Sound work and visionary prosthetics: artistic experiments in Raoul Hausmann

Cornelius Borck

Abstract
The oeuvre of Raoul Hausmann, Berlin's 'Dadasoph,' provides a rich case of an artistic experimentalism revolving around prosthetic devices. Highly critical of the contemporary technosciences and their way of fixing maimed bodies by means of prosthesis, Hausmann did not disregard prosthetic technologies in general, quite the contrary, he had larger aims with them in mind. He envisioned the fusion of art and technology as a decisive step in the shaping of 'new man,' the human of the future, liberated from the constraints of nature and tradition. Several of his innovative art forms like the photomontage or his typographic arrangements focus on this double aim of breaking away from tradition and transgressing the biological boundaries of the body. Hausmann's vision of re-engineered human bodies perceiving 'nature' in hitherto unknown ways may have lost much of its appeal, but his art opened up new ways of exploring technoscientific epistemologies.

We demand the extension and conquest of every sensory capacity.

Raoul Hausmann¹

At a recent conference on the achievements and breakthroughs in the design of retinal implants, the principal investigator of one of the leading teams competing for the first successful implantation of a microchip into a degenerated human eye proudly reported on the concepts of his group, the promising results of their pilot studies and the preparations for a clinical trial.² In the discussion that followed, a colleague asked whether the group also planned to implant devices extending the visible spectrum into infrared or ultraviolet light. The question may seem farfetched, but in fact, common photosensitive elements differ from the human eye in the wavelength at which they activate, and infrared sensors are common tools. However, all of a sudden the atmosphere at the conference changed. The scientist tried to contain his surprise and irritation by underlining how natural the entire project was, involving nothing but a technological replacement for a natural process, a device limited to the very specifications of the physiological. The question had obviously touched upon a literally 'sensitive' issue. Apparently it becomes important to insist all the more on the alleged naturalness of a scientific project and to maintain established borders, when technoscience goes science fiction.

Today and with the sciences' truly fantastic potential it may have become more evident that the sciences conjure up artificial worlds and invoke science fiction; according to the French
epistemologist Gaston Bachelard, however, this is nothing categorically new but the direct consequence of the sciences’ move from observation to experimentation:

Once the step is taken from observation to experimentation, the polemical character of knowledge stands out even more sharply. New phenomena must be selected, filtered, purified, shaped by instruments [...]. A truly scientific phenomenology is therefore essentially a phenomeno-technology. Its purpose is to amplify what is revealed beyond appearance. It takes its instruction from construction. Wonderworking reason designs its own miracles. Science conjures up a world, [...] modern science has moved on to the project of constructing a world in the image of reason.  

According to Bachelard, the modern sciences are ways of projecting and shaping the world, and in this respect they are as constructive as the arts. Bachelard conceptualised of the sciences as constructive ‘phenomeno-technologies’ on the basis of his thorough analysis of the epistemological revolution in theoretical physics at the beginning of the twentieth century. When he published *The New Scientific Spirit* in 1934, it brought him in contact with another group interested in transgressing the taken-for-granted boundaries of reason and reality. Invited to contribute to the inaugural issue of the surrealists’ review *Inquisitions*, Bachelard welcomed surrealism in a short piece exploring some epistemological links between the sciences and the arts. 

Entitled ‘Le surrationalisme’ and printed as the journal’s opening article, it drew an analogy between how the surrealists employed poetic freedom in order to acquire perceptual fluidity and how experimental rationality organized reality. In the twentieth century, it has become a truism to state that experimentation unites art and science, but it still is not obvious what exactly these practices share and where they differ. According to Bachelard a constructive dynamism bridges the two. The surrealists mobilised perception to get beyond visible appearances in somewhat similar ways as the sciences reconstructed reality in accordance with scientific reason.

Bachelard’s notion of ‘surrationalism’ was more than a playful tribute to an avant-garde of his time, as his further elaborations on this term in his *La philosophie du non* testify. The translator of this book, however, felt nonetheless obliged to make an apologetic comment before introducing the famous neologism into English. ‘The translator has his choice: super-rationalism, supra-rationalism, even, perhaps, meta-rationalism. But, since it seems to be Bachelard’s intention to link *surrationalisme* with literary and artistic *surréalisme*, it seems appropriate to make an English neologism, “surrationalism”.’ Some fifty years later and following the application of, for example, particle physics to the construction of atomic bombs, synthetic chemistry to the production of ozone holes, neurosciences and nanotechnology to the development of the retinal implant, it is probably less the constructivist undertone of Bachelard’s surrationalism that provokes criticism than its intrinsic optimism. It can hardly be questioned that the modern
technosciences construct reality as much as they determine it. If anything, one could wonder where the surrealists’ creative freedom has gone and whether one may still find an analogue of it in contemporary scientific activity.

Bachelard’s observation, however, that constructions from the field of the arts may serve as exemplars for epistemological reasoning and analysis, calls for further reflection. First of all, it offers a much more intriguing insight into the parallels between the arts and the sciences than their usual pairing as humankind’s most creative enterprises. The crucial aspect of both art and science is less their creativity per se than their potential for changing reality, their experimentalism. On this shared basis, however, it seems that experimentation in both realms followed and follows different principles. Where the scientist quoted at the beginning of this article stressed the ‘naturalness’ of the prosthetic device soon to be tested in a first series of clinical trials, contemporary performance artists such as Stelarc, for example, explore the ‘posthuman’ by emphasising the very artificiality of the hybridisation of human beings with machines. In a certain respect, it seems, artists develop not only the more critical but also the more radical projects in the field of visual prosthesis. It thus becomes not only a promising enrichment but also almost a prerequisite to investigate visual culture and experiments in contemporary art in order to arrive at a sufficiently rich understanding of experimentation in modernity.

This is certainly a task far beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, I offer a preliminary case study of an early example of artistic experimentation in the field of visual prosthesis. Raoul Hausmann, contemporary of Bachelard and Berlin’s most prominent Dada artist, offers a particularly rich case for investigating the ambiguities of prosthetic vision. I will examine some of his artworks as a form of experimentation in between artistic and scientific exploration. I am not interested in portraying him as a ‘scientific’ artist, nor as an ‘artful’ or ‘artistic’ scientist, though such readings may be plausible and even productive. Instead, I want to use Bachelard’s argument about the epistemological similarities between these two practices to introduce Hausmann’s works as a case study on experimentalism in the visual arts, more specifically in artistic perception and sensory prosthesis. After all, in his short essay on surrationalism, Bachelard localized the tertium comparationis in the appropriation of sensory perception by artistic and scientific experimentation and saw in the ‘fluidity’ of perception as effectuated by the surrealists one of their biggest accomplishments. Hausmann engaged in both, exploring sensory perception by means of innovative art forms, and constructing prosthetic devices that transformed sound and light into each other. His work does probably not offer any straightforward advice for dealing with the irritation that so suddenly erupted at the conference mentioned at the beginning of this article. But his art operates in a space which transgressed 80 years ago the ontology the scientist concerned so desperately wanted to see remain in place today, even though (or because) his experiments were constantly undermining this very ontology of stable natural objects.
My analysis of Hausmann and Berlin Dada also follows another line of inquiry. I aim at developing notions of experimentation that cut across disciplinary boundaries for the purpose of integrating the history of science into a larger cultural history of knowledge. In the context of a project on how electricity became a medium of psychic life during the first half of the twentieth century, I studied the specific spaces of experimentation, since a substantial number of the activities and debates crucial for the emergence of a field of ‘electro-psycho-physiology’ did not take place in scientific laboratories or journals. Radio stations engaged in large-scale trials on electrical telepathy, for example, and the new cultural practice of listening to the radio required a fair amount of skillful experimentation at home. The public did not only listen to the news about scientific experiments; the very process of society’s technological modernisation itself presented new scientific questions. Building on earlier work on the ‘experimentalisation of life’ by laboratory physiology during the nineteenth century, these science-in-culture dynamics could be described as an experimentalisation of everyday life, in terms designed to capture and heighten this particular aspect of the scientific culture during the early twentieth century by which potentially every aspect of human life and social activity could be subjected to scientific exploration and mobilisation.

The experimentalisation of everyday life would have to account for both the rationalisation of the life-world in Weberian terms and its re-enchantment by the very means of modernity; a process of heightened scientific control but also of increased complexity as a result of the dissolution of traditions and customs. A remark by Walter Benjamin on the new life in revolutionary Moscow connects these more general remarks to my topic here since it captures, in my understanding, quite precisely the essential elements of the spirit of Berlin Dada, pertinent with regard to the larger project of a cultural history of experimentation: ‘Each thought, each day, each life lies here as on a laboratory table.’ Benjamin’s observation of a culture of radical experimentalisation shall serve here as the guiding perspective for examining Raoul Hausmann’s Dadaist activities. Berlin Dada occurred at a moment in German history that certainly differed in many respects from life in Moscow during these years. Nevertheless, by German standards, these were truly tumultuous and revolutionary years. Experimentation took place on almost every level and in every corner of society. The Dadaists’ slogan of ‘being anti-everything’ captures something of that spirit: ‘[The Dadaists] followed the play-instinct wherever it led them and paid no heed to God or man, art or society, but only to their own unrest, THEMSELVES, the need for change. … Dada in its pure state was pure revolt, ANTI-EVERYTHING!’ Again, I am not interested in ascribing to Hausmann or the Dadaists the conscious intention to experiment in radical ways. Benjamin’s notion of everyday experimentation, which I employ here precisely to move away from this form of personalised history, points to the significance of the larger cultural context. The Dada movement took place right in the heart of society; the Dadaists engaged with the public. In Berlin, one could argue, Dada subjected the public to experiments; it was an
experimentalism in public and with the public. By investigating some of their artistic practices, I hope to develop further the notion of the experimentalisation of everyday life.

To foreground Hausmann in such a way and to take individual works of art as examples of a particular line of exploration runs the risk of false generalisations, however, as becomes apparent by looking at Hausmann’s technological reconfigurations of the human body. Hausmann’s work presents a case where everything fits together seamlessly, as it were: a political critique of society, a critical aesthetic arguing for new and experimental forms of art (and exemplars of this such as photomontage or the optophonetic poem), a speculative psychophysiological theory of ‘new man,’ and even some experimental construction work with technological devices. It seems as if all that is needed is simply to pick out from his oeuvre the relevant pieces and assemble them to fit the image of an experimental mobilisation of human perception beyond its assumed principles. The main pitfall of such an approach is, obviously, to take Hausmann’s works of art simply as a materialisation of scientific theory, as if his work ‘illustrated’ a style of scientific experimentation through the medium of art. Instead, it is exactly the interplay of material practices and conceptualisations that should be the locus of investigation and scrutiny, since Dada was, in Hausmann’s words, a realm ‘for the appearance of conflicts.’

Rather than presenting Hausmann as the test case for ‘scientific’ art, the material complications of the coming together of theory and objects should be questioned with regard to their inherent tensions, differences, or conflicts. The heterogeneity of Hausmann’s oeuvre, refusing any single overview or simple demarcations, is just a case in point.

Instead of bridging art and science by asking whether Hausmann’s work can justifiably be described as a particular style of scientific experimentation, I will focus on the material practices linking these domains as exemplified in some of his works. In doing so, I will follow the lead of material culture studies in the history of science. When such studies have consistently demonstrated the artificiality and ‘surrealism’ of scientific objects, it seems almost ‘natural,’ so to speak, to investigate how other artificial objects, and especially works of art, operate in the contested field between nature and culture. Here one deals, I would argue, with a highly fascinating zone of overlap between art and science which deserves further investigation. Works of art share a range of characteristics with scientific objects but, at the same time, they are situated in a different epistemological space. In fairly general and preliminary terms, works of art may be characterised as neither natural nor fictitious but as artificial and material at the same time. They are material objects, but not necessarily shaped in accordance with scientific concepts of nature. Hence, they may be positioned as artificial objects that question certain notions of nature and naturalness. Hausmann’s works, moving between political criticism, experimental art and prosthetic engineering, offer intriguing insights into the ambiguities of artificial natures, as I want to show. It is not of concern to me, however, whether Hausmann conceptualised the articulation of art and science in terms similar to my analysis, just as,
conversely, I am not in a position to offer here a comprehensive analysis of Hausmann’s work. The aim of this article is to introduce and use – if not abuse – a few of his art works as the basis for some comments on the notion of prosthesis and for an exploration into human perception. Some of Hausmann’s works demonstrate, I will argue, a transgression of established ontologies that also ultimately undermines his own psychophysiological theory. I will begin with Hausmann’s employment of prosthesis as a rhetorical trope that also brings in the new art form of photomontage. Then, I turn to Hausmann’s experiments in typography and to his optophonetic poetry, before I finally conclude by briefly discussing Hausmann’s optophone, a device that reintroduces the concept of prosthesis, although from a different perspective.

Prosthesis and photomontage

To talk about prosthesis in the Berlin of the early 1920s meant to talk about the war, about the mass production of disabled bodies. This was all the more true for the Dadaists. Among the many works of art on display at the famous First International Dada Fair, which opened on 30 June

Figure 1: View of the First International Dada Fair at the Berlin gallery of Otto Burchard, 1920, black and white photograph, 11.9 x 16.5 cm. Berlinische Galerie, Berlin. Dix’s Kriegskrüppel is on the left wall.
1920 in the rooms of Otto Burchard’s art gallery in Berlin, was, for example, Otto Dix’s *Kriegskrüppel* (1920), depicting a parade of ex-soldiers, still marching on, regardless of their disfigured and – by means of prosthesis – only partially reconstituted bodies [Fig. 1]. The First World War had ended with Germany’s defeat and had resulted in large numbers of maimed soldiers. It was followed by a period of anarchy and revolution, including skirmishes between striking workers, troops loyal to the Kaiser, and the forces of the new republic in the streets of Berlin in 1919. Hans Richter later recalled the atmosphere of Berlin Dada:

Dada in Berlin had a very different tone from Dada in Zurich and New York. The Berlin Dadaist might well look down on their Zurich colleagues, who had admittedly insulted the citizenry, but had no real collapse … no revolution to their credit. In Berlin they had a real revolution and they decided to join in. There was the sound of firing in the streets and on the rooftops. Not only art but all thought and all feeling, all of politics and society, had to be drawn into Dada’s sphere on influence […] While in one corner of Berlin, sailors were defending the imperial stables against troops loyal to the Kaiser, the Dadaists were laying their plans in another corner. When the stables fell, there was fighting at the Anhalter Bahnhof, in the Belle Alliance Platz and in Charlottenburg. Soldiers’ councils and workers’ councils, meetings, fraternal unions – a new age had dawned! Dada felt called upon to put the new age in perspective – and the old one out of joint.16

Dix’s polemical parade of prostheses was one way it seems to bring the unbearable consequences of the war and the old regime to attention. Another was, for example, the publication of a horrendous collection of photographs of wounded soldiers with brief explanatory statements written by Ernst Friedrich in the four languages of the main war parties: German, French, English, and Czech. Again, the parade of prosthetic soldiers was included here [Fig. 2].17
At about the same time, Hausmann published a brief text, ‘Economy of Prosthesis,’ in Die Aktion, one of Weimar Germany’s best-known pacifist journals. In this short satire, he engaged even more drastically in what one could call cynical realism. At face value, this text is a typical example of Dada’s ‘sheer irascibility,’ deriding the sincere efforts of medicine and science to help suffering soldiers. But by making jokes about the sad details of prosthetic life the satire exposes the disturbing and distressing reality through the relief mechanism of laughter. Hausmann, the ‘warhorse of Dada polemics’ as Walter Mehring once labeled him, employed his cynical irony so masterfully that he undercut his own satire; ultimately his parody unveiled the intrinsic cynicism of the technological fix. Hausmann’s cynical irony operates according to a radically mimetic approach. By imitating the cynicism of militarism, he exposed its brutality:

Every child knows what a prosthesis is. Today, a prosthesis is required by the man from the street as hitherto his beer, the Berliner Weisse. The arm of the proletarian becomes noble as soon as a prosthesis is attached. Prosthetic man, therefore, is the better man, made aristocratic, so to speak, by merit of the Great War. … Yes, the Brandenburg artificial arm: It fits everyone and everyone wants it. There are so many things to do with such an arm. Pouring boiling water over it without scalding one’s hand, for example. What natural arm withstands that? The artificial arm type Brandenburg is an engineering marvel and an act of grace. Even shots go through without hurting.

The vitriolic irony of pieces such as this one hurts quite literally; sarcasm has been turned into a form of shock therapy. In its use of slang and abbreviated sentences, the German resonates with
the firing of the guns it describes; it engages in a mimetic approach to its subject. The writing performs a salvo of gunshots, bursting into the orderly structure of language, severing many of the sentences and leaving them incomplete, crippled. The almost haptic or tactile qualities of Hausmann’s irony fits with Walter Benjamin’s famous description of Dadaism: ‘The work of art of the Dadaists became an instrument of ballistics. It hit the spectator like a bullet.’

This mimetic quality prevents any prompt incorporation of Dada irony as moral and political criticism. Irony such as that seen here, revealed an engagement with the other beyond critical distance, or rather at the heart of this criticism itself. In the words of Hausmann, ‘bluff is not an ethical principle but a form of self-detoxication.’ Bluff and irony were above all forms of auto-medication; and as a therapeutic means they required, apparently, a certain amount of identification, a partial fusion, with the object of criticism. It is important to follow this more ambiguous path in Hausmann’s photomontages since it adds a new reading to one of his best-known photomontages, the Portrait of the Dadasoph. [Fig. 3] The story behind the concept of photomontage is well known: on the occasion of their holiday in the summer of 1918 on the Baltic

Figure 3: Raoul Hausmann, Self-Portrait of the Dadasoph, 1920, mixed media, 36.2 x 28cm, private collection. © Estate of Raoul Hausmann/ADAGP (Paris)/SODRAC (Montreal) 2005.
coast, where they saw in almost every house a framed colored lithograph with the image of a soldier against a background of a barracks, Hausmann coined, together with Hannah Höch, the term 'photomontage.' He was among the first to engage in this modernist genre – and strove aggressively to oppose accounts identifying a different genealogy for the technique of collage.\(^{24}\) According to the common, more conventional reading, photomontage offered to portray accurately the new cultural and political situation in an intentionally ‘flat’ and ‘modern’ medium.\(^{25}\) Hausmann once confirmed such a socio-historical reading of his work:

I was among the first to use photography to create, from often totally disparate spatial and material elements, a new unity, in which was revealed a visually and conceptually new image of the chaos of an age of war and revolution [...] The field of photomontage has as many possibilities as there are changes in the milieu, its social structure, and the resulting psychological superstructure — and the milieu alters every day.\(^{26}\)

What exactly is the economy of prosthesis in the Portrait of the Dadasoph? It shows a partly technological, and partly biological or surgical reconfiguration of a human body. The head has been replaced by an ensemble of technology. A combination of pressure gauge and film projector pass for face and brain, whereas the chest offers a look inside the body in the form of an anatomical preparation of the lung with its tubes and arteries. According to the socio-historical reading, this photomontage portrays a cyborg\(^\text{avant la lettre}\) with nothing in its head but machines. This photomontage was a representation of the inhumaness of men in Weimar Germany, as Craig Adcock has argued:

Hausmann used his photomontage technique to come to grips with an environment that had been wrecked by the machinery of destruction. … By photomontaging [sic] together men and machines, by creating sinister constructs like Tatlin at Home, he could portray the inhumaness of men. A cyborg with nothing in his head but machines might have become sufficiently evil to be at home in the chaos of an age of war and revolution. … Merged human and mechanical attributes afforded Hausmann the opportunity for making a negative comment about the progressive mechanization of human beings. … Hausmann’s verbal outcry was given visual expression by the creation of cyborgs.\(^{27}\)

Along similar lines, Timothy Benson has argued:

Hausmann’s Mechanical Head presents culture as a product of mechanical processes, an array of arbitrary symbols on which the emptiness at the center [sic] of consciousness
is dependant for its very meaning. ... The Dadaists viewed themselves as constructors and engineers and exploited the machine metaphor to expose the outmoded enclave of avant-garde and to position man ironically within the totality of his culture with a mechanical neutrality.\textsuperscript{28}

As one way of strengthening such an interpretation, one could examine the instruments assembled here in place of the head and follow them through interwar society in Germany. Some of the instruments shown here resonate, for example, with the contemporary expansion of applied psychology and with the Taylorisation of the work place. A device somewhat similar in shape to the pressure gauge, the large indicator apparatus that replaces the face here, recorded the running times of production machines in big companies and was marketed, during the Weimar Republic, under the telling name ‘company psychograph’ [Fig. 4].\textsuperscript{29} Various comments by Hausmann apparently support such an interpretation of the Portrait of the Dadasoph. Vis-à-vis the somewhat similar photomontage Tatlin at Home (1920), also showing a male figure with the head being replaced by an ensemble of contemporary machine elements, Hausmann once remarked: ‘I preferred to portray a man who had nothing in his head but machines, automobile cylinders, brakes, and steering wheels.’\textsuperscript{30} More than simply commenting on the predominance of technology in modernity, the Portrait of the Dadasoph documented the mutual adaptation of man and machine that had resulted from the large-scale application of technology to the workplace during this period.

![Figure 4: The ‘Betriebspsychograph,’ from Fritz Giese, Methoden der Wirtschaftspsychologie, Berlin 1927.](image-url)
In his talk on photomontage, delivered roughly ten years after fabricating these collages and at the occasion of an exhibition at the Kunstdbriothek in Berlin, Hausmann stressed again the political dimensions of this new genre. According to this lecture he used photomontage in order to come to grips with an environment that had been wrecked by the machinery of destruction: ‘Dada … was a kind of criticism of the culture. [The Dadaists] were the first to use photographic materials to create a new unity that wrenched from that period of war and revolution a vision-reflection that was optically and conceptually new […] an image of the chaos of an age of war and revolution.’ One may agree with Hausmann that his photomontages exhibit an ‘optically and conceptually new’ reflection upon the human condition, but examples such as the Portrait of the Dadasoph demonstrate in their structures and details much more coherence and unity than ‘an image of the chaos of war and revolution’ suggests. The collage includes more ambiguous comments on the machine age than Hausmann’s own critical reading here, as I will show in the following.

**Engineering the self and consciousness**

By its title, the Portrait of the Dadasoph was as much a portrait of its time as it was a self-portrait. While Johannes Baader was the ‘Oberdada,’ and John Heartfield the ‘Monteurdada,’ Hausmann was Berlin Dada’s philosopher, as, for example, his business card indicated. Its text read: ‘Raoul Hausmann, president of the sun, the moon, and the small earth (interior surface), Dadasoph, Dadaraoul, director of Circus Dada’ and then in Latin ‘Who diagnoses well, will cure well.’ This enigmatic aphorism could allude to the strategy of therapeutic irony just discussed, but one should be careful before drawing such a conclusion. Brigid Doherty has recently revealed a much more sinister twist in this photomontage. As she has demonstrated, the background photograph of a sitting man was taken from a cover of Weimar Germany’s most widely read weekly, the Berliner Illustrirte Zeitung. It was a photograph of Ernst Noske, the minister of defence who had called himself the ‘blood hound of the new republic’ when he assumed command in 1919 and immediately ordered the military suppression of the Spartacist uprising. On the basis of this material linkage, the photomontage adds to the injured portrait of a technologically transformed self the insult of the conflation of the person portrayed with the most questionable member of the new government. In Doherty’s reading, this photomontage is a simulation and repetition of the trauma so widespread in Germany in this period, as she has demonstrated in another of her rich articles. A set of strong evidence supports Doherty’s interpretation of this photomontage as traumatic. Above all, her reading positions this collage fairly close to the mimetic strategy of Dada as alluded to here by the juxtaposition of Hausmann’s prosthesis text and Benjamin’s characterisation of Dada. In my view, however, mimesis does not function exclusively in a traumatic way here. In an analogue of the different layers of clippings,
photos, and cuttings in the work, this photomontage combines heterogeneous mimetic operations.

Hausmann’s self-portrait already transgressed anthropomorphism by the employment of the new medium of photomontage, resulting in a clash of man and machine. This clash, however, did not destroy the figure of the human body but remained surprisingly fixed within its shape. The photomontage creates a blending of man and machine, and thus depicts the image of a technological reconfiguration of the human that results in a transformation of the biological body. The Portrait of the Dadasoph demonstrates a variant of playful mimesis as much as it reveals trauma; a willing confusion about body and machine is displayed here. The photomontage foreshadows as much a positive engagement with prosthesis as it decries its deleterious manifestations. It was this visionary understanding of prosthesis, only indicated here, that Hausmann was to develop much further over the following years.35 For this reading, another detail of the photomontage is crucial, the combination of technological and surgical intervention that results here in a fusion of technology and biology. The device that has replaced the head is directly connected to the interior of the body and to the oxygenation of the blood. Is it too farfetched to speculate that the technological gadget supplies the human body with fresh blood? At least by his posture the man shown seems to be quite content with the transfiguration that has taken place; there are no signs of unrest or upheaval.

Such a visionary reading would connect with ideas of a technological utopia developed later by Hausmann, where he delves into a transgressive concept of prosthesis as a form of bodily engineering. Take, for example, his note on ‘PRÉsentismus’ from 1921:

We want to be transformed … through mechanical consciousness, by the bold inventions of the forward-moving engineer. Why can we no longer paint like Botticelli, Michelangelo, Leonardo, or Titian? Because man has completely changed in his consciousness, not only because we invented the telephone, the airplane, the electric piano, or the revolving lathe, but even more so because man’s psychophysics has changed with his experience. The naïve anthropomorphism has come to its definitive end.36

This was in perfect accordance with Hausmann’s conceptualisation of the role of technology in modernity:

Today, and as a consequence of railway, airplane, photography, x-rays, we have acquired such a differentiability of our optical consciousness that by means of this mechanical increase of physical possibilities we have been liberated to new forms of
optical perception and to an extension of optical consciousness in a creative design of life.\textsuperscript{37}

The prosthetic devices that have been attached to the human body here replace the human head. But the true challenge rests in their mode of operation as extensions of the body, as consciousness-enhancing technologies, as transformative powers of the biological. In order to develop this aspect of prosthetic photomontage any further, another genre within Hausmann's oeuvre has to be introduced; a different line of his work pursuing remarkably similar aims.

Typography and optophonetic poetry

\textbf{Figure 5:} Raoul Hausmann, \textit{OFFEAH}, (optophonetic poem), 1918, print, 32.8 x 47.8cm, Berlinische Galerie, Berlin. © Estate of Raoul Hausmann/ADAGP (Paris)/SODRAC (Montreal) 2005.

Hausmann's interest in typography started as an exercise in the chance production of art. He asked a typesetter in front of his letter-case to pick characters at random, at first from the set with lower-case consonants, then from the upper-case vowels, and each selection was printed as a poster. The \textit{OFFEAH} poem (1918) inadvertently reveals how this was not quite as revolutionary a strategy as proclaimed by Hausmann [Fig. 5].\textsuperscript{38} The pointing hand the printer picked is certainly
not part of the traditional alphabet but had found its way into the letter-case because of the demands for more exceptional typography from the new business of advertising. Typographic poetry is another example of how Dada was innovative in dealing with materials which themselves were fairly recent products of modernisation.

OFFEAH was one of Hausmann’s first typographic poems and demonstrates a somewhat limited development of the new form. The characters had been chosen at random and thereby liberated from the regime of semantics; in their spatial arrangement, however, they strictly followed one another in a line, obeying the conventions of printing and reading from left to right. Even in its rather narrow limits, this écriture automatique suggested already a new way of dealing with acoustics in poetry and its relation to typography. A more sophisticated example of this genre is kp’erioum from the following year (1919) [Fig. 6]. Here, the signs in the representational space of the paper functioned by themselves, so to speak, as instructions or guidelines for a performance of the poem, with small letters indicating a quieter sound, large or bold ones a louder voice, and with the spacing pointing to the intervals and duration of each individual sound:

The characters of the acoustic poem are arranged so that their visual appearance directly represents their sound. The flow of the vowels appears to be visually blocked by the consonants; the graphical differences mediate spontaneously the representation of phonetic signs in the mind which our memory has become accustomed to translate into phonemes without difficulty.

Typography in kp’erioum has been transformed into a system of sound notation by redefining the representational space of the printing paper in topographical terms. At the same time, however, the two dimensions of the representational space exert a new influence on the sound inscribed. The size of the paper in relation to that of the letters results in an arrangement of lines. We can note, for example, the symmetry and visual balance of the roughly equal distribution or spread of single bold letters across the paper. Already on the level of graphical representation, there is a highly complex interplay of the phonetic and the visual. In this version of the work, the optophonetic poem has turned into a graphical arrangement and the spatial interplay has become more prominent; it is a poem and a piece of graphic art. There exists another version of kp’erioum in which Hausmann has exchanged the underlying photomontage for the first few paragraphs of one of his writings. The text is an example of Hausmann’s highly idiosyncratic, almost automatic writing, blending kernels of philosophical insight with irony, repetition, absurdity and nonsense. In this case, the text ends literally in a series of non-syllabic, geometrical characters, further enhancing the metamorphosis of script into graphics that lies at the heart of kp’erioum.
It is less the versatility of the optophonetic poem or its amenability to Hausmann’s performances which is of interest here, but the very multiplicity of levels at which these poems operate. With the disappearance or, in fact, the elimination of semantics, typography turned into an exploration not of the symbolic organization, but of the materiality of speech and language. The typographic arrangement of individual letters, separated from the order of meaning, dissected the inner workings of phonetic structures. And in doing so, the typographic poem reconnected with the performing body. Or in the words of Hausmann quoted above, ‘the graphical differences mediate spontaneously the representation of phonetic signs in the mind which our memory has become accustomed to translate into phonemes without difficulty.’ For the artist and inventor of this form of sound poetry, this may indeed have been ‘without difficulty,’ but even if this was the case, the typographic poem was rather based on a radical departure from the memorised sound signs and their internalised transformation into phonemes. These poems were exercises in strange forms of vocalisation and sound production. The materiality of language as
explored in the typographical arrangement resonated quite literally with an exploration of the materialities of the sound-producing body – its breathing rhythm, visual acuity, and registers of sound production, to identify just a few of them. The graphical interplay of the phonetic and the visual corresponded with a bodily interplay of the various senses and faculties involved. Fairly early on, Hausmann used the medium of photography to capture the complexities of the optophonetic exploration of the embodiment of sound and vision, photographing, for example, his performing instruments (mouth, eyes, and hands) or his gestures.

Optophonetic poetry had started as typographic play but it resulted in an exploration of human physiology, or in the words of Hausmann: 'Typography is an intermediate domain between art and technology, between seeing and understanding, and is one of the most obvious means for the permanent psycho-physiological auto-instruction of human beings.' In this way, the performance of optophonetic poetry revealed, above all, the disabilities of the human body and the limits in the 'logic of the organs of the human body' that Hausmann was so interested in exploring. The typographic fusion of sound and vision outperformed the human body:

Our prevailing consciousness is split into mechanics and functionality. Mechanics include physics, chemistry, and technology; sensory-physiological and psychological formations belong to functionality. The elements of human perception are of sensory-physiological and of structural-functional nature. … Each is limited by conscious and unconscious processes of selection and by the functional specificities of the sensory organs. These are the organic limitations and functional inhibitions of the human psycho-physical nature. The human will to creation and distraction effectuates an adaptability according to a logic of the organs which finally approaches an ultimate limit in approximation and adjustment.

For Hausmann, this incongruence between optophonetic poetry and human abilities did not cause the failure of the new artistic medium. On the contrary, this making visible or tangible of its limitations counted as its biggest triumph, precisely because it called the human body into question. At this point, however, optophonetic poetry had served its part. For the further 'self-education of man,' art had to form an alliance with technology:

It is necessary to point out a law as yet undiscovered by the sciences. The temporary balance, which is historically transformable, of humanity's organic deficiencies … is manifested in technical and artistic sublimation. Seen from this dialectical angle, revolutionary periods in art, technique, and society are complementary. This relational
aspect implies that a new conception ... plays an important role in the transformation of social consciousness.\textsuperscript{45}

The future belonged to ‘a mechanical intensification of our natural faculties.’ The Dadaist embarked on the construction of a sense-enhancing perceptual device, the optophone.

**The optophone**

![Figure 7: Raoul Hausmann, Optophone, drawing from the British patent in 1936, from Hausmann, Texte bis 1933, Vol. 2, 1982.](image)

Already at the beginning of the twentieth century, an ‘optophone’ had been patented. This apparatus was a prosthetic device, designed initially as a mobility aid for blind people and later, in another variant, as a reading device. The name simply illustrated its operating principle; the instrument transformed, by means of a photocell, light into sound. In its first version, the electric
circuitry generated sound in order to guide blind persons around obstacles, while the second type converted the different forms of characters and words into acoustic images enabling a form of reading by listening. With the new opportunities of electrical engineering many technological inventions emerged towards the end of the nineteenth century that explored zones of sensory modalities and their translation, such as the phonograph, the telephone, or optical telegraphy. The optophone was just one example of a much larger family of now forgotten similar devices converting images into sound, which happened to be identified with the same name as Hausmann’s construction. The optophone was first designed by the British physicist E. E. Fournier d’Albe and quickly gained sufficient publicity to appear twice in Scientific American, for example, once at the time of its patenting as a guiding device before World War I, and again as a cover story when the reading device had become available in 1920. This is especially noteworthy in our context, since it relates to the larger political context of prosthetic design: to the demands for this generated by war and the related mass production of sensory-disabled young men that Hausmann had targeted with his vitriolic irony.

For Hausmann, in contrast, the optophone, as he envisioned it, was not a prosthetic device in medical terms. It operated rather as a scientific and/or artistic instrument that transformed light into sound and vice versa. The instrument was to enable the materialisation of synaesthesia in the form of a universal symphony of light and sound:

The optophone transforms the induced optical phenomena back into sound by means of the selenic cell and the microphone coupled into the circuitry. ... The series of optical phenomena undergoes a metamorphosis into a symphony, the symphony into a living panorama. Given the appropriate technologies, the optophone has the power, or better, the ability to reveal the sound equivalent of every optical phenomenon. Or put differently, the optophone exchanges the vibrations of sound and sight, since light is oscillating electricity as is sound. ... Where is the new brain, the new organ that is first able to perceive clearly the ongoing transformation of our time-space-world?

To Hausmann, the technological transformability of light into sound and sound into light had to be understood as a deep insight into nature since it revealed an underlying harmony in the cosmos. Modern technology demonstrated the coherence and concurrence of nature’s forces across the differences between the senses. It thus manifested a need to develop the human body beyond its natural design in order to understand nature and to come to terms with the powers of modern technology. The optophone operated precisely in a gap between two human senses, where human evolution still had to go, as Hausmann suggested:
It is our task to work on the physical and physiological problems of nature and human nature in relation to a universal consilience and responsibility. We will have to start our work where modern science stops because of its in-objectivity as long as it pursues a system of exploitation and continues to take viewpoints related to worn out forms of civilization.⁴⁹

Hausmann’s optophone operated on the assumption that the human body was lacking something, that it needed less an enhancement (as in the case of hearing and seeing devices) than a supplement, a technological gadget transforming and mobilising human perception across the gap between the human senses. So in the end it was a prosthetic device serving not as a technological aid for blinded soldiers or blind patients, but as cosmic mediator of perception for physiologically ‘disabled’ humans. Thus, Hausmann’s project connected with a whole range of artistic projects which aimed at combining sound and light during the 1920s, from Alexander Scriabin’s light-music *Prometheus* to Thomas Wilfred’s optical piano, the ‘Clavilux,’ to name just the two most prominent.

It is not quite clear, however, how far Hausmann developed his project in technological terms. Eventually, the instrument was patented – although not as an optophone in Hausmann’s vision of such an instrument [Fig. 7].⁵⁰ The apparatus patented in England in 1936 was no longer a prosthetic device lifting human beings up beyond the limits of their discrete senses into synaesthetic sensory experiences. For the patent, the synaesthesia machine was turned by an engineer and friend of Hausmann into an optical calculation device, determining railway fares at high speed – it was no longer the vehicle of an augmented reality *avant la lettre*. Apparently, Hausmann never brought his vision of a technologically enhanced perception of reality to life. When he returned to the optophone in the booklet *La sensorialité excentrique*, which he prepared at the end of his life and which was published only posthumously, he included a reprint of his earlier essay ‘Optophonetik’ but gave his once visionary manifesto a significantly gloomy twist by adding the following preface: ‘The intellectual habitus of human beings is conservative. … Human beings remain unchanged at all times, regardless of technological developments and prosthetic experiments.’⁵¹ The tone of his analysis in these new essays had changed drastically. Instead of embracing technology and celebrating the new insights gained by them, Hausmann now painted a dark scenario of human society paralysed by comfort and laziness brought about by the very same prosthetic technologies:

Humankind has constructed the tools and the weapons for extending and increasing its organic abilities. But relying and resting on prosthetic technology — be them electronic devices or household aides — only leads to intellectual and moral stagnation. In fact,
man has to make up his mind to break away from these sedentary and lethargic tendencies. He should strive again to extend and to expand his intellectual and also his somatic abilities. … But since radio, electronics, and computer govern the information flow across the world, everyone conceals himself in a similar way. Atomic weapons increase further this synchronization and stream lining of thought and imagination. 

In Hausmann’s work, a complex trajectory connects his photomontage cyborgs, his explorations into the typographic and psychophysiological interplay of the optophonetic, and finally his construction of prosthetic technology for translating one into the other. Theses activities rotate around the notion of synaesthesia, both in the sense of a harmony between the senses, and also, so to speak, in preparation for new sensory environments, of which there were more to come during the twentieth century. In contrast to the alleged revelations the new instrument was to bring, examples from Hausmann’s photomontage technique and his optophonetic poetry demonstrate a striking exploration of an optical and acoustical unconscious of modern culture.

Hausmann’s optophone was designed to reveal the secret of the universe to the human senses but it did not live up to his expectations. The experimentalisation of everyday life proved more difficult than expected. Where Hausmann’s experiments coincided with technoscience, they turned ironic play and bluffing ‘auto-detoxication’ into a new fixed metaphysic of cosmic unity. The artist turned scientist produced ideologies of the very nature that his artistic practices had often ridiculed. It is obviously difficult to outline precisely how some forms of experimentation by Hausmann became obfuscated in esoteric speculation while others nourished ambiguities in more productive and promising ways. The typographic experiments Hausmann had engaged in opened up a radical investigation of the materialities of communication and of the bodily interactions between image and sound as involved in the generation of symbolic acts. The optophone, however, reified this connectedness into a secret of nature to be revealed by modern technology and to be embraced by human consciousness. Hausmann mistook a playful form of experimentation and an ensemble of technological gadgets for another solution to age-old philosophical problems. Thereby, he reified an esoteric phantasm into a new ontology. Hausmann’s vision ultimately faded away, as a ‘Fata Morgana’ of media technology.

1 ‘Wir fordern die Erweiterung und Eroberung all unserer Sinne!’ Raoul Hausmann, ‘PREsentismus,’ in Michael Erthoff (ed.), Sieg Triumph Tabak mit Bohnen, Texte bis 1933, Bd. 2, Munich 1982, 28. All translations from Hausmann’s original German are mine unless stated otherwise.


5 Bachelard, ‘Le surrationalisme,’ *Inquisitions* 1, 1936, 1-4.


15 They share with most objects of the modern technosciences their constructedness, but as products of culture, works of art operate under a different set of constraints. Objects of scientific
experimentation would conventionally be described, in the terms of this comparison, as non-fictional and non-artificial, that is to say, natural. However, it is this traditional epistemology that the concept of experimentation developed here aims at challenging.

16 Richter, Dada, 101.


18 Founded by Franz Pfemfert in 1911, Die Aktion was published until 1932. It presented articles by many of the leading critics of Wilhelmine Germany and it was this journal that provided expressionism with its platform.

19 John C. Welchman, ‘After the Wagnerian Bouillabaisse: critical theory and the Dada and Surrealist word-image,’ in Judi Freeman, The Dada & Surrealist Word-Image, Cambridge, Mass. 1989, 73: ‘Again, the efficiency of an analysis such as this is partly undermined by the tendency of Dada (in particular) to outmaneuver analysis through contradiction and sheer irascibility. This making-absurd paralyzes all attempts at systematization. … The purist strivings of the structuralist discipline were almost antithetical to the indiscrete practices of Dada, in which (almost) everything is already ironic.’

20 ‘Haudegen der Dadapolemik ... in Wort und Collage, in Tracht und Grimasse, der streitsüchtigste aufbrausendste Dadakämpfer.’ See Walter Mehring, Berlin Dada: eine Chronik mit Photos und Dokumenten, Zürich 1959, 39f.


22 Benjamin, Illuminations (trans. Harry Zohn), London 1992, 231. Since my English translation does not capture these qualities of the German original, I have to here rely on Benjamin’s testimony.


32 The playful process of making absurd that abounds in Hausmann’s oeuvre certainly prevents such a swift conclusion.


34 Doherty, ‘“See: we are all neurasthenics!” or, the trauma of Dada montage,’ Critical Inquiry, 24, 1997, 82-132.

35 There are plenty of articles by Hausmann in which he delves into a rather esoteric and enthusiastic theory of prosthesis as a truly mindful technology. Apart from the quotations above, see Hausmann, ‘Biodynamische Naturanschauung,’ in Eva Zürchern (ed.), Scharfrichter der bürgerlichen Seele: Raoul Hausmann in Berlin 1900-1933, Ostfildern 1998, 171-176; and Hausmann, ‘Die überzüchteten Künste,’ in Erhoff, Sieg Triumph Tabak mit Bohnen, 133-144.


37 Hausmann, ‘Die neue Kunst,’ in Erhoff, Bilanz der Feierlichkeit, 182.


39 According to Cohen, developments of innovative and paratactic typography such as Marinetti’s ‘Words in Freedom’ are made possible against a horizon of ‘the placard, the sandwich man, the poster, the sign, the advertisement, the leaflet, the broadside, prospectus, prière d’insérer, ticket, handbill,’ as ‘typographic novelty began in the marketplace’ (Arthur Cohen, ‘The Typographic Revolution,’ in Foster, and Rudolf E. Kuenzli (eds), Dada Spectrum: the Dialectic of Revolt, Iowa City 1979, 76).


42 Erlhoff notes the purposeful design of this optophonetic poem unlike earlier, strictly aleatoric works, cf. Erlhoff: ‘Raoul Hausmann, der “Dadasoph”’, 155-197.


44 Hausmann, ‘Biodynamische Naturanschauung,’ 171. Hausmann used the notion of the ‘logic of the bodily organs’ in several of his texts, see also, for example, Hausmann, ‘Ausblick’ and ‘Denken und Darstellen,’ in Erlhoff, Sieg Triumph Tabak mit Bohnen, 95-100 and 167-172.


49 Hausmann as quoted in Erlhoff, ‘Raoul Hausmann, der “Dadasoph”’, 168 (original source not cited).

50 Cf. Hausmann, ‘Die überzüchteten Künste,’ in Erlhoff, Sieg Triumph Tabak mit Bohnen, 133-144. Hausmann’s optophone would require a much more thorough investigation than the one I can give here. The most detailed account is by Jacques Donguy, ‘Machine head: Raoul Hausmann and the optophone,’ Leonardo, 34:3, 2001, 217-220. The paper includes the photograph of a recent replica of Hausmann’s optophone by the British artist Peter Keene. According to Donguy’s research, the patent was granted in 1936 although Hausmann himself stated 1935 (cf. notes to Hausmann, ‘Die überzüchteten Künste,’ 214f).


52 Hausmann, ‘Die neue Zivilisation,’ in Die exzentrischen Empfindungen, 43-47.

The voyaging reality: María Izquierdo and Antonin Artaud, Mexico and Paris

Terri Geis

Abstract
As Dawn Ades has stated, 'The intersections between surrealism and art in Mexico are numerous, intimate and contentious.' These latter two qualities certainly characterise the creative collaboration between Antonin Artaud and the Mexican painter María Izquierdo during Artaud's visit to Mexico in 1936. While Artaud's interest in and writing on Izquierdo's painting has barely registered within the prolific studies of his work, the interaction between the two is continually noted in contemporary accounts of Izquierdo's career. The connection between Artaud and Izquierdo has not, however, received any in-depth analysis. In order to investigate this significant intersection between surrealism and art in Mexico, this paper follows the voyage of a painting by Izquierdo called Consolation, from its inception and reception in 1933 as a work of indigenist, nationalist significance within post-revolutionary Mexico, through its inclusion in an exhibition of Izquierdo's work organised by Artaud in Paris in 1937, to its categorisation as 'art brut' in a surrealist collection of manuscripts and artworks.

The recent exhibition Kahlo's Contemporaries, Mexico: women: surrealism at the University of Essex Gallery included a mysterious and striking watercolour painted in 1933 by María Izquierdo. Consolation was lent by a private collector in Paris, and although it is a small work (27 x 20.3 cm), the painting's impact is so dramatic that the decision was made to hang it on a wall by itself in the gallery [fig. 1].

Izquierdo's work was an essential inclusion in the exhibition, which sought to emphasise the abundance of women artists working in post-revolutionary Mexico and also to underscore the widely varied connections many of these women developed with the surrealists. Izquierdo was a key figure in the Mexican art world of the 1930s and 1940s who constantly exhibited her work in solo and group exhibitions, and her painting was celebrated in essays by nearly all of the most significant art critics, poets and intellectuals in Mexico at the time. In keeping with the period's nationalist rhetoric, Izquierdo's painting was regularly read as deeply reflecting the authentic Mexican spirit and it was with her series of small watercolours and gouaches painted throughout the 1930s, such as Consolation, that her artistic reputation was made.

Furthermore, it was through these small paintings that Izquierdo entered the surrealist 'orbit,' for when Antonin Artaud arrived in Mexico City in 1936, he befriended Izquierdo, and declared her the only painter truly reflecting the indigenous roots of Mexico in her work. Artaud took around thirty of Izquierdo's watercolours with him back to Paris and held an exhibition of her work at the Galerie Van den Berg in Montparnasse at the beginning of 1937. Most of the exhibited works have since disappeared, some perhaps confiscated and destroyed when Artaud was institutionalised later in 1937, some possibly destroyed during the Second World War, some possibly lying dormant in private collections or even in dusty attics. Recent years have seen art...
historians attempting, with little luck, to track down these paintings. During the process of conducting research for the *Kahlo’s Contemporaries* exhibition, it became evident that *Consolation* is probably one of the paintings that Artaud took with him to Paris.

**Figure 1:** María Izquierdo, *Consolation*, 1933, gouache on ricepaper, (27 x 20.3 cm). Reproduced courtesy of owner (private collection).

Reflecting on *Consolation* and its travels and reception, the work can be said to shed light
on three intertwining topics: the aesthetics of nationalism within the visual culture of post-revolutionary Mexico, the ideological role of Mexico within surrealism, and women’s place within these dialogues. This paper will examine both the metamorphosis of Izquierdo’s imagery when she came into contact with Artaud, and the metamorphosis of the reception of her paintings as they travelled from a nationalist context in Mexico City to a surrealist context in Paris.

The title of the paper, 'The Voyaging Reality', is borrowed from an essay that Artaud wrote to accompany Izquierdo’s Paris exhibition, entitled ‘Le mexique et l’esprit primitif: María Izquierdo’. In this essay, Artaud described Izquierdo as an indigenous Mexican, and asserted that her paintings exemplified a superior expression of reality that was found in both dreams and the primitive mind; the basis of this reality was metamorphosis. Artaud wrote that within these states of being:

...the shapes of objects sprout out and join their singular properties with the properties of all the other objects. Then objects don’t form the real, but are in the real, travelling … exchanging their strengths from one to the other.\(^6\)

This, for Artaud, was the ‘voyaging reality’. His notion of objects travelling and constantly metamorphosing inspires this paper’s examination of the painting Consolation and the way it has travelled and been an object of varying significance to the different people and ideologies in contact with it. Often these ideologies have reflected problematic notions of the ‘primitive,’ the ‘Indian,’ and as will be examined further along, the ‘insane.’

Izquierdo painted Consolation in Mexico City during the period in which she was collaborating very closely with the painter Rufino Tamayo. The two artists developed a technique using impasto-applied watercolour in tiny, vibrant brushstrokes to create a purposely naïve or even slightly crude effect. Thematically these works present poetic scenes of nude women who blow horns and heavily recline or meditate among architectural ruins such as fallen columns and broken archways. Izquierdo also painted many scenes of peasant women ritually mourning on their knees in front of coffins and cemeteries.

Like most artists in post-revolutionary Mexico, Izquierdo and Tamayo were attempting to articulate a specifically Mexican identity through their work. Both the intricately textured surface of their paintings and their colour palette were meant to reflect the aesthetics of the Mexican pueblo and indigenous culture, which they saw as the basis of Mexican culture. Their concepts undoubtedly romanticised these groups and positioned them as simultaneously central and on the outside, as can be seen from an essay Tamayo wrote in 1933:

Our people - Indian and mestizo - are not a festive people, but profoundly tragic, with a preference for colours that are moderate and balanced, those of a people who bear the weight of pain. White, black, blue, muted earth-tones are the colours that characterise
our painting because they are the colours preferred by the people here. If we observe the tones of their clothing, the facades of their houses, the colours of their daily utensils, we can plainly confirm this. You will see warm colours, yes, but muted and heavy.\(^7\)

Judging from the way Tamayo’s characterisation of the pueblo begins with an inclusive ‘our’ but rapidly turns into ‘their,’ it appears that for urban artists such as Tamayo and Izquierdo, the pueblo was simultaneously ‘us’ and ‘them,’ a group they were a part of, but only to a certain extent. The pueblo was also something they could theorise about from the outside. Furthermore this Mexican pueblo was conceived of not as joyous or colourful, but as one that ‘bore the weight of pain’ - something necessary to reflect in modern Mexican painting.

In terms of imagery, Izquierdo’s paintings are more poetic and mysterious than the overtly historical and didactic work of the Mexican muralists, but her scenes of rubble, ruin and mourning also arguably engage in the nationalist dialogue by commemorating the destruction of the recent Revolution, which killed nearly one million people and left the country in shambles. Within Izquierdo’s images male bodies are not directly represented, yet are everywhere alluded to through the broken columns that lie scattered in the countryside. The paintings are like small paper cenotaphs - monuments to the dead who are lost or lie elsewhere.

However, in some paintings such as *Consolation*, Izquierdo creates ambiguous scenes that purposefully evade a singular narrative, but may allude to the experiences of women. Does *Consolation* depict some profound heartbreak or grief? A standing nude woman comforts another nude who lies on the ground by covering her with a white sheet, veil or shroud in a room that is empty except for an incongruous red column. A small angel serenades the women from a window with a red horn, providing comfort or perhaps beckoning them to leave behind the pain of the body. The title of the painting, *Consolation*, would appear to confirm the meaning of the painting as one of comfort in the face of profound sadness. However, this title was only given to the painting sixty years after it was painted, when it was sold in Sotheby’s 1993 Latin American Art sale in New York. The original title of the painting - if Izquierdo gave it a title - is unclear.\(^8\)

Comfort and consolation is one reading of the painting, but its symbolism is multi-faceted. The shroud-like quality of the white cloth and the angel blowing a horn at the window could instead signify that this is a scene of death, although the reclining woman is clearly still moving, not in rigor mortis. The spread-legged position of the woman on the ground could alternatively make this an image of new life: childbirth with a midwife. There is furthermore a certain sexualised element to the scene - the covering of the nude’s face serves to accentuate the curves of her body. Could the standing woman actually be removing the white sheet in an erotic disrobing, with the angel serving as a symbol of desire? In each of these readings, the postures of the figures, the action of covering or removing the white sheet or veil, and the fantastical creature at the window create a scene that addresses the connection between the body and the spirit - is this an allegory of a physical or emotional state? The covering, veiling, shrouding - or
perhaps uncovering or disrobing - of the nude figure also underscores the painting's ambiguous expression of transformation. It is as Erica Segre's writing on the veil in Mexican photography indicates:

The veil as sudarium, shroud and envelope/wrap signifies revelation and concealment, transparency and opacity, the embodied and the immaterial, the liminal and the universal, essence and appearance, the temporal and the timeless, depth and ephemerality, tactility and the intangible, the enclosed and the limitless - in a surfeit of always inferred but also always deferred content.9

The Mexican art critics and poets who wrote about Izquierdo’s painting often analysed it in terms of both national expression and gender. For example, the poet José Gorostiza felt that Izquierdo’s painting reached an authentic Mexican core, and that this had less to do with her themes or the textures and colours of her paintings than with the heavy female emotions channelled through the works. In words that resonate with the themes of covering, veiling or exposing so clear in Consolation, Gorostiza wrote: ‘Ruins and women operate as a screen behind which María Izquierdo powerfully describes her anguish, her fear, her solitude.’10 Like the pueblo, Izquierdo and her painting could thus be celebrated as a symbol of the tragic, profound Mexican spirit. Furthermore, her images were transparent ‘screens’ through which could be seen Izquierdo’s own emotions, or perhaps screens onto which critics could project their own interests and theories.11

This is the environment within which paintings such as Consolation were initially conceived and received, but they would travel and enter new ideologies. When Artaud arrived in Mexico at the beginning of 1936, Izquierdo had been working on her watercolours and gouaches for around four years. These works would come to hold a central position within Artaud’s visualisations of Mexico, and in exchange Izquierdo’s works would come to be influenced by Artaud’s concepts.

Artaud had become convinced that it was necessary to travel to Mexico in a ‘voyage to the land of speaking blood’ in order to find an alternative to the ‘rot’ of European culture, as he put it.12 Before he left for Mexico, Artaud developed a highly esoteric vision of the country based upon Mesoamerican solar and astrology-based religions and rites of sacrifice, and he hoped to find traces of these in contemporary indigenous groups and in the Mexican earth itself. He stated:

Bound to the soil, buried in streams of volcanic lava, stirring in the Indian blood, there exists in Mexico the magical reality of a culture whose fires it would, doubtless, take little to actually rekindle.13
Artaud’s concept of ‘fire’ was central to his views. As he saw it, ‘Every civilisation started from fire and the idea of fire nourishes and sustains all aspects of Mexican life.’ Artaud felt that this fire was not only a life force, but was also ‘the drive that transformed the coppery men of ancient Mexico into determined supporters of death.’ For Artaud, the balance created through the continual flow between life and death was the antithesis of European culture’s foundation in the written word: ‘To write is to prevent the mind from moving in the midst of the world of forms like a vast respiration. Because writing fixes the mind and crystallises it into a form, and from form is born idolatry.’ The harmony brought about through fire was the means through which man’s thoughts could be ever-transformed and not corrupted in the static of written word: ‘This idea of life is magical, it assumes the presence of fire in all the expressions of human thought.’ After encountering Izquierdo’s painting, Artaud would come to describe this continual metamorphosis as ‘the voyaging reality.’

Artaud appears to have met Izquierdo shortly after his arrival in Mexico City, and Izquierdo’s daughter Aurora has recounted that for part of his visit to Mexico, Artaud lived in Izquierdo’s house, which was also her art studio. Aurora recalls that the two spent much time together drinking coffee and visiting art exhibitions. Artaud began to write about Izquierdo’s painting, incorporating it into his esoteric vision of Mexico, a realm of lava, buried indigenous consciousness, and a certain menacing violence: ‘The painting of María Izquierdo demonstrates that the red spirit has not died, that its sap intensely boils, fomented by the long effort of waiting, of incubation, of maceration.’ Having likely viewed Izquierdo at work on her paintings, Artaud saw her physical actions and brushstrokes as channelling indigenous culture, stating that her work was ‘born of a paintbrush with a species of inner vigour’ that denoted a ‘powerful reference to remote ancestors.’

While Izquierdo’s watercolours such as Consolation had always contained a metaphysical element, with the arrival of Artaud they now began to express an increased violence and imagery of mysterious astrological and solar rituals. Intriguingly, Izquierdo was inspired by Artaud’s concepts of Mexican indigenous culture, but uniquely used these ideas allegorically to underscore the situation for women in 1930s Mexico. The Andrés Blaisten collection in Mexico City contains two striking paintings that are highly representative of Artaud’s influence on Izquierdo’s painting: Allegory of Work (1936) and Allegory of Liberty (1937).

In Allegory of Work, a desperate nude crouches in a hilly landscape and like the figure in Consolation, covers her face with her hands [fig. 2]. Towering over the woman, a menacing, muscular pair of male legs emerges from the cloudy skies. In the place of genitals, or perhaps as a sort of astrological codpiece, this god-like figure has a golden sphere covered with symbols of the moon and stars, and rays of light or fire shoot out from the sphere. As Adriana Zavala has suggested, ‘Whereas in many of Izquierdo’s images the phallic symbolism is implicit, signified by columns and tree trunks, here the symbolism is overt and overwhelms the female figure.’ The title of the painting seems purposefully obscure: what kind of ‘work’ is being undertaken here?
The cowering woman and the sexual, threatening masculine presence may indicate that this is an allegorical commentary on the exploitation of women. At the same time, the fire-rays shooting out of the male legs along with the esotericism and violence of the image reveal Izquierdo’s awareness of Artaud’s concepts of Mexican culture and fire.

*Figure 2:* María Izquierdo, *Allegory of Work*, 1936, watercolour and tempera on paper, 21 x 27.5 cm. Reproduced courtesy of Museo Blaisten, Mexico.

*Allegory of Liberty* works with similar mysterious motifs of fire, mythical figures and violence against women [fig. 3]. Along with thick black smoke, a chimney exudes an apocalyptic creature: a white winged being carries a golden torch in one hand, and in the other clutches the severed heads of five women, held by their long black hair. If the figures in *Consolation* and *Allegory of Work* cover their faces to protect against some tragedy or horror, these decapitated figures have met exactly such a horrific fate, their heads bundled together into a sort of grotesque human bouquet. The repetition of their severed heads recalls the many images from pre-Hispanic codices in which warriors and priests clutch the severed heads of their sacrificial victims. The small, rather comic angel of *Consolation* has become in *Allegory of Liberty* an angel of sacrifice and death. This white figure flies heavenward - towards the same bright rays of light that appear in *Allegory of Work*. The painting addresses the costs of war and the price of freedom within the nation-state, with the standard allegorical figure of winged liberty serving as the bearer of the violent sacrifice required for liberty’s fulfilment: human lives. The decapitated, sacrificed women are victims of powers completely beyond their control, ironically undermining the
painting’s title of ‘liberty.’

Figure 3: María Izquierdo, Allegory of Liberty, 1937, watercolour on paper, 21 x 26.5 cm. Reproduced courtesy of Museo Blaisten, Mexico.

Through her interaction with Artaud, Izquierdo’s work metamorphosed into an allegorical vision that melded a dark, mystical and perhaps oneiric vision of pre-Hispanic culture with a modern, post-revolutionary sensibility. While the collaboration of Izquierdo and Artaud has sometimes subsequently led to the designation of Izquierdo as a ‘Latin American surrealist,’ Izquierdo would always adamantly refuse to classify her work in this way, stating in 1939: ‘There are two kinds of painting: mental and emotional. Surrealism is worked out in the mind, and I paint emotionally.’

Not only did Izquierdo’s imagery change during Artaud’s visit to Mexico, but the reception and context of her painting changed when Artaud took her work back to Paris for exhibition. While in Mexico her work and person served as a symbol of Mexican national identity, in Paris her work became a symbol of Artaud’s conceived alternative to stifling European rational consciousness. Both of these receptions arguably exoticised Izquierdo, but not necessarily in ways to which she would have objected.

Izquierdo’s daughter has stated that the Paris exhibition was meant to serve two purposes. Izquierdo hoped to expand her professional reputation to Europe, but she also wanted to help Artaud by raising money through the sale of her paintings, allowing him to enter a drug rehabilitation program. While it is unclear how much money was raised through the exhibition,
the paintings also held another significance for Artaud as the visual evidence of his journey and his concepts of Mexican indigenous culture. In this sense the works became Artaud's theoretical postcards.

There is no known exhibition catalogue for Izquierdo's Paris show, and there are currently only seven paintings that are known for certain to have been in the exhibition or that were very likely in the exhibition. As Artaud felt that the indigenous soul was so strong within Izquierdo that she was unconsciously repeating its voice, a voice that knew the mysteries of death and ritual, it isn't surprising to find many of the paintings in his exhibition were those highlighting scenes of syncretic Mexican worship, often within a funereal context.

Among the paintings Artaud exhibited are Cemetery (1936), which depicts the walls of a cemetery with coffins seen through the entrance, and Prostration (1936), an image of two peasant women ritually prostrating themselves in front of a cemetery entrance. Both of these paintings are currently lost and only known through the black and white reproductions that appeared with Artaud's article published in Paris. Another painting, La Manda (1933), was also probably in Artaud's exhibition. The painting is strange and striking: three women plead and pray and mourn towards something that is outside of the painting, while in the foreground an eerie stone head glares out at the viewer. A sense of foreboding, punitive ritual is created. This painting was long held in a private collection in Paris and was recently purchased by a museum in the United States.

Artaud's exhibition transformed Izquierdo's paintings into a personal conduit through which he sought to express an alternate reality to European culture. While his use of the female and the non-European as an uncontaminated source of creativity and identity was not entirely removed from the practices of Mexican cultural nationalism, his concepts of women and so-called 'primitive' groups should be seen as in closer continuum with surrealist practices. The audience for Artaud's exhibition is unclear, however, so it is uncertain how the surrealist group responded to Izquierdo's works. As André Breton and Artaud had reconciled in early 1937, it seems likely that Breton would have been at the exhibition. By all accounts, however, during Breton's visit to Mexico in 1938 he never met Izquierdo, and her painting was not included in the 1940 Exposicion Internacional del Surrealismo in Mexico City.

Returning to Consolation may help shed some light on the surrealist reception of Izquierdo's work. The painting is thought to have been one of the works in Artaud's exhibition because it later surfaced as part of a surrealist's 'art brut' collection of manuscripts and paintings that were originally owned by Artaud, Pierre Mabille, George Sadoul, Roger Blin and Roger Caillois. Consolation was placed amongst and juxtaposed with a watercolour by a German psychiatric patient, a manuscript by Artaud, and an Indian ink drawing by the nineteenth-century French psychiatric patient, Emile Hodinos. The juxtaposition of Izquierdo's painting with the work of Hodinos is especially interesting. Hodinos was an apprentice to an engraver of medals before being institutionalised for 'manic excitement' at the age of twenty-three. He would spend
the rest of his life hospitalised, and drew thousands of designs for medals based upon a personal symbolic system. Nude female figures covered or partially covered with a transparent veil and dismembered parts of female bodies are central features within Hodinos' imagery.

It is not clear if the surrealist collector knew what he was looking at when he acquired *Consolation* and classified it as art brut. Perhaps this designation was simply due to the association of the piece with Artaud, who would spend most of the rest of his life institutionalised. The designation is obviously problematic, as Izquierdo was a well-known professional painter whose work regularly appeared in major exhibitions in Mexico City and the United States. Was this collector purposely colliding the art of a female, non-European with the art of asylum patients, or was this classification simply due to the raw, naïve and revelatory qualities of *Consolation*, also the common qualities of art brut?

Either way, the naïve quality of the painting, originally intellectually and ideologically conceived by Izquierdo as a means of expressing an authentic Mexican identity, was reconfigured by this collector as a raw expression of some unmediated, irrepressible state. The placement of *Consolation* within a surrealist art brut collection may also underscore the eclecticism and chance encounter so central to the surrealist sensibility.

The interpretation and classification of *Consolation* continues to evolve. In the *Kahlo's Contemporaries* exhibition, the painting was juxtaposed with the work of five other women working in Mexico in the period, including artists more closely affiliated with the surrealists such as Leonora Carrington and Alice Rahon. It could however be argued that *Consolation* would most coherently be exhibited alongside the work of Izquierdo's male colleagues who were working with similar imagery at the time, including Tamayo, Raul Anguilano and Carlos Orozco Romero. The poet Horacio Amigorena has perhaps taken the interpretational approach most akin to Izquierdo's artistic intentions. In his short piece for the *Kahlo's Contemporaries* exhibition, Amigorena does not attempt to classify or define *Consolation*, but instead commemorates the painting's mystery and allows it to continue its voyage:

Maria Izquierdo's painting is a sphinx. It has been called *Consolation* since it was sold at auction in New York. But it gives us no consolation. The figures within it, torn from the jungle, modelled in earthy colours, discreetly attract the passerby and abruptly confront him with the sly question, 'tell me what is going on' ... The spectator, proud of being accosted so intimately by strangers, looks closely at the image and without too much thought abandons himself utterly to subtle interpretations, for the enigma never loosens its grip.28
I would like to thank Dawn Ades, Horacio Amigorena, Andrés Blaisten, and Aurora Posadas Izquierdo for their help and support with the research for this paper. I would also like to thank the Department of Art History and Theory at Essex University for awarding me the Sir Andrew Carnwath Travel Grant, which funded research in Mexico City.


2 This exhibition, curated by Dawn Ades, Valerie Fraser and Terri Geis and organised by the University of Essex Collection of Latin American Art and the AHRC Research Centre for the Study of Surrealism and its Legacies, was held at the University of Essex Gallery from 3 October – 5 November 2005. The other artists included in the exhibition were Leonora Carrington, Olga Costa, Lola Cueto, Alice Rahon and Rosa Rolanda. See exhibition catalogue details in footnote above.


4 The exact number of paintings Artaud took with him is unknown, but Izquierdo's daughter, Aurora Posadas Izquierdo, has speculated that it was around thirty. Author's interview, along with Carlos Molina, with Aurora Posadas Izquierdo, State of Mexico, 6 September 2005.

5 For example, the art historian Olivier Debroise, one of the first to present Izquierdo to a contemporary audience in his book *Figuras en el tropico* (1984), has attempted to track down some of these lost paintings, with no luck. Debroise in email to author, 22 July 2003.


7 Rufino Tamayo, 'El nacionalismo y el movimiento pictórico,' *Crisol*, Mexico City, May 1933.

8 As communicated in an email to the author from the current owner of *Consolation*, 14 August 2005.

9 Erica Segre, 'The Hermeneutics of the Veil in Mexican Photography: of rebozos, sábanas, huipiles and lienzos de Verónica,' *Hispanic Research Journal*, 6:1 (February 2005), 39-65. I am especially grateful to Erica Segre for her suggestion of the potential reading of the veil in *Consolation* during my presentation of an earlier draft of this paper at the 'Kahlo’s Contemporaries' Symposium at the University of Essex on 4 November 2005.

10 José Gorostiza, 'La pintura de María Izquierdo,' *Mexico al día*, Mexico City, 15 December 1933.

11 José Gorostiza was among the many poets and writers of the Contemporáneos group who promoted and wrote on Izquierdo. For a detailed analysis of their interpretations of her painting and ways in which they may have collapsed her body with her art, see Adriana Zavala, *Constituting the Indian/Female Body in Mexican Painting, Cinema and Visual Culture, 1900-1950*, unpublished PhD, Brown University, 2001.


15 Artaud, 'La cultura eterna de Mexico,' *El Nacional*, 13 July 1936.

16 Artaud, 'El teatro y los dioses,' lecture given at the Anfiteatro Bolívar, Mexico City, 29 February 1936. Artaud sent a copy of his speech to Jean Paulhan, and part of it was also printed in the Mexico City newspaper *El Nacional* on 24 May 1936.

17 Artaud, 'El teatro y los dioses.'

18 The author and Carlos Molina in conversation with Aurora Posadas Izquierdo, State of Mexico, 6 September 2005.


21 The Andrés Blaisten collection contains a significant number of important Izquierdo paintings. See the entries of Dawn Ades and Terri Geis in James Oles (ed.), *Arte moderno en México: Colección de Andrés Blaisten*, Mexico 2005.


23 Izquierdo quoted in Marguerite Donne, 'Mexico’s Best-Known Woman Painter,' *Mexico Today*, Mexico City, 11 March 1939.

24 The author and Carlos Molina in conversation with Aurora Posadas Izquierdo, State of Mexico, 6 September 2005.

25 Adriana Zavala has suggested that the title *La Manda* was first used when the painting appeared in the 1988 Centro Cultural/Arte Contemporáneo monograph on Izquierdo. Zavala believes the painting may have been exhibited under the title *Mourners* in Izquierdo’s February 1933 exhibition in Mexico City. I thank Zavala for sharing her ideas with me in an email on 23 October 2005.

26 *La Manda* is currently in the collection of the Davis Museum and Cultural Centre at Wellesley College in Massachusetts. The painting was acquired by the Davis Museum in 2000 from the art dealer Mary-Anne Martin. Martin acquired the painting from a Paris dealer; it had long been held in a Paris collection. My thanks to Mary-Anne Martin and Jay Oles for this information.

27 As communicated in an email to the author from the current owner of *Consolation*, 14 August 2005. This owner was not at liberty to give me the name of the original surrealist owner of these paintings and manuscripts.


Terri Geis is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Art History and Theory at the University of Essex. Her main area of research is the art of women in post-revolutionary Mexico. Her recently submitted thesis discusses indigenism and gender in the art and critical reception of María Izquierdo. With Professors Dawn Ades and Valerie Fraser, she curated the *Kahlo’s Contemporaries* exhibition at the University of Essex Gallery. Her publications include contributions to *Arte moderno en México: Colección de Andrés Blaisten* (2005).
“Painting is dead - long live painting”: Notes on Dalí and Leonardo

David Lomas

A hilarious drawing in the opening pages of Salvador Dalí’s 1948 book 50 Secrets of Magic Craftsmanship portrays him naked astride the mighty battle horse of craftsmanship about to make his triumphal return to post-war Europe. The image is a flamboyant pastiche of Leonardo da Vinci’s studies for an equestrian monument of Francesco Sforza, a gigantic statue he never executed that was to have been three times life-size and cast in some sixty tons of bronze. Leonardo himself must have seemed to Dalí a no-less-sturdy bulwark in the quixotic crusade he launched to rescue painting from the mire into which he feared it had sunk. In reality, Dalí’s ambition to bring about a renaissance of painting was in jeopardy from the start, undermined in advance by a seemingly trifling gesture - Marcel Duchamp’s 1919 defacement of a postcard of the Mona Lisa - that nonetheless spelled the end of painting as an activity whose cultural value had persisted unquestioned until the early years of the twentieth century, with Leonardo one of its highest pinnacles. Of his belatedness in relation to that history of art, Dalí was acutely and painfully aware.

While it was still unfinished, Dalí took the quite unusual step of exhibiting his painting Leda Atomica at the Bignou Gallery, New York, from November 25, 1947 to January 3, 1948 (fig. 1). He justified the exhibition of a work in an unfinished state on the grounds that it allowed the study of his painting technique more readily than would the finished picture. As the publication of his book 50 Secrets of Magic Craftsmanship soon afterward confirmed, technical mastery had become a number one priority for Dalí. In his notes for the Bignou catalogue, he remarks:

I can give no assurance that my “Leda” - where everything gravitates in space - will be a real masterpiece. In the period of frightful mechanical progress and spiritual decadence in which we are living, this seems impossible to me. But I can guarantee this picture will be a masterpiece in the work of Dalí.

While the statement betrays an anxiety about the possibility any longer of painting a real masterpiece, it leaves one in no doubt as to the importance Dalí attached to this particular work. That he chose a theme that conjures up an indisputably real though now lost masterpiece by Leonardo, his Leda with the Swan, proves to be no coincidence. Leda Atomica is a manifesto picture and a watershed that marks more clearly than any other in his oeuvre the point of transition to late Dalí, a still contentious and not fully understood entity. Merging the classical tradition of the Renaissance with the most up-to-date science he could lay his hands on, in an anachronistic compound that he called nuclear mysticism, is not the least important respect in which Dalí is indebted to Leonardo’s example.
Painting is dead - long live painting!³

In Dalí’s extensive and well-thumbed collection of books on Leonardo, is a copy of the Péladan French translation of Leonardo’s Trattato della pittura (Traité de la peinture)⁴ A sinuous blue pencil line running down the left margin, scarcely omitting a passage in many sections of the book, tracks Dalí’s attentive reading of this critically important textual source and testifies to an unsuspected interlacing of two artistic personalities. Dalí listens in as Leonardo advises on the nobility of painting and the learning in all the branches of knowledge it demands. When it reaches the famous passage about seeking inspiration from stains on walls, his pencil reacts like a seismograph excitedly screeching up and down, before moving on.⁵ Once assimilated, the Tratatto della pittura re-emerges as inimitably Dalí in 50 Secrets of Magical Craftsmanship.⁶ Written in the manner of a handbook for painters, this book is a counterpart to Leda Atomica which is illustrated within its pages along with two studies for the painting. It is not difficult to grasp the legitimacy that Leonardo could lend to Dalí’s enterprise. The paragone, the first section of the posthumously arranged notes that comprise the Tratatto della pittura, argues compellingly
for the superiority of painting to all the other arts, exhaustively pre-empting every conceivable objection. But Dalí’s eccentric book mixes spoof with honest emulation in a way that distances Leonardo at the same time as it recalls him. 50 Secrets of Magic Craftsmanship is couched in the form of advice to young painters, a rhetorical conceit Dalí borrows from Leonardo, though the secrets he divulges are often patently nonsensical. There is a strong sense in Dalí that the second time can only be irony or farce. Dalí’s misfortune, though not his alone, was to be a painter - and the 50 Secrets of Magic Craftsmanship shows that he was passionate about the craft of painting - after the end of painting.

In an essay entitled “The Death or Decline of Art” (1985), Gianni Vattimo considers the death of art under three aspects. Hegel’s prediction of art’s sublation by philosophy is realized, he says, albeit in caricatured form, in modernity. Vattimo speaks first of art’s obsolescence at the hands of the mass media. Walter Benjamin had earlier described the withering away of the aural qualities of art in the age of its technical reproducibility. The aura, originally a function of the cultic value of art works within a fabric of religious belief and ritual, came to be associated in the era of autonomous bourgeois art with the uniqueness of the original work of art. (Its corollary, seen from the artist’s point of view, Vattimo observes, is the idea of genius.) The generalization of art in the mass media as entertainment is one of the forms of art’s death; a second is the avant-garde ambition to bring about a utopian reintegration of art into life; and a third is the path of high modernism, which sets an ever more restricted programme for art as a reaction to the perceived insidious encroachments of mass culture or kitsch. The last-mentioned, in which authentic art paints itself into a corner - Adorno and Greenberg offer versions of this modernist doctrine - is a form of death by suicide. Vattimo states that the actual event of art’s death, that ought to coincide with a complete cessation of art production, is indefinitely postponed, hence one should more accurately speak of the decline of art. This situation, in which art continues to be produced while contemplating its own death, he contends, constitutes the historical and ontological constellation in which we move.

Late Dalí, I believe, evolved in a paradoxical relation of avowal/disavowal to the death or decline of art, as defined by Vattimo. Abandoning the revolutionary aspirations of the historical avant-garde - he declared surrealism over - and suspicious of autonomous abstraction, Dalí set himself an alternative programme: ‘Instead of Reaction, or Revolution, RENAISSANCE!’ The goal of restoring painting to the status it once had would occupy him for the next decade or more. One of the symptoms of the death of art identified by Vattimo is that “the work no longer seeks a success which would permit it to position itself within a determinate set of values (the imaginary museum of objects possessed of aesthetic value).” The absence of any shared and agreed-upon aesthetic criteria in relation to which artworks are judged is a crisis that the Duchamp readymade reflects upon and also exacerbates. The readymade object becomes a work of art simply by virtue of being designated as such by the artist.
Dali tried to fill the resultant vacuum by placing a renewed emphasis on traditional painting skills, a rearguard effort that shares much in common with the stance of Giorgio de Chirico, the former surrealist idol who, to the dismay of Andre Breton, reverted in the 1920s to making pastiches of the Old Masters. Dali’s vitriolic diatribes against modern art in such tracts as *Les Cocus du vieil art moderne* (*The Cuckolds of Antiquated Modern Art*; 1956) echo very similar pronouncements by de Chirico blaming the decadence of contemporary painting on a decline of technical competence. While purporting to deplore our ‘era of frightful mechanical progress and spiritual decadence’, in Dali’s words, it is striking that the practice of both artists was marked by the very conditions of reproducibility held responsible for the decay of art’s aura. There is not space here to examine the myriad ways in which Dali’s painting was infiltrated by photographic technologies and associated modes of perception, but like de Chirico’s practice of copying, which only gathered pace in the 1920s, it registered the very conditions that his reversion to a traditional painterly craft supposedly was reacting against. Thus the death of painting was recognized at the same time as it was strenuously denied.

Putting a psychoanalytic slant on the matter, Yve-Alain Bois, in his essay ‘Painting: The Task of Mourning,’ argues that the task of mourning the death of painting that one might more naturally associate with postmodernism also fell to modernism at the beginning of the twentieth-century. The end of modern art is foretold in its birth. The origins of modernist abstraction can be located in the liberation from mimesis brought about by the invention of photography, with which it is historically co-terminus. At the same time, the crisis of art in industrial modernity brought about by the appearance of photography, and of mass reproduction, was understood as signaling the end of art. In a remark that underscores the unavoidable centrality of Duchamp to this rhetoric of the ‘end’, Bois states, ‘Mass production seemed to bode the end of painting through its most elaborate mise-en-scène, the invention of the ready-made.’ These same conditions also engender, by way of reaction, ‘the essentialist urge of modernist [abstract] painting’ - to which, of course, Dali was inveterately opposed. Although it would be foolhardy to apply any diagnostic label to Dali, his response to what he understood as the decline of art bears many of the hallmarks of a manic defense, such as Bois discerns in appropriation art, more so than of mourning. Mania is a defensive operation equivalent to denial; its behavioral correlates are over-activity, triumphalism, and oral cannibalism. Aside from such traits, all of which Dali exhibits in abundance, mania is also evident in his trademark humor. The absence of an overtly melancholic tone would thus be a red herring that ought not to prevent us from recognizing its underlying causes.

Leonardo complex
Dali’s Leonardo infatuation (earnest, un-ironic) began early, with an essay on ‘The Great Masters of Painting: Leonardo da Vinci’ written in 1919 for the journal *Studium* produced by Dali and his
Catalan friends. Leonardo afforded an inexhaustible resource from which Dalí drew in distinct ways at various moments throughout his career, but most intensively when he embarked on a neo-traditional return to painting. It is not my intention to compile here an inventory of the many Leonardo references in Dalí. Rather, by analyzing his multi-faceted engagement with Leonardo during the transitional period of the 1940s and early 1950s, I hope to arrive at a better understanding of late Dalí.

My special intention had been to create a purely morphological drawing of the genius of psychoanalysis.

Of all the writings of Sigmund Freud, his foray into the life of the great Renaissance artist, Leonardo da Vinci: A Memory of His Childhood, was one the surrealists cherished most after its French translation by Marie Bonaparte in 1927. This psychoanalytic novel, as Freud called it, admitting the role of fantasy in its construction, was also one of his personal favorites. Prominent in the case study is what Freud identifies as the “double nature” of Leonardo as an artist and scientific investigator. (Freyd was no less anxious to demonstrate the double nature of psychoanalysis as a science but one with special insights on art and culture.) The essay is also a sustained meditation on the nature of genius, though whether the referent of that discussion is always Leonardo, and not on occasion Freud himself, is not clear. Freud’s Leonardo mediates what I shall be calling here Dalí’s Leonardo complex.

Fig. 2: Salvador Dalí. Original drawing for The Secret Life of Salvador Dalí (New York, 1942), 24.

Dalí was already thoroughly apprised of Freud’s Leonardo case study when he produced a portrait drawing for his 1942 autobiography, The Secret Life of Salvador Dalí, to accompany the account of his visit to Freud in London in July 1938 (fig. 2). A number of features of this heavily...
citational drawing are reminiscent of Leonardo: the combination of multiple variant images on a single sheet, for example, is highly typical, a manifestation of Leonardo’s restless intellect that was never satisfied with just one solution. Dalí said of his meeting with Freud that he had wanted to appear a “kind of dandy of ‘universal intellectualism’” (like Leonardo) but learned later that the impression he created was exactly the opposite. The grimacing profile portrait repeated three times at the left of the sheet exacts his revenge, recalling the pitiless caricatures in which Leonardo poked fun at the ravages of old age (Freud was indeed on the eve of his death at the time of Dalí’s visit). Another signature trait is the inclusion of notation on the sheet, in this case explaining that the drawing represents the morphology of Freud’s cranium according to the principle of the volute and of a snail. The adjoining text in *The Secret Life* compares Freud’s brain with that of Leonardo, which Dalí says is like a walnut. The spiral or vortex is moreover a nearly ubiquitous leitmotif in Leonardo’s art. By so deliberately and self-consciously depicting Freud in the manner of Leonardo, Dalí alluded in 1942 to a complex set of psychic investments in Leonardo and a play of identifications in which he too participated.

It is as a result of his reading of the Leonardo case study that Dalí was led to equate painting as such with a maternal imago, a compound he termed the Mother as Work of Art. This is legitimated by Freud’s account of the *Mona Lisa*, whose sitter, the Florentine Mona Lisa del Giocondo, he claimed reactivated in Leonardo forgotten memories of his own mother. The creation of this most beautiful work of art was thus the recreation of the blissful experience of an infant suckling at the mother’s breast, the conclusive evidence of which he found in the enigmatic smile that Leonardo conferred not only upon the Mona Lisa herself but on all his subsequent creations, including the *Madonna and Child with Saint Anne*, where he, so to speak, gave back the smile to its rightful owner:

> For if the Giaconda’s smile called up in his mind the memory of his mother, it is easy to understand how it drove him at once to create a glorification of motherhood, and to give back to his mother the smile he had found in the noble lady.

Sidestepping the *Mona Lisa*, perhaps because it was already thoroughly colonized as a site of avant-garde gambits, Dalí chose instead to stage the rebirth of painting around an absent origin. Leonardo’s painting of *Leda and the Swan*, a subject that occupied its creator for almost a decade, is known only from pen-and-ink studies for the painting and from several variant copies, of which the Wilton House version attributed to Cesare da Sesto is believed to be the most accurate. In 1516 Leonardo took the completed picture with him to France, where it was housed in François I’s Appartements des Bains at Fontainebleau in conditions that caused the panel to deteriorate, and it was lost in the course of the next century. By an extraordinary coincidence, Dalí was forced to abandon a first version of *Leda Atomica* after the wood panel on which it was painted was subject to extensive fine cracking of the surface, in effect suffering the fate of the lost
Leonardo original. He repainted the work on canvas, and although it would appear to have been largely finished when it was first exhibited at the end of 1947, an entry in Dalí’s *Diary of a Genius* for September 2, 1958, indicates that it underwent some repainting at that time.\(^\text{24}\) It must be said that Dalí’s composition does not conform at all closely to Leonardo’s, yet any doubts about a rapport between the works is dispelled by a later picture by Dalí of 1954, whose longwinded title infers that Leda as portrayed by Leonardo was physically reconstituted in Gala’s DNA.\(^\text{25}\) The idea of a repetition without an origin that we find here is a familiar enough topos within Dalí’s oeuvre that inevitably tinges the repeated instance with connotations of lack and belatedness as well as inauthenticity. It is a pattern that applied with some poignancy to the artist himself. The story is well known that an older brother also called Salvador died just over a year before Dalí was born, causing him to believe throughout his life that he was a surrogate for this lost original. Viewed from Dalí’s post-Freudian perspective, the myth of Leda and the Swan (in which Zeus, disguised as a swan, impregnates the object of his desire) represents a primal scene of parental intercourse in which Leda is invested with maternal associations as the original, now-lost object of desire - Freud, in his only passing reference to Leonardo’s Leda, sees in her yet another avatar of the enigmatic mother’s smile.\(^\text{26}\) Confused with painting as such, *Leda Atomica* is the occasion for a restaging of this scene with Leda-painting now magically reincarnated in, and personified by, Gala. Dalí’s desire for Leda-painting, transferred onto Gala, consequently has the structure of human desire in general, in which, to quote Freud, ‘the final object of the sexual instinct is never any longer the original object but only a surrogate for it.’\(^\text{27}\)

He also had been such a vulture child - he had had a mother, but no father.\(^\text{28}\)

It was while Dalí was residing in the United States in the 1940s, far from home, that he began to conceive of a biblical pageant set against the backdrop of Port Lligat in which he and Gala would both have their parts to play. The theme of the Madonna of Port Lligat that culminates in two versions of Gala portrayed as the mother of Christ in 1949 and 1950 first makes an appearance in a pen-and-ink drawing reproduced as a frontispiece to *50 Secrets of Magic Craftsmanship*. That the burgeoning of this religious iconography overlapped with the painting of *Leda Atomica* created conditions that were ripe for cross-fertilisation between the two subjects.

Dalí’s self-aggrandizing tendency to dramatize his relationship with Gala in terms of the biblical narrative points to a crucial parallel with Freud’s Leonardo. Owing to the peculiar circumstance that as an illegitimate child he, so to speak, ‘had had a mother but no father’, Freud contended that for Leonardo the question of his own origin was a riddle for which the Immaculate Conception of Christ held a solution. Leonardo identified himself with the Christ Child and his mother with the Virgin Mary, which Freud saw reflected in the artist’s later life in his treatment of biblical subjects. Leonardo’s vulture fantasy - a memory of a bird coming down and waving its tail...
about in his mouth when he was an infant in the cradle - is adduced by Freud in support of this interpretation. In a lengthy excursus through mythology, we are told that the Egyptians believed that only female vultures existed. Freud cites an ancient authority who recorded that ‘at certain times these birds pause in mid-flight, open their vagina and are impregnated by the wind.’29 That vultures were thought to be able to reproduce in this fashion was later cited by the church fathers in support of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. Freud supposed that Leonardo knew of this theological line of argument, thus enabling the vulture to act as a symbolic substitute for his mother in the screen memory that arose in adult life and was projected back to his early childhood. In support of this reasoning, one of Freud’s followers, the Reverend Oscar Pfister, discovered the hidden outline of a vulture in Leonardo’s picture of the *Virgin and Child with Saint Anne*, an unconscious picture puzzle by Leonardo that Freud reports, albeit with a degree of skepticism, in the published case study.

There is no doubting that Dalí appreciated all the intricacies of Freud’s argument. He refers to the essay in an article for the surrealist journal *Minotaure* in 1933 that sets forth plans for a book-length interpretation of Jean-François Millet’s *Angélus*, and the eventual study has a knowing, parodic relation to the methodology of Freud’s text.30 Some time later, in an essay written in 1939, Dali suffered a curious but explicable (Freudian) lapse in misattributing the hidden vulture to the *Virgin of the Rocks*:

Sigmund Freud, in analyzing the famous invisible vulture (which appears in that strangest of all pictures, Leonardo’s *Virgin of the Rocks*), involuntarily laid the epistemological and philosophical cornerstone of the majestic edifice of imminent ‘paranoiac painting’.31

This mistake may simply reflect Dalí’s preference for a composition that in placing the Virgin and Child in an outdoor setting can be regarded as a prototype for his *Madonna of Port Lligat*. The background of the *Virgin and the Rocks* is a veritable geological delirium, one destined to appeal to his sensibilities; it may have recalled the strange rock formations in the vicinity of Port Lligat that were a longstanding source of inspiration. The rocky outcrops that frame Leda on either side of a cove in Dalí’s painting are relatively restrained by comparison, yet their carefully delineated forms dimly echo this strangest of all Leonardo’s pictures. In the pages of *50 Secrets of Magic Craftsmanship*, Dalí tells of a book he is writing that is to be called *The Geomorphology of Painting*, showing that the subject was one he was actively thinking about (a marginal note amends this to the even more evocative term ‘geomorphopsychology’).32

*Leda Atomica* is a staging post in the makeover of Gala as the Madonna of Port Lligat - her passage from bride to Virgin, so to speak - and is therefore also the prelude to a later series of works by Dalí on the theme of the Assumption of the Virgin. A detail of the Leonardo case that chimes with the weightless suspension of Gala is the description of the mythic vulture pausing to conceive in mid-flight. The theme of the Immaculate Conception, so prominent in Freud’s
interpretation, also accords with a possible reading of *Leda Atomica* as a veiled Annunciation, itself the subject of an early picture by Leonardo.\(^{33}\) In this hypothetical scenario, the swan with outspread wings would be equivalent to the archangel Gabriel, announcing possibly the miraculous rebirth of painting. No swansong then.

**The hierarchized libidinous emotion, suspended and as though hanging in mid-air.**\(^{34}\)

*Noli me tangere*: If pictures had subtitles, I can imagine the Gala of *Leda Atomica* uttering these words, spoken by Christ in his appearance to Mary Magdalen before his ascent to heaven. *Leda Atomica* is a picture in which nothing touches upon anything else: neither the sea, the sand, nor the rocky outcrops, the sea - above all, not Gala, who hovers over a pedestal resplendent in her nakedness but untouched even by the swan. Running counter to the usual treatment of a theme in which flesh and feathers frantically entwine, Dalí’s is a purely ideal union of Leda and the swan. Although their contours overlap at the point of Gala’s left ear, they do not make contact. This unorthodox visualisation of a stock mythological subject was made possible for Dalí when he learnt that at the atomic level particles do not touch. Here, as elsewhere, a fairly banal fact gleaned from popular science books became in Dalí’s hands a recipe for bizarre, not to say surreal, effects.\(^{35}\) Following for a moment his errant logic, which recalls the ratiocination of the church fathers on the matter of the Virgin birth, one could say that modern physics proved once and for all Gala’s virginal chasteness - a ramification of atomic theory that not even Einstein had foreseen! The stark lighting and hard-edged photorealism distinguish Dalí’s treatment from the blurred, indeterminate contours that cloak Leonardo’s subjects with a more elusive intangibility. Another notable difference is the absence of any visible offspring in Dalí’s painting. A broken eggshell hovering in the foreground casts a perfectly elliptical shadow, as if to imply that the only progeny of this immaculate conception is abstract geometry. An unidentified book with a red cover inscribed with an ovoid form also floats tantalizingly out of reach in near proximity. Dalí attested that ‘Leonardo always tended to produce eggs, which were the most perfect form, according to Euclid.’\(^{36}\)

If physics supplies one explanation as to how Gala manages to stay aloft, the sublimation of libidinal energy also contributes its propulsive force. In the Leonardo case, Freud remarked that ‘we cannot imagine the mental life of any human being in the formation of which sexual desire in the broadest sense - libido - did not have its share, even if that desire has departed far from its original aim, or has refrained from putting itself into effect.’\(^{37}\) The notion of sublimation pertains to the capacity of the libido to replace an immediate sexual aim with other aims that are culturally valued more highly. Freud accounts in this manner for Leonardo’s exalted artistic and scientific accomplishments. The theory of sublimation demands that Leonardo be stunted in his sexual life in order that there be surplus energy left over to fuel an overpowering instinct for
research. Freud concludes, too hastily possibly, that ‘Leonardo was enabled to live in abstinence and to give the impression of being an asexual human being’ (a claim that is belied by the scant biographical information Freud adduces). Sublimation is a theoretical concept, but it is also a metaphor and is linked with recurring motifs of flight and ascent in the Leonardo essay. ‘But why do so many people dream of being able to fly?’ Freud asks.

There is no doubting that Dali was thoroughly cognizant of the psychoanalytic notion of sublimation as it relates to cultural, and especially artistic, production. Recalling that Freud was occupied with the problem of religion and Moses when he visited him in July 1938, Dalí observed, ‘and I remember with what fervor he uttered the word “sublimation” on several occasions.’ The meeting with Freud certainly made a huge impression on Dalí and can be taken as marking something of a watershed in his views about painting. A remark that Freud evidently made in response to Dali’s The Metamorphosis of Narcissus (1937), which he had taken with him on his pilgrimage, convinced Dalí that the surrealist project of representing the unconscious was untenable (this is corroborated by the letter that Freud wrote the following day to Stefan Zweig).

It was tantamount, in Dalí’s view, ‘to the pronouncement of a death sentence on surrealism as a doctrine, as a sect, as an “ism”’42. This event does appear to have presaged a shift from the de-sublimatory drive that predominated in Dalí’s surrealist phase to a new aesthetic predicated on sublimation that finds its quintessential expression in the strangely hovering figure of Gala in Leda Atomica. On the final page of The Secret Life, immediately after the account of his meeting with Freud, Dalí rousingly declares, ‘One must sublimate!’ while the 50 Secrets of Magic Craftsmanship reiterates in conformity with a Freudian orthodoxy that sublimation is ‘the constitutional basis of the artistic phenomenon.’43 When Dalí speaks of the libidinous emotion being suspended, we can understand this in the sense of an upward thrust that cancels out gravity but also as a postponement of sensual gratification. ‘It is doubtful whether Leonardo ever embraced a woman in passion’, speculates Freud at one point in his analysis; this too concurs with what has been reported of Dalí’s phobic avoidance of actual physical contact. Freud inferred that the separation of male and female was overcome in Leonardo’s representations of androgynous youths - Saint John the Baptist, for example - which he suggests are the realization on an ideal, sublimated plane of an incestuous wish for a blissful union with the mother. Gala’s alternation between wife and mother inclines one to think that Dalí extended this reading of an incestuous union to the myth of Leda, which somewhat curiously (given that the screen memory underpinning his entire analysis concerns a bird consorting with a human being) occupies only a very minor place in Freud’s study.45 If, as Dalí maintained, sublimation is the necessary corollary of a classical aesthetic, its essential propulsive force as it were, the ludicrous explanation he gives of it and the very odd way he pictures it, points in the direction of a parody that threatens to bring down what is ostensibly being elevated and revered. Gala-Leda may be the sublime incarnation of painting, but the subversive drag of Dalí’s comic sense pulls the rug from beneath...
her feet.  

sacred geometry

Enter, at this juncture in Dalí’s booming American career, Matila Ghyka, a Romanian expatriate and renowned devotee of the golden section. Ghyka had the title of prince, which doubtless commended him to Dalí’s attention when they met at a dinner party, just as he was at work on Leda Atomica and in the process of writing 50 Secrets of Magic Craftsmanship. In a letter to Dalí dated August 13 (probably in 1947), Ghyka wrote that he was glad to hear Dalí had received the French edition of his book and to learn that he had a part in the composition of the Leda Atomica. ‘I await the tracing of the latter with the keenest interest,’ he added.

By means of his newfound acquaintance with Ghyka, Dalí learned about a side of Leonardo - namely his mathematical pursuits - that he would not have fully grasped without Ghyka’s expert tutelage. Leonardo had long regarded optics and the study of perspective and proportion as the necessary foundations for a science of painting. With the arrival of Luca Pacioli in Milan in 1496 (fig. 3), his mathematical studies gained new impetus. The illustrations that Leonardo created for Pacioli’s De divina proportione, a treatise on geometry written in manuscript form in 1498, are regarded as an astonishing feat of draftsmanship. With the aid of wooden models, Leonardo devised hollowed-out (vacuus) representations of an array of regular polyhedrons conventionally known as Platonic solids that he depicted in perspective, the open
skeletal armature affording a startlingly direct apprehension of complex three-dimensional geometry (fig. 4). The Leonardo illustrations accompanied an Italian translation of Piero della Francesca’s treatise on geometry, *Libellus de Quinque Corporibus Regularibus*, which was included as one of the sections in *De divina proportione* (Pacioli reputedly played the role of an intermediary, transmitting Piero’s theories on perspective to Leonardo). Inspired by Pacioli, from 1497 Leonardo was motivated to undertake an independent study of Euclid’s *Elements*. So absorbed did he become in the pursuit of mathematics for its own sake that a letter by a contemporary in 1501 reports that he could not even bear to pick up a paintbrush. The preeminence of the exact sciences of geometry and mathematics in establishing the incorruptible foundations of painting is a message reiterated throughout the *Trattato della pittura*, from the famous proclamation in the opening section that ‘no activity shall merit the name of science unless it rests upon mathematical proof’ to the individual chapters dealing with linear perspective and proportion, the correct depiction of shadows and lighting, and other constituents of a science of painting.

![Fig. 4: Icosahedron and Dodecahedron drawn by Leonardo da Vinci for *De Divina Proportione* of Fra Luca Pacioli. From Matila Ghyka, *Le Nombre d’or: rites et rythmes pythagoriciens dans le developpement de la civilisation occidentale* (Paris: Gallimard, 1931), plate VII.](image)

For a time, Ghyka played Pacioli to Dalí’s Leonardo, proferring advice to his eager pupil on matters of geometry and proportion. Dalí’s personal library included two books by Ghyka, one an American edition, *The Geometry of Art and Life* (1946), and the other an earlier French-language publication, *Esthétique des proportions dans la nature et dans les arts* (The Aesthetic of
Proportions in Nature and in the Arts; 1927). From the previously cited letter, it would seem that they were given to him by the author around the time of their first meeting, and both have extensive annotations by Dalí. The final chapter of 50 Secrets of Magic Craftsmanship contains a proficient if not altogether serious digest of Ghyka. The Platonic solids - tetrahedron, cube, octahedron, dodecahedron, and icosahedron - these new playthings of Dalí’s imagination are strewn like toys in the margins of the book, their Latinate names flaunted like the mantras of an esoteric religion. Dalí recommended to students that they have a joiner build portable geometric figures out of wooden strips, similar to the structures employed by Leonardo but large enough so that live models could be posed within them.

Also reproduced in 50 Secrets of Magic Craftsmanship are two drawings relating to Leda Atomica, together with a photograph of the unfinished painting. The drawings contain too much surplus information to be regarded simply as working studies for the painting, tending to suggest that their purpose was a didactic one, with the book their intended destination. Both incorporate Leonardesque elements. One of the images, drawn on tracing paper, is an ostentatious display of Dalí’s mastery of perspective and the oblique geometric projection of shadows, technical skills that defined the Renaissance ‘science’ of painting. The background on either side of this drawing is filled with shapes and figures, none of which appear in the painting and which seem to have coalesced from thin air. An equestrian figure and a curious domed building, overt pastiches of Leonardo, perhaps were meant to convey the message that a painter must also be capable of invention and fantasy. The second drawing, recalling Leonardo’s famous drawing of a Vitruvian man, shows the finished composition for Leda Atomica upon which is superimposed a pentagon inscribed within a circle. This was almost certainly done post facto, its purpose to underscore the role of mathematical geometry in the pictorial construction. At the bottom right of the sheet is a formula relating the radius of a circle to the side of a pentagon contained within it, an example of a golden section ratio. One has a sneaking suspicion that Dalí may not have understood this equation, which he copied out verbatim from Ghyka’s Geometry of Art and Life, which suggests there was a degree of bluff in his claim that mathematical competence is a necessary requisite to the painter’s art. A geometer’s set square occupies the equivalent position in the painted version of Leda Atomica, repeating the same message loud and clear.

Morphology […] has in this book just married with royal pomp the most lucid aesthetic geometry of the Renaissance.
knee-jerk response by a one-time surrealist, ought not to obscure the fact that *Intra-Atomic Equilibrium of a Swan Feather* of 1947, and other works of similar ilk, hark back to much earlier interests in geometric pictorial construction. A renewed passion for geometry inspired by Ghyka also married up with Dalí’s longer-standing studies of morphology. During the 1930s he avidly read such classics as Édouard Monod-Herzen’s *Principes de morphologie générale* (Principles of Morphology; 1927) and D’Arcy Wentworth Thompson’s *On Growth and Form* (1919), along with other, lesser-known sources. These authors collated the results of scientific studies of morphology in such fields as mathematics, physics, engineering, and biology, presenting them in a form that was palatable for the non-specialist. Ironically, one of the main audiences for this literature, which aimed to reveal the hidden order of nature, was the very abstract artists whom Dalí now purported to despise.

Ghyka acknowledged that his own project was indebted to Theodore Cook’s *The Curves of Life* (1914), an exhaustive compendium of spirals of all conceivable kinds in nature and art that makes frequent reference to the ubiquity of spirals and vortices in the work of Leonardo. The spiral, a geometric form that results from patterns of growth (Cook regarded it as literally synonymous with life), assumes a particular form known as a logarithmic spiral in shells like the nautilus, where the intervals between successive turns of the spiral increase progressively rather than staying constant (fig. 5). Termed a $\phi$ progression by Cook, the mathematical series formed by these intervals has properties that relate it to the golden section. Ghyka states that it was as a result of reading *The Curves of Life* that he was led to reexamine Luca Pacioli’s *De divina proportione* and came to the realization that the divine proportion of Pacioli was none other than the $\phi$ ratio as defined by Cook. Dalí’s analysis of Freud’s brain in terms of the spiral of a snail shell, referred to earlier, shows that he was already apprised of this literature even before his encounter with Ghyka, and it is apparent from his informed discussion of logarithmic spirals in 50
Secrets of Magic Craftsmanship that he read Ghyka not in isolation, but hand in hand with these other authors. Dalí reported that his obsession with radiolarians, and also sea urchins, arose from the discovery that the skeletal structures that support these minuscule marine organisms comprise regular Platonic solids. Monod-Herzen illustrates radiolarians in which the delicate exoskeleton recapitulates on a microscopic scale the hollow skeletal models that Leonardo, totally unaware of their existence, had created for Pacioli. In general terms, the aim of popular scientific writers on morphology was to draw out commonalities of form and structure in order to illustrate basic principles in the natural world, as in art. It is clear from the body of works that Dalí produced in the mid-1930s, sometimes known as morphological echoes, that exposure to the literature on morphology sharpened his eye for detecting unexpected resemblances between forms, and that this propensity represents one of the most convincing points of convergence between Dalí and Leonardo. On this score, they were like birds of a feather.

The golden section, [...] called the divina proporzione by Luca Pacioli in his memorable book, the most important of all aesthetic treatises. Can we assume that Dalí had firsthand knowledge of a treatise on which he bestowed such lavish praise, or was he simply name-dropping on the basis of rudiments picked up from Ghyka? His tongue-in-cheek advice to young American artists in the 50 Secrets of Magic Craftsmanship that they keep Pacioli’s book at their bedside is certainly preposterous, since there was (and still is) no English translation. Nevertheless, the number and variety of figures from this treatise that Dalí sprinkled throughout the pages of this book exceeds those reproduced by Ghyka. Additional evidence that he had access to the original source is the adoption of a system of lettering invented by Pacioli, which he expounds in a section of De divina proportione, for Dalí’s name as printed on the cover and title page of 50 Secrets of Magic Craftsmanship. This lettering first appears in association with Dalí in 1941 on the cover of the catalogue for an exhibition of his works at the Julien Levy Gallery, New York, raising the possibility that he was acquainted already with Pacioli at that time. Had Dalí consulted De divina proportione independently of Ghyka, as seems likely, he may have been aware of the theological significance that Pacioli (unlike Euclid, who described the same ratio) ascribed to the divine proportion. Its attributes are those that belong to God himself. The first of these is unity, and the second relates the ratio to the Holy Trinity: ’Just as in God a single substance resides in three people - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit - in the same manner it follows that a single ratio or proportion is always found between three terms.’ A third property is the ineffable nature of the divine: ‘Our proportion cannot be determined by a number that one can know, nor express by any rational quantity, but is always mysterious and secret, and qualified by mathematicians as irrational.’ Pacioli also supplied a number of other reasons in favour of the proportion’s divinity, but for Dalí, the former exponent of concrete irrationality, the last-mentioned would have been of no little interest.
The appeal of geometry for Dalí at that moment seems not unconnected with his quest for a rather oddball synthesis of science and spirituality. In an appendix to the French edition of his book *Ésthétique des proportions dans la nature et dans les arts*, Ghyka carried his geometrical analyses of the Platonic solids into the fourth dimension - an ever-popular refuge for artists and others of a mystical or anti-materialist persuasion, from the *fin de siècle* to more recent times. Ghyka had an established following in these fringy circles, but this section also caught the eye of Dalí, who in the 1950s militantly denounced ‘sordid’ materialism. Ghyka supplied a table illustrating various bodies, including the four-dimensional projection of a cube, a so-called hypercube, upon which Dalí overdrew in his copy of the book a miniature homunculus in a crucifixion pose, possibly the first sketch of an idea for *Crucifixion (Corpus Hypercunicus)* of 1953-54. ⁶⁰

Dalí’s boldest attempt to imbue geometry with attributes of the sacred, however, occurred in *The Sacrament of the Last Supper* of 1955, an ambitious painting that overtly references the famous Leonardo masterpiece. ⁶¹ The subject of Dalí’s picture is not the Last Supper, however, but rather the sacrament of Holy Communion accompanied by a mystical apparition of Christ who he depicts in the upper section of the painting. Dalí carried over many of the features of Leonardo’s composition such that his own image is set in dialogue with the biblical event that the communion symbolically re-enacts. The long horizontal table and symmetrical disposition of figures is retained, with Christ positioned at the apex of a pyramid formed by strongly accented lines of visual recession. Not least among the reasons for his interest in this particular work, we may conjecture, is that the *Last Supper*, painted around 1495–97, coincided precisely with the period of Leonardo’s closest collaboration with Pacioli, when he produced the geometric figures for *De divina proportione*. An overriding interest in mathematical geometry, evident in the very rigorous application of single-point perspective, is also underscored by a study for the *Last Supper* that Dalí would have known in which a geometrical drawing of an octagon appears in the lower section of the sheet. Whether or not Leonardo ever applied the golden section in this or any other of his compositions, it certainly would have suited Ghyka’s purposes to claim that he did. In *The Geometry of Art and Life*, one of several extant copies of Leonardo’s *Leda* is subjected to a highly elaborate geometric analysis with the aim of imputing to Leonardo a dependence on the golden section, something that Dalí was probably disposed to accept (fig. 6). ⁶² His makeover of the *Last Supper* is a heavy-handed object lesson in *divina proportione*. The cassocks of the priests, their heads bowed in prayer, form a repeated series of pentagons, and the overall dimensions of the canvas are those of a golden section rectangle. Dominating the upper part of the work, in a daring departure from the original, is a giant three-dimensional version of one of Leonardo’s drawings for Pacioli, the skeletal armature of which opens window-like onto a vista formed by the sea and sky of Port Lligat. The geometric figure looming over the scene like a strange hallucination is a dodecahedron of the *vacuus* type, about which Dalí had quizzed Ghyka.
in an exchange of letters in 1947, as is apparent in Ghyka’s reply:

For the questions that you put to me on the subject of solids corresponding to the Macrocosm and Microcosm: for the Macrocosm it is evidently the Dodacahedron, already mentioned by Plato in *Timeas* as the model employed by the grand designer (“the God disposing with Art”) for the Cosmos.63

Ghyka accompanied this passage with a hand-drawn diagram illustrating how the upper part of a dodacahedron can be used to denote the cupola of the sky, a prescription that Dalí followed to the letter. The body of Christ with arms outstretched in the upper register of the picture evokes the concept of man as microcosm contained by the geometry of the celestial sphere, or macrocosm. As unexpected as the chance meeting of an umbrella and a sewing machine on a dissection table,64 the combination of discordant elements within Dalí’s image, though all are derived from Leonardo, is not something that Leonardo himself ever would have dared. While there is an element of overkill in Dalí’s zealous and inflexible application of geometric principles, he leaves little room for doubt that he comprehended fully the theological reasoning that underlay Pacioli’s *divina proporsione*.

**Sticky and retarded Kantians of scatological sections d’or.**65

The ferocity of Dalí’s attacks on abstract art throughout this period is somewhat perplexing in so far as the mix of transcendent spirituality, mysticism, and geometry that drove the pioneers of modernist abstraction is not dissimilar to Dalí’s ambitions for his own painting. When he pours scorn on the ‘abject misery’ of abstraction-creation, whose exponents he brands ‘sticky and retarded Kantians of scatological sections d’or’, the terms of his invective are more than a little contradictory in light of his own enthusiastic embrace of the golden section.66 The pictures that best exemplify Dalí’s search for a sacred geometry are the kind of Dalís before which the public gawps in amazement while critics unanimously recoil. There is no denying the oddly compromised status of a picture like *The Sacrament of the Last Supper* that ostensibly takes as its theme a vision of Christ provoked by extremes of religious faith when Dalí by his own admission had none. ‘At this moment I do not yet have faith, and I fear I shall die without heaven’, he confesses on the closing page of *The Secret Life*, nor is there any reason to think that Dalí ever found the faith he was seeking. In this regard, he possibly felt a secret affinity with Leonardo, whose strict reliance on the empirical data of perception made him the target of accusations of unbelief.67 One gets the sense that Dalí knew that a technical bag of tricks alone would not suffice to restore painting’s lost aura, and that he felt he must also revive the religious subject matter that he associated with the most glorious epochs of Western art. But in the absence of true religious belief such an enterprise was bound to seem hollow and to render more acute the lack of
conviction that afflicts the project as a whole.

Easily overlooked among the innumerable ideas cramming the pages of *50 Secrets of Magic Craftsmanship* is a charming little sketch for an icosahedral studio that was to have been built at Port Lligat, a project for which Dalí enlisted the services of the architect Gabriel Alomar after his return to Spain. In making this novel excursus into architectural design, which startlingly anticipates the geodesic forms of Buckminster Fuller and other postwar architects, it is likely that Dalí was again self-consciously emulating Leonardo. Alas, the icosahedral studio, more appealing than the wooden and sanctimonious *Sacrament of the Last Supper*, was to remain an unrealized dream, just as none of Leonardo’s architectural projects ever made it off the drawing board.

**paranoiac ambiguities and nuclear mysticism**

Not content to occupy himself with a cuisine of paint, with the mere revival of painting technique, Dalí set himself the far more ambitious goal of becoming a new *homo universalis* in the mould of Leonardo, but re-kitted for a nuclear age. Armed with the rigour (*sic*) of the paranoiac-critical method, Dalí’s self-declared aim was to furnish a new cosmogony systematically integrating all of philosophy, science, and religion. Quite aside from the practical matter of whether it was any longer possible for one individual to master all these specialized spheres of knowledge, it is surely important to bear in mind the status of the paranoiac delirium as a parodic double of true knowledge - a paradoxical double, moreover, as Freud realised, asking rhetorically whether the future would decide that there was more truth in Schreber’s delusion or more delusion in his psychoanalysis. To be sure, Dalí’s cosmogony does have an ‘architecture,’ as he insisted, but it is not the architecture governed by logic or reason (which, true to his surrealist roots, Dalí rejected) being nearer to his description of Art Nouveau architecture and ornament as the ‘realization of solidified desires.’ It is an anti-architecture at the service of the pleasure principle, cathected by libido and supplying a continuous erotic delight. With perverse, regressive, oral cannibalistic satisfaction, Dalí ingested physics together with biology, combining science with religion and metaphysics in a totalizing synthesis whose only logic was pleasure.

**Painting is consubstantially linked to geography, to geology, to botany, etc.**

Dalí’s claim that painting is linked to the natural sciences *consubstantially*, a theological term meaning ‘of the same substance’, runs counter to the spirit of an age that in the main saw art and science as polarized opposites. What Dalí says, in fact, owes more to Leonardo and to an epoch in which the terms ‘art’ and ‘science’ were not construed antithetically. Art could be a science for Leonardo if founded on mathematical truths. Moreover, since painting partakes of the whole of the visible world, it follows that the painter, in order to be the master of his art, should have a
complete knowledge of all that he seeks to represent. In short, he should be a scientist as well as an artist. Dalí, for his part, asserted in his own inimitable fashion that ‘if caviar is the life experience of the sturgeon, it is also that of the surrealists, for, like it, we are carnivorous fish who, as I have already insinuated, are swimming between two kinds of water, the cold water of art and the warm water of science.’ Leonardo afforded a role model for an artistic practice situated at the interface with science, but with the key difference that whereas for Leonardo it was possible to be a scientist as well as an artist, for Dalí - living in another era - that simply was not a feasible option. Faced with trying to grasp the rudiments of quantum mechanics or, in later life, chaos theory, he must have envied Leonardo. Universal genius was a product of simpler times.

There is a vast gulf between the physics that excited Dalí and science as it was understood and practiced in the sixteenth century. One of the problems Dalí wrestled with as he tried to create an iconography for the atomic era was the fact that modern physics is abstract as well as abstruse, a rich source of theoretical concepts expressed as mathematical formulae, but from the point of view of an artist, visually impoverished. Anachronistic though it may seem, I want to argue that Dalí discovered in Leonardo a fund of imagery that compensated for the relative paucity of such material offered by modern physics and that permitted him to give visual form to his sense of a world in a state of disaggregation. Of particular relevance to Dalí’s nuclear style is Leonardo’s inventive use of transparency and so-called exploded views that enable the inner workings of mechanical contraptions or of the human body to be displayed.

Matter is in a constant and accelerated process of dematerialization, of disintegration.

It emerges from Dalí’s assorted sound bites on the subject of physics that he was especially fascinated by the discovery that at the atomic level matter consists mostly of empty space; he saw this dematerialization of solid bodies as being somehow equivalent to a process of spiritualization that now fell to artists. To a considerable extent, the dissolution of form was something Dalí had already accomplished before nuclear science became an abiding preoccupation. This is notable, for instance, in a cluster of his works from the mid-1930s based on the idea of morphological echoes, the production of which coincided with his recruitment of Leonardo as ‘an authentic innovator of paranoiac painting’, a genealogical filiation he underlined by overtly referencing Leonardo within the images. It is as though Dalí dutifully followed Leonardo’s advice to seek inspiration in stains on walls but took it one step further, seeking out his inspiration in battle scenes and other studies by Leonardo that were themselves products of this method. One hardly needs to be reminded that Dalí hated simplicity in all its forms! How he generated his double images can be quite readily seen in the case of the painting Spain (1938; Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam), one of the most impressive of these works, in
which an allegorical figure representing Spain in the throes of civil war emerges from a background composed of fighting figures that are very obviously based on Leonardo’s battle scenes. Dalí mined the same terrain repeatedly. He did so in The Secret Life where his account of the panicked mobilization of troops in France against an imminent threat of German invasion is leavened with a whimsical drawing à la Leonardo showing how a battle can be won using the surprise tactic of infantry on stilts. Dalí, who had this flash of inspiration after he had wisely fled the war in Europe for the safety of New Hampshire, like Leonardo tends to score high on imagination but low on practicality. A similar procedure was employed in a page of studies for Suburbs of the Paranoiac-Critical Town of 1935 (fig. 7). The stain on the wall in that instance was the Sforza equestrian monument (also pastiched by Dalí in the opening pages of 50 Secrets of Magic Craftsmanship, as previously noted). This particular sheet, however, is noteworthy for the emergence of a globular, quasi-molecular treatment of the body that strikingly anticipates Dalí’s later nuclear style.

My hunch is that Dalí repeatedly gave free rein to his paranoaic-critical faculties while perusing his well-stocked Leonardo library. A passage in The Secret Life relates a childhood memory of watching storm clouds gather in the afternoon sky over Figueres. Before long, winged horses appear, followed by a colossal elephant that divides into two immense wrestlers who merge again into a formless mass. Just as the storm breaks, the now hugely swollen dark
cloud assumes the appearance of Beethoven’s cranium, which a bolt of lightning splits open to reveal the frontal lobes of his brain. Accompanying this fanciful screen memory is a superb sketch in which a brooding storm cloud recalls the curls of Beethoven’s wig as well as the fissured surface of his massive cerebral cortex. The drawing, related to the ongoing study of the morphology of genius, is overtly Leonard-esque in style, just as the episode as a whole reverberates with Leonardo’s injunction to seek out in a stain ‘heads of men, various animals, battles, seas, clouds, woods, and similar things.’ In this instance, an exact source can be posited in one of Leonardo’s numerous studies for apocalyptic scenes (Windsor Leoni volume, 12388). With the wisdom of hindsight, one can readily see how Dalí might have alighted upon this sheet and discovered in the explosive form of an angry cloudburst high above a mountainous landscape a Baroque hairpiece or the lobulated structure of a brain.

No great leap of imagination is required to see how the self-same image might have accrued a whole new resonance after atomic bombs were detonated in the skies above the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, raining their destructive force upon a pitiful humankind. It is strange that despite the invention of photography Dalí had to look back almost five hundred years, to Leonardo, to find a mind capable of conceiving an image adequate to that terrible event. A nightmarish vision of a world torn apart by spiraling centrifugal energies that shatter whole mountains, causing floods and ferocious winds to rise up and batter cities, had become reality. A chapter in the Trattato della pittura that is intended to be read in conjunction with Leonardo’s imaginary visions of world catastrophe instructs artists in how to represent a deluge:

And let some mountains collapse headlong into the depths of a valley and dam up the swollen waters of its river. But soon breached, the river bursts the dam and gushes out in high waves. Let the biggest of these strike and demolish the cities and country residences of that valley. And let the disintegration of the high buildings of the said cities raise much dust which will rise up like smoke of wreathed clouds through the descending rain.

Leonardo’s writing is wavelike in its repetitions and crescendos, in its relentless accretion of images that assault and finally overwhelm the reader. The evocation of scenes of great horror interspersed with dryly-analytical descriptions of waveforms strikes a peculiar note, suggesting an intellectual coldness or lack of ordinary human sympathy that recalls certain passages in Dalí.

Dalí read this chapter in his volume of the Traité de la peinture attentively, and he knew well the deluge studies to which it corresponds. Other drawings by Leonardo might also have triggered associations with the idea of matter in a state of accelerated dematerialization: Leonardo’s studies of geologic strata represent the solid fabric of earth buckled and splintered in response to untold forces operative in the remote past, and in a very delicate study of drapery, the ridges of a diaphanous fabric appear to define a spiral orbit around the forearm. Among the
numerous instruments of war invented by Leonardo, a page in the Atlantic Codex depicts a type of cluster bomb that explodes after being fired from a cannon, setting off what to a contemporary eye looks for all the world like a nuclear chain reaction (fig. 8). A number of these possible sources cohere in Dalí’s Corpuscular Madonna of 1952, a drawing in sepia ink that succeeds in an improbable fusion of the Italian Renaissance and the nuclear universe. It must be borne in mind that while Dalí was living in the United States he would have been shielded from the ghastly consequences of what had taken place in 1945. Much of what he has to say about nuclear science - his naïve enthusiasm for it - conforms to a sanitized Scientific American worldview of unlimited low-cost energy, rather than untold, ghastly destruction. The madonnas that Dalí produced aplenty in the early 1950s share the spirit of a decade that was in denial about the dangers of nuclear energy, as molecules innocently whiz about within the reassuring outlines of the mother of Christ. A reading of the marked-up passages in his copy of the Traité de la peinture, though, points to something darker. And in certain images inspired by Leonardo’s disaggregative vision it is possible to discern a residue of ambivalence: Raphaelesque Head Exploding of 1951, which has an overall shape not unlike the iconic image of a mushroom cloud, is ambiguous as to whether it portrays the resurrection of a classical tradition in modern garb, as Dalí intended, or its opposite, the obliteration of that very civilization.

Fig. 8: Leonardo da Vinci. Cannon with explosive projectiles. 21.8 x 41 cms. Codex Atlanticus, fol. 33 r. Biblioteca Ambrosiana, Milan.

**Mystical ecstasy is explosive, disintegrated, supersonic, undulatory and corpuscular.**

In 1954 Dali produced a picture, Head Bombarded with Grains of Wheat, a sort of neo-pointillist explosion of confetti in the skies above the village of Cadaqués from which suddenly precipitates a vision of Leonardo’s Leda, the enigmatic object of his obsessive brooding during these years.
The source for Dalí’s vision is a sheet of pen-and-ink sketches by Leonardo (fig. 9), copied with such precision that he must have had an open book in front of him as he worked, or else made a tracing. Leonardo studied in great detail the elaborate coiffure that he intended for the figure of Leda. Plaits are gathered up on either side of the head in the form of a spiral that Theodore Cook, in *The Curves of Life*, compared with an ammonite shell. The plaits of hair with their beadlike pattern may have suggested the idea of an ear of wheat to Dalí, who also mimicked the stippled hatching that defines the volume of the sinuous neck. Wavelike strands of loose hair in the Leonardo drawing mutate in Dalí’s picture into motile spermatozoa that invade and fecundate via the ear, provoking an explosion that is voluptuous, ecstatic, and corpuscular. The ear motif harks back to a 1933 photocollage, auspiciously titled *The Phenomenon of Ecstasy* (Coll. Vercamer, Paris). It is not implausible that Dalí was aware of a medieval tradition according to which the Virgin was impregnated aurally by the medium of the angel’s speech, as indicated by the Latin term *annuntiatio*. One recalls that in *Leda Atomica* the beak of the swan appears to touch the figure of Gala at the point of her left ear. It is, to quote Dalí, ‘immaculately corpuscular.’ Contrary to reports that Dalí abandons Freud, the deliberate semantic confusion in this and other formulations points to a peculiar amalgam of eroticism and nuclear science underpinned by his knowledge of psychoanalysis. Other works of this period, for example the *Corpuscular Madonna*, contain hints that molecules attract and repel on the basis of libidinal forces. ‘With lucid ecstasy I understood the discontinuity of matter, and that the particles themselves are animated by libido,’ Dalí reflected at a later date.
Leonardo ‘investigated instead of loving,’ in Freud’s formulation.\(^8^5\) Of undoubted interest to Dali was the claim that the quest for scientific knowledge could be traced back to an original impulse of an erotic nature that has undergone sublimation. The insatiable character of Leonardo’s appetite for knowledge betrays its origins in the unconscious, Freud claimed. Freud also refers to ‘an intense desire to look, as an erotic instinctual activity’ originating in a child’s curiosity about the mother’s genitals.\(^8^6\) For Dali, seeing as well as knowing were both intensely cathexed, pleasurable activities. Dali had a lifelong fascination with optical devices and with visual illusions.\(^8^7\) The fanciful optical device known as an aranaerium, whose use is explained at length in the *50 Secrets of Magic Craftsmanship*, belongs to a long line of inventions whose ostensible purpose is to assist in obtaining correct perspective. All such instruments have the effect of reifying sight, laying bare a preternatural instinctual investment in vision. Leonardo advocated the use of a wooden frame as a window through which the artist was advised to look at the scene to be represented. Dali reproduced in *50 Secrets of Magic Craftsmanship* an engraving by Dürer demonstrating the use of an ‘Instrument of Mathematical Precision for Designing Objects in Perspective.’ Regrettably, it is not Dürer’s notorious engraving in which the line of sight is directed at the sex of the reclining woman, though it is very probable Dali knew of this work. In *Leda Atomica* the line of vision is neatly intercepted by Gala’s left knee. Thwarted from reaching its instinctually ordained goal, vision is offered a surrogate satisfaction in the minutely observed optical phenomena arrayed at and below the level of her feet. A large droplet hovering in midair as if caught in a freeze-frame photograph casts a shadow toward the back of the plinth on which Gala is posed. Within the elliptical shadow is a bright spot where the same droplet has acted as a lens focusing the light that passes through it. Nearer the front of the plinth is another, smaller droplet of water whose shadow disappears within a darker surrounding area of shadow, leaving only the beam of focused light visible. The intricacy of these observations, and the meticulous recording of multiple permutations of light and shadow, is certainly not inferior to Leonardo.

**The exterior world - that of physics - has transcended the one of psychology.**\(^8^8\)

Viewers of Dali’s exhibition at the Bignou Gallery were given an opportunity to compare the unfinished *Leda Atomica* with a picture completed some three years before, *Dream Caused by the Flight of a Bee Around a Pomegranate, One Second before Awakening* (1944). The parallels between the two images are striking indeed. In the earlier picture, Gala, who is nude, levitates above ground as in a fairground trick but without any assistance from atomic science; exotic beasts are in similarly close proximity, and the setting is once again the sea and rock formations at Port Lligat. Most surprising of all is the similar confection of pictorial effects in the foreground of
each picture: virtually the same droplets in the same places and casting the same shadows, as if time, too, had been suspended. There is just one major difference between them. Where the title of the earlier work points to an oneiric, Freudian explanation for the gravity-defying feats and assorted incongruities, the later painting sends would-be interpreters scurrying to the physics library. The comparison is instructive because it points to the need for caution in accepting at face value Dalí’s contention that he jettisoned his ‘father’ Freud for the physicist Werner Heisenberg, especially as his oft-repeated definition of the hero as he who revolts against paternal authority and ends by conquering it is such a close paraphrase of Freud. In Dalí’s cosmogony - a sort of mock serious, subjective psychophysics - sex and science are indissolubly blended together.

**cosmic genius / comic genius**

Dalí’s *Diary of a Genius*, first published in French in 1964, chronicles the very time period when, it has been argued, Leonardo was never very far from his thoughts. At the back of the book Dalí compiled a league table in which he doles out scores under a number of headings to his favorite, or not so favorite, artists. Though more sober in his judgment than either Freud or Paul Valéry, for whom Leonardo the man was a masterpiece, Dalí still ranks Leonardo high in the genius stakes - slightly higher even than his estimation of himself. *Diary of a Genius* is peppered with mock serious reflections on the subjects of genius and success, many of them not surprisingly echoing Leonardo. A series of aphorisms are expounded for May 1953, for instance, that spoof Leonardo’s pronouncements in the *Trattato della pittura* such that the insights of genius now sound fatuous. Where Leonardo solemnly counseled artists to seek fame and renown rather than material wealth, Dalí tells them to follow his advice so that they might be rich and not poor. The jealousy of other painters has always been the barometer of his success, Dalí confides. In an entry for September 16, 1953, he reports an alarming setback while working on *Crucifixion (Corpus Hypercubicus)*, a picture in which he pulls out all the stops to compete with the Old Masters on their own turf. Dalí had been experimenting with liquid amber mixed with oil paint, which enabled him to lay down color in glassy, nearly transparent layers. On this occasion, however, a technical mishap caused the paint to go dark and splotchy as it dried, and the whole section had to be removed. The anecdote of a technical experiment gone badly awry recalls the sad fate of Leonardo’s *Last Supper* with the key difference that Dalí triumphantly averted disaster whereas Leonardo did not. Dalí’s *pièce de résistance* was to have been the painting of the sumptuous robes that bedeck Gala in the foreground of the picture. Numerous entries in the *Diary of a Genius* attest to a painstaking determination to get the drapery right. More than likely, he consulted the chapter Leonardo devotes to the subject in the *Traité de la peinture*. Giorgio Vasari recorded that as a student Leonardo made studies of drapery using figurines covered with soft linen dipped in clay. Dalí turned down the corner of a page in the *Traité de la peinture* showing one of these exquisitely detailed drawings, and one can imagine him with the book open on the
floor as he labored away under Leonardo’s inspiration. ‘A plague on lazy masterpieces!’ reads another of his tongue-in-cheek utterances.91

There is little doubt that Freud’s Leonardo case study was a crucial factor in the genesis of Dalí’s genius obsession. Ignoring his own warnings against the tendency of biographers to idealize their heroes, presenting us with ‘a cold, strange, ideal figure, instead of a human being to whom we might feel ourselves distantly related,’92 Freud indulged in a rampant over-identification with Leonardo that Dalí cannot have failed to notice. Paraphrasing one definition of narcissism, we can say that Leonardo, who in Freud’s exalted prose ‘soared upwards to the highest realisations of a conception of the world that left his epoch far behind it,’93 corresponds to an idealized image of what the writer himself would like to have been. Freud conjures up an unreal image of humanly perfection in everything he says of Leonardo:

He was tall and well-proportioned; his features were of consummate beauty and his physical strength unusual; he was charming in his manner, supremely eloquent, and cheerful and amiable to everyone. He loved beauty in the things that surrounded him; he was fond of magnificent clothing and valued every refinement of living.94

Freud’s Leonardo essay implanted a kernel from which Dalí’s genius obsession grew and grew. The ink drawing of Freud, analysed above, was one in a series of portraits of geniuses, including a highly unflattering portrait of Picasso that was exhibited at the Bignou Gallery.95

Fig. 10: Leonardo da Vinci. Bust of a Warrior. c. 1472. Metalpoint on paper, 28.5 x 20.8 cms. British Museum, London.

Fig. 11: Salvador Dalí. Condottiere. 1943. India ink on paper, 30 x 22 inches.
Dalí, we can be quite sure, was mesmerized by the image of Leonardo as a dandy in the court of Ludovico Sforza. It is unlikely that, as he held court at the Saint Regis Hotel in New York surrounded by an entourage of the curious and sycophantic, Dalí did not on occasion imagine himself as Leonardo, whose capacity to delight and entertain was legendary. Freud draws attention to an unexpectedly childish side to Leonardo’s personality that manifested in a love of triviality and games, traits Dalí also cultivated to excess. A well-known profile drawing by Leonardo of a warrior with a fantastical winged helmet and lion’s head on his breastplate in the British Museum (fig. 10) was erroneously identified in one of the volumes in Dalí’s library as a Leonardo self-portrait, a fact that may not be entirely incidental to the pastiche Dalí made in a drawing known as Condottiere of 1943 (fig. 11), a figure whose wildly eccentric dress and insane glint are telltale clues to a self-caricature. In Diary of a Genius, Dalí lets Georges Mathieu do his bidding for him, citing at length a passage in which Mathieu (a staunch monarchist as well as avant-garde artist - like Dalí, a picture of contradictions) draws an analogy between Dalí and the artists and architects of the Italian Renaissance, and specifically Leonardo, to whom princes entrusted the organization of lavish pageants and festivities:

Endowed with the most prodigious imagination, with a taste for splendor, for theater, for the grandiose, and also for games and the sacred, Dalí disconcerts superficial minds. . . . For those who take the trouble to discover the esoteric meaning of his movements, he appears as the most modest and the most fascinating magician, who carries lucidity to the point of knowing that he is more important as a cosmic genius than as a painter.

The boundaries between art and entertainment were willfully blurred by Dalí who consorted indiscriminately with the debased worlds of kitsch, fashion, and commerce. Branded Avida Dollars by the surrealist leader André Breton for his apostasy, Dalí scorned neither shop window displays nor the creation of a surreal fun parlor for the New York World’s Fair in 1939 (the latter included on its façade Leonardo’s Saint John the Baptist, whose enigmatically pointing finger beckons the punters to come inside). Such a pluralistic art practice is capable of appearing oddly in tune with a postmodern era of environments, happenings, and performance, but who would have thought it could also have been licensed by what Dalí knew of Leonardo?

O, Salvador Dalí! You know it now! If you play at genius you become one!

The notion of merely asserting or certifying one’s own genius, the premise of Diary of a Genius, is an affront to the post-Romantic conception of genius. But Dalí goes a step further than that. He admits that as a precocious and indulged child, ‘I was vaguely confusedly aware that I was in the process of playing at being a genius.’ As for the paradoxical idea that one might in fact become what one merely pretends to be, or simulates - of a performance that becomes real - an
antecedent can be found in the artificial construct of the bohemian poet or artist, that rare plant cultivated in the hothouse atmosphere of the fin de siècle. Could Dalí possibly have known about kaloprosopia, a neologism coined by the symbolist Sar Péladan (who we have already met as the translator of Leonardo’s Tratato della piturra) and pertaining to a notion of identity conceived as a self-styled work of art, a culmination of the nineteenth-century artistic persona of the dandy? Péladan explains: ‘The law of kaloprosopia is to realize the exteriorisation of the character one claims for oneself.’ Claiming as a precedent Saint Ignatius’s nostrum that by carrying out acts such as prayer, faith itself will eventually follow (an idea especially germane to Dalí, who, as noted above, admitted his lack of true faith), Péladan’s kaloprosopia reverses the usual order of an interiority or essence that is only secondarily rendered visible through such things as dress or mannerisms. ‘To appear what one is requires a force of exteriorisation’; more preferable, however, is ‘to appear what one would like to be [which] confirms already that one is a work of art’. Owing to his translations of Leonardo’s writings, Péladan’s influence extended well beyond the avant-garde circles of the Rose et Croix, the obscure symbolist group that he founded. Dalí, for his part, evinced a highly developed awareness of his artistic identity and self-presentation, which he freely reinvented from his very earliest works: the arch, stylized Self-Portrait with the Neck of Raphael of 1920-21 (Fundació Gala-Salvador Dalí, Figueres), an obvious case in point, being not too far removed from our subject of Leonardo.

What cynic could consciously have played this rôle through to the end?

Karl Marx famously remarked that all great world-historic facts and personages appear twice: the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce. Dalí was very conscious of his own belatedness, something that both colored and undermined his self-identity. Believing that he had been brought into the world by his parents as a substitute for his deceased older brother, of whom he retained an idealized image, and regarding himself as a secondhand copy of this more perfect avatar, Dalí, I am suggesting, imagined himself in a similar relation to Leonardo as a degraded, inauthentic copy. He was only too aware that his performance must inevitably fall short of the image, as phantasmagoric and unreal as that of his dead brother, conjured by the name Leonardo. A very early essay by Dalí, ‘Le chêvre sanitaire’ (The Sanitary Donkey), one of the texts included in La Femme visible (1930), is a veritable manifesto, published soon after he joined the surrealist group, and contains a passage that could very well be understood as an allegory for his entire artistic persona and art practice. There Dalí is attempting to define what he calls a point gratuit, a parody of Breton’s point sublime, one suspects. He gives as an example the gesture of a would-be pianist who ‘without knowing how to play the piano, imitates (perfectly) on a marble table the confident fingering of a true pianist, convinced of the absolute similarity of his imitation.’ The gratuitous point would materialize, he says, ‘precisely at the moment when the
fake pianist would lose for a moment his absolute faith in his imitation, but would continue with it nonetheless and with no less enthusiasm.' One has to imagine that our fake pianist is so absorbed in his imitation that he is unaware of not making any sound! Dalí’s enactment of genius was a farce and an imposture of this order yet he continued with it all the same, bravely or crazily - who is to say? Dalí is very funny, but his humor, which puts one in mind of that other Marx (Groucho), is often cruel and cynical. Where André Breton discerned an element of rebellious insubordination in Dalí’s humour noire, to my mind it reflects more his sense of defeat and resignation. After all, as (Karl) Marx went on to state, men may make their own history, but they do not do so under circumstances of their own choosing. Dalí’s misfortune, as indicated earlier, was to be a painter after the end of painting.

Genius, writes Vattimo, is essentially the aura as seen from the artist’s point of view. Why is it that Dalí’s repeated protestations of his genius fail to convince? The notion of simply asserting or certifying one’s own genius is antithetical to the Romantic conception of genius as a transcendent expression of qualities intrinsic to the person, a product of his or her innate essence rather than an identity chosen for oneself and performed. Comparing himself with Leonardo, Dalí must have realized the impossibility in his day of artistic genius in a form epitomized by the Renaissance artist. The inauthenticity of Dalí’s parodic enactments merely heightens awareness of the atrophy of the aura - by which Benjamin meant art’s organic embeddedness in a network of value and belief - that pervades his artistic practice as a whole. Indeed, it is far from clear that Dalí meant to endorse without any irony the idea of genius, either his own or anyone else’s: Diary of a Genius concludes with a coda on farting that has, at the very least, a deflationary effect. It may be that every age gets the genius it deserves: Dalí’s media-savvy exhibitionism smacks more of a very contemporary notion of celebrity than of a possibly defunct concept of genius à la Leonardo. Amending Mathieu, one should perhaps say that Dalí is more comic than cosmic genius.

**painting is dead - long live painting**

This chapter has argued for the pre-eminence of Leonardo within Dalí’s neo-traditional project to bring about a restoration of painting. An equally strong case could be made that Leonardo was just as important as an arena for avant-garde gambits in twentieth-century art, and particularly as a target of one of its most famous iconoclastic negations. It has already been noted that Leonardo was hailed by Dalí as a progenitor of the paranoiac-critical method during his surrealist phase at a point when he and Max Ernst were making competing claims for priority with regard to a method that Dalí saw as his. However it is Marcel Duchamp, more than any other artist, who hovers in the background of Dalí’s Leonardo transference, even including that over-determined site, Leda Atomica, where his ‘bride’ is left hanging in mid-air in frozen emulation of Duchamp’s The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass) of 1915-23 (Philadelphia Museum of
Art). While Dalí omitted him from his table of genius, Duchamp is one modern artist for whom his respect apparently remained undiminished, and as a photograph of the pair in *Diary of a Genius* attests, they were intermittently in contact during this period. The literature on Duchamp and Leonardo, by contrast with that on Dalí and Leonardo, is copious.\(^{105}\)

*LHOOQ can be taken quite adequately as the epitaph of modern painting.*\(^{106}\)

![Fig. 12: Philippe Halsman. *Dali as Mona Lisa.* 1953. Photomontage.](image)

Dali was the author of two short articles on Duchamp in 1959 and 1963 that constitute a fitting coda to our tale.\(^{107}\) Both are concerned with the subversive, dadaist gesture of Duchamp’s *LHOOQ* of 1919, which Dalí termed an ultra-intellectual aggression in order to differentiate it from the actual physical violence that works by Leonardo have on occasion incited. In keeping with Freud’s interpretation of the *Mona Lisa*, Dalí understood Duchamp’s burlesque desecration of that painting as a transgression directed against the Mother as a Work of Art. Dalí, too, had violated the sanctity of the mother as a young avant-gardist, let us not forget, in his scandalous 1929 picture *Sometimes I Spit with Pleasure on the Portrait of My Mother* which was the source of a bitter row with his father at the point when he joined the surrealist group.\(^{108}\) Duchamp had already abandoned painting when he made the graffito mark over the *Mona Lisa* that signed its death warrant: ‘*LHOOQ can be taken quite adequately as the epitaph of modern painting*,’ Dalí sanguinely observed. It was widely thought at the time that Duchamp had in truth renounced art altogether for the game of chess (*partie d’échecs*), a belief to which Dalí evidently subscribed, punning remorselessly throughout the first of his two Duchamp articles on the word *échec*, which
also means failure. Duchamp’s failure ironically repeats that of Leonardo, another artist given to making ultra-intellectual moves, whose entire life story, wrote Dalí, was a continual and dramatic game of failure (or chess).  

It was a game from which Dalí, by contrast, hoped to emerge a winner. A photograph of him by Philippe Halsman reproduced in the book Dalí’s Mustache (1954) shows Dalí impersonating the Mona Lisa but with a real moustache, his own - a witty retake that ostensibly trumps Duchamp (fig. 12). At the same time, however, it unwittingly reveals the omnipresence of a gesture that stalks Dalí’s every move. The compulsion to repeat implies that Duchamp’s economical gesture putting an end to painting was a trauma that had not been entirely abreacted, nor could it be. Behind the embarrassing tawdriness of late Dalí, the glib clowning, and the hyper-manic renaissance of painting rests the ineradicable memory trace of that act.  

Dalí is too well-versed in Freud not to have realised that by masquerading as the phallic mother, as the Mona Lisa wearing a moustache, the traumatic insistence of Duchamp’s LHOOQ is acknowledged and repeated at the same time as it is seemingly disavowed: ‘Painting is dead - long live painting!’

---

1 The photograph in the Bignou catalogue reveals that the picture, although described as unfinished, was in fact all but complete by November 1947 when the exhibition opened.


3 Ibid. Dalí reprises a traditional expression: ‘The king is dead - long live the king!’ is uttered in response to news of the death of a king, an event that triggers the immediate crowning of a successor, so guaranteeing the continuity of the institution of the monarchy. The phrase takes the form of an epanalepsis - a rhetorical figure in which beginning and ending mirror each other symmetrically. It doubtless appealed to Dalí because of his penchant for doublings, and also on account of his love of self-contradiction: that which is so emphatically affirmed is also, in the same breath, denied. The ostensibly conservative, monarchical temper of this period of Dalí’s work is riddled with similar kinds of ambiguities.


5 See ibid., 66. Dalí’s Péladan edition has an alternative version of this passage on page 74.

6 It is the most crucial inter-text, though by no means the sole one. Dalí also refers to a treatise on painting by Cenino Cellini and many of the technical prescriptions concerning oil colours are recycled, hugely embellished, from a rather dry manual by Jacques Blockx. The title itself makes reference to Giambattista della Porta’s Magia Naturalis (Naples, 1558). It may not be irrelevant, either, that the Manifesto of Surrealism contains a section entitled ‘Secrets of the Magical Surrealist Art.’ Salvador Dalí, 50 Secrets of Magic Craftsmanship, trans. Haakon Chevalier (New York: Dial Press, 1948).
Michael Taylor detects a staging of the Renaissance *paragone*, or comparison of the arts, in *My Wife, Nude, Contemplating Her own Flesh Becoming Stairs, Three Vertebrae of a Column, Sky and Architecture*. It is indicative of its significance for him that Dalí chose to reproduce this work in *50 Secrets of Magic Craftsmanship*.


Vattimo, ‘The Death or Decline of Art,’ 52.


Vattimo, ‘The Death or Decline of Art,’ 53.

See Giorgio de Chirico, ‘The Technique of Painting,’ in *The Memoirs of Giorgio de Chirico*, trans. Margaret Crosland (New York: Da Capo Press, 1994). Dalí on this point would have found himself wholly in agreement with De Chirico that: ‘The one cause of the decadence in painting today is the total loss of skill, *technique*.’ In the same essay, De Chirico says one should not forget that the word ‘technique’ comes from the Greek *techne*, meaning art.

Suffice to note Dalí’s definition of painting as: “‘Photographie” à la main et en couleurs de l’irrationnalité concrète’ et du monde imaginaire en général.’ In *Derniers modes d’excitation intellectuelle pour l’été 1934*, *Documents* 34 (June 1934), pp.33-5. The same article begins by asking the question: ‘*Comment devenir anachronique*?’ (‘How to become anachronistic?’). Dalí’s invocation of anachronism is interesting not least as it looks back to a surrealist discourse on the ‘outmoded’ but also forward to his willful resurrection of painting as an anachronistic, outmoded cultural form.


Ibid., 31. In a comment that bears interestingly upon Dalí’s emulation of Ernest Meissonier’s technique, Bois observes that traditional painterly finish and the mechanical come together and are fused in the slick surface of nineteenth-century academic painting - to which modernism, of course, arose in opposition.

Salvador Dali, ‘Los grandes maestros de la pintura: Leonardo de Vinci,’ *Studium* (Figueres, Spain) 4 (April 1, 1919). Leonardo was evidently not among the artists in the series of Gowans Art Books that Dalí’s father gave him when he was a boy.


21 Dalí, *The Secret Life*, 23 - 4. Frédérique Joseph-Lowry very kindly supplied me with a transcript of the original Dalí manuscript: ‘Le cr&egrave;ne de L'eonardo et encou&egrave;tre autre elle et une noi que lon ecrasse, cet a dire cet celui qui resemble le plus a un brai serveau.’


24 ‘My little space monkey [i.e., Gala] has come to sit on my naked feet to rest from her role as *Leda Atomica*, which I was busy repainting.’ See Dalí, *Diary of a Genius*, 184.

25 The full title of the picture is Dalí Nude, *in Contemplation Before the Five Regular Bodies Metamorphized into Corpuscles, in Which Suddenly Appear the Leda of Leonardo Chromosomatized by the Visage of Gala* (1954; Fundació Gala-Salvador Dalí, Figueres). Had the term been available to him, one suspects that Dalí would have said ‘cloned’ instead of the cumbersome ‘chromosomatized.’


29 Ibid., 179.


32 Dalí, *50 Secrets of Magic Craftsmanship*, p. 64. An endearing trait of Dalí’s was his habit of announcing yet other forthcoming volumes within the pages of the one he was at that moment writing; the accomplishment of all those volumes would have required a gargantuan energy that not even he possessed. In this respect he resembles Leonardo, none of whose numerous projected books, including the treatise on painting, were ever completed. Some of Dalí’s at least were.


34 Dalí, ‘History of Art, Short but Clear.’ See also ‘Notes for the Study “Leda Atomica”’, in *Dalí News*, November 25, 1947. Is this a veiled reference to Duchamp’s *Bride*, who also was left
hanging in midair? Duchamp hovered around Dali’s transferential relationship to Leonardo as a continual albeit latent presence, or so I argue hereunder.

35 The Bignou Gallery catalogue lists a work intriguingly titled Leda with Disintegrated Swan, an oil on panel of exactly the same dimensions as Leda Atomica. The picture Intra-Atomic Equilibrium of a Swan Feather of 1947 (Fundació Gala-Salvador Dalí, Figueres) contains body parts of said bird.

36 Dalí, Diary of a Genius, 47 (July 5, 1952). The egg dangling above the head of the Virgin in Piero della Francesca’s Brera Madonna which Dalí incorporates in both versions of the Madonna of Port Lligat is the subject of a lengthy disquisition in 50 Secrets of Magic Craftsmanship (170-174).


38 Ibid., 225.

39 Ibid., 219.


42 Ibid., 397.

43 Dalí, 50 Secrets of Magic Craftsmanship, 68.

44 Dalí claimed to be the inventor of a new perversion called clédalism in which sexual arousal is conditional upon a strict avoidance of physical contact. Unpacking this neologism, Ian Gibson discovers ‘léda’ overlapping with the words ‘clé’ and ‘dalí.’ See Ian Gibson, The Shameful Life of Salvador Dalí (London: Faber and Faber, 1997), 440. Leda Atomica (pl. XXXV) is printed back to front in this book.

45 Dalí tended to shy away from those aspects of Freud’s analysis that touched most directly on the psychogenesis of Leonardo’s homosexuality. That is not to say that Dalí did not evince an interest in androgyny, however, as shown by several drawings of louche, androgynous adolescents that emphatically recall Leonardo’s study for Saint John the Baptist.

46 It is a general rule in Dali that things that are raised up are precariously aloft. The ubiquitous crutches propping things up imply that they would totter and fall down were they not supported artificially; it evokes a generalized state of infirmity. Likewise, for the phallic obelisk atop an elephant with spindly, spider legs, a motif inspired by Bernini’s monument in the Piazza della Minerva, Rome, collapse is inevitable.


48 Matila Ghyka, letter to Dalí, August 13, [1947?], archives, Fundació Gala-Salvador Dalí, Figueres.

49 ‘Made and formed,’ Pacioli averred, ‘by the ineffable left hand [of the] most worthy of painters, perspectivists, architects and musicians, one endowed with every perfection, Leonardo da Vinci.’
Dali’s library was well stocked in these subjects. See, among others, Edme Sébastien Jeaurat, Traité de perspective à l’usage des artistes (Paris: C. A. Jombert, 1750) and Henry McGoodwin, Architectural Shades and Shadows (Boston: Bates & Guild Co., 1904).

In his copy of the Spanish edition of La divina proporción, Dali overdrew a pentagram on top of a reproduction of Leonardo’s Vitruvian man. It is clear from an appended note to Amanda Lear that this was done late in Dali’s career when his passion for these topics had plainly not lessened. It may be that a similar impulse to alter or correct Leonardo lay behind the earlier image.

At the top of the sheet, Freud’s brain is analyzed in terms of a logarithmic spiral with superimposed rectangles. This appears to be based on an illustration in D’Arcy Wentworth Thompson’s On Growth and Form (fig. 356) showing the principles of gnomonic growth. Dali excerpted this particular section as an appendix to 50 Secrets of Magic Craftsmanship. Dali’s 1930 portrait of the architect Emilio Terry at his desk includes a model of the latter’s snail house, another possible stimulus for Dalí’s interest in the spiral form.

In Leonardo’s case, the license to find morphological equivalences arose from an early modern worldview premised on a belief in the underlying connectedness of all things. An astonishing example of Leonardo’s similar bent for unusual but telling analogies is found in a marginal note and diagram to a sagittal section of the human skull in which he compares the layers covering the brain to coats of an onion that must be peeled away one by one by the anatomist. On reading this, I was reminded not only of Dalí’s irreverent description of the brain of Leonardo, which he likens to a walnut, but also of the Catalan expression ‘an onion in the head’ cited in the prologue to his self-referential poem about The Metamorphosis of Narcissus, an expression which has, according to Dalí, the precise meaning of a neurosis. See Dalí, Collected Writings, 325.

By this time, a Spanish translation existed. See Luca Pacioli, La Divina proporción: obra muy necesaria a todos los ingenios perspicaces y curiosos . . . (Buenos Aires: Editorial Losada, 1946). A copy in Dalí’s library has a frontispiece inscription dated 1976, tending to suggest it was not acquired until later.


Ghyka, Éstethique des proportions, pl. 94: ‘Déroulement et projection de l’octaédroïde (communément appelé hypercube).’ Dalí’s copy with this fascinating doodle is in the Fundació Gala-Salvador Dalí, Figueres.

A page with illustrations of the Last Supper (pp. 53–54) is manually excised and lies loose in a volume in Dalí’s library (Fundació Gala-Salvador Dalí, Figueres). One imagines Dalí removing...
this in order to have it at his side as he painted. However, the publication date of the book
_Leonardo da Vinci_ (New York: Reynal & Company, 1956) postdates the generally accepted date
_of Sacrament of the Last Supper - 1955 - that seems secure on other grounds.

62 Matila Ghyka, _Geometry of Art and Life_ (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1946), pl. LXVI:
‘Harmonic Analysis of a Renaissance Painting (Funck-Hellet).’ The source is Charles Funck-
Hellet, _Les Oeuvres peintes de la Renaissance italienne et le nombre d’or_ (Paris: Librarie le
François, 1932). For a skeptical assessment of claims by devotees of the golden ratio (_nombre
d’or_), see Marguerite Nerveux, _Le Nombre d’or, radiographe d’un mythe_ (Paris: Seuil, 1995).

63 Ghyka, letter to Dalí, August 13, [1947?], archives, Fundació Gala-Salvador Dalí, Figueres.
Ghyka is essentially paraphrasing Pacioli here.

64 The reference is to the Comte de Lautréamont’s simile ‘comme la rencontre fortuite sur une
table de dissection d’une machine à coudre et d’un parapluie’ from _Chants de Maldoror_ (1869).


66 Ibid.

67 Freud inclined to the view that Leonardo’s commitment to a scientific standpoint eventually
reached the point that religious belief became untenable for him. See Freud, ‘Leonardo da Vinci,’
217-18.

68 Dalí, _50 Secrets of Magic Craftsmanship_, p. 90. Additional studies dated 1949 are reproduced

69 ‘And from the problems of the physical kitchen of technique, I fell back into that “all” that was
the spirit of Leonardo - all, all, all. Cosmogony, cosmogony, cosmogony! The conquest of all, the
systematic interpretation of all metaphysics, of all philosophy, and of all science, according to the
fund of Catholic tradition which alone the rigour of the critical-paranoiac method would be capable
of reviving. Everything remained to be integrated, to be architectonized, to be morphologized.’
Dalí, _The Secret Life_, 383.

70 Salvador Dalí, ‘De la beauté terrifiante et comestible de l’architecture modern style,’ _Minotaure_
(Paris) 3-4 (December 12, 1933), 69-76. In Dalí, _Collected Writings_, 193-200.

71 Dalí, _50 Secrets of Magic Craftsmanship_, 64.

72 ‘We know that painting embraces and contains within itself all things produced by nature or
whatever results from man’s passing actions - and ultimately everything that can be taken in by
the eyes.’ See Leonardo da Vinci, _Leonardo on Painting_, ed. Martin Kemp (New Haven and


74 Salvador Dalí, ‘Mystical Manifesto’ (1951), in _Collected Writings_, 365.

75 ‘Leonardo da Vinci proved an authentic innovator of paranoiac painting by recommending to his
pupils that, for inspiration, in a certain frame of mind they regard the indefinite shapes of the spots
of dampness and the cracks on the wall, that they might see immediately rise into view, out of the
confused and the amorphous, the precise contours of the visceral tumult of an imaginary
equestrian battle.’ See ‘Dalí, Dalí!’ (1930), in _Collected Writings_, p. 335. The relevant passage in
Dalí’s copy of the _Traité de la peinture_ is heavily marked and the corner of the page turned down.

77 Ibid., 105-7.


79 Ibid., 184.


81 Dalí, 'Mystical Manifesto,' 364.


83 Dalí, ‘Mystical Manifesto,’ 364.


86 Ibid., 187.


88 Salvador Dalí, ‘Anti-Matter Manifesto’ (1958–59), in *Collected Writings*, p. 366. The full quotation reads as follows: ‘In the surrealist period I wanted to create the iconography of the interior world - the world of the marvelous, of my father Freud. I succeeded in doing it. Today the exterior world - that of physics - has transcended the one of psychology. My father today is Dr. Heisenberg.’

89 It comes from *Moses and Monotheism*, the manuscript of which had just been finished when Dalí visited Freud. In 1974 Dalí would produce an illustrated edition of this book undeterred by the fact that it is Freud’s final debunking of religion. One suspects, though, that religion was a factor in Dalí’s greater ambivalence toward Freud in the 1950s. The issue is directly confronted in somewhat unsavory terms in *Diary of a Genius*, 163.


91 *Diary of a Genius*, entry for May 10, 1953.

Ibid., 227.

Ibid., 152-53.

Listed in the Bignou Gallery catalogue as ‘Portrait of Pablo Picasso in the Twenty-first Century (one of a series of portraits of Geniuses: Homer, Dalí, Freud, Christopher Columbus, William Tell, etc.).’ An unprovable though not implausible hypothesis is that Dalí was also encouraged in this direction by his amateurish enthusiasm for physics; in terms of sheer hubris, the immodest proclamations of his own genius are rivaled only by a profession that viewed its science as the bedrock of all others and that, moreover, counted Einstein among its number.


Dalí, The Secret Life, 72.


In his ‘Abrégé d’une histoire critique du cinéma’ (1932), Dalí heaps lavish praise on the Marx brothers film Animal Crackers. Breton also refers to it in sketching a cinematic genealogy for his notion of humour noir, which incidentally stems from a 1935 essay that attempts to theorise the role of humour in Dalí.

A question has been raised as to whether Max Ernst may have alluded to the Leda myth before Dalí, in the context of his ménage à trois with Gala and Paul Eluard in the early 1920s. Evidence for this appears inconclusive. On the other hand, were one to contextualise Dalí within a nexus of avant-garde gambits around Leonardo, Max Ernst would be an obvious point of reference.


Salvador Dalí, ‘The King and the Queen Traversed by Swift Nudes’ (1959), in Collected Writings, 368.

Dalí, ‘The King and the Queen Traversed by Swift Nudes’ (1959) and ‘Why They Attack the Mona Lisa’ (1963), in Collected Writings, 367-70.

I am referring to Dalí’s picture Parfois je crache par plaisir sur le portrait de ma mère, 1929.
On the study of failure as a prominent strand in French psychoanalysis, of which Dalí was quite possibly apprised, see René Laforgue, *Psychopathologie de l’échec* (Paris: Payot, 1944).

Showing the muse of painting plying her wares for money, Dalí thematises a loss of innocence, but also cocks a snook at Breton who nicknamed him *Avida Dollars*.

Dalí’s formulation is reminiscent of the mixed avowal/disavowal of the fetishist: ‘Je sais bien, mais quand même…’.

David Lomas is Reader in Art History at the University of Manchester and Co-Director of the AHRC Research Centre for Studies of Surrealism and its Legacies. He has published widely on surrealism, including *The Haunted Self: Surrealism, Psychoanalysis and Subjectivity* (Yale University Press, 2000). The present article comprises a chapter of a book co-authored with Jeremy Stubbs, *Simulating the Marvellous* (forthcoming, 2008). He is co-curating a major loan exhibition, *Subversive Spaces*, at the Whitworth Art Gallery (spring 2009) that will explore legacies of surrealism within contemporary art.
Dali’s surrealist activities and the model of scientific experimentation

Astrid Ruffa

Abstract

This paper aims to explore relationships between Salvador Dalí’s practices at the end of the 1920s and during the 1930s, and models of scientific experimentation. In 1928 Dalí took a growing interest in André Breton’s automatism and elaborated his first conception of surrealism which was based on the model of the scientific observation of nature. Dalí’s writings of this period mimicked protocols of botanic or entomological experiments and reformulated in an original way Breton’s surrealist project: they simulated the conditions and practices of scientific observations of nature. Paradoxically, this documentaristic and hyper-objective attitude led to a hyper-subjective and surrealistic description of reality: objects were taken out of their context, they were broken up and no longer recognisable. When Dalí officially entered Breton’s group and conceived the paranoiac-critical method, he focused his attention on another scientific model: Albert Einstein’s notion of space-time. Dalí appropriated a concept which defined the inextricable relationship between space-time and the object and which became, in his view, the mental model of the interaction between interiority and exteriority, invisible and visible, subjectivity and objectivity. Significantly, the Catalan artist almost rewrote one of Einstein’s own papers, by pointing out the active dimension of Einstein’s space-time and by conferring new meanings on his notion of the space-time curve. I will track down the migration of this concept from physics to Dalí’s surrealist vision by considering its importance in writings where the artist uses his method to interpret the most varied phenomena, from the myth of Narcissus, to English pre-Raphaelitism and the architecture of Antoni Gaudí.

Might scientific investigations actually be ‘giant paranoiac daydreams,’ as Salvador Dalí stated in the Tragic Myth of the Angelus by Millet? At the end of this text published in 1963 but written between 1932 and 1933, Dalí emphasised the experimental value of his surrealist activities. Moreover, he placed his own investigations on a par with those devoted to philosophy, history or science. He went still further when he stated, supporting his theory with a quotation by the scientist Erwin Schrödinger, that the paranoiac mechanism characteristic of his own method underlay the determination of the experimental choice leading to scientific investigation. The obsessive paranoiac idea, Dalí claimed, occurred in an abrupt manner and focused attention on certain objects to the detriment of others:

How, I ask myself, can we not discern the presence of the paranoiac mechanism in the extraordinarily determinative process of ‘experimental’ choice which serves as a prelude to the investigations of the natural sciences? How, I ask again, can such a mechanism not be active in such cases, when the study of delirious paranoiac particularities means that we witness an essential change in the objective world, a change which presents itself as sudden and which absorbs, through its instantaneous associative power, all of our attention and our affectivity, which in turn remain irresistibly fixed upon a ‘certain’ number of facts and objects, to the detriment
and exclusion of all others? It seems to me that such phenomena, comprising just as violent determinations of choice, cannot be in vain, and cannot, to a more or less marked degree, fail to intervene in what for me is this conditional factor of scientific experimentation, and which, to use the same terms as E. Schrödinger, consists in ‘the momentary disposition of our interest and of its determining influence in the direction of subsequent work.’

In this text, Dalí appeared to challenge the frontier between the fields of art and science. This stance deserves our attention, since it testifies to a tendency taking shape in the early twentieth century: while artists laid claim to objectivity, scientists were increasingly being led to admit to a certain degree of subjectivity in their research. In addition to the quotation from Schrödinger’s work used by Dalí, one might also mention the writings of Henri Poincaré in this respect, a scientist who underscored the vacuity of demonstrative logic when not accompanied by intuition. For Poincaré, scientific truth appealed first and foremost to intuition, ‘this faculty that teaches us to see’: ‘Logic is the tool of demonstration, intuition the tool of invention.’ Poincaré’s most important results do indeed appear to have been achieved not by dint of rigorous reasoning but by calling upon subconscious thought which alone is capable of grasping the unsuspected relationships between known facts.

Albert Einstein in his writings also highlighted the ability of the scientist to call upon images. When reflecting on the principles of research, he rejected the possibility suggested by Isaac Newton of elaborating upon empirical knowledge by adopting experience as the point of departure. This, he claimed, was because fundamental concepts cannot stem from a mere observation of the facts: they have no prior or independent existence, but are instead ‘spontaneous creations of the human mind.’ The Einsteinian method therefore involves three phases: invention linked to spontaneous intuition, deductive reasoning, and finally the confrontation with experimental fact.

If these examples point to the importance of subjectivity in scientific method, they find an inverse counterpart in the field of art. With regard to promoting the value of a rigorous scientific approach within the world of art and literature, one need only think of surrealism. From 1924 onwards André Breton emphasised the necessity of becoming acquainted with the scientific discoveries linked to biology and physics in order to express ‘reality’ from a surrealist standpoint: ‘Does every man of today, eager to conform to the directions of his time, feel he could describe the latest biological discoveries, for example, or the theory of relativity?’

It was undoubtedly Dalí who took this Bretonian exhortation most strongly to heart. As an avid reader of popular scientific works, he took the liberty of re-appropriating scientific reasoning that, more than any other form, had an enabling effect on his work in two main ways. Firstly, it lent credibility to his activities by underscoring their cognitive dimension, as Dalí exploited the social prestige of scientific reasoning to authenticate his artistic experiments. Secondly, it challenged the system of rational thought. By pinpointing the imaginary conjectures underpinning science, Dalí denounced rational construction of a
scientific type and underscored the arbitrary nature of the border between objectivity and subjectivity.

The appeal of the model of the scientific observation of nature
Between 1928 and 1929, as he established closer ties with Breton’s surrealist movement, Dali conceived of an ‘antiartistic’ vision of reality and referred to the model of the scientific observation of nature. He suggested, in writings of the time, simply recording what one sees. Paradoxically, it was by the overuse of the investigative methods of a botanist or an entomologist, and by the hyperbolic promotion of the concern for accuracy, that Dali challenged the model of scientific observation and denounced the subjectivity of the viewpoint inherent to this position. He underscored the necessity of taking account of the psychological automatism of one’s view of reality, an automatism that guarantees an unconventional and cognitive approach to reality: the real object is no longer recognisable, but becomes enigmatic and is revealed in a new light. Simulation of the hyper-objective and documentary attitude thus leads to a hyper-subjective and surreal description of reality.

We could ask, in relation to Dali’s concerns in this period, in what exactly did and does the mechanism of ‘scientific observation’ consist? One definition could be as follows: the object is first of all removed from its context and placed in a measuring space which is regarded as neutral. The object is then observed by a mechanical eye, devoid of any affectivity. One might refer, for instance, to the example of the micro-photography of the 1920s: the photograph of the image seen under a microscope - like the front view of insect wings against a neutral background, photographs of crystals or the reproduction of a detail of a section of a shrimp’s tail - enables one to discover other aspects of the object. It is also worth mentioning, within the context of the scientific films which began to develop in France from 1925 onwards, mainly through the work of Jean Painlevé, the technique of close-ups and ultra-cinema shots, where the camera films the blossoming of a flower in speeded-up motion, or the process of botanical fertilisation in slow motion. Of course, in the 1920s there was nothing new about the idea of combining scientific and artistic viewpoints. On the scientific side for example, Ernst Haekel stated that observed forms of nature are already artistic forms. On the artistic side, Karl Blossfeldt, in Urformen der Kunst, sought to demonstrate that the formal models for the arts should be sought out in nature. Another example of the artistic appropriation of science could be found in the photographs of Albert Renger-Patzsch, which aimed to provide a new vision of ordinary objects, and which were very similar to scientific photographs [Fig. 1].
Dali himself, influenced by *L’Esprit Nouveau*, began conducting his own exploration of this intertwining of art and science from 1927 onwards, within the context of the Catalan avant-garde. In 1928, when he turned towards surrealism, he remained faithful to a clinical type of vision, which led him to redefine Breton’s project and to write literary texts of a documentary nature. In terms of themes, Dali, who was well acquainted with books on botany, entomology, Painlevé’s scientific films and the aesthetic approach of Blossfeldt and Renger-Patzsch, constantly referred to the model of the microscope and photography, and to the procedures inherent in documentary and scientific films. In a letter sent to his friend, the critic Sebastià Gasch, Dalí set out the nature of surrealist film and established a parallel between the rigour of the surrealist vision and the rigour of the vision of a scientist through his microscope. He emphasised that the production of an ‘absolutely surrealist film’ entailed an ‘absolute rigour.’ He also asserted that this kind of film would be ‘as antiartistic as to film what the scientist sees in the microscope.’ Moreover, the Catalan artist, in a text of 1929 in which he enumerated various ‘antiartistic’ trends, mentioned the exemplarity of the documentary mode in all its forms:

Let us hope that the first irrational attempts, free from any aesthetic sense, paralleling attempts that are strictly scientific, will present us with a documentary of the long life of the hairs of an ear, or a documentary of a stone, or that of the life of an air current in slow motion.

We note the rigorous and powerful means that are today at the disposal of the documentary: the phonograph, photography, cinema, literature, the microscope, etc.
This was not the only scientific approach Dalí appropriated. In terms of textual structures, Dalí also simulated the procedures of scientific experimentation with a view to promoting an antiartistic vision of the world: for example, in the series of 'Documentaires – Paris 1929,' seven texts of a documentary nature written by the painter for the Catalan review *La Publicitat* during his staying in Paris in 1929 for the production of *Un chien andalou*. In ‘Documentaire – Paris 1929 – I,’ in order to justify his approach, Dalí established a parallel between automatic writing and documentary texts: both stemmed from the experimental observation of reality and called upon a passive psychological automatism. But in the one case, we are looking at a rigorous transcription of inner reality; and in the other, at external reality, as he made clear:

In effect, the documentary and the surrealist text coincide from their beginning in their essentially antiartistic and particularly antiliterate process, since there is no intervention in this process on the part of the least aesthetic, emotive, sentimental purposes, these being the essential characteristics of the artistic phenomenon. The documentary notes, in an antiliterate fashion, things said to be in the objective world. In a parallel manner, the surrealist text transcribes with the same rigour and in as much an antiliterary sense as the documentary, the REAL and liberated functioning of thought, what actually goes through our minds, all this by means of psychic automatism and other passive states (inspiration).

Dalí thus seems to be redefining Breton’s ‘trouvaille.’ In Dalí’s view, automatic writing becomes an experimental observation of the ‘real workings of thought.’ If one examines Dalí’s conception of the documentary mode, one observes a hyperbolic depiction of the mechanism of scientific observation that ultimately leads to a surreal description of reality.

In ‘Documentaire – Paris – 1929 – III’, for instance, Dalí first defines a receptacle-area (the ‘tables’) where objects are removed from their natural context. He then conducts a neutral observation (using verbs linked to the idea of ‘notation’) spread out over time and relating the changes that occur. The objects are fragmented, juxtaposed and set into motion, which gives them a ghostly aura. Thus in Dalí’s text, for example, the straw on a table is replaced by different kinds of ‘objects’:

I verify the changes undergone by two of the tables observed. One had on it the drinking straw, there are now five hands, two violets, three breasts: one underneath red silk, two underneath pink georgette. The elbow of a tuxedo. Eight champagne glasses, three bottles in ice, the remaining pearl of a necklace, a bit of smoke close by to the ice.
The example of ‘Documentaire – Paris – 1929 – V’ is even more significant: the ‘documentary’ takes the form of a riddle. The straightforward notation of elements within a previously defined area engenders an enigmatic process of disappearances and transformations. First comes the observation of objects cut off from their context:

« There are » eighteen buttons, the one closest to me has a hair (perhaps an eyelash or a tiger’s hair) coming out of one of its holes. Three centimetres to the right of this button there is a cookie crumb. There are still five more biscuit crumbs situated in the manner indicated in the first illustration. Beyond the crumbs and continuing to the right there is a dark abyss two hand-spans in width. On the other side of the abyss « there is » a table hanging on a thin and long wisp of smoke. There are on this table the number 86, a cup, a teaspoon, four fingertips.¹⁷

From this static phase, one then moves on to a dynamic phase in which objects come to life and are transformed: everything proceeds as if one were facing the mechanical eye of a camera filming the movements of objects in close-up and in speeded-up motion. Adopting an objective vision, in Dalí’s account, thus makes it possible to establish an enigmatic reality, imbued with subjectivity:

When all this is noted, the biscuit crumbs change their place and form a new grouping (second illustration). The hair stays in the button, but further away, two biscuit crumbs (the two on the extreme right) take off, flying fast. Suddenly the following things take place in very rapid succession: seven hands follow one another, three gloves are introduced onto three hands, two hands leap on top of a chair, one on top of a table three metres away. The cookie crumbs all disappear but one, which makes three turns and then stays quietly in the same place (roughly). At this moment, the hands, gloves, buttons, hair, etc. are substituted by a mirror. The mirror disappears, substituted by the avenue of the Champs-Elysées that still glows in the afternoon light. The avenue disappears to be replaced by the window of a shoe store, lighted up electrically from the inside, etc. All these are objective data rigorously and scrupulously recorded.¹⁸

The delirious redefinition of Einstein’s notion of space-time
In elaborating the paranoiac-critical method from 1929-1930 onwards, Dalí developed another conception of surrealism and integrated scientific models in an entirely different way. It was no longer a question of adopting a hyper-objective vision as a starting point to designate the subjectivity and the creativity inherent in any visual perception; but instead, on the contrary, of highlighting the hyper-subjectivity of vision and its inextricable link with objectivity. The paranoiac-critical method actually combines the speculative plane, which claims to be
objective (‘critical’), and the irrational plane with its subjective nature (‘paranoiac’). The irrational idea automatically projects itself into reality and is displayed there in an entirely objective manner: it takes the form of reality. The case of Dalí’s *Paranoiac Face* (1932), a double image, is significant: it may evoke both an African landscape and a Picasso-type face. The obsessive idea of a ‘Picasso-type face’ can be objectivised in the concrete and verifiable forms seen in the postcard of an African landscape.

In order to conceptualise this inextricable link between subjectivity and objectivity, Dalí once again resorted to science: he no longer referred to an investigative method but to a scientific concept, that of space-time as defined in Einstein’s theory of General Relativity. In fact, the more Dalí insisted on the objective character and the cognitive significance of delirium, the more he appealed to this notion: it was in 1933 and 1934, when Dalí integrated the notion of space-time into his work, that paranoiac-critical activity became a ‘method of irrational knowledge.’

But what is meant by ‘space-time’ and how did Dalí re-appropriate this notion? In his theory of General Relativity, Einstein, in order to explain the mechanics of bodies in accelerated referential systems, based his argument on non-Euclidian geometry: Euclidian space is a flat space in which the shortest segment is a straight line, while Non-Euclidian space is a curved space (a sphere, for example) on which the shortest segment is the arc of a curve called ‘geodesic,’ and in which there are no parallel segments. One might mention the example of the trajectory of a ray of light going from a star to the observer [Fig. 2].

If there is no mass between the star and the observer, the trajectory of the ray is a straight line (see the trajectory A); the curve of space-time tends towards zero. On the other hand, if there is a mass between the star and the observer, the trajectory is curved because of the presence of the gravitational field. The trajectory of the ray of light is a geodesic line (see the trajectories B1 and B2); space-time is curved. The structure of space is thus variable, since gravity is no longer considered as a force, but as an element structuring space itself. There is interaction between space and mass, as mass determines the curve of space, and the curve of space defines the trajectory of bodies. One is a long way here from space as conceived by Newton, a rigid and absolute space in relation to which everything else is measured.
Dali was fascinated by the interaction between space-time and object, since it enabled him to consider the interaction between irrational thought and the objective world: delirious ideas and the material world could interfere with each other on the model of an invisible physical space acting on bodies. The most significant text in this respect is undoubtedly 'Aerodynamic apparitions of object-beings.' This article is not so much aimed at the concrete construction of a new type of surrealist object, as at establishing a paradigm enabling one to conceptualise the interaction between subjectivity and objectivity. After having defined 'object-beings' as 'strange bodies of space,' Dali, by way of illustration, associates the 'lyricism' of the extraction of blackheads from nasal pores to the 'lyricism' of a new conception of space. This association is very bizarre, since it places the trivial everyday world and the scientific world in parallel. In any case, the association enables him to trace the evolution of the idea of space: from the unsubstantial space of Euclid, one reaches the space-time of
Einstein. Dalí set out five stages in this process: 1) the ideal and non physical space of Euclid, which is compared to a ‘broth’; 2) the three dimensional space of René Descartes, which is compared to slightly denser ‘juice’; 3) the space of Newton in which forces are acting and which acquires the ‘gravity of the apple’; 4) the space of James Clerk Maxwell and Michael Faraday which is characterized by physical states and which appropriates objects by ‘saying’ ‘the apple is mine’; 5) the four dimensional space of Einstein which is compared to a ‘voracious meat which squeezes strange bodies’.

In Dalí’s view, over the centuries space had become increasingly concrete and active: it had acquired four dimensions and become a kind of ‘meat’ capable of crushing the body. One therefore grasps that the link between extirpating blackheads from nasal pores and the Einsteinian conception of space-time is the idea of an invisible entity that is manifested in visible form by compressing and expelling bodies. What is even more curious is that one finds the same stages and the same expressions to characterise each stage (without the culinary metaphors) in an article by Einstein published in Spanish in 1929 and in French in 1934, ‘The problem of space, ether and the field.’ Is this a mere coincidence? Whatever the case, by comparing the two articles, it is easy to underscore the way in which Dalí exploits this scientific concept. He essentially retains the idea of a space that acts on bodies and not the reverse. Moreover, this active and physical space does not determine the trajectory of the objects, as in Einstein’s theory, but the very structure of the objects (it expels and shapes objects). The examples of ‘object-beings’ mentioned by Dalí are thus any bodies with curved surfaces subjected to the actions of space: soft objects; curved figures such as Narcissus staring at his image, as depicted in Dalí’s painting The Metamorphosis of Narcissus, the praying mantis-woman in Millet’s Angelus; or Modern Style architecture with its undulating surfaces. The use of the space-time concept thus enables Dalí to characterise his own theory of paranoiac thought, an active thought that acts on the outside world by shaping it.

Indeed, there is evidence that the imaginary Dalinian world of space-time is linked to his reading of Einstein’s article. Dalí explicitly cited it in a little-known lecture given in Barcelona in 1935 and published by Fanés in 1999, ‘The surrealist and phenomenal mystery of the night-stand,’ in which Dalí set out to apply his method to The Weaning of Furniture-Nutrition, the image of a night-stand removed from the back of a wet nurse. After claiming, in his lecture, that the very real hole in the back of the wet nurse was a delirious space that produced objects (the night-stand) and eroded conventional space, he retraced, by constantly proceeding through the same stages, the evolution of the idea of space. And this time he referred to his source, Einstein’s ‘The problem of space, ether and the field,’ by quoting a sentence from the article underscoring the objective character of space:

Einstein writes: ‘Two solid objects may touch one another or be distant from one another.’ In the latter case, a third body can be inserted between them without altering them in any way, in the former not – there spatial relations are obviously real in the same sense as the bodies themselves. If two bodies are of equal value
for the filling of one such interval, they will also prove of equal value for filling of their intervals.

The development of the concept of space, considered from the point of view of sense experience, seems to conform to the following schema, *solid bodies, spatial relation of solid bodies, interval, space*. Looked at this way, space appears as something real in the same sense as solid bodies. 26

It is worth noting that Dalí is not interested in the method of experimentation as laid out by Einstein within this same article, but in a concept that this model of investigation enabled him to build. It is easy to understand why. The Einsteinian method first of all establishes a purely theoretical scenario (initial intuition and logical deductions), a scenario that is only later validated by experience. On the other hand, for Dalí, the delirious idea enables us to reach the truth of things not by a purely theoretical view that is subsequently confirmed by experience, but by suddenly being embodied in the objectivity of the forms of the world. There is a consubstantiality between the visible and the invisible and it is precisely this consubstantiality that the notion of space-time enables one to envisage and which confers universal validity on the Dalinian method: concrete irrationality lies at the very foundations of any cognitive act and any research, including of the scientific kind.

Dalí’s interest in the imaginative world linked to space-time had numerous applications to his own work: the curve of space-time is materialised in desiring or desired curved bodies, hence an interest in surfaces which can be described by a non-Euclidian geometry, and in morphology. In conclusion, I would like briefly to outline some instances of this. It is not surprising, for example, that Dalí took an interest in the women painted by the Pre-Raphaelites because of the geodesics of their Adam’s apples and because of the catenary arches of their clothes, which were adapted to the geodesics of their bodies, as he explained:

The Pre-Raphaelite morphology is summed up in the lukewarm and weak gravity of the ‘depressive catenaries’ of the underwear adapting themselves to the most terrifying of strained and strict costumes, with the geodesic curves of sculptural bodies, of turgescent, disturbing and imperialist flesh. 27

Indeed, in order to confirm his thesis, he illustrated his article about the Pre-Raphaelites with paintings by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, William Holman Hunt, and John Melhuish Strudwick [Fig. 3]. Without quoting his source, Dalí also copied into this article the definition of the geodesic and the catenary arch provided by Edouard Monod-Herzen. 28 This latter form naturally aroused his interest, since it is determined by the action of space. 29 Moreover, in relation to this form, Dalí also sang the praises of houses designed by Antoni Gaudí, with their aerodynamic and imaginative curves, enabling irrational ideas to materialise. 30 Their undulating walls thus became in Dalí’s reading the waves of the sea, a woman’s flowing hair,
or smoke. Dalí must indeed have been aware of how Gaudí proceeded to design his houses: he built models with ropes and weights, taking account of the force of gravity and adopting the catenary arch as the basic shape.\(^{31}\)

![Figure 3](image)

**Figure 3**: John Melhiush Strudwick, *The gentle music of a bygone day*, 1890 in Dalí’s article ‘Le surréalisme spectral de l’éternel féminin pré-raphaélite.’ *Minotaure*. 8 (1936), 48.

In terms of Dalí’s interest in morphologies derived from science, one should also mention the painting *The Metamorphosis of Narcissus*.\(^ {32}\) All of the figures in this painting adopt a curved position, and in the poem with the same name, the *curve of the back* constitutes the leitmotiv of the text and is likened to the *curve of desire* which causes Narcissus to follow the ‘slope,’ to be swallowed up by the image and transformed into a flower.\(^ {33}\) The figure that embodies the curve engendered by the logic of desire is indeed Dalí himself in this painting. He is depicted at its centre, recognisable because of his *barretina*, the red Catalan cap. He also appears at the centre of the poem:

*Le Catalan au dos sérieux,*
et bien planté
dans une côte-pente,
une Pentecôte de chair dans le cerveau.
[The Catalan with his grave back
well planted
in a sun-tide,
a Whitsuntide of flesh inside his brain.]34

Finally, it worth noting that, in the Geodesic portrait of Gala35, Gala’s head is shaped like a geodesic dome, as is clearly visible in the preparatory sketch for this work: perhaps this is hardly surprising in that Gala is the ‘other me’ so greatly desired by Dalí.

Dalí, by associating surrealist activities and science, places himself in an ambiguous territory midway between the serious and the playful. He is out of step both with the scientific world (since his experiences are not very scientific due to the overestimation of what is anecdotal and subjective), and with the artistic world (since the imaginative Dalinian world is destined to be misunderstood by those unaware of the scientific issues involved). Dalí’s work is thus at all times met with a partial or complete lack of understanding. In any case, it invites us to reflect on the multiple models for a representation of the world. Reality is a matter of ‘construction’: it cannot be faithfully represented by science and considered as a point of reference on the basis of which literature and the arts execute imaginative variations. By denouncing an a priori knowledge of the world, Dalí draws our attention to the fact that there is no ontological difference between the scientific and artistic spheres, and nor is one superior to the other in terms of their approach to reality. He thereby draws us into an imaginary world of relative possibilities and truths.

I would like to express my gratitude to all those people who made valuable suggestions related to this paper: in particular, to Prof. Danielle Chaperon, the supervisor of my thesis who always provides helpful feedback, and to Akos Dobay and Marc Atallah for their scientific advice. A special mention is also reserved for Susan Jacquet, who translated my paper into English.

1 This article is based on a paper given at the international interdisciplinary conference Experiment-Experimentalism, University of Manchester, March 2005.


3 Dalí, Le mythe tragique, 91.

4 For instance, Poincaré emphasised in ‘L’invention mathématique’ how he discovered the class of Fuchsian functions: intuition was capable of suddenly linking elements belonging to


6 Einstein, ‘Principes de la recherche’, ‘Principes de la physique théorique’ and ‘Le problème de l'espace, de l'éther et du champ physique,’ in Comment je vois le monde, 121-125,125-128 and152-153.


8 See, for example, Dalí, ‘Réalité et surréalité,’ and ‘Le témoignage photographique,’ in Oui, Paris 2004, 86-92 and 96-98.


11 ‘Pero un film absolutamente surrealista, más claramente, un film en el que se pretendiese única y exclusivamente la planificación estricta de una serie de imágenes oníricas, o de imágenes aparecidas en el cerebro de un individuo, y la tal realización se llevase a cabo con un rigor absoluto, creo que el tal film representaría una serie de logros en el campo del espíritu, seria tan antiartístico como filmar lo que encuentra el sabio en el microscopio...’ This letter from Dalí to Gasch is held in Gasch’s archives in Barcelona and is quoted in Joan M. Minguet Battlori, Salvador Dalí, cine y surrealismo(s), Barcelona 2003, 115.


19 Dalí, ‘La conquête de l’irrationnel,’ in Oui, 261.

20 Einstein broached the problem of the trajectory of the ray of light passing next to the sun and resolved it in 1915. See Françoise Balibar and Thibault Damour, ‘La relativité générale,’ in Einstein, Paris 2004.


Dalí quotes in Catalan an extract from Einstein’s essay: ‘-Einstein escriu, Dos corps poden tocar-se o estar separat-s, en el segon cas es pot sense separar res posar un tercer corp entre el dos cors, en el primer cas es imposible – aquestes manifestacions després son manifestament reals al mateix titul que els cors ells mateixus – Si dos cosos son equivalents per ocupar un interval d’aquesta mena, son tambe equivalents per omlpir un alter interbal./ L’ebolucio de l’idea de l’espai considerat segons l’experiencia dels sentits pot representarse de la manera seguent, objectas corporals, relació de posició dels objectes corporals, interbal, espai, d’aquesta manera l’espai apareix com quelcom de tan real com els objectes corporals-.’ Dalí, ‘Misteri surrealista i fenomenal de la tauleta de nit,’ in Fanés, *Salvador Dalí, La construcció de la imatge*. 1925-1930, 262.


A wire hooked to two supports and left to hang freely forms a catenary arch.


Dalí might have seen the photo of the first funicular model used by Gaudí to conceive the church of the Colònia Güell published by Ràfols in 1928. He created the church by using strings which were hooked to supports and from which he hung loads: a mirror placed on the floor under the model enabled one to see the maquette of the church from the right side. See Daniel Giralt-Miracle, ed., *Gaudí. Exploring form. space, geometry, structure and construction*, Barcelona 2002, 99.


See the extended metaphor of the ‘curve of desire’ used to describe the metamorphosis of Narcissus. Dalí, ‘La métamorphose de Narcisse,’ in *Oui*, 299-301.

Dalí, ‘La métamorphose de Narcisse,’ 299. For the English version, see Finkelstein, *Collected Writings*, 326.


Astrid Ruffa is a teaching Assistant at the Department of French Literature at the University of Lausanne. She is currently preparing a PhD Thesis on the imaginative world and verbal practices of Dali. She co-organised the international conference *Salvador Dalí at the crossroads of the knowledge*, the first conference to put emphasis on the artist's written œuvre. Dali, Breton and Surrealism are the major focus of her research and publications.
Deformography: the poetics of cybirdised architecture

Neil Spiller

Abstract

Neil Spiller has spent the last twenty years developing a personal architectural language that rejoices in the surreal poetics of contemporary technology. Simultaneously he has tried to expand the envelope of architectural discourse and its associated tactics of representation. He will illustrate his research into open-ended architectural systems with reference to his early and contemporary projects. Spiller’s work currently explores the harvesting of cybernetic, genetic and cyberspatial space-time vectors and their transmission, transmutation and growth to dissolve the old dichotomy of building and landscape. Spiller’s world is full of vacillating objects, sensing mechanisms and poetic ‘Pataphysical swerves. Architecture will never be the same again. The illustrations are of projects that use ideas of enabling, cyberspace, nanotechnology, cybernetics, molecular science and genetics and translate them into architectural projects that vary from masterplan to furniture in scale.

My organisation is the sloth-like profession of architecture. My language is a symbiotic broth of purple prose, Baroque waywardness and surrealist spatial protocols invigorated by space that does the many-spangled two step between the treacle space of out here and the slippery cyberspaces of inside computers.

I like architecture that is mythic, enigmatic, oblique and encrusted with decoration. I like it to suggest worlds, essences and supernatures.

My work of the last twenty years has continually sought to push the envelope of architectural discourse, creating new spaces where architecture might dwell. This quest first started with a reassessment of architectural ornament, narrative and the dislocation of myself as architectural designer.

Figure 1: Neil Spiller, Dorian Gray Column, 1985 © Neil Spiller.
The column was to be placed in the foyer of an architectural school. It represents the state of architecture. Its literary reference is not from Homer, Shakespeare or Corb but from Oscar Wilde whose character, Dorian Gray, commissioned a self-portrait. As Gray’s life became more and more decadent he stayed young and unblemished, however his likeness became more and more defaced and vile reflecting its owner’s depraved lifestyle. So my column is already defaced and corrupted. Generations of students would be encouraged to deface it or reassemble it, as the case may be. In this way the character of the column would change with time.
My search has taken me through all manner of terrain, via the idea of the representational column with its millennia of histories, through large city master plans about time and duration and their impact on the city, to the mystical and cyclic process of alchemy. It has also explored the virtual topologies of cyberspace and the magic power of nanotechnology.

![Figure 2: Spiller Farmer Architects, Schizophrenic Railing, 1986 © Neil Spiller.](image)

The railing was the first time I worked with Laurie Farmer. It was a bit of fun to see whether we could collaborate in any meaningful way. It was a creative jam. For my part it features the flying crucifix and the weight-training totem pole and other, what were to become, familiar motifs of disjuncture, wayward tendril and angry spike mitigated by the circular arc. It was decided to design a railing for a house near our favourite pub in Blackheath, London. It seemed the perfect site in the crisp, chill evening when breath powders against a Guinness night.

Twenty years ago sites were real and unassailable, architecture was simple and the architect’s skills were less numerous. Architecture and architects looked relatively safe. I started experimenting with an encrusted architecture, a series of filters, an architecture beyond the starkness of functionalism, an architecture whose way of representing itself was a combination of extravagant prose and a graphic gambit that was as powerful as it was invigorating, energetic and loose-limbed. It owed very little to the established protocols of the prevailing modernism. My architectural language has been honed by years of experimentation, with technology, with mythology and with shifting aesthetic preoccupations and above all it was out of control.
We are now at a point where it seems that we can start to reconstruct architectural and design practice utilising a series of highly advanced and responsive technologies. One hopes that in the future pundits will see the first seconds of the new millennium as the genesis of more fluid, amenable and responsive architectures. This progress will not happen if we continue to bicker about issues of authenticity, purity and honesty. Such concepts will not be of any merit in dealing with our new-found dynamic buildings, cities and objects and their choreographed ecologies. As designers there is much to be gained from accepting and exploiting all advances in technologies.

Figure 3: Spiller Farmer Architects, *Vitriolic Column*, 1986 © Neil Spiller.
A representational column is nothing new, it is the game of at least four thousand years and embraces all cultures. The importance of a coherent landscape theory that runs hand in hand with an architectural one is seen to be a crucial element in any evolving approach. The column is a collection of points of departure hoping to reconcile the biological and the mechanical and follows in the tradition of raising piles of material as pointers. It is a beacon into the future casting light ever onwards. A light in the black.
whether virtual, visceral, vital or viral in our culture’s continual battle against the tyranny of inertia and entropy.

Figures 4-8: Spiller Farmer Architects, Piestany, Slovakia, 1990 © Neil Spiller. In Piestany, in Slovakia we were confronted with an area whose major resources were therapeutic spas, a riverside cultural centre, featuring an art gallery and theatre, and an urban park. However, the town centre was separate from this area and the opportunity for promenading, art watching and noise receiving was impaired. Our proposal was to provide and enabling mechanism, which was to take the form of a ‘dribble’ of interventions that enhances existing functions, fine-tuning them and facilitating new ones. An Art Wall is constructed defining views of the river’s course and encouraging or cosseting art marks. It allows the population to compete in the process of identification, by making their own art and placing it on this altar to laissez-faire.
Technological developments have been fast, furious and astounding. Computers are doubling in processing power (for the same price) every eighteen months or so. Their software and hardware architecture has become faster, thinner, more efficient and more dexterous. The internet has grown to become commonplace and its servers serve us with all manner of information. Through this technology computer visualisation of objects and their computer-aided manufacture is becoming more closely wedded.

Biotechnology gives us the ability to design soft and wet responsive environments. Indeed we have already reached the stage where we can postulate the ultimate technology, nanotechnology. Nanotechnology is truly alchemic: engineering and magical in its potential. It could give humanity the power to manipulate matter atom by atom, thereby changing one material to another.

Figure 9: Neil Spiller, Nano Desk © Neil Spiller.
Figure 10: Neil Spiller, *Nano Desk* © Neil Spiller.
Advances in robotics have created simple thinking machines. Machine intelligences are being educated on a daily basis. It is here that the worlds of cybernetic and consciousness research join. These new robots will not mimic human tropes but respond to them and facilitate them.

Amazing advances in biotechnology have revealed an intricate world of proteins and genes the manipulation of which is fraught with ethical quandaries. The Human Genome Project is close to mapping our genetic ‘periodic’ table. Technologies that can radically reprogram plant and animal cells can be used to create numerous new proteins that could be used as building materials.

Recent tissue engineering successes with growing bone cultures could quite easily cause bone to become one of the new structural materials. The murky blanket of the body is being understood, unwrapped and rewrapped.

There are many types of body - virtual, vital, augmented, prostheticised, digital and machinic - to name but a few. Technology allows us to coat ourselves in these bodies. However, we fear our fleshly body and its epidemic entropy. We yearn for release from its slow decay and vulnerability. We look to our machines and information networks to give us various shots at different types of immortality.
Technology is trashing yet liberating the body, by allowing it to see further and deeper. Simultaneously technology gives us extended but fragmented versions of ourselves. Our bodies hang limply from the crucifixes of technology, waiting for the vultures of science to pluck out their sinews and smear them across the landscape. Engineering has become leaky, brittle and sore as
we look to the technologies of molecular biology as a paradigm and method for advanced assemblage of products. The skin, a technological Rubicon, has been crossed.

This is the ecstasy of the millennium and its architectures are ecstatic architectures.

Designers have never been in such a delicate position. Our simplistic educational and professional practices are becoming more and more useless. How can designers accommodate the growing demands of society for environments that facilitate spatial fluctuations, fleeting coalitions with other spaces, virtual presences and mixed realities?

Is it possible to create an architecture that stitches this tapestry of philosophy, aspiration, interest, movements, both seen and unseen, into a whole new landscape of enclosure and exposition, that changes in time and makes no distinction between art and architecture, no matter what ‘code’ of aesthetics is being used?

Can we create architectures that slip into other locations and spaces and return to show us what they’ve found and ‘plant’ a notation of this event in our environment? These ‘plantings’
might exist for some for a long time, sometimes for shorter periods of time. Such ideas are capable of producing a sublimity of space that grows and decays, changes and rearranges, that speaks of the human condition as the actor in a series of linear, non-linear and quantum events. The torsions of everyday existence, small expansions, minute stresses and strain and stains, vibrations in the World Wide Web, tigers caged in the quantum zone, and many more, all have the potential to invigorate elements in this architecture.

Figure 18: Neil Spiller, Velazquez Machine © Neil Spiller.

To address these questions I have created my Communicating Vessels project. At the heart of this project is the Velazquez Machine. It is situated in the Orangerie in the Tuileries Gardens in Paris. These elliptically shaped galleries contain Monet’s Water Lilies. The galleries were specially designed for Monet’s huge paintings that compositionally straddle representation.
and abstraction, a critical perturbation in the history of art. My preoccupation is to compositionally straddle the virtual and the actual, art and matter.

Velázquez was the first artist to depict himself working as one of the subjects of his great painting *Las Meninas* (1656-7). Since this point artists have become more and more narcissistic, creating more paintings with themselves as subjects, more websites, more exhibitions about themselves. Contemporary examples include Tracey Emin and there was even an artist who recently crucified himself. As more and more artists are subsumed with self-importance the *Velázquez Machine* vibrates in tune to this narcissism and over time its vibrations become more and more pronounced. The machine holds a frying pan with a perforated bottom, two fish lie on the pan. Inside the clasped centre of the machine along with the fish and the frying pan are nine 'Roo-Objects.' These are jumping hydrochloric acid innoculators, similar to mechanical fleas. Underneath the Machine is the ‘Oncological Couch’ on which lies a highly sensitive ‘tongue’. As the fish decompose pieces fall onto the tongue. These small impacts are then recorded, transmitted and become the planting plan for a vista many miles away.

![Figure 19: Neil Spiller, Roo-Object © Neil Spiller.](image-url)
We move to the second site, which is Bramante’s *Tempietto* at S. Pietro in Montorio, Rome (after 1502). The *Tempietto* is sited on the top of a hill in a courtyard of what is now the...
Spanish Embassy: a little bit of Spain in Rome. The temple has come to be understood as the genesis of the Renaissance in Rome, a perfect piece of the architectural sublime. The courtyard was originally planned and designed by Bramante but, alas, was not built to his circular and radial design. I have designed a measuring stick that ‘lives’ in this area. The stick is programmed with a little memory that remembers the exact proportions and idealised dimensions of Bramante’s Tempietto and his surrounding courtyard and compares it with what it finds. These numerical differences are caused by man’s fickleness and lack of ability to construct ‘perfect’ architecture. The Tempietto itself yields minor differences, the courtyard geometries yield larger discrepancies.

Here the Stick searches for swerves from the idealised and the theoretically repeatable but ultimately unobtainable dimensions of Classicism.

Figure 21: Neil Spiller, Wheel Barrow with Expanding Bread © Neil Spiller.
This piece is the receiver of all the output information gleaned from the Stick and the *Velazquez Machine*. It is characterised by a symbiotic relationship between its position and the vista that forms around it. Attached to the side of the *Velazquez Machine* is a suspended plumb line terminating with a fried egg. The vectors created by the suspended egg as the Machine vibrates condition the overall movement of the Wheel Barrow sculpture around the landscape. (The fried egg is a reference to Spanish vernacular painting in Velazquez’s time and vicariously Dalí’s Velazquez-inspired infatuation with the fried egg.) By the way, the Metro light, is an homage to Guimard’s Paris Metro stations and Dalí’s paranoid-critical interpretation of them. Dalí associated their praying mantis-like appearance with that of the dominant sexual predator female and the male’s fear of castration. In this project the lights attract moths and insects at night. Their random bumpings determine the activation of the Roo-Objects inside the *Velazquez Machine*.

![Figure 22: Neil Spiller, The Ever-Changing Vista © Neil Spiller.](image)

There are other mechanisms and notions that condition this vista but here I only have time to tell you about this small element.

This whole part of the Velazquez project culminates in the vista.

As the vista grows it wishes 50 per cent of its Bread to be seen and so adjusts position along its trajectory accordingly, or sometime inflates its ‘bread’ pneumatically. When a viewer
looks at it, it swiftly inflates to facilitate this. This moving system of viewers and the parallax of their glances creates a choreography of visible and invisible spaces relative to each viewer, another ecology yet to be fully explored.

So a complex system of cause and effect is built up around a set of semiotically charged objects that delivers a contextual, glocal, ascalar yet cybernetically beautiful architectonic ecology: an ecology between building and landscape.

These landscape pieces and their relationship to one another are highly ‘pataphysical, their logistics of form are conditioned by notions of variance, alliance and deviance. Such ideas produce a very rich formal and surreal architectural language bursting with potential.

Alfred Jarry (1873-1907) was the creator of ‘Pataphysics. Jarry was a precocious child, irritating in his childish humour and school kid japes but fearsomely intelligent. In his twenties he started to partake in suicidal drinking. It is his drinking of absinthe and ether that sustained his hallucinogenic imagination.

Along with the creation of Père Ubu, Jarry is remembered for his the creation of Doctor Faustroll and the ‘science’ of ‘Pataphysics.

‘Pataphysics had appeared in Jarry's most early work but in 1898 he wrote the Exploits and Opinions of Doctor Faustroll, (not published until 1911). This book set out the sketchy outlines of the poetic effrontery that is ‘Pataphysics. ‘Pataphysics is the science of the realm beyond metaphysics...It will study the laws which govern exceptions and will explain the universe supplementary to this one; or less ambitiously it will describe a universe which one can see – must see perhaps – instead of the traditional one, for the laws discovered in the traditional universe are themselves correlated exceptions, even though frequent, or in any case accidental facts which, reduced to scarcely exceptional exceptions, don’t even have the advantage of singularity.

Definition: ‘ ‘Pataphysics is the science of imaginary solutions, which symbolically attributes the properties of objects, described by their virtuality, to their lineaments.’

A stranger to mechanical love

The misty dawn lifts to reveal six wooden boxes, perched on the riverbank above a seldom bubbling, silent pond. Its surface reflecting the tickle of midges and the sway of lazy branches. The boxes are attached to what looks like fishing rods, which curve beautifully with the load of their catch. Each catch is not a fish but a white alembic.

Diana wanders aimlessly around the boxes finally selecting one. She plonks herself down on one, sitting on the small seat. The box's invisible suspension inductors buzz ecstatically, realigning themselves, the fishing rods tug on the neck of the alembic up and down, up and down. A small globule of grease from the alembic floats down stream.
Beneath her Diana can hear the whirl of the clinamen swerving in its Palace of ‘pataphysical machines, desire being swerved into poetry and vicariously into a reflexive landscape.

Diana is a stranger to their sort of mechanical love. One day she prised the lid of one of the boxes, she blinked in disbelief with what she saw…

![Figure 23: Neil Spiller, Boxing Topographies. Dee Stools. Exterior perspective © Neil Spiller](image)

The *Dee Trunk* is a symbolic response to the fact that Doctor Dee, Elizabethan alchemist spy and confidant and conversationalist of Angels and Demons used to put his most valued texts in a trunk and hide them away. Special things in special dark places. Dee was a natural philosopher, a magician and as such was interested in the microcosm as a reflection of the macrocosm of the universe. The universe to Dee was characterised by ascalar geometry and divined by a series of almost infinite cyclic distillations. Even the lowliest material was the most noblest, this *prima materia*, the elusive *Slough of Despond* that is everywhere but nowhere. Many alchemists have tried to find this material, the alchemic quest is still-born unless the *Slough* can be found and transmuted. To the architect alchemist the Slough is space.

My Trunks are sited on the banks of the river Stour between the villages of Sturry and Fordwich, near Canterbury in Kent, England - I grew up around this area. For the alchemists the alchemic opus needs to be personal and be imbued with an autobiographical psychogeography. These stools are miniature alchemic/’pataphysical laboratories, each one of six, just three buttocks square. The alchemist has had many disguises in the last one hundred and fifty years, he has been assimilated into the genealogy of modernism in the guise of the ’pataphysicist.
From the Outside the boxes are simple roughly made timber slatted crates. There are six because, one is a singularity and lacks the other, two is too symmetrical, three is sturdy, four is even more sturdy, five is too naughty and seven is cabbalistic etc. Each box has an induction spike at each corner. Each box has a small seat, akin to a bicycle seat on its topside. Each box is partially covered by a ‘Futurist Cloak.’ Each cloak is an homage to Marinetti’s Sudan-Paris table: it has one part covered with spongy material, sandpaper, wool, pigs bristles and wire bristles (crude, greasy, sharp burning tactile values, that evoked African visions in the mind of the toucher. While the other – the sea- had different grades of emery paper (slippery, metallic, cool elastic, marine tactile values). The Paris end was made of silk, velvet and feathers (soft, very delicate, warm and cool at once, artificial, civilised. This whole assemblage took on a table’s form; here it is a cloak shrouding the simple timber boxes. Six small facsimiles of Roussel’s whale boned corset stiffened ‘helot’ stand one on the top of each box grasping old-fashioned fishing rods. The ‘helots’ this time riding the electromagnetic induction coils positioned at the corner of each box. At the end of the fishing lines, pallid aquatic alembics bob tense in their pulchritude, subject to every tug of the rods and quiver of the boxes. Downstream a little is a bridge consisting of timber posts connected at their top by a bow of sensitive wire.

Figure 24: Neil Spiller, Inside Doctor Dee’s Trunks. Interior plan © Neil Spiller.
The interior of the boxes enclose a machinic tableaux, each box has two slightly inclined sides opposite one another. Their insides were only pristine once. There is a small table in the centre of each box. Set on the floor are some draught pistons, a cucumber, two De Chirico mannequin/statues (one a dummy-headed pseudo Classical plinth and another a seated figure with what looks like a chess pawn for a head: both are from the painting *The Disturbing Muses*, 1925), a ubiquitous umbrella, a teeth paviour machine from Roussel’s *Locus Solus*, some Swiftian academic gearage, a ready made bicycle wheel attached to a stool, a Duchampian voyeur’s door, a shelf on which five artificial lips are perched, another shelf supporting a glass alembic, a turd-shaped mystery object (is it a Dalinian wrapped bread or a bandaged arm). A Giacometti bird is imprisoned behind cool glass. Can I just see a little insect hugging the corner of the glass. Also on the table is a box with calf’s lungs rails beneath it. Mounted on a large angle-poise is my prize - the Clinaman. This is a miniature ‘pataphysical laboratory executing an experiment quite simply out of control.

My Clinaman is inspired by Jarry’s/Faustroll’s ‘Painting Machine’ which incidentally is called ‘Clinamen.’ ‘The Painting Machine, a revolving gyroscope that whirls at random through the “Palace of Machines” mechanically vandalising masterpieces: “it dashed itself against the pillars, swayed and veered in infinitely varied directions, and followed its own whim in blowing onto the walls’ canvas the succession of primary colours ranged according to the tubes of its stomach”’ (1911, 5). My Clinaman also whirs, spraying paint from the tendrils of its anemone-like head. It is
a maverick painting machine with no respect. It is activated when the box is sat on and deactivated when the sitter stands up.

Also inside the box, virtually superimposed and invisible to the naked eye is a computer-generated topology that slithers around, through and over the actual artefacts positioned in the box. These fields shift in time and can be used to determine texts, speeds, durations, positions and plantings. This in a sense is a virtual planting plan consisting of shifting zones of mathematic possibility. The box is therefore a chunking editing engine and it will mostly be used to develop new mixed surrealist poetry. Where the paint falls is therefore an instruction to appropriate a particular line, word or letter from existing surrealist poems but the information topology of this component can be recoupled to any other data sets when appropriate or when totally inappropriate. This choreography of chance creates exceptional moments and poetry (both textural and spatial) never again repeated. An example of how to describe this microcosmic changes might be to say perhaps for a moment, Dalí’s Saint Sebastian slithers across the floor of the box, subdividing the quixotic Queneau and skirting Cornell’s letter boxes as Faustroll disappears out the slot on a sieve. The key/mixing desk to these poetic dynamics is the grease globules and where, and how long, they pass under the sensitively wired bridge.

So inside the box a virtual terrain changes its responsivity to stimuli over time. The actual machine/iconic tableaux of the interior volume is trammelled, recoded, its unstable virtual terrain is constantly reconfigured with reference to the globules of grease and their turbulent infrathin tensile surfaces which reach the finishing line of the sensile and tensile bridge in some sort of dark greasy boat race. Histories of surreal writing flicker unseen across the paint splattered box, paint nailing the flicker momentarily like the stab of a stiletto through an A-Z or the dart point through the telephone directory, all at a page at a time. Here is the Duchampian kid’s matchstick firing cannon forever braising art with the brand of chance. Measurement becomes a stoppage, a point in relative time, and contingent on speed, impact, duration, virtual viscosity and gravity. Poetry swerved into the exceptional never to be repeated, a cybernetic monkey forever searching for a surrealist Shakespeare and often finding Him. The Clinamanic Medusa, with a hole for its face causes the first order aesthetics of form finding to coagulate into stone and seduces the viewer into a world of vicissitudes and attitudes of chance, of joy, of sweet and sweaty embrace of an ars combinatoria, so dear to Jarry, Roussel and Ramon Lull. Here ‘Pataphysics joins with the mathematic of Oulipo to construct an all too few example of Ouarpo - a miniature architecture of potential.

For this Clinaman is defined by a cybernetic universe of discourse which consists of all buttockian times and their durations, local turbulence, local currents, fling of tousled paint mane, the unseen surrealist data landscape as an interchangeable software application and the sweet tug of the fisherman’s rod.
The first splashes of the Clinamen determine the start of all the vistas. As just for a few seconds the virtual topology of poetic plants is replaced by a virtual site plan in the interior of the first box ever to be sat on.

**Conclusion**

The *Velazquez Machine* and the *Dee Stools* are like time capsules moving between the history of art and architecture, the virtual and the actual and the challenge of the future with all its magical potential. And this magical future is always surreal.

Receptive and transformative as the best architecture must and should be.

This text was first delivered as an inaugural professorial lecture at the Bartlett in October 2005.

Neil Spiller is Professor of Architecture and Digital Theory, Diploma/March, and Course Director, Director of the Advanced Virtual and Technological Architecture Research Group (AVATAR) and Vice Dean at the Bartlett School of Architecture, University College, London. He is author of many books on architecture and cyberspace including *Digital Dreams- Architecture and the New Alchemic Technologies* (1998) and *Cyberreader- Critical Writings for the Digital Era*. He was the 2002 John and Magda McHale Research Fellow at the State University of New York at Buffalo. His book *Visionary Architecture* will be published by Thames and Hudson in Spring 2006.
Mark Dion in conversation with Anna Dezeuze, Julia Kelly and David Lomas

Mark Dion's Bureau of the Centre for the Study of Surrealism and its Legacy opened at the Manchester Museum in May 2005. A conversation was held between the artist and members of the Surrealism Centre in Manchester. Instead of responding to a set of deliberately ordered questions, Mark Dion asked the three interlocutors to place these in a container of some sort for him to select at random. In a spirit of surrealist communality, these questions would cease to belong to their originators, made 'not by one, but by all.'

In the grand setting of the Whitworth Hall in Manchester, a Harry Potter popcorn bucket that had made its way into the Surrealism Centre office was pressed into service as a receptacle. A black velvet riding hat lined with blue silk (provided by David Lomas) was passed round the audience, together with blank slips of paper for them to formulate their own questions.

After a brief introduction, the first question was drawn.

David Lomas: When is a bureau not a bureau? What does the term 'bureau' mean to you?

Mark Dion: This is torture. I feel like I'm on a quiz show, the time is ticking away and I'm going to lose my prize. Well, an important thing to understand about this bureau, the Bureau for the Centre of the Study for Surrealism and its Legacy, is that it actually is a bureau, it's an office and that it can be used under very particular guidelines set out by the conservation department here at the Manchester Museum, who are not to be trifled with. So for instance no food can be brought into the Bureau, no pens or permanent markers can be used in the Bureau. But otherwise it's quite open, so members of the staff at the Manchester Museum, the curators and the esteemed surrealists here are allowed to conduct meetings and events in the Bureau itself. The public are not allowed to enter the Bureau generally, so they experience the piece really through the other side of the glass wall and of course when the curators are in the Bureau they are part of the Bureau. They become very much a part of the exhibition, and so they do so at their own risk, I'm afraid.

What does a bureau mean to me? I think, there is always something a little bit sinister about the bureau because the Federal Bureau of Investigation seems to be the most famous bureau that I know of, and so anything at least in the American vernacular, anything that has 'bureau' in it means mischief, so that was very much
informing the use. We had a lot of fights - or discussions I should say - about what specifically we were going to call this. I was told by a lot of people that the term ‘bureau’ is not really widely used here for office, but that certainly didn’t deter me from using ‘bureau’ in this case.

Julia Kelly: One of the pictures on the Bureau wall is of a dodo. To what extent is your work about rescuing things from extinction?

MD: I think that’s an interesting question, which has a relationship to the status of a lot of things here at the Manchester Museum. There are a lot of objects that have been collected here that no longer really fulfil the sort of mandate of the museum; they are not really any longer of scientific value but they quite possibly have other kinds of values. Certainly they have a value in the history of science, and the history of development of ideas, of museology. Some of these things are incredibly beaten up. They are things that are really orphans, they are things that you would be amazed that they have not ended up in the rubbish bin. I think that one of the interesting questions and one of the whole interesting elements of the Alchemy project, which invites artists to work with the museum, is really to come to terms with another possible life for these things.² They are never going to have another life, they are never going to have a life again as scientific specimens, but that doesn’t mean that we discard them: there are other possibilities, other ways of using them that are productive, that generate meaning. Maybe not the same kind of meaning that you can get from a museum of ethnography, archaeology and natural history, but still, they have some productive meaning.

So my favourite object in the Bureau is certainly the fish; I guess it’s a fish, it’s a skate or a ray which has been stuffed absolutely improperly and googly eyes have been put on it and it looks very much like a kebab. So that object for me is
something that is being rescued from extinction. For me the book is as much a work as the installation is - it takes a very similar attitude toward images to the one that the installation takes toward objects. So the idea is that a lot of these images in the book and a lot of things in the book have been rescued: there are rooms and rooms of cabinets of glass slides, glass lantern slides in the Manchester Museum and also in the department of Art History.

These things will never again see the light of day: they will not be used as teaching or instructional tools any more. There is not even a lantern in the Museum or in the department of Art History, but the information the slides contain, the images they contain, still are remarkable, still are fruitful: they still mean something and they still can generate other kinds of possibilities. So that was very much my strategy. Bryony [Bond] from the Alchemy department and I came up with a list of categories that we wanted the curators to be on the lookout for: we wanted things that were in between, things that were obsolete, things that were broken and damaged, or things that were fragmented, and the list is very much like the surrealists’ lists of fantastical objects.

JK: In words like ‘orphan’ there seems to be an emotional element - do you think this is part of it? That you are caring for these things that nobody else cares for?

MD: Well they are pathetic, and I’m certainly attracted to the pathetic, but yes, I think that that really is it. Also, as someone who thinks about museums and about museums activities and museums philosophies, I think I’m very close to the curators in that there are certain curators here who would never consider throwing anything away, and I kind of feel that way as well. So there is always that possibility, that I really enjoy, especially when some of the curators here are a little more pernickety and a little more protective of their thing, and I can entirely sympathise with the attitude toward the objects that they have.

Anna Dezeuze: So do you mean that no objects deserve to be extinct?

MD: I think you have to pick from here [pointing towards Harry Potter bucket], I don’t think you are allowed to just ask questions like that.

AD: [To the audience, pointing to Mark] I think he’s cheating.

MD: I don’t think I’m cheating, I think that was the rule.
AD: [Reading] Is the Bureau a time capsule?

MD: When I originally started, the idea for this project really comes from getting a phone call from David encouraging me to come here and to talk about the Centre for the Study of Surrealism, talk about the possibility of becoming an artist in residence and I remember a moment of standing before the door that is in the brutal art history building and there was a sign on the door that said Centre for the Study of Surrealism and its Legacy, and I just thought what could possibly be on the other side of that door, I mean it the possibilities are fantastic, and I was remarkably disappointed when on opening the door it was just a kind of breeze block room like all the other horrible rooms in the art history building and it just didn’t live up to its name. That sort of planted the first seed and I wanted to make a bureau even though I didn’t originally want to. I think the Bureau took on another kind of life and became more nostalgically oriented than I originally intended on it to be. In some way I’m not really interested in the more fantastical forms of surrealism, I’m not so interested in the kind of exuberant surrealism of Dalí for example, I’m more interested in the restrained surrealism of Buñuel or something like that - a really much more uncomfortable and strange form of surrealism, that’s not so magical or so fantastical, but is more about a kind of un-comfortability, an uneasiness in some way, some un-canniness to existence. And so I wanted the Bureau to be a little more restrained and I certainly didn’t want it to be nostalgic, but part of the way the piece evolved was reacting to being here in Manchester and also passing a lot of dumpsters at the University where you were seeing wood panelling and some of the great rooms and great interior spaces that I think exist here being ripped out and replaced. Seeing great mahogany and oak desks ripped out and replaced with formica and press board, that gave me more of a kind of passion for rescuing or at least turning to what I appreciate about a place like this, which is some of the original architecture, the furnishings and things like that, and finding the unthinkable: that you would pass a dumpster full of original mahogany panelling and know that what was going to replace that was going to be so much poorer. In some way the environment did take over the life of the piece and I began thinking much more. In researching offices and bureaus we did a lot of research into how early offices look: I had some students working with me as interns
who provided me with a file of interiors of offices of Manchester, and I looked at a lot of film noir movies, I looked at Sam Spade films and things like that, to get that sense. Also I was thinking very much about the heyday of surrealism in the 1920s. I didn’t know at the time about the original surrealist bureau, so when the piece came together we all got excited a little bit later on when we found out that the surrealists actually did have an office, and they did have plans for it and they had a kind of master programme, but like all other programmes of surrealism it was a bit disastrous. So all of this has informed the piece in some way...but what was the question again?

**AD:** Is the Bureau a time capsule?

**MD:** No...yes...I mean it’s incredibly difficult to say. It is much more of a period piece than I had set out for it to be, so it does I think feel that way. When I first came here people were telling me about the old curators’ offices and what they looked like, and then we tried to find them and they didn’t actually look like that and they didn’t exist like that. In some way I wanted to construct what I couldn’t find, a kind of idealised version of how I would like to imagine the curators spend their day here (I think that some of the curators would say that unfortunately it is not how they spend their day here).

**DL:** What sort of relation do you see the Bureau as having to the surrounding museum?

**MD:** I think there is a playful antagonism between the museum and its goals, even if its goals are more carefully considered now, I think, than maybe originally. The exhibition that’s in the exhibition space is a perfect match for this project because it’s about people asking questions and having those questions answered, and the surrealist Bureau is certainly not about answering anyone’s questions. It is for me a way of motivating people around the idea of the marvellous; I guess for me, as much as I have worked with museums, and I’ve studied museums for a long time, I still don’t really know what a museum is for, but I’m really sure that a museum is not a place that people come to learn specific things. I think if you’re curious about something, the museum is just not your first stop, and so I think that the museum has another kind of quality which is very hard to put your finger on. To call it an educational institution to me doesn’t seem to fit with what I observe when I see people in a museum and what they’re doing and why they’re there and what they’re thinking about. So I find that with everything that we always say museums are for, I find it very hard to find an example of someone who is actually using
the museum for that in a certain way, with the exception of children’s groups and things like that. So in some way I’m trying to magnify what I get out of museums, which is to find a kind of visually and intellectually exciting space, a space that really is going to take me other places, a space that’s going to be a key to a whole body of ideas that are not necessarily entirely presented there. Of course I’m interested in things, I’m interested in museums; I’m really essentially a sculptor, I’m interested in how knowledge is generated through objects, through things that I can be in a certain space with. So I find that that’s part of my passion for museums: you get to see the thing, you don’t go to see a picture of the thing, you don’t go to see a video clip of a thing, you don’t go to play some ridiculous computer game about the thing, you go to see the thing. And so that’s what really fascinates me about museums, it’s a sort of ‘thingness.’ That’s what this project and museums have in common, but I don’t want to anchor those things down, that’s exactly not what this project is about, it’s sort of fixing a certain kind of meaning.

**JK:** Ah...this is sort of a related question; it says ‘How scientific is the Bureau?’

**MD:** Not very. That’s really a difficult question for me, as science is a culture, science is something which has a particular aesthetic that is very much embodied in this. I wouldn’t say that it’s necessarily the science that we recognise as practiced now, so in a way we go back to the time capsule piece: I think it really is about an embodiment of the way certain people at a certain time construct an image of the natural world - that’s a very big part of it in some way. I think that a lot of people who do become scientists, who do become researchers in these fields, are initially inspired by a certain culture of science, by the way it looks, by the stuff itself and that may happen at a very early age and that’s why it’s great to see kids in a museum. That moment of that kind of spark of the marvellous, of the curious, which may be motivated at quite an early time and may be motivated not by the sort of rigours of the classroom but by a certain passion about the culture of science. But I don’t think the Bureau is actually quite scientific at all.

**AD:** Were you conscious of any affinities with surrealism before accepting this project?

**MD:** Well I think that there are a lot of aspects, of course, I think like with most artists who are studying art history. If it were sort of a blank slate and when you were born you got to choose what kind of artist you wanted to be, when and where, to be a surrealist in 1923 in Paris is not a
bad choice. Of course we know there’s a disaster before, a disaster after, but that moment is kind of amazing. I think like a lot of young artists I was very drawn to the kind of sexiness that is represented in surrealism in some way. These people had a great time, I mean they really believed in what they were doing and their level of commitment and their belief in what could be done through the movement were amazing. I think that certainly seems naive, but from today’s perspective I think was remarkably exciting. There are certain surrealists whom I feel much closer to in terms of the kind of activities that they were doing - the research of someone like Man Ray for example - and there are a lot of overlaps in terms of their interest in the sort of uncanny aspects of trying to understand nature: their interest in camouflage and mimicry for example, a whole series of things that I think really do overlap in my practice. I think a lot of those relationships are conscious and pretty serious.

**MD:** The book is really the report of the *Bureau*... For me it’s kind of interesting because I’m using a lot of strategies but in totally different forms, and the book is an artist’s book: this is a work of art, it’s not a book about the project, so it really is conceived of as two halves of the same thing. I think they can exist independently, but it’s really dealing with a lot of the same problems but having to come at it with an entirely different formal body of concerns. The look of the book - we could easily ask is the book a time capsule - all of those aspects, everything that I’m trying to build in, in I hope very subtle ways inside the installation, I’m trying to work with some of the same problems within the book. I think in some way the book is even a little more radical than the installation in that the relationships that it sets up for the catalogue - there is certainly a catalogue list of things, both the catalogue list and the actual index - don’t correspond in any way. So there are kind of logical systems that are set up that don’t follow through: logical systems that lead you to very irrational ends, and that’s very much a strategy in the *Bureau* itself.

**JK:** How did you select the objects on display in the *Bureau*?

**MD:** Bryony Bond and I went through this museum from top to bottom and we scoured every possible corner we could find. We’d come out at the end of the day with our hands just black with coal dust and it was a sort of process of elimination, there are just so many fantastic things here. We took a lot of fantastic advice
from the curators of different departments; people had their own passions, their own interests, the things that they were really into. In some cases it seemed really obvious, for example when we went to Egyptology, there is such a wealth of stuff there but we wanted something that made sense. So how do you go to a collection that has thousands of things and make a distinction? So we decided for example that we would only look at their fakes and forgeries, so all the things that we decided to explore were just in that category, and that narrowed things down tremendously, but also curiously: as we were going through the fakes and forgeries with the curator, she was sort of reclassifying things in front of us, so we would go through and she would say 'oh, that's actually not a fake at all, it's just not what they think it is, this is something else.' So you really saw this whole process of things being reconsidered, their value changing, their role changing in an instant based on expertise, based on a certain body of knowledge. That was an interesting selection and we tried to do that more or less with each collection, to come up with a kind of framework of what we could borrow, and again the things that we couldn’t take - pieces from the collection for various reasons - we were able to articulate in the book. For example, the coin collection isn’t really well represented inside the Bureau but it’s well represented in the book. There were other kinds of possibilities for other kinds of collections. I was thinking very consciously of James Clifford’s list of ethnographic curiosities for the surrealists’ interests and so I was looking at that as a system of categorisation, I was looking at the surrealist list of fantastical objects. Those were the kind of lists that I was applying, so immediately I was drawn to things that were fragmented, to things that were anomalies, to curiosities.

AD: I think you talked a little bit about this, but what is the role of fantasy and wonder in the museum experience?

MD: You know for me I think that we could go through the Manchester Museum and rip down every label, and for many people their experience of it would be just the same, they would be just as engaged and just as enthusiastic and just as passionate about what they see. So I think that for me that’s a big part of what museums do. They motivate people through wonder and I think that they motivate people to move beyond their experience with the actual object. Even if they do read the label, even if it does anchor things in meaning, doing that takes them to a place where
they continue to that level of research, that level of engagement. I think museums are places where people get inspired to learn things; I don’t think they are places where people actually learn things, in a sense. I mean, that sounds really crazy, but I think that for me, museums are really about motivating through marvel and through wonder and not about learning a handful of facts.

**DL:** What are your surrealist likes and dislikes?

**MD:** I intensely dislike MTV surrealism. To me it’s so difficult to find a definition of surrealism. I think surrealism, we could argue, is probably the dominant cultural form of expression, it’s functioning in about one in every five television commercials and in practically every advertisement so, to me, that is not really the kind of surrealism I’m interested in, the sort of ‘album cover’ surrealism. I’m interested in the kind of surrealism that was a serious interrogation of the human condition based on the discovery of the unconscious; it’s quite rigorous, I think, and that’s what excites me the most about it. It is a kind of rigorous attempt to analyse culture with what at the time were new tools, you know; Freud contributed a major new tool to try to understand culture and the surrealists were really the first people to explore it, I think. Surrealism is a literary movement, it’s an art movement in film and cinema so I think that it was really a group of people, loosely affiliated, approaching culture from a very particular kind of perspective in that it was essentially experimental: so that’s what excites me about it.

**AD:** Do you want to ask some improvised questions? Where is the hat?

**MD:** The dreaded hat, this is when things get really hard. This is going to be a long evening.

**AD:** I’m afraid there will be some disappointment; we are not going to be able to read all of them. Chance will decide.

[Questions are drawn from the hat]

**MD:** Is it an infection?

**AD:** I think that this is something that we talked about in the earlier session today, that artists that are engaged with museums from a perspective of critique and a kind of critical way; it’s always hard when you are an artist to know when you
are doing anything. You can’t measure success of affectability in any kind of tangible way. I think for those of us who have engaged with museums… If you think of David Wilson and Fred Wilson and Andrea Fraser and Renée Green and Christian Philipp Müller, and what their critique, their approach and their analysis of museums have led to, I think museums have internalised that and have really tried to engage with some of those problems and sometimes that is successful, sometimes not. Sometimes it exists on a kind of level of a confessional: the museum works with someone, they air the museum’s dirty laundry and then the museum says, ‘oh fine, that’s over with, let’s get back to business.’ But every museum that I have been to has been staffed by incredibly thoughtful and engaged people who are constantly striving to make the museum a better place and I think that they are looking at these critiques very seriously and trying to develop new strategies within the museum. So in that way I would say there is an infection, and I think that if there is one situation in which artists engaging with an institution or with a public institution have been successful and have really demonstrated a kind of tangible bettering of a situation, it’s probably with their relationship to history, natural history and art museums. I think it’s something as measurable as we will ever get as artists to be able to say that we have made some tangible impact.

**AD:** But you are not out there to kill the museums, so it’s not a fatal infection?

**MD:** Yeah, it’s not an infection; it is an antibiotic, actually. I think that really does articulate two very different positions that artists can take to museums. The surrealist position of course, is with Buñuel’s famous quote that it’s more interesting to blow up a museum than to visit one. I think that there are artists who see museums as un-correctable sites of ideology, that they will always express a certain dominant world view and therefore they are just broken from the beginning, so there is no way to really engage them, there is no way. And I think there are other artists whose engagement with museums is really to make them better; they believe in the mission of the museum, they believe that a museum is a place to gain knowledge through things and they will strive to make more responsible museums. I think at this point, my relationship is a little more perverse, much more playful, with museums, and my relationship is less programmatic than it has been in the past, especially in a piece like this where I am working in an already quite sympathetic institution and I can
engage in a much more playful way rather than a kind of didactic critical way.

**DL:** The surrealists use the notion of a foreign body which is perhaps a productive way to think about the Bureau as a kind of irritation or something that poses questions to the museum at large?

**MD:** A parasite? But the parasite always does damage to the host, and in this case that is certainly not my intention.

**JK:** [From the hat] The next question is, what do you think about Nietzsche, is God dead?

**MD:** That’s really two questions, isn’t it? I have to say that this is a weird question, partially because of the political situation in the United States right now. I’m moving from a religiously tolerant person to a definitively religiously intolerant person because of the general effect of conservative fundamentalist religion on really every aspect of life in the States, so I’m not sure if God is here, but he certainly should be at this point.

**DL:** You have spoken elsewhere about your interest in Benjamin: is he someone who has mediated in anyway your relationship with surrealism or the way you think about surrealism?

**MD:** Well, I think certainly I’m interested in Benjamin’s kind of look at surrealism - I love the quote of Benjamin that we always talk about the surrealists being interested in the ‘just past’: you know, when Ernst is making his collages he is not using material contemporary with those collages, he is using things which are fifty and sixty years old. So I think if we are looking at that and if I were making collages now and using images from the 1950s, that would really mean something very particular. I think that there is something really interesting about the intentionality of that, and so in that sense of the surrealists’ interest in using their parents’ generation as a way of reacting to a contemporary situation but using a slightly archaic visual language, that is really interesting to me.

**DL:** [From the hat] How big is your house? These are getting better and better.

**MD:** It’s really big. I have multiple houses: I have lots of little ones, I have a main house and I have a lot of outbuildings, and all those outbuildings have specific functions, so there is the archive building that keeps all the photographs and images and prints and things like that and then there is the barn which is kind of the studio building, and there is what I call the art destruction unit which is our less than perfect storage unit which tends to make
everything mouldy and it really destroys art quicker than anything I know. So I have a lot of space and that is why I have accumulation without issue, I don’t have to worry about throwing away, I just make another building for all the stuff I accumulate, but I do feel a little guilty that I buy these marvellous things and then they moulder away in some building. I need a registrar and a restorer to come and live with me for a couple of months and kind of work things out.

MD: From the hat Did you ever find your child’s tooth?

MD: No, never.

JK: If André Breton were here today, what do you think his reaction would be to the Bureau?

MD: Oh, that’s a really great question. You know André Breton seems extremely intolerant of everything anyone else did but himself, so I can’t imagine that he would appreciate the Bureau very much. What do you think?

MD: Well I think there are a lot of Bretons: there’s a quite young Breton who, the way I’ve always understood it, didn’t see surrealism in the beginning as a kind of movement in poetry or a visual art movement, he saw it as a revolutionary movement, he saw it as a kind of movement which was going to change society like democracy or communism. I think he saw it on that kind of scale and I think that this was reflected in things like his disappointment with the way the bureau [of surrealist research] was functioning, his disappointment with the ability to sell surrealism to the broader public and to make it a real social movement. I mean I can’t imagine what a social movement like that would look like but I think that that was a tremendous kind of blow; I think that they were very idealistic and their hopes were very high. For me they [the surrealists] really embody the concept of the avant-garde and the hopes of what the avant-garde meant in a certain way, a real radical transformation of society toward more liberation, and so I just don’t think that he would settle for something like changing a museum, it’s not big enough for Breton.

DL: But then I guess, thinking further about this question, one of the explicit points of reference for the Bureau was Breton’s apartment, and really he shared a similar kind of aesthetic.

MD: Oh absolutely. I think Breton’s passion for surrounding himself with things that were inspirational, things that motivated his imagination, is certainly an aesthetic that informed the Bureau. For me, if you have the choice of being in a bare room or being in a room where you are surrounded by things that are inspiring to you, that engage you, that take you other places, that certainly would be my...
choice. In that sense I think that Breton would enjoy the space, but I’m not sure if he would identify with the goal of the project. That’s a good question, though.

AD: [From the hat] Can a meeting to discuss surrealism ever be truly quorate? I guess this might be a question about the uses to which the Bureau is called and what might take place there.

MD: Or it could be a question about this particular meeting? It’s a very strange thing...I mean you must find often yourselves in this situation, where you study in a very kind of rational, organised and academic way something very excessive and a bit (intentionally) on the crazy side and very politically and socially radical. To put that into a category where you are placing that under a microscope and dissecting it seems to be a process that is quite contrary to the original intentions.

DL: That’s one respect, I think, in which from the point of view of an art historian, this experience has been really fruitful: our interaction with you Mark, as an artist. Because I think you’re able to articulate and express something of the spirit of surrealism in a way through your work which is perhaps betrayed, as you suggest, by an academic style of writing.

AD: I would like to thank Mark for answering these questions so patiently and Julia Kelly and David Lomas and of course the wonderful questions from the audience. I think we might keep those.4

MD: Keep these, actually perhaps as a surrealist object.

AD: I think so. Do you think they might have a place in the Bureau?

1 Conversation transcribed by Kerry Cundiff. Photographs courtesy Bryony Bond, Richard Weltman and Marion Endt.

2 Alchemy is an artist residency programme organised by the Manchester Museum and co-ordinated by Bryony Bond. For more information, please visit www.alchemy.man.ac.uk.

3 Mark Dion, Bureau of the Centre for the Study of Surrealism and its Legacy, the AHRB Research Centre for Studies of Surrealism and its Legacies and Book Works, London, 2005.

4 See appendix below.
Appendix: unused audience questions

How did you select the objects on display in the Bureau?

What do you like about this project and the Manchester Museum context?

Were you conscious of any affinities with surrealism before accepting this project?

What is the point of art? What can it achieve in today’s society?

Miwon Kwon has called you a site-specific artist. Do you agree?

What is your favourite collection of all time?

Are you an archaeologist at heart?

Do you collect anything?

Surreal versus hyper-real?

Do you agree that there is ‘natural’ surrealism (e.g. Magritte, Ernst) and also ‘forced’ surrealism (e.g. Penrose)?

Is surrealism a natural concomitant of the body of knowledge or its antithesis?

What are the things you are curious about?

The Bureau reminds me of the Freud museum in Hampstead, London. Were you inspired by this and if so, why?

If the Bureau had a soundtrack playing when it was viewed and experienced, what would that soundtrack be?

Why do you love Baron Cuvier?

Is it not time to re-assert or re-invent an active and living surrealist organisation/society?

What is the most poignant question you ask yourself?

Do you think people’s reactions to the permanent collection will change after seeing your Bureau?

Is art a bi-product of a problem-solving mind, with fewer problems to solve, or is it trying to solve a problem that has only become more apparent with an evolved society with fewer physical tasks?

Is there a point where art and science really link and what is that point (in time and space)?

If you had a space in a gallery and were asked to fill it with your deepest secret, fantasy belief, would you, could you?

How personal to you is the project?

How relevant is the surrealist legacy to the 21st century?
Richard Wentworth in conversation with Anna Dezeuze

Introduction by Anna Dezeuze

This talk by Richard Wentworth and his interview with myself were part of the series ‘Communicating Vessels: Surrealism and Contemporary Art’ and took place at the Manchester Museum on April 21, 2005. The event coincided with the artist’s exhibition at Tate Liverpool in January-April 2005. The following transcript has only been edited minimally in order to remain as close as possible to the artist’s informal way of lecturing; this choice was made in the belief that Richard’s style is as revealing as the content of his discourse - as I suggest in our conversation, the flow of anecdotes, associations and insights in his discussions often evoke the manner in which materials resonate with each other in his sculptural work.

Richard made no secret of his ambivalence towards surrealism, and this proved to be a particularly interesting aspect of the talk and conversation, as two surrealist themes - death and eroticism - end up coming up again and again in his discussion of objects. In terms of more specific connections, our discussion focused on a comparison between Richard’s photographs and the Involuntary Sculptures, a collaborative work by Brassaï and Dalí published as a page of the surrealist journal Minotaure (nos. 3-4, 1933).

Richard showed and discussed a series of his own photographs before responding to questions from myself and the audience.

Talk by Richard Wentworth

Landscape: View from a high speed train, Seville – Cordoba, March 2004 © Richard Wentworth

Richard Wentworth: [pointing to the slide]
Can anyone tell me what this image is of?

Audience: [silence]

RW: Anyone want to place it? Are we agreed it is on this planet? Even that’s interesting.

Audience: North of France?

RW: Warmer, getting warmer. If I tell you it’s a five-week old photograph, you ought to be able to do something with seasons.

Audience: Spain?

RW: Spain, yes. Whereabouts in Spain?

Audience: Just north of the telegraph pole?

RW: A man with a sense of humour. Anyone want to put it on a ‘up, down, a little top left, bottom right’ scale?

Audience: Middlish? South of the middle?
RW: It is south of the middle. Anyway, I think it’s a useful thing to do. I suspect, if you had a slide show in here 80 years ago, I think people would have been able to make a better job of it because I think they knew more about the seasons, they knew more about things being grown, and identifying things. I think that’s an interesting thing that we are getting less and less knowledgeable. I was on a train going from Seville to Cordoba. The colour was very extraordinary, and it’s serious agriculture, but it’s on a fast train, and fast trains are highly protected space, and the atmosphere on Spanish trains post-Madrid bombings is really pretty disturbing. You get checked. I don’t have a personal fear of being blown up but I’m extremely conscious of that politic and I think it’s a very, very serious condition that we’re all in.

Ok, so I’m interested in how things are made, how we name them, how we think we say we know what they are, and how we know what they’re not. I think Surrealism has something to do with heat, I think Surrealism is to do with weird sex, men dressed as women, Catholicism, very, very hard politics, politics the like of which I don’t think anyone in here could possibly have ever known, I mean really hard. I think it’s very sharp, I think it’s about blood, I think it’s very, very charged, and I was never that. I’m a sort of ‘1960s poster kid’ at best. I was born in 1947. Surrealists - the real guys - were still around (most of them hadn’t actually died), but they didn’t come and visit me in my cradle.

This is a tree; I happen to know what it is, because it’s a tree I’m rather interested in. It’s called a ‘Tree of Heaven,’ Ailanthus. In New York it’s known as the ‘weed tree’ and they say it will just grow in shit, and it does. In fact next time you are in New York you will see Ailanthus which looks a bit like an ash tree. It’ll just come out of anything, and if there has been spilt engine oil or something completely disgusting around it will come out of it, it’s fantastic. I think that’s a really Surrealist thing: you just build your wall, you just cement this tree, it grows, and that, to me is just extraordinary. I wasn’t even aware of coming to give this talk - I passed this, and I just thought: ‘that is so odd, it is so hard…’ And I remember not that long ago whenever we went to Spain, which we always drove to, when we went over the border there would always be a dog upside down with its legs in the air that was dead within half a mile of the border, and we would go: ‘oh look! Spain.’ Incredible. I suppose I do think Surrealism is Spanish, actually - I hadn’t really thought of that. I think that’s probably what I really think it is.
I am intrigued how signs have that habit of coalescing. I suppose I have the kind of nervous system which is tuned to it. [Pointing] That is the phalange symbol, that’s the fascist symbol of all the arrows being bound together, as if proclaiming: ‘there are more of us than you.’ And I’m sure there’s somebody here who could give a really eloquent reading of its heraldry. Heraldry is very interesting, it’s very connected to Surrealism where you mash different images, different emblems of different families together, and make new emblems. I thought this was an exceptionally lively crossing sign and it was right next to the tree and I thought how funny that that sign, where the tree is all held together in this concrete at the base, just happened to be next to it. Clearly these things knew nothing of each other - I’m the agent, I’m the person who can’t stop myself from seeing the relationship. I never expected to say this to anybody, or show them next to each other.

That’s how I think of Spain. I think that is brilliant. Does anyone know what that word, carcoma, means? [No answer from the audience]. It means woodworm. I expect there is a better word for it but it generally applies to creepy crawlies. I think that’s as good as graffiti gets, really. It’s just fantastic, and you seldom see graffiti with that speed and calligraphic authority and collective currency in Britain. We have our codes, we have our things that we want to say to each other, but that just stopped me dead. That was in Cordoba.

I’m very interested in the folkloric. I like the fact that we answer back, I like the way that it’s a very argumentative culture, I like the way that we need class wherever we can find it. We just really need to dislike each other if we can manage it in some way or form.
So cutting to our own chilly spot. I went for a walk with a nice man, a man called Joseph Sharples who wrote the new Pevsner for Liverpool. It’s a really beautifully written book. And he took us to the cemetery in Liverpool, and under the new legislation, if a gravestone fell on you in a graveyard, not only might you be dead - which is rather appropriate, it’s a rather good image (you would have to be transported less distance) - but of course the council would be responsible. So they now have toppling machines all over Britain: all graves are tested with the toppling machine and if there is x amount of wobble, the headstones are levelled. I’m not a conservationist, I’m not particularly interested in heritage (I’m aware that I have one and that we are in bits of it), but I think this is a serious cultural illness. It sets up a tension with me because it’s in a place of the dead, which again I think of as being something to do with Surrealism.
This is some kind of Surrealism, isn’t it? Imagine walking into this cemetery. I’m interested in rituals, I suppose, and I think I was always somebody who has been fleeing the smell of the Victorians, and I grew up in a slightly Victorian household. This imagery, all of this, is rather weird. No mason would have been able to have made that until the tools that made that existed, because that’s really a big routing. But if you are interested in that language, go into cemeteries now, and they’re getting really wild and they are getting very complex, in terms of what they stand for, because there were many, many cultures represented here. But you arrive to this.

[He shows slide of French War Memorial] This is a French war memorial. I don’t quite know what that means, but I have got masses of stuff on war memorials, and how we behave in the face of them. Maybe because, as somebody said to me – and this seems to be a pretty strong Surrealist remark - somebody of my generation said to me on the telephone: ‘oh, we were on the beaches, weren’t we?’ And I said: ‘oh, were we?’ It seemed a very odd thing to say. And she said: ‘you know we were, you know we were,’ and she meant that if you were born in 1947 what did we hear for 10, 15 years? What do we hear now? We hear ‘we won the war, the beaches etc.’ How strange that the period in which you are actually born into is the period at least 15 years before, that’s the cultural space you occupy. So there are people in here who were born in the 1980s who’ll know a hell of a lot about the ‘60s - they weren’t there, but they know so much. Partly of course because you never born into a perfect historical moment: there’s the old car, or the things in the kitchen, or the books that have been acquired, or whatever it is…
And I’m very intrigued by the way we nominate things and then maybe get very confused about what they were. I was walking along in Liverpool and I thought: ‘I don’t need to photograph this, but I will.’ The motive for photographing a sign saying ‘pipes’ was immediately explicit because there was a girl of about 15 with her dad on this walk and she said ‘why are you photographing that?’ And I said: ‘well, tell me what pipes are.’ And she said: ‘oh I expect…,’ and then she realised that there might be a trick in it, and she said ‘is it, are they plumbers?’ And I said ‘no’ and she didn’t know what a pipe was. And a pipe is a central Surrealist object - presumably because it’s so sexually charged and it smokes, and it’s ridiculous, it’s a bit like sticking a steam train (of course another strong Surrealist object) in your face. (I don’t smoke.) Anyway, I thought it strange that the word ‘pipes’ continues - it’s just there, it’s a bit lame, it’s probably not going to make it. When I was a child, probably the word ‘pipes’ was everywhere, but it’s nearly gone.

That typography just makes we want to weep. I just think ‘how fantastic!’ but that was probably not even that special. That’s lead inlay, so that’s incredibly sophisticated, that’s a piece of letter-cutting - that’s effectively a piece of carbon - and then it’s been filled with lead, which incidentally is the same as Mies [van der Rohe] used in the National Gallery in Berlin, which was the first time I had ever seen lead used in that way in stone. But I do like the fact that buildings used to be nominated in that way. There are lots in the north, where people were very busy telling you who they were. So it’s on the top of the building, and it’s in the masonry, and it obviously has a very elaborate history but it seems very strange because of course you see that in the early Oldenburg who is most certainly a Surrealist.

This is in Cordoba, and I hoped there might be someone who knows something about this plinth. This is such an exceptional sculpture. Equestrian sculpture is quite strange to us because we can’t really know what all that would have meant, but you slightly know it when you meet a police horse: then you have some pretty strong sense of things to do with power and elevation. I don’t actually know what the head is made of, but it was a change of material, and I thought there was something very special about that because things made of bronze hardly ever argue with themselves (unless Picasso went there) - they tend to be rather busy being bronze.

Of course that guy was a warrior and this is pretty much what we have come to. I was taken in an off-road vehicle in 1990 in California by a coked-up collector and he drove off the road
somewhere in one of those deserts in southern California with me and my wife on board, showing off. He drove up a dry riverbed with boulders the size of the tables - it was absolutely horrifying, but it was funny as well. He then got out his mobile phone, which was enormous, and he started saying to his wife, ‘Hey Lesley, we’re off-roading, we’re off-road!’ It was just one of those moments that I didn’t seek, I didn’t really know what any of it meant, but I remember having a discussion with him and saying: ‘do you know what all this stuff means in England?’ (that’s now 15 years ago.) And I was trying to explain to him about land rovers and landownership and what at the time were the kind of values associated with having a ‘Discovery.’ He didn’t believe me, so I bought him copies of The Field and Country Life with these people standing beside these cars (which of course they had already started to bring into the city, where they would wear this green stuff). And I was trying to explain to him that this is very, very late Gainsborough, but he is in southern California, and there was no way he was ever going to get it. But ever since that moment, I’ve been interested in this topic.

This culture and the naming of these two-by-fours is really interesting because it’s always about the American military and possibly the Japanese: ‘Shogun,’ ‘Patrol,’ ‘Cherokee,’ lots of stuff to do with outer space, lots of stuff to do with the militarization of space. I have always imagined that there is a department of branding somewhere where they are going through the military possibilities…

[He shows slide of Cotton Exchange, Liverpool]

I’d like to say a few more things to do with how things are made. This building was made in 1900, Joseph Sharples told me; this is what’s left of the cotton exchange in Liverpool, and its architecture is directly governed by the need to see. That glazing was the maximum glazing that the technology at the time could give, because in order to buy and sell cotton you had to look at it, and that sent a real techno-shiver through me because in 1900 there was nothing better, there still is nothing better than light. How fantastic that you were building for daylight and not building for other forms of illumination! I remember as a student going to a lecture by George Steiner, and he said: ‘whatever people will say about the century (the one that’s past), the thing they should say is it’s the first century that got rid of the night.’ And actually when you are anywhere where there is night (which I think is absolutely wonderful), when you really experience night, it is quite amazing what we have lost. I’m not suggesting we haven’t gained
some things as well. And I think there is a lot of night in Surrealism.

[He shows slide of television screen with reflection]
I’m very interested in what good receivers televisions are. A television which is off is a fabulous object. I’ve got this feeling that perhaps televisions are actually - perhaps this is slightly ‘Dr Who’ - pulling stuff in: they’re not putting anything out at all. If you get the light right, the telly gets very busy conversing with the world. And there is nothing better than a dumped telly, a telly away from an electrical supply, in a country hedge or on a street, full of its context.

[He shows slide of dock wall, Liverpool]
Oscar Niemeyer borrowed this construction from American Indian construction and used it a lot, and you see this also in Gaudí, but you see it all over Liverpool (this is, I think, one of the dock walls in Liverpool again). A friend of mine said - and I thought it was very nice for me – ‘the thing about Richard is he says he’s very interested in how the world’s put together, but actually he’s really interested in how we can take it apart.’ And of course the thing about that wall is that that’s actually made. I bet somebody here knows how to do that, but that’s just brilliant, that’s worth a lot of Henry Moores to me. And that’s done quickly, it’s not done artistically. There are some really quite important questions about what somebody who was doing that, whom we don’t get to talk to, felt about it, and if you look at one of those walls, you can actually see conversations between people who are probably different people, you can see different speeds, almost like handwriting. That sort of stuff means a lot to me, and like anyone who’s fiddled, I’ve done little bits of stuff like that, but there is no way I’ve sold my labour to do that. I think it’s an incredibly honourable space, really.
Getting onto the railway in Seville, I have a very powerful sense as I have already said of the dead dog, the heat, that the land is hard, life is difficult. I’ve got a lot of friends who have worked in Spain professionally, a lot of Spanish stories, things that happened, that there is something about the sun coming down and it’s hard, and it’s completely unlike the sort of softness that most people here encounter. I have a very, very strong sense of people making things for themselves, so I’m really interested in agrarian activities. But Spain has had so much European money spent on it, it’s now so busy being euro-chic that you don’t really expect to see that kind of agrarian activity at all. But as I’m about to get on the fast train at Seville, there’s a man (whom I regret not photographing, I hardly ever photograph people…) [pointing] I think that’s his leg), and he’s selling these tiny little mousetraps. And they are made of little bits of old crappy wood and little springs. I bought two full size mousetraps from him ([pointing] I bought that one for 2 euros), and this guy is about 70 and he has obviously made mousetraps all his life, and these are key rings. I wanted to hug him… I didn’t know… what to say to this man? It was like a little lightning conductor back to things that were absolutely central to that peasant culture 30-40 years ago, but also, I bet, that’s the same pattern that Goya would have known and it would probably go back beyond that. But I would just be a patronising prat if I had that conversation with this guy. Anyway, I speak adequate Spanish, so we had a bit of a conversation about all the different grades of metal that were required for the springy stuff, the softer stuff, the binding stuff, and all the little pieces of wood. But it’s partly the emblematic thing that it represents that affected me. He’s just making them, the days go by, that’s like a conversation with
the world, people come by, occasionally somebody from Britain turns up and buys two mousetraps.

[He shows slide of Liverpool graveyard] This is the last of the Liverpool graveyard that I'll be showing you today. I thought that was just a fantastic monument. You don't really get sculpture as good as that anymore. And it is slightly how I feel about high Victorian. I can't really do high Victorian, it's just too disturbing to me.

And then (just to finish): those chutes that were only invented about 25-30 years ago for slooshing building stuff out of buildings - they're chains of interlocking cones. Only in Spain would they invent something as beautiful as this. It's made with some old awning which ended up being abandoned, or maybe it's one of those big sacks…That's the kind of thing where you think that you can't go home and make one of those: that would be a seriously bad sculpture. It was partly its relationship to the car below that was so good.

Rubbish Chute, Cordoba © Richard Wentworth
I don’t know what one calls that, but if you think about it, the special knowledge in that is fascinating. Again, it can’t be anything but pretentious to say it, but the fact that not only is it broken but it’s tipped the right way, and it seems to be saying ‘I just want to keep my parking place’. It’s like somebody who just puts together a really decent sentence and you think: ‘well, I actually liked hearing that.’ Maybe that’s a noun, a couple of adjectives and a broken conjunction.

I was going to say that when I worked for Henry Moore I kept thinking: ‘gosh, these are bloody bad Surrealist things.’ He used to give me little things that looked as if he had taken a potato and carved it while he was a bit bored. He was very good at it - I’m not putting him down - but you’d be handed this sort of thing like that, and he would say: ‘times six,’ and you’d go off into the garden and measure it up and make one times six. One of mine’s in the Tate actually, with all the mistakes. This is 1968 or 1969, that’s very late for that kind of work. There is no way Henry Moore is a Surrealist, but actually if you go back, if you’re interested in how influences flow, you can see a moment when Picasso and Henry Moore and others cross - you probably know the date, but I would say it was probably about 1927 - and that’s probably where it starts out.
Interview

Anna Dezeuze: Do you always choose to show your own photographs rather than images of your own work when you give a talk?

RW: I don’t really like photographs of my own work, so why would I show them? I’ve learned more by doing that than I would by showing things that I’ve done. Maybe that’s very rude to the audience, but I had to work harder to achieve that.

AD: Do you mean you have to work harder when you’re trying to comment on the images, or when you select them?

RW: The hardest is trying to explain to myself why I would choose each one. Those are very specific acts. Photography’s a crap art, I think. Everyone is a photographer. It’s just a method of achieving something. And you can learn things and not learn things from it, but I think it’s inappropriate to say photography’s terribly important, and modelling in clay is not. Different people have done different things at different times, and they have an effect on the culture. But I am curious to know… When I have a sheet of photographs, I’m quite surprised, and I also like the fact that they might belong to three different cultures, they might have been taken over a month. The next sheet was in Miami, but I thought that was too easy, because it was so surreal. The photographs looked so surreal, they just looked wacky. But in a way, the word ‘surreal’ is so damaged because it’s in the language. (And that’s why we’ve had a rather contentious conversation for nearly a year, where I get led to the edge of the precipice, and then I rush back and say I won’t go over.) I do think it’s quite a damaged territory, but Minimalism is also damaged, Minimalism’s kitsch.

AD: I’m interested in the way you use these images to talk about things you’re interested in (but always as a way of talking about your sculpture without showing your sculpture). There is no obvious connection between the photographs and the sculptures, but they share a discourse, a set of interests.

RW: I think what they probably share is … I am being a bit deferential (it’s just embarrassing to say because it sounds naff), but in front of something like that dock wall, I always feel very humble. Well, actually in front of any decent brick wall I feel humble - it’s a bloody amazing piece of sculpture, you know, if you know what a brick wall’s doing. And that’s why it’s taken thousands of years to invent, and the people who build brick walls are not hugely celebrated, but they make the culture. And that’s part of my daily pleasure. But it may be some very feeble sort of nostalgia - I don’t know how you’d say it - wishing I were an artisan. It was not my ambition, but I suppose there are lots of people here who probably wouldn’t even know what an artisan was, because now it’s just so invisible.

AD: The Surrealists are not very well known for the sculpture that they created,
but at one point they were interested in what a Surrealist automatic sculpture could look like. The idea of ‘involuntary sculpture’ was illustrated in a page of photographs by Brassaï, published in *Minotaure*, which I think you quite like, don’t you?

**RW:** Shall I have a go at describing it?

**AD:** Yes, why don’t you try?

**RW:** What’s funny is that I’m not even sure how I first found out about them, but there is this very strange thing, which is that somebody says something to you, and you pay not much attention to it, but then somehow it’s repeated 5 years later, or twenty years later, and these things start to grow into a bit of a knot and after a while they belong to you and you think: ‘well, I really care about that,’ or ‘I really know about that,’ but actually, it’s been received in all these little social increments. There’s a funny group of people that I knew – some have died, and some are very old - who were very, very generous to me in various ways (I don’t know whether they were aware of it). Maybe one of them perhaps once showed me an original copy of *Minotaure*. Maybe even it was put through their letterbox - imagine somebody receiving a real art magazine or however one would describe it in 1933! And there was a little - what we, embarrassingly I think, now call - ‘project’ (I think every time we are about to say I’m working on a project, if you could think of another noun you would be doing culture a favour. It’s really difficult but it is becoming an illness). They did this project, and Brassaï, who is, I think, a really wonderful photographer … (I have always wondered - in fact maybe you could tell us – why do all those photographers come from the middle of Europe? They’re not French, they all are Hungarians and Czechs, and so they’re from that strip up the middle, which is very powerful.) Anyway, Brassaï was Hungarian but ended up in Paris, and he knew a hell of a lot about light - and of course that’s all attached to understanding black and white photography and contrast and all those qualities - and these photographs [the *Involuntary Sculpture* set of images] are really of things that are in the world, that are made by us, that we don’t quite see. So one of them is a photograph of the end of a croissant or the end of a brioche, which of course is flat at some point and then it’s rolled and gets put in the kiln - in fact it’s almost more like a photograph of a ceramic, because baking and ceramics are really the same thing. And then the one that I really adore is a kind of neurotic furling of a bus ticket, which has somehow been folded in half and it’s broken and it’s got two volutes – to use an architectural term - two fabulous twirls of paper on the end, and they are photographed so that they look big. In fact, I always thought it would be great if one could have taken Roland Barthes to *Toy Story*: when I was in *Toy Story*, I thought: ‘oh, I know it would be fun to be next to him here.’ And in a way I’d not thought of this, but those photographs by Brassaï are very like very good animation. And of course *Snow White* comes out about the same time, where there are the beginnings.
of popular reference to scale change - something small and modest which is transformed and made very, very big and visually assertive. Brassai’s photographs are very, very moving and they’re very ordinary.

(I discovered something domestic only yesterday: I’d never understood why all the zappers in our house were so fucked up - I actually find zappers rather difficult to use - and my wife said: ‘oh, don’t you realise Felix always puts them in his mouth?’ I hope there is no friend of Felix’s here because he would be so angry – he’s my younger son, and he is old enough not to do that, and he still puts the bloody zapper in his mouth! You know, it’s obviously psycho-sexual: you’re watching television, and you have to put this thing in your mouth… And these remote controls are all damaged, they have got these little teeth marks in them, and I was looking at one this morning thinking: ‘that’s rather nice, actually.’ It’s like the area of the chewed pencil, of all those neuroses…)

**AD:** The other images include a piece of soap, some discarded toothpaste… And they take on this monumental dimension because they are photographed in close-up and in a very contrasting, dramatic lighting. I was thinking about this notion that, in a sense, the *Involuntary Sculpture* photographs are about giving up, in fact, the notion of making an automatic sculpture altogether: you can’t create it yourself, you have to go out and find it, as a kind of residue. So I was interested in thinking about your photographs as involuntary sculptures, and I was wondering: at what stage do they become sculptures?

**RW:** Well, I’m really embarrassed by my photographs… There has in fact been a long-running row with my gallery because at different times people have pushed me in the gallery because they always think they know that they can sell these photographs and I’ve proved them wrong because they’re not really that popular; they certainly don’t give me a living wage. I think that’s quite important: things can become quite mythic and become quite known, and be in a collective currency, but be absolutely bloody worthless in the marketplace. I saw a beautiful Schwitters yesterday and I thought: 'what a fat lot of use that did to him, he died of TB in total isolation.'

**AD:** Well I’m not comparing your photographs to Brassai’s photographs directly…

**RW:** No, but the point I’m making is that it’s to do with how things enter the culture and become known, and whether they really have the physical existence… (I’ve already admitted to you that I tried to steal a Brassai photograph but Mrs Brassai, who is an extremely assiduous widow, whisked it back from me just as my little fingers were going out after it.) Do you think you should tell everybody what ‘automatic’ is (because a lot of people might not really know the ideas behind the ‘automatic’)? And then we can go back to my idea that, because gravity is such a
AD: It was automatic writing that was most important for the Surrealists at the beginning, and then they tried to find forms of involving this, in painting for example. The idea was to somehow channel the subconscious into the act of writing so that you didn’t make the decisions of sentence construction, themes, narratives, syntax etc. in a rational way. So the difference between the conscious and the unconscious was the basic opposition.

And the question arose: how do you make an automatic sculpture?

RW: Well, I would say there are some examples. There’s a lot of automatism in Pollock, for example - his paintings are very nearly sculptures, because if you put enough gobby paint down, painting in effect becomes sculptural. There’s something about viscosity and gravity which he understood very, very well - he’s very good at it. That definitely goes directly to Richard Serra’s ‘thrown lead’ pieces [Splashing (1968) for example]. Richard Serra is a small man of Italian parentage (perhaps Italian-Jewish, I don’t know), very competitive, very tiring to be with (I’m not very good with those sorts of blokes). But of course that always comes with a really fantastic energy. You’ve probably all at some point seen a photograph of him doing these lead throws. [A 1969 photograph shows Richard Serra making his 1969 Casting at the Leo Castelli Warehouse]. Lead is good fun; most men have melted lead (women tend not to do it - we can have a discussion about this). Most men, when they are between seven and thirteen – interestingly - melt lead and do things with it. It’s very powerful, and it’s very strong - I happen to have done it recently, so I re-thought how strong it is. You take something which is not quite like a piece of steel, but it’s definitely a metal, and suddenly it becomes like cream, hot cream, and it’s quite dangerous, it changes its condition and it is very exciting, as you appear to have power over it because you have to hold it to a flame. And if you’re really going to work with it, you need to dress up: you have leather gloves and helmets and all that gear, so you become rather heroic in a sort of Japanese manner. And the documentary photographs are of Serra dressed in this way, with a cauldron with a regular supply of lead, and he’s throwing it. So he’s got his physicality (a direct reference, probably self-conscious, to Pollock), and there is this hot lead flying through the air and zapping into the joints of the floor and the wall. With the lead throw, you’ve got something which is changing, which has already changed its condition, which is on its way to changing it back because as it’s going through the air it’s stiffening and beginning to harden; you’ve got gravity; you’ve got the thing that we call the wall and the thing that we call the floor, which is completely different (and it’s important that we know which is which because it’s something to do with how we behave); and you get, effectively, a mould of the space, and space is expressed by his physical ‘oomph.’ That would be a
good automatic sculpture. I didn’t think that until I said it!

AD: I don’t know if I agree. I’m just trying to connect this to the images you were showing earlier, which, I personally do see as involuntary sculpture…

RW: Well, I see, they look like it, but I think my motives for taking a picture are so banal. Michael Craig-Martin and I taught together for quite a long time and I remember - it would have been about 1972 or 1973 - I said one of my pathetic little things like maybe ‘that looks like a Rauschenberg,’ which I’m really careful not to do now, and Michael said something like ‘oh, you’ll find the world often looks like art,’ and I remember being so crushed. (I’ve never said that publicly, I’m not even sure I’ve said it privately.) So in culture that’s the predicament (and I don’t mean to say this badly). By definition, what’s happened culturally is that we are really damaged now because we would barely know a Warhol if we saw one, because we have seen so many - you know, the latest GAP campaign is probably inspired by Pop Art. Art is in everything, so the days when all the complications of where art is, and who it belongs to, and where the bourgeoisie are, have gone. Now that everyone is bourgeois, and we’ve all got a mobile phone and the right shoes, it’s really difficult… So I’m very nervous when I… When I take my photographs, I think I’m just trying to remind myself that the world is made, actually, I think that’s what it comes down to. Maybe it did start with a rather babyish ‘that looks like a Jasper Johns,’ but you have to do babyish stuff to grow up. I’m amazed at how iconic some of my photographs have become, but then everybody takes photographs like that. The other thing is I feel very strongly they don’t belong to me, it’s a linguistic space, if you like.

AD: So do you think of them as an expression - if you were using the idea of the ‘unconscious’ - of a kind of ‘collective unconscious’?

RW: Yes, I think I would. A brain scientist friend of mine, Mark Lythgoe, said that the reason that people smile when they look at those pictures is because it’s attached to the fact that you need to remember that stuff because that’s how you survive. And he has a really - it’s actually in the catalogue for the Tate show - nice thesis about what it is that each of us needs to remember, so if I one minute I yell ‘Fire!’ you will almost without hesitation - only the really dozy ones will fail to - remember you came through a door in that corner [points]. When you walked in here you were not thinking: ‘now, if there was a fire what would I do?’ Our lives would be impossible if we did, but it is interesting how much we are geared up - if we weren’t, we might all rush to the window.

AD: Actually, I was quite annoyed by this conversation in the catalogue that you have with Mark Lythgoe because it seemed to reduce everything to a kind of Darwinist survival instinct. When I see your photographs I don’t think ‘this is going
to be useful for me when I want to patch up…

**RW:** No, he was talking about the mechanism that… We would be nerds if we were doing that, we’d all be nerds. We’d be going round with our little pad going ‘oh, remember wobbly table, put this under.’ Although that, in a way, has always been for me a kind of pleasure - I’ve always thought ‘isn’t it funny how we know that stuff?’ Going out of the building carrying two bags of rubbish and your suitcase in your teeth, you use your arse to do something with the door, and you notice that there’s an old slipper that’s fallen out of the rubbish and you jam it in… And the speed with which those spaces are articulated and with which we all know what to do, and the value systems that they contain, maybe they’re not edited that well: you just did it, that’s what you felt.

**AD:** Well, I just got a feeling that Lythgoe was taking the involuntary sculpture out of your work, the sculpture which is this totally useless thing that we look at, that takes up room, that has no function… I thought that by orienting the discussion towards function, and how we make do and how we cope with situations, he seemed to lose the …

**RW:** Yes, I remember, even in the conversation, thinking that a little bit with him, I think that it’s true. But there’s another thing that might be worth saying, because obviously there are a lot of people here who look at images and make images. There’s a man I’m very fond of who wrote a lovely book that was very important to my generation, *Eye and Brain*, a man called Richard Gregory. We had to do a talk like this together in Bristol and he said: ‘I take photographs too, they’re really absolute rubbish. When I see your photographs, they are marvellous, marvellous, marvellous.’ And then he said: ‘but I had an idea the other day. What if we got some really nice oak frames and we went around the town and we placed these oak frames wherever you wanted them, would that be good enough?’ And I said ‘well, no.’ It’s to do with the strangeness of what all our perceptual conditions are. I was with somebody who lives in Switzerland yesterday in the tube and all I could see was how filthy it was, that’s all I could see. She’s not even Swiss, but because I was with somebody whom I knew had flown from Zurich that morning, I saw things differently. I think that’s an incredibly interesting part of our cultural condition; we are all doing that, this sympathising, with each other, all the time. We are aware of our next-door neighbour, how they’re taking to this conversation or not.

**AD:** What’s really interesting in the relation between the photographs and the sculptures is that you didn’t decide ‘oh, this is such a beautiful, or intriguing object in the street, I’m going to take it and put it in the gallery’ - some artists do that. I was wondering about how the processes you explore in your photographs are echoed in the space of your studio in terms of the way you bring objects together. How do
the objects in your studio end up in your studio?

RW – Well, I seem to be marooned in anecdote today - forgive me. A very tender thing happened on - I think it was - Saturday evening. My eldest son, who is 25, rang up and said: ‘we’ve found some steps in the street and we think you’ll really like them.’ Probably there is nobody, not even my wife, who would know my ‘nervous thing,’ and he gave me a fabulous description on the phone of how it had paint drips on it and it was a little bit homemade, and it might have been cut down from some taller steps but he wasn’t really sure, and he gave descriptions of the cords, and how it was slightly abject (he doesn’t use words like abject, but that’s what he was saying), and he was talking about gravity, clearly referring to the gravity of the paint that lands on the step as opposed to on the side pieces (the verticals and horizontal express things differently). And I have to say it was quite erotic, it was a quite juicy ‘I bet you’d like this.’ But at the same time, he was presenting it very, very nicely, which I think is something that lots of us do, by saying: ‘and if you like it you can have it,’ rather than saying ‘I got it for you.’ He’s just moved into a new flat, so he was implying: ‘if you don’t want it, I’ll mend it, and we need some steps.’ So I was forced into a quite complicated social thing where I didn’t particularly want to go over (I’ve lost my licence at the moment, so I was thinking ‘I’ve got to walk round there and it’s a bit of a pain’), but then I was thinking it was discourteous not to go and complete the transaction, so I went round and his description was immaculate, it was really, really good, it was a really nice piece of what you get from people you have a close relationship with. But unfortunately I realised it was absolutely no good for me at all, and I thought a lot about it, and I think that’s because I didn’t find it. And I think that’s actually pretty straightforward - this is difficult territory, but I think that’s an erotic thing, somehow: you don’t want people sent to you because somebody says ‘this is your kind of sexual treat’ (this happens in novels and films and so forth, it’s never happened to me, or at least I’m not aware of it ever having happened to me). However, if I find myself in a condition of engagement with somebody, which has some expressed or unexpressed erotic content - that does happen to humans - that’s a very specific electrical, or whatever you want to call it, line. And as I said ‘no, I don’t think I’ll have the steps,’ I felt as though I had given up something. It was quite an agonising thing, and I think that’s the best reply to your question I can give.

But what was really important was that he understood that I don’t look for things - I very, very seldom look for them. I don’t want to go into that kind of catalogue-type condition. I spend time in Brick Lane market, a little bit, but it’s less and less interesting because it’s more and more self-conscious. I like to be near things that are falling - actually sometimes physically. I like to be near things at the end of their social life. There was a market I used to go to in Berlin that was absolutely extraordinary because
everything had fallen to this same point. The market used to open on a Saturday and a Sunday and it was absolutely straight commerce; they could see in your eyes that you collected glasses – ‘zwei Mark!’ - or whatever it was, and you did or didn’t buy it, whatever those games of purchase or barter are. But on the second day, at I think about 4.30pm, people started shouting ‘Billig, billig, eine Mark, eine Mark!’ [‘Cheap, cheap, one mark!’], and everything became one mark, so the whole mood changed, and at 4.50pm they would say ‘Alles frei!’ [‘everything is free’] - and the place would go absolutely barking. So people were scrabbling, taking home a torn lampshade, both the rich and the very poor, it was incredible. (I often suspect I should probably have been a filmmaker but I’ve done nothing about it, and I wish I had been able to film one of those moments, where you see everybody running around with these objects). I have one very old friend who has described what displaced persons’ camps were like at the end of the war, and she said that what is fascinating is that everybody was reduced to exactly the same level — you know, people are ill, they are disconnected from every aspect of their culture, they are very close to a kind of mental illness, but they’re not mentally ill, because they’re fucking going to survive… So they’re all in the camp together, and she said they absolutely exhibited their national stereotypes. She said the Portuguese did what the Portuguese did, the Serbians did that, and it was a really incredible description (of course, I’ve never been in such a situation). I don’t know why I’m saying these things, but I suppose because my life’s quite privileged, all our lives are privileged, you can’t not speculate about that. But if you’re in a flea market, that plate lying in the gutter is symbolic, somehow; you know you can save that plate, you can take it home and put it on the wall and never eat off it, and so it’s the most important plate in the world, you can put back into it all that meaning, or you can stand on it and it’s on its way to a landfill. I find that moment … It’s probably not an accident that I showed some photographs in a cemetery. I bet there is an analyst in the audience.

AD: It seems very obvious that the sexuality and the death drive that you identified with Surrealism are channelled through the erotic encounter with the object and the interest in objects that are about to die.

RW: Are you speaking for everybody or for me?

AD: It may apply to everyone (I don’t know), but I was thinking of your work specifically, because of your interests.

To go back to how the objects in your studio get together, you mentioned earlier the Surrealist image, which is often approximated to dream images, in the way it brings together disparate elements. Is that the kind of process that happens in the studio?

RW: I think the kind of process for me is much more like… It’s more American, and I think that’s because of my time.
artists I really identify with, whom I obviously cannot be, are... Oldenburg once used this expression which I thought was absolutely brilliant, he called them the ‘inventor artists.’ (I gathered that it is a term, but I’d never heard it at the time.) Inventor artists are people like Calder, David Smith, H. C. Westerman, perhaps. Well, I’m probably about to show up how little I know, but the idea is that they are people who are resourceful, and their resourcefulness somehow goes into their work in a very particular way. Perhaps that’s also specific to their time - pioneering in the States didn’t really finish until the end of the ‘40s, a lot of American political advertising propaganda from the ‘30s and ‘40s is effectively Soviet advertising with different strap lines, Roosevelt-types going west, building dams and what have you, and you feel that very strongly in David Smith. And that is attached to something which is rather more domestic, and a bit meaner, because this takes place in smaller places: like your grandmother who never threw away bottle caps because they might be useful, and then, one day, she discovered that they fitted exactly on the bottom of her walking stick, and her walking stick would always have one of these on. I have to say that I think that’s also a rather sexual thing. Discovering that things fit... I am a fiddler, and I like that thing of...I was taught for a brief period by a lovely man called David Pye who was a naval architect who became a furniture designer and ended up as a kind of super whittler really. Something would be on a bench, he would say: ‘four and seven sixteenths,’ and then he would take out his callipers and he would be right. But that was because this guy had spent his entire life making judgements about size but also because he was quite intellectual. I don’t want to know the size of things, and I seldom measure things, I measure with my feet or a piece of string, or I have measured houses I’m going to buy with a five pound note as my unit of size, and I’ve found a broomstick and done something which allows me to say: ‘it’s that sort of stuff.’ It’s like there are people it’s fun to move furniture with because they’re just spatially cool when they get to a turning. In contrast, my wife is half my height, and she has no idea about that kind of space at all. She’s an extremely intelligent, able person, but it is a really unpleasant experience to move something with her. (I’m sure she’s giving a lecture at the moment saying the same thing about me.) But I think those sorts of things are essentially special comprehensions. It’s also like knowing when something is for you. It’s probably attached to aspects of shopping.

AD: So in a sense the resonances and associations that you brought out in your talk operate in the same way as what occurs, as a kind of language, between the objects and the materials lying in your studio?
RW: I think so. It’s now very accelerated. For instance, probably not more than ten days before the Tate show was meant to open, lots of work had got lost, and I thought: ‘well, I’ll make lots of new work suddenly, so I’ll have a kind of safety net.’ I was arriving on the train with bags full of bits of shit. And one of the things in the bag was all the string, all the long stuff that’s in that red thesaurus with the mirror stuck in the back. I don’t need very long to think about it, but I realised that what that was, was that in the English language (and you could do it as a party game) how many words are there for something that’s long and thin? There’s thread, and cord, and string, and line, and obviously this is to do with the fact that we live in a mongrel world, we speak in a mongrel language, we like speaking in a mongrel language, we behave in a quite ‘mongrelish’ way. After this talk, some people will go for an Italian meal, some people will go for a Chinese, some people will go for an Indian, somebody will go for something that’s Moroccan mixed with Thai, because that’s what this culture has done for a long time, and now it’s very accelerated. So I don’t do any rationalisation any more, and I was just putting this string in this book and the book says ‘thesaurus,’ and I don’t like hearing myself say this now because it sounds so laboured and it sounds illustrative, and that’s not how the work is made. I have a friend who’s a very celebrated ’70s illustrator, he worked with Hypgnosis in a company called NTA, his name is George Hardy, and George is a
real fusspot illustrator and everything is rationalised to the ultimate degree. The drawings are like death because he can’t just let it do it’s own thing, because everything has these huge mythologies and complex double arrangements, and everything, even down to measurement, is controlled. But that’s maybe what graphics does to peoples’ mind. (George is so smart. He once said ‘Coincidence which we know you like, Richard, is only half as interesting as you think, because you were there already.’)

AD: Well, I think this rebellion against control suggests that there is some automatic sculpture going on somewhere in your work. But let’s have some questions from the audience.

Audience: This is do to with what you said about the bricks and the guy with the mousetraps, and how you didn’t want to patronise the guy who made the mousetraps, and how a bricklayer is never celebrated... Is art something that you would do that’s not part of being a programmed, or a problem-solving, human being anymore (humans have always evolved because they solve problems)? Is art another problem to be solved, is it beyond a more practical thing? As you start thinking of art and trying to understand things through art, is it becoming less and less intrinsic to what a human being can be? Or further away from the animal, from what a human being is? Does it make it more separated from that kind of life?

RW: That’s a really fab question. God, what a question! Well, I wish I knew... I read a lot about the history of processes, in the most undisciplined way. If I find a book on the history of the industrial revolution I nearly always buy it. I read a chapter in the middle of the night the other day about needle-making, it was just from heaven. Needles used to be made in one village, Long Crendon in Buckinghamshire. There was no explanation as to what was going on there. Then the industrial revolution gets going and it all gets very different very quickly. But the thing about humans is that we give meaning to things besides, so we don’t know who invented the brick, we are never going to meet them, they’re not celebrated - it was obviously like the wheel, invented in a lot of places more or less at the same time. It turns up, changes how we behave, and walls start appearing, walls start to have meanings, they are used in different ways, they express different kinds of power, so it’s obviously very different to make a wall for somebody else as opposed to making one for yourself. All sorts of things to do with defence, lots of things that we find really difficult to imagine. I find it very difficult to imagine small walled towns where you go out into densely wooded landscapes in the Middle Ages, go out in the day and do things in the woods, and then flee back into the town at night and shut the door. We all experience certain kinds of violence, but not that open-landscape type of space, the stuff that’s represented in usually not-very-good films, where there is smoke in the distance, they all get together with the
mayor and have a word about what that could be…

We're very bad at computing where religion comes into this, where things that are difficult to get hold of come into this, when in an Art History lecture somebody tells you that the hat in The Arnolfinis is like Prada to the power of a million. We're so bad at seeing that that hat or that cloth is a Mercedes Maybach or whatever it's called. So the fact is that's what humans do, they keep giving belief to things (we've talked about that already). I haven't read any anthropology, I really regret that I haven't because, although maybe it would damage me now, it would be really interesting to find out more about all our behaviours. I've done - we've all done - odd things which have broken some social code, and we've felt quite strong and weird about it as we've done it, and sometimes we might have done it belligerently, but sometimes we might have had to do it for some other reason. It's only when those things happen that you register how codified it all is. So I suppose what I meant about the bricklayer is that it's a class predicament. I do know some people who build brick walls but I just sound like an overeducated prat if I start talking about 'your gorgeous walls.'

You have to know somebody very well to start that, because for a start bricklaying is an all-weather activity, it's very, very tough - I'm not being romantic about it. But I think what is made is wonderful and is a kind of art, because it's got all that complexity in it.

**AD:** I think you could spend a long time trying to respond, that's such a complex question, so maybe we should move to another question.

**Audience:** At Tate Liverpool some of the work made me feel uncomfortably precarious, it gave me quite an emotional feeling, the feeling that something's not quite right, do you know what I mean?

**RW:** Yes [laughs]. Most of my life.

**Audience:** [continues] Is that what you do: just sort of move things about and say: 'That's it, that feeling's not quite right, therefore, it is right'?
RW: I think that’s a really nice question. I like heights and I like the danger of heights. I’m not a climber or anything, but I’ve noticed over the years that I’ve done a lot of things up ladders and on tops of walls, and I’m not a clever-dick, steeplejack person but there is something very odd, which is sort of... ‘Sexual’ is a bit strong, but it is a very powerful thing, that thing. One of the primary things about being alive is trying to stand upright, which is why the act of falling over is really quite a catastrophe, and as you get older it becomes a real catastrophe, because bits fall off. I’ve had a sequence of major falls in foreign cities. One of them was because I had an erotic thought about my wife in Tirana on a staircase, and I fell the whole fucking staircase on my arse, and it was a stone staircase and I can tell you I didn’t have the thought at the end of the stairs (but I was still holding my camera which I was trying to keep off the floor). But the act of falling and losing the thing we have taught ourselves to do in evolution - to stand up - is catastrophic. I fell over last May in Rome in the traffic, and the traffic drove round me [laughs]. What I just said is because you’ve reminded me that these things are quite strong. I don’t set out to illustrate anything, but the first time I put a piece of glass in the wall and made it stick out longer than seemed like it was a very good idea, the next morning I took the bracket out from underneath and I got a real buzz. And there are lots of things in our lives that are like that: it’s like getting away with something. If you’re a good
painter, that’s getting away with some gesture or an overloaded brush, which is not my talent. There are lots of things that are somehow exhilarating, but maybe the exhilaration is precisely that I have that feeling, and it’s very nice for me to hear you say that it has the possibility of projecting the inverse back to somebody I’ve never met before, but maybe it’s because we’re all going to die.

**AD:** That, we can’t argue with. Another question?

**Audience:** Just a quick question: you were saying earlier that you don’t seek objects, you find objects along the way. How do you react to the ‘happy accident’ within your work? Or does that not happen?

**RW:** Oh yeah, it happens. That’s the first thing I would say to any student is: ‘this is an art school, none of us know what we’re doing, you are speculating. You were good at drawing at school or something, you’ve come to an art school, some of the people teaching at the art school were like that once, they don’t know what they’re doing, but we could have three years of good fun and see how much luck we could make.’ And in fact, you discover that some people in art school make buckets of luck. It’s not a creepy thing at all; they manage to set up enough risk and then they get payback from it, and it’s a fantastic pleasure to watch. I think I’ve got so good at it I really must trust it. I’m not showing off, I’m just astonished at the level… I really love a good coincidence. Obviously, as you get older you must get more coincidences, as you’ve got more stuff to work with, but some of the things that happen to me make me think: ‘oh, come on!’ But that for me is a little engine, I can’t then go off and make a little model of the coincidence - that’s not what happens - but it’s good for the spirit.

**Audience:** Why is it, do you think, that Giovanni Anselmo has been such a big influence on your work?

**RW:** Oooh. Well, it’s so funny because when people ask me about influences… I read something - probably only this morning - which was that influences are good as long as you can absorb them, which I thought was a really nice description. Influence just means flow, the ‘flu’ in influence just means flow. Where it’s not something that is stuck on you, but it becomes part of you, then that’s good. I realise I’ve got no books about Joseph Beuys, no books about Arte Povera. And if I did have them, I’m not even sure I would look at them. There is a Matisse show in London at the moment which is plying a very specific little argument about his relationship to his childhood in this dreary North French town that made very high colour textile, and there’s a proposal that it just stained him in some way, well at least that’s how I read the argument. But that’s true for everybody. Everybody grows up in a cultural moment, and there’s a noise, you could say, in the background, and that never goes away, so you have to do something with it. So those Italians [the Arte Povera artists] are probably ten years
older than me. I sort of knew that the smell of Richard Hamilton and a certain kind of ‘Poppishness’ didn’t have any air in it for me to breathe, not because I even knew what it meant to be second generation, it just didn’t seem like I could grow anything in that, and I’m sure that it’s as silly as that when you’re a young artist, because you’re just looking for somewhere where you can speculate: ‘if I put something in here and water it, might it come up?’ So Anselmo isn’t somebody… In fact I missed the show in Birmingham. It’s a bad answer but it’s an attempt to answer.

**AD:** Well on this very modest note – ‘an attempt to answer’ – I’m going to thank you very much for your willingness to give up your uneasiness with Surrealism momentarily for our pleasure, and I would like to thank our audience for coming to this talk. Thank you all very much.

---

1 The talk and interview were transcribed by Kerry Cundiff.

2 Wentworth is referring to the conversations with myself as I was trying to convince him to come up to Manchester to give a talk for the AHRC Research Centre for Studies of Surrealism and its Legacies (AD).
In the final room of An Aside Lothar Baumgarten’s feathered bread rolls scattered on the windowsills were poised to fly, as their title Mosquitos in Kopula (1969) suggests, like insects around the other exhibits. Unconstrained by the doughiness of their bodies they conveyed the apparent lightness of curatorial touch that was present throughout the entire exhibition. Indeed, the lack of any additional literature on my visit (barring the catalogue itself) that might be read in conjunction with the objects of the display bore witness not only to the success of the show but to the ease with which it might be traversed. Devoid of accompanying notes, or ‘informative’ panels of text, spectators could meander throughout the Camden Arts Centre weaving their own connections between, and frameworks around, the objects of the exhibit. Conversely, the accompanying catalogue provided a compelling narrative of chance and missed encounters that encompassed and exceeded the boundaries of the physical exhibition.

**Surrealist at a distance**

In the catalogue Dean writes of her dilettante approach to the surrealist thesis of objective chance -- the genesis of her serendipitous curatorial methodology is exemplified in the retelling of her encounter with another of Lothar Baumgarten’s works included in the exhibition, Da gefällt’s mir besser als in Wesfalen, El Dorado [There I like it better than in Westphalia, El Dorado], (1968-76) [Fig. 1]. This slide and audio show of ambiguous images mixes man-made and natural objects, producing involuntary sculptures of found materials from the Rhine river swamps that fascinate and disconcert simultaneously. On meeting Dean, Baumgarten recounted an anecdote of seeing a dog in this swamp that he subsequently discovered belonged to Gerhard Richter. Furthermore he recognised resonances between the other artist’s work and his own, pointing in particular to a self-portrait by Richter that appeared to Dean as ‘effaced, or lost, beneath a deep dark forest undergrowth.’ This web of connections fortuitously encompasses many of the themes of the exhibition -- self-portrait, landscape, object and journey -- in addition to providing the accidental process (which led to the inclusion of another of Richter’s works) that gave Dean the form of the exhibition, one of connections, encounters and coincidences, an organic development of content and context.
To describe this as a process of objective chance is to take this surrealist concept at face value. André Breton retrospectively described objective chance as ‘the geometric locus of … coincidences,’ and posited it as the problem of how ‘phenomena that the human mind perceives as belonging to separate causal series come so close together that they actually merge into one another’ producing a glow ‘so bright, albeit so ephemeral.’ 

Dean’s reading of the subject is right to emphasise the pragmatic nature of her relationship to this thesis. The processes of chance that contributed to the curatorial decisions do not produce bright glows of light, sparks derived from the decontextualised juxtapositions of works. In fact, these processes almost operate in opposition to this marvellous effect as the works derive meanings directly from both their original contexts and nudging up against each other. They are instead definitely ‘asides’: that technique of turning from the fictive illusion of the stage to the audience to impart information not previously visible, but present and essential to the plot.

**Ritualised practice**

Dean’s inclusion in the catalogue of a description of Baumgarten’s temporally drawn-out process of collecting his images from the banks of the Rhine also draws attention to another of the exhibition’s themes; that of repetition and ritual in the construction of the artwork. Baumgarten’s slide images were collected over a period of years during early morning walks. In a more controlled and precise methodology the montaged images of Yvan Salomone’s watercolours of the empty industrial spaces of container ports, which took over an entire wall...
of the show, were made within the strict confines of a self-imposed regime [Fig. 2]. He painted one a week taken from his own photographs, each work the same format and size (104 x 145 cm) and devoid of human figure or movement. This emphasis on process was visible too in the inclusion of Roni Horn’s work, the double self-portrait Were 4 (2002). Here one could almost see the painstaking progression of the work with its successive stages of the application of pigment to paper, the cutting of the paper into geometric shapes and the joining of the edges of paper together, defined further by the use of pencil markings and producing a result almost topographical in its detailed appearance. In Sharon Lockhart’s film NŌ (2003) we were further presented with compulsive process as a male and female farmer raked up twelve piles of straw and then began the procedure of undoing their work as they reintegrated the piles back into the landscape. This piece, possibly the weakest of the show, acted most successfully as a space from which one could be prodded gently on some of the motifs that had now established themselves in the form of landscape, circularity and repetition. However, these returns spoke less of compulsion and more of circularity, laying bare the labyrinthine connections between the works.

Figure 2: Yvan Salomone, 3.0604, 2004, watercolour on paper, 104 x 145 cm. Courtesy Praz-Delavallade, Paris and Baronian-Francey, Brussels © Yvan Salomone, 2004

Object and landscape

Interspersed with this emphasis on process was the more evident relationship between object and landscape. The scale of Yvan Salomone’s watercolours of industrial spaces placed in
relation to Paul Nash’s exquisite but tiny black and white photographs of natural subjects threw into high relief the presence of the artist at the work. Just as Salomone cannot contemplate painting an image that he has not experienced personally, Nash’s images appear as ‘found’ in the landscape and connected to the pair of painted stones by Kurt Schwitters as a sympathetic manipulation of still life. In another room (the one populated by copulating mosquitoes) Thomas Scheibitz’s over-sized decorative, wrapping-paper Star (2002) [Fig. 3] responded to Fischli and Weiss’s rubber facsimile of a Moroccan pouf, Marokanis Sitzkissen (1987), drawing attention to geometric pattern and innate compositional structures.

Figure 3: Thomas Scheibitz, Star, 2002, brass, 83 x 83 x 40 cm. Courtesy the artist, Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York and Produzentengalerie, Hamburg. Private collection.

This play of object and intervention found its apotheosis in the most outstanding piece of the show, the transfixing film by Rodney Graham of a pristine 1930s German typewriter, slowly being covered by a layer of snow/flour, Rheinmetall/Victoria 8, (2003). Part film and part meditation on medium, it was necessarily afforded its own large space in order to accommodate the outmoded projector which formed not just the apparatus of the work but a constituent aspect of its subject. The visibility of this huge machine, its movement and its integral noise, emphasised the mechanical nature of the subject, the physicality of the machine required to project it and, by extension, explicitly pointed to its complement, the
natural fall of snow and the reliance on the somatic affect of the persistence of vision to complete the experience.

Self-portrait

The other obvious constituent to the exhibition was the inclusion of self-portraiture from the aforementioned work of Horn to the delicately androgynous sculpture by Beuys. The additional heads that populated the exhibition in the form of the companion bust of Beuys by Walter Brüx and the *Deux Têtes* (1983) of Marisa Merz reinforced the doubling of imagery and idea within the exhibition and the persistent interplay between representation or recognition of the self and the other. That is to say, the whole exhibition could be read as self-portrait or at least an autobiographical retelling of a journey of discovery undertaken by Dean herself. The connections between the works and her own are explicitly drawn in the catalogue. Take for example the collective contribution of Horn, Raymond Hains (whose ravaged poster work hangs adjacent to Horn’s piece), Peter Fischli and David Weiss who all reference Jules Verne, whether through, respectively, other works, anecdote, or the kinetic sculpture *Son et Lumière, Le Rayon Vert*, 1991. The latter is a deceptively simple sculpture consisting of a revolving turntable which tilts a plastic cup causing it to roll in a repeated pattern while a flashlight projects a green or red ray through it and against the wall. In referencing Verne’s book *The Green Ray* as mediated through Eric Rohmer’s film of the same name, the work draws attention to issues of light, horizon and journey. These themes are all too familiar from Dean’s own film and flick book *The Green Ray* and surface in many of her other pieces.  

Indeed, with Breton’s *Nadja* cited in the reading list that accompanied the notes for the exhibition it is perhaps useful to think of the show not simply as a narrative of fortuitous encounter or eagerly willed chance occurrence (Breton’s search for the presence of BOIS-CHARBONS comes to mind). Instead it is perhaps *Nadja’s* and the catalogue’s parallel autobiographical narratives that reveal the surrealist import of the exhibition, as exemplified in Vincent Kaufman’s recognition that ‘Its [Surrealism’s] kernel is an autobiographical project’.  

As Dean herself points out in her introduction ‘I have begun to recognise myself: my human psyche, not so much in the work of others -- although I have always believed that art works best when it responds to the autobiography of the viewer -- but in the connections between them.’ This is an exhibition where the trace of the artist/curator is insistently present in these connections but where there is also an excess of space for the viewer to insert themselves and their own stories.

Samantha Lackey  
University of Manchester

---


3 See Tacita Dean and Jeremy Millar, Place, London 2005, 166.

4 In particular I am thinking of her series of works Disappearance at Sea, which were inspired by the story of Donald Crowhurst who faked accounts of his around-the-world sailing attempt. For example, the film Disappearance at Sea (1996) charts nightfall as seen from a lighthouse, alternating between the view towards the horizon and the play of light caused by the bulbs themselves.

5 Vincent Kaufman, ‘Life by the Letter,’ trans. Caren Litherland, October 64 (Spring 1993), 99. An additional account of the importance of the surrealist ‘autobiographical narrative generated by the condemnation of the novel,’ is proposed in Dennis Hollier, ‘Surrealist Precipitates. Shadows Don’t Cast Shadows,’ October 69 (Summer 1994), 124.

6 Tacita Dean, An Aside, 4-5.
When Aube Elléouët took the fateful and difficult decision to auction her father’s collection she was certainly aware that it would be controversial. The dispersal of such a magnificent collection, the sum of a lifetime’s endeavour by one of the pivotal figures of twentieth-century culture, might seem to many an ultimate sacrilege.

There is undeniably something inexpressibly poignant about visiting the home of those departed who have helped to found our modern sensibility. In the homes of Freud, Keats or Victor Hugo, for instance, retained as museums, one feels a sense of direct communication with their ghosts. Breton’s presence was even more apparent in those cramped rooms in which he had spent most of his life and for anyone who ever visited the apartment in rue Fontaine it is impossible not to feel a sense of loss in thinking that the collection no longer exists. There was never any chance of Breton’s apartment being similarly maintained and made open to the public, however: its situation made that impossible. And the idea that it might be recreated in another place, or turned into a museum display, was enough to turn the stomach, because this wasn’t simply a collection; it was also an atmosphere, an ambience that was inseparable from those mysterious rooms which you entered after ascending the rickety stairway that led to them. The mess the Beaubourg made of the ‘wall’ bequeathed to them is powerful evidence against any will to use Breton’s life to satisfy the theme park mentality of today’s world.

In the circumstances, it seemed far more appropriate for the collection to be dispersed, and Aube no doubt made the right decision, or at least one of which her father would have approved. It would have been nice to think the collection could have been given away or destroyed in a kind of potlatch, but the auction at Camels Cohen was probably as close to a potlatch as one could imagine in this materialistic age. At least, it might be seen to stand as a protest against one of the strangest obsessions of our age: the desire to hold on to everything at all costs. Breton’s collection was at least well known, documented and catalogued. What has been lost is a material presence, a loss that simply marks the passing of time.

That bringing together such a collection for an exhibition can nevertheless be both moving and revelatory is shown by the exhibition in Tokyo of the collection of Takiguchi Shūzō (1903-79), the most significant figure of surrealism in Japan. Takiguchi’s collection was in its way as remarkable as Breton’s, as well as being similarly excessive in its extent. When Takiguchi died, his widow entrusted his books and manuscripts to the safekeeping of the Museum of Modern Art in Toyama, the west coast seaport where Takiguchi was born and lived during the latter part of his life. She kept the rest of his collection with her until her own death in 1999 (although one presumes she did not, like Elisa Breton, maintain the house as a living
museum). The collection has now been brought together again in an exhibition curated by Sugiyama Etsuko held first in Tokyo and travelling later to Toyama. Its real value lies in the quality of the evidence it provides of a life as veiled from history (even in Japan) as Breton’s was open and inseparable from the surrealist movement he founded (surely the true import of that house of glass Breton insisted he inhabited). The history of surrealism in Japan is as inseparable from Takiguchi’s life as surrealism in France was from Breton’s, but this is a very different history and Takiguchi’s life sheds light on only one facet of what is a complex story.

Japan was one of the first places to respond to the surrealist message. It had already been well prepared by a flourishing Dadaist movement and a Surrealist Group was established in 1926. The Manifeste du surréalisme was published in Japanese translation in 1929 and Takiguchi himself published translations of Aragon’s Traité du style in 1929 and Breton’s Le Surréalisme et la peinture in 1930; in addition, the Second International Surrealist Exhibition was held in Japan in 1937, travelling from Tokyo to Kyoto and Osaka. Surrealism has since remained a persistent, if shadowy, presence in Japanese culture. Miryam Sas claims that it made a greater impact in Japan than anywhere else except France, which is probably not strictly accurate (surrealism was surely more significant in Belgium and Czechoslovakia), but such a claim does highlight the neglect the Japanese surrealists have suffered.¹

In Europe we lack a comprehensive history of Japanese surrealism and it is difficult to discern its overall traces (the section devoted to Japan in Gérard Durozoi’s History of the Surrealist Movement is almost wholly inaccurate even in its broad strokes).² The two books we do have – Véra Linhartova’s Dada et surréalisme au Japon and Miryam Sas's Fault Lines: Cultural Memory and Japanese Surrealism – are both excellent (in fact Sas’s book is exemplary in the effort it makes to understand surrealism in its own terms rather than, as too many commentators do, impose received ideas on it) and give a glimpse of the extent of surrealist activity in Japan and the way it has entered and affected Japanese sensibility.³ Given the complexity of surrealism in Japan, however, these two books do no more than provide starting points for our understanding of it, as both authors acknowledge.

From the little I have been able to glean, and what this exhibition above all tends to confirm, is how ‘individualist’ surrealism in Japan has been. The impression is that we see here less a surrealist movement than, in the felicitous phrase used by Alain Joubert to describe surrealist activity in France in the 1970s, ‘surrealists in movement.’ That is, we see a whole range of different artists responding to surrealism in individual ways, but without establishing the common ground necessary to found a basis for collective action. Even though a whole series of ephemeral groups have emerged over the years, none seems to have made much of a collective impact and the most important figures of Japanese surrealism (Takiguchi, Nishiwaka Junzaburō, Okamoto Tarō, Kitasono Katsue, Yamamoto Kansuke and Fukuzawa Ichirō) seem largely to have worked independently of one another. We might be tempted to
think that, where in Europe, surrealism was founded in a revolt against western individualism, the Japanese attraction to it realised its basis in an individual revolt against the collectivist structures of Japanese society. This may, however, be an ethnocentric conjecture, and in fact one of the themes Miryam Sas perceives in the surrealist poets she discusses is an assault on the concept of the individual that is if anything more acutely focused than in Europe. On the other hand, this assault on the individual took a particular shape in Japan, being simultaneously a protest against (or resistance towards) the incorporation of Western concepts and a re-assertion of Japanese traditions. It is in this respect that surrealism assumed necessarily an ambivalent position within the unfolding of modern Japan, representing a revolt against the strictures of both traditional and modern forms, while simultaneously offering a means for their reappraisal.

Surrealism entered Japan in the same way as futurism and dadaism, as an aspect of European modernism. However, it needs to be understood not as a reflection of a European form (the hoary old cliché about the Japanese genius for imitation certainly does not apply here) but as a response to the challenges of modernity and the violence it unfurled across Japanese society. For most of the Japanese attracted to it, the value of surrealism lay in the possibilities it offered to question their position in the world. It was, however, a surrealism largely perceived in aesthetic terms: it offered them tools they could use to chart out a new directions for their art and poetry, but it did not take the form of an adventure of the spirit as it did in Europe. Japanese surrealism appears never to have had the quality of negation that characterised it elsewhere, which no doubt partly reflects the fact that Japan in the 1920s was not suffering the sense of demoralisation that afflicted Europe. If anything it was in the opposite position (even Japanese dadaism was largely a positive movement) of being optimistic about the future but not knowing which direction it should take. As a result, for most of those drawn to it, their commitment to surrealism was subject to the vagaries of fashion and most ceased to consider themselves surrealists once it ceased to be fashionable.

Takiguchi was the exception. Surrealism entered his life in a violent way, causing him to question all of the things he had until then taken for granted. Miryam Sas emphasises this point, quoting the critic Tsuruoka Yoshihisa that ‘Unlike Kitasono and the others, [Takiguchi] as a prerequisite for his acceptance of surrealism, had to pass through a state of spiritual turmoil, as a highly personal experience.’

This sense is certainly borne out by the exhibition, which reveals Takiguchi as a tireless magnetiser of energies throughout his life and indicates that while a sustained group may not have formed around him, he inspired (and was himself inspired by) a wealth of writers and artists throughout his life. Certainly, the collaborative aspect of his work is much in evidence throughout the exhibition. In fact, Takiguchi’s life can doubtless be told in terms of a series of encounters with both Japanese and European artists. He made works in collaboration with

© Michael Richardson, 2005
artists in both the West (Joan Miró, Sam Francis, Antoni Tapiès) and Japan (Abe Nobuya, Nonaka Yuri, Okazaki Kazuo), and also collaborated with musicians, notably the composer Takemitsu Toru.

Perhaps the most striking of these collaborations was that with Miró. Takiguchi had written the first ever monograph on Miró in any language in 1941. The two men met in 1958, when Takiguchi visited Europe and Miró later appears to have visited Japan on more than one occasion. On display here is a strange found object that Miró created for Takiguchi [Fig. 1] and several paintings he constructed around poems by Takiguchi, which raise the question of the extent to which communication was being effected across languages (not only between Japanese and Spanish, but also between those of the poet and the painter). Of course, there is always doubt as to the extent to which such collaborations are genuinely communicative rather than simply two artists combining their work, but one does get a sense here that as he responded to Takiguchi’s poems (in Japanese script), Miró was responding at a different level of interaction than when he illustrated — say — Jacques Prévert’s poems. Of course, in Western eyes, kanji characters, even though not understood, always have a greater visual impact than alphabetical letters, but there is a feeling in this work that Miró was responding to Takiguchi’s script in a way that went beyond such a seduction of the exotic.

During his 1958 journey to Europe, Takiguchi went to both Spain (where he met not only Miró, but also Duchamp and Dalí) and Paris, where he paid a long anticipated visit to Breton. Takiguchi had been in contact with Breton from the early years and, in the dedications he made to Takiguchi in the books he sent to him, Breton constantly regrets the distance that kept them from meeting personally. Despite the cultural and geographical distance between them, the two men seem to have had a rare rapport and Takiguchi must have felt at home in that rue Fontaine apartment as ramshackle and congested with objects, paintings and books as his own home.

In many ways, though, the presiding spirit of the exhibition is Marcel Duchamp, who seems to have exerted a fascination not only over Takiguchi, but also over those Japanese artists with
whom he worked or whose work he collected. Takiguchi himself seems to have been fascinated over a long period with the play Duchamp made on identity, something which carried over into the work of some of his friends such as Arakawa Shusaku, Nakanishi Natsuyuki, Akasegawa Genpei, Goda Sawako, and Tsubouchi Tazutada. With Okazaki Kazuo, Takiguchi also made a kind of table based on the principle of Duchamp’s Rotoreliefs. The inspiration here is certainly very different from the way we have come to think of Duchamp in recent years, as the enemy of painting and father of conceptualism. In this exhibition we are made aware of the extent of Duchamp’s presence as a surrealist, as the weaver of enigmas which serve to bring our existence into question and raise complex questions about the nature of identity, not simply in a personal sense but in its questioning of the very nature of objects and the material world.

Takiguchi was especially fascinated by the personality of Rrose Sélaivy, with which he played on several occasions. Seeing the way in which Japanese artists of the 1950s and 1960s responded to the challenges set up by Duchamp’s work makes us all too aware of the poverty of imagination revealed by those more recent Western artists who have used the example of Duchamp’s work as a pretext for conceptualist exercises in redundancy.

Takiguchi’s own main art works were a series of decalcomanias. These intense, complicated works function more like visual poems than paintings, each one having a pungent taste that brings to mind the meticulousness of traditional Japanese poetry. He also used a range of other techniques to make drawings and designs in ink, as well as some appealing objects, which are often presented in the form of intimate gifts to spiritual accomplices.

Most of the artists and poets Takiguchi associated with were not formally surrealists, but these associations functioned by means of communicating vessels to extend and deepen the idea of surrealism in Japan and give evidence of the contagious and energetic quality it had over a long period of time. Takiguchi’s sensibility was that of a poet finely attuned to the mood of the times. He appears never to have stood still but to have been quietly and unobtrusively present in twentieth-century Japanese culture and, principally through him, surrealism seems to have run often imperceptibly through contemporary Japanese culture like a vein, but without having taken a specific shape as a movement or an idea.

Michael Richardson
Waseda University, Tokyo

‘Brecht for beginners’


In 1965, John Cage is said to have spent a whole evening trying to convince George Brecht not to leave the United States. As it turned out, Brecht did not heed Cage’s arguments, and his move to Europe would turn out to be permanent: after Rome, he went to the South of France, London and Düsseldorf, before settling in Cologne where he has lived since 1971. Whatever Brecht’s reasons, his move very probably contributed to his progressive marginalisation. A prominent figure in early-1960s New York, where he was associated with Neo-dada, happenings, Fluxus and Pop, Brecht would take some distance from the artworld, becoming increasingly reclusive – so much so, that the Ludwig Museum in Cologne has had to beg the artist for a long-awaited retrospective for years. The very thorough **George Brecht Events: A Heterospective** is finally providing a welcome opportunity for his work to be reappraised. The significance of Brecht’s work is also celebrated in the catalogue which, in addition to two excellent essays by the curators and some of Brecht’s key writings, includes a ‘reflections from artists and friends’ who include Richard Hamilton, Robert Morris, Lawrence Weiner, Allan Kaprow and Claes Oldenburg. This section echoes the ‘Collective Portrait of Marcel Duchamp’ by artists (including some of those just cited) and critics included in the catalogue for Duchamp’s 1973 retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York—Brecht himself was invited to contribute a text, which has in turn been included in his own retrospective catalogue. If the 1973 exhibition served to consolidate what has since been termed the ‘Duchamp effect,’ a ‘Brecht effect’ still remains to be explored. Austrian artist Erwin Wurm recently listed Brecht, alongside Duchamp, as artists whose ‘secret art’ he loves, and there are, undoubtedly, plenty more out there who would readily agree. What is it, then, that makes Brecht’s ‘secret art’ so significant?

**From Chance to Choice**

Cage was Brecht’s teacher at the New School for Social Research in New York in 1958. Like many of his classmates, who included Al Hansen, Allan Kaprow and Dick Higgins, Brecht was no professional musician – he was in fact, at the time, working full-time as a research chemist for Johnson & Johnson’s. The relations between art and science would naturally emerge as an early concern of Brecht’s, as his 1957 text *Chance Imagery* demonstrated: there, he brought together his interests in Zen, probability theories and quantum physics, to explore the significance of chance processes in art (his discussion includes an analysis of the way chance is mobilised by dada, surrealism and Jackson Pollock). At that time, Brecht was creating paintings using chance effects. Included in the exhibition are two beautiful 1957 *Chance Paintings* made from ink-stained bed sheets that seem to have been folded and unfolded to create random patterns (a technique that Paris-based painter Simon Hantaï would
independently develop from 1960, and expand to great effect throughout his career). If Brecht would gradually become more critical of science, his vision of art as ‘research’ (best embodied by the notebooks filled with ideas and sketches that he has kept since 1958) betrays his early training. Brecht's patents for menstrual tampons, filed during his time at Johnson and Johnson’s, have been included in the show at the artist's request – all the artworks in the exhibition, they seem to suggest, are simply other kinds of inventions.

In Chance Imagery, Brecht was particularly interested in the ‘chance event’ as ‘a selection from a limited universe’ of possible results.³ It is not surprising in this context that Brecht would have been instantly attracted, during Cage's classes, to the composer’s definition of sounds as ‘events in sound-space.’ Brecht operated a twofold transformation of Cage’s definition: on the one hand he focused on the single ‘event’ rather than the (sometimes simultaneous) combination of ‘events’ in Cage’s compositions, and on the other hand, he expanded Cage’s definition to encompass any activity, whether it produces sound or not. For Brecht, the main characteristic of an event was that it occur in time, and such an event could only be isolated from the field of experience through notation. Since sound was deemed incidental to the event, musical notation was no longer appropriate. This is why Brecht developed his ‘event scores,’ verbal instructions which anyone is invited to perform. As the title of the retrospective exhibition suggests, this notion of the ‘event’ would be the basis for his most interesting work, and constitutes Brecht’s most important contribution to contemporary art. What the event scores allowed, Brecht would remark in the 1965 postface to Chance Imagery, was ‘the resolution of the distinction between chance and choice’ which he had been preoccupied with in his early work. Leaving behind chance techniques such as die and random number charts, Brecht discovered that simply leaving performers to make the decisions usually controlled by the artist was an equally, if not more, effective way of introducing chance into an artwork.

In a letter to Brecht reproduced in the catalogue, critic and friend Jill Johnston suggests that the artist’s preoccupation with music can be read as an indirect challenge to, and identification with, his father, who was a professional flautist but died when Brecht was a child. Brecht has himself suggested that the 1962 event score for Flute Solo, which invites performers to ‘assemble’ and ‘disassemble’ the instrument, was inspired by a reported incident during which his father took his flute entirely apart in protest against an exhaustingly demanding prima donna whom he was supposed to accompany in an opera duet. While some of Brecht’s scores involve such traditional instruments and poke fun at the rituals of classical music, many invite less theatrical performances, drawing on everyday objects and activities. The 1961 Three Lamp Events, for example, reads:

• on.
  off.
• lamp

• off. on.

These are of course ‘events’ that we all perform a great number of times a day. The act of turning a light on, as Liz Kotz has pointed out, also happens to be one of the ‘generic examples of physical “events”’ given by scientific discourses such as physics. 4

It is however absolutely unnecessary to know anything about Brecht’s biography to perform his scores. Indeed, Brecht is not only very reluctant to give any information about himself, but some of his scores embody the most open, and at times enigmatic, instructions ever to be given by either a composer or a visual artist. For the concert of his scores for the exhibition’s opening (staged by Brecht’s Fluxus colleagues Larry Miller and Alison Knowles), the audience was provided with the scores instead of a programme, and it was often a delightful challenge to match the performances to the instructions, as when Larry Miller performed the instruction ‘table’ (from the score Table) by reading out the periodic table. The interpretations are endless, and can encompass everything from poetry to slapstick, from theatrical entertainment to boring routine. Unlike a traditional musical composition, there is no ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ way to perform a Brecht score. In this context, it is not surprising that during his stay in England Brecht felt close to composer Cornelius Cardew and musician John Tilbury, whose compositions and involvement with the amateur Scratch Orchestra represent one of the most radical attempts to develop a democratic type of experimental music at the time (I participated a few years ago in a London performance of Cornelius Cardew’s 1968-71 The Great Learning with a friend who was not only unable to read music but also sang off-key).

It is difficult to find other works that come closer to both Umberto Eco’s theory of the ‘open work’ and Roland Barthes’s celebration of the ‘death of the author’: Brecht combined Eco’s interest in experimental music with Barthes’s acknowledgement of surrealist automatism as an initial blow to the authorial voice, and simultaneously extended the groundbreaking lessons of both Duchamp and Cage. And all of this, Brecht achieved with an economy and humour that makes any theorisation (including this one) inevitably sound too wordy, too clumsy, too controlling.

**Between Object and Event**

At the same time as the scores, Brecht developed the implications of the event in the visual arts in his first solo exhibition, in 1959, which was appropriately titled Toward Events. Visitors to this groundbreaking show were invited to handle objects included in various works displayed on the wall or on tables. One of them, The Case was meant to be ‘approached by one to several people and opened,’ its contents ‘removed, and used in ways appropriate to their nature,’ before closing it again [Fig. 1]. Spelling out the connection between scores and
objects, the invitation explains that ‘(t)he event (which lasts possibly 10-30 minutes) comprises all occurrences between approach and abandonment of the case.’

Figure 1: George Brecht, *The Case*, 1959. Case with objects. 23 x 47 x 33 cm. Private Collection, Courtesy Gagosian Gallery, London. Photo: Lothar Schnepf, Cologne © George Brecht

Brecht’s belief that ‘every object is an event and every event has an object-like quality,’ ‘(s)o they’re pretty much interchangeable’ was derived both from his musical background and the lesson from quantum physics that ‘there’s no great difference between energy and matter.’

This conception allowed Brecht to shift from scores to objects and back again. After conceiving the works in *Toward Events* as a new kind of object-based events, Brecht started
making objects based on existing scores. In the 1961 group exhibition *Environment, Situations, Spaces (Six Artists)* at the Martha Jackson Gallery in New York, Brecht exhibited a realisation of his *Three Chair Events*. Three chairs were shown in different places in the exhibition: a white wicker chair under a spotlight in the gallery, a black one in the toilet and a yellow one just outside the entrance of the gallery. In the score for *Three Chair Events*, Brecht uses the term ‘occurrence’ again, suggesting this time that ‘sitting on a black chair’ and finding a ‘yellow chair’ are two such occurrences: the events are thus framed above all by perception. As he explained, ‘[t]he score is an event; so is finding an incident of it.’ In the exhibition, the chairs indeed existed as artworks only when they were noticed as such by a visitor (in the Cologne retrospective, the chairs are similarly casually placed around the galleries). The score and realisation point to an extremely significant shift in Brecht’s conception of the event: if finding or noticing ‘an incident’ of the event is an event in itself, then a score need not involve any action at all, it can be performed simply by *perceiving* something in our environment.

While his 1962-63 objects involving chairs, stools, ladders, tables and clothes trees can also be matched with a series of object-based event scores written between March and November 1962, in some cases works were produced *before* being scored, rather than being based on existing instructions. The objects in this series are much more minimalist than the ones in *Toward Events*: instead of aiming to provide viewers with a variety of sensory experiences, they are carefully staged encounters of a spare selection of visually attractive elements – wooden furniture is painted white, decorative patterns are kept to a minimum, and objects placed on the chairs or tables clearly contrast in colour or material with the monochrome backgrounds against which they sit [Fig. 2]. This style – which ties with Brecht’s preferred design for his event scores, which allowed the bullet-pointed words to stand out clearly from the empty white space of the card – became a staple of Brecht’s subsequent score-realisations.

When in 1963, Brecht turned to canvas as the support for other score realisations, he maintained a strictly monochromatic palette. This time, Brecht literally transformed the canvas into scores by applying words on the canvas – the humorously titled *Action Paintings* bear words (plastic letters pasted and painted the same colour as the canvas) from his event scores such as the 1966 *No Smoking, or Starting/Stopping*. In addition to these score realisations, Brecht became interested in the canvas as an object and planned to create a monochrome painting inscribed with the year in which it was made – this was 1963, two years before the first of conceptual artist On Kawara’s well-known *Date Paintings*. In later score realisations, Brecht freely combined both words and objects, to create rebus-like juxtapositions.
Figure 2: George Brecht, Clothes Tree, 1962-63 (1973 realisation). Clothes rack with caps, umbrellas and coat, 193 x 70 x 70 cm. Private Collection, Courtesy Gagosian Gallery, London. Photo: Lothar Schnepf, Cologne © George Brecht.
Fluxus and Co.

Brecht’s collaborations with Dick Higgins on performances, with Robert Watts on the Yam Festival, and with Watts and Alison Knowles on a collective project entitled The Scissor Bros. Warehouse, constitute a kind of prehistory of the network of artists that George Maciunas would gather shortly under the umbrella of Fluxus in 1962. Indeed, the periodical V Tre, started by Brecht in 1963, would be taken over one year later by Maciunas as the official Fluxus journal (renamed CC V Tre). Moreover, Brecht’s scores and his objects would be crucial references for Maciunas. Developed in parallel by other artists such as La Monte Young and Yoko Ono, Fluxus scores would become the basis of Fluxus concerts around Europe from 1962 onwards, and consolidate the Fluxus aesthetic of minimal ‘neo-haiku’ performances, opposed to the more painterly ‘neo-baroque’ happenings. In addition, Maciunas was no doubt inspired by works such as The Case as he started to package Fluxus scores and other objects in the numerous Fluxboxes and Fluxkits which would become the staple of Fluxus publications. Brecht also anticipated Fluxus’s interest in the distribution and dissemination of art through alternative circuits. ‘Shouldn’t scores be simply published in the newspaper, or available on printed cards or sheets of paper, to be sent to anyone?’ he asked as early as 1960. The Village Voice, to whom he proposed this, unfortunately declined, but display cases in the retrospective are packed with mailings of scores and other ‘events’ by Brecht to his friends. Maciunas’s Fluxus publications, advertised and sold through mail order, were thus expanding Brecht’s project on a larger, international scale.

Brecht’s involvement in Fluxus is relatively downplayed by the exhibition, which only dedicates a small room to Brecht’s Fluxus objects. Another collaborative relation only glimpsed at in the show is the one Brecht had with Robert Filliou, as they created together the ‘Centre for Permanent Creation’ in Villefranche-sur-Mer in the South of France in 1966. This joint project, and the cross-pollination between the two artists’ works are interesting topics in themselves. Particularly Fillou-ian in my eyes are Brecht’s Land Mass Translocation projects, developed after he had moved to England in 1968 and become, one can easily guess, so depressed about the weather as to conceive ‘the idea of moving England closer to the Equator.’ Brecht’s maps chart other imaginary translocations such as the 1969 Wedding of Miami and Havana.

Between ‘Junk’ and ‘Conceptual’ Art

Over his career, Brecht’s work was included in two major exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art in New York: the 1961 The Art of Assemblage, which celebrated the trend for junk collages and assemblages, and, nine years later, the well-known exhibition of conceptual art, Information. In fact, Brecht’s work occupies a unique position within both of these two historical moments. On the one hand, Brecht’s were, I would argue, the most radically ‘conceptual’ of all Neo-dada objects, environments and happenings: instead of suggesting the flow of everyday life, like Rauschenberg’s combines, for example, Brecht’s works of the time
literally capture the temporal dimension of the perception and experience of the material world. The key to this difference lies in Brecht's letter to William Seitz on the occasion of *The Art of Assemblage*: his works, Brecht suggests, are less assemblages than 'arrangements' – a term which emphasises the musical, temporal dimension of the event rather than the 'clusters in space' by artists in the exhibition. This conception of the arrangement is what allowed Brecht to take the glue out of the assemblage and make objects more fluid and more open than anything Rauschenberg succeeded in achieving.

On the other hand, even Brecht's most 'conceptual' works maintain a strong link to a dada, collage-like aesthetic. A painting bearing the words 'No Smoking' (the 1966 *No Smoking*) may resemble the word paintings of conceptual artists like John Baldessari or On Kawara, but, unlike them, Brecht avoids falling into the self-referential by emphasising the relation to the event score and the vernacular language of everyday signs found in so many public spaces. Brecht became increasingly interested in language and shared with Bruce Nauman an interest in the humour and puns contained in idiomatic expressions. Where Nauman relied on the abstract relation between caption and photograph (of someone polishing the word HOT to act out the expression 'waxing hot' in his 1966-67/70 *Eleven Colour Photographs*), the performativity of Brecht's 1975 *Pinning Down the Meaning*, is enacted in a collage where the word 'meaning,' written on paper, is pinned in a glass case, and the whole expression is spelled out in a handwritten label below. If Brecht was included in Lucy Lippard's well-known survey of conceptual art, he remains very much of a generation that did not embrace the photographic medium that would 'dematerialise' conceptual and performance art taking it further away from sculpture and painting.9

Brecht's oeuvre as a whole oscillates between these poles of the conceptual object, and the object-based concept. Walking through the exhibition, however, one is struck by a distinctly material turn in his work: in the *Book of the Tumbler on Fire*, started in 1964, objects are frozen in cotton and in framed compositions behind a glass window; a delicate glass tumbler, so dear to Joseph Cornell, betrays Brecht's relation to the older American artist, which he had tried to downplay in his earlier works.10 Despite the mobility suggested by the conception of these objects as pages in a book, the event-aspect of Brecht's work seems to be stifled: in *Venus Paradise, Exhibit 25*, coloured pencils are suspended in a cotton field, tips converging towards the blank outline of an eagle doomed never to be coloured in [Fig. 3]. This stilling of the event seems to have been prefigured by a group of works in which objects including a tennis ball were suddenly halted in plaster. The most Cornellian boxes in the exhibition, however, are surely the 1976-79 *Crystal Boxes*, which contain precious-looking crystals surrounded by die, amulets and other symbolic or metaphoric objects, and in some cases, texts in a variety of languages. At the time, Brecht started learning Chinese in order to read Buddhist texts in the original.
Shortly before the *Crystal Boxes*, Brecht had created two series of works addressing most directly the fetishisation of objects of museum displays. Both the absurd 1975 *San-Antonio-Installation*, which displays real and invented objects inspired by the eccentric French detective novels by San Antonio, and the more melancholy 1976 *Brunch Museum*, which celebrates the imaginary figure of a scientist called ‘Brunch,’ humorously explore the fluid boundaries between fiction, history and biography.

![Figure 3: George Brecht, Venus Paradise, Exhibit 25, Städtisches Museum Abteiberg Möchengladbach. Photo: Ruth Kaiser. © George Brecht](image)

‘Borderline’ Art
If Brunch, as Alfred Fischer suggests in the catalogue, acts as a stand-in for Brecht, then the *Brunch Museum* cannot but conjure the retrospective show that the artist shunned for so long. Beyond the problem of fixing the authorial voice of one of the most self-effacing artists around, the difficulty faced by Robinson and Fischer lay in conveying the musicality, or ‘event-ness’ of Brecht’s work in a fixed, static display. With the exception of *Solitaire*, none of the objects from the *Toward Events* show can now be handled by the viewer (the owners did not wish it), and the chairs, tables, and clothes trees scattered throughout the show inevitably stand out as works, rather than merging almost seamlessly with their domestic environments.
The scores, casually pinned up throughout the show, pointed to the dimension that perhaps only the concert of Brecht’s works, which guests of the opening were made to attend before seeing the exhibition, could make visible. Watching the concert, I found myself unable to tell when and where one work stopped and the other ended, so discrete and commonplace some of the activities are. This sense of confusion lingered as I attended the more spectacular outdoor performance of one of Brecht’s early works – his 1959 Motor Vehicle Sundown – enacted on Cologne’s central cathedral square by a large number of vehicles, including vintage cars, a jeep, motorcycles and even a fire truck. A crowd gathered, attracted by the unexpected grouping, but wandered rather aimlessly as the drivers of each vehicle performed such mundane activities as blowing horns, opening and closing doors, operating windscreen wipers and switching headlights on and off: there was no apparent order, no climax, no clear beginning or end. This was one of Brecht’s most Cagean works, and the simultaneity of the actions and large-scale organisation required to stage the performance are uncharacteristic of Brecht’s later, more minimal, work, but the deliberate sense of uncertainty about the difference between the artwork and its surroundings is certainly one of Brecht’s most radical achievements. Writing about a work by Brecht involving a table and two chairs, Donald Judd suggested that it belonged to a category of works that ‘barely exist’;¹¹ Robert Morris, whose work Judd included in this category has unsurprisingly been more enthusiastic about the fact that ‘(s)itting on Brecht’s white chairs one can forget about them.’ Maciunas heralded Brecht’s works as emblematic of Fluxus’s desire to create impersonal works that would eventually lead to a ‘time when fine art can be totally eliminated and artists find other employment’ as people realise that these events are everywhere around them.¹² Whether or not he shared Maciunas’s political agenda to work towards the disappearance of professional art, Brecht undoubtedly strove to achieve what he called a ‘borderline’ art, ‘an art verging on the non-existent,’ ‘at the point of imperceptibility.’ At his best, Brecht has been a virtuoso of such ‘borderline’ art: this is why he can be seen as a forerunner for the many contemporary artists exploring the limits of what I would like to call the ‘almost nothing.’

Anna Dezeuze  
University of Manchester

A substantially shorter version of this review was initially published in Art Monthly, 291, November 2005.

Unless otherwise stated, all quotations in the text are from the retrospective exhibition catalogue: Alfred Fischer and Julia Robinson eds., George Brecht Events: A Heterospective, exh. cat. (Cologne: Museum Ludwig and the Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2005).


This opposition was made by Maciunas, cf. Ken Friedman, ‘Getting into Events,’ in *The Fluxus Performance Workbook*, special issue of *El Djarida*, 1990, 6.


For more about this project, cf. Steven Harris, ‘The Art of Losing Oneself without Getting Lost: Brecht and Filliou at the Palais Idéal,’ *Papers of Surrealism*, 2 (Summer 2004).


I have written about Brecht’s relation to Cornell in his early work in ‘Unpacking Cornell: Consumption and Play in the Work of Rauschenberg, Warhol and George Brecht,’ *Papers of Surrealism*, 2 (Summer 2004).


**Magritte et la photographie, Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels**  
February 23, 2005 - May 15, 2005


Exhibitions of René Magritte’s works have largely focused on his paintings. Recent examples include the Magritte retrospective in the BA-CA Kunstforum in Vienna and the Fondation Beyeler in Basel. The display of other artistic media has been treated as not quite integral to Magritte’s artistic creation, and his photography has, until now, not received any extensive curatorial and critical attention. *Magritte et la Photographie* at the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels, organised in collaboration with the Fondation Magritte and curated by Patrick Roegiers, changes all this. It forms one in a series of exhibitions to commemorate the 175th anniversary of Belgian independence and 25 years of federalism.

This exhibition is a monumental effort comprising over 330 photographs, leading the viewer into the labyrinthine exhibition space of the Palais des Beaux-Arts where unexpected turns reveal ever new rooms offering photographic, filmic and recorded reproductions by, and of, Magritte. The staccato rhythm of over 330 ‘snapshots’ which, due to their small size, draw the viewer in close, is slightly broken, either by projections of short films displayed on large projector screens, or by the showing of larger photographs, capturing and maintaining the curiosity and attention of the viewer.

Magritte’s short films are shown throughout the exhibition space, and the rooms are accompanied by different sound recordings which sometimes mix and overlap so that one can hear in one room the irrepressible chattering of Georgette and René Magritte, Louis Scutenaire, Marcel Mariën, Christian Dotremont, E. L. T. Mesens, Marcel Broodthaers, Paul Delvaux, Achille Chavée and others, together with the *Six Gnosienennes* by Erik Satie which echoes from another room. As with the photographs, we see not only Magritte’s films but also films of him by other directors such as Christian Bussy, Patrick Roegiers, Jean Dypréau and Lucien Deroisy. These short films use surrealist juxtapositions and overlappings of Magritte’s paintings and photographs to produce new, hybrid artistic images, smudging the boundaries between reality and representation, between painted fantasy and photographic reality, and ultimately between the artist and his œuvre.

This exhibition is a curatorial masterpiece, allowing the viewer to trace the all-too-often neglected, serious and deeply philosophical side of Magritte’s œuvre as an engagement with the transience of life and with an artistic (self-)awareness of mortality. Magritte’s photographic work extends the negative and negating character of his painterly productions, expressed in the titular sentences of his artworks such as ‘Ceci n’est pas...’ in *La Trahison des Images*
(1928), and 'Je ne vois pas...' in *La Femme Cachée* (1929), where negation is enforced by the similarity of the surrounding photographs to death masks. This negation returns in Magritte’s photomaton images, in his so called *portraits manqués*, failed portraits, which deny the subjectifying glance of the model, showing only the back view, the missing or hidden face or a reflection in a mirror, and also in Duane Michals’ photographs of Magritte, taken on a visit in 1965, two years before the artist's death. In one image Magritte is shown sitting before an unfinished sketch of *Ceci n’est pas une pipe*, the glaze of his eyes reminiscent of the empty focus of those of a corpse. Another photograph of Magritte taking a nap on his sofa has, in its exhibited version, in a premonitory manner, a caption stating: 'Merci Monsieur Magritte, dormez bien.' The artist is, in Michals’ photographs, repeatedly represented as threatened by his own absence, already resembling a cadaver, an image of himself.

Magritte’s absence is asserted throughout the exhibition – the photographs, films and sound recordings here are unable to commemorate or capture being, and repeatedly reveal their real character, namely the relentless assertion of reproductive media which try to capture or record the absence of life, confirming Roland Barthes’ famous photographic *punctum*: ‘the lacerating emphasis of the *noème* (“that-has-been”) […] the *punctum* is: *he is going to die*. I read at the same time: *This will be* and *this has been*; I observe with horror an anterior future.
of which death is the stake. Here, the various recording media are revealed as a trace of something or somebody which is absent, a ghostly trace of the past through which the once present can only be experienced in and through its very absence. The danger of these themes becoming melodramatic and superficial is, in Magritte’s art and photography, counteracted by his awareness of the deadly seriousness of the joke, and the comedy of the deadly serious: the most trivial of holiday snaps and amicable fooling, the most everyday of gestures, become also the most tragic and moving manifestations of the Barthesian punctum.

The exhibition repeatedly asks the question (also the title of one of the rooms) Où est Magritte? – a question double in its meaning, suggesting the self-awareness of Magritte’s œuvre as a remainder and a reminder of its vanished creator. As the title of the exhibition, Magritte et la photographie implies, it concerns not only those images taken by Magritte, but brings them together with others of him taken by other photographers such as Georges Thiry, Christian Gibey, Daniel Frasnay, Maria Gilissen and Shunk Kender. These represent Magritte through his own artistic devices of doublings, impossible juxtapositions, sometimes echoing his painterly themes, suggesting and enforcing a major concern of Magritte’s œuvre, namely the artist’s melting and eventual absorption into his own work, an absorption which is closely bound to the vanishing of the artist. The vanishing here reveals not just a simple retreat from life into death, but also a retreat from life into art, in which art becomes the memory, the trace through which we can view the artist. Perhaps this is also the point where biography has to be transcended, where biography can no longer help to comprehend an artist, and the artworks’ conceptualisations need to come to the fore – conceptualisations which no longer allow for linear narratives, but lead, like this exhibition, into intricate juxtapositions and mysterious labyrinthine structures.

The photographic evidence of Magritte’s life in this exhibition does not stop with his death in 1967, but includes photographs such as those by Roger Dyckmans, taken in 1967, of a life without Magritte. In these, Georgette is shown surrounded by images of herself, indices of a creator who no longer exists. One of the most powerful of these is Georgette seule avec une toile inachevée de Magritte, showing Magritte’s widow standing beside his final canvas. The painting revisits the theme of La jockey perdu, the lost jockey in the woods (Magritte’s first surrealist painting in 1926), implying Magritte himself as the lost jockey. Reality, in this photograph, has been transformed into representation: even Georgette barely maintains her position in the photograph, squeezed out by the artwork beside her. All that remains are signifiers of Magritte, precisely because Magritte is no longer: a brush, glasses, the doubling of the image of the lost jockey in the glasses, all familiar elements of Magritte’s œuvre. Even the last stage of Magritte-the-person is shared with the artwork; metonymies of Magritte collapse into the metonymic convention of the artist as his work. In Dyckmans’ posthumous photograph, the image has taken over and replaced the artist’s own being, which is lost in his work, becoming itself unworked. The inevitably unfinished painting in the photograph only
marks the last stage of the artist, not of his perishing, but of his final absorption into the artwork.

This and other photographs in this exhibition seem to function less as records of Magritte’s life than to be concerned with how art and representation replace reality. This is also evident in the gradual loosening of the biographical and chronological approach of the first couple of exhibition rooms, entitled Photos de Famille and La conquête de Paris. Later rooms are titled La peinture est un objet qui s’aime quand on y pose le regard (‘A painting is an object that you look at and fall in love with’) and La Peinture à l’épreuve de l’image fixe (‘Painting tested by the fixed image’), the surreal images demanding different sequences, no longer sustaining divisions between biographical document and artistic creation.

The exhibition is accompanied by Patrick Roegiers’ catalogue Magritte et la photographie, which is now available as a book in English. Translated by Mark Polizzotti, it is the first Anglophone publication on Magritte and photography, examining more than 200 previously unpublished photographs from Magritte’s personal collection and tracing some features of his painterly œuvre back to photographic processes and practices. For example, Magritte’s photographic self-portraits are offered as key elements in the establishment of the iconic bowler-hatted figure in his paintings. While it offers a thorough biographical overview and a wealth of previously unpublished photographs, the book also returns the photographs from their artistic, philosophical realm (insisted upon in the exhibition) to a more mundane function in which photographs are primarily and conventionally records of the artist’s life. The biographical information given here reiterates information already available in many of the classic biographical writings on Magritte such as those by Suzi Gablik or David Sylvester. Even though it aims to attract a more popular audience, its analysis would have benefited from addressing recent theoretical discussions of Magritte such as those offered, for example, by Ben Stoltzfus and Silvano Levy.

Titles of photographs such as La Mort des fantômes (1928), L’Ombre et son ombre (1932) and L’Apparition (1935) suggest avenues of theoretical inquiry that remain unexplored. There is no reference to the theory of photography – no account is taken of scholars such as Barthes, Susan Sontag or Walter Benjamin, nor is there any allusion to important explorations of photography and surrealism, such as Rosalind Krauss and Jane Livingston’s seminal L’Amour Fou, or to recent theoretical developments in the understanding of surrealism. Instead of tracing photographic influences on Magritte, Roegiers attempts to establish Magritte as sole creator of his works. This is particularly evident in his noting that Magritte used an Agfa Synchro box camera without a timer, which means that somebody else took the pictures when Magritte appears in the image. Such a significant finding, however, does not lead to an exploration of Magritte’s problematisation of authorship, but to comments such as: ‘No matter! The person who pushes the button or focuses the lens is far less
important than the own who devises the composition. The same goes for the person who makes the print, especially when we’re dealing with a photo booth picture.°

Roegiers tries to establish a coherent narrative of Magritte as the sole author of his work, despite asserting that: ‘Belgian Surrealism was above all a collective activity.’ Even if they are not by him,’ he argues, ‘in many cases these shots can be considered Magritte’s photos: he directed them in his mind, planned the situations, arranged his own placement in the viewfinder.° This desire might also explain why several pressing questions are never addressed: which photographers influenced Magritte’s photography? What are the relationships between his photographs and those of other surrealist photographers? What are the surrealist concerns in his photography? How do his photographs affect our understanding of Magritte as an authorial figure? The book offers, in places, an over-romanticised version of Magritte’s life, which is sanitised to a level of respectability doing justice neither to Magritte nor to his relationship with Georgette. Further simplifications occur in the referential slippage between the Brussels Surrealist group and the ‘Belgian Surrealist group.’° Belgian Surrealism resists being seen as a unified, coherent whole. It was divided, exploring and being marked by the differences within its own history, and between Flemish and Walloon traditions and identities. Such differences triggered the formation and re-formation of different groupings such as the Brussels Group, the Rupture Group, the Hainaut Surrealist Group or the Haute Nuit Group. There is therefore arguably no such thing as the ‘Belgian Surrealist group.’

However, Roegiers’ attempt to establish a biographical understanding of the artist is broken and deconstructed through its own identification of the ‘perishing of Magritte’ by analysing his clothes as signifiers of his self-presentation. These, according to Roegiers:

...envelop, adjust, protect, and dissimulate. Magritte the person is absent; he exists only through his garments. Banal to the extreme, the exact copy of a copy, as neutral as Belgium itself, the dark three-piece suit represents an exemplary will to pass unnoticed. Transparent in its simplicity and yet impenetrable, reliably playing its own part, the uniform makes him disappear behind the disguise of Mr. Everybody, even as it allows him to laugh, ‘You’ll never know who I am!’

This not only counteracts the insistence on biographical explorations, but also adds another layer to the theme of Magritte as always already absent, to Magritte’s absorption into his œuvre. It seems that Magritte returns (perhaps precisely at this moment of Roegiers’ recognition of his non-return): ‘We don’t know what he’s thinking, who he is, what he feels, or what he believes. The same as everyone else, this faceless man is a perpetual stranger.’ And this leads back to the exhibition’s concern, to possibly the most capturing and touching attempt yet to ask the question ‘where is Magritte?’, which is answered with the double-logic of ghosts: ‘everywhere and nowhere.’


8 Roegiers, *Magritte and Photography*, 120.


The many colours of black bile: the melancholies of knowing and feeling

Mélancolie: Génie et Folie en Occident

Mélancolie: Génie et Folie en Occident, by Jean Clair et al., Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Gallimard, Paris, 2005, 504pp., 59 euros

Jointly organised by the Réunion des Musées Nationaux and the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, this exhibition on melancholy comes as a timely follow-up to another landmark exhibition curated by Jean Clair at the Grand Palais in 1993 - L’Âme au Corps/Arts et Sciences.¹ The nearly three hundred works on display seek to reassemble a more specific aspect of the relations between body and ‘soul,’ telling the Western history of melancholy from antiquity to the present. This enterprise seeks to enrich the landmark histories of the ‘saturnine affliction,’ its iconographical and cultural readings by Erwin Panofsky, Raymond Klibansky and Fritz Saxl.² The bulky catalogue is indispensable to make sense of this hugely complex and ambitious project.

Rarely would one find a happier, yet more perverse affinity between the subject of an exhibition and floating perceptions regarding the current state of social and political affairs in the countries where the show takes place, France and Germany. There is a great deal of public talk in Britain – frequently with an unmistakable tinge of glee – about the malaise in French politics and society. This exhibition unapologetically accepts and celebrates this phenomenon, implicitly addressing the perceived impending social and economic transformations in Europe. The evidence from the outstanding press package and website is eloquent. Georges Minois’s amusing panegyric of melancholy, in an interview on the website, is brimming over with a telling impatience towards all champions of the imperative ‘duties of happiness,’ and ‘the society of consumption and immediate satisfaction,’ and towards all those ‘compulsively happy people’ and ‘optimists by command’ – all evidently ‘superficial spirits’ whose ignorance renders them all the easier prey to the democratic form of melancholy, i.e. depression.³ The present exhibition offers, for Minois, the antidote to this: it serves as a therapeutic platform of recognition and reassurance to the thousands of people depressed by the failure to accomplish this impossible model of happiness. Jean Clair evokes a similar sense of fervour: ‘the decline of ideologies of progress, the failure of political utopias, the worrying development of the power of science and the emergence of religions which have nothing to do with the charity of the judeo-christian traditions’ (!) together with ‘the million-time repeated slogans for a positive society’ inexorably ‘produce everyday millions of depressed.’⁴ This is an odd agenda for maverick politics, which is nevertheless a recognisable part of the French political establishment. However, in the face of even odder steps to render
grumpiness, complaining and malaise in the workplace a breach of contract – a German company in Leipzig has in fact just enforced similar measures – one cannot help but sympathise with the cause of these embattled scholars. Going against the tide, Clair and his colleagues insist that it is in this historically-defined experience of melancholy – which acquires, for them, the dimensions of a primal, anthropological and a-temporal event – that the ‘grandeur’ of modern man lies. Living by this malaise and reflecting on it are the only possible therapies: ‘it is this malaise of life that gives us the reason to live and the passion to create.’

The visitor to the exhibition is, on the one hand, astonished and, on the other, bewildered by the heterogeneity of the phenomena encompassed by its version of melancholy. The definition of this state remains deliberately vague and ranges from pensiveness to grief, from mourning to frenzy, from paralysis to violence and from torpor to delirium. Permanent states and passing moods, ephemeral moments of introspection and daydream and entrenched scenarios of suffering and agony are all used as markers of melancholic temperament. There is a lot of evidence in the sumptuous and detailed exhibition catalogue that naturally supports, and, more paradoxically, challenges this sweeping definition.

**From reflection to the cycles of torpor and ecstasy**

The first room of the exhibition – the antique history of the visualisation of melancholy – is a fitting introduction to the dilemmas and the ambitions of the show: the essay contributors repeatedly, and rightly, recommend caution, aware of the fuzzy reductions that the porous boundaries between passions, emotions and melancholy might encourage. Here of course Aristotle’s ‘Problem XXX’ and Hippocrates’s definitions of the symptoms and dangers of ‘black bile’ (the ‘μέλαν-χολή’ at the root of melancholy) feature strongly. As Jackie Pigeaud emphasises, the first definition of melancholy as such, as well as its association with genius, are primarily medical. The bronze statue of Ajax is celebrated by the organisers for the way in which it introduces the also archetypical pose of melancholy (head propped on hand), an iconographic thread that runs through the entire exhibition. Yet the special gem of this room is the funerary stele of Damocleides of the fourth century BC, depicting a sailor anticipating his death by looking at the sea from the top of his ship – clearly evoking Ulysses’ nostalgia in the island of Calypso. The colours of antique melancholy seem predominantly blue, evoking the sea that divides and separates, and the sea that devours; and white, pointing to the coldness of dying and the elegant purity of funerary decoration.

The next room, titled ‘The Bath of the Devil,’ makes a clumsy leap ahead to cover the medieval history of melancholy. The melancholic pose, the tilted head propped by bent arm, is the main iconographic passport for the inclusion of rare pictures and sculpture ranging from the topic of ‘Mourning in Christian iconography’ and the apocalyptic cycles of the ‘Seven Deadly Sins’ to the lyrical poetry of the Codex Manesse and its sub-section on ‘Courtly Love.’
However, the most impressive part of this room is reserved for the iconography of early Christian monasticism and the generic stories of hermits and monks like Saint John the Baptist and Saint Anthony. This brings together a variety of excellent pictures including *Saint John the Baptist in the Desert* by Gerard De Saint-Jean (1480-5), two oil paintings of *The Temptations of Saint Anthony* – including one attributed to Hieronymus Bosch – and two dramatic engravings of those spinning whirlwinds of sin and martyrdom at the centre of which the floating body of Saint Anthony is eaten by monstrous rodents.

The tissue connecting ascetic denunciations of world/self and melancholy is the early-Christian notion of ‘acedia,’ which is retrospectively – according to a later Renaissance reading – redefined by the show as a specifically interesting species of religious melancholy. Acedia comes from the negatively used Greek term α-κηδία, and implies a singular lack of care for the self, a state of listlessness and self-torture, implicitly holding for some the promise of spiritual regeneration. Acedia allows the organisers to add some depth and adventure, some intriguing drama to the notion of melancholy. Yves Hersant’s essay on acedia retrieves with persuasiveness the fundamental ambivalence of this affliction, its perpetual almost schizophrenic passage between virtue and sinfulness, despair and rapture, ‘blindness’ and ‘vision.’ In fact, acedia and its cycles is useful to Jean Clair and his colleagues as they set out to extract melancholy from current understandings of the notion in French as an unproblematic state of paralysed inactivity – itself a historical product of the eighteenth century as the exhibition aptly shows. The decision to include in this section Max Ernst’s *L’Ange du Foyer* (*The Triumph of Surrealism*) (1937) is a happy choice not only because, as Werner Spies aptly shows, Ernst is deliberately engaged in the reinterpretation of the iconography of acedia, and different aspects of the theme of the ‘Temptations of Saint Anthony’ can be discerned in it as a result. More importantly, Spies’s analysis lays out the ironies and frustrations involved in the way in which the painting generates a vertiginous slippage between the themes of cruelty and vitality, despair and frenetic fury, destruction and political action, defeat and dance, reason and irrationality, totalitarianism and surrealism. For Spies, Ernst’s picture like other work of his from the 1930s is a rare instance of the appearance of ‘history painting’ in the context of surrealism. Indeed, the notion that this picture is a reflection of the equally split (dejected and furious) 1930s was crucial for its inclusion in an exhibition on melancholy as it provides an exciting, yet problematic bridge to modernity.

There are other problems with acedia. First of all, there does not seem to be any direct association between this ‘type of melancholy’ and genius. Acedia’s war on flesh and matter is a war on knowledge and erudition – a theme that Gustave Flaubert’s amazing book on *The Temptations of Saint Anthony* recaptured and inverted – and the final objective of acedia, a different kind of transcendence, was unrelated to genius. Secondly, this torpid denial to engage with the world was officially classified as one of the deadly sins and was routinely
condemned by ecclesiastical figures. In this strict sense, Hersant is right to protest at the way in which this distinct – terrifying and much maligned – lifestyle was later devoured by ‘the cannibalistic melancholy’ of the Renaissance, and thus forgotten. Despite Hersant’s revisionist attempts to place acedia on an equal footing with the subsequent melancholy celebrations of genius, however, there is, in fact, little connecting acedia to what humanists understood by the term melancholy. By being included in the exhibition, acedia – together with Ernst’s sense of the tragic and the morbid – loses its specificity once more; it is now devoured by a rather more omnivorous ‘beast,’ ‘Melancholy-the exhibition.’

The birth (and the demise) of the ‘cannibal’

The Renaissance ‘cannibal’ is investigated in the third section on ‘The Children of Saturn,’ which is, in fact, the real beginning of the exhibition. It is indeed with Albrecht Dürer’s Melancolia I (1514) – a systematic reflection on the idea of melancholy rather than a vague evocation of mood – that the close visual and philosophical association of melancholy with folly and genius, thinking and knowledge, feeling and painting actually begins [Fig. 1]. It is also with this picture that the ‘imperialist’ history of the concept of melancholy is consolidated. The melancholy of the imagination (for artists and architects), the melancholy of reason (for philosophers, physicians, orators, mathematicians and astronomers) and the melancholy of the spirit (for theologians and saints) are assigned their hierarchies and their own specific objects of choice. While the catalogue sets out to revise some of Panofsky’s static accounts of the picture, Lucas Cranach the Elder’s later polemical work – his Melancholy (1532) –
enriches the usual list of melancholies by introducing another neglected species: the fury of amorous melancholy, the melancholy of desire whose colour is vibrant red and neighbours with jealousy [Fig. 2].

This section of the show – certainly and justifiably the largest one – is divided into five parts covering, among other topics, the subjects of Knowledge and Time, of the typological characteristics of the melancholic person, and the cannibalistic affliction of Kronos (Saturn). One of the most exciting twists in this section is its brief excursion into the British history of melancholy, associated with the green and yellow colours in which the melancholic portraits of Elisabethan gentlemen are bathed. In Nicholas Hilliard’s Portrait of Henry Percy (c. 1594) [Fig. 3], Marcus Gheeraerts’s portraiture, William Shakespeare and Jonathan Swift’s literary work, melancholy features as the companion to joyous work, the stimulus to practical action and travelling, the discreet company of society and fashion – neither genius nor folly but plenty of life and a bloody-minded sense of survival through sheer energy and labour.
Picking up on the issue of symbols and allegory that dominated the representation of melancholy in the Renaissance – allegory is in itself repeatedly treated throughout the exhibition catalogue as a rhetorical/intellectual trope associated with the symptomatology of melancholy – this section stages a veritable museum of melancholy by bringing together a collection of objects linked with its causes and its antidotes. This tour around the messy material cultures of melancholy, indeed, a ‘cabinet of curiosities’ as it is titled, makes it one of the most stimulating rooms in the exhibition: different types of hourglasses (with grey or orange grains of sand to count the changing colours of the seconds), celestial globes, and cases of stereometric objects and geometric instruments – the typical erudite and elegant paths to melancholy; life-giving horns of rhinoceroses sumptuously gilded and encrusted with precious stones are contrasted with stripped skeletons of bats, their wings menacingly stretched; macabre funerary chests are included along with white crystal balls which kept the hands, the armpits, and other curvy parts of the body of the upper classes cool in the summer or during fits of melancholic fever. Two objects stand out above all: an elegant watch skilfully installed in the brain cavity of a human skull – a sophisticated memento mori in the form of ‘brain-clock’ that would make a gift of choice in today’s stock-exchange and office culture; and a glorious calculus, the product of a digestive malfunction, decorating the upper part of an object shaped in the form of a holy grail and swallowed up in a flurry of dizzying arabesques of golden wirework. This huge stone, an abnormal growth usually found in ruminative animals like horses, is formed around an indigestible element in the stomach as vegetative debris and mineral elements gradually accumulate, swell and cement, creating a special meeting point of two different worlds within a third, the stomach of a living animal. Hence its magical powers: two or three grains from this extraordinary growth could, it was believed, chase away grief and gloom as well as cure a series of other diseases (the grafting of the stone in the top-
end/the ‘mouth’ of a cup-shaped object plays with this notion of divine potion). Typical of the thematic juxtapositions that the show encourages are Alberto Giacometti’s *Cube* (1934) and Giorgio De Chirico’s *Hermetic Melancholy* (1918-1919), both included in this section.

Picasso’s *Death’s Head* (1943) made during the Occupation and placed at the end of the next section titled ‘The Anatomy of Melancholy: the Classical Age’ serves, according to the same logic, as a modern example in which the enduring relations between the *vanitas* theme and the subject of melancholy can be retraced. The history of melancholy in the long seventeenth century, told in this next section, feeds on numerous pictures of *vanitas* and *memento mori*, the dance of death and the macabre, religious contemplations and martyrdom. Religious didacticism and moral discipline are presented less as instruments of power than as psychological reflections on time. Similarly, the eighteenth-century section (‘The Light and its Shadows’) reduces the picturesque focus on the didactic importance and the sensual load of antique ruins to a general melancholy. In the context of the neoclassical project, the pursuit of a healthy economy of passions – the minimal and quietist physiologies underlying Johann Joachim Winckelmann’s quest for bodily perfection meant as a state of ‘noble simplicity and quiet grandeur’ – is swallowed up by the narrative of ‘sweet melancholy’ – this affect of nostalgia, drenched in the tearful pleasures of loss and the longing of restitution. Although this is not mentioned in the catalogue, the ‘sweet melancholy’ of Winckelmann’s *History of Ancient Art* (1764) had a crucial role to play in the very birth of art history both as a discipline and rhetoric.

Fuseli’s works *Silence* (1799-1801) and *Ezzelin Braciaferro*… (c. 1780) appear in the section called ‘Furious Melancholy,’ which brings up the ambiguous role of British history in the context of this exhibition. Repeatedly evoked and continually blocked, this history is treated in a series of passing and well-placed references which hold but never fulfil the promise of a new perspective. In Britain, the shift from humouralism to neurology in medicine and the cognate passage from the ideal to the sublime in art and art theory destabilised the Renaissance phraseology of melancholy. Fuseli’s work was precisely caught up in the British discourse of the sublime and its attendant, commercially profitable, sensationalism. In the pain and agony, the fury and terror, or, in the obscurity, darkness and privation evoked by Fuseli’s paintings one can no longer read the traditional themes of melancholy and the ‘pathetic.’ Rather these themes are now redefined by the sublime as offering a healthy exercise to the nerves, and a vital, rather *energising* experience leading directly to a life of sensual, intellectual and biological enhancement. In the British case of the sublime, the genius of melancholy is not affirmed, but inverted: a pragmatic and positive, self-reflexive and empowering discourse on pain and labour emerges that rendered melancholy and its themes almost unrecognisable.
Finally, this section raises for the first time the problem of the diagnosis of melancholy in the art of portraiture. The analysis of Goya’s two self-portraits and especially his portrait of *Don Gaspar Melchor de Jovellanos* (1798) show the tentativeness of this exercise [Fig. 4].

![Figure 4: Francisco de Goya Y Lucientes, Don Gaspar Melchor de Jovellanos, 1798, oil on canvas, 205 x 133, National Museum of the Prado, Madrid](image)

**Figure 4**: Francisco de Goya Y Lucientes, *Don Gaspar Melchor de Jovellanos*, 1798, oil on canvas, 205 x 133, National Museum of the Prado, Madrid

**Distributing the beast’s body parts: medicine and modernity**

The history of the nineteenth century is divided into three sections. ‘The Death of God: Romanticism’ explores the question of landscape as a metaphor of the melancholic soul, and the notion of spleen in portraiture. The tenacious presence of the melancholic element in the classical and the sublime, the Romantic and the Realist landscape — the exceptional inclusion of Caspar David Friedrich’s famous *Monk by the Sea* (1808-10) justly celebrated in the introduction — forms one of the themes. The nineteenth-century cult of ruins, another transformation of the melancholic temperament, and the related question of attitudes to restoration, are surveyed. This section is visually one of the most exciting in this show thanks to Camille Corot’s lyrical allegories of melancholy and some fascinating portraits of artists in their studios but it slips into more controversial territory when it offers a series of diagnoses of ‘melancholic figures and portraits’ from Chateaubriand to Nietzsche. Here melancholy
advances to engorge the spleen and the tragic in art, as well as Alois Riegl’s historical and age-value in architecture.

The third section of the nineteenth-century history of melancholy, bearing the evocative title ‘The Naturalisation of Melancholy,’ traces these developments in a medico-scientific context. This is a new development, according to the organisers, that marks the dangerous threshold after which melancholy is medicalised. As the catalogue essays show, this medicalisation was conducted in a serious analytical and positivist environment where melancholy was, on the one hand, split into many different specific types of conditions differently defined, termed and evaluated, and, on the other, assimilated by the notions of neurasthenia, mania and delirium, and accordingly downgraded in importance behind debility, schizophrenia, hysteria and mania. ‘Melancholy-the exhibition’ seems to aim to reverse this process, set to eat up the stray children of nineteenth-century medical psychiatry.

Both in conceptual and visual terms, the coherence and plausibility of this part of the exhibition is not satisfactory. Visual exhibits range from the sensational impersonations of ‘melancholic’ and ‘furious madness’ formerly placed at the entrance of Bethlem hospital, to painted portraits of pensive individuals by Thomas Eakins, and David Nebreda’s recent photographs of illness and self-torture. The suggestion that the physiological and medical study of expression from Esquirol to Charles Darwin and Guillaume-Benjamin Duchenne, also represented in the show, is somehow intimately related to the negative treatment of melancholy by theories of degeneration, is misleading. Apart from Goya’s Yard of a Madhouse (1794), the star piece here is the notorious Van Gogh Portrait of Doctor Paul Gachet (1890), depicting the psychiatrist as a melancholic himself. Jean Starobinski’s 1991 classic essay on the painting, extracts of which are included in the catalogue, brings a much-needed sense of specificity, rigour and confidence to this section: it offers a precise sense of modern melancholy, it highlights the un-melancholic uses of the supposedly melancholic iconography of vanitas, and provides a visual interpretation that goes beyond the diagnosis of what one simply set out to find.

Conceptually, the one-sided emphasis of this section on degeneration serves to reaffirm the show’s basic preconception that the nineteenth-century forged around the theme of melancholy a catastrophic union of medicine, politics and art. A serious reversal is indeed noted: the symptoms of melancholy stop being the marks of genius; rather genius becomes the sign of mental disease, degeneration and madness, including the condition of melancholy. This is a plausible proposition but its virtue again lies in the extent and the direction to which one is willing to pursue it. Sloppy comparisons of nineteenth-century degeneration with genetic and other types of biological research into mental illness today, or immature discussions of Nietzsche’s supposed identification with Nazism, do not help.10
Firstly, the assumption that medicine marks the line when it all started going so terribly wrong for melancholy does not sit very well with Pigleaud’s thesis, one of the prominent contributors in this exhibition, that melancholy began its cultural career in medicine and remained since antiquity a compound category placed at the frontier between medicine and culture, the body and the mind, the external body of expressive contractions and the internal body of visceral change. The eighteenth and the nineteenth century did not change the treatment of certain types of ‘nervousness’ as ‘diseases of civilisation’ and lifestyle with a broader social meaning: it analysed, deepened and re-engineered it. Secondly, the medical and naturalistic study of emotions and sensibility, and the relation between bodies, sensation, physiology and aesthetic stimulation are not identical in the history of medicine with the history of degeneration. In opposition to the latter thrive a series of more fertile and sophisticated models of physiological aesthetics that explored the dynamic, complex and non-reductive relations between mind and body in art and in philosophy alike. Thirdly, raising the spectre of degeneration actually shows how little melancholy came to matter in this period – unless, of course, we identify it with the manic-depressive cycle, a historical and conceptual confusion, which many of the contributors, unlike Laura Bossi, rightly oppose. Moreover, classic concepts of degeneration – maximal stimulation, nervous excitation, hypersensitivity, or even fatigue – were not only perceived negatively, as they were most notoriously by Nordau: they were frequently assigned in medical psychiatry distinct positive and optimistic values, featuring as the engines of mental power and health. Finally, it is abundantly clear that artists, writers and critics, for reasons of publicity, professional aggrandisement or socio-political awareness, developed their own conscious and ambitious, creative and subversive, tactical and ironic appropriations of the notion of physical, mental and sexual disease: here Aubrey Beardsley’s approach to ‘spleen’ would have added a refreshingly un-melancholic note to this melancholy-based history of the morbid in the nineteenth century.

‘The Naturalisation of Melancholy’ indeed does not touch on any of these parallel stories; it is fixed instead on the modern dichotomy between medicine and culture, genius and society, modernity and pre-modern ‘innocent’ forms of melancholy. Among other regressions, this nostalgic approach leaves one with the sense that the myth of the tortured and persecuted genius which has for some time now been taken apart by sociologists, feminists and social historians of art, is here being smuggled back into the picture as a reaction to ‘evil’ medicine.

The visual material in the ‘The Angel of History,’ the final section of the exhibition, which deals with the period from the early twentieth century to the present, is even more heterogeneous, and only Clair’s catalogue essays can really link it together. New melancholic variations shoot up and old ones persist: the melancholy of mechanisation and technology (De Chirico, Wilhem Heisse, Carl Grossberg and Heinrich Hoerle), the melancholy of immortality (Nebreda and Edward Hopper), the Faustian melancholy (Otto Dix) but also the melancholy of antiquity (from Sironi to De Chirico), the sweet melancholy of the emptied signifier (De Chirico) and the
feisty red melancholy of love and jealousy (Edward Munch). This is all seen as illustrative of Clair’s notion of History as a melancholic project, a project that is undersigned by the manic depressive perception of the present as hanging in the middle of an impossible past (antiquity) and an impossible future (apocalyptic millenarianism). An impromptu company of predecessors all dealing in direct or allegorical ways with ‘the end of history’ is put together, including Dürer’s engraving *Apocalypse* (1497), John Martin’s intriguing *The Last Man* (1833) and Eugène Delacroix’s oil sketch of the *Death of Sardanapalus* (1826-7). Hopper’s *Woman in the Sun* (1961) serves as a meditation on the vacuity of signs and objects, and as an enchanting footnote on the disenchantment of the world, and the end of history [Fig. 5]. That Clair can read in the sharp, cold and golden light of the picture the flashes of an atomic bomb exploding in front of the naked figure and in the imagination of Hopper’s contemporaries is typical of the type of astonishing, and yet almost unverifiable if not implausible, suggestions that the exhibition’s curator is frequently capable of. Nevertheless, the essays in this part of the catalogue prove to be enlightening, whether addressing the melancholy of Nazism and its relations to the ‘fetishising’ forces of Historicism, or the relations between archaism and modernity, barbarity and erudition, historical knowledge and Walter Benjamin’s ‘intropathie.’ One of the most interesting revelations in this respect is Clair’s analysis of Albert Speer’s ‘theory of the value of ruins,’ unpicking the broader implications of Speer’s decision to plan the Zeppelin stadium of Nuremberg as a ruin from the very beginning of the building’s life.17

![Figure 5: Edward Hopper, Woman in the Sun, 1961, oil on canvas, 101.92 x 155.58, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 50th anniversary gift of Mr. And Mrs. Albert Hackett in honour of Edith and Llyod Goodrich © Robert E. Mates Studio, N.J.](image)

The inclusion of the major works in this section – Anselm Kiefer’s *Melencholia* (1989), De Chirico’s *Jeux Terribles* (1925-6), and Ron Mueck’s *Untitled (Fat Man)* (2000) – perversely summarise the show’s tendency to slide so easily from the solid and the specific, to the
creative but risky, and the downright speculative. Kiefer’s lead fighter jet, combined with a stereometric glass structure, presents indeed a very interesting case of the way in which visual topoi persist while migrating and mutating; it becomes here a self-reflexive meditation on melancholy as a disease of civilisation. While De Chirico’s Jeux Terribles supports Clair’s analysis of the distinct nature of the artist’s ‘melancholy’ as a thorough critique of reason and technology, it also invites a series of interesting speculations regarding De Chirico’s ambivalent position in the fraught relations between antiquity and modernity, and art and politics in his time. Finally, Mueck’s meditative giant concludes the long series of ‘head-propped-on-hand’ poses dominating the exhibition [Fig. 6]. Throughout the show, this veritable cliché allowed a range of momentary or more stable states of introspection, as well as a plethora of different human encounters with the finitude of knowledge and life, to be treated by right as melancholic territory. A comparison between Mueck’s giant and the angel of melancholy in Dürer’s Melancholia I quickly reveals the different stories told by poses of reflection. A sceptical resolve of the mouth, obliquely peering eyes, an exuberant abundance of flesh undisturbed by surrounding objects, a direct - but not acedic - type of nakedness, and an assertive introduction of the right arm, as it intersects with the left, set the ‘fat man’ apart from other earlier melancholy figures. These differences reflect the long distance between Dürer’s humanist perspective and the modern – and other more recent, post-melancholy attitudes to finitude.

**Figure 6**: Ron Mueck, *Untitled (Big Man)*, 2000, painted polyester resin on fibreglass, 203.8 x 120.7 x 204.5, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington © Lee Stalsworth
Between Dürer and the present, the subject of thoughtfulness – of reflection and (self-) reflexivity, for that matter – and the cognate issues of science and scholarship, genius and madness, were transformed by a series of crucial shifts, first associated with the Enlightenment. The pains of genius came to be explicitly perceived as the direct road to the healthy ‘energy’ and ‘vitality’ of body and mind, and not as extraordinary accomplishments achieved at the cost of disease. Thoughtfulness acquired a fullness of its own, ‘strengthening life’ and ‘quickening [the] activity.’ Similarly, the labour of strenuous intellectual application carried with it the refreshing delights of ‘recovery’: for Burke, the delights of the sublime are also the ‘delights of convalescence’ from energising states of thoughtful application – be it the bustle of the tumultuous world of ‘party’ politics and ‘dissention,’ or the realm of ‘difficult ideas’. The previously mentioned portrait of Don Gaspar de Jovellanos – a contemporary of Burke’s, and also a statesman-cum-writer – interestingly spans these two realms of energising reflection, more plausibly depicting Don Gaspar in an empowering state of sublime passage and suspense – besides, the half-opened mouth was a usual pictorial topos at the time – than in the pose of melancholic frustration. Likewise, from the nineteenth century onwards, positive, sumptuous and useful analyses of death and the limits of knowledge – conducted in parallel in contemporary medicine and philosophy – raised a self-reflexive sense of finitude that was directly put in the interest of the notion of life and knowledge. These famous mutations – rightly called ‘inversions in the structure of finitude’ – produced critical types of understanding science and art, thinking and scholarship that frequently speak more of “a vitalism rooted in mortalism” as Foucault put it than of melancholic genius.

**Difference and similitude, judgment and the imagination. Conclusions.**

The exhibition’s self-proclaimed agenda is to reform French art history and museological practice, consciously raising issues such as the relations of the art world to cultural history, the history of ideas, the neglected importance of iconographical analysis, and the need for more thematic exhibitions. One of its most solid contributions is no doubt the courageous way in which it tackles the issue of interdisciplinarity by exploring and demonstrating the possible ways in which a broad range of scholars and professionals (from history and philosophy to medicine, psychiatry, from the history of literature to the history of religion and art) can be brought together, and encouraged to learn from each other. However, the show’s suggestion that art history is at the forefront of new tendencies of interdisciplinarity in the humanities in France may seem controversial; in the more integrated Anglo-American world of research in the medical humanities, the history of literature, and art history, such claims sound rather outdated and irrelevant. Nevertheless, it is not coincidental that among the most rigorous and ambitious contributions to this discussion about cross-disciplinarity we find two essays written by historians of medical ideas, Pigeaud in France and Noga Arikha in the United States, who have evidently benefited from a longer and more sustained academic tradition of interdisciplinarity in their field. Indicatively, Pigeaud extends a similar invitation to encourage even medical practitioners to collaborate with historians. This is all timely and apt indeed.
However, Pigeaud’s ‘unity of melancholy,’ her celebration of Anthony Burton’s dictum about melancholy ‘’Tis all one,’ does not only promote a ‘unity’ of methods. Rooted in the humanist traditions of the history of ideas, this ‘unity’ also advances a problematically ‘unified,’ namely diachronic, conception of history: ‘I will never cease to fight in defence of the unity of melancholy. As far as I am concerned, we have to place our bets on the identity of melancholy that would exist between the prostrate and atonic malady of the Moderns, the melancholy of the Ancients, and the melancholic genius.’²⁴ The homogenising principle of ‘permanence and variations’ organises the entire show in which heterogeneous themes and histories appear and then disappear like soft undulations on the melancholic seas of continuity.

The show tried to solve this uncontrollable diversity by the notion of the ‘cycle’ and the concept of ‘variation.’ The cycles of acedia reappear again, with some urgency, in the final part of the exhibition. The problem with this notion of passage between opposite states of emotion is that while it indeed fleshes out some dynamic connections between melancholy and psychological areas obliquely related to it, it is also used by the show’s organisers to facilitate a series of dangerous slippages. The way ‘Melancholy-the exhibition’ seizes hold of the ‘cycle’ allows the discourse of melancholy to colonise the different, frequently irreconcilable, forms that the problematisation of life – of being, feeling and knowing – has traditionally taken. From pain and death, torpor and ecstasy, grief and jealousy, tears and anger, unhappiness and fury, anxiety and resignation, mourning and daydreaming, abandon and violence, to intense self-scrutiny and introspection, and the themes of study and meditation; almost everything that is specific to the human condition, and characterises this anxious being ‘never at ease with himself,’ becomes fodder for this narrative on melancholy. More confusingly, the very cycle of contradictions itself is frequently treated as a melancholic symptom in its own right – like the familiar ‘manic-depressive’ cycles of today which the exhibition confusingly insists on assimilating to ‘melancholy.’ Linguistically, this process manifests itself in the proliferating use of an indefinite number of generic qualifiers to be attached to the main predicate ‘melancholy’ – melancholies can be sweet, furious, amorous, religious, rational, Faustian, technological…

Another problem with the exhibition, accurately pinpointed by some commentators on the website, mostly practitioners in the field of psychoanalysis, is related to the difficulty of talking about melancholy in the presence of the work (œuvre) – in this case, in terms of art. An art exhibition on melancholy raises the problem of sublimation; it is caught up in the paradox that it is only in the distancing of melancholy that the abundant possibilities of a work – and the delectable activities of viewing and reading – can re-emerge. Distinctions between melancholy as a debilitating experience of mourning (a disease) and as an object of discourses and representations designed to overcome it; or, again, between melancholy as a possible condition (or a general mood) and as a set of technologies (perceptions, literature,
art, medicine) offered to distance us from it, are not always clearly made in the exhibition. In these slippages between signifier and signified, the spectre of an old style of art history with deep roots in turn-of-the-nineteenth-century clinical psychiatry and biographical psychoanalysis makes frequent and unwelcome appearances. Pictures, themes, models and artists jointly or in turn become objects of easy psychological diagnoses, long dismissed by more historicised and discursive engagements with psychoanalysis.25

In this context, the exhibition becomes by definition about ‘génie et folie,’ about the genius of survival in the face of madness. Since the motto ‘melancholy is the main driving force behind creative inspiration’ is too vague, Clair occasionally introduces the more helpful Freudian notion of ‘working through mourning.’26 And this exhibition is indeed not about melancholy but about all those different ‘workings through,’ those cultural mediations that allow subjects and bodies to seize hold of situations of pain, anxiety and privation – their finitude. In a nutshell, this show is about power and its thousands of historically specific confrontations with its limits. And power is an altogether different kind of monster from melancholy; it is, predominantly, the monster of history. The exhibition indeed wavers between diagnosing the ‘essential’ psychological experience of melancholy and telling its volatile history as a culturally organised power-response.

In the face of these problems, the use of the old concept of ‘variation’ seems like an inevitable compromise, the glue that reassuringly keeps everything together. This appeal to ‘variation’ is bound to sound an obsolete note in the era of the information code – digital and genetic: we know that tiny, local and otherwise unexceptional alterations in the transmission of the code can have spiralling, catastrophic or monumental, effects in the system. Errors, interceptions, mutations, and systems sensitive to initial conditions cannot be fully evaluated with the apparatuses available to the humanist discourses of variation, which rely too heavily on the larger fields of the unchangeable. Nor can modern discourses of discontinuity – whose comparable narcissism and artificiality Michel Serres has usefully outlined – solve the problem.27 What would instead seem more promising is new ways of navigating the dangerous passages of history, of maintaining a perpetual movement between different fields and different scales of analysis, simultaneously macro- and microscopic, continuous and discontinuous, stable and unstable.

In the end, this show raises the old problem of the opposition between two antithetical styles of knowing, one based on resemblance and the other on difference. The complications of this opposition were highlighted by Burke when he agreed with John Locke that ‘wit is chiefly conversant in tracing resemblances’ while ‘the business of judgment is rather in finding differences,’ but these two powers of the mind ‘differ so materially… that a perfect union of wit and judgment is one of the rarest things in the world.’28 The exhibition offers many refreshing and witty comparisons, and many discriminating and rigorous judgements. Yet it does not
achieve a ‘perfect union’: Mélancolie is decidedly tipped towards the former – the field of ‘the pleasures of the imagination’ – and not the latter. This is perhaps the way it should be: exhibitions, especially those organised by institutions with such resources and clout, are bound to thrive when they irritate the exercise of judgement, and succeed when they produce unexpected, yet also unavoidable, resonances. Mélancolie definitely goes all the way towards achieving these tasks.

Aris Sarafianos
University of Manchester

---

1 Perhaps to underline this continuity, the long out-of-print and much sought-after catalogue of L’ Ame au Corps exhibition reappeared briefly, for the duration of the exhibition, at the bookshop of the Grand Palais.

2 I am referring here to Raymond Klibansky, Erwin Panofsky and Fritz Saxl, Saturne et la Mélancolie, Paris 2005 (first published in Britain in 1964 with the eloquent subtitle ‘studies in the history of natural philosophy, religion and art’); its French edition was reprinted on time to coincide with the exhibition. The exhibition as a whole is dedicated to Klibansky, the German-Canadian Professor of the History of Philosophy, who died recently (1905-2005).

3 ‘Entretien avec George Minois: Ce qui change avec les époques, c’est l’expression de la mélancolie,’ exhibition website, www.rmn.fr/melancolie/06Aentretiens/accueil.html.

4 ‘La Mélancolie à l’oeuvre,’ interview with Jean Clair in special issue of the series ‘Connaissance des arts,’ L’Express, 261, 21.

5 ‘La Mélancolie à l’oeuvre,’ 21.

6 ‘Entretien avec Jackie Pigeaud: Le mélancolique est lui-même et un autre dans un même temps,’ exhibition website.

7 The term eloquently compares to its opposite, the word κηδεία (from κήδοµαι), which signifies the sacred assiduity and splendour accompanying the rites of mourning and burial.

8 Jean Clair et al., Mélancolie: Génie et Folie en Occident, Paris 2005, 58.

9 The oft-quoted final couple of lachrymose paragraphs from Winckelmann’s book or his description of the ‘Torsos Belvedere’ published in the Annual Register (1765, 180-82) in J. H. Fuseli’s translation; and Fuseli’s drawing of The Artist Despairing before the Size of an Antique Ruin (1788-90) could make another persuasive case for the cultural instrumentality of the discourse of melancholy in art and art history at the time.

10 Mélancolie, 408-10.

11 ‘Entretien avec Jackie Pigeaud.’


13 See for example Roger Smith, ‘The Background of Physiological Psychology in Natural Philosophy,’ History of Science, 11 (1973), 75-123.

14 For opposition to this rash identification see ‘Entretien avec Olivier Douville’ and ‘Entretien avec Marie-Claude Lambotte’ on the exhibition’s website. For a characteristic example of the problem, see Mélancolie, 398-411 (esp. 408-10).
Sir Thomas Clifford Allbutt (1836–1925), physician, regius professor of physic in Cambridge and commissioner in lunacy in London (1889–1892) and pupil of Duchenne’s, is a brilliant example in this respect. See T. C. Allbutt, ‘Nervous Diseases and Modern Life,’ Contemporary Review, LXVII (1895), 210-231, a text that reveals Allbutt as a deserved inheritor of Burke’s medical discourse of the sublime.


Mélancolie, 351-2.


Steven Shapin thoroughly traces these passages in the history of reflection and the cultural reception of study and knowledge; numerous exciting yet neglected hybrids are described in “A Scholar and a Gentleman”: The Problematic Identity of the Scientific Practitioner in Early Modern England,’ History of Science 29 (1991), 279-327.


Mélancolie, 394 and 395.

Mélancolie, 394. See also 393 and 395.


‘La Mélancolie à l’oeuvre,’ 20.


In January 1938 the young painter and art critic Jean Bazaine co-authored an exhibition review with Maurice Morel for the newspaper Temps présent that they titled 'Faillite du surréalisme,' 'the failure of surrealism.' The occasion that instigated the review was the Exposition internationale du surréalisme at the Galerie des Beaux-Arts with its astonishing installation design, its mannequin street, objects and paintings by both the stalwarts of the movement and by newcomers such as Roberto Matta or Wolfgang Paalen. However, Bazaine and Morel were not at all impressed. Their review is an attack on several fronts, explicitly on surrealism's insufficiencies in terms of painting, and implicitly, on surrealism's failure as an avant-garde dedicated to the overcoming of traditional categories of art, to the project of representing inner life, and to the formation of a new structure for society. On the first score, Bazaine and Morel found that surrealism had failed to significantly alter the conditions of painting, avoiding the pictorial questions of colour and space and relying on an anachronistic form of naturalism to depict either preconceived dream scenarios or default literary narratives. With reference to the second issue, the review concluded with the verdict that the surrealists'

...bits and pieces constructed in an epoch of disgust ... finish up at the decorators, the ad-man's, the hairdresser's, and the fashion designer's. When one thinks of what they've done with all that they touched, with such a craving for purity, such indignation, one wants to cry out: A d'autres!

Although this criticism may seem reiterative of the standard response of many modernist painters and conservatives to surrealism, Bazaine's interrogation of surrealism's achievements as an avant-garde derives from his own efforts – as part of the group around the personalist philosopher Emmanuel Mounier and the journal Esprit – to envisage a new relation between art and society that would in turn prefigure a new regime of existence. Bazaine and Morel see the fundamental crime of surrealism as its betrayal of the original intention to produce 'the total liberation of man and the immediate social consequences that that would entail, and finally, a revelation of the unknown.' A decade later, Bazaine would admit and admire the fact that surrealism had been, in his view, the first movement to denounce the 'divorce between man and the universe that one calls in an intuitive manner his milieu.' In effect, Bazaine was not so much an enemy of the surrealist project and its works than someone bitterly disappointed in surrealism's inability to truly convert art into the authentic expression of inner life and something that would no longer be a separate, aesthetic category or activity but would belong to and be practiced by all. In his Notes sur la peinture
D’aujourd’hui (1948) the situation of the surrealist object preoccupies him for several pages as an emblem of this failure: ‘The machine that liberated monsters becomes the reassuring domestic ornament … the only instrument of unrest is blocked mid-way. Like the dream object, the object taken from the world loses its impact quickly.’ Duchamp’s bottlerack having performed its de-utilising gesture, Bazaine considered that ‘a world of hooligans and liberated slaves stirs things up usefully but is insufficient – it is a blind and anarchic force that awaits its embodiment.’

During the so-called second period of surrealism, from 1929-1939, the intertwined fates of the surrealist object and the movement’s engagement with radical left politics could not be so easily or simply construed as ‘failure’; Bazaine’s diagnosis indicates the necessity for an artist in the 1930s and 1940s to negotiate surrealism’s principles and works and to come to a proper understanding of what that ‘failure’ meant. This is a task that has renewed itself through the decades of first-hand accounts of the group and in the art historical analysis of more recent generations of students and scholars. To give a short list, a foundational narrative of failure was laid out by participants Maurice Nadeau (The History of Surrealism, 1945) and André Thirion (Revolutionaries without Revolution, 1972), in Robert Short’s essential text ‘The Politics of Surrealism, 1920-1936’ (1966) that one assigns to every undergraduate class, in books by Helena Lewis (The Politics of Surrealism, 1988), Louis Janover (Surréalisme, art et politique, 1980), or Hal Foster (Compulsive Beauty, 1993), and in a plethora of articles detailing various issues, episodes, and associations. To this substantial literature can be added Steven Harris’s book Surrealist Art and Thought in the 1930s: Art, Politics, and the Psyche, a book that makes an important and timely contribution to our ability to re-imagine the stakes of the avant-garde investment in politics during this ideologically overwrought period.

As its title suggests, Surrealist Art and Politics in the 1930s is a historical study of a limited period; within the 1929-1939 decade, most attention is in fact given to the five years from 1931-1936. The book presents a densely woven, cohesive narrative of these years based upon close readings of surrealist texts, artworks, and the intellectual sources for surrealism, situated by the author within a detailed cultural and political context. The narrative that unfolds tells in large part the history of the item (I am now reluctant to ever again refer to it as an ‘artwork’) that has often been presented as the paradigmatic surrealist production – the surrealist objet – but which has, until now, curiously lacked its own specific study. This book in no way functions as verification of all the objects produced by the group, mentions all the artists involved in object production, or sets out to provide a definitive, all-encompassing theory of the surrealist object. Instead, through the course of five solid, tightly argued chapters, Harris places the surrealist object within the immediate setting of surrealist aesthetic theory, collective action, political affiliation, and personal affectivity.
At the same time, Harris offers an account of the period that successfully argues against seeing it as characterised by decline and establishes its importance (compared to the 1920s) to the history of the movement. He does this through an attention to the politics of surrealism that deepens our comprehension of the complicated and often denigrated or only very partially understood (at least by students) alliance with the Communists, not least through the readings of texts and artworks that allows their political valence in surrealist terms to be clearly seen. Finally, Harris makes his methodological claims evident through close dialogue with primary sources - whereupon the footnotes constitute an ancillary evidential narrative - and careful historical accuracy, in order to demonstrate his basic contention about the principles and status of surrealism as an avant-garde dedicated to the supersession of traditional categories of art and life: surrealism, he shows, does not merely capitulate to the exigencies of real-world politics but makes its decisions in constant tension with both party politics and the cultural field of modernist art production.

The introduction lays out the stakes of the investigation with regard to method, where Harris quickly establishes the inadequacy of a formal or curatorial approach that describes the surrealist object merely as a kind of construction made of found articles that combine to produce poetic meaning. At the same time, he acknowledges the contributions made to the study of surrealism by Rosalind Krauss, Hal Foster, and Denis Hollier, but firmly sets himself against the privileging of Georges Bataille and his base materialism that these authors have pursued at the expense of André Breton's supposedly irredeemable idealism. By re-positioning the surrealist attack on modernist aesthetics, for example in object production or through the concept of convulsive beauty, as a de-sublimatory strategy that is absolutely central to their work in the 1930s, Harris argues instead for the strength and depth of the surrealist effort to de-sublimate the aesthetic, to break down art’s isolation and purity, and to return art to its sexual origins. In this effort, Harris re-reads and reconstructs the texts of Hegel and Freud that provided the surrealists with their ammunition, or rather, the tools by which the recasting of art as ‘research’ could eventuate in its supersession. Again, the insistence on the historical specificity of surrealism’s understanding of these authors distinguishes Harris’s approach from the deployment of psychoanalysis as a governing structure of interpretation that motivates the work by Krauss, Foster, and also, more recently, that of David Lomas in *The Haunted Self* (2000) (with crucial differences from the former two authors). Hegel’s thought, as Marguerite Bonnet has indicated, is inescapable as the guiding structure for Breton’s re-thinking of automatism that took place from 1931 and for the Prague lectures of 1935 that focus on the object; the same issue of *Surréalisme au service de la révolution* (no. 3, 1931) that displayed Alberto Giacometti’s *Boule suspendue*, Salvador Dalí’s *Objet à fonctionnement symbolique*, and Valentine Hugo’s still fascinating and disturbingly fetishistic *Objet* – all of which are discussed by Harris in his first chapter dedicated to the ‘au-delà de la peinture’ and surrealism’s relationship to the genealogy of modernism – also featured a page dedicated to the 100th anniversary of Hegel’s death. Harris likewise
emphasises the romantic and symbolist dimension that, along with Hegel and Freud, informs the counter-tradition that the surrealists build in opposition to a Kantian-inspired modernism (and here we might recall the pages of Breton’s scrapbook that present photographs of his poet heroes as well as the double-page pantheon of names in *Littérature* nos. 11-12, October 1923, that includes Hegel and Fichte).

If, as Harris states in chapter one, the imperative for the surrealists is to stand against modernism but to maintain a fruitful relationship to modernity, then a dialectical operation with respect to traditional categories of art, literature, and indeed, politics, becomes visible in the surrealists’ self-conscious avant-gardism. This perspective allows Harris, and the reader, to develop a nuanced understanding of the situation of the object as an equivocal construction that derives its attributes in part from collage, in part from sculpture, but deploys these features against their modernist origins. The specific readings in chapter one of several early and influential surrealist objects in terms of their de-sublimated aesthetics, their troubling of the stability of socially constructed regulations of sexuality and gender, their deliberate regression from métier, and their relation to the social, leads the reader into the realm of politics more strictly.

The second chapter works its way through the web of negotiations with the PCF (French Communist Party) as the surrealists attempt to merge their revolutionary supersession of modernist art with revolutionary politics without, of course, giving in to the demand to make political art. As we re-read the details of the Kharkov episode, with an interesting emphasis on Louis Aragon’s position, the intensity of the crisis of 1931 becomes palpable, when, as Harris points out, the only collective activity that was seen to be possible was anticlerical. Including an excursus into the question of Soviet policy on proletarian literature and its application in France, against which surrealism would position itself, and the discussion of the factions involved in the founding of the AEAR (the Association of Revolutionary Writers and Artists, from which the surrealists are excluded) Harris adds crucial detail and nuance to the narrative previously supplied by Short’s article. Out of this malaise of 1931, and the surrealists’ activities against the Colonial Exhibition, the object emerges within this specific political setting and moment of collective crisis as the creative activity that will offer so many possibilities: a renewed collective effort that will both re-energise the group as well as demonstrate the principle of a poetry made by all; a concrete manifestation and verification of the dream and all its elements of desire, fetishism, perversity and de-stabilisation; an anti-utilitarian and anti-aesthetic (for all its origins in collage, Duchamp or de Chirico) defiance of both rational use-value and the beauty of modernism.

The third chapter - titled ‘A delay in glass’ in reference to Duchamp’s *Large Glass* but that, for me, evoked the questions of dialogue and opacity implicit in the founding text of automatic writing, the 'La Glace sans tain' section of *Les Champs magnétiques* - is a complex one that
requires close reading. Harris takes us through an analysis of the texts that preserve the debate in the surrealist group on the functions and nature of automatism that in the end divided Breton and Claude Cahun from Dalí, Tristan Tzara and Roger Caillois. He explores in clearly structured sections the theoretical principles of Breton’s conception of the autonomy of automatism against the alternative positions of Dalí’s formulation of the theory of paranoiac criticism or Tzara’s attempt to establish poetry as a synthetic activity that integrates with politics (in the form of collaboration with the Popular Front). Within this methodological discussion the political stakes are embedded and Harris explores the way in which Breton comes to support a delay in the avant-garde project of melding art with life in order to better research its possibilities for a time when the political situation of Europe might offer superior opportunities for revolution. Harris does offer a convincing, psychoanalytically-inflected exegesis of the object as a ‘theoretical’ compensation for the delay – one that caused further dissensions and departures from the core of the group around Breton. The chapter further explores the contributions of Freud and Hegel to texts such as *Les Vases Communicants* (1932) by Breton, as well as the principles of objective humour and chance, and the significance of science as a paradigm for the surrealist casting of their activities as ‘research’ over and beyond ‘art.’

From the comments on Tzara and Caillois’s writing for the little-known, single-issue Popular Front journal *Inquisitions*, Harris then moves to chapter four to discuss the fraught moment of 1935-1936 as the surrealists re-energised their efforts to intervene in the unfolding of events in the political sphere and simultaneously presented their research into the object at the now-famous exhibition at Galerie Charles Ratton. Too many histories of surrealism separate the discussion of the politics from the attributes of the artworks and their theorisation in the texts of the group’s writers; Harris demonstrates throughout each chapter how much the interpretation of the surrealist object is structured by politics and at the same time is constructive of the surrealists’ rapidly evolving stance towards the possibility of effective political action. Via a detailed exegesis of the frightening, talismanic, mixed media *Objet* by Claude Cahun – a crucial addition to understanding her role in the movement in contrast to the isolated consideration of her photographic self-portraits – and the further theorisation of the object in articles by Cahun, Breton, Dalí, Caillois and René Crevel, Harris evokes the fragility of the surrealist effort to revolutionise art in tandem with working at a revolutionary politics that did not partake of the nationalist affirmation of culture that all parties, including the PCF, were espousing in the confrontation with the fascism. The object is primary for the group in its staging of the passage between subjective and objective, re-iterating the presence of uncontaminated thought and of a surplus of desire in subjective experience (noted in a section discussing Gaston Bachelard’s *surrationalism*, or, an excess of rationalism that floods the channel between sensibility and reason). In contrast to this surfeit of reflection and creation, Harris’s research has found only a single review of the 1936 objects exhibition (which Bazaine seems not to have seen, perhaps due to his involvement with Popular Front
cultural activities) – an indication of the marginal and estranged position that the surrealists inhabited at this moment on through to the dispersal of the group with the onset of war.

The fifth and final chapter focuses on the intensity of this turn inwards, away from the political sphere as *Contre-Attaque* imploded, and towards the seeming purity of interpretation. This immersion in the object and the dynamics of automatism is, as Harris comments, a restatement of the most radical aspects of surrealism at the very moment that Breton and the group acknowledge their failure in the political domain and when, though the object continues its rearguard battle against modernism, the surrealists turn to the defence of modern art. As with previous chapters, Harris gives a full reading of his selectively chosen objects that includes the psychoanalytic dimension that would underscore the objects’ role, at least in part, as symptoms of political crisis. This time Breton and Jacqueline Lamba’s enigmatic constructions, *Le Grand paranoïaque* and *Le Petit mimétique*, are contrasted to particular paintings and objects by Dalí in order to plot the methodological and formal differences between them on automatism. Neither position, nor indeed that of Bataille, would be able to triumph over the determining political conditions of the late 1930s and Harris concludes his book with an overview of the situation of frustrated actions, isolation, and crisis that surrealism endured whilst painfully adjusting to its historicised position as a movement of modern art.

Given the density and strength of the material explicated in the chapters however, this is not a conclusion that turns reflexively to a simple verdict of failure. The value of this study resides in the close, contextual readings of carefully chosen examples, always situated against the structuring issue of avant-gardism and its specific goals in the artistic and political domains, that succeed in giving the surrealist object a historical and interpretative depth it had hitherto lacked in art historical scholarship. As Breton demanded in 1935, the object assumes its relevancy when read ‘dans son sens philosophique le plus large.’ Harris’s re-readings of Hegel, Freud, Trotsky, and the surrealist texts themselves are dense but never heavy-handed and though often beyond the scope of many undergraduate readers, illuminate the dependence of the surrealists on their intellectual sources. Harris’s intimate knowledge of the primary sources allows his interpretation of the group’s activities to emerge from an active engagement with the problems faced by the group. Some readers may regret that his study restricts itself to only a few members of the so-called ‘orthodox’ group, but its strength is in its foveal attention to the details of a limited number of richly informative texts and objects. The activities of other members of the group around Breton may be situated in relation to the narrative established for the 1930s by Harris and although Bataille is only present in the margins, the assessment of the de-sublimatory strategies of Breton and his companion-in-arms suggests further avenues for the continuing exploration of the interdependence of the two groups.
It may also be pointed out that modernism suffers short shrift in this book for being the constant foil for surrealism’s attacks and that much work is yet to be done on the dialogues between the variant and complex modernist artists, factions, and proposals, and surrealism. This is not intended to be a criticism of a book that is to be admired for the thoroughness of the research, the considered and carefully worked-through argument, the evaluations of objects that have long been in need of a subtle presentation, and the elegant and convincing appraisal of the relationship between art and politics that is the historical legacy of avant-garde theory and practice. The status of the surrealist collective and its avant-garde ideals emerge from this study as the result of an engagement with the social sphere that is, as always, still open to critique, but that reminds us, as it did Jean Bazaine and many others in the post-war years, of the primary task.

Natalie Adamson
Lecturer, School of Art History
University of St Andrews

1 Bazaine and Maurice Morel, ‘Faillite du surréalisme,’ Temps présent (28 January 1938), 4 (my italics).


Giorgio de Chirico has remained a puzzling figure within the history of twentieth-century art. The Greek-born Italian artist was lauded by the French surrealists for his ‘Metaphysical’ paintings of 1914 - 1917, distorted scenes of deserted piazzas populated by classical statuary, faceless manikins and mundane objects. When de Chirico began to emulate neo-classical, baroque and romantic styles of painting in the 1920s, however, he was summarily expelled from the movement. Since that time, his reputation has been subject to several such shifts: once hailed as the originator of avant-garde forms of modernism, he was re-defined during the 1980s as the archetypal post-modernist. The late works in which he pastiched and copied his earlier Metaphysical paintings have starkly divided scholarly opinion, some viewing the works as a critique of modernism, others laying charges of conservatism and even fraudulence. Art historians and curators have sought to contain this multiplicity by focusing exclusively on one aspect of de Chirico’s career, usually the phase prior to his expulsion from surrealism in 1926. From this perspective, the greater part of the artist’s work simply disappears from view. Historical significance has been at the expense of a reduced and truncated corpus.

What would it mean to look at de Chirico differently, not to separate out the various strands of the artist’s career but to understand them as part of a broader field of disparateness, one which accounted for the full range of his own production, including both art and literature, and looked further afield, beyond his individual production to that of his closest artistic ally? Keala Jewell’s new book The Art of Enigma: The De Chirico Brothers and the Politics of Modernism provides the answer to this question by examining the work of the de Chirico brothers, Giorgio and Alberto (later known as Alberto Savinio) together. Following a model of double monographs seen in several recent art publications, including Matisse and Picasso, Jewell gives equal weight to both individuals, studying their artistic and literary output side by side. What emerges is a new picture of the de Chiricos that refuses easy definitions and is salutary for its protean spirit of inclusiveness and heterogeneity.

The central argument of The Art of Enigma is that both the de Chiricos’ works are characterised by qualities of multiplicity, ambiguity and mixedness. As Jewell maintains, these qualities can be interpreted as an attack on idealist concepts of unity and purity. This leads her to discuss the brothers’ work as expressions of a ‘postmetaphysical’ outlook. At first this seems an odd choice for two artists who together developed the concept of ‘Metaphysical’ art. Nevertheless, it is an astute observation, in that it captures the Nietzschean element in both their work, their critique of essentialist ideas of what is natural, heroic or divine, and their positing of such ideas as
imaginative social constructions. This perspective enables Jewell to demonstrate that impurity is central to the brothers’ practice, whether in Savinio’s bizarre bird-human hybrids or hermaphrodites; the blending of past and present in de Chirico’s juxtapositions of classic sculpture and modern utensils, or the uncanny indeterminacy of the latter’s paintings depicting piled-up gladiators. At the same time, Jewell demonstrates that such aesthetic hybridity cannot be necessarily associated with transgressive art or even progressive politics, further complicating the story. Although the brothers’ hostility to unity and purity can be interpreted as an aversion to fascist politics, the de Chiricos were not simply interested in destroying values; they had strong ideas of the Italian nation which they promoted in their work. This is a strength of Jewell’s account, in that she moves beyond the cliché that literary and artistic experimentation has a politically subversive intent or outcome, and examines the particular complexities of each individual’s aesthetic and political position within its historical and social context, concentrating on the period framed by the advent of two world wars and the rise of fascism. As Jewell demonstrates, the peculiar strangeness and alienation at the heart of the Metaphysical project took the de Chirico brothers into terrain that was amenable to the ideologies of cultural legitimation and anti-Semitism favoured by European fascism.

With the exception of the introduction and the afterword where Giorgio and Alberto are discussed in tandem, Jewell analyses the different kinds of multiplicity and mixedness in the brothers’ work separately, dealing with Giorgio de Chirico in chapters one to four, and Alberto Savinio in chapters five to seven. In the first chapter, titled ‘De Chirico’s Cultural Topographies,’ Jewell defines the Metaphysical project, carefully distancing it from ideas of occult or superstition. As de Chirico pointed out, the Metaphysical was not some airy space beyond the earth but rather the human capacity to imagine and construct the existing world. This capacity was exemplified for de Chirico by acts of transformation brought about by particular framings, such as the multiple picture frames which cascade through the space of several of his early canvases. Among the objects framed in this way in de Chirico’s work, alongside bananas, windows, curtains, T-squares and horses, are maps of terrain. Maps, like works of art, demonstrate the human ability to make sense of the world through representation. However, as Jewell points out, these maps, just like the Metaphysical pictures more broadly, are not just of any place, but of Italy. In other words, a specific cultural and geographic locality is at stake in these paintings. The Italian piazza is a privileged site for artistic creation due to the abundance of cultural wealth it contains, such as architecture from different eras of history, layered one upon the other, creating the possibility of a ‘polymorphic’ art, freed from limited or constrained viewpoints. Similarly, for de Chirico, Italy is a multiple place: as a peninsula it is both part of a larger cultural whole, yet separate from it. Jewell demonstrates that in poems and paintings de Chirico conceived of the terrain of Italy and Europe as at once the ground of identity and collectivity, while also being the strange, mysterious world of
the Metaphysical pictures, a place seen as if for the first time by foreigners. Jewell’s point is more convincing when applied to the literature than to the paintings, her analysis of which, in this chapter, remains inconclusive. However, the broader argument, that de Chirico retains the idea of Italy and Europe as privileged places to the extent that they are inherently estranged, is convincing. In this way, Jewell shows that ideas of multiplicity and relativity are commensurate with ideas of national belonging in de Chirico’s work.

Subsequent chapters pursue this argument further in de Chirico’s writing and painting. The 1929 novel *Ebdòmero* begins in a German consulate in Melbourne, and shifts through a series of ill-defined places, which all, nevertheless, conform to an imagined concept of Italian landscape. The novel thereby defines a place of multiplicity which is, nevertheless, distinctly Italian. The text also contains a new concept of warfare, one of the most powerful mythic narratives in the history of western civilization. Jewell points out that de Chirico, because of his postmetaphysical outlook, avoids the conventional ideal of the masculine warrior and the representation of agonistic contest so dear to the propaganda machines of the totalitarian state. He prefers an image of battle without victory or defeat, without victors and vanquished, avoiding the idealizing hierarchies that are normally attached to such narratives. In place of the rigid, over-inflated warrior type which populated official visual culture in Italy in the years of Mussolini’s reign, de Chirico’s novel *Ebdòmero* is populated by men who rarely fight but are engaged in constant waiting and strategizing over future battles. Similarly, in his extraordinary paintings of gladiators from the late 1920s, the warring figures are flaccid, immobile, sedentary and piled-up in heaps like stacks of objects. Here Jewell’s themes of multiplicity and polymorphism re-emerge. Instead of ideal warriors, strictly bound by rigid contours as in the neo-classical ideal perpetuated by Antonio Canova and Jacques-Louis David, de Chirico’s warriors intermingle, blend and collapse into each other. Jewell reads this multiplicity as the basis of a different, postmetaphysical warrior, who through ‘potent indetermination linked to a bountiful, diverse accumulation’ possesses a new kind of heroism, a particularly Italian one, because of its affinity with a nation whose multiple cultural histories and trajectories have been piled up over centuries of diverse civilization. She reads these pictures and the related writings as ‘postmodern texts’ which ‘might also be seen to build identities,’ concluding that the hybridity and mixedness of these images and texts are forms of cultural legitimation, a source of strength rather than national debilitation.

The second half of the book is devoted to Alberto Savinio, the younger of the two brothers. In Savinio’s work, Jewell finds themes of multipleness, hybridity and mixedness similar to those encountered in Giorgio’s work. The dancer Isadora Duncan is the subject of one of Savinio’s texts in *Narrate, uomini, la vostra storia* (1942). Duncan is presented as a grotesque, hybrid figure who runs counter to rigid gender myths. Savinio perceived the American dancer, who was famous for
her unconventional dance movements and scantily-clad, barefoot performances, as a model of an emancipated woman who is virilised, and who embodies the ideal of a mixed man/woman hybrid.\textsuperscript{9} She is also associated with the avian kingdom, being half-human, half bird. In this sense she embodies the concept of multiplicity and its association with the postmetaphysical. However, as Jewell points out, for Savinio she is also a representation of how the idea of multiplicity can degenerate into unity. Intoxicated with the ecstatic response of her male audience, Savinio has Duncan fantasize about being impregnated by numerous men and giving birth to a new race of children in the role of a primal mother. By attributing enormous power to herself in this way as a woman, Duncan falls into a trap of unity and singularity. Savinio’s allegory punishes her for this hubris, putting the blame squarely in her lap. As Jewell observes, what appears at first to be a liberating, pro-feminist celebration of multiplicity is an oppressive thwarting of social difference and empowerment. Savinio’s dream of a collective, multiple world ultimately swallows up alterity and eliminates it.\textsuperscript{10}

Chapter six examines the 1944 novel \textit{La nostra anima}, a reconfigured version of the Eros and Psyche myth. In Savinio’s text, Psyche, after she is united with her lover, the god Eros, is shocked to find that he is nothing like a human in form, being a limbless phallus with wings. She subsequently falls out of love with him and breaks off the union. Psyche in this story is also a monstrous, abject creature, a woman’s body with a pelican’s beak, huddled in a pool of slime and excrement, preserved in a waxworks exhibit curated by a Jewish doctor named Sayas. Jewell observes that the story critiques ideas of unity, from the social mores surrounding the rituals of love and marriage, to the narrative of union that underpins the ’ontotheocratic’ myth of oneness exploited by fascist dictators in the twentieth century. Importantly, she also stresses that this critique of unity is not simply an empty play with ideas, an assertion of the pointless character of culturally constructed meaning, but an earnest attempt to find the ground of a new meaning and cultural identity in a modern world where such myths have run aground. At the same time, she also points out that Savinio tends to glorify the abjectness of Psyche, because of his negative reading of feminism as preserving what he saw as a culpably idealistic dualism. Dr Sayas, on the other hand, who is presented as embodying the overly-rational and inherently deceptive world of science, is characterized as typically ‘Jewish,’ an anti-Semitic aspect of the text that undermines its otherwise democratic tone. In this sense, the monstrous narrative of Savinio’s writing has given birth to a textual monster born of racial intolerance.

In the final chapter Jewell deals with the most hybrid of Savinio’s creations, the hermaphrodite, in his 1918 prose work \textit{Hermaphrodit}. Again the figure of the Jew looms large, a protagonist of polymorphic identity and multiplicity. Once more, Savinio’s focus on the ‘other’ and difference serves to compound the structuring binaries of essentialism. The hermaphrodite of the title is the
Jew, celebrated for various kinds of mixedness and multiplicity, including those of gender (both male and female), temporality (both modern and ancient), cultural diversity (the setting of the Balkans) and internationalism (living in Salonika but yearning for Zion). Furthermore, at a certain point in the text, Savinio creates the figure of a double-sexed Jew, who gestates children in intestinal passages and gives birth through the anus. The outrageous biology of this figure is intended as another celebration of hybridity. Savinio makes favourable comparisons to Italian identity, celebrating both the Jew and Italy for their hybridity, a counter-example to the oppressive unity of totalitarian thinking. But what of the politics of this story? Jewell reminds us of George Mosse’s important work on the historical relationship between stable gender identity and the formation of nation states. Savinio’s multiple Jewish figure seems calculated to defeat that very notion. Like Jews, the de Chiricos would be savagely attacked in the extreme right-wing of the fascist press in Italy for their statelessness. But in its extreme abjectness, Savinio’s counter-example falls into the trap of exacerbating difference in a way that fails to escape the dualism of metaphysical, essentialist thinking. As Jewell reminds us, the fascists regularly conceived of Jews as inherently contradictory figures.

Jewell has asked us to look again at the de Chiricos, not either Giorgio or Alberto in isolation, but to examine their work in tandem. Through her analysis we see the unitary identity of the traditional art historical or literary monograph collapsing. We discover that the brothers closely shared certain themes and that Alberto was the originator of many ideas taken up within Giorgio’s Metaphysical art. After reading this book it is more difficult to classify each individual as exclusively a painter or an artist. Jewell has also provided a key to understanding the apparently repetitious nature of Giorgio de Chirico’s late work. In The Art of Enigma repetition is read as an accumulation of themes over space and time which embodies the value of hybridity and mixedness. Perhaps one of the most startling revelations is the re-reading of Alberto Savinio. He is assessed as an embodiment of the mixed destiny of the avant-garde project, hostile to idealism but falling repeatedly into its trap, hopeful for a polymorphic cultural future but insufficiently removed from the intolerance which underlay the fascist project. At the same time, Jewell has opened a window onto the motives behind each artist’s radical experimentation, their desire to create a new, postmetaphysical terrain upon which the monstrous gods of modernity could reign.

Anthony White
Visiting Fellow, Humanities Research Centre
Australian National University


