal) activity of reading. Twombly’s reception has thus been divided into those critics who interpret his work according to these inscriptions – subjugating every mark to their signifying power – and those who regard them simply as another form of mark-making, or playful red herrings for conscientious art historians. Schama, for example, describes a cutting from a biology textbook stuck above the word Pan as: ‘two tenderly caressing leaves of chard (one crimson, one gold) as if laid gently over the brow of the goat-lord.’ A reddish-brown smear is seen to represent ‘the visceral reality of his rule: Pan-Ic.’ Reading Twombly through Bataille, Krauss regards such word-play as indicative of the scatological violence of graffiti, noting that a disjointed Mars equals M/ARS: ‘art’ in Latin, but ‘arse’ in English. Whilst she eschews the kind of mythological story-telling favoured by Schama, Twombly’s words still trigger a narrative for Krauss: when the word ‘fuck’ is found on Olympia (1957) it conditions her entire reading of the piece.
Yet when Twombly gave his 1953 paintings names like *Tiznit*, it was not because they were representational, but because he liked the sounds of the words. Certainly the signifying potential of these North African names would have been blunted by their relocation to a New York gallery. For most visitors to the Serpentine, the word *ANABASIS* is similarly dislocated from any identifiable concept. Rather than telling a story then, these words seem to investigate what it means to write: to detach *M* from *ARS*, to hook up *PAN* to *IC*, to put *FUCK* in front of *OLYMPIA*. On a larger scale, this reconfiguration of signs follows the logic of the citation – the re-ordering and re-inscription of previous utterances. The virtuoso scrawl of *Adonais* (1975) mimes the act of writing – of producing meaning – in the grooves of the already written. Cut and pasted from Shelley’s poem *Adonais: an Elegy on the Death of John Keats*, these citations are presented *as though for the first time*, in an accelerated splutter of inspiration. Yet the sentence at the foot of the paper – ‘he has outsoared the shadow of our night’ – has been inscribed and effaced repeatedly, so that it is finally scratched over the remnants of its own prior manifestations.

If Twombly’s early work investigates the process of drawing, which veers towards – and eventually becomes – an exploration of writing, then his pieces from the mid-1980s onwards have a different, more painterly aesthetic. The final rooms at the Serpentine are filled with viscous globs of paint smeared by hand across the paper, or watered-down pigment allowed to course in rivulets down the page. Some of these are similar to Twombly’s *Four Seasons* (1993-94), currently on display at Tate Modern, or the huge ‘flower’ paintings on show at the new Gagosian gallery. This sudden spate of Twombly shows is in marked contrast to the artist’s reception at earlier points in his career: after a disastrous exhibition in 1963 he claims that, for a few years at least, nobody in America cared what he did. Whilst Twombly remembers that period as a time of freedom, it seems that now – secure in his popularity – he is able to produce his least self-conscious works. In fact some of the smaller paintings in these final rooms seem a little self-indulgent, weak parodies of the monumental canvases from the same period. Given the impressive cycles of larger paintings on view elsewhere in London, the Serpentine show could have concentrated on the earlier drawings, or important paint-on-paper works like *Petals of Fire* (1989).
In one of the most influential essays on Twombly, ‘The Wisdom of Art,’ Roland Barthes describes painting as a kind of stage on which an event unfolds, permanently altering the spectator. Twombly’s palimpsests recall another kind of stage, the ‘Scene of Writing’ described by Jacques Derrida. Such theatrical metaphors indicate a temporal event, and one that exists for an audience – what Derrida describes as the sociality of writing as drama. The subject of writing is not an isolated author, but a layered system of differential relations in which the writer, the instrument of inscription, the reader and society all play a part. Instead of presenting us with a narrative that is fully present and intact, Twombly offers an incomplete archive of impressions on which our own experience must be bought to bear. It seems unlikely that the enigmatic presentation of Cy Twombly: Fifty Years of Works on Paper is a deliberate curatorial strategy, but it is nonetheless pertinent to the fragmentary traces of Twombly’s own artistic practice.

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References:
Julie Sylvester, Cy Twombly: Fifty Years of Works on Paper, Munich, 2003
Mike Nelson’s installations are travelling shows. Not that they shift venues – they don’t, since each one tends to be purpose-built (elaborately so) to fit a single chosen site. Nor are they mobile in the carnivalesque sense – although many die-hard fans have certainly commented on their ‘funhouse,’ chamber-of-horrors feel. Rather, Nelson’s installations require one to travel through them, to use ambulatory, bipedal, humanoid instincts – to walk. This might sound like a rather pedestrian (every pun intended) comment to make, but a significant characteristic of Nelson’s projects is, quite simply, that they make you move.

This blunt fact struck me with more force recently as I travelled through the artist’s latest construction, *Triple Bluff Canyon*, at the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford. This multi-part installation assumes a shape that is somewhat unusual within Nelson’s extensive list of projects, although his two recent pieces in San Francisco and Istanbul (both 2003) were a heads-up that things were changing. His converted GMC bus at the California College of Arts and Crafts and his Biennial caravanserai outpost (reached only after a long wander through one of Istanbul’s busiest market areas) seemed to mark subtle but substantial departures and new directions for the artist. The work in Istanbul, in particular, was at its heart a piece about walking, searching, and finding, and I think that *Triple Bluff*, in a protracted sense, is as well. I wish to look briefly here at Nelson’s embrace of the ambient-ambulatory mode in conjunction with a very particular post-surrealist ‘philosophy’ of walking: that of the situationists.

Nelson, to my knowledge, has claimed allegiance neither to Guy Debord nor his predecessors/followers, although the artist’s knack for obscure and provocative referencing might well have them turn up one day. One never knows where Nelson’s mind might turn. For instance (and I’m walking away from walking for a moment), as part of the accompanying catalogue for *Triple Bluff Canyon* Nelson has published some of his working notes and sketches associated with the show. On one page we are offered up this loosely connected list of terms, ideas, works, and persons that, in some way, informed the making of *Triple Bluff Canyon*:
Nelson’s accompanying construction doodles link these words with the built structures in Oxford’s space as he first envisioned them. In looking at his projected thematics we are prompted to consider how the artist finally chose to ‘walk us through’ such a conceptual labyrinth within the physical realm of *Triple Bluff Canyon*. Because of my particular interests I have been further prompted to speculate on the qualities of Nelson’s perambulations: do they lean towards the surrealist (with a list like that) or the situationist (with a plan like that)? And finally, if Nelson’s works are not exactly a ‘legacy’ of either of these traditions, what are they exactly?

**Walking Along**

Entering through the sliding doors of the Museum of Modern Art from a small side street we are liberated from the throngs of tourists and students that jam the pavements outside. Such a transition is one over which the artist has no direct control, but which nevertheless has the desirable Nelsonian effect of heightening the other-worldly character of the gallery and its laid back, slow paced interior. It is precisely these kinds of natural shifts in register that Nelson purposefully hones in on, assiduously studies, and then artificially re-theatricalises in the fabrication of all his works. For *Triple Bluff Canyon* he does it again, this time – you guessed it – thrice.
But Nelson's ambient triumvirate isn't concerned on this occasion to meld with our recent experience of street culture; rather he eventually moves us through his signature set of double doors into a series of worlds that, contrary to his usual way of working, make no attempt to morph seamlessly into one another (as with *Coral Reef*). In fact, Nelson purposefully reveals his artifice in *Triple Bluff* (calling his own bluff, perhaps?) by allowing us to see the ‘backside’ of each component in the installation. He orchestrates an almost rhythmic pattern of observation and review that mimics other reflexive couplings such as the close-up and the pan, the event and the flashback, the reality and the memory. Within this installation we walk through an environment, then step outside it, look back at it, and move on. We exist first within the illusion and then the illusion (its 2x4’s, plywood, screws and nails) is shown to us. Importantly, the three segments of *Triple Bluff* are physically separated and we are purposefully immersed and then released as we walk toward the next scene, grounded by the sight of Modern Art Oxford’s own architecture (although, admittedly, with Nelson you can never be sure).
From our initial encounter with a small-scale octagonal cinema foyer (nostalgically vacant), we are taken up some back stairs to peer into and around the front room of a Victorian London terraced house (doubling as a conspiratorial, alchemical, artist studio that is, in fact, a replica of Nelson’s own former conspiratorial, alchemical, artist studio). From here, we move again to confront one of Nelson’s most magnificent corridor/tunnel/shafts that I have yet seen. We then find ourselves, at the end of the journey, both inside and outside a kind of desert bunker, Robert Smithson style. With Nelson’s arid version of the *Partially Buried Woodshed* re-constructed at nearly full scale within the confines of the Oxford gallery, there are enormous amounts of sand involved. It’s stunning. (The catalogue is your one chance to see how Nelson’s illusion has been created.)
Surrealist or Situationist?

In literary terms *Triple Bluff* reads more like a collection of independent short stories than a novel in chapters. The inclination to force a link between the installation’s discreet segments is thwarted by Nelson’s punctuated, tripartite design which resists the imposition of any flowing narrative line. This strategy, if you will, is what allows Nelson’s ‘chaotic space’ to express its own wonderfully warped version of order that resists unification under a single thematic banner. As the show’s commentator, Jeremy Millar writes in the catalogue, ‘art,’ especially Nelson’s art, ‘is a form of closure that most often attempts to engage with openness, to encourage openness.’¹

If I can carry on from Millar’s comments and shift Nelson’s work away from the literary and science fiction analogies it most often attracts, I find myself moving toward other vocabularies that are equally capable of addressing *Triple Bluff’s* procreative ‘chaos.’ While forensic language has often been deployed in critiques of Nelson’s work (most proficiently by Ralph Rugoff, among others²), the clue-tracking detective weaving together threads of evidence, while appropriate, is perhaps too specific a figure for our purposes here. Shifting to the more broadly based urban explorations of ‘detective-like’ figures, I suggest that Nelson’s audiences move through the kind of kaleidoscopic, Nadja-like wanderings of the Surrealists into territories that are more closely allied to the psychogeographic practice of the Situationist International (SI). In fact, what is so compelling about the many metres that Nelson’s shows have made us walk over the years is that, together, they make up a choreographed *dérive* of interiors that we might think of as part of a second generation of ‘situations’ constructed by artists operating some fifty years after initial SI activity.

To the situationists, the kind of chaos that Millar describes – ‘of emerging order, an opening’ – was to be found in the teeming urban sphere. By entering into this sphere in a decisive, provocative, playful, research-driven manner, one could create numerous ‘situations’ that the SI felt were encounters ‘deliberately constructed and passionately lived.’³ The oft-cited situationist methods of the *dérive* (the technique of transient passage through changing ambiances) and *détournement* (a method of integrating aesthetic fragments into a renovated, ‘superior construction’) were important parts of their programme of unitary urbanism, as was
the embrace of ‘the ludic’ – one of Constant’s pet notions. Constant, especially, loved the image of the labyrinth while Debord spoke of the ‘zones of distinct psychic atmospheres,’ and Henri Lefebvre of ‘the moment.’ Each of these original strategies has a second life in Nelson’s hands. In a sense, the artist has ‘detourned’ (reappropriated) situationist tropes and brought them into service within his constructed, artificial environments. Not only do Nelson's interiors mimic the haphazard, random environments that exist within a city's unseen inner fabric, their ‘discovery’ by Nelson’s audiences also harkens back to the situationist ‘discovery’ of the city’s hidden corridors of activity.

Reviewing these terms, it is not hard to see how Nelson’s own programme of re-appropriated iconic imagery and pop cultural borrowings allow his labyrinthine, ambient, immersive installation-making to represent a concentrated psychogeography of its own (he would probably enjoy Asger Jorn’s definition of psychogeography as ‘the science fiction of urbanism’). Within the contemporary sphere Nelson’s works act as ‘theoretical objects’ that, according to theorists such as Mieke Bal, do not simply illustrate or follow the tenets of an aesthetic tradition but, in their reworking of material, actually change the way we look back on those traditions.4 While *Triple Bluff* does not incorporate or directly reference its host city (as Nelson did in Venice, San Francisco, and Istanbul), nor bring the inner workings of the city into the gallery (there are no minicab headquarters, crack dens, seedy waiting rooms, or vagrant hideouts in this show), it reconfigures a strategy of détournement and embraces what in Yve-Alain Bois’s terms is ‘the poetic principle of the situationist dérive.’5

**From Situationist to Situational**

In the catalogue for *Triple Bluff Canyon*, Millar writes:

In order that we might fully engage in such a situation, a situation such as that presented by Nelson, we must find ourselves in a space that is dominated by neither world – neither external reality nor interior fantasy – but in the third space which opens out onto both. To find ourselves too closely aligned to either would suggest that we have been denied the opportunity for creativity, of play ... and in doing so lessens our engagement with both.6

Nelson’s ‘third space’ – a ludic space according to Millar – opens out onto both external reality and interior fantasy, never tidily bridging that gap, but lubricating a passageway between
them. For the classic situationist, Nelson’s transitional third space created within the installation is not unlike the physical and psychic ‘space’ reached and breached whilst traversing a city on foot. This is a type of passage à pied where choreography and chance intermingle, where one’s present condition need not anchor one’s meandering thoughts, and where the most miniscule detail can set off a cascade of associations. Walking between the trio of elements that make up Nelson’s piece I suggest, is as important as encountering its main components. It is here, in the gaps, in the hiatus spent walking, that we let go and let the elements of the situation – ‘perishable instants, ephemeral and unique’ – take over. As with the dérive, Nelson’s kind of wandering ‘is systematic, with restrained leeway for coincidence; it moves around the psychogeographic relief of a predisposed apparatus.’

The ‘dérive’ that Nelson sets us on is highly choreographed (you can be sure that every bit of rubbish and dust and each speck of sand was meticulously accounted for by the obsessive Nelson). At the same time, walking Triple Bluff feels as if we are wandering into a series of accidental landscapes. It is no mistake that Nelson sets up his three ‘bluffs’ – the cinema, the artist’s studio, the abandoned shed – to make us progress from the entity most closely associated with the shaping and maintenance of aesthetic control, to a space whose liberated, enigmatic, ‘alchemical’ associations are legendary, to a final destination that is altogether disappearing – dissolving into a fine-grained landscape whose shape needs to be constantly maintained by the Gallery’s attendants. And there are other dynamics to notice: our walk moves decisively from a world of tight interiors (our entrance into the dark and womb-like foyer) toward an ever-expanding view of exteriors (concluded by our look back upon the half-buried shed separated from us by improbable dunes of sand). From another perspective, Nelson transports us from the symbolically metropolitan experience of going to the pictures to a more peripheral voyeurism: peering into the artist’s studio on the city’s fringes. He then leads us into, and then out of, and then finally back to what is perhaps the ultimate in non-urban encounters: the desert. As Nelson builds each of these ‘moments’ (the physical presence of each one begins to open out more and more in a cinematic sense) we might be reminded of the 1960 pronouncement, that ‘the situationist considers his environment and himself as plastic entities.’
All of this, I suggest, is Nelson at his shape shifting best – working out a personal cartography that protracts, essentialises, and reworks the core of a situationist psychogeography within Oxford’s interior spaces. In Triple Bluff Canyon, he performs an extraordinary feat by not only directing our ‘micro-dérive’ but first conceptualising and constructing the three ‘landscapes’ through which it will pass. Where Nelson himself walks in pursuing this endeavour is, in situationist terms, ‘on the path towards a unity of the structural and the conjunctural ... a constructed situation [that] could also be defined ‘as an attempt at structuring the conjunction.’

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3 Libero Andreotti and Xavier Costa, Theory of the Derive and other Situationist Writings on the City, Museu d’Art Contemporani, Barcelona 1996, 68.
5 Yve-Alain Bois, ‘Character Study,’ Artforum, 38: 8, April 2002, 131.
6 Millar, ‘Ordo ab Chao,’ n. p.
By the time Robert Filliou started writing in 1956, the thirty-year old Frenchman had already been involved in the resistance, obtained an M.A. in political economy from UCLA, worked for the United Nations programme of economic development in South Korea, and also spent time in Egypt, Spain and Denmark. His nomadic lifestyle would subsequently lead him to live in Paris, the French Côte d’Azur, Düsseldorf, and South West France, before retiring to a Tibetan meditation centre in the South of France where he died in 1987. Although his contacts extended from Joseph Beuys and Marcel Broodthaers to the international Fluxus movement (through friendships and collaborations with Fluxus artists Daniel Spoerri, Emmett Williams and George Brecht), Filliou remained a marginal figure on the international art scene. This may explain why, despite the recent rise of interest in Fluxus, his work is to this day much better known in the countries where he was active during his lifetime – France and Germany – than elsewhere.
The main reason Filliou remained so resolutely independent and original was that he actively cultivated the persona of a ‘good-for-nothing’ naive autodidact, to the point of flirting, at times, with downright idiocy – an attitude which, paradoxically, was in fact closely related to his background as an economist, as the two kinds of artistic ‘principles’ which run through his work suggest. The first of these, influenced by the nineteenth-century economist Charles Fourier, was formulated by Filliou in 1966 as the ‘Principes d’Économie Poétique’ which opposed what he called the capitalist ‘Économie de Prostitution’ by privileging unproductive and immeasurable concepts such as joy, desire, pleasure and life. The second driving force of Filliou’s work, the ‘Principe d’Équivalence,’ extended this first general principle by positing a practical equation between what is ‘bien fait,’ ‘mal fait’ and ‘pas fait’ (well made, badly made and not made). Equipped with this pseudo-economic equation, Filliou explored, perhaps more systematically than any artist before him, the fragile boundaries between process and product, success and failure, genius and mediocrity.

And artistic thinking like this, of course, is bound to constitute a challenge for anyone wishing to put together a retrospective of Filliou’s work, a challenge to which the curators of Robert Filliou, Génie sans talent at the Musée d’Art Moderne Lille Métropole evidently responded by fully embracing Filliou’s philosophy and including as many aspects of his disparate œuvre as possible. As a result, the eighteen rooms of this roughly chronological display structured around Filliou’s central concepts seemed, with the exception of five major large-scale works, to be mostly filled with small, shabby-looking objects made up of unpainted wood boards, string, bricks or cardboard (often bearing obscure scribbles), along with some amateur videos of the artist’s antics and a few deliberately silly one-liners – typically, a handwritten sign attached to a broom (shown with a bucket and floor cloth) reads: ‘Back in 10 minutes. Mona Lisa.’ As I walked through the exhibition, however, the interest and delight of other visitors clearly demonstrated the success of the curators’ choices, and confirmed two things to me: that Filliou’s often unprepossessing objects are somehow sufficiently suffused with his quirky humour to sustain the viewer’s attention, and that the artist’s ‘principles’ seem to still be very relevant today.
Bien Fait, Mal Fait, Pas Fait

The 1968 work *Principe d'Equivalence: bien fait, mal fait, pas fait* illustrates Filliou’s ‘equivalence principle’ by using a simple unit consisting of a red baby sock in a wooden box. The unit is repeated five times according to these three possible outcomes: the ‘well-made’ model is a replica of its precedent, ‘errors’ are introduced in the ‘badly-made’ version, and a space is left blank in order to stand for the ‘not-made’ possibilities. Using different and less visually attractive units, Filliou created other works following this protocol, while many other works bear the stamp ‘bien fait, mal fait, pas fait’ with a tick indicating the state in which the artist chose to leave the work. For example, a stamped ‘portrait’ of Joseph Beuys (1972) remains obviously ‘not made’ as it simply consists of a canvas painted white bearing the German artist’s name. Stamped as a ‘badly made’ work, *Spontaneity is Fed by Non Competence* (1969–1970) develops the work’s title-concept in a hand-written text disrupted by crossed-out words, corrections and the chaotic superimposition of scrabble letters which needlessly duplicate their hidden counterparts. *Paper Brain for 103 Days* (1972) is a more conceptual piece exemplifying the potentialities of the ‘not-made’ – in a cardboard box, the viewer can find instructions, stickers, and a demonstration photograph which relate to the idea of sticking a small black dot on one’s forehead as a kind of disposable brain to be thrown away at the end of every day. Inspired by the short-lived trend of disposable underwear, this work also invites participants to rid themselves of superfluous ideas in order to ‘unlearn’ traditional commonplaces, a central notion in Zen thought. Another aspect of Zen which attracted Filliou was the ‘idea of sitting quietly and doing nothing’ – a belief in the possibilities of the ‘not-made’ if ever there was.

**Bricolage**

One of the more obvious formal elements running through Filliou’s work in the show is the simple device of interlocking, metal cup hooks which usually serve to join together assembled wooden panels hanging on the wall. In his early *Suspense Poems*, verses were mailed to subscribers one at a time in the form of small irregular wooden rectangles which could be hooked together and suspended to the wall to obtain the complete work. *Permanent Creation Tool Box no.2* (1969) also exploited the potentially endless openness of the hook device: in
this piece we are invited to rummage through a blue metal tool box filled with pieces of wood which can be hooked to each other as we wish. The shape of these hooks would also inspire the name of the workshop run by Filliou and George Brecht between 1965 and 1968 in Villefranche-sur-Mer, near Nice: it was called La Cédille qui sourit (The Smiling Cedilla).

The ‘do-it-yourself’ aesthetic of the hook is carried out in other, rather austere, materials such as easily transportable brown cardboard boxes, or pieces of string simply nailed around objects to act as improvised frames. The Briquolages (1982) are literal puns on the words brique – the bricks of which the works are made – and bricolage, a French word which can be translated as ‘do-it-yourself’ and which was used as a theoretical principle by Claude Lévi-Strauss.¹ No doubt familiar with Lévi-Strauss’s discussion of mythical thought as a form of bricolage, Filliou stated that the Briquolages aimed to ‘give wings’ to a ‘grandiosely down-to-earth material,’ thus simultaneously mocking and celebrating the artist-shaman’s supposedly ‘magical’ touch.² The contrast between bricolage and technology is evoked in L’Héritage de Lascaux (1983), where bricks are connected to electric wires and a kind of antenna, and the series of Video Games (1980-1982), imagined archaic forms of electronic entertainment made of cardboard boxes, flat bricks, and rows of wooden cubes bearing tiny pencil drawings.

‘Genius without Talent’

Filliou’s throwaway, unskilled bricolages embody his celebration of ‘genius’ as opposed to ‘talent.’ As he explained in 1970: ‘I simply think that being a man or a woman is being a genius, but that most people forget this,’ because, he went on, ‘they are too busy exploiting their talents.’ Through his ‘untalented’ works, Filliou wished to ‘give people the secret of permanent creation’ – a message which lies at the heart of many of his projects.³ At the 1962 Festival of Misfits in London, Filliou allowed viewers to create their own poems by spinning bicycle wheels with three axes pointing to different words. Other works were conceived as collaborations with fellow artists such as Daniel Spoerri, Emmett Williams and George Brecht, while the Joint Works were completed variously by a child, rain, sun, or even ‘drunkenness.’ ‘Permanent creation’ was the key notion both of the Cédille qui sourit, where Brecht and Filliou created games, mail poems, and films, and of the Poïpoïdrome conceived in 1963 and executed in different contexts in collaboration with the architect Joaquin Pfeufer. Inspired by a Mali Dogon ritual in which all questions within a specific dialogue are answered with the word ‘poïpoi,’ the Poïpoïdrome created by Filliou and Pfeufer consists in a wooden structure acting
as a site of exchange where adults and children can play, think, read and meet. *Le Territoire de la République Géniale* (Territory of the Republic of Genius) was another concept which Filliou used to appeal to viewers’ creativity. From the Amsterdam Stedelijk Museum piece, *A Joint work of Robert Filliou and the Anonymous Visitors of the Genial Republic* (1971) to the act of driving around with his family in a minibus, each situation sought to create an imaginary territory where research, work and play were closely associated.

**Serious Play**

Always looking to children for wisdom, Filliou liked to cite his seven-year-old daughter who, upon being told that her uncle could not play with her because he was working, retorted: ‘Well, when I play, I am working.’

Play is indeed what Filliou worked on most, actively blurring the boundaries between work and leisure, humour and seriousness. Early poetic works embody comic ideas, as in the charmingly simple *Bouteille de lait rêvant d’être une bouteille de vin* (*Milk Bottle Dreaming of Being a Wine Bottle*) (1961), an empty milk bottle to which is vertically attached an upturned bottle of wine by a piece of wire. Elements from existing games figure prominently in Filliou’s later, more spectacular, installations. In one of Filliou’s last works, *Eins. Un. One.* (1984), thousands of different-coloured, different-sized dice lie scattered on the floor in an erratic pattern, multiplying, potentially infinitely, the throw of the die which has long fascinated gamblers, physicists, mathematicians, philosophers, and poets, alike. In this piece Filliou succeeded in tricking chance, the laws of probability and fate all in one throw by choosing dice with the same number on each of their sides: the number one. As we gaze at this chaotic landscape and ponder our freedom or inability to load the dice of our lives, or possibly on our place as single individuals within the cosmos, it becomes evident that Filliou conceived play not only as a form of entertainment and a means of questioning ‘serious’ art but also as a pedagogical and a potentially political tool. Nowhere does this come through more convincingly than in Filliou’s proposal that war memorials be exchanged between Germany, Belgium and Holland: announced by a press conference and visualised in the form of collages, this project to promote peace through an apparently childish gimmick seems to offer effective possibilities of symbolic reconciliation.
Robert Filliou, _COMMEMOR, échange fictif de monuments aux morts entre Sittard (Hollande) et Verviers (Belgique) [COMMEMOR, Fictional Exchange of War Memorials between Sittard (Holland) and Verviers (Belgium)],_ 1970.

**An Expanding Territory**

Above all, Filliou was no doubt attracted to play’s unique capacity to bridge divides between generations, social classes, and nations. In his desire to reach as wide an audience as possible, Filliou explored alternative means to distribute art and disseminate ideas. Unable to sell his work, Filliou created in 1962 his _Galerie Légitime_, a cap filled with small-scale works which could thus be easily shown and transported. Years later, when he was invited to exhibit at the Centre Georges Pompidou in 1978, he chose to construct a version of the _Poïpoïdrome_ in the form of an _Hommage aux Dogons et aux Rimbauds_ which involved him and Pfeufer travelling to Mali during the show. Inspired by the ethnographic writings of Marcel Griaule and Michel Leiris, Filliou and Pfeufer were particularly drawn to so-called primitive oral forms of communication, relations between play and ritual, and alternative social constructions of the role of artists.
Alongside experiments such as the *Poïpoïdrome*, the *Territoire de la République Géniale* or the *Eternal Network*, Filliou carried out his social projects through publications and multiples which remain amongst his most significant contributions to contemporary art. Written in 1968 and published two years later, his pedagogical book, *Teaching and Learning as Performing Arts*, brought together statements by well-known artists such as Joseph Beuys and John Cage with the ideas of his own children, privileging free and open discussion as a site for sowing revolutionary seeds – a kind of pre-figuration of the prevailing atmosphere of the events of May 1968 in Paris. The hundreds of multiples produced by Filliou usually combined word and image in a variety of media. The delightfully titled *Ample Food for Stupid Thought* (1965) is a meditation game consisting of boxed cards with enigmatic statements and questions such as ‘why did you do this?’, while the card game *Leeds* involves two blindfolded players who must be guided in their moves by the watching audience, thus creating an improvised network based on collaboration and trust. Filliou’s multiples embody his philosophy of art as a playful, philosophical activity which can be performed by everyone; readily and cheaply available, they are conceptual tools rather than finished products. These and other works in this exhibition successfully exemplify Filliou’s ambitious and fruitful project, summarised by the artist in a statement ranking amongst the most challenging definitions of art to this day: ‘Art is what makes life more interesting than art.’

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A New Accent on Sculpture

Following a vicious encounter on his television chat show with Emu in the 1970s, Michael Parkinson spoke on a number of occasions subsequently of how much he hated Rod Hull's sidekick ('that bloody bird'). Strangely, Hull himself resented Emu, presumably once he realised he was fastened forever to the silent bird to which he owed his fame and which halved his celebrity. Hull's accidental death in 1999 made an odd kind of sense – he fell off his roof while moving the television aerial – and one imagines him hurling abuse at Emu before leaving the house, the unseeing bird slumped before the television, the interference on the screen increasing, the silence of puppeteer, puppet, and TV.

This scenario flickered into life behind my eyes while I walked around With Hidden Noise: Sculpture, Video and Ventriloquism at the Henry Moore Institute, which ostensibly takes
sculpture and sound as its theme. Michael Parkinson’s remarks, Rod Hull’s weird relationship with Emu, and my opening sentences all lightly evoke what is now commonly called ‘the uncanny;’ that strange feeling we get when a lifeless object is animated, and which according to Freud is experienced at its most intense as dread and horror.¹ Over the last thirty or so years, the unheimlich has provided philosophy, cultural studies, and literary and art theory with an endlessly recyclable concept.² Its influence can be sensed just off stage at With Hidden Noise, an exhibition which I felt was strongest where it dealt with the ontology of the three dimensional object, but started to look overstretched and nearly lost its footing when it started to fiddle about with television installations.

‘The box’ plays an important role in the exhibition, on show even before one enters in the form of a replica of John Logie Baird’s extraordinarily primitive early television apparatus placed in the foyer. Constructed from a tea chest, biscuit tin, darning needle, and other bits and pieces, and including the head of the dummy ‘Stooky Bill,’ used because no human being would have been able to stand the powerful lights required by Baird, this 1990 copy of the 1925 original is meant to bring together the themes that shape the exhibition. Yet the show itself is titled after an object in the first room, Marcel Duchamp’s With Hidden Noise (1916), on loan from the Philadelphia Museum of Art. A ball of string clamped between two pieces of metal secured by four long screws, Duchamp’s work carries just-illegible messages in ‘franglais’ on its upper and lower surfaces and contains an unknown object. Duchamp had asked his friend and patron Walter Arensberg to place something in the space inside the ball of string before it was clamped between the plates, and he enjoyed the experience of not knowing that detail of the work. If it introduces notions of secrecy, lack, authorship, and noise, it is less easy to find a fit for Duchamp’s object in the three divergent themes of the exhibition’s subtitle – sculpture, video, and ventriloquism. The gap between Baird’s TV equipment and Duchamp’s object articulates both the ambition and the overextension of With Hidden Noise, which does not quite gel conceptually, I feel; because within the limited compass of a small group of only ten works (this excludes Baird’s apparatus) it attempts too much, when a larger display would have allowed a more studied exploration and development of its themes.
This is not to say, however, that the slight tearing-at-the-seams sensation one experiences before such a heterogeneous set of works spoils the show. The Henry Moore Institute is to be commended not only for the very rare loan of Duchamp’s object, but also for showing a related work that was inspired by it, Robert Morris’s *Box with the Sound of its own Making* (1961). Morris’s early conceptual works emerged in the wake of Duchamp’s return to prominence in America in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the last years of Duchamp’s life. The *Box* consists of a smooth, featureless, wooden box resembling a piece of furniture or a small scale Donald Judd, accompanied by the sounds of Morris constructing it played back on a concealed CD. Its absurd reordering of cause and effect – its inscription of memory in the present, of process in the complete – recall Spike Milligan’s instruction ‘open the crate with the crowbar you’ll find inside,’ and allow its alignment with Duchamp’s *With Hidden Noise* along the axes of hidden-ness, noise, and (a)temporality. The curators have emphasised the relationship visually by constructing similar pedestals for the two, and approximately matching the dimensions of the small vitrine containing Duchamp’s object to the dimensions of Morris’s *Box*.

In the gallery space and in the attractive catalogue, the ‘box’ idea is extended to relate several of the works and themes: Morris’s *Box*, the ‘box in the corner of the room,’ the one that houses the ventriloquist’s dummy, and so on. This is continued in Juan Muñoz’s *Gracias* (1988), consisting of a large crate open on one side and at the top, upon which is perched a papier-mâché ventriloquist’s doll, its top half concealed by another box. Pushed up against the wall, the main, wooden construction is built to the dimensions of the adult human body, inviting entry into the space of the ‘sculpture’ while suggesting the cacophonic performance of a Punch and Judy show, in spite of its stillness and silence. The uncanny aspect of the relationship between ventriloquist and dummy that I introduced earlier – that discomfiting filiality suggesting a kind of compromised authority that might be reversed at any moment – is raised here in the absence of the human: the dummy looks like it has been told off and forcibly silenced.
In their pre-emptive circumvention of facile interpretation, these three non-sculptures by Duchamp, Morris, and Muñoz provide a powerful introduction to the exhibition, which is not really sustained by the other two works in this room. Tony Oursler’s Underwater (Blue/Green) of 1996 looks like a classic example of ‘gag art.’ Inspired by those pedagogical museum exhibits where, for instance, a human face is projected onto a Roman bust to make it speak about everyday activity in the Roman Empire and ‘bring history to life’ for bored schoolchildren, Oursler has projected a film of his own bemused-looking face onto a smooth Brancusi-like stone lit in blue and green and submerged in a perspex TV-sized box. Underwater is technically attractive and, like much contemporary art, fine as an amusing one-liner, but when we seek out its depths we recover only clichéd flotsam and jetsam to do with the corrosive effects of television, blocked communication, and the media’s banalisation of events. The visual arts tend towards over-simplicity when making (or provoking) statements about the ‘society of the spectacle,’ and seem critically redundant in the face of the discursive strain of cultural theory from Debord to Baudrillard which has analysed provocatively the issues involved. At least Oursler’s disembodied-head-as-self-portrait fits in well with the theme of ventriloquism, which cannot be said for Bill Woodrow’s Songs of Praise, constituting rather an awkward presence in the show. Consisting of found objects like washing machines, painted to resemble amplifiers and connected to microphones made from strips of metal, Woodrow has recreated on a human scale the space of a stage awaiting its performers. Obviously, the anticipated amplification and performance are the point in the context of this exhibition, but Songs of Praise is closer to an installation than a sculpture (though it could be used productively to question the nature of sculpture). It does not square at all with the idea of ventriloquism, which starts to look a bit strained here. Unfortunately, too, Woodrow’s contribution to With Hidden Noise has the disjointed appearance of an art school project, lacking the conceptual sophistication and poetic indeterminism of the better works on display.

The logic of the exhibition becomes clearer in its second half, for if the first room gestures critically at traditional sculpture, this is less obvious in the other two where television and photography take over. Lucy Gunning’s Malcolm, Lloyd, Angela, Norman, Jane (1997) consists of five televisions facing in different directions. Each screen shows one of the people
named in the title of the work – all of whom stammer and who appear in these videos having responded to an advertisement placed by Gunning – reading a text or being interviewed. The piece is deliberately coarse in its method and appearance and far from being ‘compelling,’ as suggested by the exhibition catalogue, is something of a turn off. Overly-literal and self-consciously alienating, its message that ‘communication is difficult’ and ‘television is a slick and deceptive medium’ is pretty conventional, provoking little more in the way of a response than a ‘Yes, I know.’ Nam June Paik’s *Buddha 21* of 2003 (another impressive loan) uses similar video technology to greater effect, facing a statue of the Buddha towards a TV screen which displays the head of the statue itself in real time, filmed by a video camera behind the TV. Bringing together East and West, the traditional and the modern, religion and technology, Paik’s work has a simplicity and depth that Gunning’s lacks, demonstrating that conceptual work need not carry its content so crudely in its method (uncommunicative works of art about non-communication, boring works of art about boredom) to draw an audience to reflect upon that content.

A third exhibit in this room is a photograph *Convention/ces poupées qui disent oui* by the German artist/ventriloquist Asta Grötting (2001), showing a gathering of delegates (with dummies) at the annual ventriloquists’ convention held in Las Vegas. Under the rubric *The Inner Voice*, Grötting has produced a series of works over the last ten years dealing with ventriloquism. The dummy she made acts as the focus for her other exhibit in *With Hidden Noise*, a set of five films of ventriloquists scripted by Grötting entitled *The Inner Voice/Las Vegas* (1999-2000). Ventriloquism is evoked literally here, but also more obliquely in the sense that Grötting created a doll for others to speak through and wrote a script for others to read from. This is an interesting and entertaining enough work in its own right, but it brings back the nagging dissatisfaction around the exhibition’s central concept of ventriloquism. Like the notion of the uncanny from which it seems to spring, the concept loses its nimble acuity and conceptual value when it becomes blunted by a multitude of sub-meanings to do with voice, noise coming from hidden sources, reading a text written by another, television, role playing, dialectics, any splitting, twinning, or loss of control (which serve to expand its flexibility further through its easy adaptation to various psychoanalytic themata), and so on.
Some would argue that this accommodation of anything from Pygmalion to Postmodernism actually signals the strength through its usability of a given theme or concept. But my argument here is that unless reasonable limits are observed in any interpretative, critical, or curatorial endeavour, the distinctive cutting edge of a concept is lost and the project becomes a victim of limitless possibility, overburdened by potentially inclusive material and missing its own point. I feel that this happened at an early stage of With Hidden Noise, where the ‘bright idea which animates this exhibition: ventriloquism’ was adhered to with insufficient rigour and compromised by proximate themes.

This is to say that the idea of ventriloquism would have offered a perfectly coherent, central strand to the exhibition, able to withstand the internal bickering that an over-expanded deployment of that concept brings. The remarkable film that ends the show, Dummy (1998) by Imogen Stidworthy, demonstrates this, making evident the haunting potential of ventriloquism for art. Projected onto both sides of a screen set up in the centre of the final room, on one side of the divide we are shown a speaking ventriloquist’s mouth reflected in a small handheld mirror, while on the other the camera lingers on the dummy and the spaces it occupies, not allowing it to attain to convincing animation. The voices of ventriloquist and dummy emerge from either side of the screen creating a single reality out of two perspectives that weave and intertwine in our imagination. These shifts, transpositions, and blendings are exacerbated by the use of subtitles, which run forward on one side of the screen and back to front on the other. Mysterious and uncanny, Stidworthy’s film is like the ventriloquist’s art itself, presented as a unified act whilst yet displaying its disturbing fissure that we explore with our eyes and ears as well as our bodies, for we must walk around the screen to get a ‘full view’ as though it were a sculpture.

While there is much to engage with and enjoy in With Hidden Noise, in a different, more critical sense, Stidworthy’s film also rehearses the exhibition’s not-quite-coming-together as a unit. This is echoed in the exhibition catalogue, where Stephen Feeke’s interesting essay on Baird’s early experiments with television seems ill-at-ease with the sculptural context, and also with its catalogue companion, Jon Wood’s excellent account of sound and ventriloquism.
in sculpture.\textsuperscript{4} Again, one views a kind of double act dialoguing in different registers and disagreeing a little with itself, rather than a homogenous entity speaking in unison which a sharply defined, unitary concept or a larger scale exhibition could have facilitated and worked through, sealing over divisions instead of staging them.

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\textsuperscript{1} Sigmund Freud, ‘The “Uncanny,“’ \textit{Art and Literature} Harmondsworth, 1990, 335-76.


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Surprisingly, this reader is the first single volume collection of Roger Caillois’ writings to be published not only in English but in any language. Although this is a crucial addition to the very few existent translations of Caillois’ work, its publication serves to underscore how neglected this writer is in the English-speaking world. One of the reasons for this neglect perhaps is that Caillois’ writings resist categorisation. Like his colleagues at the College of Sociology, Georges Bataille and Michel Leiris, Caillois writings were diverse. Spanning the domains of literature, ethnography, mythography, social theory, and science, Caillois’ writings could be said to outshine even Bataille and Leiris as examples of the multidisciplinary achievements in the evolution of surrealist thought. The Edge of Surrealism selectively represents the diversity of Caillois’ writings whilst providing the reader with an astonishing bibliography, which is a gift to those who can read French and cruelly tantalising to those who cannot.

Claudine Frank’s selection of texts is in itself interesting, and carries with it a subtle thesis of its own in terms of her situating Caillois with regards to surrealist and post-war French thought. Like the texts themselves, Frank’s authoritative introduction maps the shifts in Caillois’ thought from his short-lived involvement with André Breton’s surrealist group in the 1930s to his late writings on the ‘natural fantastic’ of the 1970s. In addition to the introductory essay, Frank precedes each text with a useful commentary, which both serve to situate the texts in terms of Caillois’ oeuvre and to draw attention to any specific contemporary events or debates to which the writer was responding. Whilst this might sound like a matter of course, Frank’s skill as a commentator comes from her grasp of the complexities of Caillois’ thought and a thorough knowledge of his intellectual environs. Furthermore, in the context of a writer who was so close to his times, Frank is extremely helpful to the reader in drawing our attention to just who and what Caillois was responding to in his essays. Thus we are prompted to read Caillois’ texts with an awareness of their relations to a number of influential figures in twentieth-century French thought: not only Breton and Bataille, but also Gaston Bachelard, Georges Dumézil, Emile Durkheim, Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, Claude Lévi-Strauss, André Malraux, Marcel Mauss, and Jean Paulhan, amongst others. To a student of surrealism, this book is crucial in highlighting the degrees to which Caillois’ writing can be seen in many ways as a continuous response to Bataille and to surrealism.

The commentary reflects what Frank defines as her ‘two coordinated axes of interpretation,’ which she loosely defines as ‘the dialogical and the self-reflexive’ (p. 6). The former axis refers to the various dialogues which motivated much of Caillois’ writings, and the latter to the inner evolution of his thought. The book clearly presents Caillois as a writer who cuts right
across intellectual territories. Whilst this aspect of Caillois' thought is fairly self-evident for any reader, the question of self-reflexivity reveals Frank’s perspicacity as a commentator, for it is here that she draws out the threads running through Caillois’ oeuvre: where they are paradoxical, and where they reflect a self-conscious shift in his thought. Frank’s commentary here is useful in clarifying Caillois’ mobility on certain issues, as well as providing the reader with an account of the internal development of his thought as well as the external historical factors that shaped it. This is particularly important with respect to his writings from the late 1930s to the immediate post-war period, following his return from Argentina. This period Frank characterises as one in which Caillois underwent ‘a progressive intellectual, ideological, and cultural change which left him a convert to “civilisation” – or what he had previously sought to overturn and destroy’ (p. 33). Frank thus defines this change as one from revolution to civilisation; from the whirlwind of theories on the sacred, mythology, and power developed during the College of Sociology, to what Frank terms as Caillois’ ‘humanist awakening’ (p. 33), epitomised by the essay ‘Patagonia’ in the second chapter.

Essentially, the book situates Caillois’ writing into three periods. Since Frank’s focus is on Caillois’ situation at ‘the edge of surrealism,’ these three chapters combine texts which, although diverse and almost entirely at odds with either the surrealists or with Bataille, nonetheless reveal the extent to which Caillois’ writings are a part of the history of surrealism. The first chapter, titled ‘Theory and the Thirties, 1934-1939,’ represents Caillois’ early relations with surrealism, his use of biology and mythography following his split with surrealism in 1935, and his writings from within, and later reflections on, the College of Sociology. Importantly, however, the writings concerning the College of Sociology do not repeat anything within Hollier’s edition of The College of Sociology, and in fact present Caillois’ writings from this period as having little in common with such College essays as ‘The Winter Wind,’ in which Caillois appears at his closest to Bataille.\(^1\) The second chapter, titled ‘Writing from Patagonia, 1940-1945,’ maps Caillois’ war-time exile in Argentina, where he participated in the avant-garde journal Surr, led by Victoria Ocampo, and from where he established the free-French journal Les Lettres françaises. This chapter helps to give a context to Caillois’ turn to humanism after the war, his establishment of the review Diogenes, and his work with UNESCO. The third chapter, entitled ‘Post-War Stances, 1946-1978,’ surveys the period from the immediate post-war writings to Caillois’ death. This chapter, which tackles the difficult task of finding a coherent structure to Caillois’ thought over such an extensive period, presents a selection of texts that reflect the writer’s post-war return to literature and in particular his objections to surrealist poetics.

Caillois joined the surrealist ranks in 1932, following a period of involvement with the group known as Le Grand Jeu, whose central figures, René Daumal and Roger Gilbert-Lecomte, had befriended the young Caillois in their home town of Reims. While Caillois exists in the English-speaking world as a neglected but nonetheless recognised figure within surrealistic
environ, Le Grand Jeu remain unrecognised, misrepresented, and generally scorned, most notably, for example, by such marginal surrealist figures as André Thirion. In her Ph.D. thesis, Frank was one of the first scholars to argue for the important influence of Le Grand Jeu on Caillois’ thought, and in The Edge of Surrealism her references to Le Grand Jeu certainly shed light on what are possibly Caillois’ most recognised ideas, at least in connection with surrealist studies. Frank writes that in part she traces back to Le Grand Jeu Caillois’ ‘lifelong obsession with depersonalization, the dissolution of the self, and the instinct d’abandon (instinct of letting go)’ which ‘he explored from “Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia” to Le Fleuve Alphée,’ (p. 9) – the latter being Caillois’ autobiographical text. ‘Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia’ is possibly Caillois’ most familiar text for students of surrealism. Published in Minotaure, 7, 1935, it has generally been seen to reflect Caillois’ interest in Pierre Janet and Sigmund Freud, in particular Freud’s Beyond the Pleasure Principle, and to have influenced Jacques Lacan’s notion of the ‘mirror stage,’ published in 1936. This withstanding, Frank’s commentary brings to this well-known text a greater contextual complexity by drawing it into relations with Le Grand Jeu’s negation of selfhood as well as Bachelard’s ideas on the disruption of spatial distinctions developed through his interpretation of contemporary physics.

In The Edge of Surrealism, ‘Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia’ is preceded by another of Caillois’s Minotaure articles, ‘The Praying Mantis,’ and although they were both published under the aegis of surrealism, Frank emphasises how both essays developed through Caillois’ dissatisfaction with what he considered surrealism’s lack of objectivity and scientific rigour. This dissatisfaction, Frank observes in her introduction, was symbolised by the clash between Breton and Caillois that occurred during the famous episode of the Mexican jumping bean. As the story goes, Caillois, in the spirit of scientific enquiry, wanted to open up the object but Breton absolutely insisted that it must retain intact in order to retain its mysterious animate character. (We are given another example of Caillois’ peevish enjoyment in spoiling Breton’s desire to retain the mystery of objects in Caillois’ post-war essay, ‘Surrealism as a World of Signs’; this time in relation to the revelatory mask of L’Amour fou: ‘I doubt that Breton was pleased when I brought him the complete object: a fencing mask worn by students during the Romantic era,’ p. 331). Caillois’ split with Breton led him to join forces with Tristan Tzara, Louis Aragon, Bachelard, and Jules Monnerot in establishing the review Inquisitions: Organe de recherche de la phénoménologie humaine, which ran for only one issue in June 1936 and, Frank writes, attempted to ‘uphold the Popular Front with ideological innovations reflecting the latest scientific breakthroughs’ (p. 16). The inclusion of Caillois’ article for this review, ‘For a Militant Orthodoxy: The Immediate Tasks of Modern Thought,’ is important for bridging Caillois’ surrealist break and his turn towards Bataille and the College of Sociology in 1937. Caillois’ essay follows the multi-disciplinary nature of his earlier surrealist explorations into entomology, mythography, and psychopathology, and marks the beginning of his attempts to theorise this multi-disciplinary methodology into a theory of ‘generalisation,’ which would
develop in the post-war years into the notion of a ‘diagonal science.’ This idea, according to Frank, ‘proposed an open series of new classifications based on creative, interdisciplinary taxonomies’ (p. 49), and it is represented in this anthology by Caillois’ essay published in 1970, ‘A New Plea for Diagonal Science.’

Caillois’ attempts to establish a form of imaginative science was formed by his reaction to surrealism’s lack of objectivity as he saw it, and yet, one can read in his essay for Inquisitions an argument against the tyranny of reason that further belies Caillois’ roots in surrealism: ‘A certain abstract and crudely reductive mentality (the terms “rationalist” and “positivist” here denote this sufficiently well) has obtained nothing by expelling into outer darkness all the irreducible elements of real-life experience that did not fit into its narrow framework. Such an uncomprehending attitude, which bore the seeds of its own demise, inevitably brought about various kinds of deadly results’ (p. 133). Recalling Breton’s manifestos and prefiguring future surrealist articulations of this theme in the 1940s, such as in Situation of Surrealism Between the Wars, it also prefigures Bataille’s reflections on surrealism of the 1940s.

Another important inclusion in this book is Caillois’ ‘Letter to André Breton’ of December 1934, in which he articulated certain criticisms of surrealism to which he would return in later writings. These ostensibly hinge upon his opposition to the surrealists’ poetic stance, and specifically their reliance on the ‘privileges’ of poetry, which he felt the surrealists utilise to absolve themselves of the need to develop the kinds of rigour that scientists have been forced to adopt. This poetic privilege Caillois perceived to be manifest in the surrealists’ insistence on mystification, intuition, and their lack of any coherent theory on the irrational: ‘The irrational: granted. But first and foremost, it must be coherent (I am thinking of that coherence in favour of which logic had to yield all down the line of the exact sciences). I want the irrational to be continuously overdetermined, like the structure of coral; it must combine into one single system everything that until now has been systematically excluded by a mode of reason that is still incomplete’ (p. 85). Very much like René Daumal’s ‘Open Letter to André Breton’ of 1930, which was written as a response to Breton’s criticisms of Le Grand Jeu in his Second Manifesto of Surrealism, Caillois here admits that he shares many goals with the surrealist leader, but they must agree to differ on their methodologies: ‘Of course, you and I still share, for example, a great number of common exigencies. Even so, because we have totally different views as to the methods most likely to fulfil them, collaboration is out of the question; we can merely offer each other support’ (p. 86). Frank’s selection of texts and her commentary help to guide the reader through these ‘common exigencies’ and provide a focus for Caillois’ differences with surrealism.

In the first chapter of the book, Frank draws our attention to Caillois’ early attempts to develop what he considered to be the shortcomings of surrealism’s lack of scientific objectivity concerning its theories of the image. Although his essays on the praying mantis and mimicry
may well contain ideas and obsessions shared with the surrealists, Frank emphasises how these essays attempt to ‘grant the image a systematic, scientific ground’ (p. 10), which Caillois felt lacking in surrealism. Frank notes that while Caillois considered Dalí’s paranoiac-critical method as the most successful surrealist attempt to provide an objective theory for the image, he nonetheless found it too subjective. Thus, Caillois’ *Minotaure* essays and his book *The Necessity of The Mind* (which remained unpublished until 1981) are significant for their introduction of the idea of the ‘ideogramme,’ which André Chastel defined to the editor as ‘a quest for the fundamental structures of the individual and collective imagination’ (p. 10).

Caillois’ turn to the questions of myth and the sacred in the late 1930s, and politics and morality in the 1940s, suspended his writings on the image. However, in the final chapter of the book, Frank has included several essays which represent Caillois’ return to the question of the image and surrealist poetics in general during and after the war. His critique of surrealism after the war is not only consistent with the issues he raised in the 1930s, but, thanks to the insights gained from reading texts of the intervening years, can also be seen to have been strengthened by his humanistic turn during the war. Several essays, including ‘The Situation of Poetry,’ ‘The Pythian Heritage (On the Nature of Poetic Inspiration),’ ‘The Image,’ ‘Fruitful Ambiguity,’ and ‘Surrealism as a World of Signs,’ all follow in some way the critique of surrealism offered in ‘Letter to André Breton.’ Published here in the final chapter of *The Edge of Surrealism*, following a diverse range of texts which correspond more strictly to Caillois’ relations with Bataille, these essays on poetry show how much Caillois was still invested in surrealist thought, albeit as an implacable critic.

In parallel with the clarification of Caillois’ relations with surrealism, this book offers a reading of Caillois’ debate with Bataille, initiated through their involvement in the Contre-Attaque group in 1935 and the College of Sociology in 1937. With the recent glut of writings on Bataille, Caillois has certainly appeared the lesser figure in discussions of either the attempted anti-fascist mobilisation of Contre-Attaque, or the quest, by the College of Sociology, for social renewal through a modern recapitulation of the sacred. Frank’s commentary attempts to provide a more balanced view, emphasising the importance of the exchange of thought which took place between Caillois and Bataille over the years. She underlines, for example, how much Caillois was influenced by Bataille’s essay ‘The Notion of Expenditure,’ published in *La Critique sociale* in 1933, and interestingly suggests how this influence can be seen to have been manifest early on his career in ‘Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia’ (1935), specifically in Caillois’ observations on the anti-utilitarian instincts of insects. In turn, Frank draws our attention to how it was Caillois’ academic studies in the sociology of religion with Mauss, and in comparative mythology with Dumézil at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, which led to his writing *Man and the Sacred* in 1939 at the age of twenty-six, and which earned him an authority that was very well respected by Bataille. We are reminded, for example, of how Bataille thanked Caillois in his text *L’Erotisme* (1957) for
‘having provided the first theoretical elaboration of “transgression” with Man and the Sacred’ (p. 398).

With regards to this intellectual relationship, Frank is keen to present Caillois as a restraining and corrective force upon Bataille, whose personal allure and Dionysian ideologies Caillois seems to have resisted. This would appear as much for intellectual reasons, such as his reservations over Bataille’s less cautious responses to the threat of fascism, as perhaps for fear of a very real dissolution of self in Bataille’s Acéphale group. Frank notes in her introduction to ‘The Function of Myth’ (1937) that Caillois had been influenced by Nietzsche’s notion of the orgiastische Selbstvernichtung (orgiastic self-destruction) in his writing on myth. This followed his writings in Minotaure on the deathly instincts of insects in ‘The Praying Mantis’ and ‘Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia,’ with all three essays constituting the first two chapters of his book Le Mythe et l’homme (1938). What Frank does not suggest in her commentaries, however, is that Caillois’ fascination with the instinct of self-dissolution or destruction, nurtured through Le Grand Jeu, may have had some determining influence on some form of self-preservation instinct necessary to resist Bataille. Frank thus avoids the kind of psychobiographical speculation that Hollier cannot resist in his commentary on Caillois.5

She presents a specific selection of texts which serve to represent Caillois’ writings on myth, society, and the sacred as far more tempered than those of Bataille, arguing for how Caillois brought ‘a note of scholarly calm and rigour’ (p. 110) to the debate on myth in the 1930s, specifically in response to the drive to use myth as a political weapon led by Bataille and the surrealists.

As much as Frank attempts to present Caillois’ writings on myth as crucially different to those of Bataille, in that they do not dwell on bloodshed and sacrifice but rather on festival, she does not shy away from addressing the problematic nature of what it was that Caillois was himself proposing in his ideas for the reinvigoration of society, and concomitantly his opposition to fascism. As an example of the more problematic aspects of Caillois’ writings at the time of the College of Sociology, Frank includes the essay ‘Aggressiveness as a Value’ (1937), which she describes as ‘unacceptable to contemporary readers in any political sense’ (p. 4), in that it promotes the use of violence for political ends, to be initiated by a militant elite order. Throughout her commentary though, Frank is careful to provide specific contexts for Caillois’ essays, and maintains that at the heart of Caillois’ position on fascism was his consistent opposition to its violence, irrationalism, and anti-intellectualism. This, she insists was not ambiguous in any way.

It is evident from this selection of writings that the idea of an elite was an obsession of Caillois’ and was central to his opposition to liberal bourgeois democracy. Whilst this idea never loses its problematic nature, Frank draws our attention to its different modulations and sources of influence, and includes two texts in which Caillois reflects upon his involvement
with two forms of contemporary ‘sects,’ the College of Sociology and Acéphale. On the former Caillois commented in an ‘Interview with Gilles Lapouge, June 1970’: ‘The war had shown us just how inane the College of Sociology’s endeavour had been. The dark forces we had dreamed of setting off had unleashed themselves entirely of their own accord, with results quite different from what we had expected’ (p. 145). While Caillois may have given his support to the ambitions of the College, this book serves to emphasise his resistance to the Acéphale adventure. His ‘Preamble to the Spirit of Sects’ was part of an ‘Essay on the Spirit of Sects,’ written in 1943 but not published in its entirety in France until 1964, due to the still sensitive nature of discussing Acéphale. This study of sects, Frank states, marked Caillois’ definitive break with Bataille. Frank’s commentary is extremely helpful here in grounding Caillois’ fascination with the notion of a ruling elite within his studies of mythography and literature. The idea was, it seems, influenced by Baudelaire’s ideas on a ruling aristocratic elite, which he saw as having much in common with James Frazer’s ‘The Magic Art and the Evolution of Kings,’ and ‘The Magic Origins of Royalty.’ It was also inflected, Frank informs us, with Caillois’ readings of ancient Chinese pre-Dynastic history, in which the positions of ruling moral authority and political administration were distinct. Whilst in exile in Argentina during the war Caillois continued his discussion of sects with the group gathered around the review Surr.

One such discussion is published here as ‘Discussions of Sociological Topics: On “Defense of the Republic”’, wherein Caillois’ definition of a ruling elite is defined as an ‘Order, in the religious sense of the word’ (p. 214). This ‘order’ would ideally, he suggests, exert power, not through coercion, but through ‘influence,’ which takes on the meaning of the contagious effect of the sacred as theorised in the College of Sociology. Interestingly, the group considered Gandhi as the most exemplary contemporary figure whose power arose from a moral and spiritual authority.

The second chapter of The Edge of Surrealism provides the reader with texts and commentary that help to situate Caillois’ aforementioned ‘humanist awakening,’ a major part of which was his critical reflection upon the College of Sociology and his obsession with sects. Frank includes comments by Caillois on his rejection of the idea of sects as belonging to youthful predilections that were ‘novelistic,’ ‘personal,’ ‘imaginary,’ ‘futile,’ and caused by ‘excessive romanticism’ (p. 206). Perhaps the most astonishing of texts published here – astonishing in that it so clearly marks a huge shift in Caillois thoughts on power and revolution – is ‘Patagonia,’ first published in the review Renaissance, 1943. Written after his journey down the Argentine coastline and back up along the Chilean shore, this essay is a meditation upon the bleak coastline of Patagonia and how it represents for him the enormous efforts of the past to build a civilisation in the face of natural obstacles – both those of the external environment and the internal obstacles in mans’ own nature. The essay reads as the work of a man humbled, disgusted at his previous destructive urges and turned to contemplate the moral value of even the smallest of collective efforts. He contemplates the most basic of tasks carried out by the first settlers in the New World and their transposition of traditional
knowledge: ‘the precepts for harnessing animals and pruning fruit trees, for lace patterns and embroidery stitches; the recipes for distilling and bottling spirits; advice on how to serve them, and on the proper way to drink them …’ (p. 247). Caillois thus marvels at the efforts of rediscovering ‘every rule of a secret, delicate syntax that was never formulated,’ and the careful, constructive values that generate community, build civilisations, and nurture the ‘invisible treasures’ that constitute the soul of man. This essay, Frank notes, marks Caillois’ new respect for men’s achievements and his rejection of his previous insistence on the powerful potential of harnessing men’s violent and vertiginous natural instincts. Poignantly inspired by a wind-swept Patagonian beach strewn with the carcases of animals, ‘the absence of man,’ Frank writes, ‘drew Caillois away from nature’ (p. 242). Not entirely, though, and the last essay in The Edge of Surrealism, ‘The Natural Fantastic,’ reveals how Caillois’ thought went full-circle, and how he returned to meditations upon men’s part within nature in the development of, what he called, his ‘materialist mysticism’ (p. 2).

This is a truly important book for students of surrealism, which covers a significant range of Caillois’ writings and provides the reader with a good grounding from which to explore further Caillois’ thought. In its insightful presentation of the complex and multi-disciplinary aspects of Caillois’ thought, Claudine Frank’s commentary is invaluable for both students new to Caillois and for the more advanced reader.

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5 In his afterword to The Necessity of the Mind, Denis Hollier does discuss Caillois’ theories as possibly having certain personal determinations. Here Caillois is presented as a man struggling with the temptations of the imagination and the dissolution of self, who shores up his ego with scientific defences. The Necessity of the Mind, trans. Michael Syrotinski. Venice, CA, 1990, 153-161. Frank has translated this text as Necessity of Mind.

For those who have followed Robert Rauschenberg's career, it would seem that this has, until recently and with notable exceptions, been a relatively undertheorised area. It is in this context that this book is a welcome attempt to redress that imbalance. In addition and perhaps more significantly, Branden Joseph has attempted to put in place a substantial theoretical basis for our understanding of one of the most significant artists to have emerged from the milieu that sits historically between Abstract Expressionism and later Pop Art and Minimalism. More broadly, Joseph's project is to refigure the ideas and intellects behind the art associated with the term neo-dada and, with the use of more recent theoretical ideas and methodologies, to identify an authentically new and challenging form of avant-gardism in the post-war period. His is a circuitous course which appears to have many different agendas, some of which he shares with other writers including those who have been published recently by October books. As such, this cannot fail to beg the question amongst Rauschenberg observers whether Joseph's project is one that will enhance our understanding of his work or utilise it in order to embody more far reaching cultural issues.

A superficial reading of Random Order appears to confirm the latter view. In a significant number of cases Rauschenberg's mentor and collaborator John Cage stands in as a more erudite and conceptually sophisticated surrogate for the artist himself. In chapter one, for example, it is Cage's more consistent reading of Rauschenberg's infamous White Paintings of 1951–52 that is privileged over the latter's almost embarrassing naivety and interest in spiritual symbolism that informs his understanding of these works at the time that they were executed. From this reading Joseph proceeds tangentially to an in-depth exegesis of Cage's understanding of first Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, then Henri Bergson and eventually – in order to provide a perhaps more contemporary spin – to Gilles Deleuze. This trajectory is repeated in subsequent chapters to varying degrees and with a variety of different interlocutors, some of whom are much less obvious than Cage. For example, in chapter three we are asked to consider Rauschenberg's approach to performance in the light of the writing of Antonin Artaud when all we are offered as evidence that validates this connection are the discussions of Artaud's The Theatre and its Double at Black Mountain College hosted by M. C. Richards at which Rauschenberg may have been present. Again, other than a comparison of certain statements made by Rauschenberg (in none of which Artaud is actually named) with passages by Artaud that seem to articulate similar ideas, the author's exploration in this area is shored up by Cage or more accurately his collaborator David Tudor. Earlier in the same chapter the absurdism of Rauschenberg's theatre pieces (particularly those made in collaboration with the Judson Dance Theatre) is related to what Joseph calls an 'idiosyncratic'
reading of Marcel Duchamp’s *Large Glass* put forward by Michel Carrouges. In this, Carrouges focuses on the element of the Large Glass that is identified as ‘the bachelor machine,’ an entity that ‘appears first of all as an impossible, useless, incomprehensible, delirious machine’ but which can also be considered to illustrate a particular mode of behaviour as exemplified by certain arbitrary or more specifically destructive actions (p. 232). Thus the smashing of eggs in the Rauschenberg-choreographed *Spring Training* (1965) is linked to Carrouges’ proposal that ‘the bachelor machine’s specific function is solitude and death’ (p. 235). The prescriptive nature of this reference is curious since its symbolic tone contradicts not only Joseph’s rejection elsewhere of understanding Rauschenberg’s work in this way but also the artist’s strident opposition when exactly these kinds of metaphorical associations were applied to his black paintings.\(^5\)

The goal of Joseph’s exegesis, as the book’s title indicates, is primarily to locate Rauschenberg and Cage within a neo-avant-garde, one that mounts an assault upon conventional notions of art works as symbolic manifestations of an individual ego or a singular subject matter. As Joseph puts it in his introduction, Rauschenberg’s position ‘forms part of a distinct strain of avant-garde production heretofore unrecognised in its consistency, seriousness, and oppositional intent’ (p. 5). The genealogy that Joseph attempts to instate has the effect of introducing the notion of a *post-modern* avant-garde, one that embraces plurality and difference as a norm and has little to do with more historical notions of transgressive art.\(^6\) Instead of the neo-avant-garde mounting a full frontal assault on the institution of art, in the work of Rauschenberg and Cage as it is presented in *Random Order*, the challenge is towards conventional (Western, in Cage’s case) notions of subjectivity and its surrogate in the age of mass-media. Therefore, what Joseph sees Rauschenberg as putting into place in his early work is ‘a positive, non-anthropocentric force of difference’ (p. 195) in order to counteract firstly the illusion that subjectivity is unified and self-identical and secondly the simulacral ‘spectacular representational presence’ (p. 191) proposed by the television image. To Joseph’s credit, it is clear that many of these views are inspired by observations deriving from the works themselves as well as accounts given by the artist and there are several detailed and lucid descriptions that serve to anchor Joseph’s various theses. For example, chapter five is perhaps the only sustained attempt to date to understand Rauschenberg’s approach to live performance; the exploration of key works such as *Collection* (1954) in chapter two exposes Rauschenberg’s reflection on the status of painting in the mid-1950s, which informed his early Combine paintings and which perhaps represents his most profound contribution both to painting as a medium and to contemporary debates surrounding the art object. Substantiating the broader implications that Joseph detects in Rauschenberg’s work is, however, more problematic and, as I have indicated, requires that he make connections that are distinctly equivocal.
This kind of intellectual promiscuity shown by Joseph in *Random Order* can be understood on a number of different levels. Firstly, it might be seen as the output of an author who is handicapped by the absence of broadly intellectual discourse on the part of Rauschenberg with the result that any suggestion of a wider-reaching political or cultural agenda informing his work is bound to depend on a significant level of conjecture. Secondly, *Random Order* is far from being a unique instance of a writer’s apparent exploitation of Rauschenberg’s work in order to serve more ambitious intellectual ends: it would perhaps be more accurate to say that it is part of a distinct tendency in writings about this artist. From Leo Steinberg’s epochal essay, *Other Criteria*, through Calvin Tomkins’ *Off the Wall: Robert Rauschenberg and the Art World of Our Time*, to Douglas Crimp’s *On the Museum’s Ruins*, it seems that Rauschenberg is destined to provide an illustration for concepts or contexts that would otherwise lack an apposite visual equivalent. The third level on which we might approach Joseph’s treatment of Rauschenberg’s work demands that we turn our attention to our established expectations of theoretical writing concerning the visual arts.

Both Rosalind Krauss and Joseph have referred to the inappropriateness of any in-depth analysis of Rauschenberg’s iconography. That said, the observation that analysis of any symbolic connotation in his work has often stopped short of a comprehensive explanation of the artist’s repeated use of certain images and of enigmatic titles has been made by writers as far back as the 1970s when, for example, Charles Stuckey mounted a rather rigid analysis of Rauschenberg’s *Rebus* (1955). A few years later Roger Cranshaw and Adrian Lewis took issue with what they saw as the predominance of writing about Rauschenberg’s work that focused on ‘decomposition rather than composition, discontinuity rather than continuity (both in individual works and between works).’ Instead of a straightforward enunciation of the objects, images and formats used in his work, Cranshaw and Lewis explore the possible formal and semiotic operating of these elements in order to coax out the communicative function of his works. This kind of analysis has laid low until the late 1980s when the emergence of queer theory as a significant theoretical voice began to reconsider Rauschenberg’s imagery in terms of the iconography of closeted homoeroticism. Significantly, in *Random Order* Joseph dwells neither on established iconographic analyses nor on the coded messages that writers such as Jonathan Katz have attempted to reveal. Rather, he states his belief that ‘Rauschenberg pursued forms of aesthetic signification and Spectatorial reception that *challenge* traditional signifying means’ (p. 11, my italics).

It is important to note that due to the powerful impact in recent years of both linguistic theory and gender studies on writing about art the differing approaches to understanding Rauschenberg’s use of imagery in terms of either unconventional or more broadly conventional modes of signification reveals a potentially powerful schism between deconstruction and queer theory. In considering why sexual difference is not apparently as valid as the philosophical readings of difference – *à la* Bergson or Deleuze – that the author...
explores, Joseph concludes that a particular sexuality implies a stable subjectivism that is at odds with ‘the radically individualized reception instigated by the White Paintings’ (p. 67), a reception that changes for each viewer each separate moment in which they are confronted by the work. Although Joseph does not deny the validity of analysis of a work in terms of the artist’s sexuality, and admits that Rauschenberg does at times ‘traffic in signification’ (p. 290, note 27), he does not resurrect this debate in reference to the combines or the silkscreen works despite these being far more appropriate places to do so. The neo-avant-garde challenge as presented by Random Order has something disingenuous in this refusal to permit sexuality its role in at least bracketing the experience of an artwork dealing with difference just as Bergson or Deleuze’s philosophy is embedded in a certain ‘historically effected consciousness,’ to borrow a phrase from Hans Georg Gadamer.

But what of the works themselves and how they manifest the ‘challenge [to] traditional signifying means’ claimed by Joseph? His understanding of Rauschenberg’s transfer drawings and early photographic silkscreen prints as responses to the way in which television presents or represents images is telling. It is one thing to make a photographic screen print or a transfer drawing as a response to the phenomenon of television’s role as ‘instrument or agent of spectacle’ (p. 183), as Joseph puts it, and another to work with the medium in which that broadcast is actually presented as artists were beginning to in the late 1960s. Instead of an engagement with the ‘medium’ of the television picture, which at its core is mobile, transient and immaterial, the traces Rauschenberg provides us with are more like a static version akin to the retinal after-image, caused by exposure to bright lights, but fixed subsequently onto a flat, tangible surface. In other words, we seem to be witnessing a procedure that is an analogue of photography and not television. Even his experiments with technology appear to stubbornly resist television’s rapid annexation of imagery throughout the period with which Random Order deals: Rauschenberg uses broadcast sound only – in Broadcast (1959) – and static images which change location – as in Revolver (1967) amongst others – but never deals directly with televisual equipment. Couple this with Rauschenberg’s undoubted play with conventional pictorial, as well as linguistic, signification from the early combines to his most recent work, and his insistence on the imagistic properties of all of his work (including his performances) might be seen to represent a repetition of standard practices of the original Dada groups, from photomontage, absurdist cabaret and the machine imagery of Duchamp and Francis Picabia. That is not to say that Rauschenberg has not been supremely innovative in much of his work but rather that this innovation is undoubtedly bracketed by the specific means through which he chose to operate and that these have artistic precedents. In this respect, the pejorative connotations of the term neo-avant-garde put forward by commentators such as Peter Bürger are not dispelled by Rauschenberg.
Joseph makes it clear from the outset that his is a partial account and to imply anything else would contradict the departure that he is trying to effect from any totalising or hermetic definition of Rauschenberg’s early work. However, it might be worth considering the effects of accounts of Rauschenberg’s work that are uncritical or open-ended, or divide their focus between his practice and the art historical phenomena of which it is a symptom. How, for instance, does this help us interpret Rauschenberg’s early work in relation to his career as a whole, bearing in mind the general consensus that he has produced little of significance from the 1970s onwards? In Random Order, Joseph cites both Rauschenberg’s disenchantment at the failure of the radical political movements of the 1960s and his growing stature in the art establishment as the reason for the dilution of the critical effect of his work. However, Joseph simply does not provide enough compelling evidence for Rauschenberg’s immersion in radical politics here, and the reader whose sympathies lie with identity politics are left asking the question of why, if the neo-avant-garde are to be seen as an effective political as well as aesthetic voice, didn’t sexual difference at least become a factor in his work? Whilst Katz might cite Random Order as another example of ‘an insistent and damaging homophobia’ that has underpinned writing on Rauschenberg, others might give their criticism a different gloss.14 Cranshaw and Lewis, for example, would regard the use Joseph makes of the heterogeneity of Rauschenberg’s imagery as further evidence of the persistent absence of confrontation by many writers of the manner in which plurality appears in Rauschenberg’s work. Their view is that Rauschenberg’s work manifests an openness that begs a dialogue both inside and outside the art world; this has not been forthcoming. As Cranshaw and Lewis observe, an unwillingness to engage Rauschenberg’s work in a conventional formal or semiotic manner when the works themselves are clearly referencing established art forms or to merely admit that they ‘traffic in signification’ without exploring this avenue is to fail to connect with it on a sufficient number of levels. They insist that ‘no other body of critics was prepared to consider seriously Rauschenberg’s semiological ability, his capacity, that is, to manipulate and transmute the signs and meanings that were available to him.’15 This plea seems finally to have found a response in the re-inscription of Rauschenberg’s work by queer theory. In Random Order, this response is made to appear reactionary, and yet whilst contemporary art theory might demand of its ‘operatives’ an attempt to define an artist’s work outside the tradition of the monograph, and within the ‘perpetually flowing stream of writing’ as Roland Barthes would have it, this ‘stream’ now includes the powerful attempt by writers such as Katz at re Integrating iconographic analysis into writing about art.
Random Order can be rightly heralded as a significant attempt to approach, using current ideas, an artist whose career has long deserved such an in-depth reappraisal. Yet in the end we are left in the dark as to precisely what Rauschenberg’s true legacy is. With over thirty years of largely ineffective work as the net result of the period under discussion in this book, and no reference to his neo-avant-garde successors in later generations, the significance of ‘the distinct strain of avant-garde production’ to which Joseph refers in Random Order is hard to fathom. As such, the broader question of the relevance of the term avant-garde in the post-war as well as the post-modern era remain – perhaps deliberately – unanswered.

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1 As Joseph notes, the volume of writing on Rauschenberg has expanded considerably in the last ten years; other seminal essays which predate this period are Rosalind Krauss’s ‘Rauschenberg and the Materialized Image,’ Artforum, 13, December 1974, 36–43, and Leo Steinberg’s ‘Other Criteria,’ in Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth Century Art, New York, 1972 (the relevant parts of this essay also appear in ‘Reflections on the State of Criticism,’ Artforum, 10, March 1972, 37–49). A number of these have been collected in Branden W. Joseph, ed., Rauschenberg, Cambridge, MA and London, 2002. A few other notable contributions to a more complex understanding of Rauschenberg’s work will be referred to below.

2 The debate surrounding the origins of an authentic avant-garde in the post-war era, which is one of the main issues in this book, has also been dealt with by Hal Foster in The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century, Cambridge, MA and London, 1996. In this, Foster asserts a minimalist genealogy for the neo-avant-garde; Joseph, therefore, situates the neo-avant-garde shift earlier than Foster. Benjamin Buchloh also dwells on this issue in his Neo avant-garde and Culture Industry: Essays on European and American Art from 1955 to 1975, Cambridge MA, and London, 2000.

3 The first explanation by Rauschenberg of these works was given in a letter written to the gallery owner Betty Parsons dated 18 October 1951. The letter is reprinted in extracted form throughout chapter one.


5 In 1966 Rauschenberg expressed frustration in the critical perception of these works. He recalled: ‘they couldn’t see black as pigment. They moved immediately into association with “burned-out,” “tearing,” “nihilism” and “destruction.’” Quoted in Random Order, 86.

6 The debate concerning the relevance of a neo-avant-garde first set in place by Peter Bürger in his Theory of the Avant-Garde, Michael Shaw trans., Manchester, 1984 is taken up both by Hal Foster in The Return of the Real and here by Joseph.


9 Roger Cranshaw and Adrian Lewis, ‘Re-reading Rauschenberg,’ *Artscribe*, 29, June 1981, 44.


11 Rosalind Krauss identified this aspect of Rauschenberg’s work in ‘Rauschenberg and the Materialised Image,’ *Artforum*, 13, December 1974, 36–43, where she states ‘that images themselves, within the medium of Rauschenberg’s art are material substances’ (39).

12 By this I mean both his use of text in the works themselves and titles that seem to lead our understanding of the works in a particular direction.

13 Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*.


The celebrated photographs of André Breton, Diego Rivera and Léon Trotsky posing together in Mexico in 1938, at the time of their joint manifesto Pour un Art révolutionnaire indépendant, are usually seen as emblematic of a certain convergence of culture and revolutionary politics – and yet, paradoxically, most accounts of Surrealism’s engagement with politics pose the tide of revolutionary fervour as already receding by 1935, while 1938 has also been viewed as the year that Surrealism made the volte-face ‘from the street to the salon.’ A re-appraisal of Surrealism’s troubled relationship with political activism and organised politics has been long overdue, and therefore a collection which sets out not only to analyse in depth some of the key themes and crucial moments in that engagement, but also to rethink the condition of ‘the political’ itself in its relationship with culture, is to be welcomed.

In their introduction to this collection, Raymond Spiteri and Donald LaCoss take issue with what they view as the prevailing wisdom on Surrealism’s involvement in politics, an account which begins with the high jinks of the Surrealists’ interruption of the Saint-Pol-Roux banquet in July 1925, at the time of the Riff War in Morocco, extending through the movement’s troubled rapprochement with the Parti communiste français (PCF), and effectively ending in the summer of 1935 with the disruption of Breton’s intervention in the International Congress of Writers for the Defence of Culture. This latter event prompted the suicide of René Crevel and concluded with the definitive rejection by Surrealism of Stalinist communism with the publication in August 1935 of the pamphlet Du temps que les Surréalistes avaient raison. Spiteri and LaCoss challenge this delimiting of Surrealist political activity to the decade 1925–35, instead tracing its genesis back to the Paris Dada period, while also extending it beyond the mid-1930s and on into the postwar period. To effect this extension of political engagement, however, requires that they radically re-configure the definition as to what actually constitutes the ‘political,’ and in this the editors draw upon the distinction made by Claude Lefort in his essay ‘The Question of Democracy,’ between ‘politics’ [‘la politique’] as the particular institutional forms of political organization and activity in a society,’ and ‘the political’ [‘le politique’] as ‘the movement that constitutes the social space of a particular society.’1 On the one hand, then, we have overt Surrealist engagement in ‘politics’ in the form of tracts, statements and other direct interventions within politicised contexts, while on the other hand we have a far more wide-ranging commitment to ‘the political’ in what Spiteri and LaCoss characterise as ‘an experience of freedom grounded in the imaginative possibilities revealed through creative endeavour.’ It is this latter experience, the editors argue, ‘that constituted the link between the artistic or literary plane and the social plane, between culture and politics in Surrealism.’2 While this approach has the undoubted advantage of vastly expanding the scope of what might legitimately be considered political activity – and there are
numerous examples within this excellent collection where such a re-interpretation pays enormous dividends – there are perhaps also occasions where one could reasonably question whether the term ‘political’ is in fact being deployed in any meaningful sense. Nonetheless, this journey through a re-configured political landscape, together with the challenge that it poses to our pre-conceptions of ‘the political,’ is well worth making and we emerge from it with a fresh appreciation of Surrealism’s politico-cultural engagement.

Robert Short’s classic account The Politics of Surrealism, 1920-36, written in 1966 and reprinted in this collection, plays a pivotal role within it. Short’s crisply written and much-cited essay is posed as the orthodoxy which the rest of the collection seeks to challenge or expand upon, though in many ways it refuses to be confined to that role. While Short’s account is one of the heroic ‘failure’ of the Surrealist political enterprise, it is a failure premised upon the movement’s attempt ‘to associate its intellectual, artistic and moral preoccupations with the aims of international Communism.’ But as Short also makes clear, this failure and the breach with organised communism did not mean that Surrealism abandoned the political path. In fact, political participation continued throughout the history of the movement, as for example in Surrealist anti-fascist activity, involvement in the Spanish Republic as well as Surrealist participation in the short-lived revolutionary movements Contre-Attaque and the Fédération internationale de l’art révolutionnaire indépendant (FIARI). The Surrealists’ failure was therefore quite specifically that of failing to attain their goal of bringing together ‘spiritual revolution’ with that of international communism, such that, after 1935, the ‘group’s artistic and political activities were definitively separated.’ Short is also acutely aware of the slippery problem of defining Surrealist political activity and suggests that the term ‘politics’ might be a misnomer in this context, given the movement’s broad restriction of its activity to the stage of agitation and that the Surrealists either ‘rejected or were incapable of the sustained application which commitment demanded.’ The timing of Short’s essay is also interesting, coming as it does (September 1966) at precisely the time of Breton’s death and at a time when post-Surrealist groups, and in particular the Situationist International, were already preparing for the events of May 1968, when the Situationists would participate in the building of barricades in the rue Gay-Lussac.

The re-interrogation of proto-Surrealist political attitudes during the period of Paris Dada is undertaken by Theresa Papanikolas in her essay ‘Towards a New Construction: Breton’s Break with Dada and the Formation of Surrealism,’ which explores the influence of Max Stirner’s The Ego and His Own (1845) and in particular what Papanikolas designates as the group’s ‘anarchoindividualism.’ The mock trial of Maurice Barrès conducted by Breton in May 1921 is often portrayed as a trial of the betrayal of the idealism of youth, but in fact assumes a far more political dimension when Barrès is acknowledged as having been admired by Breton’s generation as an exponent of Stirner’s anarchoindividualism. While Barrès’s trilogy Le Culte du moi (1910) is permeated by Stirner’s thought, the final volume saw a retreat from
individualism and a shift towards recognising the self as part of a greater, national whole – hence Barrès’s political journey to the right, eventually becoming emblematic of the reactionary nature of the Third Republic. The trial also provided the occasion for Breton to interrogate Tzara on his own anarchoindividualism and hence to move on from the destructive bias of Dada, to the far more creative project that was to become Surrealism.

In his own contribution to this volume, ‘Surrealism and the Political Physiognomy of the Marvellous,’ Raymond Spiteri draws upon Walter Benjamin’s concept of the ‘image realm’ in order to explore some of Surrealism’s complex involvement in revolutionary politics and to analyse the tangled interrelationship of culture with politics. Spiteri juxtaposes two ‘failed encounters’ of Surrealism within social space – Breton’s short-lived encounter with Nadja in October 1926, and the group’s tortuous attempts between 1926 and 1927 to join the PCF – and treats Breton’s writing of *Nadja* (1928) towards the end of 1927 as a kind of ‘working through’ of those two encounters. Spiteri’s analysis of *Nadja* focuses upon Breton’s deployment of photographs in that volume, which provides, he argues, a concrete example of Benjamin’s notion of the ‘image-realm,’ where the images ‘seem to trace Surrealism’s trajectory across the social space, suspended between the fields of culture and politics.”

However, Breton’s appeal to the concept of the ‘marvellous’ ultimately fails to bridge the gap between imagination and action, and fails to transform latent possibility into concrete revolutionary action. A close reading of *Nadja*, Spiteri concludes, reveals Surrealism’s ‘profound ambivalence’ towards political action, but that the encounter can nonetheless be conceived as successful to the extent that it facilitates the manifestation of the ‘political’ within Surrealism. Surrealist political activism, Spiteri argues, ‘rarely managed to escape the orbit of culture’ and its engagement with revolutionary politics consequently ‘assumed the form of a series of missed or failed encounters.’

Cultural politics again provides the central theme of Elena Filipovic’s essay, ‘Surrealism in 1938: The Exhibition at War,’ which finds its focus in Duchamp’s staging of the *Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme* at Georges Wildenstein’s Paris gallery in 1938. Whereas this show is widely perceived as a sign of Surrealism’s withdrawal from political activism, Filipovic takes issue with the argument that it marks, in Susan Rubin Suleiman’s phrase, a shift ‘from the street to the salon.’ Her contention is that the assumption of Surrealism’s withdrawal from politics rests upon ‘stable notions of aesthetics and politics’ and a notion of ‘political’ activity as constrained to overtly political actions. Instead, Filipovic contends that: ‘it is precisely in this newly privileged Surrealist arena for expression – the exhibition space itself – that I would argue that the *Exposition* sought to redefine the movement’s relationship to the ideological.” Filipovic sets up an intriguing opposition between, on the one hand, the two highly political exhibitions held in Munich in the summer of 1937 – the *Grosse Deutsche Kunstaussstellung* and the notorious *Entartete Kunst* shows – and on the other, the dark and dank show created by Duchamp in Paris, with its ‘1200’ coal sacks suspended from the ceiling and a floor strewn
with dirt and dead leaves, while the opening night crowd picked their way through the darkness with the aid of torches. Filipovic’s point is that the exhibition space itself was already highly politicised by the late 1930s and that we must therefore read Duchamp’s gesture, not as a retreat from, but rather as a shift towards politics: ‘the Surrealists’ idiosyncratic installation defined a form of ideological critique that concentrated on the disruptive potential of process, ephemerality, instability and visual frustration ...’.

While the point is well made, it nonetheless leaves valid questions – given that the protagonists themselves made no overt political claims for the show (particularly given Duchamp’s own celebrated attitude of detachment), and that, as Filipovic herself points out, it was ‘the overwhelming opinion of the press and critics in 1938’ that the show marked a retreat from politics – as to the extent to which an event so lacking in political intent or consequences could still be considered in any meaningful sense to be ‘political.’ The dancer Hélène Vanel performed a convulsive-hysteric dance within the exhibition space, suggesting to Filipovic an opposition between the hysterical female body of Surrealism and the rational, disciplined and ordered bodies of the Nazi parades and spectacles – though in terms of sexual politics, if Breton and Aragon could still celebrate ‘Le Cinquantenaire de l’hystérie’ in 1928, the joke, a decade later, was surely wearing thin. Certainly more ominous, even premonitory, was ‘the inclusion of loudspeakers blaring the German army’s “pas de parade” at the opening night of the exhibition,’ and Filipovic’s broader point about the increasing politicisation of the exhibition space during the late 1930s is well made.

Gender and body politics is surely an outstanding exception to the general neglect of the political within Surrealism and figures within a number of contributions to this volume, considered variously from the standpoints of such themes as masculinity, misogyny and pornography. In her essay ‘Advertising Surrealist Masculinities: André Kertész in Paris,’ Amy Lyford explores the depiction of masculinity in the work of Kertész – a figure somewhat outside the mainstream of Surrealist activity – in a portrayal at odds with the postwar rhetoric of regeneration and which instead presents ‘the traumatised male body as a sign of modern French culture.’

Lyford’s contention that Surrealism borrowed from contemporary publicity techniques in ‘producing and disseminating images permeated by a language that emphasized dismemberment instead of a seamless process of reconstruction’ is certainly fascinating, though perhaps not fully borne out by the example of Kertész. This is in part a problem of Kertész’s still ambivalent status within the Surrealist movement, though the work of Ian Walker has required a rethinking of the role of documentary photography within Surrealism, which, in shifting attention towards material reality and the everyday, has potentially far-reaching implications for our understanding of Surrealist politics.

Alyce Mahon provides a sophisticated analysis of the photographic work of Hans Bellmer, drawing on the writings of Barthes (in particular his The Pleasure of the Text) and on Lyotard’s deployment of the term ‘libidinal politics’ in his book Libidinal Economy (1974). For
Lyotard, Mahon observes, libidinal economy is ‘connected to political economy as representation (ideological, artistic, fantasmatic) and production (economic and material production),’ where both representation and production are ‘part of a general process of libido-circulation,’ such that both the economic and the bodily systems are founded upon desire. In Lyotard’s terms, Bellmer’s ‘displacement’ and ‘substitution’ of the various body parts of his Poupée becomes conceived as an act of transgression – ‘as transgressing the unified body’ – and thus assumes a far broader socio-political dimension. Sited within this broader context, Mahon is able to argue of Bellmer’s project that its deployment of the female body ‘must be understood within the historical context of its production and reception as a subversion of gender and national politics in the pre- and wartime Germany.

Mahon thus provides further support for the re-reading of Bellmer effected by Hal Foster (Compulsive Beauty) and Rosalind Krauss (Bachelors), though framed within a psychoanalytic reading of the work, wherein his violent assaults upon the female body are to be construed in terms of an affront to the fascist father, and more broadly as a transgression against the totalitarian body of the Nazi state that Bellmer abandoned in 1938. But as Foster himself observes, there are ‘problems with this work that cannot be resolved away’ and the poupées ‘produce misogynistic effects that may overwhelm any liberatory intentions,’ such that the work, notwithstanding its political inflection, nonetheless remains both deeply disturbing as well as highly problematic in terms of its sexual politics.

Jonathan P. Eburne’s ‘Surrealism Noir’ takes as its focus the case of the Papin sisters, whose sensational trial in 1933 following their bloody murder of their employers, provides the occasion for an analysis of Surrealist attitudes towards terrorist violence, paranoia and desire. Eburne argues a shift in the character of the Surrealist movement, from the ‘red’ period of political activism under the banner of Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution (1930–33), to what he designates the movement’s ‘noir’ period, characterised by ‘a renewed interest in formal innovation, mental aberration and automatism,’ and as exemplified in the shift in 1933 to Surrealism’s new and far more visually seductive vehicle, Minotaure. Eburne’s contention is not that this shift signals an end to Surrealism’s political ambitions, but rather that ‘Surrealism’s noir period is nonetheless driven by serious political concerns insofar as this dystopian theme actually performs analytical work in the service of the group’s political philosophy.’

Drawing upon the clichés of what Slavoj Žižek has called the ‘noir universe,’ Surrealism is thus able to map out in symbolic form the lived reality of a ‘world gone wrong’ of the 1930s.

Robin Adèle Greeley, in her analysis of the relationship established between Breton and Trotsky in Cárdenas’s Mexico in 1938, points to the neglect by scholars of the historical and ideological impact of Trotsky’s thinking upon Surrealism. Greeley’s essay takes as its focus the manifesto ‘For An Independent Revolutionary Art’ (1938), drafted by Breton and Trotsky (though signed, for reasons of political expediency, by Breton and Rivera), in order to tease
out the very different attitudes towards the role of culture held by the two men, with Breton according to culture a far more autonomous status in relation to the economic order than did Trotsky. For Greeley it is ‘Surrealism’s dedication to cultural theory’ that marks its ‘fundamental opposition to Trotsky’s more orthodox Marxism,’ and we could add that it is surely Breton’s unbending insistence upon individual liberty and cultural autonomy – ‘Aucune autorité, aucune contrainte, pas la moindre trace de commandement!’ – that pre-determined the failure of the movement’s rapprochement with organized politics.

Postcolonialism is now well established as a specific academic discourse and in relation to Surrealism, important work has already been carried out in areas like the Surrealist critique of France’s colonial heritage. The theme of anti-colonialism is directly addressed in Amanda Stansell’s essay ‘Surrealist Racial Politics at the Borders of “Reason”: Whiteness, Primitivism and Négritude.’ Like Filipovic, Stansell extends our conception of the political to the exhibition space itself, this time in the context of the Surrealists’ response to the International Colonial Exposition held in Paris in 1931, in the form of their exhibition ‘La Vérité sur les Colonies’ with its promiscuous juxtaposition of Western and colonial artefacts alongside one another. Stansell also touches upon Breton’s relationship with the Martinican poet Aimé Césaire and the limits of the Négritude movement, topics developed in greater depth in E. San Juan, Jr.’s essay ‘Aimé Césaire’s Insurrectionary Poetics.’ In a subtle and demanding reading of Césaire’s poetics, San Juan analyses the dialectical nature of the poet’s insurrectionary thought in its engagement with Surrealist concepts such as ‘objective chance’ and the ‘marvellous,’ through which contradictions (between dream and reality, reason and sensibility) are resolved.

With regard to Surrealism’s postwar political record, Donald LaCoss in his essay ‘Attacks of the Fantastic,’ challenges the arguments of the movement’s opponents in 1945, that Surrealism had abandoned political activism and had instead immersed itself in escapist utopianism, mythological themes and an obsession with the occult. LaCoss views Breton’s turn to utopianism as integral to Surrealism’s postwar radical politics and focuses in particular upon the role of Fourier’s thought in that project, considered not in terms of any practical ‘manual’ of social subversion, but rather for the work’s ‘potentially liberating effect upon the imagination.’ What also appealed to Surrealism in Fourier’s thought, LaCoss argues, is Fourier’s concern with the psychosocial – his concern with behavioural motivation and with creativity. In the context of the increasing paralysis of thought with the intensifying polarization between East and West culminating in the Cold War, and with growing conservatism in the United States, utopian speculation thus assumes a new importance as one aspect of the exercise of liberty of thought. LaCoss also points to the significance of Fourier for post-Surrealist movements such as the Situationist International, and while outside the scope of this particular essay, it might have been interesting to reconsider within this expanded notion.
of ‘the political,’ how Surrealist politico-cultural thought fed into the political activism of such groups and its relationship with, for example, the events of May 1968.

We should also mention two significant analyses of political interventions by painters not normally associated with overt political activism – Salvador Dalí and Joan Miró. Robert S. Lubar provides an extensive analysis of Miró’s Still Life with Old Shoe (1937) in terms of the artist’s political mediation of the tragic events experienced in Spain during 1936–37, where politics is inscribed through the very form of the artwork itself. Jordana Mendelson argues that Dalí’s explorations of paranoia and of Millet’s The Angelus in both his painting and writings, emerge crucially from Dalí’s engagement with mass culture and ‘have a political dimension which Dalí negotiates like a cultural critic.’ Mendelson also makes some interesting parallels between Bataille’s analysis of the structure of fascism, using concepts such as the ‘heterogeneous’ and ‘unproductive expenditure,’ and similar concepts in Dalí’s paranoiac-critical writings, though the two men clearly differed radically in terms of political engagement.

In the concluding essay of this collection, ‘Failure and Community: Preliminary Questions on the Political in the Culture of Surrealism,’ Michael Stone-Richards returns to the key question of the way in which the political is to be framed in relation to Surrealism. For Stone-Richards, considering the failure of Breton and Bataille in 1935 to present in Contre-Attaque a valid alternative to organised communism, Surrealism’s ‘failure’ needs to be viewed within the context of ‘the larger failure of European political culture’ during the 1930s (totalitarianism, Stalinism, Nazism), and the political thought of Breton and Bataille must also be seen as part of ‘the re-thinking of the conditions of the political’ of the time (for example in the work of Heidegger) in an effort to get beyond the present impasse. Drawing upon Jules Monnerot’s La Poésie moderne et le sacré (1945), a text admired by Breton, Stone-Richards also points to the centrality of the collective experience to the Surrealist movement, ‘an association,’ says Stone-Richards, ‘based upon solidarity, and election,’ where such solidarity serves to create an ‘ethical space’ enabling movement towards ‘a possible political realm.’ Stone-Richards further contends that, following the debacle with the PCF, ‘Surrealism gradually defined for itself a more ethically-based notion of protest ... which opposed itself to institutionalized forms of politics,’ as for example in the assumption of an attitude of ‘refusal.’16 Thus, while this enables the customary accounts of the failure of Surrealist politics in this period (Short, Lewis) to be criticised as ‘too simple,’ such a judgement demands a re-configuration of our conception as to what constitutes ‘the political,’ more particularly a shift from political activism into the territory of what is more usually considered the realm of ethics.

Quite apart from its considerable enhancement of our understanding of a number of specific cultural contexts, one of the central achievements of this collection is the challenge it poses to our preconceptions surrounding the meaning and functioning of the political in its engagement with culture, such that the scope for further research within this expanded field is greatly
increased. Surrealism's engagement with politics emerges from this interrogation as no less troubled, though as a field of study it emerges greatly invigorated – as such, this collection is to be commended.

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2 Spiteri and LaCoss, *Surrealism, Politics and Culture*.

3 The editors trace the source of this account to Maurice Nadeau’s *Histoire du surréalisme*, Paris, 1944, and see it reiterated in Helena Lewis’s *The Politics of Surrealism*, New York, 1988.


7 Elena Filipovic, ‘Surrealism in 1938: The Exhibition at War,’ in Spiteri and LaCoss (eds), *Surrealism, Politics and Culture*, 180 note 2.

8 Filipovic, ‘Surrealism in 1938’ in Spiteri and LaCoss (eds), *Surrealism, Politics and Culture*, 181.

9 Amy Lyford, in Spiteri and LaCoss (eds), *Surrealism, Politics and Culture*, 74.


14 Eburne, in Spiteri and LaCoss (eds), *Surrealism, Politics and Culture*, 95.


‘La rencontre était pour André Breton une raison de vivre’: the opening sentence of Georges Sebbag’s *André Breton: l’amour-folie* sets the tone of his study, aiming to retell some of the most famous love stories which illuminated André Breton’s life and whose magic/tragic twists of the ‘mad love’ plot sparked many versions of the history of surrealism. At the beginning of a new century, does Sebbag succeed in making us believe that there are more secrets to uncover about Breton’s love for life and (remarkable) women? Yes, without a shadow of a doubt – or more precisely, with the help of previously unpublished material throwing new light in all directions on four familiar female figures (Simone, Nadja, Suzanne Muzard and Lise Deharme alias ‘The lady with the pale blue gloves’ who haunts the first chapters of *Nadja*), all leading actresses on the Bretonian love stage, but still half kept in the grey areas inhabited by fugitive muses or static ladies-in-waiting, and only retrieved from the wings of surrealism by feminist studies.\(^1\) Yes again, with many sub-plots still to unfold, an acute sense of suspense, and a crafty art of the collage, relating hypotheses and facts to extracts of letters, criss-crossing references and dates, which creates a perfect mix and (mis)match of all characters involved (Simone Kahn-Breton with Max Morise, Léona Camille Ghislaine Decourt alias Nadja, Suzanne Muzard with Emmanuel Berl, or Lise Meyer, née Hirtz, soon to marry the radio pioneer, Paul Deharme).

If this new account of Breton’s loves is partial (we cannot fail to notice the conspicuous absences, as Elisa Breton and Jacqueline Lamba only appear in the odd photograph, and later admired women like Nelly Kaplan only feature as ‘la fée au chapeau de clarté’\(^2\) at the end of a sentence to establish a parallel with later stages in Breton’s life, while Valentine Hugo or Joyce Mansour are kept in the thick darkness of oblivion), this is because this study of *l’amour-folie* is focused on a particular period of Breton’s life. It centres around 1926 to 1928 and around Suzanne Muzard and Nadja (and the other favourites at the time, previously mentioned) in order to recast the dice of fated attractions and reconsider the singular/triangular/quadrilateral mad love stories or the madness of passion around all the women involved in Breton’s affections at the time: his first wife Simone, competing (or being quite accommodating) with Berl’s companion, Suzanne Muzard, who succeeded to Nadja and Lise Deharme. The result is far from a portrait of Breton as a fickle and lucky Don Juan (or even worse), since it is a clever interweaving of stories and possibilities, and (unavoidable) coincidences, leading to most suitable inconclusive conclusions, weaving references and dates around an unfinished portrait of Breton’s heart and mind in the late 1920s.

The titles of the chapters indicate the complex dynamism of the dual or triangular relationships, as well as give us a sense of restlessness as they follow the many travels
and peregrinations involved in these complicated love stories: after ‘Les confidences inachevées de Suzanne Muzard’ and ‘Les lettres éperdues de Nadja,’ we will face ‘La fin d’un amour sublime’ for Lise, replaced by ‘Clara [Malraux], Simone et Suzanne,’ or ‘Simone, Denise et Lise,’ and be transported (in Suzanne’s charming company) from ‘Du rat mort à Biarritz’ to ‘Avignon, palais des papes’ (innuendoes intended), to the ‘Manoir d’Ango et Château de Loups’ (a ‘heavy’ combination of words involving threatening wolves/loups indeed), only to flee further in ‘La fugue à Toulon,’ with a ‘Détour à Ajaccio,’ leading to ‘Tourbillons du Loing’ (Moret-sur-Loing). All of these, after many dramatic episodes of various ghosts and rivals, as seen in ‘Apparitions,’ ‘Les fantômes vinrent à sa rencontre,’ ‘Berl entre en scène’ and ‘Haro sur Berl,’ result in unexpected coups de théâtre: ‘Quand l’impossible donnera la main à l’imprévu,’ and more ‘Divorces et déchirements,’ before reconciliation in ‘Retrouvailles,’ finally leading to a more recent testimony from Suzanne Muzard in Fay-sous-Bois, during ‘Un Dimanche à la Muzardièrre’ in July 1988. No wonder coincidences multiply as well as personalities, under the sign of ambiguity: Suzanne Muzard is therefore revealed (and hidden) through the portrait of her childhood friend and double ‘Susana la perverse’ only to confuse us with another double ‘Une, deux, trois Suzanne.’

More importantly, Sebbag’s book gives back a voice to the successive queens of hearts who tamed this deeply amorous and adventurous spirit – a voice at least to two of them, Suzanne and Nadja, since Lise Deharme3 is still restricted to the silent role of a coquette or a drama (ice)queen, only viewed as the ungrateful recipient of Breton’s homage, while Simone Kahn-Breton’s letters, in particular to her cousin and confidente, Denise Lévy, have not been published yet.4 The originality of Sebbag’s study is undeniably his (adopted) female points of view, relying on extracts from Suzanne Muzard’s journal or interviews with her, as well as extracts from Nadja’s letters (previously unpublished and acquired by the Bibliothèque Jacques Doucet in April 2003 at Calmels and Cohen’s auction).5

The iconography of the volume is impressive and deeply moving: many previously unpublished pictures of Suzanne Muzard and Simone Breton, as well as a rare picture of Lise Deharme and drawings by Nadja, are scattered without real (recognisable) order among the chapters, therefore retaining a surprise effect to unsettle readers’ expectations. One should add that the aura of these images seems to be (without getting into any discussion about the Barthesian legacy in photography) partly mystic and mystifying, or deeply mysterious: after all, the previously secretive and unseen from the family album and private collections is now shown (frequently) for the first time in public, but how do we respond to this revelation in the case of a legend, if not by an initial sense of awe and eerie recognition? However, the quite informal photomatons6 of Muzard, for instance, also convey her exuberance and add a (light) touch of modernity, as well as
evoke (with a gender twist) all the more famous photomatons of male surreалиsts that have been reproduced over the years and have contributed to a (familiar) surrealist iconography.

After addressing the question of the viewpoint (as we have seen, at times an exclusively female - shall we say feminist? - viewpoint fluctuating around Suzanne Muzard and Nadja’s voices, and Simone’s changing moods, or fixed and encumbered by old stereotypes regarding surrealist women as mere muses, as in Deharme’s case), one question of format and content needs to be answered. Why does Sebbag’s book become somewhat chaotic after chapter 2? We might say the absence of order is more vivid, bringing back and forth arguments and anecdotes in a new combination, and seems much more faithful to surrealist aesthetics and ethics. After all, Sebbag was (is, one starts to suspect) a practising surrealist, part of the last group surrounding André Breton in the two years before his death in 1966, which gathered in Les Halles in the café La Promenade de Vénus, rue du Louvre. We might also suggest a simpler answer: endless wandering, visions, revisions of free will and free spirits and ‘objectively’ rushed or deliberately chosen ‘faits précipices’ are notoriously the key processes to retrace the ghosts of Nadja or Breton himself in Nadja. In order to follow the fluctuating movements and volte-faces of ‘l’errance de l’amour,’ with the surrealist heart beat oscillating towards Simone, Suzanne, Lise or Nadja, and therefore to trace the main phantoms haunting the thirty-year old Breton (who are still haunting us today, as this book shows remarkably well), I would suggest that Sebbag had no choice but to adopt a resolutely anti (or multi) chronological approach to pay justice to the intermittences and synchronicities of Breton’s volatile and explosant-fixe heart. It would appear that he was better off practising his own hand at collage techniques to give back a new dynamism to facts and legend, intermingling fiction and testimonies through a series of flashbacks and superimposed parallels. If these prove to be at times quite repetitive, they succeed nevertheless in mimicking and following the unpredictable detours taken by Eros and Cupid, governed by the twin supreme principles of hasard objectif and mad love, or even the madness of love, ‘amour-folie.’

A coincidence in the French literary world will not have escaped many readers. The March 2004 issue of Magazine littéraire offered a whole dossier dedicated to Nadja and reopens the (all too famous) Nadja case – or Breton’s (supposedly infamous) abandon or loss of interest? – with previously unpublished letters by Nadja. This whole reassessment, which attempts to see Breton in a new light (or actually cornered by contradictions and rather trapped in limbo between shadows of ‘amour fou’ and apparitions of ‘amour-folie’) owes a lot to Georges Sebbag’s meticulous scrutiny of every aspect of André Breton, l’amour-folie in the 1920s. Sebbag’s achievement in his latest book on surrealism is to give us a new portrait of Breton as a Mad Lover which also is (and remains rightly so) a
puzzle or a collage, a dually rigorous and ambiguous portrait based equally on facts and curious ‘rapprochements soudains’ or (‘petrifying’?) coincidences, all the more convincing in that it retains its aura of biographical vulnerability and uncertainty.

These fragmentary pieces are ready to be scattered, distorted and reassembled again in exquisitely uncanny patterns or utterly unpredictable combinations. Since the wave of pessimism or the mixed feelings which surrounded the Vente Breton at Calmels and Cohen in Paris in April 2003, André Breton: l’amour-folie will surely reconcile readers to the utterly commonsensical (or genuinely surreal) idea that what seems lost is never truly lost, and pave the way for the forthcoming editions of lost and found correspondence by surrealist women (or men) around Breton, who, hasard objectif oblige, cannot remain silenced for much longer. Nadja herself predicted that ‘l’âme errante’ and ‘l’âme des amants’ would not be pinned down that easily: ‘A André vers d’autres horizons et vers d’autres lumières.’

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Sebbag, André Breton: l’amour-folie, 99.

See Barnet, La Femme cent sexes, and ‘To Lise Deharme’s Lighthouse: Le Phare de Neuilly, a Forgotten Surrealist Review,’ in French Studies, 57: 3, 323-334.

Georgiana Colville (ed.), Correspondance Simone Kahn-Denise Lévy, forthcoming. Some of these letters have been published in German in Unda Hörner, Die realen Frauen der Surrealisten, Mannheim, 1996.

Complex negotiations are apparently taking place to publish Nadja’s 27 manuscript letters but her correspondence can be (partly) accessed and consulted at www.calmelscohen.com, on the section of the site entitled ‘Breton, 42 rue Fontaine,’ where it is described as the ‘Correspondance exceptionnelle du plus romanesque et mythique personnage de la littérature surrealiste: Nadja.’ See Bernard Fauconnier, ‘Les Secrets de Nadja: enquête sur le chef-d’œuvre d’André Breton,’ in Magazine littéraire, no. 429, March 2004, 96-103 for more extracts and note 6, 103. More details of the sale of Breton’s collections at Drouot-Richelieu (how much and how many ‘moules à hosties’?) are also available and manuscripts of all letters by Nadja are visible (if not always that easy to decipher).

7Nadja, ‘La Fleur des Amants’ (1926), and see the dedication of her poem to Breton written on the back of the famous eye-flower drawing at www.calmelscohen.com, ‘Breton, 42 rue Fontaine.’