La Reproduction Interdite: René Magritte and Forgery

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Abstract
Money, paintings and even reality are open to forgery and, according to Marcel Mariën, have been forged by René Magritte. This essay explores the intricate routes, entanglements and developments of Magritte’s alleged forgeries as subversive strategies against his official œuvre, which he at the same time constructs and demolishes, placing the viewer as well as the reader of his biographical writings in eternal uncertainty. Drawing on theorists such as Jean Baudrillard and Jacques Derrida, these alleged forgeries will also be related to his application of trompe l’œil techniques as a way to undermine the aesthetic sublime. Through these strategies, Magritte invites comparison with his hero Fantômas where the moment of (in Magritte’s case canonical) capture becomes the very moment of his escape.

What would a mark be that one could not cite? And whose origin could not be lost on its way?¹
(Jacques Derrida)

The first monograph on René Magritte’s art, entitled Magritte, was published in 1943. Marcel Mariën wrote the introductory essay for the book and Magritte himself chose twenty images which were reproduced in colour. As David Sylvester writes: ‘There was one highly significant difference in the book as published from the book as originally planned – that all the reproductions were in colour. This was a surprising development given the cost involved and Magritte’s precarious financial position …’² Marcel Mariën’s autobiography Le Radeau de la mémoire states that the funds for this book, and for other projects, stemmed from Magritte’s production and sale, between 1942 and 1946, of artistic forgeries. Mariën cites Magritte to illustrate his relaxed attitude towards forgeries stating ‘that buying a fake diamond without knowing will cause the same degree of satisfaction [as buying a real one], due to the fact that one has paid a high price for it.’³ Sylvester has reproduced some of the forged images in question in the Magritte Catalogue Raisonné; however, there is as yet no real, substantial evidence that Magritte ever forged paintings: therefore these images will be referred to in this essay as ‘Magritte’s alleged forgeries.’

An exploration of Magritte’s work in relation to forgery evokes a ‘Magritte’ who differs markedly from the conventional art-historical establishment conception of him as a coherent, even if somewhat eccentric, surrealist artist, producer of a mostly coherent œuvre, from which his Vache period (which parodies fauvism) and his impressionist period of the 1940s, as well as other identifiable periods and occurrences such as his alleged forgeries, are regarded as mere accidents, mostly marginal to his œuvre. However, as will be argued, Magritte’s alleged forgeries, far from being extrinsic to a central body of work that constitutes his ‘genuine’ artistic production, are part of a central and wider concern evident throughout the artist’s career with issues of authorship, authenticity and, ultimately, with his avowed subversion and exposition of the fakeness of capitalist ideologies and realities. As Marcel Mariën states in that first monograph of 1943: ‘The particular point of [Magritte’s] painting … is a permanent revolt against the commonplaces of existence.’⁴ Magritte’s forgeries are part of a wider method intended to disrupt Western bourgeois capitalist ‘habits of thought.’ As he wrote in 1935: ‘My
art is only valid insofar as it resists bourgeois ideology, in the name of which life is extinguished.\textsuperscript{5} These apparently ‘marginal’ elements continually threaten to undermine and to dissemble the ‘coherence’ of the established œuvre and its canonical artistic creator ‘Magritte.’ Magritte’s alleged forgeries, like his different, often critically ignored, periods, are instances from which a much more interesting Magritte emerges.

According to Mariën, Magritte’s forgeries were produced to fund colour plates for the 1943 monograph and included, it is alleged, imitations of Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque, Giorgio de Chirico, Max Ernst, Titian and Meindert Hobbema.\textsuperscript{6} However, the first monograph of 1943 on Magritte is also interesting because it differs from the canonical and popular image of Magritte represented in exhibitions and literature on him – it neglects to mention ‘surrealism’ at all, and Magritte’s chosen images also differ from the works which might, at that time, conventionally have been included. This idiosyncratic choice was noted in a review comment by Gille Anthelme in 1943, who states: ‘There is a “Treasure Island” as strange as a tale by Edgar Allan Poe, and a “Lost jockey” which has the force of a nightmare. But the proportion of successful pictures in this choice of reproductions is small. It would not have been difficult to make a better choice.’\textsuperscript{7}

Magritte deliberately selected less typically ‘Magrittean’ images for this monograph – his ‘impressionist’ paintings are particularly prominent, occupying ten of the twenty plates and three drawings, and Mariën was specifically encouraged to write about these images. For example Magritte included his painting \textit{Le Traité de la Lumière} (1943), based on the large late Renoir \textit{Les grandes baigneuses} from c.1918-19, which initiated Magritte’s ‘impressionist’ period. Mariën elaborated on this work of Magritte:

\begin{quote}
Fired with enthusiasm, Magritte immediately went on to make other versions, including ‘The dance’ (a standing nude), and ‘The harvest’ (a reclining nude), and then concluded the experiment by taking the solution to its peak of refinement, since he performed the same transformation on Ingres’s \textit{La Source}, an ‘academic’ representation if ever there was one, by not only adorning the young girl’s body with different colours, but by re-creating the whole picture according to the technique of the Impressionists! And Nougé, who had already supplied the titles for the previous versions, was to name this last experiment, the subversive profundity of which remains as usual unnoticed by everyone else: \textit{Monsieur Ingres’s good days}.\textsuperscript{8}
\end{quote}

The appropriation and subversion of existing canons, and their re-creation through imitation or copying, a form of artistic plagiarism, all figure heavily in the named artworks – art here is not the product of a mythical creative individual, but is a ‘collective invention’ made out of plagiarism of as well as collaboration with other artworks. Magritte’s alleged forgeries are part of a ‘counter-œuvre’ existing in opposition to the official, art historical ‘Magritte’ as constructed by Suzi Gablik, Sarah Whitfield, A. M. Hammacher and others. This counter-œuvre subverts and undermines any simple summary of ‘Magritte’ as a coherent, self-consistent figure. These acts of canonical sabotage are precisely at the heart of Magritte’s art. Magritte’s œuvre pretends to offer reliable, endless repetitions of a restricted
number of iconic images and motifs, instantly recognisable. Yet there is an uncanny discord which remains, a ‘crack’ or ‘rift’ in the texture of the art historically asserted reality of Magritte as individual and as œuvre. Magritte and his œuvre, like his popular cultural hero Fantômas, masquerade as reliable icons, whilst carrying with them, at every step, the potential to disintegrate this very same œuvre and persona.

Counterfeiting banknotes

Mariën’s allegations of forgery were contested by Magritte’s widow, Georgette, in the Brussels and Paris courts. The allegations were based on citations from postcards and letters by Magritte in La Destination, which is Mariën’s collection of letters between himself and Magritte, making the reader reliant on the former’s claims about the authenticity of the letters he provides. This reliance on narrators stretches still further, since, as Sylvester explains: ‘It may well be that Mariën has not neglected to follow his mentor’s [Magritte’s] lead. The reproductions in Destination include, on the one hand the drawings within Magritte’s letters, on the other, a number of drawings unconnected with the letters, which are not actually ascribed to Magritte but are not ascribed to anyone else either and which are in a style closer to that of the set of drawings made by Mariën for Louis Scutenaire … than the style of any Magritte drawings known to us.’

La Destination seems to be haunted by the question of authorship – the first image in the book is a portrait by Magritte, which has the word L’Auteur inscribed on its left. This assertion is, perhaps ironically, mirrored or even counter-acted by an alleged self-portrait which closes the textual part of the book – is this a Magritte or is it a forgery by Mariën? Here already authorship and authority, even if not necessarily forged, are placed in limbo, are challenged, their reliability questioned. The two portraits embrace and surround the writings, like parentheses they open and close the scene – perhaps the scene of a crime, the scene of forgery.

Given Mariën’s unreliability, are we facing after all, a double-bluff? Whilst it has been established that the artworks Mariën addressed are forged, whether Magritte was their forger remains questionable. Is there a double-bluff going on – the paintings are fake, but so might Mariën’s claims be? The reader/viewer is denied a final conclusion and is left in absolute uncertainty. This notion of ‘absolute uncertainty’, however, is not something that prohibits us from understanding an important aspect of Magritte’s images – quite contrarily, it is integral to them. Negation, the ‘ceci n’est pas’ and uncertainty are central to his art.

The images in La Destination were not the only instance where Mariën could have produced work that was subsequently attributed to Magritte and where Mariën could have forged Magrittes. Another instance is the spoof advertisement ‘Grande Baisse’ from 1962. It was produced by Mariën, but ascribed to Magritte. The leaflet was sent out the morning before the private viewing of Magritte’s retrospective at the Casino in Knokke. It was headed by a caption showing a 100 Francs banknote with Léopold I’s head replaced by that of Magritte [fig. 1]. The title that appeared below this, Les Travaux Forcés, was taken from the warning printed on Belgian banknotes: ‘La loi punit le contrefacteur des travaux forcés’ (‘the law punishes the counterfeiter’).

This photomontage was clearly attributed to Magritte. Another double-bluff, a double forgery where not only the banknote is
forged, but also the forger himself. And what exactly is forged, counterfeited in this picture? Is it a banknote? Is it Magritte’s portrait in a military uniform? Or is it the false provenance of the forged banknote through the writing of ‘Magritte’ underneath the photomontage?


Under Belgian law the reproduction of a current banknote in any form constitutes forgery unless it is printed over with the word ‘specimen.’ The photomontage led the Director of the Banque Nationale Belge to call in the police who immediately phoned Magritte. André Blavier, in a letter to Raymond Queneau, explained the incident: ‘Very important gentlemen of the police are said to be dealing with the case. And Magritte, when interviewed on the telephone, thought the call was part of the joke and, not appreciating it, started bawling out the director of the STD, or whatever its equivalent is in our dear mother-country.’ Leo Dohmen, a photographer and art dealer, was Mariën’s accomplice. He was, following Mariën’s suggestion, the actual producer of the photomontage. According to Dohmen the image and its title Les Travaux Forcés were deliberate allusions on Mariën’s part to another, much more serious forgery, namely five hundred copies of counterfeit 100 francs banknotes allegedly made by Magritte and his brother Paul in 1953 and which Mariën helped to distribute. Given all this evidence, the title Les Travaux Forcés takes on a further meaning in which Magritte and forgery, as well as Magritte’s relation to the market value of art, are brought into intimate proximity. This is also clear from the ironic text that was published underneath the image in ‘Grande Baisse,’ again presented as being written by Magritte, which stated: ‘Moving from mystery to mystery, my painting is coming to resemble a form of merchandise subject to the most sordid speculation. People now buy my painting as they buy land, a fur coat or jewels. I have decided to put a stop to this unworthy exploitation of mystery by putting mystery within reach of all purchasers.’ ‘Grande Baisse’ is on one level an ironic comment on Magritte’s growing prosperity, which, according to his friends such as Louis Scutenaire and Paul Nougé, led to the artist behaving in a more and more estranged manner.
Although ‘Grande Baisse’ is a critique of Magritte, connecting him closely with forgery, it also seems to be based on, and imitates (or perhaps even plagiarises), another artwork depicting a banknote incorporating the manipulation of the King’s head, namely Magritte’s painting Le Spectre (1948 or 1949) [fig. 2]. This detailed image of the obverse of a Belgian 500 Francs banknote stretches across the picture’s dark background, and the image is signed, underneath on the left, by Magritte. According to Sylvester the banknote is ‘a virtual copy of a Belgian 500 franc [sic] banknote.’ Only one small detail in relation to the currency is added – in Magritte’s portrait Leopold II, second King of Belgium, smokes a pipe. Money here reveals its spectrality – like the spectre, it stands in for and marks the ‘return’ of something which is absent, namely value. The signature in the painting also reveals its ghostly character, as marker of the absent presence of the artist. Money, the image and its signature – all are open to forgery, revealing the unreliability of the very elements of bourgeois reality which relies so heavily on conventional assumptions about the authority of presence guaranteed by representation, money and signatures. Magritte’s aim is to create pictorial experience, which, as he states, ‘questions the real world.’ Through repainting, and forging in the strict sense of the word (since also here the word ‘specimen’ is not written on the note, the banknote, onto which is added the small detail of a pipe), Magritte dissects bourgeois reality and its value system through its own authoritative iconography. As he states, his aim is to ‘render reality doubtful through reality itself.’ A further twist to this narrative of forged banknotes and paintings occurred in 1998, when a new, and real, Belgian banknote came into circulation. It was a 500 Francs banknote with Magritte’s head on the front, underneath which, on the left hand side, looms a copy of his signature.
The *trompe l’œil*

Magritte’s *Le Spectre* draws together two forms of representational currency, art and money. It seems to imitate or copy (forge) not only money, a 500 Francs banknote, but also art, as indicated in the work from 1890 by nineteenth-century American *trompe l’œil* artist John Haberle, entitled *One Dollar Bill* (with which Magritte may have been familiar) [fig. 3]. *Trompe l’œil* and forgeries share an intention to deceive the viewer, and, simultaneously, to question the aura of originality. The counterfeit is, like the forgery, a constitutive part of the *trompe l’œil*, since, as Céleste Dars states, the *trompe l’œil* is designed or placed in such a way as to “draw the real world into a counterfeit one.” Indeed the etymological meaning of the word counterfeit reveals the closeness between forgery and representation: according to the Oxford English Dictionary, earlier meanings of the word also included, amongst ‘imitation’ and ‘forgery’, ‘represented in a picture …’; ‘portrayed’ and ‘a representation in painting, sculpture … an image, portrait.’

The *trompe l’œil*, like the forgery, blurs the boundaries between reality and artifice, or rather it makes the fragility of these boundaries apparent. Magritte’s exploitation of, and pre-occupation with, *trompe l’œil* paintings demonstrates how the logic of forgery constitutes the basis of his artistic exploration of the relationship between representation and reality. Magritte’s art repeatedly embraced the *trompe l’œil* tradition, ranging from his use of elements such as shattered glass (e.g. in *Le Soir qui Tombe*, 1964), to simulated frames in paintings (e.g. *La Clef des Songes*, 1935), and the meticulous representation of wood (e.g. *Le Modèle Rouge*, 1935) to suggest different levels of reality within the image. His *grisaille* paintings, such as *Souvenir de Voyage* (1951), also derive from *trompe l’œil* traditions which employed the technique since classical times to produce highly deceptive imitations of marble statuary. Flemish painters used *grisaille* to decorate the backs of their polyptych wings, as can be seen in Jan Van Eyck’s *Annunciation* (c. 1436). Magritte’s *La Condition Humaine* (1933) is repeatedly cited in books on *trompe l’œil* as an example of the tradition. From 1933 onwards he painted a number of these ‘window views.’ In these images he worked with three significant elements of *trompe l’œil* simultaneously. Firstly, he showed a painting of a painting, a classical theme of *trompe l’œil*. Secondly, he employed the trick of opening a wall up to the landscape behind. Thirdly, he
employed the obligatory curtain as often used by the Dutch in the seventeenth century. Here reality and fiction, interior and exterior, image and imagination, all flow into one another.

**Negating the aesthetic sublime**

In a well-known allegory from Classical Greek literature, the impossible surface of representation is demonstrated in a way that resembles that of Magritte’s painting. Pliny the Elder recounts the tale as follows:

The contemporaries and rivals of Zeuxis were Timanthes, Androcydes, Eupompus, Parrhasius. This last, it is recorded, entered into a competition with Zeuxis. Zeuxis produced a picture of grapes so dexterously represented that birds began to fly down to eat from the painted vine. Whereupon Parrhasius designed so lifelike a picture of a curtain that Zeuxis, proud of the verdict of the birds, requested that the curtain should now be drawn back and the picture displayed. When he realised his mistake, with a modesty that did him honour, he yielded up the palm, saying that whereas he had managed to deceive only birds, Parrhasius had deceived an artist.17

The trompe l’œil seems to be, in one sense, something that deceives the eye, a forgery of reality that in the process of deceiving also reveals something. As in the tale of Zeuxis, the important moment is not the moment of deception, but the moment of the revelation of this deception. As Eckhard Hollmann and Jürgen Tesch argue, ‘to deceive the eye also means to open it.’18 Like the forgery, the trompe l’œil produces a moment where, according to Jean Baudrillard, it ‘turns upon itself and negates itself’19 – producing a moment of aesthetic negation, a moment of ceci n’est pas.

According to Jacques Lacan, Parrhasius’s example makes it clear that: ‘...if one wishes to deceive a man, what one presents to him is the painting of a veil, that is to say, something that incites him to ask what is behind it.’20 The forgery, like the trompe l’œil, radically undermines notions of the sublime, of the aesthetic aura, since it asserts that the specific aesthetic ability to evoke the sublime can be imitated and reproduced. What Parrhasius’s image demonstrates is less the astonishing similarity of his painterly representation to reality, than the ‘human condition’ which Magritte described as ‘our gaze always [trying] to go further, to see the object, the reason for our existence.’21 Magritte asserts that his painted canvases and curtains, as in La Condition Humaine, do not hide anything. He famously replied, when asked what was behind one of his paintings: ‘The wall.’22

La Saignée from 1939 also draws on the tradition of trompe l’œil through the representation of a painted frame and a brick wall [fig. 4], exploring the trompe l’œil’s subversion of the sublime since ‘the trompe l’œil artist will not leave anything to the imagination. He will not allow any interpretation beyond what he represents.’23 Sarah Whitfield recalls Magritte’s reply, when asked by a journalist what was the reason for painting a brick wall: ‘I think I was wondering at the time what would be absolutely forbidden to show in a picture.’24 What is absolutely forbidden to show is the nothingness and the bareness behind the painting. Magritte comments: ‘Behind the colours in the pictures is the canvas.
Behind the canvas there is a wall, behind the wall there is ... etc. Visible things always hide other visible things. But a visible image hides nothing. The nothingness of the ‘absolutely forbidden’ is revealed in Magritte, through allowing the viewer to risk the ‘gaze’ into nothingness. As effective as a forgery, Magritte’s artwork counteracts and subverts the Western ‘privileged position of the gaze.’ Typically for trompe l’œil tradition, there is no horizon, no horizontality in La Saignée. The gaze is abruptly stopped before a brick wall, like the trompe l’œil described by Baudrillard as an ‘opaque mirror held before the eye, and then there is nothing behind it. Nothing to see.’ This radically undermines Western insistence on the sublime, on that which is behind and beyond representation. As Baudrillard states:

When the hierarchical organisation of real space ... is undone, something else emerges ... . What is more, this shock that is the miracle of trompe l’œil ... reveal[s] to us that ‘reality’ is never more than a world hierarchically staged (mise-en-scène), an objectivity achieved according to the rules of depth; that reality is a principle the observance of which regulates all the painting, sculpture, and architecture of the time. But it is a principle and a simulacrum and nothing more, put to an end by the experimental hypersimulation of trompe l’œil.

Magritte’s forgeries and use of trompe l’œil methods reveal reality’s simulated nature. His art does not try to ‘create’ or use a ‘new language’ – this would reinforce the capitalist myths of ‘originality’ and ‘individual creativity.’ Rather, through plagiarism and forgery, he reinvents, changes and interferes with the language of those who exert aesthetic and representational power, ranging from the previous canon to the art market. Magritte’s attraction to forgery is motivated by the same factors as his attraction to trompe l’œil – both negate Western notions of the authenticity, originality and genuine

Figure 4: René Magritte, La Saignée, 1939, Museum Boymans-van Beuningen, Rotterdam © ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London, 2007.
meaning of the work of art. As Mark Jones argues, in *Fake? The Art of Deception*, forgeries challenge the authenticity of our responses to works of art: ‘Why, if what we value from a work of art is the aesthetic pleasure to be gained from it, is a successfully deceptive fake inferior to the real thing?’

The phrase ‘real thing’ appears both in Jones’ book and David Phillips’s writing in the exhibition catalogue encompassing the Arts Council exhibition on forgery of 1986, *Don’t Trust the Label*. Phillips states: ‘However good the imitation or reproduction, it is not the same as the ‘real thing.’ Both, the forgery and the trompe l’œil, situate themselves within a neither-nor space, denying any kind of resolution in Western terms — they are neither real, nor do they convey conventionally seen ‘higher meanings.’ Both are depthless and both mark the failure of reality and the failure’s mocking of reality. These counterfeits are, in Baudrillard’s words, Western reality’s ‘ironic simulacrum’; they are not the ‘real thing’ but the ‘thing of the real,’ which denies reassurance and reveals artificiality as reality, as Baudrillard argues:

In fact a complete reversal of the rules of play occurs – which might lead one to suppose, or at least permit the supposition, that the whole exterior space … , even the space of political power, is perhaps nothing more than the effect of perspective. … Somewhere or other, since Machiavelli, politicians have perhaps always known it: the mastery of a simulated space is at the source of power, politics is neither a territory nor a function nor a real space, but a simulated model of which the manifest actions are no more than a realized effect. … A ‘blind spot’, a ‘hole in reality’, a simulacrum hidden at the heart of reality and which reality depends on for its entire operation. Thus the Pope himself or the Grand Inquisitor or the great Jesuits and theologians alone knew that God did not exist — that was their secret and their strength.

Similarly … the secret of the bank is above all others. Its initiates transmit it one to another — these priests, these theologians of figures, they alone know it and laugh in their sleeves. But I will reveal it to you: money does not exist.

*This is not …*

Notions of the betrayal of the viewer, of mistaking and thereby misreading one thing for another, are at the core of Magritte’s art. Perhaps one of the best-known of these images is *La Trahison des Images* (1928) in which the betrayal is already present in the title. In front of the orangey-brown background of the painting, a clearly outlined realistic depiction of a pipe floats in the air. The painting is reminiscent of a school blackboard. Underneath the pipe there is some handwriting — which, as Michel Foucault states, seems a ‘steady, painstaking, artificial script, a script from the convent, like that found heading the notebooks of schoolboys, or on a blackboard after an object lesson. The writing says “Ceci n’est pas une pipe” — “This is not a pipe”. We are looking at this image and call the image ‘pipe’; we trust it to resemble something which we’ve learnt is a pipe. Is this not the same belief, the same trust, which forgery latches onto and turns against itself? Is it not our trust in style and in scholars who have studied certain styles by certain artists, which aids the forger
ultimately to be treacherous? Does the 'treachery of images' not belong to the same category as the 'treachery of forgery'?

The painting interrogates the very character of language, representation, communication and reference. The painting utters the question through the simple device of the word 'Ceci,' 'This.' A word so mundane and ordinary, used in everyday communication, yet Magritte achieves with this insertion the questioning of the very ability of the signifier to refer – to communicate accurately. The viewer is confined, through the simplicity of the painting and through the restricted number of constituents: image, sentence, signature and the word 'pipe.' Michel Foucault notes in his discussion of the painting:

A painting ‘shows’ a drawing that ‘shows’ the form of a pipe; a text written by a zealous instructor ‘shows’ that a pipe is really what is meant. We do not see the teacher’s pointer, but it rules throughout – precisely like his voice, in the act of articulating very clearly, “This is a pipe.” From painting to image, from image to text from text to voice, a sort of imaginary pointer indicates, shows, fixes, locates, imposes a system of references, and tries to stabilize a unique space. … scarcely has he stated, “This is a pipe,” before he must correct himself and stutter, “This is not a pipe, but a drawing of a pipe,” “This is not a pipe but a sentence saying that this is not a pipe,” “The sentence ‘this is not a pipe,’ is not a pipe.” “In the sentence ‘this is not a pipe,’ this is not a pipe: the painting, written sentence, drawing of a pipe – all this is not a pipe.”

The deictic ‘this’ in Magritte’s painting sets off boldly into every direction, naming every item in the painting, aiming at nothing, referring to all of them, yet to none. Dylan Evans describes such words as ‘shifters’ to ‘refer to those elements in language whose general meaning cannot be defined without reference to the message.’ ‘This,’ in Magritte’s painting, performs precisely this function – it shifts and defers any certainty of meaning and the possibility of reference, as Derrida writes: ‘… this about which we have failed to say anything whatsoever that is logically determinable, this that comes with so much difficulty to language, this that seems not to mean anything, this that puts to rout our meaning-to-say …. It does not allow the confinement of meaning to one item, it does not allow certainty of meaning, but eternally places and displaces it, away from the image of the pipe and into the realm of linguistic signification – from icon to symbol. A newly established hierarchy between text and image emerges which is immediately deconstructed since image contains text and text contains image, leading to an aporia in how we read the painting.

**Counterfeiting signatures**

Conventionally the signature asserts authenticity – it stands-in for the author’s absence. Forgery undermines this reliability of the signature, of the label, as is stated in the exhibition catalogue of the 1984 exhibition *Seeing is Deceiving:* ‘The point is fundamental: to what extent do we rely on the name and on the label in formulating our response to a painting?’ Magritte repeatedly subverts the
reliability of the signature, through, for example trompe l’œil methods which hide the artist’s signature on an object or on a painting within a painting – in Le Modèle Rouge (1937) Magritte’s signature vanishes beneath gravel, and resembles the stones, in Le Fils de l’Homme (1964) it is an inscription in stone and in L’Air et la Chanson (1964) it is two-levels removed from reality, being positioned in the frame within the frame, rendering problematic the reference to a ‘Magritte’ outside of art. Magritte uses trompe l’œil’s ability to ‘dispense with an artistic signature, a fact that further underlines its character as an object, lending the picture a quality that is almost autonomous.’

The word ‘signature’, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, has its etymological root in signatura, which means ‘to mark out or designate.’ It means to ‘mark with a sign,’ to ‘acknowledge or guarantee [through] affixing or having affixed one’s name or initials or recognized mark.’ As Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari argue, the essence of society is not exchange but inscription: ‘the essential thing is to mark and to be marked.’ hub In La Trahison des Images Magritte’s act of signing the painting, through the application of the word ‘this,’ is rendered problematic, questioning the status of the signature as being able to refer to a referent outside of the painting. The signature is a representation of the artist, a mark of the artist. The signature as écriture connotes writing as interplay of presence and absence in that ‘signs represent the present in its absence.’ Conventionally it asserts the artist’s presence in his/her absence. Magritte’s signature cannot resist the slipstream effect of ‘this.’ If ‘this’ distorts reference, pointing out the very inabillity of reference actually to refer to, then it also renders the signature’s referent outside of the painting, ‘Magritte,’ uncertain. Magritte’s use of ‘this’ constructs a similar scenario to Derrida’s use of shifters such as ‘here’ and ‘there’ in his verbal, deictic play on the final page of his essay ‘Signature Event Context,’ challenging the reliability of his own signature: ‘Remark: the written-text of this – oral – communication was to have been addressed to the Association of French Speaking Societies of Philosophy before the meeting. Such a missive therefore had to be signed. Which I did, and counterfeit here. Where? There. J.D.’

The signature ‘Magritte’ is not the same as the person who bears this name, yet the signature is presumed as that which asserts the authenticity of the painting. The signature no longer marks, but becomes integral to the artwork. The signature, conventionally, is the mark or trace of the artist as author or creator, asserting presence in the artist’s absence; Jacques Derrida remarks that the signature operates in order to ensure ‘the presence of the “author” as the “person who does the uttering,” as the “origin,” the source, in the production of the statement.’ Magritte’s integration of the signature into the artwork, the challenge of the signature as referring to something outside the artwork, begins to deconstruct these various themes of the original, the source and the author. Conventional notions of the value of the work of art, and its belonging to a particular producer are organised around notions of author – authority – authenticity, and through these words hierarchies of value and degrees of genuineness are established. According to Derrida, every sign, every mark is, after its production, ‘abandoned to its essential drifting’:

This is the possibility on which I wish to insist: the possibility of extraction and of citational grafting which belongs to the structure of every mark; ... as a possibility of functioning cut off, at a certain point, from its ‘original’ meaning and from its belonging to a saturable and
constraining context. Every sign, … can be cited, put between quotation marks; thereby it can break with every given context, and engender infinitely new contexts in an absolutely non-saturable fashion.\textsuperscript{43}

Still more importantly, what Derrida describes as this potential citationality, this duplicability of a signature is not its ‘abnormal’ state, but is at the very heart of its existence. The signature, in order to be valid, recognisable and ‘unique’ to a certain person, must be recognisable through its repeatability. I have to be able to duplicate my signature in order for it to stand for me. In order for the signature to function as singular, it must have a repeatable and imitable form – in order to be singular it is based on doubling and repetition. As Derrida states: ‘This citationality, duplication, duplicity, this iterability of the mark is not an accident or an anomaly, but is that (normal/abnormal) without which a mark could no longer even have a so-called ‘normal’ functioning.’\textsuperscript{44}

\textbf{Fantômas}

One of the colour images included in the monograph, to fund which Magritte forged artworks, was \textit{Le Retour de Flame} from 1943 – another instance of painterly ‘plagiarism.’ The painting shows Fantômas, the master criminal, reigning over Paris. Sylvester calls this painting a ‘translation of the famous Fantômas poster,’ whilst Georges Marlier dismisses it as ‘the \textit{Fantômas} poster, painfully transposed onto canvas.’\textsuperscript{45} The painting is indeed a repainting, a plagiarism of a poster where the only changes are the style of the painting and the flower in Fantômas’s hands. Counterfeit and forgery are also present in Magritte’s identity. The remnant of ‘Magritte’ the person is a fictional, almost cartoon-like, bourgeois figure, coupled to an œuvre which has been shaped by art history into a ‘coherent’ whole. As is stated in the catalogue to the exhibition \textit{Seeing is Deceiving}: ‘It is characteristic of 20\textsuperscript{th} century needs that art historians have attempted, purely on stylistic grounds … , to isolate a group of works produced by the same artist. This “artist” is essentially the creation of art historians.’\textsuperscript{46}
A photograph taken in 1938 shows Magritte standing beside his painting *Le Barbare* [fig. 5]. The photograph itself is a phantom, an apparition of the painting, which no longer exists. *Le Barbare* shows Fantômas wearing a cylinder and an evening gown in front of a fragile wall – fragile, because it metamorphoses into transparency. According to Sylvester there is ‘a remarkable similarity … between this image and a music-hall poster of the period, showing the popular illusion of transparency known as Pepper’s Ghost effect’—another *trompe l’œil*, another forgery. In the photograph, Magritte mimes the posture of Fantômas in the painting as well as his clothing through wearing a bowler hat and evening dress. Magritte mimes and parodies Fantômas, thereby reversing the conventional pre-eminence of reality – here reality follows fiction. However, he mimes a character whose main feature is that he can slip in and out of roles and appear in different, but mainly bourgeois, identities. Fantômas is the master criminal who subverts the everyday, by slipping into the role of its actors. Fantômas films are obsessed with forgery, depicting its prevalence in scenes, motifs and actions ranging from fake jewellery to the forgery of letters, signatures and other documents, as for example in the first Fantômas film in 1913. In this film Fantômas steals a baroness’s jewels and leaves her with a blank name card on which, after he has gone, his name magically appears. In the same episode different letters and signatures are shown, and people are not who they seem to be; so the bourgeois gentlemen Gurn turns out to be Fantômas himself, thereby allowing Fantômas to enact the meaning of the word ‘Phantom’ embedded in his name, by repeatedly becoming ‘something that has only an apparent existence; an apparition, a spectre; a spirit, a ghost.’ Fantômas is like a linguistic ‘shifter’ where the moment of capture becomes the very moment of his escape, recalling Derrida’s deictic play: ‘Where? Here. There.’

**Biographical writing**

Magritte’s writings resist, on any level, the stable, reliable coherence – the consistency of argument, of logic, of tone – so much desired by the reader and especially by the interpreter of his works. Forgery, plagiarism and doubling, citational grafting, are the basis on which Magritte’s autobiographical writings are built. Magritte introduces the author, himself, as unreliable, as unstable. The most autobiographical of his writings, ‘La Ligne de Vie’ (‘Lifeline’), exists in two versions. The first was written in 1938 for a lecture at the Musée Royal des Beaux-Arts in Antwerp, and ‘La Ligne de Vie, II’ was revised and edited by Magritte in collaboration with Louis Scutenaire, in order to be published in *L’Invention Collective* in 1940. The similarities between the two texts are undermined by the evident changes that the author has made in producing the second version of the text. However, André Blavier and Mariën draw attention to similarities between passages of Magritte’s ‘La Ligne de Vie’ and passages from Edgar Alan Poe’s ‘Berenice’ (1835), and also with Max Ernst’s celebrated text ‘Le 10 août 1925 …’ which was published in *Au-delà de la peinture* in *Cahiers d’art* in 1936, a year before Magritte’s first version of ‘La Ligne de Vie.’ These similarities suggest Magritte’s possible appropriation and adaptation of these past texts for his own autobiographical writings. Most importantly Magritte describes, in ‘La Ligne de Vie, I,’ an experience in 1925, which led him to paint objects exclusively in possession of their obvious details:
Therefore, I decided around 1925, to paint the objects only with their apparent details, because my research could only be developed under these circumstances. I gave up on all except one way of painting, which brought me to a point which I had to transgress. This decision, which allowed me to break with a by then comfortable habit, was eased by the way, through long observations, in which I found an opportunity in a popular Brasserie in Brussels. The psychological state I was in, caused the decorative moulding on a door to appear as if it would have a mysterious existence, and I was long in touch with its reality.\textsuperscript{49}

Blavier suggests that these lines can be compared to Edgar Allan Poe’s ‘Berenice,’ in which the hero narrates:\textsuperscript{50}

To muse for long unwearied hours with my attention riveted to some frivolous device on the margin, or in the typography of a book; to become absorbed for the better part of a summer’s day, in a quaint shadow falling aslant upon the tapestry, or upon the door; to lose myself for an entire night in watching the steady flame of a lamp, or the embers of a fire; to dream away whole days over the perfume of a flower; to repeat monotonously some common word, until the sound, by dint of frequent repetition, ceased to convey any idea whatever to the mind.\textsuperscript{51}

However, Blavier also notes that Magritte’s text might also bear comparison with Ernst’s writing, pointing to Marcel Mariën’s citation of Magritte’s passage, following a citation of Ernst’s text ‘Le 10 août 1925 …,’ in his book \textit{Les Corrections naturelles}.\textsuperscript{52}

On August 10, 1925 an intolerable visual obsession made me discover the technical means that enabled me to put Leonardo’s lesson … into practice. It started from a childhood memory in which a panel of false mahogany across from my bed provoked a vision in my mind while I was half asleep, and, being in an inn by the sea during a rainfall, I became obsessed and irritated with the patterns of grooves in the floor, accentuated by thousands of washings.\textsuperscript{53}

Ernst’s text, which is influenced by Leonardo da Vinci’s \textit{Treatise on Painting} (c. 1500),\textsuperscript{54} in which the author recommends that artists should stare at stains on walls until figures appear, shares significant similarities with Magritte’s text. The date, the place of the experience (Brasserie/Inn), the experience of marvelling at mundane features of domestic spaces (decorative moulding/floor) and its influential, revelatory effect on both artists seem to point towards more than just an accidentally similar experience. Ernst’s statement seems reworked and appropriated by Magritte into his own autobiographical outline.
Magritte’s methods of obscuring the ‘truths’ behind and sources of his autobiographical writings conform to an important but often forgotten part of his lifelong project to undermine bourgeois ideology. His devices of self-contradiction and narrative or factual inconsistency, and the adaptation or assimilation of Ernst’s professed experience into his own autobiographical outline, are used to undermine the ideological notions of authorial reliability and notions of originality, authenticity and the implicit assumption that events presented with such qualities are therefore ‘real.’ Magritte’s aim is to withdraw the comfortable veil of security and certainty from any one thing in order to introduce us to the human condition, a condition of uncertainty and insecurity that requires the constant, unsettling effort of decipherment. Here conventional meaning is rendered unstable – Magritte’s ‘incoherence’ is the deconstruction of our world as a coherent whole. Magritte shows us the fragility of the supposed ‘coherence’ which we comfortably inhabit.

Ceci n’est pas un Magritte

![Figure 6: René Magritte, La Force de l’habitude (Force of Habit), 1960, private collection © ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London, 2007.](image)

However, Magritte’s writing seems not to be the only plagiarism of Ernst. As David Sylvester writes, Magritte’s forgeries for the monograph published in 1943 included ‘imitations of Picasso, Braque and de Chirico and, in particular, Max Ernst’s Forêt of around 1927 [formerly in the Graindorge collection and included in several major post-war retrospectives, but with no record of having been shown before the war – which is no. 1167 in the Ernst catalogue raisonné by Werner Spies. Spies re-affirmed to us in 1984 that he considered this piece to be authentic].’

Ernst never publicly
commented on or denied his own authorship of this work, however, he did produce a possible ‘reply’ or ‘statement’ on this matter, in the most appropriate way possible – on a canvas [fig. 6]:

In Max Ernst’s dining room in Paris there was a painting by Magritte, entitled Force of Habit (1960), in which a heraldic image of a large green apple is inscribed, in English, ‘This is not an apple.’ Max and Magritte had exchanged pictures, as artists often do. And Max, in the middle of the apple, had painted a cage with a bird inside. Below this cage, Max had written, ‘Ceci n’est pas un Magritte – signé Max Ernst.’

Magritte’s only comment on Ernst’s ‘joke’ was ‘forced laughter,’ perhaps because he knew too well what Ernst was aiming at. Ernst’s signature appropriates, becomes a further item in the play and multiplication of ceci, but also in the multiplication of names – Magritte as signature, Magritte as label, Max Ernst as counter-signature. Ernst’s inscription unearths the subversive character of Magritte beneath his appearance as a commercial artist, revealing him as being ‘like a worm in the apple … changing what is within, without touching the surface.’ Whilst Magritte saw this painting and its title as ‘another version’ of the ‘problem of the pipe,’ of the ‘problem of the ceci,’ complying with the art-market which wanted to see endless reproductions of the same theme, Ernst teases out a different meaning, a different ‘Magritte,’ allocating the ‘problem of ceci’ to its rightful, subversive place. Force of Habit is exposed, not as the re-painting of the same motif, but as the inability not to forge, to plagiarise, the inability to keep one’s hands off the other’s artworks. The phrase ‘Ceci n’est pas’ takes on the specific discourse of forgery. Of course, Magritte countered, for a last time, as Fantômas would do. Marcel Mariën narrates that three months before Magritte’s death in 1967, the forged La Forêt reappeared in Brussels at an exposition of six surrealist painters where Ernst’s and Magritte’s paintings hung next to each other. Christian Bussy reported to Mariën that Magritte, in passing by the painting, called out: ‘This is a famous Max Ernst!’

The ‘other’ side of Magritte’s art insists on what Isidore Ducasse, himself a fervent plagiarist, stated, that ‘plagiarism is necessary’ in order to overthrow Western bourgeois myths of the artist and ideologies. As another notorious plagiarist, Stewart Home, explains, plagiarism, and, by extension, forgery, ‘enriches human language. It is a collective undertaking … Plagiarism implies a sense of history and leads to progressive social transformation’ – or, to close with the wisdom of a true forger, as Tom Keating stated: ‘Some people might argue that to work in another artist’s style automatically precludes originality or ‘inspiration’. But they do so at their peril, for the history of art is a history of borrowings and adaptations.’

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3 Marcel Mariën, *Le Radeau de la Mémoire*, Breteuil-sur-Iton 1983, 102 (‘... qu’achetant un faux diamant sans le savoir, la satisfaction se trouvera être la même du fait que l’on y a mis le prix.’)
4 Mariën, *Le Radeau de la Mémoire*.
5 René Magritte, ‘Réponse à l’enquête SUR LA CRISE DE LA PEINTURE’ (1935), in André Blavier (ed.), *René Magritte*, Paris 2001, 85 (‘Le point de vue communiste est le mien. Mon art n’est valable que pour autant qu’il s’oppose à l’idéologie bourgeoise au nom de laquelle on éteint la vie.’)
6 Styles evoking different periods and influences appear in Magritte’s œuvre; they include futurism, cubism and impressionism. Magritte seems repeatedly to cross the boundaries between being influenced by and copying another artist, for example in his *Girl at the Piano* (1924) compared with Albert Gleizes *Femme au Piano* (1944), his *Jeunesse* (1924?) compared with Robert Delaunay’s *La ville de Paris* (1912) and, particularly, his *La Pose Enchantée* (1927) which obviously derives, as Magritte’s alleged Picasso forgery, from Picasso’s neo-classical nudes from the early 1920s.
14 Magritte, ‘La Ligne de Vie II’ (1940) in Blavier, *René Magritte*, 145 (‘met le monde réel en cause’).
15 Magritte, ‘Je pense à...’ (1952) in Blavier, *René Magritte*, 327 (‘La mise en doute de la réalité par la réalité elle-même’).
32 Baudrillard, 'The Trompe l’Œil,' 60–62.

33 Michel Foucault, This is not a Pipe, trans. and ed. James Harkness, Berkeley 1983, 15.

34 Foucault, This is not a Pipe, 30.


37 Seeing is Deceiving, Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester 1984, 7.


40 Michel Foucault, 'What is an Author?' in Language, Counter-Memory, Practice, trans. and ed. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon, Oxford 1977, 119.

41 Derrida, Margins of Philosophy, 330.

42 Derrida, Margins of Philosophy, 328.

43 Derrida, Margins of Philosophy, 320.

44 Derrida, Margins of Philosophy, 320.

45 Sylvester, René Magritte: Catalogue Raisonné II, 319.

46 Seeing is Deceiving, 7.


49 Magritte ‘La Ligne de Vie, I’ (1938), in Blavier, René Magritte, 107 (‘Je décidai donc vers 1925 de ne plus peindre les objects qu’avec leurs détails apparents, car mes recherches ne pouvaient se développer qu’à cette condition. Je ne renonçais guère au’une certaine manière de peindre, qui m’avait conduit à un point qu’il me fallait dépasser. Cette décision, qui me fit rompre avec une habitude déjà devenue confortable, me fut d’ailleurs facilitée à cette époque par la longue contemplation qu’il me fut donné d’avoir dans une brasserie populaire de Bruxelles. La disposition d’esprit où j’étais me fit paraître douées d’une mystérieuse existence les moulures d’une porte et je fus longtemps en contact avec leur réalité’).

50 Other passages from Magritte’s text share similarities in narratives and their moods with Poe’s ‘Berenice.’ For example: ‘Dans mon enfance, j’aimais jouer avec une petite fille, dans le vieux cimetière désaffecté d’une petite ville de province. Nous visitions les caveaux souterrains … ’ Blavier, René Magritte, 105 (‘In my childhood, I liked playing with a little girl on the old, abandoned cemetery of a small provincial town. We roamed the underground vaults … ’). Similarly, the narrator in Poe’s story, Egæus, solitary in character, spends his childhood playing only with his young cousin, Berenice.

51 Blavier, René Magritte, 105.

52 See Marcel Mariën, Les Corrections naturelles, Brussels 1947, 82–84.

53 Max Ernst, ‘Au-delà de la peinture,’ Cahiers d’art, Paris 1936, 28 (‘Le 10 août 1925, une insupportable obsession visuelle me fit découvrir les moyens techniques qui m’ont permis une très large mise en pratique de cette leçon de Léonard … . Partant d’un souvenir d’enfance au cours duquel un panneau de faux acajou, situé en face de mon lit, avait joué le rôle de provocateur optique d’une vision de demi-sommeil, et me trouvant, par un temps de pluie, dans une auberge au bord de la mer, je fus frappé par l’obsession qu’exerçait sur mon regard irrité le plancher, dont mille lavages avaient accentué les rainures’).

54 Magritte possessed a copy of Leonardo’s Treatise, as Sylvester’s records of Magritte’s library show.

55 Sylvester, Catalogue Raisonné II, 99.


58 Mariën, *Le Radeau de la Mémoire*, 103 (’Ça, c’est un fameux Max Ernst!’).


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The Surrealist Fait Divers: Uncovering Violent Histories in J. G. Ballard's Running Wild

Jeannette Baxter

Abstract
In this paper I read J.G. Ballard’s illustrated novella, Running Wild (1984), as a subversive example of the surrealist fait divers. One of the most ethically challenging fragments in Ballard’s often controversial oeuvre, this modified detective fiction presents the reader with a catalogue of contemporary atrocities – parricide, political assassination and terrorism, acts of random violence – and challenges us, the readers, to get our hands dirty. I explore how Ballard negotiates the cultural and historical consequences of global capitalism in Running Wild, and how he tests, through fiction, the controversial theory that moral and social transgressions are legitimate correctives to psychological and social inertia. In this context, Ballard incorporates a variety of surrealist texts (paintings, photographs, collages) into his fait divers, I suggest, in order to open up moments of critical and ethical reflection, and to provoke the reader into a confrontation with the deviant logics and violent psychopathologies which operate below the polite surface of contemporary history and culture.

René Magritte’s The Threatened Assassin (1926) haunts the process of reading J.G. Ballard’s Running Wild. Influenced by the literary and cinematic adventures of Fantômas (the seductive genius of crime whom the surrealists admired), The Threatened Assassin offers, at first glance, a transparent narrative of murder and impending capture.1 We observe the sprawled body of a naked female corpse; blood pours from her mouth, and a white towel lies across her shoulders. A man, whom we presume to be the murderer, stands with one hand in his pocket as he listens to a gramophone record. The presence of his hat, overcoat and suitcase suggest imminent escape. In the foyer, two detectives await the assassin with a bludgeon and a net. In the background, three men peer over an iron railing and observe the murder scene. The story of The Threatened Assassin appears to be foretold as verisimilitude counters enigma and mimesis dissolves any sense of mystery. But is this really the case?

Magritte’s surrealist exercises in transparency are anything but straightforward. For this painter of visual riddles, evident realities not only reveal that which is visible, but they also, crucially, conceal that which is invisible. Subsequently, transparency becomes a weapon of disorientation for the surrealist artist: it is ‘the privileged medium for turning convention on its head and transforming it into an enigma and, at the same time, revealing to the greatest degree possible the mystery that it contains within it.’2 Within this formulation, the mystery of The Threatened Assassin is never revealed but constantly evoked through concealed situations and alternative events which the painting’s realistic mise-en-scène hints at. The spectator is encouraged, therefore, to search the visual landscape and to penetrate its latent mysteries: who is the female victim? Why does the presumed murderer pause next to his victim in order to listen to music? Who are the three figures in the background? Are they accomplices or are they witnesses? And what about the ambiguous title of
Magritte’s work – who is threatening the assassin, and why is the spectator urged to adopt an ambivalent moral position towards a potential murderer?

It is this line of associative enquiry which Ballard urges his readers to undertake as they step into the literary riddle of *Running Wild*. More of a *why*- than a *whodunit*, *Running Wild* is a work of formal and generic experimentation along surrealist lines of influence. Although Ballard’s condensed text has been read conventionally as a novella, I want to suggest here that *Running Wild* should be read within the subversive tradition of the *fait divers*, a narrative form which, according to Roland Barthes, is structurally ‘related to the short story and the tale, and no longer to the novel.’

Evading a direct English translation - ‘human interest story,’ ‘oddity’- the *fait divers* was a rich source of literary and visual experimentation for the surrealists who appropriated the technique of listing scandalous and bizarre news items in order to unsettle consensual hierarchies of knowledge within the modern press. Mapping the ‘sensitive outer edges of public opinion,’ *fait divers* coverage of daily catastrophes and horrific crimes drew attention to ‘the disturbing violence, accidents and irrational impulses below the surface of the everyday.’

Within my process of recontextualisation, *Running Wild* is not only a component of ‘insolent mass culture’ which displays a ‘flagrant disregard to cultural conventions and social proprieties,’ but it also unpacks as a surrealist experiment in ideological unchaining or ‘désenchaînement’ whereby conventional thoughts and perspectives are ruptured by latent, unconscious forces.

Furthermore, in the manner of Alain Robbe-Grillet’s elusive criminal investigation *La Belle Captive* (1975) (which is illustrated with seventy-seven paintings by Magritte), *Running Wild* does not ask to be solved, for there is no definitive truth or reality to be recovered. Rather, this short text demands a process of readerly investigation which opens the transparent surfaces of contemporary history and culture up to the revealing powers of paradox and ambiguity. Just as Magritte suggested that Juve (the inspector of the Sûreté and arch-rival of Fantômas) would have to enter one of Fantômas’s dreams and participate ‘as one of its characters’ if he hoped to ensnare the villain, so Ballard challenges us, the readers, to immerse ourselves in the deviant logics and emerging psychopathologies of the text. This process of going ‘undercover’ is not only important for confronting difficult and often elusive questions about agency, guilt and moral responsibility which *Running Wild* throws up. But it is also marks an integral and invariably disquieting process of self-reflection: to what extent are we, the readers, implicated in, or complicit with, the criminal horrors of contemporary history?

‘These Children That Come at You With Knives’: *Running Wild* and the Logics of Late Capitalism

I look at the things you do and I don’t understand … you say how bad, and even killers, your children are. You made your children what they are … These children that come at you with
knives, they are your children. You taught them. I didn't teach them … Is it my fault that your children do what you do? What about your children? You say there are just a few? There are many, many more, coming in the same direction. They are running in the streets – and they are coming right at you!

Charles Manson, Los Angeles Hall of Justice, November 19, 1970.  

Charles Manson’s analysis of parent-child relationships echoes chillingly throughout Ballard’s tale of mass murder. *Running Wild* is set in Pangbourne village estate, an exclusive gated-community situated within convenient reach of London and the M4. The ‘newest’ and ‘most expensive … of a number of similar estates in Berkshire,’ Pangbourne estate boasts a landscape of security fences, state-of-the-art surveillance equipment, well-manicured lawns, and an equally well-heeled demographic of ‘senior professionals – lawyers, stockbrokers, bankers – and their families’ (*Running Wild*, 12). On the morning of 25 June, 1988, the estate’s plush social fabric is rent by a mysterious massacre: all 32 adult residents have been murdered in their own homes, and their children (totalling 13 and aged between 8-17 years) have disappeared without a trace.

On the face of it, the process of investigation is headed and narrated by Dr Richard Greville, a forensic psychiatrist who is called in by anxious Home Office officials. Together with his assistant, Sergeant Payne, Greville fails, however, to see initially what the reader recognises almost immediately: namely that the Pangbourne mystery is a very clear case of parricide. It is out of this contest of perspectives – the reader pitched against the detective – that another process of narrative investigation emerges. Greville’s perceptual obtuseness highlights what Michel Foucault, the historian of vision who also investigated and brought to public attention the parricidal crimes of Pierre Rivière in 1836, criticised as the intellectually immobilising quality of the self-evident. Although derived etymologically from the Latin word ‘videre,’ which means ‘to see’, self-evidence is that which is accepted unseeingly and uncritically. The self-evident promotes, therefore, a myopia of sorts, a rigid and blinkered modality of seeing which is nourished by habituation and assumption. It is this delimiting social vision, with its attendant discursive structures and established hierarchies of knowledge, which Ballard encourages the reader to scrutinise and dismantle.

For a text in which perceptual acuity is paramount, *Running Wild* opens provocatively on a note of obfuscation:

*From the Forensic Diaries of Dr Richard Greville, Deputy Psychiatric Adviser, Metropolitan Police*

25 August 1988. Where to start? So much has been written about the Pangbourne Massacre, as it is now known in the popular press throughout the world, that I find it difficult to see this...
tragic event with a clear eye. In the past two months there have been so many television programmes about the thirty-two murdered residents of this exclusive estate to the west of London, and so much speculation about the abduction of their thirteen children, that there scarcely seems room for even a single fresh hypothesis (RW, 1).

In the manner of Alfred Jarry’s *fait divers* writings for *Le Canard Sauvage*, Ballard holds the textualisation of historical reality up for critical scrutiny. Recent events at Pangbourne Village estate have been recuperated and reconfigured by the world’s press to the extent that a media phenomenon – the Pangbourne Massacre – has been created. A collation of popular hypotheses (which range from ‘International Terrorism’ and ‘Organised Crime’ to ‘Misdirected Military Exercise’ (RW, 21-23), official statements and unofficial speculations, ‘the Pangbourne Massacre’ is a flagrant intertextual and intervisual space in which history, reality and knowledge have been recycled to the point of obscurity. Any notion of origins has been subsumed under a process of mediatisation which immerses the actual historical event within competing moments of surface repetition. As Jean Baudrillard notes, it is this ‘*universality of the news item* [le fait divers] in mass communication’ which characterises contemporary knowledge networks. All political, historical and cultural information is ‘received in the same – at once anodyne and miraculous – form of the news item. It is entirely actualised – i.e. dramatised in the spectacular mode – and entirely deactualised – i.e. distanced by the communication medium and reduced to signs.’ In the absence of epistemological depth and historical specificity, the atrocity of mass murder is refashioned into a reproducible yet wholly inaccessible event. Ironically, the ‘Pangbourne Massacre’ as media spectacle has become something of an historical blindspot.

At first glance, Greville’s forensic diaries promise to puncture this prevailing climate of media fictions with a counter-narrative of empirical enquiry. A self-conscious framing device used commonly in detective and gothic fiction, the diary form functions conventionally to contain an ‘inexplicable event’ (RW, 13) within a rational and authoritative framework. As Greville’s textual investigation unfolds, though, the reader soon realises that Ballard’s framing device functions as a red herring. Indeed, Greville’s forensic document is as promiscuous in form and meaning as the equivocal media discourses which cloud his vision. His diaries are composed, for instance, of brief narrative extracts (including a ‘Reconstruction’ and a ‘Postscript’) which boast various titles – ‘The Missing Children’, ‘Marion Miller, the First Hostage’, ‘The Pangbourne Massacre: The Murderers Identified’ (RW, 44, 78). Reminiscent of newspaper headlines, these titles establish a (false) hierarchy of information which directs the reader to aspects of the enquiry which the author-detective deems to be salient (abduction and murder). Furthermore, the sensationalist impact of these typographically bold and emphatic titles sets the tone for a narrative which indulges in the kind of emotive verbal poetics that characterises much media discourse. Averting his eyes from ‘files’ of incriminating evidence – ‘Extensive scuff-marks, bloody handprints and shoe impressions that match the children’s known shoe sizes indicate that almost all the children were present at the scenes of their parents’ murders’ (RW, 18) – Greville...
presents a profile of the children and their families which ignores the textual signatures, and which
draws instead on a media-authored lexicon of victimisation, innocence and vulnerability. Seduced by
the media’s ‘melancholy parade of murder and kidnap victims,’ the detective ponders the loss of
‘enlightened and loving parents’ who were ‘guiding their sons and daughters towards fulfilled and
happy lives when they were cut down so tragically;’ he tortures himself with recurrent thoughts of
‘these orphaned children’ and their ‘desperate attempts to resist the kidnappers’ (RW, 10-16).

Replete with recycled platitudes and well-worn phrases which frustrate the reader, Greville’s
response to the Pangbourne massacre gestures to a double logic embedded within the text. Firstly,
Greville’s diaries, which he is revising ‘for publication’ (RW, 3), are implicated within an invasive
media-capitalist logic which is dependent upon the perpetuation of a certain ideological framework for
its continued profits. The world’s press, Ballard reminds us, have fetishised the Pangbourne children,
transforming them into media merchandise. Carefully selected photographs of ‘a group of thoughtful
and pleasant adolescents smiling out of their school speech-day portraits and holiday snapshots’ (RW,
17) have been selected by editorial powers in order to trigger fierce emotional responses in the reader.

To rework an Orwellian axiom: all atrocities are newsworthy, but some, and especially those involving
white, middle-class children, are more newsworthy than others. The national press’s organisation of a
‘marathon of manhunts’ and of ‘ransom funds, which received millions in public donations’ (RW, 74,
46) has nourished a cultural psyche which seeks the illusion of agency in the face of utter
disempowerment. In this context, however, agency can never be anything more than the act of buying
a newspaper or, in Greville’s case, the act of writing a text which will merely extend the burgeoning
library of Pangbourne fictions and which will, in turn, cultivate the media-capitalist process.

Greville’s conditioned reader-response also gestures to a prevailing cultural logic of denial. As
his list of Bizarre Theories on the Pangbourne murders reveals, the detective’s myopia is not
idiosyncratic, rather it is symptomatic of a wider cultural condition:

(9) Bizarre Theories

There remain a few outlandish possibilities.

(a) A unit of Soviet Spetsnaz commandos, targeted on the residential quarters of the NATO
headquarters staff at Northwood, received an incorrect war alert order and were
parachuted by error into the Pangbourne estate during the night of 24 June. They
slaughtered the adult residents, assuming they were senior military personnel, then
realised their error and abducted the children.

(b) An experimental nerve-gas projectile fell from an RAF or USAF military aircraft into the
Pangbourne area and deranged a group of nearby residents who committed the murders.
They then destroyed all traces of the children before suffering retroactive amnesia that
erased any memory of the crime. Unaware of the murders they carried out, they have now
returned to ordinary domestic life.
(c) The murdered residents and their children were, unknown to themselves, deep-cover agents of a foreign power. Their mission accomplished, the parents were ‘instructed’ to murder each other, and the children disappeared into the cellars of the foreign embassy before being spirited abroad.

(d) The parents were murdered by visitors from outer space seeking young human specimens.

(e) The parents were murdered by their own children (RW, 24-25).

Running Wild is full of very funny lists like this which collapse into cliché or absurdity. I disagree with Andrzej Gasiorek’s flat assertion, therefore, that ‘there is nothing funny about Running Wild.’ Ballard’s fait divers is, in contrast, an audacious experiment in surrealist black humour which (in the tradition of André Breton, Jarry, Guillaume Apollinaire and Jean Genet) employs comedy as a mobilising and eruptive force. A defense ‘against the objective reality of the external world, and a perversion of its representation,’ humour noir is a site of critical and imaginative resistance, the political dimensions of which were recognised and exploited by the surrealists. The po-faced tone with which Greville delivers his hypotheses, for instance, is undercut radically and ironically by the ridiculousness of their contents – botched terrorist activity, a bio-chemical accident, retroactive amnesia, psychological de-patterning (brainwashing) and alien abduction. Moreover, Greville’s incredulous denigration of ‘parricide’ to the most ‘outlandish’ of possibilities creates a comedic and critical jolt which, moving beyond the detective’s obtuseness, alerts the reader to a latent cultural logic which also refuses to see ‘the obvious’ (RW, 3). On a literal and symbolic level, parricide is such an affront to patriarchal authority, to conventional notions of ‘the family’ and to social propriety that the dominant cultural psyche buries unpalatable truths beneath the convenience of stereotype. ‘Too much emotional capital had,’ after all, ‘been invested in the notion of thirteen orphaned children’ (RW, 79).

Following Sigmund Freud’s reading of jokes as forms of psychological effectiveness which ‘set themselves up against an inhibiting and restricting power – which is now the critical judgement,’ Ballard’s fait divers employs the convulsive energies of surrealist black humour as a means of exposing and dismantling a prevailing social consciousness which flaunts a reified ideological process of semblance rather than substance.

Visions of Murder: Running Wild and the ‘Papin’ and Nozières affairs

Running Wild is a palimpsest of real and imagined terror. When Greville eventually identifies the Pangbourne children as the murderers, for instance, he invites comparison with the ‘Hungerford’ massacre, ‘the Baader-Meinhof gang, the French Action Directe or the Italian Red Brigades,’ ‘the Jonestown massacre,’ and the Manson ‘Family’ (RW, 19, 22, 81, 84,). For my reading of Ballard’s tale of parricide, though, it is pertinent at this stage to introduce two more murderous intertexts which
scandalised 1930s France, and which provided the surrealists with a source of intellectual and creative enquiry.

In February 1933, Christine and Léa Papin murdered their mistress, Mme Lancelin and her daughter, Geneviève, in a shocking display of domestic violence. Armed with a hammer, a kitchen-knife and a pewter-jug, the Papin sisters bludgeoned their mistresses, before mutilating their battered bodies. The suggestion (which would later come from psychoanalytical case studies) that the sisters’ heinous crime was of an oedipal nature was born out of one particularly gruesome detail: the servants had torn out their victims’ eyes whilst they were still alive and with their bare hands.\(^{15}\) If the Parisian bourgeoisie were shocked by the action of servants ‘rising up to attack the citadel of bourgeois privilege,’ then they were soon to witness an unprecedented threat which ‘came from within the very ranks of the respectable classes.’\(^{16}\) During the trial of the Papin sisters, Violette Nozières was arrested for the murder (by poison) of her father and for the attempted murder of her mother. Nozières’s claims that she had been the victim of a sexually abusive father incited accusations of ‘double-parricide’ from an outraged public. Not content with killing her father, this ‘vile’ and ‘promiscuous’ daughter also wanted to sully his memory.\(^ {17}\)

For the surrealists, the ‘Papin’ and ‘Nozières’ cases possessed a double resonance. Firstly, these young assassins joined the list of ‘surrealist anti-heroines’, keeping company with, amongst others, Germaine Berton, who assassinated Maurice Plateau, the ‘Action Française’ leader in 1923, and to whom the surrealists paid homage in the first issue of *La Révolution Surréaliste* (1924). In this visual collage a central image of Berton is surrounded by photographs of the surrealists and their progenitors (including Freud). The text at the bottom of the page reads, ‘It is woman who casts the biggest shadow or projects the greatest light in our dreams.’\(^ {18}\) Within the surrealist imagination, Berton, Nozières and the Papin sisters had retaliated poetically rather than criminally against the repressive social and political order. André Breton especially felt a ‘visceral commitment’ to Violette Nozières’s case, believing ‘that Monsieur Nozières, not his daughter, had been the guilty party.’ Even more important, for Breton, ‘was the bad light in which this affair seemed to put the bourgeois family institution.’ For the surrealist artist, ‘supporting Violette Nozières meant spitting in the face of the parents he still resented.’\(^ {19}\)

The second source of fascination for the surrealists lay in the prevailing textual response to the women’s transgressions. In the aftermath of the murders a miscellany of newspaper articles, medico-legal commentaries and psychoanalytical case studies emerged which tried, in varying ways, to locate these violent crimes within a socio-economic context. *Humanité* ran a series of newspaper articles – ‘Christine and Léa Papin Give the Reasons Why they Mortally Beat Their Mistresses’ and ‘The Murderesses of Le Mans Are the Victims of Exploitation and Servitude’ – which re-presented the case within a narrative of material deprivation.\(^ {20}\) As Jonathan Eburne points out, it was precisely the ‘challenge to the possibility of explaining, or justifying such violence as something fully conscious’ that made the Papin and Nozières affairs so ‘significant to surrealist political thought.’\(^ {21}\) Less interested in
class or political motives, the surrealists were more fascinated by the question of what ‘such an outburst of abject violence’ revealed about ‘motive, desire and breaches in the basic structure of every day reality.’

The surrealists responded to the Papin and Nozières affairs with characteristic imagination. In 1933 Breton collaborated with sixteen other artists (including Paul Eluard, René Magritte, Max Ernst, Man Ray, Hans Arp, Salvador Dalí, E.L.T. Messens) on the fait divers, Violette Nozières. A collection of poetry, prose, illustrations and photographs, this surrealist work asserted ‘the legitimacy of Nozières’s act as a strike for freedom, linking her parricide with a liberation from an economy of rape (the “viol” encoded in “Violette”) and from the repressive values of petit-bourgeois family life.’ In constructing their textual response to the case, the surrealists recycled certain elements from the fait divers rubric: press photographs were built into collages, circumstantial details (such as Monsieur Nozières’ pornography collection) appropriated from news reports were written provocatively into poems. Counter to the linearity of conventional crime narratives, Violette Nozières presented a series of unstable and equivocal narrative fragments which teased the rigidity of ratiocinative thought with the playfulness of associative anticipation.

Figure 1: The Papin sisters, ‘before’ and ‘after,’ Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution, 1933.

The surrealists rejoined official explanations of the Papin affair with equal insolence. Two photographs of the sisters, ‘before’ and ‘after,’ were published in Le Surréalisme au service de la Révolution with the short text: ‘They emerged fully armed from a song by Maldoror’ (1933) [fig. 1]. Gesturing to the gratuitous evil of Comte de Lautréamont’s Les Chants de Maldoror (1868), Paul Eluard and Benjamin Péret’s caption works contingently with the image in order to open analyses of
the Papin affair up to irrational forces. At first glance, the images invite a straightforward reading of radical transformation: docile submission has been corrupted somehow into diabolical subversion. Yet, when the images are reconsidered in conjunction with the text, a process of verbal and visual juxtaposition is initiated which invites further questioning: are the manifest signs of violence (in the second image) not also present, though latent, in the first? Calling for a re-examination of the transparency of the surface image, the surrealist fait divers accentuated the enigmatic, psychological depths of the Papin affair which the majority of media and medical commentators flattened into statements of motive and causality.

Ballard similarly incorporates visual images into his fait divers in order to excavate invisible social and psychological dimensions of the Pangbourne massacre. Although Running Wild is commonly known as a text-only work, it was published originally as an illustrated ‘novella,’ featuring six illustrations by Janet Woolley. Due presumably to financial restrictions, these visuals have fallen out of subsequent editions, but here I want to restore them to the critical frame [figs. 2 and 3]. In the first instance, it is worth noting how the colour has been drained from Woolley’s images. Although the reasons for using black and white copies of original colour prints (the book cover features a colour portrait of the thirteen child assassins) may, again, be financial, the presence of these monochrome plates is nevertheless open to figurative interpretation. Just as the ‘Police Video’ of Pangbourne Village uses a ‘minimalist style of camera-work’ which ‘exactly suits the subject matter, the shadowless summer sunlight and the almost blank façades of the expensive houses – everything is strangely blanched, drained of all emotion’ (RW, 4), so Woolley’s illustrations present chilling visions of murder.

Both illustrations return us, the readers, to the scenes of the crime, thus transforming the reading process into an act of witnessing. Admittedly, the initial impact of these illustrations on the reader is more comical than horrific. Resembling pictures from a comic-book or newspaper, Woolley’s drawings contrast markedly with Ballard’s psychologically realist prose. Indeed, the artist’s use of perspective coats these murder scenes with a veneer of innocence and harmlessness so that, at first glance, the diminutive assassins do not appear to pose any real threat. But appearances are clearly deceptive in Running Wild, and as the reader/witness looks more closely at these scenes, so our initial sense of distance breaks down. Against expectation, the tiny guns (they are smaller than Mrs Reade’s earrings and hairclip) which enter the visual frame are not, as perhaps first thought, toy pistols [fig. 2]. They are weapons of execution. The horrific dimension of Mr and Mrs Reade’s murder lies less in the method of assassination, however, and more in the fact that this heinous crime could only be executed so effectively and efficiently through a violation of love and trust: ‘both have been shot by assailants who have crept so close to them that the cutlery beside their napkins is undisturbed’ (RW, 9). As this snapshot of familial togetherness conveys, intimacy can also be the harbinger of death.
Figure 2: Janet Woolley, illustration for Ballard's *Running Wild*, 1988.

Figure 3: Janet Woolley, illustration for Ballard's *Running Wild*, 1988.
In mood, tone and perspective, fig. 3 is equally unnerving. The faces of the soon-to-be victim and the assassin are blank and emotionless; father and daughter return the reader’s gaze unflinchingly. Contradicting Greville’s initial speculations on the psychological profile of the killers, Mr Miller is not, we see, murdered by a ‘deranged loner,’ a ‘crazed gunman’ or a ‘thrill killer’ (RW, 20). He is assassinated, instead, in the privacy of his own bathtub by Marion Miller, his eight year-old daughter, and by Robin Miller, his thirteen year old son, who is concealed from view. The literal (Mr Miller is ‘well over six feet tall, a former amateur boxer,’ RW, 55) and symbolic enormity of the children’s crime is conveyed through disproportion; the father figure looms large in the foreground, unaware of the oedipal revolt emerging from behind the shower curtain. Moreover, the depiction of oversized objects – a sponge, a bar of soap, a tube of toothpaste, a toothbrush holder and brushes (which are as big as, or bigger, than Marion) – disorientates the reader/witness to the extent that we are encouraged to reassess the function of these uncanny objects. Reminiscent of Magritte’s and Paul Nougé’s Homage aux Soeurs Papins (1934), in which a jug is deliberately misplaced on the floor in order to accentuate its unexpected place within a ‘litany of household torture devices used in the Papin affair,’ Ballard’s fait divers employs the surrealist technique of dépaysement in order to expose and explore an invisible logic of violence which resides below the unassuming surface of the quotidian.27 Holding a hairdryer, ‘with a pistol grip’ (RW, 53), Marion Miller will drop the household weapon into her father’s bathwater. Then Robin Miller will emerge from the adjacent bedroom and stab his ‘stunned’ father with a ‘kitchen knife’ (RW, 54). Within this process of re-contextualisation, the means for exacting violence and cruelty are never far from reach.

Revealing what Barthes terms ‘a false innocence of objects; the object hides behind its inertia as thing, but only to emit an even stronger causal force, which may derive from itself or elsewhere,’ Running Wild calls for an investigative reading process which is aleatoric and contingent.28 The Pangbourne mystery is not ‘constituted by a quantitively accumulated force, but rather by a mobile energy, active in small doses.’29 Greville’s meticulous accumulation of forensic evidence – the parents’ reading lists, ‘an A-Z of once modish names from Althusser and Barthes to Husserl and Perls’; displays of ‘electronic affection,’ such as ‘Well done Jeremy!’ which intrude across the childrens’ computer screens; a ‘mutilated copy of Jean Piaget’s classic text on the rearing of children’ (RW, 35, 36, 47) – remains, therefore, inconsequential to the investigative process proper. Although our myopic detective finally accepts the ‘strange logic’ of parricide, he remains reluctant to immerse himself in its complex psychopathologies. Subsequently, he forges an alternative, yet still rational and coherent narrative, out of a miscellany of information:

By a grim paradox, the instrument of the parents’ deaths was the devoted and caring regime which they had instituted at Pangbourne village. The children had been brainwashed, by the unlimited tolerance and understanding that had erased all freedom and all trace of emotion …
Altogether, the children existed in a state closely akin to sensory deprivation … The same schizophrenic detachment from reality can be seen in the members of the Manson gang, in Mark Chapman and Lee Harvey Oswald, and in the guards at the Nazi death-camps. One has no sympathy for Manson and the others – an element of choice existed for them all – but the Pangbourne children had no choice. Unable to express their emotions or respond to those of the people around them, suffocated under a mantle of praise and encouragement, they were trapped for ever within a perfect universe. In a totally sane society, madness is the only freedom (*RW*, 82-84).

In an ironic intertextual reversal of materialist readings of the Papin affair, Greville argues that the Pangbourne massacre is an expression of imposed emotional and material excess. The murderers, within this formulation, are victims of atomisation, the death of the imagination, the rationalisation of desire, alienation and affectlessness. Echoing Theodor Adorno’s and Max Horkheimer’s anti-Enlightenment proposition, ‘Yet the fully enlightened earth radiates disaster triumphant,’ it is tempting to accept Greville’s revised logic at face value.30 Indeed, in his review of *Running Wild*, James Marcus was so convinced by Greville’s final analyses that he questioned the efficacy of Ballard’s text as a social critique on the basis of them: ‘The assumptions *Running Wild* is supposed to challenge,’ he criticised, ‘such as the fairy-tale version of family happiness, haven’t been widely accepted for decades.’31 Seduced by the textual surface, Marcus does not read *Running Wild* beyond what he sees as the limits of its Enlightenment critique. Consequently this myopic critic, like the detective, fails to see the bigger picture.

I agree with Dennis Foster and Andrzej Gasiorek when they observe that Greville’s concluding thesis is yet another comfortable delusion which allows society to avert its eyes from further offensive truths.32 More than a rebellion against a coercive regime of tolerance, the Pangbourne massacre is also this ‘social order’s most perfect expression.’33 Irreducible to one cause, the Pangbourne massacre should be read within a network of complex and contradictory logics at work within late capitalist society. The meticulously planned and executed killings (which took place within ‘ten minutes’) would not have been possible, for instance, without either the vast network of surveillance and security equipment on the estate, or the parents’ own ruthless systems of observation – ‘Scarcely a minute of the children’s lives had not been intelligently planned’ (*RW*, 32). Equally, the killers’ escape in blood-stained clothes could only have gone unnoticed in a community blinded by social disconnection – no one would have noticed ‘a party of jogging teenagers, while the drying blood would soon have resembled mud-splashes of an arduous obstacle race’ (*RW*, 103).

Furthermore, Greville’s revised yet interminably reductive reading of events conceals another manifestation of the text’s prevailing logic of denial. Comparisons cannot be made, he insists, between the morally reprehensible crimes of Manson, Chapman, Oswald and Hitler, and the Pangbourne children’s cries for ‘freedom.’ Persistently short-sighted in its scope and emotive in its rhetorical
expression, Greville’s theory is problematic for two reasons. Firstly, his propensity to consider historical atrocities collectively and relatively demonstrates an uncritical historico-cultural perspective which collapses complex knowledges and psychopathologies into ready-made and consumable profiles. Secondly, by divesting the children from any sense of agency, Greville exercises a doubly-repressive logic which seals the Pangbourne mystery off from both conscious and unconscious activity. Ironically, though, the detective’s palatable explanations actually raise a number of unpalatable questions about history, agency and moral responsibility which the reader cannot ignore: if the children ‘had no choice,’ then to what extent is Manson’s moral indictment of a capitalist society that produced and nurtured his psychopathology justified, albeit unwittingly, by Greville’s analyses? What kinds of ethical tensions does this throw up for the reader? And, what about the possibility that the children acted randomly, and without motive. Greville considers this difficult proposition only to dismiss, and by extension contain, it within a narrative of insanity. But can we shut down the unconscious energies of ‘the Pangbourne massacre’ so readily?

Uncertainty and ambiguity are clearly anathema to the myopic detective. Just as the authorities invest in a clean-up operation which will fill in ‘the deep ruts left in the finely trimmed grass’ and thus restore ‘the once-immaculate surface’ of the Pangbourne estate (RW, 5), so Greville’s closing remarks attempt to contain the murders within a narrative which society will accept uncritically and subsequently forget. Yet the challenges and complexities of Running Wild ask that we, as readers, resist convenient surface narratives and immerse ourselves instead in the text’s poetics of ambiguity. Despite Greville’s repeated efforts, the Pangbourne mystery remains, and indeed has to remain unsolved. For it is the function of the fait divers to preserve ‘at the heart of contemporary society an ambiguity of the rational and the irrational, of the intelligible and the unfathomable.’34 It is the evocation of mystery, rather than the revelation of it which Ballard’s surreal detective fiction demands.

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1 The written series Fantômas was composed by Pierre Souvestre and Marcell Alain between 1912 and 1914. Louis Feuillade’s serialisation of Fantômas (1913-14) thrilled and disturbed a cinematic audience which included Apollinaire (Fantômas was his favourite film); Suzi Gablik, Magritte, London 1970, 41-65.


4 Barthes, Critical Essays, 70.

In his own description of Juve, Magritte concludes that ‘Juve has failed again this time. One means remains for him to achieve his end: Juve will have to get into one of Fantômas’s dreams – he will try to take part as one of its characters.’ René Magritte, *Distances* (March 1928), cited in Gablik, *Magritte*, 48.


In *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution*, Aragon wrote that in 1931 Lewis Carroll’s work was written at the same time as the English massacres in Ireland. He added that *Les Chants de Maldoror* and *Une saison en enfer* were written in the same decade, suggesting that we make the connection with the crushing of the Commune. Breton’s *Anthologie de l’humour noir* (1939) was also published in the face of Fascist ascendency in Europe. Breton perceived humour ‘as a powerful force for revolt, as the origin of an avalanche, the political repercussions of which could go on indefinitely,’ Jacqueline Chénieux-Gendron, *Surrealism*, trans. Vivien Folkenflik, New York 1990, 90-91.


Eburne, ‘Surrealism Noir,’ 101.

Eburne, ‘Surrealism Noir,’ 95.


Eluard and Péret published their own series of *fait divers* called ‘Revue de la Presse’ (Reviews of the Press) in the May 1933 double issue of *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution*. ‘Revue de la Presse’ is translated and reprinted in Eburne’s essay, ‘Surrealism Noir,’ 98.

I am following Eburne’s in-depth analysis of the double portrait of Christine and Léa Papin, ‘Surrealism Noir,’ 91-93.
29 Barthes, ‘The Structure of the Fait Divers,’ 190
34 Barthes, ‘Structure of the Fait Divers,’ 194.

Realising the Endless:
The work of Jürgen Mayer H. and the legacy of Frederick Kiesler

Joseph Cory

Abstract
Frederick Kiesler realised that the perception of our physical reality is triggered by the swinging pendulum of the psyche. More than eighty years after the surrealist revolution and Kiesler’s unrealised tempo-spatial concept of architecture, his spirit and his never-ending need to reveal the unconscious in his art and spatial design can still be found in contemporary architecture. This paper examines and analyses the subconscious relationship between space and the psyche in the different design schemes of Kiesler and the contemporary architect Mayer H., showing that the theory of the ‘endless’ is about to be realised and that Kiesler’s ‘endless’ space can finally become a reality.

The Jewish architect Frederick Kiesler, a prominent figure in the surrealist group, was never able to realise his dream of the Endless House. Even when he wrote to Breton in 1959 that ‘finally, after thirty years of hibernation in New York, not me, but the world around me has awakened and I am able to do things while I had always hoped for and never was quite able to reach out for,’ the ‘endless’ project had still not come to fruition.1 Is it possible that 40 years after Kiesler’s continued efforts to realise his vision, the Metropol Parasol project designed by the German architect Jürgen Mayer H. succeeded to put the spirit and vision that Kiesler spoke of into a real form?

In order to understand the unconscious relations between Mayer H. and Kiesler and the manifestation of the ‘endless’ in the Metropol Parasol project one must look at the broad spectrum of their work. In contrast to the growing attention that Kiesler’s work has received in recent years as the inspiration for many digital architects, whose work formally resembles Kiesler’s spatial vocabulary, the relationship between Mayer H.’s architecture and Kiesler’s legacy deserves a deeper and more complex reading.2 The resonance between them can be related more to the vision Salvador Dalí had in 1935 of the rise of a great ‘soft’ period of flexible, sticky and convulsive buildings that would not only be places to live in, but places that would serve our innermost burning dreams. Mayer H., like Kiesler before him, had to spend years convincing the world that art, architecture and technology could be as one. He has described his early years when he had to hold his ground and not give up on his dreams or end up working in a ‘no man’s land’.3 In his continual efforts to transform his dream space into a concrete space, Kiesler spoke in similar terms:

Here again looms the great question for me: to build or not to build. I feel like an imaginary totem pole built of ice blocks held together by red-hot iron bars, all enwrapped in screaming steam. Have I to quit the job because the compromise is too great, or am I to
keep on fighting to save something that most probably would no longer pertain to my basic ideas, but only be a satisfaction to the committee and perhaps of some financial gain for me? I feel so often like a beggar who is truly rich and extends his hand for alms only to give pleasure to the giver.  

Mayer H. was able gradually to establish a unique architectural language that sees in a piece of furniture much more than we are used to seeing. Like the experiments of Kiesler before him, he is well aware of the possibilities of using and adjusting a single object. Using the same free forms made by cutting and pressing techniques that Kiesler (in his object designs) and Jean Arp (in his minimal paintings and reliefs) were keen on (while under the influence of the surrealist group), Mayer H. can show us how complexity is achieved through simple means leaving our imagination to work overtime and letting inner impulses and the laws of chance complete the design. Kiesler, in the surrealist gallery he designed for Peggy Guggenheim in 1942 (for the Art of this Century exhibition), revealed his multi-purpose furniture that could stand any way up, functioning simultaneously as a bench, a table, a sculpture, a display area and a chair among its other eighteen uses [fig. 1]. The innumerable uses of Mayer H.’s works also interact constantly with the user and the observer, loading the piece of furniture...
with our ever-changing desires [fig. 2]. In the work of both, there is a great and important need to feel and touch their objects. In this way, our perception and understanding is deeper compared to the information we get through just looking. Even a simple single object can become organic, functional, modular, adaptable, meaningful and in a way ‘endless,’ even, due to its continuous surface and multiple possibilities. Recently, Mayer H. used the same principles of his interior design upon an entire building (in the case of the food factory and curiosity centre of the Danfoss project) blurring even more the traditional distinctions we would have expected to find between the functions of different kinds of space.

Figure 2: Jürgen Mayer H., Stylepark Lounge at UIA Congress, Berlin, 2002. Photograph by Uwe Walter, courtesy the J. Mayer H. archive, Berlin.

Kiesler’s own approach prefigured this challenge to spatial distinctions, as the following passage from his writings on the Endless House shows:

The traditional art object, be it painting, a sculpture, a piece of architecture, is no longer seen as an isolated entity, but must be considered within the context of this expanding environment. The environment becomes equally as important as the object, if not more so, because the object breathes into the surrounding and also inhales the realities of the environment no matter in what space, close or wide apart, open air or indoor. No object, of nature or art, exists without environment, As a matter of fact, the object itself can expand to a degree where it becomes its own environment (see my wooden galaxy exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art in 1951). Thus we have to shift our focus from the object to the environment and the only way we can bind them together is through an objective, a clarification of life’s purpose – otherwise the whole composite picture in time and space will fall apart.5

Early on in his career Kiesler too wrote in his book Contemporary Art Applied to the Store and its Display (1930) about our need to stimulate desire and to blur the distinctions between everything. In this very theatrically-informed text Kiesler asked, for instance, ‘why doesn't the show window hold, instead of display- a play? A stage play. Where Mr. Hat and Miss Glove are partners. The window is a

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veritable peepshow stage. Let the street be your auditorium with its ever-changing audience.’ This was the beginning of his design philosophy, which we will continue to explore in this article.

Figure 3: Jürgen Mayer H., Octobar 2, 2005. Photograph courtesy the J. Mayer H. archive, Berlin.

Figure 4: Frederick Kiesler, Surrealist Gallery, Art of this Century Gallery, New York, 1942. Photograph Kiesler Foundation archive © Frederick and Lillian Kiesler Private Foundation, Vienna, 2007.

The use of a large scale, reflecting this expansion of the object into its wider environment, is apparent in Mayer H.’s projects Octobar 1 and Octobar 2, the first instances in his work of breaking the barriers between floor, wall and ceiling [fig. 3]. These efforts contain again a remote echo of Kiesler’s pioneering work in his Art of this Century exhibition design for Peggy Guggenheim [fig. 4].
Mayer H. only once made a direct conscious reference to Kiesler, in his In Heat installation [fig. 5]. The architect placed a text on his website that openly states this inspiration:

Stems from Friedrich Kiesler’s design for the 1947 Blood Flames exhibition at the Hugo Gallery, New York. His radical new concept proposed merging art, architecture and the viewer into a continuation of painted walls and floors which hosts and interconnects the artwork. In Heat develops this confusion of art, viewer and space into an even more radical way by introducing thermosensitive coating as interactive paintings where the viewer, creating a temperature shadow by touching, melts into the overall exhibition design. Everything gets flattened into an architectural surface with depth in time.6

Figure 5: Jürgen Mayer H., In Heat installation at Henry Urbach Architecture, New York City, April-May 2005. Photograph by Mauro Restiffe, courtesy the J. Mayer H. archive, Berlin.
This gesture to Kiesler’s Blood Flames exhibition from 1947 [fig. 6] is a fresh and technologically-informed reinterpretation of Kiesler’s philosophy, trying to merge everything together, including the viewer. Like in the surrealist game of the ‘exquisite corpse,’ Mayer H. continues from where Kiesler had left off, making a new but yet connected spatial drawing, letting the visitors proceed with this game without being fully aware of previous artistic attempts. The viewer becomes conscious not only of installation history, technology, art and architecture, but mostly of him- or herself. The viewer becomes a participant, while the thin line between Kiesler and Mayer H. disappears, bridging past and present into a collective work of art. The welding of walls, floors and ceilings consumes everything that comes into the architectural site, including the observer, who now becomes observed in turn as Kiesler originally intended:

The wall, the floor, the ceiling, are no longer segregated planes, they flow into one another, colors and lighting, breathing heavily and lightly; so-called paintings no longer created with standard forms and planes, sculptures no longer on pedestals, nor harbored in niches, like frozen custard, nor conglomerations of parts, animal and mechanical, motorized or made mortal, nor pictures hung along walls like laundry on washlines. No. There is a breaking down of barriers of separation between the constituents of architecture, which itself is
contained within the flow of nature’s forces. Thus the creative genius of man can express itself once more with the power of his own time.\footnote{7}

Kiesler’s intention was that all of us, the inheritors of chaos, must become the architects of a new unity in his exhibition projects. The dramatic way in which he wanted us to view paintings on display is being enhanced in Mayer H.‘s work, as the viewer becomes the object of display itself, thus fulfilling Kiesler’s desire to overcome the failure of modernism as he saw it, asking for example ‘Are those your questions? Whether the walls have ornaments or not? We couldn't care less! Skip the walls.’\footnote{8}

Experiencing architecture through motion in space is the ultimate challenge to an architect. Mayer H.’s architecture is becoming a moving phenomenon through different mediums such as light, shadow, temperature sensitive surfaces, water, wind and so on. By making experiments with ‘technology that is activated by nature’ and ‘nature that is activated by technology’\footnote{9} Mayer H. is subconsciously using a surreal method of ambiguity and reversed meaning such as one can find in René Magritte’s or Dalí’s work. Using such a method allows one to continue to explore new territories, ask new questions and doubt existing conventions. For example, the sheltering roof that is supposed to keep us away from rain in his Municipal Building project, becomes the producer of rain [fig. 7]:

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{image.png}
\caption{Jürgen Mayer H., Pitterpatterns, Stadt.haus Scharnhauser Park, Ostfildern, Germany, 1998-2002: computer animated artificial rain dripping from underneath the flat cantilevered roof, courtesy the J. Mayer H. archive, Berlin.}
\end{figure}
Light and water animations are an integral part of the stadt.haus and include a subtle relationship between nature and technology. Framing the main entrance visitors will have to walk through a computer animated artificial rain dripping from underneath the flat cantilevered roof. Wind.light is a light installation next to the stadt.haus. Hanging glass fibre cables project points of light onto the ground, animated by the movement of the wind. Built-in webcams collect all light points with a surveillance software and send a life image of its dynamic constellation into the stadt.haus and onto the website of the City of Ostfildern. The stadt.haus and square construct a new public building prototype by offering simultaneity of city life in real, mediated and virtual space.¹⁰

This is truly a surreal technique (one that Dalí used inside his famous Rainy Taxi for the 1938 International Exhibition of Surrealism) that makes the initial interaction between the viewer and the building a completely surprising mixture of real and unreal effects. This project captures the genuine and immediate response of the viewer’s unconsciousness like a kind of automatic architecture, attempting to break the barrier between man and his subconscious – in this honest moment that is not influenced by formalistic boundaries and controls one can find one's true self. The dadaist notion of a playful environment is here combined with a surrealist notion of mythical thought. Kiesler too experimented with similar effects: in many of his conceptual sketches for the Shrine of the Book, in the heart of the shrine was a water-jet that was supposed to rise from a bronze vase (above the main display case of biblical manuscripts) through a hole in a dome and beyond it into the open air, running down on the outside surface of the dome that was cooled in the opposite direction by surrounding water-sprays. Len Pitkowsky, who was for many years Kiesler's assistant and also worked on this project, told me in an interview of 2005 that all the inner plumbing was already in place but that this idea to have water running so close to the fragile scrolls was not approved at the last minute.

Returning to a smaller scale, the E-gram project, which Mayer H. also calls the Glass House, is a way of bringing materiality back into the terrain of the conceptual [fig. 8]. This little glass cube holds within it a dreamlike space that was made through light (laser beams) produced by programmed information, causing microscopic cracks in an unreachable parallel dimension. One can even suggest that the effect is like looking into one of Joseph Cornell's boxes, Alberto Giacometti's Palace at 4 a.m., or at one of Man Ray's roentgen-technique photographs known as Rayographs. The effect is certainly of a building that shows more than meets the eye. Unlike the random strings in Duchamp’s installation for the First Papers of Surrealism (1942) or the cracks that occurred accidentally in his Large Glass revealing the importance of chance – the E-gram cracks are carefully programmed giving the modern designer the elusive feeling of controlling chaos.
It is important to mention that Kiesler was the first to promote the significance of Duchamp’s *Large Glass*. Kiesler also wrote about the discovery of x-rays in his article ‘Design-Correlation.’  He himself had a sustained concern with the notion of continuity held together by invisible nothingness (what he termed ‘galaxies’), while this ‘nothing’ was nothing else but the breath of the cosmos itself, as he saw it. Even before 1930 he wrote about windows being the most direct method of human contact, because we live mainly by the eye that observes, calculates and advises us about things quickly. Ten years later while inventing his ‘vision machine,’ he wrote:

> Through this demonstration we learn that neither light, nor eye, nor brain, alone or in association, can see. But rather, we see only through the total coordination of human experiences; and even then, it is our own conceived image, and not really the actual object which we perceive. We learn, therefore, that we see by creative ability and not by mechanical reproduction. The transformation of light impulse reflected from the real object through man’s physiology creates an image, which hides the original object. All parts of this object, built from transparent synthetic and other materials, are connected mechanically, except the object, which remains a separate unit. From the beginning to the end, a talking apparatus gives a synchronized explanation with the unfolding of the process in demonstration.\(^\text{12}\)

Kiesler was obsessed with his ‘vision machine,’ which was also influenced by the historic *camera obscura* technique of projecting a scene of nature through a minute hole. He wrote in 1937 that these kinds of experiments were based on the desire of man to project himself beyond the moment of his being.
Kiesler, seemingly able to pre-empt future artistic developments, promoted novel ideas that entailed new ways of representing spatial environments, as in his support for Duchamp’s *Large Glass*. The following extended passage makes this clear:

Duchamp’s ‘Big Glass’ [sic] created 1912-1923 in New York City’s Fourteenth Street, known at that time only to a small group, is in 1937 acclaimed by the progressive professionals throughout the world. It surpasses in creative ingenuity any painting since the great Illusion-Builder SEURAT, anticipating as well as continuing the line of development Picasso-Miro-Dali, X., Y., Z. It will fit any description such as: abstract, constructivist, real, super-and-surrealist without being affected. It lives on its own eugenics. It is nothing short of being the masterpiece of the first quarter of twentieth-century painting. It is architecture, sculpture, and painting in ONE. To create such an X-ray painting of space, materiae and psychic, one needs as a lens (a) oneself, well focused and dusted off, (b) the subconscious as camera obscura, (c) a super-consciousness as sensitizer, and (d) the clash of this trinity to illuminate the scene. The glass plate cracked 1931, cutting strokes across the pane that would have broken any other composition, but not this singular masterpiece of tectonic integration. Strange for factualist is the magic of subconscious creation with which the outburst of broken glass-streaks which now veins the whole picture was anticipated by Marcel Duchamp. A preparatory drawing of 1914 … already showed radiating lines abstractly superimposed upon the reality of the main theme of the design. But it seems to me that not until the breakage had actually occurred was the cycle of perfect fusion of the subconscious image with its realization completed, and the time ripe to give its message to the public.\(^\text{13}\)

Mayer H. with his rich artistic background also seems to deal with new ways of capturing building space, in certain works evoking a feel of miniaturisation like that of the small Duchamp models from his *Boîte-en-valise* series. This technique of representing an existing work of art on an even smaller and private scale holds within it many layers and associations which cannot be found in the original full scale building. Just as it was impossible for André Breton to consider a picture as anything but a window, we might wonder onto what Mayer H.’s work looks out. The glazed *E-gram* brings magic back into architecture and gives us the ability to see through the window into the inside of our intentions, following Breton’s image of a transparent dwelling: ‘I myself shall continue living in my glass house where you can always see who comes to call; where everything hanging from the ceiling and on the walls stays where it is as if by magic, where I sleep nights in a glass bed, under glass sheets, where who I am will sooner or later appear etched by a diamond.’\(^\text{14}\)
All of the above brings us to explore more closely the hidden layers behind Mayer's *Metropol Parasol* project in Seville [fig. 9]. Mayer H. reveals the origins of this project on his website:

Metropol Parasol is the new icon project for Sevilla, a place of identification and to articulate Sevilla's role as one of Spain’s most fascinating cultural destinations. Metropol Parasol explores the potential of the Plaza de la Encarnacion to become the new contemporary urban centre. Its role as a unique urban space within the dense fabric of the medieval inner city of Sevilla allows for a great variety of activities such as memory, leisure and commerce. A highly developed infrastructure helps to activate the square, making it an attractive destination for tourists and locals alike.
The Metropol Parasol scheme with its large mushroom like structures offers an archeological site, a farmers market, an elevated plaza, multiple bars and restaurants underneath and inside the parasols, as well as a panorama terrace on the very top of the parasols. Thought of as a light metal structure, the parasols grow out of the archeological excavation site into a contemporary landmark. The columns become prominent points of access to the museum below as well as to the plaza and panorama deck above, defining a unique relationship between the historical and the contemporary city. Metropol Parasol’s mixed-use character initiates a dynamic development for culture and commerce in the heart of Sevilla.\textsuperscript{15}

The very location of this project in the heart of Seville on top of an archeological site, its duality and its surprising relations between past and present, bring to mind Freud’s writings on Pompeii’s remains and rebirth as a parallel to the subconscious mind, as well as the surrealist approach towards romantic ruins. It was the pre-surrealist poet Lautréamont (Isidore Ducasse) who wrote long before Freud in Les Chants de Maldoror that it is important to look at the ruins of cities but it is even more important to look into the ruins of the human being, suggesting that the human soul is more intriguing than concrete reality. The past will always haunt the present from the surrealist as well as from the psychoanalyst point of view. Dalí even selected a ruined theatre to house his museum in Figueres.\textsuperscript{16} Benjamin Péret published in Minotaure in 1939 a wonderful article called ‘Ruines: Ruine des Ruines,’ in which he hoped that one day in the future a strange dinosaur skeleton-like ruin revealed from the earth would turn out to be nothing less than the Eiffel tower itself [fig. 10]. For these surrealists it was important to forget and to neglect the most amazing things in order to rediscover them again at a later time.

Figure 10: Church ruins, Dobrokoz, Hungary, Minotaure 12-13, 1939,165
Kiesler saw modern (machine-age) houses as living ruins – one box next to another, one box below and another above, proliferating until they grew into skyscraper-tumours, suffocating all the life from the city and in a way making our modern existence like the aftermath of Pompeii, a way of ‘living’ without noticing that we are already dead:

What are our houses but coffins towering up from the earth into the air? One storey, two storeys – a thousand storeys. Walled up on two sides, on ten sides. Stone entombed – or wood, clay, concrete. Coffins with airholes.

Cemeteries have more air for the skeletons of their dead than our cities for the lungs of their living. Each grave has its lawn, its piece of meadow, a gravelled path to separate it from its neighbors. Each grave an islet of green. Each his own master: each his own settlement.

And our cities? walls, walls, WALLS... We will have NO MORE WALLS, these armories for body and soul, this whole armorized civilization; with or without ornament. We want:

1. Transformation of the surrounding area of space into cities.
2. Liberation from the ground, abolition of the static axis.
3. No walls, no foundations.
4. A system of spans (tension) in free SPACE.
5. Creation of new kinds of living, and, through them, the demands which will remould society.

We are satiated with architecture. We want no new editions, be they ever so well contrived. Instead of the old bedizzened single-faced models, plain four-faced models; for baroque curves, straight lines; for ogival windows, rectangular windows. The expert is bankrupt.

What interests everyone is: how does one LIVE among these curved or straight walls? from what sort of life, of NEW life, do these four or x faces arise?

In reaction against its state at the time, Kiesler thought that architecture should be a kind of magic – a creation of life and a creation of freedom. He wished that the outer and inner worlds should meet in architecture. Kiesler, like Lautréamont and many other surrealists, realised that the human body itself is the most extraordinary universe. He claimed for instance that his Endless House merited this name because ‘... all ends meet, and meet continuously. It is endless like the human body – there is no beginning and no end to it. The “Endless” is rather sensuous, more like the female body in contrast to sharp-angled male architecture. All ends meet in the “Endless” as they meet in life. Life’s rhythms are cyclical ... They touch one another with the kiss of Time.’
A long-neglected archeological site in Seville is being rediscovered, reborn and reshaped in Mayer H.’s project. The cave-like feeling of the curved inner space of Mayer H.’s project, starred with infiltrating light, evokes the same spatial and social questions that Kiesler asked while working on his *Endless House* [fig. 11]. Kiesler once said that archeology is the art of digging out the past, while architecture is the art of digging the future into the present: ‘One is digging out, the other is digging in. The archeologist can never tell about the future or the present, but the artist can – and will.’

Like in the work of a skilled psychologist who unveils different layers while trying to get to the bottom of the patient’s problem, the needle point approach of the *Metropol Parasol* is not apparently damaging the site, and is trying even to heal the wounds inflicted by time on this historical urban setting. We can see in Mayer H.’s work that the voids play the same rule as the mass of the building, reminding us again of Kiesler’s approach to void and space:

Space, so hard to define, is so translucent in its endlessness that until coagulated into solid form, it cannot be perceived. Space in nature always seems to be a void – an emptiness encompassing solid bodies. The endlessness of space once had meaning only in connection with the ‘outer cosmos.’ But modern research taught us that space can also be endless in the inner sanctum of the micro-atom.

In regard to the cave-like feeling created in his work, Kiesler himself wrote in his *Manifesto on Correalism* (1947):

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**Figure 11: Frederick Kiesler, *Model of Endless House*, 1959, Cement and wire mesh, 96.5 x 243.8 x 106.7 cm. Photograph Kiesler Foundation archive © Frederick and Lillian Kiesler Private Foundation, Vienna, 2007.**
The magnetism that held us together is gone, and our force of attraction is exhausted. Backtrack. Let us go back within ourselves and become cave dwellers. We would be able to scrawl our beliefs on the walls once again. For all caves look alike and all scratchings are similar. Then we will live together! The walled cells will become a continuous support for a boundless edifice.

Giving back life to a historical place or culture is indeed a great responsibility for an architect, who must use all of his or her sociological and psychological skills to merge the past reborn with the people of the ever-changing present. Kiesler dedicated his work to this, and hoped others would follow this concept of rebirth:

I wonder if one could find a plastic expression for the idea of ‘rebirth’ – that is, an architectural concept that would make visitors feel the necessity for each person to renew himself while yet on this earth. To give birth to oneself – not to be satisfied with the birth by a mother, but to re-create one’s own being in the image of his own life experience. This is not, of course, rebirth after death, but rebirth during one’s very own lifetime. Perhaps, a Sanctuary of Silence, with the flow and return of water suggesting to everyone the Second Coming of himself. Such an architecture would indeed be worth searching for.21

On the conscious and visual level, the arches that Mayer H. is using in his Seville project are linked to the gothic curves of the nearby cathedral or to the bent trees near the site, as the architect himself pointed out in recent interviews with me. One can even relate them to the work of Antoni Gaudí. Mayer H. adds his interpretation to these historical layers by deforming and transforming the original cathedral into what he calls an ‘open democratic cathedral,’ a structure that is open, all-embracing and connects to the open sky and to local history.22 Time is being revealed here through patterns of light penetrating the continuous structural canopy of a very light latticework (unlike the ribbed concrete walls of Kiesler’s Shrine). The openings are mediators between the viewer and the environment. The light that passes through is in the viewer’s mind a constant reminder of nature and its constant flux. Kiesler’s hope was that the atmosphere in his ‘endless’ structures would be characterised by processes of flowing, opening, softness, and inhabitation, and that the feeling of being inside his Endless House would be like living inside a sculpture that was changing every second with the light. I dare to say that a similar feeling will be achieved in Mayer H.’s Metropol Parasol. The alchemical feeling of a structure ever changing through light suggests that architecture should not be only about completion and perfection but rather about constant experiencing and searching. Mayer H.’s strong social vision of architecture as a gift to the people and the environment reflects the surrealists’ and Kiesler’s vision of a quest for total equality and humanity.
A knowledge of Kiesler’s philosophy of the ‘endless,’ his time-space concept of architecture, can help us to read more layers into the Metropol Parasol [fig. 12]. Kiesler’s work is derived from his conception that art and architecture must express the act of living inside time and space. Therefore the spectator of his work must be inspired to participate in it, both actively and passively, as he liked to say. Kiesler understood intuitively the strength of the oval shape and tried with no real success to anchor this feeling for experimental architecture in concrete forms. The walls of his ‘endless’ projects became invitations into new spaces that are often read as architectural wombs (corresponding to the concept of rebirth). The Endless House was for Kiesler the last sanctuary for man. Returning to Mayer H.’s Metropol Parasol – if it is possible to compare a project for a domestic dwelling with a public building – the effect of freeing the ground by putting the entire structure on pillars, together with the floating cloud forms and intertwining promenade on top, can be considered as a contemporary representation of the principles of Kiesler’s Endless House. Mayer H.’s innovative structure is a subconscious updating of Kiesler’s unidentified theoretical cloud, fixing it in everyday reality without losing out or making compromises, in this collision between the ideal world and the real world.

To become one with nature was one of Kiesler’s goals in his Endless House sketches that in my opinion is being finally fulfilled. Mayer H. embraces in his project nature, technology, art and design as well as communication with the people who are at the centre of all architecture. While working on the Shrine of the Book Kiesler wrote in 1958: ‘The Dead Sea Scrolls unfold a new life for me,
architecturally speaking – demanding a blunt reality, not a theory … Evidently a new architecture in spirit, form and materials will have to be found. I must retire to the no man’s land of my inner sanctum waiting for guidance. Only a belief, and not the intellect, will help to find a solution. Kiesler did his best to retain his notion of the ‘endless’ in his last masterpiece, but this project still only reflected a fragment of his entire design philosophy. Mayer H. is able to realise fifty years later this dream of the ‘endless’ by simply knowing when these complex ideas need to be frozen and applied using feasible materials and tangible spaces. By knowing when the ‘endless’ must reach its end and where theory must become a reality, Mayer H. enables us to appreciate it more, to understand it better and to capture a small piece of the ‘endless’ in his own timeless architecture.

Surrealism was an attempt to use the mechanisms of inspiration and imagination scientifically, in order to explore the world of dreams and that of repressed desires, and to apply the conclusions of this investigation to concrete reality. This article has briefly shown how well surrealist artists (long before modern architects) used different methods of revealing the subconscious in art, interior design and even architecture. Bernard Tschumi claimed in an interview with myself of 2005 that in his opinion architecture was not ready at the time to explore the spaces of the unconscious. But is architecture capable of exploring the spaces of the unconscious now? After analysing the subconscious and historical relations especially to Kiesler’s work, I can draw my conclusion that the spatial ideals of Mayer H.’s Metropol Parasol, together with other examples of his contemporary work, are deeply rooted in the surrealist past while pointing to the future, showing that space and psyche are always connected and it is the duty of the architect to rediscover this link. Like a true alchemist, Mayer H., just like Kiesler before him, is able to melt architecture into a shiny surrealist gold realising not only his own but also our own dreams.
1 Letter from Frederick Kiesler to André Breton, 10.07.59, archive of the Austrian Frederick and Lillian Kiesler Private Foundation, Vienna.


3 Interview with Jürgen Mayer H. by Joseph Cory, Berlin, 23.03.06.


5 Kiesler, Inside the Endless House, 573.

6 http://www.jmayerh.de/home.htm. (10.05.06)

7 Kiesler, Inside the Endless House, 157.

8 Kiesler, Rethinking the Endless Symposium, Witte de With Cahier 6, July 1997, 73.

9 Interview with Mayer H. by Joseph Cory, Jerusalem, 25.04.06.

10 http://www.jmayerh.de/home.htm. (10.05.06)


12 Kiesler, Rethinking the Endless Symposium, 85.


14 André Breton, Nadja, London 1999, 18.

15 http://www.jmayerh.de/home.htm. (10.05.06)

16 ‘Here is your new museum. It is a ready made!’ said Duchamp to Dalí according to a statement by Morse from his unfinished essays and writings on the theme of ‘Dali and Science,’ archives of the Salvador Dalí museum in Saint Petersburg, Florida.


19 Kiesler, Inside the Endless House, 32.

20 Kiesler, Inside the Endless House, 394.

21 Kiesler, Inside the Endless House, 323.

22 Interview with Mayer H. by Joseph Cory, Berlin, 23.03.06.

23 Kiesler, Inside the Endless House, 318.

24 Interview with Bernard Tschumi by Joseph Cory, New York, 07.09.05.

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Notes on British Surrealism at Southampton City Art Gallery

Peter Jones

Abstract
This article examines British surrealism at Southampton City Art Gallery where a judicious acquisition policy and a number of bequests have enabled the development of an extensive collection of surrealist art. The collection includes works by such figures as Eileen Agar, Ithell Colquhoun and Roland Penrose. The aim is to give an overview of the surrealist holdings in the context of the Gallery's history and acquisitions policy, and to highlight some of the key works in the collection.

Figure 1: Photographer unknown, Main Hall, Southampton City Art Gallery, 1939, black and white photograph, original size unknown. Photograph: Southampton City Art Gallery © By courtesy of Southampton City Art Gallery.

Although there has been a recent proliferation of research within the field of surrealist studies, the majority of critical attention and curating has tended to remain focused on continental, and particularly Parisian, surrealism.1 As a result British surrealism, while periodically entering the limelight, has often been marginalised and undervalued, being seen as an apolitical and provincial offshoot of the 'official' movement.2 However, many of Britain's public art galleries have been steadfast patrons of indigenous surrealism. In particular the often-overlooked regional galleries have an important role to play in redressing this account as they hold many works by major artists and less well-known figures that merit serious
attention. As such regional collections are a crucial part of the reception, development and historiography of British surrealism and constitute a significant research resource.

The origins of Southampton City Art Gallery and its acquisition policy

Southampton City Art Gallery opened just before the outbreak of WWII [fig.1]. Its origins lay in a 1911 bequest from a local councillor, Robert Chipperfield, for the building of an art school, gallery and the establishment of a charitable trust for the purchase of art. The Chipperfield bequest was instrumental in forming a definite acquisitions policy in that it stipulated that the Gallery should consult the Director of the National Gallery on purchases (later this commitment was passed to the Tate Gallery). Kenneth Clark, one of the first directors to take on this advisory role, formulated the Gallery’s acquisitions policy in 1936. Local councillors reported with pride that: ‘The Director showed every readiness to assist us and said that if our collection were wisely made we could have the best provincial Gallery in the country.’

The policy focused on Old Masters, nineteenth-century art and, somewhat unusually for the time, modern painting – in particular twentieth-century British art. A second bequest in 1925 from F. W. Smith, another councillor, augmented the Gallery’s funds. He also stipulated, in a proviso similar to Chipperfield’s, that it be administered by experienced and perceptive persons. Smith set the tone: ‘I hope “freaks” will not be purchased, but this does not mean that “new ideas” must be avoided.’

This combination of bequests and expert advice made for an effective acquisitions policy characterised by an informed catholicity. In a 1959 review of regional collections Quentin Bell noted that at Southampton, ‘the purchase of works of art has been managed with intelligence and discretion. Where other towns rely upon the hesitant compromises of a Committee, Southampton has a Collection which has been formed by a coherent policy.’

During the 1950s and 1960s, relatively stable art market prices allowed the Gallery to concentrate on filling in the gaps in the pre-modern holdings, with the acquisition of many fine examples of early Renaissance, seventeenth-century Dutch painting and eighteenth-century English portraiture and landscape. However, by the 1970s rising prices and inflation meant that many Old Masters and works by established modern artists were suddenly out of financial reach. In response, the acquisitions policy underwent a major change in 1976 to focus on more affordable contemporary British art by rising stars. Dr David Brown (1925-2002), the Tate’s advisor to Southampton at the time, recalled: ‘I said the only thing to do, in my view, was to buy what was happening now. It’s a high-risk enterprise … that’s all one can do.’

Yet, despite this shift, surrealist works have continued to be purchased on a regular basis.

This consistency of purchasing policy is in accordance with the Gallery’s policy of enhancing the existing strengths of the collection and also results from the legacy of Brown. Brown, a local man by birth, was Tate advisor to the gallery and initially trained as a veterinary scientist. However the bon vivant Brown developed a strong affection for the Southampton City Art Gallery and was introduced to modern art collecting in the 1958 by Maurice Palmer, the Gallery’s second curator. After studying art history at the University of East Anglia and a stint as a research assistant at Edinburgh’s Museum of Modern Art, Brown...
became the Tate's Assistant Keeper of Modern Art in 1974. From 1976 he served as the Tate's representative on the Smith Bequest Selection Committee and was subsequently invited to advise Southampton on modern acquisitions until his retirement in 1985, in which role he was an influential figure at the Gallery, overseeing purchases, bequeathing a generous fund for new acquisitions of post-1900 art and donating his own large collection of modern British art to the Gallery in 2002.

Although he had no surrealist work in his own collection, Brown was interested in the movement and advised Southampton on the purchase of many surrealist works. He was also a close friend of ‘the Marmalade Queen’ as he called Gabrielle Keiller (1908-95), of the famous Dundee preserve makers, who was one of the foremost private collectors of surrealist art in the country. Tim Craven, Southampton's current curator, acknowledges Brown's directional contribution: ‘David started our surrealist collection, buying the Penroses, Agar, Colquhoun etc. when he was our advisor and I have used his bequest fund to build further – he was the inspiration.'

Indeed, in the last five years the Gallery has bought a second Agar, works by John Banting, Desmond Morris and the psychological investigators Grace Pailthorpe and Reuben Mednikoff.

Figure 2: Edith Rimmington, *Prophylactic Sea-Mouth*, 1949, crayon on paper, 63.6 x 77.5cm. Photograph: Southampton City Art Gallery. © Courtesy Southampton City Art Gallery.

One should also note the Gallery’s long-term relationship with the Mayor Gallery. The importance of this London institution to British surrealism needs to be emphasised. During the 1930s the gallery played
a pivotal role in the development of the movement with its groundbreaking exhibitions of avant-garde art. It ‘has to be given full credit for first bringing surrealism to public notice with the two Miró and Ernst exhibitions in 1933,’ which galvanised British artists. The gallery remains the capital’s foremost private gallery for British surrealism. The current co-director of the Mayor Gallery, Andrew Murray, a long term friend of Brown, has over the years, been instrumental in helping Southampton build up its collection of surrealistic art. The most recent example of this is the rare large crayon drawing *Prophylactic Sea-Mouth* (1947) by Edith Rimmington which was purchased from the Mayor Gallery in 2006 [fig. 2] with Murray’s assistance. This somewhat disturbing work, once owned by George Melly, presents an isolated gangliar form that is both animal and vegetable. Set out on a white ground, it recalls scientific and taxonomic drawings of specimens; in this case some primordial creature dredged up from the ocean floor or rather the unconscious.

Since its inception Southampton Gallery has been associated with British surrealism. In a courageous move the somewhat eclectic inaugural exhibition in the spring of 1939 featured two ‘magic realism’ botanical paintings by Colquhoun. Furthermore, in the exhibition catalogue, G. L. Conran, Southampton’s first curator, made explicit reference to surrealism and, perhaps with the intention of pre-empting any criticism, stated: ‘They will not meet with universal approval, but the collection of this exhibition was made in the belief that it is only knowledge and familiarity, even with styles of painting that are not liked, which can give a real discrimination in the arts.’ The boldness of this strategy for a public art collection may be contextualised by Norbert Lynton’s observation that: ‘In the days of 1930s nostalgia we need to remind ourselves how resolutely the British public at all levels resisted every hint of radicalism.’

**Key works in the collection**

The Gallery holds around thirty works by artists associated with British surrealism. The collection features a range of styles and concerns from biomorphic abstraction to assemblage, from super-realism to automatism. Although the bulk of the holdings are made up of works from the ‘Golden Age’ of British surrealism; the 1930s, the post-war era is also represented with works by Desmond Morris, Julian Trevelyan and the quasi-surrealist Tristram Hillier.

The works by Hillier, two intriguing landscapes entitled *Chapel of the Misericordia, Viseu, Portugal* (1947) and *Portuguese Farmhouse* (1960), were part of the Jeffress collection bequest of 1963. Both depict strangely depopulated landscapes with an eerie or ominous quality about them. As in many surrealist works there is a suggestion of a narrative or *mise-en-scène*, particularly in the latter with its abandoned garden rake and pitcher, which evokes absence/presence and a sense of expectation or foreboding.
Critiques of vision

In 1977, the Gallery, in a prescient move, brought a quartet of important surrealist works just before price hikes in the wake of the hugely influential Dada and Surrealism Reviewed exhibition at London’s Hayward Gallery in 1978. They comprised of an assemblage by Agar and three oil paintings, two by Penrose, and one by Colquhoun – all bought on the advice of Brown. These works, all to varying degrees, problematise the viewer’s gaze and the relation between seeing and comprehension. Indeed, as Michel Remy has noted, a salient feature of British surrealism was its anti-ocularism, with artists engaging in a critique of the sovereignty of vision and the supposed certitude of perception.14

Agar’s The Object Lesson (1940) consists of an artist’s lay figure holding paintbrush and a champagne cork, set in front of a cane-work platter [fig. 3]. These are superimposed over a framed, earlier semi-abstract image of a head in profile, possibly derived from a very similar figure in her polychromatic and structurally complex Muse of Construction (1939) which was at one time on loan to Southampton from...
a private collection. The incorporation of earlier work and the three-dimensional layering of objects adds layers of meaning and a temporal quality to the assemblage. Moreover, the lay figure and cane-work platter appear to guard or screen the work restricting the view of the painted base image. Thus *The Object Lesson* hinders the inquiring and habitually totalising gaze, and perhaps suggests that creativity is ultimately an obscure and private phenomenon.

One of the Penrose paintings *Conquest of the Air* (1938) shows a fierce and vigilant looking owl caged within a human head [fig. 4]. The head is masked or blindfolded and averts its blank gaze from the viewer. A blindfold is a traditional symbol of moral or spiritual blindness. The work can be read as a political comment on ignoring the dangers of fascism and the sense of an uncertain future. Although it may also suggest the inadequacy of vision and allude to the human propensity to bridle the imagination and potentially pernicious drives with the bird of prey standing for the peremptory superego. As Slavoj Žižek notes 'in the imagery of our culture … birds function as the embodiment of a cruel and obscene superegoic agency.'\(^\text{15}\)

![Figure 4: Roland Penrose, *Conquest of the Air*, 1938. Oil on canvas, 112.5 x 81 x 75cm. Southampton City Art Gallery. Photograph: Southampton City Art Gallery © Roland Penrose Estate, England 2007. All rights reserved. www.rolandpenrose.co.uk. Reproduced with the permission of The Penrose Collection.](image)

In *Good Shooting* (1939), Southampton’s other work by Penrose, the artist employs a familiar surrealist trope; that of the female body [fig. 5]. Although this subject matter was ubiquitous in European surrealism, Penrose is one of the few British surrealists to explicitly depict and disjoin the female form, which in this case is directly inspired by the American photographer Lee Miller who Penrose had met in 1937 and later married.\(^\text{16}\) In his work the female body is often truncated or decapitated raising issues of castration anxiety and sadism. In *Good Shooting* a headless and truncated female nude with an armour
plate skirt is set against a brick wall used by a firing squad. Her raised arms frame a tranquil landscape. This other reality, or dream-image, disrupts the illusion of a coherent pictorial space, undermining the integrity of the image and gaze. It also suggests displacement and the surrealist notion of analogies between the unconscious, woman and the natural world. *Good Shooting* can additionally be seen as an unorthodox portrait where the canvas acts as a screen for the projection and location of desire and fantasy. Moreover, with its veristic style and subject matter, there are clear echoes of Magritte, especially within the suggestion of affinities between the body and face.

The Colquhoun work within this quartet, *Rivières Tièdes* (1939), is from a series of seven entitled *Méditerranée* [fig. 6]. It was first shown at her 1939 solo show at the Mayor Gallery and features an austere, almost prison-like church with four coloured rivulets seeping out from its firmly closed doors, hinting at events or dark secrets within, which cannot be discerned by the viewer. The title alludes to the line ‘but your hair is a warm river’ from the poem *Tristesse d’été* by Symbolist Stéphane Mallarmé, a surrealist favourite. Yet the painting invites a number of interpretations. Remy regards *Rivières Tièdes* as one of the artist’s key works of the pre-war period, being ‘marked with a radical unsettling of concrete reality,’ while Colquhoun stated in 1981 that the picture could ‘deal with erotic themes.’ Drawing on psychoanalytic readings, it can be seen to manifest psychic conflict; the repression and eruption of unconscious thoughts and desires represented by the tightly sealed church and escaping streams. These could also relate to the four bodily
humours once thought to determine emotional and physical disposition. This is certainly in line with Colquhoun’s interest in archaic and esoteric beliefs. Yet considering the Iberian-looking church and the picture’s date, it has generally been read as a comment on political oppression and the unholy union between the Catholic Church and Falangists.¹⁹

Figure 6: Ithell Colquhoun, *Rivières Tièdes (Méditeranée)*, 1939. Oil on wood, 76.2 x 106.6 x 6.5 cm. Southampton City Art Gallery. Photograph: Southampton City Art Gallery © by courtesy of the National Trust.

**The problems of landscape and abstraction**

One of the most important aspects of British surrealism was its complex relationship to the English landscape tradition. Although this has been interpreted as both an extension of that tradition, part of the movement’s ‘romantic impulse,’ or a radical de-stabilisation of it, this is, to all extents and purposes, a moot point. For Paul C. Ray, this concern with landscape was a hangover from Romanticism and an inversion (and travesty) of basic surrealist principles: ‘For the surrealist, it is the mind that projects itself on the external world and reinterprets it, not the external world, fantastic though it be, that inspires the mind.’²¹ Similarly problematic was the related issue of abstraction vis-à-vis surrealism, which also opened up fissures within the British avant-garde of the 1930s. Yet these issues are best understood as cases of negotiation and adaptation rather than polarisation. Paul Nash felt that both practices could revitalise British art: ‘The one offers the all-importance exercise of the structural purpose so deplorably neglected in
our history, the other the release of our imaginative powers so often discouraged or perverted. Three arresting landscapes by Nash, John Selby Bigge and John Tunnard at Southampton illustrate these vexing issues and a range of responses.

Nash subtly unhinged the traditional certainties of the English landscape by investing it with a sense of animism and otherness. These qualities are found in The Archer which was acquired by Southampton in 1952. The curious dating of the work as ‘1930-37-42’ is representative of Nash’s habit of re-considering earlier work. The painting was started at Iden in Sussex but acquired its final form at Nash’s studio in Oxford. The Archer is typical of his best work with idiosyncratic and evocative imagery combining metaphorical objects composed of semi-abstract forms, frequently derived from found objects. Nash spoke of his interest in ‘the significance of the so-called inanimate object’ and the necessity of ‘drama’ in a picture and it is clear that these concerns inform The Archer. The painting presents an encounter between an upright ovoid form with a phallic-like protrusion; ‘the Archer’, which Nash described as a masculine ‘object-personage’ and a target-like object. The objects and their arrangement have strong sexual connotations. Furthermore, a sense of tension is compounded by strange, elongated shadows reminiscent of the work of Giorgio de Chirico. These include one of a fleeting female figure which possibly signifies maternal loss and ‘both creativity and death’. Works such as The Archer have been read as ‘a refusal to choose between abstraction and surrealism’.

A more overt disruption of landscape and reality is found in the relatively little-known work of John Selby Bigge. Although he was never a card-carrying surrealist, Bigge produced some works that may be described as highly surreal. Moreover, he was part of the Mayor Gallery stable and showed at the 1936 International Surrealism Exhibition. During the 1930s – aside from an excursion into abstraction due to his involvement with Unit One – Bigge worked in heightened figurative style, similar to that of his friend and supporter Edward Wadsworth. Both men had an interest in machine forms and the uncanny interplay of the inorganic and organic. The gallery acquired Bigge’s work Composition (1930) in 2005, thanks to the Brown bequest fund [fig. 7]. Composition features a seascape dominated by a bizarre towering structure rather like a cut-away section of ship’s hull, set against billowing clouds and a disconcerting staggered horizon. This sublime machine appears to be moving by its own volition as its skeletal rudder suggests it could never be steered thus investing it with a sense of vitality and its own intelligence and invoking the Freudian uncanny through its confusion between the animate and the inanimate. This absurd hybrid suggests a parody of the Modernist cult of the machine; Bigge’s wayward vessel mocks the ideal of the rationally-designed machine at the service of humankind.

In contrast, John Tunnard’s, Composition Plein Air Abstraction (1944) combines both abstraction and surrealism in successful synthesis. In this work purchased from the Mayor Gallery in 1953, celestial structures of lines and translucent planes float and overlap recalling the ethereal constructions of Naum Gabo. Herbert Read noted of Tunnard’s work: ‘The final effect is that of a dream-landscape’. Yet for all its otherworldliness Composition Plein Air Abstraction references incongruous wartime constructions; radar
installations, telegraph wires and coastal defences. This choice of subject matter may be derived from Tunnard’s experiences as a coastguard auxiliary during the war in Cornwall. The landscape is transformed into an amalgam of nature and technology by the artist’s vision and the exigencies of war.

![Figure 7: John Selby-Bigge, Composition, 1930. Oil on board, 93.5 x 68.3 x 3 cm. Southampton City Art Gallery. Photograph: Southampton City Art Gallery © The Estate of John Selby-Bigge.](image)

**Conclusion**

A coherent and informed acquisitions policy coupled with a number of generous bequests has enabled Southampton to build up a significant collection of surrealist art. It bears witness to a continuing interest in home grown surrealism and is a testament to the peculiarities and richness of the movement. Moreover, regional public galleries like Southampton through acquisitions and exhibitions have been instrumental in constituting, defining and promoting British surrealism. Nevertheless, history and critical opinion have not been kind to the movement. One commentator has concluded: ‘Surrealism in Britain may be said to contain a number of small successes within an overall failure.’ If that is so, some of those successes can, and should, be seen at Southampton City Art Gallery.
The author would like to thank The Roland Penrose estate, Tim Craven, Curator, Clare Mitchell, Acting Exhibitions Manager at Southampton City Art Gallery and Andrew Murray of the Mayor Gallery for their help.


2 For example, Charles Harrison is dismissive of British surrealism in his survey *English Art and Modernism 1900-1939*, New Haven 1994.

3 As recorded in the *Southampton Art Gallery Collection Inventory*, Southampton Art Gallery, 1980, 7. The Gallery’s current advisor is Ann Gallagher, Head of British Collections, Tate.

4 Cited in Elizabeth Goodall, ‘One City a Patron,’ in *One City a Patron: British Art of the 20th Century from the Collection of Southampton Art Gallery*, Scotland 1985, 5. In addition to the Chipperfield and Smith bequests, the Gallery has benefited from gifts and grants from the National Art Collections Fund, Victoria & Albert Purchase Grant Fund, the Contemporary Art Society and the Gulbenkian Foundation.


6 *Boom, Boom, Cluster: The David and Liza Brown Bequest*, Southampton 2004, 117. As a result of the change in policy the Gallery has acquired works by important contemporary British artists such as Richard Long, Rachel Whiteread and Douglas Gordon.

7 I am indebted to Tim Craven, Curator, Southampton City Art Gallery for this information.

8 Tim Craven, e-mail interview with author 23rd June 2006.


10 The collection is not confined to British surrealism, but also includes graphic work by Max Ernst and paintings by Belgian surrealist Paul Delvaux, in particular his *A Siren in Full Moonlight* (1940) and *Annunciation* (1949). Also of note is an extraordinary Aubusson tapestry *Ferme Ton Armoire* by the designer and painter Jean Lurçat who was strongly influenced by surrealism. Details of the Gallery’s holdings can be found on its online searchable database <http://www.southampton.gov.uk/leisure/arts/art-gallery>. Information on Southampton’s surrealist art can also be obtained from the AHRB Research Centre for Studies of Surrealism and its Legacies UK, Surrealism Works Database <http://www.surrealismcentre.ac.uk/database/home.htm>.

11 *Exhibition of Painting April–May 1939*, Southampton Art Gallery 1939, 5.


16 Antony Penrose, Roland Penrose: The Friendly Surrealist, London 2001, 95-96. Aside from Magritte, it has been suggested that the figure was based on a ship’s figurehead purchased by Penrose in Cornwall in 1937. Yet in a 1979 interview Penrose claimed that Good Shooting was influenced by ‘Ernst’s La Femme 100 têtes.’ See ‘Telephone Conversion notes between Sir Roland Penrose and Fred Tear, Research Assistant, Southampton Art Gallery, 11 July 1979,’ Roland Penrose History File, Southampton City Art Gallery, unpaginated. Another possible source is the photograph Lee Miller (Torso) (circa 1931) by Man Ray.

17 Michel Remy, Surrealism in Britain, Ashgate, Aldershot 1999, 204.


22 Paul Nash, ‘Unit One,’ in Unit One: Spirit of the 30’s, London 1984, 43.


27 One of the few texts on Bigge is Christopher Collier, ‘John Bigge’ in Unit 1, Portsmouth 1978, 12-13.


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‘Pataphysical Graham’: A Consideration of the Pataphysical Dimension of the Artistic Practice of Rodney Graham

Steven Harris

Humour is one of the forms of melancholy
Louis Scutenaire

This paper explores the pataphysical dimension of Rodney Graham’s work, as a supplement to the existing critical literature on his art. The concepts used here come from two main sources: Jeff Wall’s early discussion of Graham’s work, ‘Into the Forest,’ which was first published in 1988, and Dorothy Zwirner’s recent book on the work by Graham in the Flick Collection, published in 2004. These two essays frame the serious criticism of Graham’s work. Wall uses the Hegelian concept of ‘bad infinity,’ or an infinite repetition of the same, to understand and situate Graham’s artistic production of the 1980s; Zwirner identifies the melancholy that she perceives in Graham’s work with the demise of the utopian thinking that motivated the artistic activities of the generation that preceded Graham. It is a question, as Serge Guilbaut put it so well in a 1997 essay on Graham’s work, of ‘how to live artistically after the end of utopias.’ Both Wall and Zwirner situate Graham’s production within a modern and contemporary economic, social and cultural context, from which his gestures take their meaning. I accept this reading, to which I shall add a few supplementary observations of my own.

Wall’s essay introduces Hegel’s concept of ‘bad infinity’ to understand and interpret Graham’s work. According to Wall, Hegel distinguished between affirmative or transcendent infinity and negative or bad infinity in his Science of Logic (1812-16), to describe on the one hand a notion of freedom as continuous transformation and self-realisation, and on the other an abstract progress ‘which remains incomplete because there is no progress beyond this progress itself.’ Both infinities are bound up with modernity, but by affirmative or transcendent infinity is understood ‘an unfinished state of liberation’ in which things change, while bad infinity is the eternal recurrence of the same even within contemporary culture. For Wall bad infinity ‘is also an image of mechanistic, routinised “progressive” modernity.’ To the extent that Graham’s art refers to an earlier moment of modernity in its preoccupation with obsolete mechanical technologies, it can be said to take bad infinity as its subject, and even assume its logic; in this way, it is an image of unfreedom. Wall certainly thinks of it this way when he discusses Graham’s 1983 work Lenz as an example of bad infinity that is both symptomatic and diagnostic of ‘this modernity, which is ours.’

While Matthew Teitelbaum may be the first writer to describe Graham’s art as melancholic, in 1994, this description is the subject of Dorothy Zwirner’s book-length essay ‘Melancholic Masterpieces,’ which is at the date of this writing the most recent criticism of Graham’s work, as well
as one of the most substantial. Zwirner situates Graham’s particular melancholy in relation to the end of utopian thinking in her discussion of his 1997 film *Vexation Island*:

In this cycle, we can recognize the peculiar interplay between melancholy and Utopia characteristic [of] this type of the intellectual. The intellectual laments the condition of the world, and from this lament emerges utopian thought, which sketches out a better world and thereby dispels melancholy. Yet the end of Utopia leads to a return of melancholia. In his ‘Mourning and Melancholia’ (1917), Sigmund Freud suggests that these two forms of grieving are either responses to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction such as one’s country, an ideal, etc., with the difference that mourning is something that one gets over, while melancholy can become a permanent pathological condition if not worked through. In the interpretation Zwirner gives to Graham’s work, melancholy is a response to the loss of an ideal, and the return to an earlier mechanistic moment of modernity, referred to in so many references to or uses of obsolete technology, is a return to the revolutionary promise of human betterment embodied in these outmoded technologies, and at the same time to the endless repetition of the industrial era, which failed to deliver on that promise.

I, too, wish to approach Graham’s practice with these issues and this perspective in mind, and to supplement them with a discussion of the pataphysical dimension of Graham’s work, in keeping with my understanding of the role and situation of ‘pataphysics in twentieth-century art and thought. It is quite possible that I am imagining this pataphysical dimension, since Graham himself never mentions Alfred Jarry or ‘pataphysics in his descriptions of his works, but I do not believe it is just my delirium of interpretation that finds it there.

In a recent review of my book on surrealism, Charles Miller described it as a melancholy one, in its conclusion that surrealism failed to realise its aim of founding another culture. If the colour of my book is in fact a little blue, in my view the failure of surrealism was due not so much to its internal contradictions – though these existed, of course – as to the splintering of its revolutionary aspirations against the revolutionary nightmare of the Soviet Union under the rule of Stalin, and against the ‘bad infinity’ of unchanging social relations in market regimes, where commercial considerations (and not just economic ones) dictate social policy.

My current research is focused on that splintering, and thus might be construed as melancholy. I am interested in what I would call the ‘afterlife’ of surrealism, even where the continued existence of surrealist groups in postwar France and elsewhere is concerned. For although the end of utopian thinking is commonly identified with the 1970s and postmodernism, and is the immediate context for Graham’s melancholy (though we have yet to establish this), my research has made me aware that
this perspective was already quite widespread in the 1950s among those who had in some way been involved in the surrealist enterprise. The surrealist group itself remained invested in utopian thinking in the 1950s, but many of those who left it also abandoned utopia. One of the formations I have been investigating is the College of ‘Pataphysics, which was populated by former surrealists like Raymond Queneau, Jean Ferry, Jacques Prévert, Michel Leiris, Max Ernst, Joan Miró, Man Ray, Simon Watson Taylor, Pol Bury and Noël Arnaud – aside from many others who had nothing whatsoever to do with surrealism. My research into the College, though by no means complete, has enabled me to imagine or discern certain pataphysical features of Graham’s work that have been overlooked by others – though I should acknowledge that Anthony Spira has preceded me here by noting some of these in his catalogue essay for the Whitechapel exhibition of Graham’s work in 2002.\(^9\)

Now, what is ‘pataphysics exactly, and how is it related to the College that takes its name? ‘Pataphysics was the brainchild of the symbolist writer Alfred Jarry, best known for his character and his play *Ubu Roi*, who laid the foundations for pataphysical thinking in his novel *Exploits and Opinions of Doctor Faustroll, Pataphysician*, completed in 1898 but not published until 1911, four years after the author’s early death at the age of thirty-four. The exegetes of the College claim that everything one needs to know about ‘pataphysics is in *Faustroll*, and it is true that the major pronouncements of the College’s doctrine hold quite tightly to the ideas suggested there. There are two related definitions of ‘pataphysics that I wish to point out here:

1. ‘Pataphysics is the science of imaginary solutions,’ which implies that all solutions to any problem whatsoever, scientific or otherwise, are imaginary in nature; and
2. ‘Pataphysics is the science of exceptions – in other words, there are no universally valid laws such as science seeks to discover; laws or principles can only be legitimately applied to particular cases, and are in any case imaginary in nature.\(^{10}\)

The one principle that holds water in this exceptional universe is the principle of equivalence: that any solution is as good as any other, all things being equal. In this way, Jarry counters the scientism of his era, with its complementary faith in progress, and his novel can be viewed as an imaginary triumph over the law, and over laws in general. It is narrated by the bailiff Panmuphle, who comes to Faustroll’s apartment to serve him eviction papers for his failure to pay the rent, but who is overpowered by Faustroll and made to row his paraffined sieve for the duration of their fantastic voyage through contemporary art, literature and science. Significantly, Panmuphle has his back to the future, and has no idea where he is headed.
There are several pataphysical motifs in Graham’s work – or at least I think I see them there – but I want to focus on two: the clinamen and the spiral. Graham has written about the clinamen on two occasions, and it informs his work in general. This concept, which is featured in *Faustroll* and which is foundational to ‘pataphysics, was the Roman author Lucretius’ term for what the Greek philosopher Epicurus understood to be an indeterminate swerve in the downward motion of atoms. The concept of the clinamen was used to refute the idea of a uniform, fatalistic flow of atoms, which had previously been suggested by Democritus. Here is Graham’s own definition of the clinamen:

"The word is from Lucretius, for whom it signifies the sudden and unpredictable swerve of a single atom from its otherwise pre-ordained trajectory ... It is the clinamen, according to the physicist, that breaks the endless chain of fate and yields the law of nature."  

Lucretius, following Epicurus, described an exception to the fatalistic understanding of matter by Democritus, as a kind of free will that was a property of atoms themselves. To this extent, the unmotivated swerve or clinamen becomes the locus and the guarantor of free will in general, against fatalistic thinking. The concept of the clinamen underpins Jarry’s understanding of ‘pataphysics as the science of exceptions, which attempts to undermine all claims to universal validity. Graham makes a particular application of this concept, which we will come to later.

The second motif that Graham takes over from ‘pataphysics is the spiral, which is inscribed on Père Ubu’s belly and which became the symbol of the College of ’Pataphysics from its inception in 1948 [fig. 1]. The spiral is brought up twice in *Faustroll*, each time in relation to progress; in other words, the motif of the spiral is understood as a movement outwards, which is potentially infinite in its expansion. While neither Jarry nor the College of ’Pataphysics accept the commonplace understanding of progress as human betterment, and while progress here is imagined as a spiral rather than a straight line, it does figure the eventual extension of a pataphysical understanding in which everything, every value, has become equivalent, in which every phenomenon is viewed with equal interest and where nothing is true. Founded by a small group of men, women and reptiles in 1948 (forty-one years after Jarry’s death), the College of ’Pataphysics understood itself to be an institution for purposeless research, which was anti-foundational in nature albeit hierarchical in organisation and bureaucratic in its functioning. Founded as it was in 1948, it was rather sharply oriented against two contemporary tendencies that were themselves deeply antagonistic to one another: existentialist commitment, and surrealism. These were its two most frequent targets, in part because of the revolutionary or utopian political values represented by these tendencies, but also, in regards to the second of these targets, due to the personal experience of many of its members in the surrealist group. André Breton could still say in 1951 that ‘poetry must lead somewhere,’ a notion that
is rejected in principle by the College, which upholds the view that no idea is worth more or less than any other: as one of its early members, J.J. Mauvoisin, wrote in 1956: ‘our College ... neither seeks effects, nor seeks to have any effect. It is an end in itself.’¹⁴

![Figure 1: Alfred Jarry, Veritable Portrait of M. Ubu, 1896, woodcut. Frontispiece for Ubu Roi, Drame en cinq Actes en prose. Restitué en son intégrité tel qui a été représenté par les marionettes du Théâtres des Phynances en 1888, Paris, 1896.](image)

The College, which is founded on a fiction, has as its director or curator Faustroll, who is fictional; the phenomenal director or vice-curator of the College may or may not be human or fictional; currently, the vice-curator is one of the reptilian founders of the College, Lutembi, a crocodile who lives on the shores of Lake Victoria in East Africa, and who has contributed several important essays over the years to the College’s periodicals. Lutembi is the fourth vice-curator in the College’s history. At the beginning of the magistrature of the third vice-curator, Opach, in 1965, Raymond Queneau introduced the device and motto of the Swiss mathematician Jakob Bernoulli to the College as a sign of renewal, and they have since been incorporated into its insignia [fig. 2]. In the late seventeenth century, Bernoulli developed the mathematical formula for what has been called the logarithmic, equiangular or sesquialteral spiral, whose proportions remain the same even as it expands in size. Bernoulli was referring to his spira mirabilis, as he called it, when he had a spiral and the Latin motto EADEM MUTATA RESURGO inscribed on his funerary plaque. It was this device and this motto – which can be translated as ‘I arise again the same though changed’ – that Queneau introduced to the College in
1965, and which it adopted: for instance, in Stanley Chapman’s design for the *Subsidia Pataphysica* series of College periodicals [fig. 3]. The design of Bernoull’s funerary plaque was later used for the *Organografa* series of College periodicals in the 1970s and 1980s and for some of its publications [fig. 4]. As a self-similar spiral whose proportions do not change even as it grows in size, the logarithmic spiral becomes the emblem of an institution that does not believe in qualitative change of the kind sought by communists or surrealists, and which sees itself as persisting unchanged in its essence throughout what Jarry called ‘ethernity.’ In other words, while the self-similar spiral figures both identity and difference (‘I arise again the same though changed’), it does not automatically figure progress, despite Jarry’s own identification of the spiral with progress in *Faustroll*.

Figure 2: Jakob Bernoulli, Funerary Inscription, Münster, Basel, 1705.
Graham has written of the clinamen on two occasions: his essay ‘Freud’s Clinamen’ was included in the catalogue for the 1987 Münster Sculpture Projects, to accompany his contribution to that exhibition which first brought him to international attention; and in 1997, his essay ‘Siting Vexation Island’ was published in the periodical-cum-catalogue that accompanied his short film Vexation Island for the Venice Biennale of that year, which raised his reputation to a new level.16

Graham’s Münster installation, and the essay that went with it, are concerned with one of Freud’s own dream accounts in The Interpretation of Dreams, the ‘dream of the botanical monograph.’ While we do not need to go into the details of this dream, I want to touch briefly on their significance for Graham’s understanding of the clinamen. While out and about, Freud happened to see in a bookshop window a monograph on the cyclamen plant, which made its way into a subsequent dream. For Freud, this was a dream of ambition (of seeing his own book finished) which depended on the residues of the previous day for its manifest content; but for Graham it is an instance of the clinamen, or swerve, as Freud’s attention was drawn by the chance sighting of a book cover to which he attached no importance at the time. If Freud hadn’t gone that way, or if his attention had been drawn elsewhere, the botanical monograph would not have entered his dream, would not have been analysed in his famous book, and would not have been the occasion for a Rodney Graham work. What is decisive here, I think, is that Graham identifies the clinamen with the glance at the shop window, with consumer society, and thus with the experience of modernity.17 His installation consisted
of dummy copies of the same botanical monograph Freud spied in 1898 placed in amongst other books in the window displays of bookshops around Münster; in this way, Graham stages the same sort of chance encounter in 1987 that Freud had experienced in Vienna nearly ninety years before, which is similar to the involuntary swerve or attraction experienced by hundreds of millions of people on a daily basis.

In his 1997 essay about Vexation Island, Graham writes of what he calls the ‘clinomatic instant,’ and identifies this with the cyclamen, with the clinamen, and of course with the cinema, as Vexation Island is a nine-minute film loop shot in cinemascope.¹⁸ This film is a repeating loop of the kind that has been such a prominent feature of Graham’s work since the early 1980s. In ‘Siting Vexation Island,’ Graham writes about the ‘clinomatic or catastrophic instant’ that draws the shipwrecked sailor back to the tree he shakes, which causes the coconut to fall, which knocks the sailor out, who wakes again and repeats the vicious circle that is formally embodied in the film loop itself, as an endless repetition of the same or a ‘bad infinity’ [fig. 5].¹⁹ Tellingly, the ‘catastrophic instant’ is the clinamen which draws the sailor back to the tree, as Freud was drawn to the display of the monograph in the bookshop window, and Graham makes this identification explicit in his essay:

As I have made clear elsewhere, it was a monograph on the common house plant cyclamen that set in motion Freud’s Dream of the Botanical Monograph. Freud’s glimpse of the recent publication in a Vienna bookstore defined the clinamen – the unpredictable veering away of attention – that interposed itself into Freud’s daily routine. It is the clinomatic or catastrophic instant that I desire to place at the exact centre of Vexation Island.²⁰

Figure 5: Rodney Graham, Vexation Island, 1997 (still). Video/sound installation, 35mm film transferred to laserdisc, 9 min. continuous loop. Courtesy Donald Young Gallery, Chicago © Rodney Graham.
The swerve that is described in each instance is more unfreedom than free will, more overdetermination than indetermination, which Graham figures in comic fashion. In identifying the clinamen with the seductions of the shop window, Graham describes both the aleatoric lure of the individual object, which has to be seen to be desired, and the unending sameness of this relation, which is catastrophic. This, I believe, is the point of Graham’s conjugation of clinamen and consumption.

In this sense, *Vexation Island* and some of Graham’s other loop works are parables of the ‘bad infinity’ of contemporary market society, whose logic Jeff Wall discerned through the analysis of works made before the films were even imagined. In *Lenz* of 1983, for instance, Graham appropriated an unfinished novella by Georg Büchner in which the mentally unstable protagonist, Lenz, wanders through a forest. The artist reset the type on pages one to two and on pages five to six of an English translation of the story, to set up a situation in which the page breaks at the same phrase ‘through/the forest,’ which establishes a loop whose effect is to cause Lenz to endlessly repeat his journey by returning from page five to page two; in 1993, Graham had a reading machine constructed for this version of the text to facilitate the repetition [fig. 6], and the hardcover version of the 1983 work was a book bound with eighty-three repetitions of these pages, which in principle can be continued forever.

The loop is not of course identical to the spiral in its form, and Graham in fact carefully distinguishes between the spiral that film is, and his own film loops, which are made visible for instance in the looping mechanism outside the little theatre built to show his 1996 film loop *Coruscating Cinnamon Granules* (whose central image is a spiral) [fig. 7]. There are three works by Graham that feature the spiral, among the many that privilege the loop: his 1987 novel *The System of Landor’s Cottage; Coruscating Cinnamon Granules*, just mentioned; and *The Phonokinetoscope* of 2001.

*Figure 7. Rodney Graham, *Coruscating Cinnamon Granules*, 1996. 16mm film loop in black and white, 4 min, purpose-built kitchen-size cinema with eight cinema seats. Courtesy the artist and Lisson Gallery, London © Rodney Graham.*

*The System of Landor’s Cottage* is an appropriation and extension of Edgar Allan Poe’s last published story ‘Landor’s Cottage’ (1849), from its original ten or so pages to more than three hundred. It consists of a series of narratives nested inside one another, in imitation of Raymond Roussel’s series of bracketed observations in his *New Impressions of Africa* (1932). Graham’s novel opens out from Poe’s description of a landscape and a country cottage to describe an annex to the cottage, which he interpolates into Poe’s largely descriptive tale. The annex occasions the series of narratives that explain the reasons for the presence of its fantastic contents. One of the narratives concerns the writing of an eleven-volume set of memoirs by a composer named Sligo, who has plotted a code in his memoirs in the shape of a spiral. Once deciphered, the letters of the code spell the word ‘EUTERE,’ which though missing a letter is still recognisable as the name of Euterpe, the muse of lyric poetry. The names of the other classical muses also appear in Sligo’s memoirs – with the exception of Clio,
the muse of history. When fully deciphered, the code at the heart of Sligo’s memoirs and of Graham’s own novel reveals the phrase ‘EADEM MUTATA RESURGO,’ ‘I arise again the same though changed,’ which was Bernoulli’s description of the self-similar spiral.24 There is an obsidian tabletop in the annex with the same motto in spiral formation. While Clio, or history, is literally absent from Sligo’s text, she is anagrammatically figured as the coil or spiral in which the motto is inscribed. That is, history, which Hegel identifies with freedom, is replaced by a figure which, in being self-similar, is identified with repetition rather than change. This same tabletop is also identified by Graham with the spiral form of a record, since a copper stylus repeatedly traces its grooves in the annex to Landor’s cottage. In the final pages of the novel, Graham reveals that this cottage, while rectilinear in design, is conceived according to the proportions of a sesquialteral (or self-similar) spiral, with each wing half again as large as the preceding wing, in a proportion of three to two. Allan Landor has a notebook entitled ‘The System of My Cottage,’ which envisages a total of fourteen additions to the original cottage, which will arc out into the valley in an architecture of increasingly fantastic scale, while maintaining the same proportions of three to two as the cottage itself: ‘I arise again the same though changed.’25

Graham returns to the spiral form in his 1996 film Coruscating Cinnamon Granules, which is both cosmic and banal in its depiction of cinnamon burning and ‘coruscating’ on a stove element [figs. 7 and 8]. The correlation between the words ‘cinnamon’ and ‘cinema’ has been noted before by Alex Alberro, which is one part of a declension from cyclamen to clinamen to cinnamon to cinema, which brings together the clinamen and the spiral in Graham’s thinking.26

Figure 8: Rodney Graham, Coruscating Cinnamon Granules, 1996. 16mm film loop in black and white, 4 min, purpose-built kitchen-size cinema with eight cinema seats. Courtesy the artist and Lisson Gallery, London © Rodney Graham.
I have identified a link between the absence of Clio, or history (which is the inability to realise freedom) and ‘bad infinity,’ and at this juncture I would say that ‘pataphysics is a way of learning to live within constraints, as utopian solutions, if not refused outright, are made equivalent to everything else. Graham is very fond of obsolete technology, which is identified with an earlier moment of modernity, including its promise of change. His fascination with the camera obscura is part of this, and he comically re-invents its development into a portable camera as the Camera Obscura Mobile (1996), in which the passengers seated inside are not looking out at the view rolling by beside them, but instead at the screen in front of them, by means of which they see an inverted image of the disappearing scene behind them [fig. 9]. In The Phonokinetoscope, and in the weathervane whose figure is taken from this film loop, Graham performs the childhood trick of riding his bicycle backwards [fig. 10]. This is very much the vantage point of Panmuphle, and as writers like Robert Linsley and Shep Steiner have observed, this is also the vantage point of Walter Benjamin’s angel of history driven into the future by the storm of progress, a tragic theme that is given here comically and banally. In a passage from The Arcades Project that is linked to his image of the helpless angel, Benjamin writes: ‘The concept of progress must be grounded in the idea of catastrophe. That things are the "status quo" is the catastrophe … hell is not something that awaits us, but this life here and now.' I think the
weathervane makes this association with the angel of history explicit, though deliberately without the pathos of Benjamin’s image. Progress drives the angel forward, but the catastrophe is not some exceptional disaster in store for humanity; rather, it is Hegel’s concept of progress in which ‘there is no progress beyond this progress itself,’ which we experience today and which is the cause of Graham’s melancholy. The very ordinariness of the weathervane’s figure is in keeping with this interpretation of Benjamin’s angel.

Figure 10: Rodney Graham, The Phonokinetoscope, 2001 (still). 16 mm film installation with modified turntable, 33⅓ rpm vinyl LP. Courtesy the artist and Lisson Gallery, London © Rodney Graham.

In The Phonokinetoscope, Graham pays homage to three figures: Thomas Alva Edison, who invented the phonokinetoscope of the title, which was an early attempt to link sound and image; Albert Hofmann, the inventor of LSD; and Syd Barrett, early leader of Pink Floyd and famous acid casualty. Image and sound are joined in a non-synchronous way, so that the film loop and the soundtrack, written by Graham in emulation of acid rock, repeat at different intervals, and the whole apparatus is triggered by lifting the arm of a record player and placing its needle on a vinyl record. Graham sings and plays the music, and appropriates the refrain from Barrett’s song ‘Bike’ (from Pink Floyd’s first album Piper at the Gates of Dawn, 1967). He rides a bike in the film and takes a tab of LSD, in emulation of Hofmann, who rode his bike home during his own first trip. The bicycle is also associated with Alfred Jarry, who used it as his way of getting around at a time when it was a modern invention.

While other works by Graham display a nostalgic relation to obsolete technology, this film in particular seems filled with yearning for the artificial paradises and the utopian politics promised by the
counter-culture, which Graham experienced as a young man. Three different moments of invention – the 1880s, the 1940s, and the 1960s – are associated with the promise of freedom and self-realisation, though all of them are located in the past, and we see Graham regressing to his own past here with his bicycle trick.

Figure 11: Rodney Graham, A Reverie Interrupted by the Police, 2003 (still). DVD, video projector, four speakers, subwoofer and amplifier, 35 mm film transferred to DVD, 7 min 59 sec, continuous loop. Courtesy Donald Young Gallery, Chicago © Rodney Graham.

I would like to conclude these reflections by thinking about two recent works: A Reverie Interrupted by the Police, 2003, and Fantasia for Four Hands, 2002. The idea for the former was prompted by a remark made by André Breton in his 1951 essay on film, ‘As in a Wood.’ In it, Breton mentioned a radio broadcast that featured ‘a bit of piano playing by a handcuffed man,’ which Graham has transposed into a vaudeville scene with a prisoner and his guard – not presented aurally as Breton heard it, but visually in the form of an early spectacle [fig. 11]. In this loop, the prisoner, whose uniform resembles the keys of his instrument, is playing a piano prepared in the manner of John Cage, though his playing is of course hobbled by the handcuffs. The film suggests not just the artist as criminal, which is a longstanding modern trope of the artist, but abjection, as the artist-performer is controlled by authority – and authority here not only interrupts the performance/reverie, but returns the artist to it repeatedly. In this case, it is not so much the melancholy performance on screen that is important, as the logic of the loop, and the artist’s role in this eternal recurrence. ‘Poetry must lead somewhere,’ Breton claims elsewhere in his essay ‘As in a Wood,’ but this imperative is
overlooked in Graham’s film in favour of an aural image that denies it, and to which Breton has called attention for this very reason. Even experimental art, Graham seems to suggest in preparing the piano, is subject to bad infinity, leads nowhere else.

_Fantasia for Four Hands_ [fig. 12] is likewise focused on the role of the artist (again as piano player), quadrupling the artist’s presence in the manner of Jeff Wall’s _Double Self-Portrait_ of 1979. Graham has based his self-portrait on the cover of a Dutch LP featuring a piano-playing duo similar to Arthur Ferrante and Louis Teicher, whose routine was partly comic. That is, the reference to the commercial role of music as entertainment is as clear here as it is in _A Reverie_, and reinforced by the baffle panels in _International Klein Blue_, which refer to the paradigm of the artist as showman.

Graham has referred to Freud’s use of the Greek word ‘allotrion,’ or ‘other path,’ twice: in ‘Freud’s _Clinamen_’ in 1987, and again in 1999, in the endpapers for his Vienna Kunsthalle catalogue. This allotrion is synonymous with the clinamen, in that it signifies a swerve or deviation from one’s path: not just the swerve of attention to the shop window, but in Freud’s case, his swerve from neurology to psychoanalysis, or Graham’s own swerve in the 1980s to his research on Freud, to his further research for _The System of Landor’s Cottage_, or his more recent return to pop music, which is just as pronounced a clinamen as any other, and which conditions his self-presentation as musical performer in _A Reverie_ and _Fantasia_. Graham writes, in ‘Freud’s _Clinamen_’: ‘It is the “allotrion,” the
too-absorbing hobby, the other path that holds the promise of another vista, and that, in the course of more serious endeavors, carries one’s thoughts elsewhere.\textsuperscript{33}

At the same time, this deviation is presented as being no different from the straight path of the falling atom (or for that matter, the coconut), in the same way that the spiral is no different from the loop or the circle. There is an effort to escape, but the only true escape is through laughter. Moreover, I think it can safely be said that Graham represents a certain truth about the contemporary institutionalised situation of the artist, as opposed to the utopian views of the past in which it was felt that art really could be a means of liberation; this is the sense of Breton’s claim that ‘poetry must lead somewhere,’ which Graham swerves from in favour of the image of a shackled art. Breton would have us enact that liberation in the making of the work, whereas Graham mourns its loss. In other words, Graham is showing us ‘how to live artistically after the end of utopias.’ In this way, his work is both symptomatic and diagnostic of ‘this modernity, which is ours,’ much as it was in 1988. While Graham might not have taken the motifs of the clinamen and the spiral directly from ‘pataphysics, both the relinquishment of utopia and the little escape figured by the clinamen are at play in his works, as they are in the exploits and opinions of the College. The self-similar spiral and its motto figure identity and difference simultaneously, as does the clinamen in the interpretation Graham gives to it: the lure of the commodity that traps us in the vicious circle of a history not of our own making, which we repeat because we do not remember, all things being equal.

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\textsuperscript{2} Jeff Wall, ‘Into the Forest: Two Sketches for Studies of Rodney Graham’s Work,’ \textit{Rodney Graham}, exhibition catalogue, Vancouver, 1988, 10. Just prior to this, Wall writes: ‘The “affirmative infinity” of the finite, the tendency of the existing world to “force itself out of its bounds,” is the original conceptual image of the historical storm of transformation which we call modernity and which Hegel immediately recognized as the meaning of the French Revolution,’ 9.


C.F.B. Miller, ‘Rereading Surrealism, Misreading Documents,’ *Art History*, vol. 28, no. 5, November 2005, 807.


Jarry’s various definitions of ‘pataphysics are found in chapter 8 of *Faustroll*.


The two passages in *Faustroll* that identify the spiral as a figure of progress are given here (in translation, of course): ‘One may confidently assume that he could only perceive space in two dimensions, and was refractory to the idea of progress, implying, as it does, a spiral figure; and ‘For, just as Professor Cayley recorded the past in the two dimensions of a black surface, so the progress of the solid future entwined the body in spirals.’ Alfred Jarry, *Exploits and Opinions of Doctor Faustroll*, *Pataphysician*, trans. Simon Watson Taylor in Roger Shattuck and Simon Watson Taylor eds., *Selected Works of Alfred Jarry*, New York, 1965, 229 and 245 respectively. Incidentally, Robert Smithson entered the second of these passages in his notebook entitled ‘A Metamorphosis of the Spiral,’ which was assembled around 1970 during his work on the *Spiral Jetty*, and which is reproduced in facsimile in Lynne Cooke and Karen Kelly, eds., *Robert Smithson Spiral Jetty: True Fictions, False Realities*, New York/Berkeley, 2005, 130-6. The quotation from *Faustroll* can be found on 135.

between 1950 and 1965. Mauvoisin’s essay was originally published in the *Cahiers du Collège de 'Pataphysique*, nos. 22-23, in November 1956.

15 Raymond Queneau contributed a note on Bernoulli and his motto to an essay by Antoine Taverna, ‘Arnaud Daniel et la spirale,’ *Subsidia Pataphysica*, no. 1, December 1965.


17 In ‘Freud’s *Clinamen*,’ Graham writes: ‘This clinamen bears on the idle physics of the flâneur. If the flâneur seeks inspiration in the huge cities, in the “great medley of their interrelations,” (Baudelaire) what is it that founds the very possibility of the *correspondences*, if not the unpredictable swerve of attention, the veering glance, the sudden *declination* of the gaze?’ Graham, ‘Freud’s *Clinamen*,’ 60.

18 The first part of Graham’s essay is titled ‘Towards the Clinomatic Image.’


20 Graham, ‘Siting Vexation Island,’ 15.

21 The insight that film is a spiral belongs to Smithson, from his 1972 essay ‘The Spiral Jetty.’


27 Constraints, incidentally, were the hallmark of the procedures of the Oulipo, or Ouvroir de Littérature potentielle, which was founded in 1960 as a sub-commission of the College. Five of its ten founding members – Noël Arnaud, Jacques Bens, Latis, Jean Lescure and Raymond Queneau – were also members of the College, while three more of the founding members – Jacques Duchateau, François Le Lionnais, and Jean Queval – were sooner or later admitted to the College. These first Oulipians would be joined later by fellow Collegians André Blavier, François Caradec, Ross Chambers, Stanley Chapman, Marcel Duchamp and Luc Étienne, as well as others not affiliated with the College. On the founding of the Oulipo, see Jean Lescure, ‘Brief History of the Oulipo,’ (1973), in Warren F. Motte, Jr.

28 *Weather Vane* was produced as a limited edition for *Parkett* in 2002.


31 See footnote 14 above. Breton, ‘As in a Wood,’ 80.


33 Graham, ‘Freud’s Clinamen.’
Lost in translation: Notations on certain titles of Blanchot’s works in relation to Breton … and Bataille

Michael Stone-Richards

In 1997, Laurent Jenny published in the journal Critique ‘Mauvais rêve: Blanchot surréaliste,’ the first of two articles devoted to the relationship of Maurice Blanchot to surrealist thought; the second article, ‘Blanchot, théoricien du surréalisme,’ would appear shortly afterwards in the Cahier de l’Herne (1998) issue devoted to André Breton.¹ The tone of Jenny’s writing can very well be captured as an expression of some surprise and irritation, even, that Maurice Blanchot – friend of Georges Bataille, Blanchot, the secret prince of post-Liberation Parisian thought, model for Jacques Derrida, Phillipe Lacoue-Labarthe, Jean-Luc Nancy and Sarah Kofman, admired of Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault² – this Maurice Blanchot should not only have written extensively on surrealism but, indeed, aspects of his very conception of writing may be in dialogue with Breton and surrealism. This holds above all where Blanchot allows to be seen, inescapably, what was evident to the generation of Jules Monnerot, René Daumal, Gustave Roud, Julien Gracq, namely that surrealist experience, from its early and developing engagement with psycho-analysis and Hegelian thought, could scarcely be intelligible without some conception of the work of the negative, even where surrealism’s practice is to be understood as one of affirmation. It is not after all an accident that the range of thoughtful responses to surrealism should encompass Foucault and Deleuze, let us say, with Monnerot, the Nietzscheans, as well as Blanchot, the unfaithful Hegelian – surrealist affirmation is, as Antoine Compagnon says of Julien Gracq in relation to surrealism, ‘Un oui, mais – dernier trait antimoderne de Gracq – un oui qui n’est pas optimiste.’³ For Jenny, Bataille – and by implication Blanchot – in reviewing the
publication of Monnerot’s *La Poésie moderne et le sacré*, ‘esquisse une réévaluation du surréalisme.’ In fact neither Bataille nor Blanchot - nor Gracq - does anything of the kind.

II

*Pour André Breton, ‘En Attente entre voir et dire’ avec reconnaissance, avec affection, avec espoir. Blanchot*  
(Maurice Blanchot’s dedication in *L’Attente, l’oubli*, 1962, to André Breton)

Jenny’s response points to what can only be called a resistance to surrealism, and therefore repression. This repression of surrealism, it is telling to note, is one that is more characteristic of the contemporary secondary academic audience rather than writers, philosophers, or artists, where all reading, all interpretation must of necessity, as with Kofman, be one that approaches its subject at an angle, a *bias*. Since repression cannot be intentional – and it is not my aim here to examine the unconscious motives of certain actors in this subject – there is one small but interesting way in which the repression of surrealism, and with it the name of Breton, can be notated, and that is through a consideration of certain titles of Blanchot’s works.

Consider, then, *La Part du feu* (1949, containing ‘Réflexions sur le surréalisme,’ the review of Monnerot’s *La Poésie moderne et le sacré*): in a book devoted to Blanchot’s political activity, Philippe Mesnard, comments, in a perfectly matter of fact way, that the part of the experience of negativity, ‘[Cette] part de soi – la part coupable -, résidant au creux de son propre oubli [...] cette part qui, là, est propre à Blanchot, à son propre feu, a pu trouver dans l’expression [...] la “part du feu” qui lui vient de Bataille, la réponse, toujours provisoire, d’un apaisement certain [...]. En retour, le titre de *La Part du feu* adresse un signe d’amitié à Bataille.’ For her part, Charlotte Mandell, in her translator’s note to *The Work of Fire* (*La Part du feu*) explains why she chose ‘the *work of fire,*’ rather than the ‘fire’s *part.*’ Where Mesnard will foreground a biographical link to explain ‘la part du feu,’ Mandell will adduce a claim of rhetoricity:

The original title of this collection of essays is *La Part du feu*. The most literal, simply verbal translation would be ‘the part of fire.’ But the word ‘*part*’ has, as in English, the two meanings of ‘division of some whole’ and ‘role,’ as in play. It has further senses of ‘advantage,’ ‘political party,’ and others. So we might begin by thinking of The Role of Fire, the Work of Fire, and so on. But then we reflect that *feu* also has a range of meanings broader than the English ‘fire.’ It can mean ‘light,’ ‘lights’ (as in traffic lights, tail lights), ‘signal flares,’ the ‘warmth’ of feelings or of someone’s prose style, the frenzy of someone’s piano playing. Now we start thinking of the Role of Light, Signals, Flares, the
Side of Light; we are caught up in a tangle of speculations about illumination, work, taking sides, destruction (for fire does destroy what it briefly illuminates), signs and signals, various self-consuming artifacts.  

It is by no means clear to me that all of the connotative range indicated by Mandell would be historically applicable to Blanchot’s title La Part du feu, but it could be shown that in English poetic language since the Elizabethan the range of terms adduced by Mandell – warmth, destruction, self-consuming illumination, signals, etc – has been long available and is by no means redundant in modern idiomatic English. One has only to think – for an example – of the common rhyme of fire with desire in Shakespeare (Sonnet 44) and Sidney (“O Lord, how vain are all our frail delights”) or the powerful, dense play of light, night, sight, and shadow in Shakespeare’s Sonnet 43.

Without, though, questioning the direction of Mesnard’s interpretation of the friendship between Bataille and Blanchot, and without the need to pursue the value of Mandell’s preference for work over part, it remains that the expression la part du feu, as is only too clear from Blanchot’s 1966 essay on Nadja, is both an idiomatic as well as an enigmatic expression in Breton’s Nadja: ‘N’empêche que s’il faut attendre, s’il faut vouloir être sûr, s’il faut prendre des précautions, s’il faut faire au feu la part du feu, et seulement la part, je m’y refuse absolument.’  

Faire la part du feu is the idiomatic expression for to consent to a small sacrifice in order to avoid a larger one; but faire au feu … introduces a changed register, a moment of density to reflection which cannot go unnoticed by Blanchot. The question is partly one of intertextuality, but it is also one of the work of reference, for not only is Breton’s name repressed – that is, the intertextual element – but so too is the nature and kind of work of metaphor common to Bataille, Breton and Blanchot elided, and thereby also the kind of world that could respond to such work of reference – the part to the whole, the part in the process, the fragment, motion.

Indeed, it is worth noting, since it can scarcely be merely accidental, just how many of Blanchot’s titles, from the emergence of the post-journalist Blanchot in 1943, evoke, echo and perlarborate surrealist and Bretonian titles and utterances:

Faux pas (1943): the title of the inaugural work of the emergent Blanchot. Though, again, the everyday, colloquial register of this expression (in English as well as French) must be acknowledged, it cannot be ignored how powerfully this same colloquial register is invoked in an early surrealist Declaration to Society: ‘Qu’elle fasse attention à ses écarts, à chacun des faux-pas de son esprit nous ne la raterons pas.’ (Déclaration du 27 janvier 1925) – and it is to be found again in Breton’s Le Message automatique (1933), (Point du jour, 1935).
Le Livre à venir (1959): toward the close of Les Vases communicants, Breton invokes, as a figure of the communauté and la Révolution à venir, the poète à venir alongside the fenêtre noire.\(^{11}\) Just as Blanchot, after May ’68, will allow himself to speak only of a negative utopia, likewise Breton, in Les Vases communicants, will insist – and Blanchot will cite Breton – on ‘cette autre nécessité non moins impérieuse qui est de ne pas voir dans la Révolution à venir une fin.’\(^{12}\) The simplicity of the expression bears considerable weight, since not only the poète à venir is implicit in it, but so too would be the temporality of the future, and with it the care (Sorge) of Heideggerian thought.

Le demain joueur (1966-67): when, in a reflection which is also a meditation on Nadja, Blanchot comes to write his essay on l’avenir of surrealism, that is, the future modality distinctive to the manner of opening made possible by surrealist experience as well as that mode of what is yet to come (à venir) foregrounded by surrealism as encompassed in surrealism’s future, he chooses as title Le demain joueur, an expression from the Second manifeste du surréalisme, a dense and enigmatic expression the choice of which shows what a fine ear Blanchot possessed. This essay with its title is re-published as the penultimate chapter of L’Entretien infini (1969). The passage of the Second manifeste from which this phrase comes, which shows as clearly as possible the way in which surrealism as conceived by Breton concerned the articulation of the activity and risks of thought, indeed, the fragility of recommencement, reads as follows: ‘Il est normal que le surréalisme se manifeste au milieu et peut-être au prix d’une suite ininterrompue de défaillances, de zigzags et de défection qui exigent à tout instant la remise en question de ses données originelles, c’est-à-dire le rappel au principe initial de son activité joint à l’interrogation du demain joueur qui veut que les coeurs «s’éprennent» et se déprennent.’\(^{13}\) Just as it should not be a surprise that Blanchot’s ear should have picked out this expression and this passage on the necessity for thought always to be a thought of recommencement, one can see why the surrealist group L’Archibras and journal of the same name, simultaneously with, but independent of, Blanchot, should have used the same expression as part of the title for an internal document, namely, ‘Pour un demain joueur,’ bearing the significant sub-title: ‘Résolution intérieure destinée à enrayer la formation des poncifs et à interdire la formation des dogmes dans le Surréalisme.’\(^{14}\)

Le pas au-delà (1973): to the title of Breton’s Les pas perdus (1924), Nadja had replied, ‘Il n’y en a pas’ – for there are always traces – which would thus, in the work of the negative, open movement to le pas au-delà, which is yet an au-delà [qui] soit dans cette vie.\(^{15}\)

L’Écriture du désastre (1980): in subtly engaging the transition between the given in daily life and the imposed horror of the apparently exceptional that changes the conception of measure – Le désastre, opens L’Écriture du désastre, ‘ruine tout en laissant tout en l’état’ – cannot avoid
Breton’s recognition through the encounter with Nadja of a ‘temps [du] désastre irréparable,’ which affects the part ‘la plus humainement définie.’

**Du merveilleux:** in 1947, Blanchot published ‘Du merveilleux,’ in part a review of Pierre Mabille’s *Le Merveilleux* (1946) which provided the occasion for Blanchot to reflect upon the status and kind of experience and mode of being that the surrealists understood by *le merveilleux* – an experience the character of which, as Mabille insisted, is one of ‘épreuve et de tension’ – as well as the way in which *le merveilleux*, once brought to the attention by the surrealists can be understood as bearing a life of its own. Hence the opening sentence of the essay reads: ‘Depuis le temps où André Breton écrivait: «Le merveilleux est toujours beau», le merveilleux a fait son chemin.’ Christoph Bident, in his superb intellectual and spiritual biography of Blanchot, will go so far as to make of this essay a key moment, along with the *La Part du feu*, in the development of a distinct critical position by Maurice Blanchot in dialogue with surrealism: the relationship between language and revolution, the questions of community, the refusal to see in communism – or the Revolution – anything but a preparation – at best – for the ground of liberty, of the things that matter. Bident, in other words, does not present Blanchot’s relationship to surrealism – and the name of Breton – as a surprise, as something to be accounted for. On the contrary, Bident sees surrealism as making something possible for Blanchot, initially, as with Bataille and Gracq, against Sartrean existentialism, hence Bident’s comment: ‘Cette réhabilitation du surréalisme [in the post-World War II period] accompagne l’affirmation de plus en plus brillante et profonde d’une théorie littéraire qui implique des prises de positions politiques, esthétiques, philosophiques et critiques d’une fermeté toute nouvelle.’

### III

Les signataires de la présente communication s’élèvent contre l’exploitation dont sont l’objet de différents côtés, singulièrement depuis Mai 68, les noms d’Antonin Artaud, de Georges Bataille et d’André Breton.

Qu’avec plus ou moins de rigueur ou de naïveté certains circles intellectuels tentent de tirer à eux des pensées fortes, sur lesquelles ils éprouvent le besoin de s’appuyer, avant même souvent d’en avoir aperçu toutes les nuances, c’est là sans doute un phénomène généralement admissible, inévitable en tous cas. Il n’est pas tolérable en revanche qu’ils en viennent à réduire ces pensées à jouer un rôle tactique dans les actions polémiques où leur volonté de croissance les entraîne.
Finally, there is one crucial incident that makes clear that Blanchot’s relationship to and with surrealism was of a spiritual, thoughtful nature, and that is the common authorship with Dionys Mascolo and Jean Schuster – one of the executors of Breton’s literary estate – of the *Déclaration sur le droit à l’insoumission dans la guerre d’Algérie* (September 1960), frequently referred to as the *Déclaration des 121*. Leslie Hill, in his exceptional study, *Maurice Blanchot, Extreme Contemporary* (1997), has addressed the bad faith motivating the *méconnaissance* of Blanchot’s political trajectory, but I should like to conclude this set of notations with a suggestion – to which I shall return in further studies – which is this: surrealism is the condition, the means by which Blanchot was able to re-think his political and literary practice of the 1930s. A surrealist such as Philippe Soupault had no difficulty in admiring a monarchist Roman Catholic such as Georges Bernanos precisely because Bernanos was not a conformist; just as Gracq could relate that Breton was indeed more than able to appreciate the greatness of Paul Claudel’s poetry – which should not have been such a surprise. The apparent triumph of liberal democracy has not made one of the key questions of the 1930s redundant – a question, I would dare say, which links a Pope John Paul II (i.e. Roman Catholic social philosophy) with, say, a Guy Debord (i.e. the avant-garde as a spiritual phenomenon born of the inter-war years), namely: Is democracy distinct from capitalism or an unwitting vehicle for capitalism? It is by no means obvious in these times of ecological threat, the immoral waste of wealth and the idolatry called the spectacle that this matter has been settled. There are many things at issue in the understanding of Blanchot’s inner relationship to surrealism and the inter-war years, not least that it is through Blanchot’s reading of surrealism – Antonin Artaud, René Char, Leiris, Bataille and Breton – the *culture* of surrealism – which is also to say, Romantic and post-Romantic philosophical *thought* – that surrealism becomes available for certain of the key thinkers of the post-World War II generation: Foucault, Deleuze, Derrida, Michel Deguy, but also Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe. To get at, indeed to assume the availability of this situation requires a reading that is at once historical and philosophical, and often, as with Kofman, indirect.

2 Consider the following note by Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy: ‘Since we have been asked – and to be mysterious about this would be frivolous – the itinerary of one of us (J.-L. N.) runs through Esprit and the CFDT, whilst the other (Ph. L.-L.) for a long time found himself in accord with the positions of Socialisme ou Barbarie and, for a while, of The Situationist International.’ Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, ‘Opening Address to the Centre for Philosophical Research on the Political’, Retreating the Political, London 1997, n.3, 179. See Jean-Luc Nancy, ‘André Breton’, a suite of three prose poems written on the occasion of Breton’s death in 1966 and published in Esprit. This suite of poems has been recently translated by Michael Stone-Richards and Julien Lenoir as ‘André Breton’, in Detroit: Imaginary Cities, Spring 2007, 146-147.

3 Antoine Compagnon, ‘Julien Gracq entre André Breton et Jules Monnerot’, Les Anti-modernes, Paris 2005, 402. This chapter of Compagnon’s book is a development of an earlier study, ‘Evaluations du surréalisme: de l’«illisible» au «poncif»’, which appeared in the same issue as Jenny’s second Blanchot and surrealism essay which appeared in Cahier de l’Herne: André Breton, 72, Paris 1998. One could scarcely believe that the two articles address the same subject, the same field, the same periodicity.


5 In André Breton, 42 rue Fontaine: Livres, vol. I, Calmels Cohen sale catalogue, Paris 2003, 59. Blanchot’s ‘entre voir et dire’ could here be interpreted as an allusion to the form of Orpheus and Eurydice – which, at the risk of stating the obvious, is also to realize that Blanchot interpreted (grasped?) the fundamental relation between Breton and Nadja as a modern Orpheus and Eurydice.


7 Originally published as ‘Quelques réflexions sur le surréalisme’, in L’Arche, 8, August 1945.


10 André Breton, Nadja, Paris 1928, 206.

11 André Breton, Les Vases communicants (1932), Paris 1955, 170, 171.

12 André Breton, Les Vases communicants, 161.


15 André Breton, Nadja, 172.

16 André Breton, Nadja, 154.


These notations come out of a talk ‘Autour des marges: Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) and the philosophical intelligence of surréalisme,’ delivered to the philosophy, poetry and religion section of the Harvard Humanities Center, Harvard University in February 2005. This lecture on Derrida and surrealism, delivered as an act of homage, will be a chapter in the book *Surrealism and the Negative Work of Culture: André Breton, Maurice Blanchot and the Philosophical Intelligence of Surrealism* (forthcoming).

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**Drawing the Line: a Round Table on Rebecca Horn**

**Introduction**
This is an abridged and edited transcript of a round table that took place at the Hayward Gallery in London, on July 9, 2005, to coincide with the exhibition *Rebecca Horn Bodylandscapes: Drawings, Sculptures, Installations 1964-2004*. The participants were: Sarah Kent, art critic for *Time Out* in London, who has long been interested in Rebecca Horn’s work, Joy Sleeman, senior lecturer at the Slade, University College London, who has written about Land Art and Performance Art, and is currently writing a monograph on the sculptor William Tucker, and Peg Rawes, lecturer at the Bartlett School of Architecture, also part of UCL, who is currently working on a year-long project called *Spatial Imagination in Design*. The round table was chaired by Anna Dezeuze who, at the invitation of Rebecca Heald from the Hayward Gallery, helped organise the event on behalf of the AHRC Research Centre for Studies of Surrealism and its Legacies.

Since this was the first show of Horn’s work to bring together her drawings, sculptures and installations, the round table focused on the relation between the drawings and her other works, as well as the evolution of Horn’s *oeuvre*, her poetry, and the specific characteristics of her work that emerged from the exhibition. The round table was followed by audience questions, of which a small selection has been included in this transcript. The round table and questions have been transcribed by Kerry Cundiff and edited by Anna Dezeuze.

**Round Table**

**Bodies, Space and Drawing**

**Anna Dezeuze:** My first impression of Rebecca Horn’s work, when I encountered it some years ago now, was one of incredible immediacy and accessibility. I found it quite interesting to see her drawings, because they seem to me much less immediate, much less accessible than the installations.

**Sarah Kent:** My impressions are exactly the opposite of yours. Having seen Rebecca Horn’s work here and there over the years, I’ve had different reactions at different times; sometimes I’ve found it very funny, sometimes very poignant, but I’ve always felt that there was something about it that I couldn’t quite grasp. It seemed to me that the work was in some way empty, hollow at the core. It seems to direct attention away from itself to somewhere else. For example, in the mechanised sculptures, you are often made to wait for a long time for something to happen – for an instrument to play, for something to sprinkle or a pendulum to move. And while you’re waiting and anticipating and wondering, you’re in a strange state of suspended animation; and then whatever happens is always an anticlimax, it never fulfils your expectations. But seeing the large recent drawings, the *Bodylandscapes* (2003-2004), for the first time, I felt the opposite. I thought: ‘Here is work that is immediate, visceral and full of vitality and energy. It’s here, it’s now; it’s not about deferred gratification, it’s about immediate interaction and intimacy.’ So it’s interesting that we have such different responses.

**Joy Sleeman:** I personally was struck at how sculptural the exhibition seemed as a whole. It brought to my mind the sculptor Julio Gonzalez’s definition of sculpture as ‘drawing in air,’ which is also translated as
'drawing in space.' I think that Horn’s work – both her actual drawings and the sculptural works themselves – seems to make something manifest in space in that way. Some of the sculptures, of course, are literally drawing machines.

The other link between the installations and the drawings, I felt, was the centrality of the human figure, which is something that dominates even the most abstract sculpture. In fact, Michael Fried’s famous attack on minimalist sculpture, which you might think of as the most un-bodily sculpture, focuses on the blatant anthropomorphism of minimalism. Even the most abstract sculpture still has a relationship to the body.

Peg Rawes: I agree that there is a really interesting return to the body in this exhibition, and I am particularly interested in how you construct the body and the sense of self in space. This is where my interest in the imagination comes in. Hearing Sarah talk about this intellectual distance that a lot of Horn’s work can have, reminded me of the way in which imagination, as a mental process, was written about in eighteenth-century philosophy and aesthetics as a connective principle between art processes and scientific processes. In that particular era it was really given a very strong power in linking different disciplines that are, for us now, often very removed. Horn seems to have an interest in how the imagination projects out, and I think her early prosthetic extensions to the body embody this expression of possible extensions into space. In fact, they are almost imaginary medical prosthetics, which is very poignant, when you know about her biography at that time.

The other area that I’m interested in is how the imagination works in the construction of space as a bodily experience and in mathematics, and particularly geometry. (There’s actually a very long history of geometry in relation to imagination.) I think Horn uses a very mathematical way of measuring, of constructing an aerial construction of the world, which is formally a geometric space, into something that can be bodily as well. This kind of construction seems to me to take place in her sculptures, and in the Bodylandscape drawings, which are very dynamic and actually quite immersive. The act of drawing these circles points to where the body is placed in relation to the drawing – at some points it is almost a projection of the body into that space – and I think that’s a very performative element.

AD: Peg, you just hinted at the ways in which Horn’s early biographical experiences influenced her sense of body and space. Sarah, could you speak more about this relation between her life and work?

SK: The most obvious example of course is Cornucopia (1970). Horn was making sculptures using fibre glass, and she and some other students at her art school got lung disease from inhaling the fibre glass, so she ended up in hospital for about a year, followed by two years in isolation,
having to live very quietly without being able to see friends or family, and having to take antibiotics until she had recovered. Cornucopia is almost a literal description of the trauma of that. Before she was in hospital, her sculptures were about the female body, so the drawings she made while she was lying in bed, and the sculptures she began to sew, were not so much a break as an extension of her earlier work. Cornucopia consists of a pair of lungs that you wear on the front of your chest; they’re very odd because they connect your mouth with your nipples, as though the sculpture were a form of breathing apparatus and also a method of self-nourishment, which seems a fairly direct reflection of the fact that the artist was completely isolated and had to sustain herself in some way. I think it’s the only example that is so literal; the work soon becomes much more metaphoric and symbolic. The other body extensions – claws that give you greater reach, wing-like appendages that you attach to your arms to make it appear as if you could fly, and the mask – all do two things. On the one hand, they extend your reach, literally and physically, but on the other hand they inhibit your actions. They are also quite fetishistic, and it seems to me that they are about being separate, isolated, alone, wanting to make contact with people who are not physically present, while being entrapped at the same time.

AD: Peg, did you also pick up on this sense of confinement in Horn’s earlier work?

PR: Yes, but I think what interests me is the way in which geometry is mobilised in these works, so that it becomes a very material substance. It is manufactured into artefacts, little packages, portable elements. They are not art objects, they have a specific design function. But built into that notion of design, there is also some limit to what it can do, so they are transformable in one aspect, but maybe not in others.

JS: These early pieces are about control and the body being both extended and restrained, and this is a very specific gestural and expressive body. Henri Lefebvre makes the distinction between a fleshy body and a more expressive body, and I think that this is where Horn differs from other women artists who made work using the body in the 1970s, who seem to me to have been more concerned with the interior of the body. Eleanor Antin, for example, made a work which was called Carving: a Traditional Sculpture, which is her body losing weight over a period of very severe dieting. Whereas the restraint in Antin’s work is imposed by not putting nourishment into your body, Horn’s bodies are restrained by putting elaborate straps around them. So it seems that the body in Horn’s work is very much about an expressive, extrovert kind of body. It is always externalised in some way: even when Horn’s dealing with something that is to do with the body’s viscera, to do with the internal workings of the body, as in Cornucopia, her way of working with that is to externalise it entirely.
AD: We were saying earlier that that’s maybe one of the reasons that Horn’s work is cross-gender – both men and women can wear these objects – so it doesn’t seem as aligned with a feminist project in the same way the work of other 1970s body artists might be.

SK: Well, she made two versions of the same work: *Black Cockfeathers* (1971), for men, and *Paradise Widow* (1975) for women. The one for the woman is longer, so that the wings cover her completely, and they are motorised so that they function independently from the wearer. The pieces we have been talking about so far are attached to the body so that the wearer has to manipulate them and find a use for them, whereas the motorised pieces function independently and are autonomous. They become in that sense quite frightening, because they seem to have their own will and are like prisons (one of them is actually called *The Feathered Prison Fan* [1978]). But although the two versions of *Black Cockfeathers/Paradise Widow* are different – the male performer is in control whereas the female is trapped inside an automated cocoon – they don’t seem to be gender specific. They just illustrate the moment where she moves to the next phase in her work.

JS: And I think that’s the key moment where it moves away from sculpture too, in that it moves, which is one of the key taboos about sculpture. Traditionally, sculpture was meant to depict movement but without actually moving itself. Once sculptures start to move themselves, they touch on that whole world of automata and Frankenstein’s monster, which is part of a very problematic and quite creepy history …

PR: I quite like that history! But I agree, the kinds of power that are transferred into these mechanised elements often carry a sense of brutality or conflict. It’s never a straightforward celebration of an inanimate object coming to life.

AD: One of my problems with the drawings is precisely related to the introduction of machines in her work. Once we’ve seen automated machines make traces and paint, I feel we can no longer see the drawings as being spontaneous or expressive in any way. For me that really does raise questions of expression, authenticity and biography, in that one wonders not only whether these drawings are really expressive, but also whether Rebecca Horn’s own body has lost all its expressivity by being identified with a mechanised automaton.

PR: I don’t agree, because I don’t construct the idea of the self and technology as separate. I personally don’t see, in the way we live, this idea of us being natural and not augmented in some way by other technologies, whether it’s pens or tools, or classical art materials. In fact, in the show, there’s a shift from the finger, the digit, as a drawing tool, to these harpoons in later installations. The drawing instrument seems to come into all
AD: But the first film that you see when you walk into the exhibition is Rebecca Horn with her Pencil Mask (1972), and the kind of drawing that she is making there seems very repetitive, it operates as a compulsive movement which is dictated by what she is wearing as opposed to what she wants to draw …

PR: Well, I think that that particular piece, which is very early, is much more problematic: self-expression seems to involve a very difficult psychological state. I actually find the later works far less troubled. In them, there’s a sense of unity or synthesis, or an idea of the self in an immersive act, in which repetition has come to an end.

Biographical Tales

SK: Yes, I wonder if this is the point at which Horn shifts from making body extensions to the next stage in which the human body is replaced by surrogates such as shoes, books, instruments that play themselves, butterflies … It’s a gradual move away from the surface of the body. A recurring motif in these works is a machine of some kind on the wall, which is either a motorised brush that splashes liquid, a hammer which knocks a piece of coal or carbon, or something that shakes pigment down onto something below (the something below might be a pair of shoes, a book …). I read a story in one of her early interviews which I find very revealing in this context. In her early childhood, she lived with an aunt, because her parents were always away, and she was sent to boarding school. (She almost never saw her parents, so the time she spent in hospital was by no means the first time that she was alone. She was used to being alone – to longing for absent loved ones – and that permeates the work throughout, I think.) This astounding event took place when she was six years old. Her school teacher had a wooden leg – which is already surreal enough – and every day one of the kids had to come out in front of the class and say prayers. Now because her parents were away, and her Romanian nanny had never taught her how to say prayers, when it was her turn to stand out in front of the class, Horn was terrified, and she peed down her legs and onto her shoes and also onto the wooden leg of her teacher. As a punishment, she had to go home with him, carrying his heavy books. It seems to me that this explains the sprinkling on books [Salomé (1988)] and on shoes [Lola - A New York Summer (1987)]. Why, at a particular moment, she decided to move into what is in effect symbolism or metaphor, I don’t know. But of course, a work like Les Amants (1991), in which two funnels, one filled with black ink and the other filled with pink champagne, apparently consecrate their relationship by ejaculating onto the wall and making a wall drawing, is also a spoof on Jackson Pollock and all those male artists whose testosterone-fuelled excitement created such amazing action paintings.
AD: If we go back to Horn’s experience in the sanatorium, would you say that the body in her work is a wounded body, an ill body?

SK: No, I would say it was a separated body. A lot of the work is about the relationship between the body and the space around it, or one body and another body, or, in sculptural installations like Circle for Broken Landscape (1997), the relationship between various elements, their interconnections. In the video called Keeping Hold of those Unfaithful Legs, there is a man and a woman, both with orange hair and bands which contain very powerful magnets strapped around one leg. The couple spend their time coming together, locking onto one another and moving apart. What’s interesting is that the person doing most of the separating is the woman – who is either Rebecca Horn herself or a stand-in for the artist. Given her childhood, I would imagine that she finds intimacy really difficult to contend with. Similarly, in Circle for Broken Landscape, there is one pendulum that moves in a spiral which rises and falls, and a vertical one that is static. At one point they almost touch; it’s like Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel ceiling in which the fingers of God and Adam are eternally frozen at the moment just before they touch. In Horn’s work, contact is often interrupted at the point at which it is almost made – whether it is between peacock feather fans in a courtship ritual [The Raven’s Twin (1997)], or knives about to fight each other [Knuggle Dome for James Joyce (2004)].

AD: In terms of biographical narratives, one of the main points of comparison would be Joseph Beuys, of course …

SK: But they are quite different. Beuys’s story is that he was shot down as a pilot during the Second World War and then supposedly saved by Nomads who covered him in fat and wrapped him in felt. (In fact he was a radio operator, and when he was shot down, he was saved by a special German unit that was sent out to search for people who’d been shot down.) In nearly all his work he alludes to this narrative, and the vibrancy of his works relies on this heroic personal mythology and the ideology that he preached; without that foundation his work doesn’t really seem to have the status of sculpture at all. In contrast, Rebecca Horn’s works are created as sculptures and even if you know nothing about her, they still operate as sculptures. In fact she hides her autobiography, she doesn’t talk about it anymore. She is keen that her work should not be seen as specific to herself and her history, she wants it to be understood in much more universal terms. Speaking to me about the Bodylandscape drawings, she mentioned that she meditates and that the drawings came out of that practice. They are in a sense like body maps, in that they literally refer to how far she can reach and how tall she is – they’re hung low because they are in effect mirrors of her body. But when I asked her if they relate to the shakras on the body – because there are obviously points of concentration in the drawings and ‘energy’ is a word she uses all the time (in
particular psychic energy) and she has said that she perceives the human body as a part of universal energy – she wouldn’t go down that road at all because it was too specific. In that respect, I think her work is almost the opposite of Joseph Beuys’s.

**Humour and Romanticism**

**AD:** I felt the last work in the show [Light Imprisoned Inside the Belly of a Whale (2002)] is almost like a romantic Gesamtkunstwork, in that you really have the sense of the words, images, light and space really feeding into each other. And in the later works as a whole, I feel Horn’s vocabulary has shifted to a more romantic, a more symbolic repertory of pens that are like snakes, and round basins that are like the moon which is like an egg, in an endless narrative of resonances. How romantic do you feel Rebecca Horn really is?

**SK:** The thing I notice most about the relationship between earlier work and Light Imprisoned inside the Belly of a Whale is that the sense of time is altogether different. As I mentioned, earlier pieces involve deferred gratification and a sense of anti-climax, so you are always left with a feeling of longing and a sense of not being satisfied. I found Light Imprisoned Inside the Belly of a Whale very soothing, it was very beautiful. You are trapped inside this body, as it were, yet the experience isn’t claustrophobic, so you just relax. This must relate to the fact that Horn has taken up meditation; it implies a completely different sense of being in the world – not longing for something or someone that is absent, but being focused in the here and now.

**PR:** I find those later works less interesting because they do seem to me to go into a universal transcendental language. In her earlier work, there seems to be an interest in cybernetic theories of the body as a point of circulation within systems or economies. There are, for example, these 1968-1969 drawings of the circulation system that’s been put into tubing on the external part of the body. In contrast, the more formally symbolic pieces like the landscape with the butterfly and the mirror and the binoculars [Circle for Broken Landscape], seem to me less immersive than the earlier work.

And I thought Light Imprisoned inside the Belly of a Whale was going to be about Moby Dick, so I was disappointed that it revolved more around the Judeo-Christian symbolism of the biblical Jonah. There seems to be a turn to a more conventional subject matter in the Calvary and Saint Sebastian drawings [El Calvario, (1996-2004), Saint Sebastian (2004)], and I don’t know if she really deals with that subject matter in such an interesting way.

**AD:** I was wondering about Horn’s poetry, which is also something that this exhibition foregrounds by literally putting it on the wall. Did that shed any light on the work for you?

**JS:** I suppose one of the things that was noticeable when I walked around the
exhibition a couple of weeks ago was the point at which drawing and writing seemed to be very interchangeable. In the way that this exhibition is set up, it very much seems to be that you start with the drawings and then there is a point at which the drawings peter out and words become much more prominent, and then at the end the words are totally immersive. It does seem that there is some kind of interchangeability between the words and the drawings, but also that they serve a slightly different function. Maybe words can be more evocative, but they can also be more specific as well.

**PR:** But I don’t think she’s interested in the act of writing, is she? I don’t think she’s dealing with the trace, do you?

**JS:** Well, there are marginalia at the bottom of some of the drawings – often only a few words.

**AD:** For me the poetry displayed on the walls really emphasised Horn’s strong use of images, which relate to those striking images created by her installations, which really stay in your mind. I was also quite struck by her interest in nature, which is not something that we are used to seeing in contemporary art.

**PR:** But it’s a very positive part of the romantic spirit, isn’t it? I think there is a problem in the way the poems have been presented in a very formal and rather grand presentation. If they had been presented as traces, or in a more process-based way, I think they wouldn’t have that sense of elevated transcendental value that they are given as commentaries.

**JS:** I suppose they make some of the work very literal in that way, don’t they? The text telling the myth of the spiralling birds that disappear in the middle of the ocean seems to close down the meaning of the adjoining installation [Spiral Bath (1982)].

**SK:** I think we are in danger of missing one aspect of Horn’s work, which is the humour, in particular the relationship between sex and humour. For example, the new piece called Cinema Verité (2005) consists of a large dish of water standing on the floor, a spotlight which shines an egg-shaped shadow of the water onto the wall and an egg attached to the wall with mirrors. A pointer dips until it touches a little metal disc which agitates the surface of the water to produce beautiful patterns in the reflection. As the water calms down, the reflection begins to look like a culture in a Petri dish or cells seen through a microscope; then, suddenly, you see the shadow of the pointer as a sperm penetrating the cells – so a union has been achieved, satisfaction has been reached. I think it’s extremely funny that one should go to such lengths of dispassionate mechanisation to produce such an intimate story.

**PR:** She doesn’t make me laugh, but I definitely think there is a shift in her romantic spirit when she moves from the energy of pain or trauma into something that’s about desire in a positive sense.
**JS:** I think the most humour is probably in her films. There are some funny moments which seem to domesticate the grand themes of Surrealism. For example in Buñuel’s *Un Chien andalou* there’s the famous scene of an eyeball being cut, but in one of Horn’s pieces [*Cutting one’s hair with two pairs of scissors simultaneously* (1974-75)], she’s just cutting her fringe. Or in *Un Chien andalou*, there’s a scene with a piano and a donkey tied to it, but in another of Horn’s films, it’s just a silly little piano … So Horn seems to make those grand surrealist narratives very domestic and ordinary and everyday, and there’s something humorous about that everydayness.

**Audience Questions**

*On Horn’s Drawings*

**Audience:** I just wondered if you could talk a little bit more about her drawings. I personally was a little bit disappointed with them. I thought they reminded me of Cy Twombly’s recent work, and I just wonder why she’s used so little material on the paper.

**AD:** Well, I agree with you, my initial comparison was also Cy Twombly and that’s why I wanted them to be a lot messier.

**SK:** I too thought of Cy Twombly when I saw the late drawings, and felt they were a bit pretty compared with Twombly, but what worries me more about them are their titles. I really have a problem with the references to pain and martyrdom; they weren’t there in the earlier work — although you could argue very strongly that that was what the earlier work was about. The titles seem to invite you to see the drawings almost illustratively, suggesting ‘this is my bleeding heart’ or ‘this is where it hurts most.’

**JS:** Do you see them as therapeutic then, or even cathartic?

**SK:** No, because they are much too controlled for that.

**PR:** I didn’t have that disappointment about their relation to Cy Twombly, because I think of Horn’s drawings more as existing between drawings and diagrams, and I actually quite like her diagrammatic method. In terms of the construction of space and the body, there is among the earlier alchemic, prosthetic objects in the first section, a series of drawings of fan wings [including *Fan* (1970)]. In those drawings she seems to start from this Vitruvian figure of a stretched body, which suggests an architectural or built space. And the last drawings are quite interesting as plans or sections, moving into a different discipline. So maybe it’s not so much about the material: it might be about what different disciplines do with drawing, and that’s very interesting.

**JS:** I agree - the key is in the relation between the drawings and the sculptures. In those earlier drawings, you have a sense of drawing as a surrogate for sculpture. Then those become a bit more precise and there are measurements, so
you’re actually now thinking ‘this is a drawing for a sculpture.’ The later drawings, for their part, are more like drawings after sculpture, like residues, bits that couldn’t be put into the sculptures. There is a sense of there being some kind of taboo about drawing in a very conventional way, as if the diagrammatic style were the only style available. I’m saying this because the sculptor that I’ve been working on [William Tucker] said that in the 1960s there was a real taboo about sculptors drawing. When he started to draw again, he said he had to come up with ruses, like for example drawing with electrical tape on plasterboard, or drawing full scale, because that seemed somehow more sculptural. Maybe this idea of a sculptural drawing, contrasted with the romantic idea of expressive drawing, is something relevant to Horn’s work as well.

On the Exhibition

Audience: Do you not think that the display of the early prosthetic works in wooden boxes, and the slightly odd way the drawings are scattered throughout the show, although they have only been made recently, contributes to a kind of mystification that Horn is gradually developing?

SK: I do. I think she was probably involved in the installation, and is trying to turn herself into a conceptualist.

PR: Well I like the fact that the objects have been left in their cases, because it brings out their pseudo-scientific, lab-like aspect. They are there as instruments, as contraptions. There’s a real interest in alchemy that comes through the show, with a fascination with the transformation of materials, in an almost spiritual, mystical sense, and the transformation of energy from organic or inorganic material into animate life. If they had been presented as performative body pieces, that notion of other matter, this reference to attempts to produce life in a Frankenstein-like way, would maybe not have come through.

SK: It’s interesting that she seems to be updating her own work, so that it no longer belongs in the late 1960s and early 1970s, but becomes something else. I can understand why someone would want to do that!
Susan Hiller in conversation with Roger Malbert

Introduction

This is an edited transcript of an interview that took place between Susan Hiller and Roger Malbert at the Fourth International Symposium on Surrealism at West Dean College, Chichester on 13 May 2005. In exhibition during the conference was Susan Hiller's series of lightboxes, 'From India to the Planet Mars,' illustrating examples of automatic writing from various sources that she has collected. The conversation focused on the theme of automatism and explored the relationships between this historical surrealist practice, its mediation though subsequent art production and criticism, and Susan Hiller's work.

The conversation was transcribed by Kerry Cundiff and edited by Susan Hiller and Roger Malbert. Annotations and additional editing are by Samantha Lackey.

Roger Malbert: I'm very honoured to be introducing Professor Susan Hiller to you. I'm sure that much of her work will be known to many of you, but that's not to say that all of you will be familiar with everything she has produced, because it's a long career, a very diverse career, with work which relates in many different ways, I think, to surrealism.

We're going to concentrate on one or two particular aspects of Susan's work, but there is a rolling image bank of past work behind us which gives an idea of the whole range. At the moment, she has a new work on in London at the Timothy Taylor Gallery called the J Street Project (2002-5), which has grown out of a DAAD fellowship in Berlin. There is another work which she is just about to finish installing in Bristol as part of a group show, and I mention that partly because of its title, which is very significant. It's called Psychic Archaeology (2005).

Susan Hiller, Psychic Archaeology, 2005. Commissioned by the City of Bristol for 'Thinking of the Outside.' © Susan Hiller.

And there is a third work - which I hope that you will have a chance to at least glimpse upstairs: called From India to the Planet Mars. It is a selection from a larger series of light-box works, and that work

Susan Hiller, Psychic Archaeology, 2005. Commissioned by the City of Bristol for 'Thinking of the Outside.' © Susan Hiller.
draws on one really quite consistent interest of Susan's over many years: in automatism, automatic writing and in collecting in a kind of archival way, examples of, broadly speaking, material culture - in this case, versions of automatic writing which come from many different sources. Some come from books to do with psychical research, some come from psychoanalytic case histories, some from artists; some of them are fraudulent, some are nineteenth-century studies of paranormal phenomena, designed to prove some point about spiritualism or mediumistic work. And since we have her work here, and automatism in one way or another has been a theme of Susan's work since a piece in the seventies called *Sisters of Menon* (1972), which is the first complete work employing automatic writing, I thought it would be interesting to start with a question relating to that, perhaps in a more historical way. Shall we take as a point of departure your origins in the United States, where you first started making work: how automatism was perceived in America at that time and what you were engaging with; were you picking up on something from surrealism that had been already filtered through many different voices and interpretations?


**Susan Hiller:** It's a little complicated to dissect the threads of all this and I know that most of you here are much more knowledgeable about surrealism, the histories of surrealism and aspects of surrealism than I am. So I'm only going to speak from my own point of view. I think I first have to somewhat correct something you said, Roger, because I didn't really begin to work as an artist until I came to Britain in the late sixties. It's true that my background was in the United States, which has a slightly different trajectory in relationship to various modernisms than this country, but my interest in surrealism came about through an experience of automatic writing. This was a very strange
and interesting spontaneous experience. I know at least one person sitting in the room has heard me talk about this as long ago as the seventies so it’s a bit difficult to talk about it again now but, let me see, how can I start?

In the early seventies I was interested in making participatory works for groups of people, which sometimes took a quasi-scientific form, but the basis was always an attempt to examine something which was considered to be irrational or trivial. One of the things that had always struck me was the way that there seemed to be a kind of ideology of ‘influence’ and a notion of ‘progress’ in the way art history was constructing what artists did. There was supposedly an artist who did something first, then there were other artists who followed afterwards. But of course when you are an artist you know that isn’t the way things happen. Lots of people get ideas at the same time and develop them in different places and somebody gets the credit for being first but it isn’t like that. This always made me very cross and so I decided to do a piece of work, and the piece of work that I wanted to do was based on a series of experiments in telepathy that were designed by the American socialist novelist Upton Sinclair (some of you may have read his novels). Upton Sinclair was married to a woman who was clairvoyant and they developed a drawing practice which is quite fascinating. He would go into one room and select an image from a random assortment of images and he would look at it and she would be someplace else and she would draw it. Then they extended this experiment so that they got further and further apart in distance and it went on like this. He, being a socialist and a rationalist, believed that he had discovered something very important and very true and he wrote a book called Mental Radio - a great title - about it.\(^2\) I had read this book and I thought how interesting it could be to set up some kind of quasi-experimental situation with groups of artists. This was the period of postal art, which some of you may know something about. So, I designed a postal art project and the idea was that at certain times, on certain dates, I would select an image from about a thousand images that had been cut out of magazines, not by me, and I would just blindly select one of these images and stare at it for a long time and artist friends around the world at that same
time would try to do a drawing, and then they would send me the drawing, and we would decide whether there were interesting connections or not. This was in 1972. On one of these occasions when I had finished staring at my magazine picture, I put it down and I suddenly began to write; my hand began to move, and as I said afterwards, it was a very uncanny experience because I was just observing my hand writing. I felt a total dissociation from the experience. What I wrote was a sort of text that was a combination of undecipherable hieroglyphics which turned into readable words with several puns: a sort of shape that looked like a child’s drawing of an eye for ‘I,’ and a lot of mirror writing, backward, reverse writing and so forth, the sort of classic surrealist-type drawing if you like. The problem for me was that I didn’t have the ideology of spiritualism or any other belief system that would support this kind of experience. I didn’t think spirits were dictating to me or anything of the sort. I was just left with this drawing, really, and that led me to look again at surrealism and the repressed history of automatism within modernism which I’ve spoken about on other occasions, but that is a somewhat different point.

RM: Yes, so that was your beginning. I think it is worth talking about that repressed history for several reasons; obviously you were coming to this practice quite a bit after the initial experiments of the surrealists with which you identified?

SH: But they were the only people I could think of who had done anything like this. Then I got interested in ideas like the relationship between writing and drawing and the fact that the Greeks had only one word for the two practices, and psychoanalytic theories and ideas coming from linguistics - but there’s no time to go into all this now. At that time of course, the early seventies, surrealism in terms of conceptual practice was really a sort of dirty word. No one talked about surrealism, no one evoked it; it wasn’t a meaningful model for anybody. It was considered rather embarrassing, and that interested me because I am always interested in things that are thought to be embarrassing, or disturbing or not to be spoken of etc. etc., and I began to look back on the history of how this had come
to be. What I discovered which is probably not in accord with other people’s histories of the time is this: in the United States, the extremely important and wonderful artist, Ad Reinhardt, had in the late fifties been influenced by Jackson Pollock or he had the desire to work like Pollock. He was interested in this idea of spontaneous expression and he started to make some calligraphic works which are called the Kufic drawings because the marks look like Arabic. Shortly afterwards he attempted to suppress or withdraw them and to get these drawings back from various collectors. As you know, Ad Reinhardt was an extremely witty and brilliant and articulate artist and he wrote very influentially against surrealism and against the notion of the unconscious, which he considered to be a myth and a romantic weakness. He deliberately positioned himself in opposition to his own experience of automatism, to paint those black paintings which are totally self-referential and conscious. And at the same time Clement Greenberg was attempting to erase all traces of the automatistic surrealist heritage within Pollock’s work, so much so, that Greenberg’s essays on André Masson and Mark Tobey are totally denigrating and he attempts increasingly over time to separate Pollock’s expression from any of that history. Reinhardt’s rigorous self-referential approach to art practice was a huge influence on the next generation who were the minimalists, Sol Le Witt, Donald Judd etc., who also attempted to create art out of surface, if you like (that’s one way you could describe it). At the time that I was beginning to make work, the most important movement was the emergence of the first generation so-called of conceptualists, the linguistic conceptualists who followed very clearly down that same line.

**RM:** Rationalism and materialism?

**SH:** Yes. And made pronouncements about propositions that pre-existed in language. For that reason I would call myself a second or third generation conceptualist. We had already had Fluxus and other movements that were more playful and more interested in getting gently outside that kind of set of constraints. It seemed to me that if you only dealt with things that were already in language you were giving up a great deal
of what art could do and what artists could be working on. So that was really where I came in. There were so many other artists of that generation who took this road, not necessarily in relation to surrealism but as a kind of rebellion against the constraints of that early set of practices.

Anyway, you can see that my relationship to surrealism is really rather indirect, but I do think that the return of content in art has its historical roots in surrealist practice. The two things about historical surrealism that interested me were not the paintings, far from it, but the sort of two-pronged interest in the idea of the unconscious and the idea of the political. Nowadays these two poles seem to define current art practice, but hardly anybody goes back and talks about surrealism in relation to those practices. Surrealism is usually thought of as a set of stylistic manoeuvres, which I think is a bit unfair.

RM: But the practice of automatism, is really where you, as you have said, were determined to insert yourself?

SH: I said I was trying to insert myself in, and against, the history of psychic automatism as it had developed because, on the one hand there is the ideology of spiritualism and then on the other there is the self-expressive notion of abstract expressionist painting. I didn’t feel comfortable with either of those but it’s quite clear that whatever it is, this kind of spontaneous mark making which is part of most drawing practices, is something that needs to be looked at more closely and it isn’t looked at closely because of the histories.

RM: So Reinhardt suppressed his images?

SH: Yes, his automatistic drawings. It’s very interesting looking back and reading his texts against this information.

RM: What is coming out is something he rejected, in a way, but you have adopted it?

SH: Yes, well it’s the return of the repressed, isn’t it really? I mean after all, how many people can go on making black paintings?

RM: Yes it’s pretty rigorous. But there was an almost indecipherable hieroglyphic
language that came out in your own practice. Usually you mediated it, you didn’t show it directly: you didn’t show the drawings themselves, but reproductions.


**SH:** On the original *Sisters of Menon* - my piece from 1971 - the paper has gone all funny so it’s hard to show it now. I was just working on really cheap paper, whatever was at hand. In fact, I used light blue pencil on this cheap sugar paper which has now gone yellow and the light blue has faded, you can hardly see it, but it’s still there. I presented the original scripts alongside their translations, in so far as they could be deciphered, and some contextual material as well. Nowadays the work is exhibited in the form of an exact replica of the original. Then later I did a lot of other automatistic works because I found it very easy to use as a drawing practice. I've done this experiment with art students: if you’re right-handed you take the pen with your left hand - there are several different tricks you can use to achieve this dissociation. Recently I haven't done much of it myself, I have been more interested in collecting other people’s automatistic examples.

**RM:** Are they your translations?

**SH:** Yes they are my translations. A few of them are exhibited upstairs. It’s a series called *From India to the Planet Mars*.

**RM:** The idea of the unconscious is inherent in the early practice of automatism.

**SH:** Well, whatever the unconscious is. I mean when you say ‘the unconscious,’ it makes it a thing and that’s always misleading. But it could be whatever it is that temporarily escapes the scrutiny of normal everydayness, or whatever it is that surprises you in some odd way, or disturbs a smooth practice or work, or inserts itself into something unexpectedly. We can call those things eruptions of
unconscious tendencies but I don’t even like to use the word ‘the unconscious’ as a noun anymore, I just sort of leave that alone.

**RM:** But the spontaneous element, the improvisational...that is very important to you in your work?

**SH:** I have moved further and further away from any kind of programmatic approach to art-making. I think that if one doesn’t have a context in some sort of mystical universe and yet one knows that there are ways of perceiving and ways of behaving and ways of acting and ways of making art that aren’t so readily describable in other terms, there’s an interesting ‘between place.’ I have tried to make work increasingly that puts the viewer where I am, in this situation of ‘undecidableness,’ if you like, as for example, in that piece that came up in our slides a moment ago. It’s called *Psi Girls* (1999) and it uses clips from five movies, heavily edited and altered clips. I used five films that show girls, pre-adolescent and adolescent, who have telekinetic powers, that is, they can mentally move objects. I’ve made an immersive environment using these images which of course suggests relationships between the power of art and magic. Basically what I do with the soundtrack in that piece is to have a minute of silence followed by a minute of very compelling music by a gospel choir which has a very strong rhythmical beat. I’m attempting to introduce a situation to the audience so that when you look at the images, the moving, exciting, colourful, huge images in silence, you are allowed a distanced scrutiny. When the music starts, you feel your heart pumping, you feel this music which is of course designed to drive you towards some sort of belief and you have a completely different experience. This is a deliberate attempt on my part to share my own ‘between’ position.


**RM:** ...between this extreme kind of subjectivism and the experience of making
something unexpected and the rational order.

We don’t have to drop in the question about women’s place, women artists’ place in that history, but there may be something you wish to say about that?

**SH:** Well, I mean I have said this so many times. We all know about women in surrealism. I’m not going to go into that …

**RM:** I was thinking of automatism specifically, although we could talk about surrealism. I’m thinking of people like Madge Gill. I mean there is a parallel history, isn’t there?

**SH:** Well, this was one of the motives that I had when I first started all this. It was a redemptive project to look at the shadow side of modernism, the mediumistic practices, to make sure they got acknowledged, which was the thing that Greenberg drove out, like trying to get rid of witchcraft and all the women. He wrote them out and I had a big programme going on about that in my own mind. Interestingly enough, although I don’t think feminism has succeeded in many ways, I do think that in the art world now there are so many women artists that many of those issues have completely changed; the power balance has changed tremendously and so from that perspective it almost seems like a non-issue now. I think there are people who are very aware of the spiritualist origins of the practices and they are very aware of the role of women artists, both the professional artists and the non-professional artists.

**RM:** Within a sort of gestural expressionist tradition as well?

**SH:** The historical record still remains to be rewritten; I’m only talking about the present when I say things have changed.

**RM:** And the other thing, which we were just talking about earlier, which is very central to your work, is appropriation of images and the use of existing material, referring briefly back to your training as an anthropologist and your gathering of material. There are often examples of a systematic assembling of found material. That’s now really commonplace.

**SH:** Yes, it is very commonplace, but of course it wasn’t, there was always a time when something wasn’t commonplace and
certainly in the seventies when I started making work I was doing something that no one else was. I think the first big work that I made that got shown at all was a piece called *Dedicated to the Unknown Artists* (1972-6) which is based on postcards of rough seas and I assumed that the unknown artists were women who did the hand tinting of all these postcards. I was interested in the relationship of words - the postcards’ captions - and the images.


**RM:** Right, so that was the meaning of that title?

**SH:** Yes, that was what the title’s about. But of course I was attacked for not doing what all the other conceptualists were doing. It’s so difficult looking back, I hate being retrospective. It just seems to be a normal and innovative 1970s work now, but at the time this piece was very controversial.

**RM:** Because you were using a minimalist form of presentation?

**SH:** I was using a minimalist and conceptualist format with charts and so forth, but I was dealing with popular imagery and I was accused of trying to combine pop art and conceptualism which was said to be impossible. And the only review I had - I was very proud of it, I had worked for years without a review - said it was like the contents of a handbag. So, things have changed a lot and it’s very difficult now to realise that there could be, if you like, considered art moves which could be controversial. The things that cause controversy in art now are not intellectual moves but they are attempts to shock and outrage which of course also has a long history but it’s a slightly different kind of history.

**RM:** I was reminded of *Dedicated to the Unknown Artist* when I saw your new work
the *J Street Project* for several reasons. It has a similar methodology behind it in terms of the systematic grouping, the sequence, a series of images with a sort of implicit explosion in them. It is a highly charged but a very quiet and controlled piece. The work consists of a film which is an hour and seven minutes long which is shot in three hundred different towns across Germany, where Susan has been living for three years. It uses just shots of the street signs containing the word ‘Jew,’ *Judengasse, Judenweg*, etc., and it’s very controlled: the camera hovers for a minute or two in each street and people are passing. There is a sense of the banality of everyday life - its quietness and orderliness - and I think we can perhaps bring that word ‘heimlich’ in; there is a ‘homely’ atmosphere of ordinariness, of children running across the road between cars...

Index. © Susan Hiller.

**SH:** Well you know, if you want to talk about surrealism, this bringing together of two things, the ordinary and the not ordinary - juxtaposing them - could describe what I’m doing in this work. Because I’m looking at street signs, and street signs are signs, and signs stand for what is no longer there. Here we have actual street signs which name what was once there but isn’t there anymore and the effect is actually very disturbing. I don’t make any comment on it really, I’m just presenting the material but I’m obviously aware of the strange disjunction between the two elements.
SH: Yes and no. That’s what artists do; artists are both participants and observers. You have to take shared internalisations that are collectively formed and find a shape for them. There are the two parts to art practice and there’s always the participation and then you have to step back and make something of it.

RM: Yes, and this relates to your interest in memory - your big show which opened at Baltic and then travelled to Basel and Portugal was called Recall. Could you say something about the title?

SH: Who was it who said that ‘the longer you look at a word, the further away it gets from you’? Recall obviously has to do with recollection, which isn’t quite the same thing as memory: it’s the calling back into the now. But it was also to do with the fact that a lot of the pieces in that exhibition were audio pieces and they had to do with sound.

RM: Yes I see... Witness (2000), another one-word title, was also an amazing piece that again played with really a fantastical realm of imaginary experiences...

**SH:** I’m interested in contemporary visionary experience and I’m interested in the forms it takes, collecting stories and listening to stories. When you listen to a story you form a mental picture of what the story is about. I collected hundreds of these stories of people who had had an experience, an extraordinary experience. The way they tended to talk about it was in terms of a scientistic idea of creatures from outer space, or flying vehicles of some kind. The basic ingredient in all this experience was always an experience of light. Of course that links these experiences to the traditional kind of mystical vision: there is really no difference, but instead of talking about angels or devils, people are talking about Martians.

People say to me, ‘Well are these stories real?’ Well, yes, they’re real stories, they’re social facts, they are real social facts. ‘Are they really, really true?’ What does that mean? I have no idea what it means, it’s not my job. I don’t even know how many philosophical paths you have to go down to even argue that one, but they certainly exist as social facts. I think this is an interesting issue for artists because now when artists are being encouraged to do a lot of research, what’s the difference between the kind of research that an artist does and an art historian does? I think it’s on that kind of point that there is a difference. You know I like to use Paul Cézanne’s apples for an example - may I repeat that?

**RM:** Sure.

**SH:** Ok, Cézanne painted apples. Is it relevant to ask what kind of apples they are? How much do they cost? What market did he buy them at? Does that matter? No that is irrelevant. I mean, is he an expert on apples? In a way he is a complete expert on apples but in another way he knows probably very little about them and that’s how I feel about the
material I collect. I mean I can’t do the kind of thing that I do with the material if I always have to pre-censor myself by asking the kinds of questions that I think a scholar would ask.

**RM:** But you love to make works where the voice enters as a whisper, or is almost incomprehensible, or there is a sense in which it’s coming from some secret hidden or immaterial place.

**SH:** Well, I like the idea in *Witness* and also in *Clinic*, which has voices of people talking about near-death experiences, that there are some secrets to share. I have been inspired particularly by the internet which is where I do most of my research for these kinds of works. And the internet, as we all know, is the biggest confessional booth you can imagine, I like to think of people going into a chatroom late at night and telling something which they have seen: they’ve just seen this thing and they have to tell somebody and so they tell everybody. And that interests me, so, secrets, yes, but we all get to hear the secrets.

**RM:** Could you say something about ghosts...

**SH:** Yes, what would you like?

**RM:** Well, all your work is concerned with ghosts. Take this *J Street Project* as one example.

**SH:** Yes, I have finally realised that. That is correct. Everything I do is about a ghost or ghosts, but you see, my idea of a ghost is that a ghost is something that some people see and other people don’t see. Our lives are haunted by ghosts, I mean our own personal ghosts and collective social ghosts and those are the kinds of cultural materials that interest me to start with, those are my starting points, and then I try to make a work that in some way is true in this old-fashioned kind of way that I was taught - truth to materials. I try to make something that is materially true to its starting point and that’s the only kind of guideline I have formally for the works. I used to try to describe my starting points in different ways by saying they were materials that were denigrated or relegated, or embarrassing, or whatever and then I realised there is just a very
simple way to explain, I’ll just think of them all as ghosts.

**RM:** There is a wonderful sense of engagement with other people’s experience, a shared world in most of your work; in fact, just going back to automatism for a moment, I remember you said something about your interest in the early experiments, they were collective investigations, they were mostly anonymous. Those were the things that appealed to you, and that obviously has a counterpoint in the underground of the late sixties.

**SH:** Yes it does, doesn’t it? I mean, you know, one of the things that I think is interesting is how as you go on you have to give up certain illusions or delusions perhaps that you have about what you’re doing. When I first started to work I worked anonymously under a pseudonym and I was interested in collective works which were not theatrical, that is there was no performer and there was no audience. The group was both performing and also being the audience for each other and that was a kind of commitment. I worked very hard to make works like that and then at a certain point I realised there was a futility to this because if there was anything really interesting coming out of this kind of work, no one else would ever know about it, except the six or seven or twelve people who had taken part, so I tried to think of other ways to work which could have a more public aspect.

**RM:** Let’s have a few minutes of question and discussion.

**AUDIENCE:** I’m really interested in what you were saying about the fact that basically surrealism has no style and that surrealism is a not a matter of style. I just wonder whether this is something that you felt was being misrepresented?

**SH:** Well I always felt that - people can be really angry with me if I say this - but I always thought that there was too much attention just on the painting which was the most marketable side of surrealism. But I myself loved things more like the magazines or poems or strange games, this was my personal preference. I didn’t like the clear-cut images in the paintings, but I shouldn’t go down that road.
AUDIENCE: Go down that road.

SH: I'm just not a big fan of what is said to be surrealist painting. I like the experimental side of things and if it ends up like a painting that's fine, I have nothing against a painting per se but when it hardens into a repeatable style, I have a problem with it. That's why I stopped doing personal automatistic works, because they all started looking extremely lovely and were all looking the same. It was a habit - I can reproduce it now all the time - and so I just don't want to go that way. I feel the basic impulse of the surrealist experiment is very important, very, very, very important and I think that it's slightly misrepresented when it's presented to people as a form of painting. I think that should come after the other stuff is presented.

AUDIENCE: No I quite agree with you there, I think there is a very fascinating grey area in automatism between the habitual automatism and the forgotten about and something completely unexpected.

SH: That's one of the interesting things isn't it? And that's why I said that I think that anybody who does a lot of drawing, or painting - something physical, a physical practice - will have moments when they are dissociated from what their hand is doing and there is this great pleasure. Everyone loves those moments when you know something happens and you are not thinking about it consciously. But we don't anymore talk about it in terms of automatism, do we?

AUDIENCE: Well I think it's a very strange relationship because thinking about my own tracks as an artist if I glide into my own visions and in a sense persevere with them they turn into something else.

RM: Well that happens, and the series upstairs illustrates that move away from it.

SH: What's upstairs, is part of my bigger presentation of other people's automatism to show some of the things that happen when writing turns into drawing or drawing turns into writing. You get mirror writing and back and forth, all sorts of really interesting things which are classic tropes that we know about because the
surrealists laid them out as part of art. It’s absolutely fascinating that these elements always emerge. Tutors often talk to art students about drawing and suggest to them that they might relinquish a subject for their drawing and just make some marks on a paper and see where it goes, and they make lovely things. But it can be a bad habit. Practitioners know what I mean, I think.

AUDIENCE: You did an installation From the Freud Museum (1991-1997) and I was going to ask you whether the guiding script there was ‘Freud the Jewish psychologist’ or was it ‘Freud mediated through surrealism’?

SH: My own interest in Freud is probably complicated. I think we all live inside the Freud Museum. The Freud Museum is a cultural concept we can’t really escape. I was interested in a lot of aspects of Freud, for example his art collection which my installation invokes. Most of the objects in the work of mine you mentioned are personal, but they took on a special aura through being shown first in the actual Freud Museum in Hampstead.

I’ve owned for many years a wonderful book of essays called Psychoanalysis and the Occult which has some intriguing texts by Freud about telepathy and clairvoyance in relation to his patients. What interested him, as you know, was why his patients were so fixated on him that they could mysteriously discover mentally where, for instance, his furniture was placed in his private rooms which they had never seen. He said he was ‘on the side of the common people’ when it came to being interested in this kind of strange transmission of knowledge. Later when he and Jung broke, he paid less attention to these phenomena. It wasn’t surrealism that got me interested in Freud so much as this book and then later, the invitation to make a work in his last home.

Regarding my piece From the Freud Museum which you mentioned - which went on to be shown in many other places and is actually one of the most popular works I’ve ever made, even though I thought not many people would be interested in it - I think my use of the magic word "Freud" in the title makes people gear up their attention and energy for scrutiny and interpretation, and they consider everything in it in a certain
intense way which is quite wonderful and surprising.


AUDIENCE: I understand that you are against the linking of your practice to anthropology, but I can see in your work - perhaps it is my misconception - an ethnographer, a disciplined observer, where you’re actually collecting work...

SH: No, that’s not possible.

AUDIENCE: Could you tell me why...

SH: Because the basis of ethnography is in colonialism and the study of others from a superior position and that isn’t what I do. That is ethnography, the history of ethnography; you can’t get away from it.

AUDIENCE: It isn’t the current view...

SH: I make complex, embodied, large scale works, not academic texts. I think my works speak for themselves in this regard. I don’t think what I do is anthropology and I’m always offended when people say that it is because that’s a way of saying it’s not art and if it isn’t art, it isn’t anything.
1 From India to the Planet Mars is also the title of a book by the Swiss psychologist Théodore Flournoy. Published in 1900, under the title Des Indes à la planète Mars: Étude sur un cas de somnambulisme avec glossolalie, Geneva, it describes Flournoy’s investigation and interpretation of the mediumship of Hélène Smith who, under trance, produced automatic writing and drawing derived from her experiences as Marie Antoinette, a Hindu princess and visits to the planet Mars. A serious study into the properties of the subliminal imagination, the book was highly influential in the development of psychology, and noted by André Breton in his 1933 discussion of the development of surrealist automatism, ‘Le Message automatique.’ See ‘The Automatic Message,’ in What is Surrealism?, translated and edited by Franklin Rosemont, New York, London, 1989, 97-109.


5 George Devereux (ed.), Psychoanalysis and the Occult, New York, 1953.
'André Breton,' Prose-poems on the death of Breton by Jean-Luc Nancy

Translated by Michael-Stone Richards

ANDRÉ BRETON

OBLIVION

Oblivion flows back to its source, and our boredom turns light in the liquid name of André Breton where, with its silvered sheets, its droplets of mercury, it slips and roles on the light leaves of our pages.

What should it matter that winter may have frozen this source? Beneath the glassy ice the black stones shine – open mineral heart, beautiful dominion of no-possession. About it, the sand is penetrated by the dream of time-pieces, and there right to the thaw, fish make love.

Beneath the glassy ice, we are looked at, recalled. The century’s weight bears the shadowed claw: only our terrors and feasts are pierced, the secret spasm of our failing hand. Faced out, disfigured, by the whip, the tamanoir and the uncultured rose.

PORTRAIT

Smooth memory of André Breton and of the starred ravens which, with him, were nailed to the doors of our night… What is their weight on our back – and already, imperceptibly, in the straight line of what will be? What solicitous assurance, and of what charge of dawn gives it confirmation?

Cornucopia of shadows – oh, jet of grey powder diffused by the photographs of André Breton, milky way of rare leaves of rare books, this head of hair, these cravats with large stripes, this size of mannequin, under the antique foliages, boarded up, bespeak the terror, joy, the time of glow-worms.
(The old magician, in his clean sleeve, was hiding the tarots, the eggs of Columbus and the pistols. And for the malice, here, take the scarcely believable chin, this sperm-whale bone in the vitrine of a perfumer.)

And the eye more clear than the clearest night. The aurora borealis his daily bred.

**AT OUR SIDE**

Gentler, more implacable, he shines beneath the earth amidst its forest of mandragoras, at the nadir of our hopes. The least hint of our steps awakens him; the least of our missteps triggers the ringing beneath the briar and the mushrooms of his laughter with silver folds. And when we lay this body down, arms outstretched, through the fields, over the tar of cities, there he is who pierces our side, he through whose earth-spring wounds and traps blossom and flower.

In order to invent the day, and all that invents itself, his cloud-filled fingers make us leap into rings of fire. Faithful dance where shall burn the too transparent skin.

Upon our calcinated bones mounts a greasy pole: imagination heaven-sent.

In the morning of his death, cattle and books are marked. There is no longer time to doubt any part of his dream. In the next night fall, our women will read the name of André Breton close to their stomachs, against these hips where the unlettered transport their children.

Jean-Luc Nancy

*Esprit*, no. 12, December 1966, 848-49.
It must be kept in mind that, for the collector, the world is present, indeed ordered, in each of his objects. Ordered, however, according to a surprising and, for the profane understanding, incomprehensible connection … We need only recall what importance a particular collector attaches not only to his object but also to its entire past, whether this concerns the origin and objective characteristics of the thing or the details of its external history: previous owners, price of purchase, current value and so on. All of these – the ‘objective’ data together with the other – come together, for the true collector, in every single one of his possessions, to form a whole magical encyclopaedia, a world order, whose outline is the fate of objects…It suffices to observe just one collector as he handles the items in his showcase. No sooner does he hold them in his hand than he appears inspired by them and seems to look through them into the distance, like an augur.¹

Walter Benjamin

Figure 1: Max Pollak, Etching of Sigmund Freud at his Desk, 1914, courtesy the Freud Museum, London.

It is unclear whether Benjamin had any particular ‘collector’ in mind when making the observation above, but the evocation of such a distracted gaze – through and beyond the collected objects – finds
a striking visual correspondence in Max Pollak’s 1913 etching of Sigmund Freud at his writing desk [fig. 1]. Here the collection of sculptural objects is foregrounded, its presence helping both to frame Freud’s gaze whilst also functioning in an indexical relationship to a space over and above its specific location. In this exhibition, curator Jon Wood installed this famous image on the wall opposite the viewer, such that one’s gaze was similarly distracted over the antiquities on display by identification with Freud’s own meditative position. If, as Karl Kraus argued, Freud’s gaze in the Pollak etching is directed with concentrated introspection, we can see this as related to the physical proximity of the collection before him. In actively bringing together discrete material objects, the collection, as Benjamin observes, also encapsulates a multiplicity of individual and cultural memory traces. According to this account, the act of collecting is characterised by the dialectical interplay between the physical encounter with objects kept ‘close-at-hand’ and the imaginative distance created in mind of the collector through the disparate associations of the particular objects: ‘Collecting is a form of practical memory … of all the profane manifestations of ‘nearness’ it is the most binding … [Its] physiological side…is important.’ We are told that Freud would habitually handle and inspect the objects whilst speaking. Note that on such occasions he was deeply immersed in some other matter; the tactile encounter occurs distractedly, when Freud’s mind was elsewhere. The physical presence of the objects provokes the mind to wander into the more distant recesses of the imagination. A certain doubling is taking place here, since the effort to grasp puzzling remnants of another time and place is precisely characteristic of psychoanalytic discourse itself. If psychoanalysis has alerted us to the otherness with which all speech is permeated – the non-identity between voice, desire and memory – then we should also bear in mind that the body’s material interaction with objects is no less overdetermined. Each culture is physically confronted by the material residues of its predecessors – objects which appear to signify both an uncanny familiarity and an unknowable past. How such objects are then ‘taken up,’ valued or neglected speaks, however obliquely, of the relation between contemporary experience and cultural memory.

The notion that behavioural interaction with objects can be seen as analogous with forms of speech would become a central feature of clinical practice, with the development of what Melanie Klein termed her ‘psychoanalytic play technique’:

...full use had to be made of the symbolic language of play which I recognized to be an essential part of expression. As we have seen, the brick, the little figure, the car, not only represent things which interest the child in themselves, but in his play with them they always have a variety of symbolical meanings as well which are bound up with his phantasies, wishes, and experiences.
Just as Freud encouraged ‘free association’ in his adult patients who would speak of their dreams, and in doing so issue up material for interpretation, so Klein believed that children’s play articulated unconscious wishes and anxieties in a symbolic language of its own. It is interesting in this light to observe that his collection of antiquities has been termed, affectionately or ironically, ‘Freud’s Toys.’ Of course, children’s play is less subject to the censorious ego than is usual in adult behaviour. However, as Freud himself suggests,

When the child has grown up and has ceased to play, and after he has been labouring for decades to envisage the realities of life with proper seriousness, he may one day find himself in a mental situation which once more undoes the contrast between play and reality. As an adult he can look back on the intense seriousness with which he once carried on his games in childhood; and, by equating his ostensibly serious occupations of today with his childhood games, he can throw off the too heavy burden imposed on him by life and win the high yield of pleasure afforded by humour… As people grow up, then, they cease to play, and they seem to give up the yield of pleasure which they gained from playing. But whoever understands the human mind knows that hardly anything is harder for a man than to give up a pleasure he has once experienced. Actually, we can never give anything up; we only exchange one thing for another.

On one level, then, Freud’s collecting is a deliberate form of self-promotion. He is surely keen to furnish his study with interesting objects illustrative of his professional identity and fulfil others’ expectations of an appropriate scholarly environment. And yet at the same time, insofar as these objects may momentarily facilitate the suspension of ‘reality’ and ‘phantasy,’ they enable a form of play which substitutes for much earlier modes of satisfaction. If infantile play is itself a defensive response against traumatic experience (as in the account of the fort/da game as a repeated attempt at mastering the helplessness felt at the mother’s absence, or as Klein would have it, the loss of the breast as ‘good object’), we are surely entitled to ask: what structuring phantasies enable the production of compensatory satisfactions? To what extent do such phantasies still underlie ‘respectable’ adult pastimes? Just as Freud remarks upon the all-absorbing fascination of the child happily at play, so Benjamin remarks upon the way the adult collector ‘loses himself assuredly’ in the ‘magic circle’ of the collection’s horizons. What rules are observed in this particular form of ‘play,’ and how does it deliver such a high ‘yield of pleasure’?

In his study Man, Play and Games, Roger Caillois establishes a typology of ‘play’ behaviours, in which he argues that forms of play culturally valued in Western civilization have tended to involve ‘a taste for gratuitous difficulty,’ which he terms ludus. This, it is said, ‘provides an occasion for training and normally leads to the acquisition of a special skill, a particular mastery of the operation…or the
discovery of a satisfactory conclusion.\textsuperscript{10} In this sense, the ‘play’ involves a purposive element to which one may discipline oneself to excel (crosswords, anagrams, mathematical problems and the like). However, this is said to be just the most developed, later refinement of \textit{paidia}, or the ‘primary power of improvisation and joy.’\textsuperscript{11} An over-hasty reading of Caillois’s text might assume a straightforward teleology is being established here, \textit{ludus} being established as superior ‘civilizing’ version that improves upon earlier attitudes to play. However, it is evident that with all its refinements and apparent sophistications ‘civilized’ life has seen the quality and intensity of its available pleasures diminish, whilst the ‘energies of intoxication’ (to use Benjamin’s phrase) continue to exert a powerful subterranean attraction. That is to say, other forms of ‘play’ will either find some form of expression, or else erupt in a dangerous ‘return of the repressed.’ Whilst \textit{ludus} might encompass activities culturally valorised for their complexity, simpler forms of play might fulfil psychic needs more thoroughly.

Hence, Caillois is by no means dismissive of non-western forms of recreation. The Chinese term \textit{wan}, for example, is said to cover a ‘vast semantic area’ of possibilities which fall outside of the more strictly defined character of \textit{ludus}:

To begin with [\textit{wan}] includes child’s play and all kind of carefree and frivolous diversion such as are suggested by the verbs to frolic, to romp, to trifle, etc. It is used to describe casual, abnormal or strange sex practices. At the same time, it is used for games demanding reflection and \textit{forbidding haste}, such as chess, chequers, puzzles (\textit{tai Kiao}), and the game of nine rings. It also comprises the pleasure of appreciating the savour of good food or the bouquet of wine, the taste for collecting works of art, or even appreciating them, voluptuously handling and even fashioning delicate curios...Lastly the transitory and relaxing sweetness of moonlight is suggested, the pleasure of a boat ride on a limpid lake or the prolonged contemplation of a waterfall.\textsuperscript{12}

Whereas \textit{ludus} privileges instrumental outcomes of play (self-improvement, the attainment of ‘excellence’), \textit{wan} describes activities which are enjoyable in themselves, simply \textit{for their own sake}. However, these two categories are not necessarily mutually exclusive. With respect to Freud, we might see the collection of antiquities as offering both an appropriately ‘learned’ hobby for a cultured bourgeois and respectable professional to pursue, whilst also being simply pleasing in itself. We have already observed his tendency for ‘voluptuously handling’ the objects, but it bears repeating that Freud quite simply \textit{enjoyed} their physical presence in addition to any cultural or financial value. Whilst, as Wood observes, by the time of Freud’s death the collection contained some prize pieces, it is also true that ‘many were not expensive, unique or “museum quality” specimens and some were copies or fakes.’\textsuperscript{13} It would not be difficult, for instance, to imagine Freud choosing a piece such as the \textit{Baboon of Thoth} (‘Egyptian god of intellectual interests, of wisdom and learning, of reading and writing\textsuperscript{14}’) for
its symbolic significance with respect to his professional identity, but the object may equally have appealed due to its smooth, tactile qualities [fig. 2]. Indeed, we are told that ‘Freud was known to have liked stroking this smooth surfaced marbled sculpture, almost as if it were a pet.’ That is to say, he savoured the look and feel of these objects much as he savoured his beloved tobacco (an expensive and addictive pleasure in which he also indulged).

In this respect, the hybrid character of collecting as a form of play might be compared to the game of chess, to which the arrangement of Freud’s ensemble of objects bears a striking visual similarity (particularly as the collection grew over the years, the objects tended to be arranged in distinct ‘ranks,’ with the larger objects at the back). On the one hand, chess is clearly a highly complex game to which players aspire to ‘excel’: players are ranked hierarchically, ‘grand-master’ status conferring significant status and implying a great mind. Yet, on the other, it is a game which can be played to idly while away the hours, for no particular purpose other than the escape from demands of everyday life. Indeed, the game was a popular leisure pastime in the Viennese coffee houses Freud frequented. This ambivalence in the nature of chess has been encapsulated by his friend and compatriot Stefan Zweig, whose used chess as the basis for his last work ‘Schachnovelle’ (translated as ‘The Royal Game’):

…are we not already guilty of an insulting limitation in calling chess a game? Isn’t it also a science, an art, hovering between these two categories as Muhammed’s coffin hovered between heaven and earth? Isn’t it a unique bond between every pair of opponents ancient
and yet eternally new; mechanical in its framework and yet only functioning through the use of the imagination; confined in geometrically fixed space and at the same time released from confinement by its permutations; continuously evolving yet sterile; thought that leads nowhere; mathematics that add up to nothing, art without an end product, architecture without substance, and nevertheless demonstrably more durable in its true nature and existence than any books or creative works? Isn’t it the only game that belongs to people at all times? And who knows whether God put it on earth to kill boredom, to sharpen the wits or to lift the spirits? Where is its beginning and where its end?...Every child can learn its basic rules, every bungler can try it; and yet it requires, within those small and unchanging squares, the production of a special kind of master, not comparable to any other kind, men who have a gift for chess, geniuses of a particular kind, in whom vision, patience and technique function in just as precise divisions as they do in mathematicians, poets and musicians, only on different levels and in different conjunctions.\textsuperscript{16}

We may note in passing here that this combination of obsessive technical expertise with complete freedom from purposive instrumentality was a large part of its appeal for Marcel Duchamp, a time-served and highly skilled player of the game who would co-author a book on chess which, by his own admission, featured ‘end-game problems of possible games but so rare as to be nearly Utopian.’\textsuperscript{17} We may also note that Zweig’s description recalls a number of similarities with psychoanalysis: the production of a ‘special kind of master’; the ‘unique bond’ between opposing figures; the requirement of ‘vision, patience and technique’; the affinities with both science and art – the mechanics of technique coincide with imaginative creativity – and not least, the essential timelessness of the problems it presents.

Beyond such parallels, however, what is the significance of Freud’s antiquities’ chess-like arrangement? In the context of the historically persistent association of chess with militarism,\textsuperscript{18} Molnar’s observation that ‘the antiquities face Freud as the serried ranks of infantry face their general’ is suggestive.\textsuperscript{19} In their usual home at 20, Maresfield Gardens, now the location of London’s Freud Museum, the objects can ordinarily been seen only in profile from the roped-off viewing position around Freud’s desk. Their scale is such that their significance can be overwhelmed in the context of the study as a whole. However, in the Henry Moore Institute exhibition, the objects were mounted on a desk-high plinth which allowed the viewer a frontal view of the sculptural objects in their own right [fig. 3]. This helped to replicate their original conditions of display on the desk itself, a location which as curator Wood explains, ‘afforded a horizontal, intimate and immediate surface’ from which to view the objects.\textsuperscript{20} Importantly, too, it placed the viewer in a position directly facing the ensemble, offering a view much closer to that available to Freud himself. These figures are sometimes described as providing a mute ‘audience’ observing the scene of Freud’s writing. This has some merit, but in
depicting Freud as a passive spectator it misses the sense of a more active, strategic relation towards the objects implied in Molnar’s description, a relation more akin to the chess player’s position. For if the antiquities confront Freud with the regimented order of a military force, we are entitled to ask, ‘who is it that they are expecting to confront?’ Might these ‘pieces’ represent the obstacles which an unknowable opponent (the unconscious) puts forward to ‘check’ the rationalising ambitions of the analyst? The sharp rebarbative spines of the porcupine might suggest the analysand’s resistance to proffered interpretations, for example the warrior-goddess Athena (‘missing her spear’) could connote disavowal. It is not necessary, however, to assume such a rigidly determinate symbolism is in operation. With regard to Freud’s collection, we may also observe that – as with chess – his ‘pieces’ both observe a logic immanent to their own specific setting but, when seen in isolation, are often of limited intrinsic utility or significance. It is enough to see Freud as marshalling the disparate resources of his own psyche to out-maneuver the defensive moves of opposing forces.

Figure 3: *Freud’s Sculpture*, 2006, installation view, courtesy Henry Moore Institute Leeds. Photograph by Jerry Hardman-Jones.

If Freud’s relation to the objects in some respects reflects the chess-like strategic positioning of the analyst, Isador H. Coriat’s clinical observations on chess-playing patients are quite telling. Coriat observes that in those

who had a strong negative transference, the playing of the game [chess] was identified with the analytic situation, that is, a feeling of hostility, a desire to checkmate the passive analyst, who was identified with the passive King (father).\(^{21}\)
In the analytic setting, as in chess, conflicting forces engage each other tactically and strategically in a power struggle over a single (inter-/intra-) subjective space. In both situations, patients (unconsciously?) felt they were locked into a game in which they felt the analyst-king-father was trying to conquer and overpower their own forces, and sought satisfaction in retaliatory aggression. Ernest Jones, in his celebrated essay on Paul Morphy (a figure once esteemed as ‘the greatest chess player of all time’ but who died aged 47 after suffering a nervous breakdown\(^{22}\)) directly confronts the oedipal wishes and anxieties that animates the game. Jones observes that the main goal of the game is a barely concealed substitute for father-murder: the immobilisation of the patriarch, a paternal figure which must be attacked until rendered utterly defenceless. He traces the possible etymology of the English expression checkmate in Arabic and Persian, concluding that the expression ‘Shah-mat’ literally means either ‘the king is dead’ or ‘the king is paralysed, helpless and defeated.\(^{23}\) It is not difficult to see how such manoeuvres lend themselves to an oedipal interpretation, particularly since it involves an active and still-empowered matriarchal figure in the Queen. Jones argues that,

…”the mathematical quality of the game gives it an anal-sadistic nature. The exquisite purity and exactness of the right moves…combine here with the unrelenting pressure exercised in the later stages which culminates in the merciless dénouement. The sense of overwhelming mastery on the one side matches that of inescapable helplessness on the other. It is doubtless this anal-sadistic feature that makes the game so well adapted to gratify at the same time both the homosexual and the antagonistic aspects of the father-son contest.

The playing of chess is seen, here, to represent an avenue for the sublimated expression of ‘unthinkable’ wishes which must ordinarily remain unconscious. But also, Coriat comments, the game, protects against the ego against the anxiety of actual parricidal impulses and because of this protective function any unconscious super-ego guilt is minimized or abolished. Hostile aggression tends to accumulate in the ego; the aims of the game thus have protective, liberating and sublimating functions.\(^{24}\)

This might explain why for the accomplished player, the most deeply satisfying game is not the swiftest possible triumph over a beginner. It is precisely in the unpredictable waves of attack and defence, resistance and counter-attack that the psyche finds its ‘yield of satisfaction’ in outwitting the forces martialed against it.

In this way, the player might enjoy the rhythm of the game as much as the desired outcome. Much the same is also true of the collector, who seldom develops a collection solely with regard to the possibility
of its completion, or for any discernible measure of self-improvement, but rather to enjoy the very process of collecting.

The analogy between the analyst's strategic relation to the analysand's unconscious and the chess player's relation to his opponents' moves also problematises Freud's claims to have heroically pursued a measure of self-analysis. Is self-analysis not rather like attempting to play oneself at chess, a self-defeating project from the start? Again, the latter topic is taken up in the Zweig novella, in which Dr. B, held in solitary confinement by the Gestapo, manages to steal a chess manual and is forced to try splitting his ego so that he might apply the moves to new game-scenarios and overcome his shattering isolation:

The attraction of chess lies …only in the fact that its strategy evolves in two different brains, that in this battle of the mind Black doesn’t know what White’s next move will be, and he is constantly trying to guess and thwart him. While for his part White, countering him, strives to outdo Black and oppose his concealed intentions. Imagine Black and White being one and the same person, then, and you have the contradiction that the same brain knows something and isn’t supposed to know it, simultaneously…Such two way thinking really presupposes a complete split in one’s consciousness, an arbitrary ability of the mind to switch on and off as though it were a mechanical machine … [T]here was the risk I would no longer be on firm ground, but would fall into an abyss.  

Dr. B. manages to approximate this ‘impossible’ psychic achievement but only at the precise moment of a vertiginous descent into madness and obsession: the boundaries of phantasy and reality are dissolved in a condition he terms ‘chess-poisoning.’ The novella, published in 1944 shortly after Zweig’s own suicide and against the backdrop of war atrocities, shows the extreme difficulty of confronting the furthest reaches of the psyche and emerging intact. Keenly aware as he was of Freud’s own endeavours, Zweig could be read as implying that – like attempting to play chess with oneself – the analyst will either fail to ‘engage’ the unconscious or succeed all too comprehensively but at the price of annihilating the very possibility of self-knowledge.

Of course, Freud’s collecting is not identical to any other ‘game,’ chess included: it has its own unwritten rules, protocols and techniques. The collection not only grew in overall size over the years, but its composition and arrangement also shifted as new elements were incorporated and others removed from the desk. The evolution of the collection was subject to the logic of the chance find (not entirely dissimilar from the objet trouvé) or the availability of material for purchase rather than a deliberately planned exercise. Pieces would fall away and make way for gifts received from others, or souvenirs from his travels. If this is ‘chess,’ it is a strange surrealist variant in which pieces and rules
mutate in the course of the game. It would be a game of chess closer to that envisaged by Bertolt Brecht, who Benjamin tells us once suggested to him after a game:

You know, when Korsch comes, we really ought to work out a new game with him. A game in which pieces do not always stay the same; where the function of every piece changes after it has stood in the same square for a while: it should become either stronger or weaker. This way the game doesn't develop, it stays the same for too long.  

The complexity and unpredictability of such a game would perhaps only be matched by Freud's attempt to engage the unconscious on the chessboard of the analytic session. There is no finite number of 'situations' here – the mutability and resourcefulness of the psyche holds the upper hand and the analyst struggles to learn the contours of the game even as it takes place. It is though, as collector, Freud assembles and arranges these enigmatic objects from 'elsewhere' in order to map and re-order his whole (psychic) world. As master of these diverse objects' fate, he playfully uses the 'toys' as substitutes forces which are comfortably present and malleable, or can be mastered and 'checked.' The figures could be seen as delegates of a parodic 'congress of Vienna,' a comically arbitrary gathering inadequately standing in for the warring forces of the psyche. This exhibition provides a welcome opportunity to consider and enjoy these objects in their own right, and as Freud might have 'engaged' them in phantasy play-combat.

Michael Calderbank

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3 Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, [H1a, 2], 205, [H4, 1], 210.

4 See, for example, Molnar, ‘Half-Way Region,’ 20.


9 Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, [H1a, 2], 205.


12 Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, 34.

13 Jon Wood, ‘Re-staging Freud’s Sculpture,’ in *Freud’s Sculpture*, 10.

14 ‘Baboon of Thoth,’ (catalogue entry by Jon Wood), *Freud’s Sculpture*, 45.

15 ‘Baboon of Thoth,’ 45.


18 As Alexander Cockburn writes, ‘... legend has chess being invented as a rehearsal or exemplar of war. There are innumerable examples of generals and statesmen expressing enthusiasm for chess, and their suggestion that their own trade is simply conducted on a larger board. In the popular imagination, mirroring such sentiments, international affairs are often conceived in terms of chess imagery. Hardly an issue of *Punch* magazine in the nineteenth century was complete without a cartoon of “the chessboard of Europe” simulating the play of policy and manoeuvre,’ *Idle Passion: Chess and the Dance of Death*, London, 1974,156.


In a year in which Dada has been subjected to blockbuster treatment in Paris, New York and in Washington, David Hopkins’ compact exhibition, *Dada’s Boys*, at the Fruitmarket Gallery in Edinburgh, offered a refreshingly partial and intimate encounter with Dada and some of its putative conceptual offspring. Freed of aspirations to encyclopaedic coverage, it created an opportunity to see select works, in a mid-size gallery space, by Marcel Duchamp, Francis Picabia, Man Ray, Douglas Gordon, Jeff Koons, Roderick Buchanan, Keith Farquhar, John Bock, Paul McCarthy, Sarah Lucas, Martin Kippenberger, Matthew Barney and several others. The declared aim of the exhibition was to propose a ‘provocative new perspective on dada, contemporary art and gender.’ This article reviews both the exhibition, which ran for just six weeks in the summer of 2006, and the accompanying publication; a catalogue with a long essay by Hopkins also titled ‘Dada’s Boys: Identity and Play in Contemporary Art.’

Hopkins’ well-known scholarly work on Dada and surrealism and aspects of contemporary art, together with his interest in issues of gender and identity, intellectually ground this exhibition. A number of ‘thematic touchstones’ are clearly established by the first handful of exhibits. Judicious selection and juxtaposition of works ensure that the themes resonate in different registers throughout the show as a whole as well as throughout the catalogue essay. A broad theme, clearly, is humour. Hopkins’ project might have become a rather arid and worthy excursion into avant-gardist genealogy and the vexed question of male identity, were it not for the subtle (and occasionally unsubtle) wit with which the exhibition insinuates its hypothesis. It is already there in the punning title of the exhibition, which for Hopkins ‘serves chiefly to evoke dada’s ironically paternalistic role for a lineage of predominantly male artists concerned with developing themes of male identity.’

The cover of the catalogue bears nothing but the slick image of a black plastic joke moustache. A more apt signifier could not have been found: like the exhibition itself, it evokes a faint nostalgia for prankish old-school(boy) humour. It nudges suggestively at cross-dressing and male impersonation. It tickles art historical funny-bones by reminding us of Duchamp’s assisted ready-made of 1919, *LHOOQ*, in which his rogue moustache ‘de-faces’ a reproduction of the Mona Lisa, and it makes knowing gestures towards a whole Dadaist/surrealist iconography of facial hair and the masculine ritual of shaving. Appropriately enough, the catalogue essay begins with a good joke told by Man Ray, salacious and absurd, about two wise old men contemplating in sanguine gestures and tones the vagaries of sex and desire. Hopkins argues that a love of jokes, play and wit are often expressions of what he identifies as the central concern of the exhibition: a particular ‘self-reflexive’ kind of masculinity, subjectivity and male identity ‘in a specifically heterosexual register.’
The dual themes of play and identity are cogently articulated at the outset in the first, and arguably the most persuasive, section of the exhibition. Two works encountered on entering the gallery space, separated by three quarters of a century, already suggest a subversive and semi-private dialectic between self and other, played out narcissistically by means of dressing-up, aliases, stand-ins, and implied transgressions of both masculine and artistic identity. Marcel Duchamp’s *The Non-Dada* of 1922, a lesser-known ready-made, consists of a religious pamphlet showing the image of a chirpy, squeaky-clean lad, smiling for the camera. Hopkins uses the work as a ‘perfect emblem’ of the way in which New York Dada, as a homosocial network whose participants were ‘unified by a quasi-adolescent sense of humour,’ were able negatively to establish their identity.² Here, the mummy’s boy, hair brushed and parted, is emphatically the non-Dada. Read in Duchamp’s mother tongue, he is the *no-Dada*. Significantly, this work is titled in Duchamp’s hand and signed ‘Rrose’ – his female alter-ego, whose shadowy presence lurks elsewhere, literally and figuratively, in the exhibition. Hopkins sees in such gestures a ‘conceptual succinctness’ that he regards as one of the defining legacies of Duchamp, Picabia and Man Ray.² The *Non-Dada*’s juxtaposition with Douglas Gordon’s *Self-Portrait as Kurt Cobain as Andy Warhol as Myra Hindley as Marilyn Monroe* (1996) is just one of the many suggestive and slyly comic pairings to be found at several points throughout the exhibition [fig. 1]. This passport-sized photograph shows the unshaven Glasgow-born artist wearing a cheap blonde wig and deadpan expression. As if to underscore its multiple ‘inversions,’ the backdrop to Gordon’s cack-handed transvestism is provided by an inverted film poster. However, Hopkins’ curatorial and discursive positioning of this image argues refreshingly for a reading (via Duchamp and others) that is predicated more on complex questions of male subjectivity than on gender mutability.

Figure 1: Douglas Gordon, *Self Portrait as Kurt Cobain as Andy Warhol as Myra Hindley as Marilyn Monroe*, 1996. Courtesy of the artist and Lisson Gallery, London.
There are other small works by Duchamp, Picabia and Man Ray in this first room. Together, they venture and substantiate the conceptual premises on which the exhibition is built. Many of them have a private, intimate, collaborative, improvised or ephemeral character emphasising Dada’s and other boys’ ‘clubbishness.’ Several weave in-jokes relying on the use of punning language. In a nearby room, yBa hipster pals Damien Hirst and Angus Fairhurst dressed in clown costumes, drinking and smoking, conduct on video a grotesque and meandering pub conversation. All are redolent of homosocial familiarity and shared humour and are, for Hopkins, vitally constitutive of a masculinist concern with identity and its contingency.

Figure 2: Francis Picabia, La Sainte Vierge (Blessed Virgin), in 391, no. 12, 1920. Courtesy of Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art © ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2007.

Most of these works rehearse some form of gender, aesthetic, bodily, sexual or moral transgression. They range from one of Man Ray’s photographs of Marcel Duchamp as his feminine alias Rrose Sélavy (1920-21) to Picabia’s blasphemous ink-splat La Sainte-Vierge (Blessed Virgin) [fig. 2] to his machinist drawing Voilà Elle (Here She Is) from the journal 291 and Duchamp’s cover, using a found matchbook showing two dogs sniffing each other’s behinds, for a 1917 magazine, Rongwrong. In this room we are also introduced to more ‘wrongness’ and examples of Hopkins’ playful curation: it is there in Keith Farquhar’s Kats Mask (Bum-hole eyes) (2001), while up against one wall a man (in a 1995 video piece by Knut Åsdam) pees his pants. We see only his immobile crotch as urine seeps and spreads like a pale blush across his smart trousers. The play on and with masculinity here is
ambiguous: the differencing, ‘manly’ ability to urinate while standing is destablised depending on whether the act is understood as wilful or as an inability to control the bladder/body. Not least by its physical proximity in the exhibition to Picabia’s Sainte-Vierge and its connotative relation to the iconic urinal of Marcel Duchamp’s Fountain of 1917, Ådam’s Pissing is also made to participate in what Hopkins identifies in his essay as ‘a major strand of modernist/postmodernist art concerned with the indexing of the body’s processes via emissions, stains, traces and so forth.’ There is, however, a caveat to this interest in the unrulier aspects of bodily processes worth mentioning: it is part of this exhibition’s distinctiveness that Hopkins takes care to foreground a masculinist discourse of the body that is not of necessity indexed to guilt, trauma and abjection. While Dada’s Boys does have its darker recesses (the inclusion of the work of Paul McCarthy springs to mind) with respect to post-war art in particular, Hopkins argues persuasively ‘for a more affirmative view of male subjectivity than that which is on offer in the self-punishing tropes of “body art.”’

From these few examples of cunning juxtapositions alone – and there are many more – it should be clear that this is an exhibition that derives much of its sophistication and persuasiveness from its many knowing nods and winks to existing avant-garde traditions and academic discourse. In effect, the ‘clubbish’ collusiveness and witty self-ironisation that is so much Hopkins’ subject here, has also become a feature of his curatorial method. This is not to say that the exhibition or its catalogue are rarefied – on the contrary, both are very accessible – but there is an exclusive dimension in the sense that, more than most exhibitions, Dada’s Boys operates ‘at two speeds.’ The many art-historical asides, cross-references and insider-jokes ultimately mean that the audience is split between the initiates who ‘get’ the boys’ jokes (the artists’ and the curator’s), and everyone else.

Hopkins’ essay – and implicitly, much of the exhibition – makes important challenges to the tendency to read Duchamp in particular in terms of opposition to art, rather than engagement with social issues such as gender. In the context of Dada studies, this tendency might be seen as the flip-side of the way in which the work of women artists – pre-eminently Hannah Höch – has been read. Among other things, Hopkins encourages a nuanced apprehension of Duchamp’s own adoption of female identity, which he sees as ‘a kind of appropriation of femininity in favour, ultimately, of a male mythopoetic system.’ That said, in the course of this and especially of his reflections on the men of New York Dada and their machinist and auto-erotic thematics, his argument tends to rehearse what has become something of an academic given; namely, an account of an unquestionable crisis of masculinity, the ‘low ebb’ of ‘male self confidence’ in the years around the First World War. He highlights the rise of feminism and what he calls the ‘spectre of the “femme-homme”’ in France and elsewhere in the 1910s and 1920s as challenges to the ways in which men understood their gender roles. There are of course grounds for the familiar claim that traditional male identity was compromised and that men may have felt emasculated by women’s increasing political
validity and economic independence during this period. What is sometimes overlooked, and this appears to be the case with the thesis offered by *Dada’s Boys* too, is that these artists were also alienated from dominant expectations of male behaviour. Such expectations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were predicated on ideas of duty and *devoir*, discipline, authority, control, order and acquiescence to hierarchy. These values pertained to social as much as to sexual life and to bodily decorum. It therefore seems especially pertinent that many Dadaist works and rhetoric involve not only transgressions of the body and gender, but also a playing out of, and playing with, more-or-less fantasised masculine identities. These include the unruly and wayward (bandits, vagabonds, con-men, fetishists, pugilists, sex-attackers, dilettantes, drunks and more) but also those that exist, disdainfully, on the margins of social life, such as the dandy and the aristocrat. Hence too, as negative identifiers, the many images in Dada of emasculated authority figures: generals, Kaisers, fathers and husbands. With regard to *Dada’s Boys*, the emphasis on adolescent humour and the bachelor bonds of friendship between adult ‘naughty schoolboys’ might therefore also be considered in terms of a rejection of the culture of adulthood, marriage and (for many in the 1910s) military service. Given these factors and the historical context of Dada’s emergence during the First World War, Peter Gay’s wider observation that ‘bravado joking is a whistling past the graveyard of physical fear or social uneasiness’ has particular resonance.

Although it is not made explicit, an underlying theme of *Dada’s Boys* and of the masculinities it dissects is that of a particular kind of off-key amateurism. This can appear as a subversive counterpart to the ‘private blush victories’ (as Tristan Tzara termed Dada hoaxes in 1919)\(^{13}\) in the face of the public male worlds of ‘success’: professional work, sporting prowess, paternal authority and so on. Hopkins’ curation brings out an interesting tension between this amateurism and a concomitant ‘masculine love of meticulous finish’ in the work on show by Koons, Prince, Buchanan and Farquhar.\(^{16}\) Both could be seen as part of a particular masculinist poetics of dandyism. It is doubly significant that the Dadaists ironically celebrated ‘dilettantism.’ A familiar Berlin Dada slogan, which appeared in journals, photomontages and on one of the placards made for the *Erste Internationale Dada-Messe* (First International Dada Fair) in Berlin in 1920, urges ‘Dilettanten erhebt Euch!’ (‘Dilettantes rise up!’). Intermittently throughout *Dada’s Boys*, we are confronted with an ambivalent play with other kinds of amateurism. The inclusion of Martin Kippenberger in the exhibition, represented by a 1983 painting, *The Inner Life of a Laughing Sack*, is apposite because of the reflexivity of his own artistic and male persona. A perfect exhibit here would have been the amateurish ‘calendar’ shots of the beer-bellied Kippenberger posing (like so many ‘readers’ wives’ in men’s magazines) in his big baggy Pablo Picasso underpants in 1988.\(^{17}\) But Kippenberger is also fitting because he enacted in both his life and work so effective and conscious a dilettantism, in a performative, even Dadaist sense.
More straightforwardly, a short video piece by John Bock has the German artist flailing dementedly in a culinary and bodily chaos of his own bachelor creation: his blunt knife slips on plastic-skinned sausage, food tins spring open, fried eggs leap at him, red wine, cheap spaghetti and diabolical rollmops (the brand name translates as ‘little devil’s rolls’) fling themselves at their yelping victim, staining the white of his business-like shirt. In a work that shares some superficial structural similarities but is much more redolent of a fraught struggle with habitual and compulsive (sexual) behaviour, Paul McCarthy’s film Cultural Soup (1987) is, at first, something of an outsider in Dada’s Boys. While Bock’s wrestle with foodstuffs is both hilarious and compelling, McCarthy’s frantic smearing of two child-dolls with mayonnaise while muttering ‘the daddy begets the daddy and the son begets the son...,’ filmed home-movie style, is more sinister. It is only when viewed as a part of the exhibition as a whole, that McCarthy’s inclusion makes sense. Beside the genealogical references to the father-son relationship and the Picabia-esque spatters, there is the ‘amateur’ look of McCarthy’s work and the childish play with toy props that speaks of an emasculated and arrested subjectivity. As well as evoking a disenfranchised male world of alienated garden-shed hobbyists and DIY-ers, failure, inadequacy and incompetence become gestures in the work of Bock, McCarthy, Gordon and others here that consciously problematise traditional masculine identity even as they reaffirm separation from traditional ‘feminine’ spheres of competence.
Upstairs at the Fruitmarket space, the second half of *Dada’s Boys* was given over to more recent work, ranging from two key pieces by Jeff Koons from the 1980s to a specially-commissioned installation by Farquhar, *The Rules of Attraction: White Wine/White Cotton* (2006). The works by Koons were *One Ball 50-50 Tank* [fig. 3] and *Zungul Lord of Indoors* from the *Equilibrium* series of 1985. One a glass tank half-filled with water in which a basketball floats and the other a poster of a crowned, enthroned sporting hero surrounded by footballs, they are works that reference a commercial masculinist culture of sport, physicality and consumerism. All those ‘balls’ in such close proximity in the gallery to a work spawned by a fascination with testes and a testicular muscle (the ‘cremaster’ of Matthew Barney’s eponymous film series) offers – for those in on the joke and with a sufficiently puerile sense of humour – another opportunity for an art-historical and adolescent snigger. However, for one commentator at least, the choice of these Koons works for inclusion in the exhibition was ‘simply puzzling.’ He argued that the inclusion of one of Koons’ ‘pornographic’ works from the *Made in Heaven* series featuring his porn-star wife Cicciolina might have offered ‘a far darker, morally ambiguous view of the vortex of male desire, pleasure and power.’ Given *Dada’s* own persistent interest not only in ciphers of masculinity but also in mass culture, advertising, and indeed sport, the Koons works in fact seem perfectly logical choices, particularly as they are juxtaposed with Roderick Buchanan’s *Tombez la Chemise* (2002); slyly edited, silent film footage of football stars promiscuously embracing, patting buttocks and exchanging sweat-sodden shirts after play [fig. 4]. But, and indeed because of this, the lack of engaged, active, let alone fulfilled (hetero)sexual desire is significant. The solitary nature of much of the (hetero)sexuality on view in *Dada’s Boys* is striking. As we have seen, there is a lot of homosociality and clubbishness, there are shared jokes and team sports. There is much physicality. There are rampant bodily functions and fluids in abundance. However, mutual sexual relationships (that is, with women) are almost entirely absent from the works in *Dada’s Boys*. This is not a criticism, since it creates an unusual opportunity for engagement with masculine identity and sexuality that is not refracted through the prism of heterosexual desire and the power politics of gender. One intriguing side-effect of this exclusion is that the underlying homoerotics of *Dada’s Boys* are allowed room to insinuate themselves. Another is that the masturbatory aspect (overt in some works) of such solitary dynamics unfolds. Although this does not appear to have been Hopkins’ explicit intention, for this reviewer at least, the narcissism of the play with identity that this selectivity thematises exists in a highly suggestive dialectic relationship with the homosociality that is the show’s other key theme. We are reminded of the Dadaist Walter Serner, who affirmed the dandy’s rule: ‘play yourself to yourself.’

19
Besides Lee Miller’s photograph of Man Ray, there is one other work in the show by a female artist, a series of well-known 1990s self-portraits by Sarah Lucas. Hopkins includes Lucas ‘as a kind of honorary “Dada’s Boy”.’ His catalogue essay is careful to establish a genealogically sound basis for her inclusion, predicated on Lucas’ own play on a range of Duchampian and other Dadaist gestures, but like the ‘ladette’ label of 1990s pop sociology (which Hopkins discusses in connection with Lucas), there is something a little too univalent, too hip, too knowing, and too flippant about the masculinist tropes with which she flirts in these poses to constitute a substantial part in Dada’s Boys’ critical anatomy. If this is not immediately apparent, it becomes so when the visitor reaches the implicit ‘end’ of the exhibition in the shape of Matthew Barney’s film, CREMASTER 4 [fig. 5]. Hopkins’ essay acknowledges the leap that the viewer must make in order to accommodate Barney’s satyr-dandy’s warped quest for transformation of more than one kind on the Isle of Man, and journey through an out-of-bodily birth canal of sorts. But in terms of the exhibition’s structure, its inclusion as conclusion is highly effective. Barney’s figure, however absurd and unreal, nevertheless posits a distillation of the mobile, fugitive and multivalent nature of masculinity and male identity in art. Hopkins’ observation that Barney’s tale can be seen as ‘an allegory of male self-definition, involving a merciless parody of traditionally-conceived virile masculinity’ provides a more thought-provoking end to an exhibition of this broadly affirmative kind than might otherwise be expected.
Figure 5: Matthew Barney, CREMASTER 4, 1994-5, silkscreen laser disk in onionskin sleeve, prosthetic plastic bridal-satin banner and Manx tartan in self-lubricating plastic and acrylic vitrine, 91 x 122 x 104cm. Courtesy Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, Rotterdam.

_Dada’s Boys_ is an exhibition with a strong curatorial presence. The display of works and the catalogue essay are deftly composed mutually to affirm Hopkins’s central thesis. As such, the exhibition has both a polemic and didactic character that – ironically – may be a touch too authoritative for some. However, for all their stridency, _Dada’s Boys_’ claims are not deterministic. There is enough playful and open-ended suggestiveness to the art, the inspired curation and the accessible scholarship that a pleasingly messy ambivalence remains. Dada’s or otherwise, boys will always be boys.

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2 Hopkins, _Dada’s Boys_, 90.
3 Hopkins, _Dada’s Boys_, 36.
4 Hopkins, _Dada’s Boys_.

© Debbie Lewer, 2007
6 Hopkins, *Dada’s Boys*, 32.
7 Hopkins, *Dada’s Boys*, 91.
8 A phrase used by the Zurich Dadaist Marcel Janco to describe Dada.
12 Hopkins, *Dada’s Boys*, 33.
13 For a further discussion of these and related issues around the exhibition, see the round-table debate between David Hopkins, Debbie Lewer, Dominic Paterson and Keith Farquhar in *MAP*, 6 (Summer 2006), 34-39.
16 Hopkins, *Dada’s Boys*, 77.
18 John Beagles, review of *Dada’s Boys*, *MAP*, 7 (Autumn 2006), 48-49.
John Stezaker. Norwich Gallery, Norwich School of Art and Design, 27 April - 3 June 2006

While still an art student, it dawned on John Stezaker that the world was already too full of images for artists to add to the stockpile. Abandoning painting, he has devoted his career instead to the meticulous task of collecting, reclassifying, reformatting and juxtaposing the found mechanically-reproduced image with an increasingly pared-down economy of means that reveals the smallest intervention as fraught with complexity. The result is a painstaking critical practice based as much on the skills and intuitions of an archivist as on those of an artist, keyed largely to intellectual rather than visual arts references - it is significant that his teaching position at the Royal College of Art is in Critical and Historical Studies rather than Fine Art - and in which in some cases the simple reframing and reorienting of an original is now found sufficient to release its repressed meanings. Yet at the same time this is a practice torn on the one hand between an exposure of the reproduced image’s status as ‘weapon of mass seduction’ and the redemptive revelation of its occluded poetic resonance, and on the other between its status as critical intervention and the undeniable material fascination of the results.

Although seen as a key figure in that generation of British conceptual artists emerging in the late 1960s with a shared concern for the politics of media, representation and society, Stezaker’s work and ideas have in general remained less well-known to wider audiences than those of some of his peers, and relatively little has been written about them. The evidence of Stezaker’s calendar for 2006, however, indicates an artist in great demand: a contribution to the Tate Triennial hailed by Guardian critic Adrian Searle as a highlight of the show, and at least half a dozen international mixed and one-person exhibitions lined up for the rest of the year. It might be, in part, that the continuing enthusiasm for dada and surrealist collage and photography among curators and public alike has helped Stezaker’s work resonate with recent audiences in ways that seemed problematic in the 1970s and after - he has noted how surrealism remained a taboo subject for British artists during this period - and indeed the use of one of his works as the poster for the recent exhibition World Gone Mad: Surrealist Returns in Recent Art (Herbert Read Gallery, Canterbury, January-February 2006) points to the way in which Stezaker’s collage practice is all too likely to be read at first glance as bearing a simply formal affinity with dada and surrealist photographic and collage traditions. Unlike a number of other contemporary artists for whom this might also be said, however, Stezaker’s considered and complex engagement with the intellectual currents at stake make this comparison a rather more serious matter.
A new suite of works highlighted by the April 2006 exhibition at the Norwich Gallery, selected in collaboration with curator Lynda Morris, makes this point immediately. The *Africa* collages, seemingly culled from a colour catalogue of African carved statuettes where portions of the reproductions are cut away to reveal what appear to be vintage film publicity images underneath, immediately call to mind Hannah Höch’s well-known series of the mid to late 1920s *From an Ethnographic Museum* [fig.1]. Where Höch’s collages are generally read in terms of their overlay of an ambivalent and parodic set of gender signifiers over museum-bound colonial artefacts, collapsing together contemporary western beliefs in the colonial and gendered other, Stezaker’s *Africa* works seem to empty out even this possibility of interchangeable readings. The carvings and their metonymic but problematic reference to Africa, in pictures suggestive of illustrations from auction house catalogues rather than monographs, are doubly absent. Firstly (as for Höch) they are present as image rather than object in an echo of their removal from one location to another and then from collection to collection, but then they are literally excised from the image frame. Behind their gaping outlines the viewer seems to glimpse not so much a domestic parallel to ethnographic meanings as an entirely internalised, western set of desires, so that now in revisiting Höch’s work today the troubling other turns out to be ourselves - and the gossamer threads between desire and its pretexts - after all. Completing the circle back to Höch’s ethnographic museum, this sense of the exotic object’s emptied-out return to the spectator’s
original desire was deliberately intended by the curator to resonate with the reopening of the Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts just a few miles away during the Norwich Gallery show.

The strategy of removing one image to reveal and frame a second rather than paste them upon one another is one that Stezaker has used for a number of his best-known and most immediate works in recent years, notably those based on movie star portraits from cinema production stills such as the *Dark Stars* series (2005) shown in Norwich. Silhouettes of Hollywood icons from foyer publicity cards or film annuals are excised to reveal different images underneath, perhaps of landscapes, paintings or other film stills, so that beneath every constructed image-as-personality lies its shadow - switching gender, blurring genre and diverting readings with its uncanny reframings. This makes it tempting to distinguish Stezaker's *découpage* method from the familiar collage techniques of dada and surrealism. In fact, antecedents might be found among less celebrated individuals connected to surrealism - works that neither Stezaker nor his audiences are as likely to have in mind - such as the caustic collage work of Marcel Mariën, the rubbed-out film vamps in Abdul Kader El Janabi's *gommages* or the cutting and revealing ‘intercollages’ of Jiří Kolář.²

The distinction between cutting and pasting is significant: an excavation rather than a layering of the found, Stezaker’s archival practice often works through editing and revealing rather than accretion and describing. It invites a sequence of careful removal and provisional realignment that suits the artist’s cautious process, apparently requiring long periods of deliberation before a stubborn combination of elements (of which there are never more than two) is finally allowed to stand. The artist himself has described this in terms of an ‘evacuation’ - a term that points to the sense of hollowness or absence accompanying the mass-produced image - but for Stezaker this deathliness is one that might be related more specifically to Maurice Blanchot's contention in ‘Two Versions of the Imaginary’ that it is only death that renders a body truly visible and understandable, that turns object into image.³ Stezaker’s works may be read as attempts to capture a moment when an image might at the same time be dead yet reveal its true nature, and it is this paradox that might explain his willingness to situate his practice as an exploration of both ‘apocalyptic’ and ‘redemptive’ currents in contemporary culture and thought.

The artist’s preferred sources, in turn, are outdated books and magazines from the charity shops and second-hand bookshops that he already sees both as opening out onto alternate systems of archiving and collecting, and as suffused with the pathos of death, where the demise of a former owner releases each book to a new set of exchanges. This is a process built on accident and the drawn-out contemplation of each image’s meanings, sensitive to the nuances of the item’s materiality, and Stezaker’s contention is that from their dusty shelves these artefacts are in a
sense seeking him out rather than the other way around. This claim makes it very tempting to suggest a parallel with André Breton’s categorisation in Mad Love of the flea market find as a predestined, personalised sign, and to see the artist’s fascination with images that are both absent yet revealed, ‘apocalyptic’ yet ‘redemptive’, as a kind of meditation through the image on the surrealist notion of objective chance. The Cinema series of collages shown in Norwich, in which postcards of landscapes are overlaid on film stills, masking a ‘faked’ scenario with a natural form in which the protagonists’ outlines are unexpectedly rediscovered in rock formations or geographical features like an accidental Archimboldo or de Momper painting, also hint strongly at this fusion of chance and intertextuality in a way that frequently manages to be playful and deeply unsettling at the same time [fig. 2].

Figure 2: John Stezaker, Cinema 1 X, 2006, collage, 18.0 x 23.5cm. Private collection. Photograph courtesy of the artist.

Perhaps the most distinctive formal innovation Stezaker has pursued in recent years is the deceptively simple inversion of the unmodified image, a chance discovery that by his own admission took many years for him to accept and incorporate into the body of work. To point once again only to dada and surrealist examples it might be observed that the technique of rotating found images by 90 or 180 degrees has been used frequently to short-circuit the mechanisms of
looking at and reading them, most famously in Salvador Dalí’s misrecognition of a Picasso portrait in a photograph of an African tribal scene in *Paranoiac Face* of 1931 (another classic case, of course, of the projection of western cultural values onto colonial text). One might argue that Stezaker’s inversions, however, represent something more sustained and less playful than these antecedents, but that they still invite readings consistent with a number of surrealist principles - most notably in the way in which, like many of the most arresting surrealist works, they invite the viewer not to invent an alternative world but to imagine the existing one afresh. For one thing, these found images are only inverted and reframed, not juxtaposed, collaged, retouched or rephotographed. The simple, sober framing and presentation of work on the Norwich Gallery walls - 32 small scale pieces, some measuring only a few inches across, matted and mounted in plain black frames - emphasised the materiality and archival conservation of the source material, and indeed the artist prefers his work not to be reproduced in formats that diminish these qualities or permit the viewer to manipulate them. A nagging question - or perhaps more accurately a necessary tension - remains the extent to which a gallery show like this, even with a selection of relevant critical reading and a small display of early documentation on hand for visitors - can do justice to the density and the radical intention of ideas at work: a strategic assault on visual codes and values that nevertheless chooses the traditional exhibition space, the frame and the ‘original’ as its weapons of choice.

Figure 3: John Stezaker, *Bridge V*, 1998, found image, 15 x 19.5cm. Private collection. Photograph courtesy of the artist.
Yet the result, for instance in the sometimes tiny *City* series (2000-4), is images that on first encounter possess a simultaneous documentary and perplexing quality (and that despite their apparent simplicity are, Stezaker recounts, the result of gruelling work). Upside-down aerial photographs of urban scenes or industrial architecture seem both familiar and yet strangely in suspension, in my case momentarily prompting a reading that their elements had somehow been minutely snipped out and reassembled into an orientation diagram that was readable yet unusable, reconnaissance intelligence for the reimagining of our interaction with social space. Another major theme to emerge from the endless sub-classification of Stezaker’s ongoing archive, the bridge, appeared here in six works where photographs of bridges are inverted, sometimes with the ‘real’ part of the picture deleted to leave only a shimmering reflection that somehow never truly resembles the ‘real’ at all, opening instead into some quite new perspective [fig. 3]. Stezaker sees these bridges, an outgrowth from the *Overworlds* series begun in the 1980s, as inviting readings of the bridge as a threshold and passage, in particular the metaphorical passage from life to death attested in a number of ‘near death’ accounts; and more generally the theme of inversion as a utopian invitation to reverse the polarities of real and imaginary in a literal revolution of values, and to discover a redemptive space concealed in plain sight within the welter of images saturating our line of vision.

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1 Factual information used here has been informed by an interview with the artist, London 1 March 2006 (with my thanks to Lynda Morris for setting up this encounter) and his talk accompanying the Norwich Gallery exhibition, Norwich School of Art and Design, 27 April 2006.

2 Marcel Mariën’s uses of text, collage and the object, as well as his publishing projects, are a key contribution to Belgian surrealism and a vital link between surrealism and the situationists, yet have still to receive sustained attention from English-language scholarship. For Abdul Kader El Janabi, see Édouard Jaguer et al, *Vamps évaporées: Les gompages d’AKEJ*, Paris: 1985; in addition to being a driving force behind a number of collective surrealist initiatives in Paris during the 1970s and 1980s, El Janabi is also an important link with and historian of Surrealist currents in Arabic. For Jiří Kolář, see for example intercollage works in *Jiří Kolář*, New York: 1975; whilst not a direct participant in Czech surrealism, Kolar was nevertheless active during the forties in Skupina 42, a group of Czech artists and writers closely aligned with surrealist interests.

3 ‘At first sight, the image does not resemble a cadaver, but it could be that the strangeness of a cadaver is also the strangeness of the image.’ Maurice Blanchot, ‘Two Versions of the Imaginary,’ in *The Station Hill Blanchot Reader*, New York: 1999, 417-27 (419).

4 Perhaps surprisingly, in conversation the artist indicated only a partial awareness of this parallel to surrealist theory, and Stezaker himself explicitly links his work to the ideas of a number of writers such as Blanchot and William Burroughs rather than Breton in this regard.
The Hayward’s latest touring exhibition contains a huge, heterogeneous array of secrets. From the mystical to the bizarre to the downright sinister each work suggests a new twist of the word ‘secret’. In fact, the show is so fragmented and disparate that it is very difficult to write about. While there is a clear rationale for each piece, in that arguably it reflects some aspect of the title, there is no easy relationship between the works on display. In many ways this makes A Secret Service very appealing and forms quite a challenging experience; partly in terms of figuring out the underlying principle behind some of the curatorial decisions, and partly in terms of the diverse range of viewing experiences it offers.

The answer to the challenge of the logic of curatorial choice may be found in the particular reference made to the work of Kurt Schwitters within this exhibition. Indeed Schwitters’ projects offered a rich point of departure for the show’s curator, Richard Grayson, who used their repeated tropes of secrecy, removal from view, and their qualities of insider and outsider practice as a thematic pegs from which to hang his choices.¹

The last remaining evidence of Schwitters’ activities is displayed in the form of the photographs of the giant construction inside his Hanover home taken by his son before they fled Germany for Norway. These provide a primary locus for almost all of the themes listed in the show’s catalogue: magic, alchemy, sexuality, dreams, religion, political conspiracy, assumed identity and the covert workings of the State. The images provide tantalising glimpses of the monumental project which grew like a great Constructivist fungus to fill his three storey house. Nothing of the Hanover Merzbau, or the later versions Schwitters built in Norway, survives apart from these photographs, and very few people had access to what they show. Schwitters kept his work a secret, fearing the condemnation of people who did not

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understand what it was or why he needed to make it. Not least of all, as an epileptic avant-garde artist, he feared the Nazis.

Figure 1: Kurt Schwitters, Merzbarn Wall Relief, 1947-48.
Image courtesy of Hatton Gallery, University of Newcastle Upon Tyne, UK / The Bridgeman Art Library © DACS 2006

It will be interesting, incidentally, to see how the show travels without Schwitters’ Merzbarn which is permanently installed at the Hatton Gallery (Fig. 1). The Merzbarn, for me, provides an important tool in the process of extrapolating an understanding of Schwitters’ processes from the photographs of the Hanover and Hjertøya Merzbauten. It also offers a compelling counterpoint for Mike Nelson’s specially commissioned installation, a piece which is a direct descendant of Schwitters’ Merzbau, but which has significantly different aims: Schwitters’ work was created to provide a reassuring, protective environment in which he could escape from whatever pressures he was facing, and in which he could explore his personal concerns and current fascinations away from prying eyes. Nelson’s installation offers no such comfort. It is an unsettling reflection of the circumstances in which the artist, and indeed all of us, find ourselves, in which conflict and violence transform the world around us.

Nelson’s piece is an extension of the Amnesiac Shrine, which appeared earlier this year at Matt’s Gallery. It consists of a number of steel temporary fence panels, interlocked together and hung with the remnants of its fictional visitors, The Amnesiacs. Trophy heads, old trainers, desert storm camouflage clothing, a scattering of ‘Iraq’s Most Wanted’ playing cards,
rifles, Persian rugs, bottles and horseshoes are amongst the detritus left for us. The Amnesiacs are a mythical biker gang who last appeared in Nelson's work in the mid-nineties, and whose purpose at the time was to help him come to terms with loss. The Amnesiac Shrine functions formally in a similar manner to Schwitters' Merzcolumns, many of which were later integrated into the Merzbau and which included incredibly personal items such as his son's death mask as well as more mundane content. This new installation incorporates, as Schwitters' grottoes did, elements of the everyday; found objects and detritus which reflect the world around, but they reference the fictional world that Nelson has created, rather than representing a connection to the real world as they did for Schwitters. Nelson even references the bottle of urine, suspended as per Schwitters' Hanover production. Nelson's bottle, however, has no 'immortelles' - everlasting flowers - floating in it to offer any reassurance.

The Merzbarn, in contrast to the somewhat threatening, bleak aesthetic of Amnesiac Shrine, is a manifestation of the last hopes of a dying man whose life had been spent dodging trouble, escaping by the skin of his teeth, and having to constantly start again. Schwitters' was certain he could preserve himself within the Merzbarn and it now stands as something of a monument to his tenacity in the face of nigh insurmountable difficulties. Both pieces invoke a sense of the partial, of something abandoned. We are left with only traces of the people who created them and the stories behind them.

Nelson's work is probably one of the most disturbing exhibits in the show. (It is also a secret in itself: it doesn't appear in the catalogue; there are no photographs of it and even that most scholarly of research tools, Google, yields no result.) One of the most interesting aspects of the exhibition as a whole is the way that one is thrown between an unnerving piece such as this and the almost pure comedy value of, say, Jeffrey Vallance, whose subversion of the Freedom of Information Act, My FBI File (1981), is downright hilarious. Vallance opens up his own secret file, obliging the FBI to hand over the information that they were keeping about him – it's very funny and we must be grateful to him for this self-sacrifice.

Such machinations of the 'state' loom large within the exhibition and are quite often sincerely scary as in Mark Lombardi's exquisitely executed diagrams of high-level corruption and covert
relationships. One thing that is striking about so much of the work on show is the sheer intricacy of it. Lombardi’s work is incredibly meticulous, and pretty much all of the other artists featured demonstrate a similar level of methodical complexity within their productions. There is a marked emphasis on the processes used, which seem often to verge upon, or even plummet right into, the obsessive. Kataryzna Józefowicz’s thousands of tiny cubes, diligently and painstakingly folded from unsolicited mail, form a sprawling expanse in Games (2001-2003), a piece which took two years to create. Paul Etienne Lincoln’s alchemical process, Passage to Purification (2001) (Fig. 2) is the most elaborate, convoluted and painstaking performance, and is an involved enough experience to watch, never mind to create.

![Figure 2. Paul Etienne Lincoln Passage to Purification (detail), 2001 Courtesy Alexander and Bonin, New York © Paul Etienne Lincoln](image)

Similarly, Henry Darger’s drawings are evidence of his complete immersion in his creation. A room full of Darger’s massive drawings, in all their pre-oedipal, Enid Blyton-on-acid glory, is a sight to behold (Fig. 3). Fastidious attention to detail and an obsessively constructed universe make Darger’s work completely compelling: the world inside his head was evidently much
more exciting than the world outside it. It’s fascinating to visit but I don’t think I’d like to live there.

![Figure 3: Henry Darger, Then true character was discovered, but when the Glandelinians were taking them from the camps in an auto, the machine got troublesome and this enabled the little girls to so easily get away, 500 A (date unknown). Watercolour, pencil and carbon tracing on paper. 48.3 x 61. Courtesy Kiyoko Lerner © Kiyoko Lerner 2006](image)

There is, it must be said, something faintly disconcerting about looking at something you know you were never intended to see. Some of the work exhibited was created in secret and some was intended to remain secret. Either way, it puts one in an uncomfortable, yet slightly thrilling, position. Take for example Sophie Calle’s *Hotel* series (1981), in which the artist took a job as a chamber maid in order to rifle through and photograph guests’ possessions. Can art legitimate such intrusions, we are asked? Clearly, the exhibition answers, it can, and it will happily implicate us in the process.

Intrusion, then, is the principal foil to secrecy in much of what is displayed here. Not necessarily in a sense of infringement, such as in Calle’s series, but rather in a sense of
interruption. The strategies of concealment or suppression deployed by various parties – be that the artist or the subject matter – have been interrupted not only by their presence in a gallery and my presence as viewer, but by the relationships that are created within this field, and as I remarked at the start of this review, these relationships are not easy. For example, the relationship between Sophie Calle’s work and Jeffrey Vallance’s: how would we react if it were the FBI taking pictures of people’s hotel rooms? Or the relationship between Oskar Voll’s pencil drawings: straight out of the Werneck asylum and full of soldiers and swords, and the very real images of war utilised by The Speculative Archive; both refer to the effects of violence and conflict but with very different results. To then juxtapose these with Mark Lombardi’s work creates another interruption, as Lombardi combines Voll’s obsessive pathology with The Speculative Archive’s expositional ethos.

It is, the catalogue admits, a paradox to stage an exhibition with secrecy as its main theme. It is also easy to take such a theme at face value. The secret is such a universally understood concept that it has obviously been a challenge to exploit and subvert this, and to come up with interpretations and uses of the theme that go beyond any simple definition. In the current climate, in which information is a commodity and secrecy is so intrinsically linked to scandal, power struggles and violence, an exhibition which engages with the dynamics of the secret is a timely one indeed.

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4 The story of Schwitters’ time in Ambleside and the beginning of the Merzbarn is recounted in William Feaver’s article ‘Alien in Ambleside,’ Sunday Times Magazine, August 18th 1974, pp. 27-34.


The recent exhibition of Hans Bellmer’s work which travelled to the Whitechapel Gallery from Paris and Munich, and the handsome accompanying publication, together provided a welcome opportunity for re-assessment of this artist’s oeuvre. Surprisingly, Bellmer has never before been the subject of a solo exhibition in a public gallery in the UK. The recent heightened profile the artist has enjoyed is due rather to the publication of two major monographs, in 2000 and 2001 respectively: Sue Taylor’s The Anatomy of Anxiety, and Therese Lichtenstein’s Behind Closed Doors. Neither of these books, however, made as major a new approach to the artist’s work as this exhibition signalled.

The Whitechapel show had a slightly complicated exhibition structure. What had been a single-artist show at the Pompidou Centre in Paris earlier this year, in London was combined with an exhibition of Pierre Klossowski’s work, curated by Sarah Wilson, and an intervening or ‘bridging’ small exhibition, also curated by Wilson, on Klossowski’s surrealist activities, entitled the ‘Vicious Circle’. In addition at the Whitechapel there was a further small room showing the installation I am Anagram, by Aura Satz (whose agreeably fortuitous surname means ‘sentence’ in German).

Altogether, this arrangement of the Bellmer material, folded into an interlocking structure of other works, like mirrored chambers, worked well: the different parts each benefiting the other. In particular, the I am Anagram installation highlighted the new focus which the exhibition signalled on Bellmer’s restlessly circuitous drawings, and his related theoretical writings concerning his vision of the body as an anagram: ‘a sentence that invites you to dismantle it, so that, in the course of an endless series of anagrams, its true contents may take shape.’

This focus brings a new physicality to interpretations of Bellmer, and enables a new, phenomenological reading; which has the potential importantly to displace the emphasis of other, earlier interpretations on Freudian theoretical structures.

Bellmer and surrealism

Bellmer’s Doll photographs are increasingly often reproduced in histories of surrealism, and have even been hailed as the ‘summa’ of surrealism in one recent account. Typically, the photographs are understood on the basis of a reading of the doll as supplying exemplary figurations of a range of Freudian drives and scenarios, including the uncanny, sadomasochism, fetishism, castration anxiety, scopophilia, hysteria, hermaphroditism and the death drive; and are sometimes positioned as key to a traumatic, uncanny unconscious at the heart of surrealism, at work beneath Breton’s idealisations of
mad love. Bellmer was certainly eager to win acceptance from the surrealists in Paris. He sent his cousin Ursula round the group with copies of his photographs when she visited Paris in 1934, and he appears consciously to have imitated certain surrealist photographs in some of the Doll arrangements. But these points suggest that what we see in the Doll photos, rather than an interpretive key to the unconscious fantasy of the wider culture or movement, might be the staged vocabulary of an ‘unconscious,’ adopted as a readymade artistic idiom, and a language of avant-garde affiliation.

The Whitechapel exhibition encouraged the viewer first to recognize that there were only a small number of Doll photographs (c.150-180 in total, of which only around 30 were published in Bellmer’s lifetime, and only 50 or so of which were exhibited here), and that the period of their production was short – only about four years, between c.1933 and 1937. It also enabled an understanding of the famous Doll photographs in systematic relation to Bellmer’s other output: his drawings; his theoretical writings; and his occasional bizarre, collage-objects, of which the doll was, of course, the first, and for which it remained the prototype.

These collage-objects and ‘sculptures’ often reveal links between Bellmer’s production and figures usually positioned at surrealism’s margins – such as Picasso, for example, whose small-scale 1926 Guitar collages incorporating scraps of tulle, string and buttons on cardboard are clearly referenced by Bellmer’s own 1936 collage-construction, Ball-Joint, shown in the London exhibition. Such links suggest a reconfiguring of Bellmer’s relationship to surrealism; no longer conceived on a ‘depth’ model, with Bellmer’s photography positioned as key to the movement’s buried unconscious, nor yet, symmetrically, as pyramidal hierarchy, with the Doll photographs at its ‘summa.’ Rather, we might think, Bellmer’s work proposes a more ludic and physical configuration of surrealism: as a movement that constantly displaces its centre to the margins, like a Rotorelief hallucination, or like Cardan rings.

**Body as anagram**

The Whitechapel exhibition helped us to realize that there is another, more deeply structuring and more interesting picture of the unconscious which is at work in Bellmer’s output than the various Freudian theoretical structures figuratively alluded to in the narrative scenarios of the photographs. This is what several contributors to the catalogue call Bellmer’s theory of the ‘physical unconscious,’ and it informs his idea of the ‘body as anagram,’’ as well as linking together the various material parts of his output.

The idea of the body as an anagram to be rearranged is such an interesting aspect of Bellmer’s writing that it is a surprise it has not been really focused on to date (an important exception is Malcolm Green’s excellent essay in the new Atlas edition of Bellmer’s artist’s books, re-issued last year). The notion is formulated most explicitly in Bellmer’s essay ‘A Brief Anatomy of the Physical Unconscious, or, The Anatomy of the Image,’ which Bellmer worked on between 1942 and 1954, and which was
published in 1957 as a self-standing book accompanied by drawn illustrations. However, Bellmer had begun to formulate the idea first in his earlier essay 'The Ball-Joint,' which was included in his second book *The Games of the Doll* (published in 1949, but largely written between 1937 and 1945).

The theory of the physical unconscious is a complex phenomenological account of experience of the self, doubled and split between psychic and physical reality, which compares interestingly with the contemporary work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jean-Paul Sartre and Jacques Lacan. (Bellmer's discussion of holding a mirror to the surface of the body, for example, recalls Merleau-Ponty's discussion in 'Eye and Mind' of seeing himself caressing the stem and bowl of a pipe, in a mirror; and at the same time suggests the possibility of an interestingly erotic re-interpretation of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy.) At another point, Bellmer gives the example of a reflex action, to illustrate the virtualism and image-producing character of physical experience even when this is without the aid of a mirror:

What, among all the reflexes triggered by a toothache, is the meaning of the fierce muscular reaction of the hand and the fingers as they claw their nails painfully into the skin? This clenched hand is an artificial focus of arousal, a 'virtual tooth,' which diverts the currents of the veins and nerves from the actual seat of pain to itself, in order to diminish it. In this way the toothache is divided, graphically doubled, at the expense of the hand.

Thus Bellmer explores the idea that all physical experience creates a second, virtual realm or shadowy mirror-image, duplicating itself, or, as he says, 'counter[ing] a real centre of arousal with a virtual one.' From this develops a theory of the self's interpenetration with others and with the world, which unfolds through sections of the essay headed 'The Images of the Self,' 'The Anatomy of Love,' and 'The Self and the Outside World.' Eroticism is the central matrix in Bellmer's theory, through which, in relationship to a loved other, every area of the body is invested, doubled and found anew.

However, it is in his earlier ‘Ball-Joint’ essay, where the theory first begins to find expression, that a key description makes clear the importance of the doll theme to the theory of the physical unconscious. The key passage describes a girl tipping her weight through the tip of her finger onto a grain of sugar, and it is written as though a linguistic re-tracing of the links of a graphic or mechanical diagram:

How, it may be asked, is one to describe the scheme of a little girl's body image as she sits with the emphasis on her raised left shoulder and her arm lying to one side on the table, and with her chin tucked between the muscles of her upper right arm, her chest and collarbone positioned so that the sinews on the right side of her neck are palpably strained, while the pressure of her arm, together with the counter-pressure mirroring it from the surface below, issues from her armpit in a relaxed downward line, gliding over her gently upturned wrist, scarcely noticing any longer the slope of the back of her
sleeping hand, before climaxing in a grain of sugar beneath the tip of a finger resting on
the table top.

The play of weight and balance described in the account of the girl leaning on a table, revolving her
weight through the end of her finger upon a small grain, is typical of the whole engineering system of
the eventual, ball-jointed model of the doll. Bellmer describes the body as an ensemble armature of
displacement, each area standing in for a focal area of arousal elsewhere. He describes the girl in this
linguistic diagram as endlessly substituting one area of pressure and torsion for another:

[I]t may be assumed that the entire physical alphabet is at the brain’s constant beck and
call, for even after an amputation it is evident that the physical parts within the
aforementioned framework – the chin, the armpit, the arm – can be subjugated by
analogues from outside their own preserve, such as images of the genital region, the leg,
etc that have been activated precisely by their ‘repression.’ Even if the letters of this
alphabet refer to nothing more than local experiences in physical, motoric and
interoceptive awareness, it must be noted that as in dreams, the body can capriciously
displace the centre of its own images’ gravity, and does so constantly. As a result, it is
able to perform ‘condensations,’ ‘superimpositions,’ ‘proofs of analogies,’ ‘ambiguities,’
‘puns’, and canny and uncanny ‘calculations of probability’ with these images.

From this idea came Bellmer’s interest in anagrams, puns and linguistic tricks; all of which centred
around the body as anagram, conceived as fundamentally reversible (he included a section on
palindromes in ‘The Anatomy of the Image’). This interest of Bellmer’s of course suggests
immediately a connection to Marcel Duchamp. Like Duchamp, Bellmer modelled his dis-arrangement
of the body as a play with words, and in 1954, published a volume of anagrams together with his lover,
Unica Zürn. Bellmer and Duchamp (and Picasso), it seems, all shared an engagement with word-play
(puns, riddles and anagrams), which produced a slippery, associative, mobile circuitry in their work.

Particularly relevant to this interest of Bellmer’s are Duchamp’s various optical discs, around some of
which Duchamp inscribed puns and word-plays. It is possible that Bellmer saw the Rotoreliefs when
he visited Paris in 1935, since Duchamp showed them at a trade fair that year; just at the time Bellmer
was embarking on his second series of photographs. In a vitally interesting,
but until now entirely
neglected section of the ‘Ball-Joint’ essay, Bellmer himself connected Duchamp’s Rotoreliefs to the
workings of the ball-joint, and so to the workings of his Doll series of photographs. He devotes
‘Example Four’ in his essay to a vivid description of the discs:

Counteraction and forcible reconciliation of concentricity and eccentricity are pushed to
the extreme in Marcel Duchamp’s ‘Rotoreliefs,’ to the point where they are mutually
resolved. The principle is as follows: a series of eccentric circles arranged around the
false centre B are drawn on a disc with its centre at A. When placed on a gramophone,
the disc rotates around A in such a way that every point within the circles is in concentric motion about A, while appearing to be in eccentric motion around B. Although this theoretically scandalous contradiction results from an illusion, it produces an optical miracle: the surface of the circles rises up like dough or a heaving bosom, only to collapse and rise again at periodic intervals.

This description vividly suggests a link to the tumescence of the doll’s limbs in Bellmer’s second series of photographs (The Games of the Doll), and mirrors their quality of confusion between phallic and breast-like forms. The swelling and detumescence conjured in Bellmer’s word-picture of Duchamp’s discs was in addition further materially configured and drawn out by Bellmer’s construction of his sculptural object The Spinning Top (1938); which recalls the action of the arm of a record-player and is composed of a pyramid of breasts of varying sizes, suggesting the optical illusions of inflation and diminution which would be produced were it to be set in motion. In turn, this link to optical illusions points the way forwards to the relationship of Bellmer’s photography to his constructions of apparatus-like gadgets; and to a new understanding of the photographs that is linked to the theory of the physical unconscious.

Ball-joint

To understand the place of Bellmer’s Doll photographs in relation to the rest of his output (in particular, the constructions, the drawings, and the theoretical writings), it is necessary to differentiate between the two series of his photographs, which are each approximately divided around two different models of the doll. The first doll was wooden-framed, and covered in layers of flax fibre, with a top-coating of plaster of Paris. It housed a small ‘panorama’ apparatus in its abdomen, which was illustrated as the frontispiece to Bellmer’s first book, Die Puppe, in 1934.  

Halfway through making his first series of photographs, it seems, Bellmer hit upon a new way of connecting the doll’s limbs to its torso. This was the ball-joint, or ‘universal joint,’ as Bellmer also called it; and it not only came to replace the old bolt-joints which had connected the doll’s arms and legs to its torso, but also the whole central section of its abdomen. In the exhibition the viewer was enabled to see, perhaps more clearly than is apparent when the photographs are reproduced in books, the crucial change that occurs in the Doll series when Bellmer made the switch to a ball joint. This switch has long been recognized and acknowledged in accounts of the construction of the series, but has yet to be made sufficiently significant use of interpretively.

The discovery of the ball-joint at some point in 1934 was undoubtedly a breakthrough: the new design producing a greater suppleness and fluidity, making the doll seem less stiff and constructed, and lending to the doll in the second series of photographs its more supple and seamlessly illusory capacity for reversal and transformation. The ball-joint became a key, erotically-invested mechanical device for Bellmer, who devoted the entire essay published in his second book (The Games of the
Doll) to its inspirational workings. The ball-joint also instituted a new regime of visuality. Not only were there more photographs in the second series, after the invention of the ball-joint (approx. 150, many of which were hand-coloured, as compared to approx. 30, black-and-white photographs in the first), but the ball-joint also entirely replaced the old panorama device which had been housed by the original doll, and which the diagram shows so clearly, had turned that doll into a clumsily improvised apparatus or ‘seeing-machine.’ Now with the panorama device replaced by a giant, globular and rotating ball-joint, a new spectacularity becomes evident in the rapidly proliferating, luridly coloured and increasingly repetitive photographic series that Bellmer produced.

Though there is little room to develop the idea here (it is work I am taking forward elsewhere), I want to suggest that what the Whitechapel show enabled us to see is the way that the ball-joint brought a new model of motorised production to the photography of the doll; the new ease, circuitry and rotation which the mechanism brought to the anatomy of the figure enabling a concomitant fluidity in Bellmer’s imagining of photography. What we see in the photography of the doll that followed the introduction of the ball-joint is an increased mobility, and a motile, hallucinatory, heat. The photographs acquire new qualities of repetition, superimposition and overlay, each over the other. These are also qualities which, the exhibition showed, were originally visible and continued to be so in Bellmer’s drawings – in their slippery overlay and mobile line. In the second series of the Doll photographs – which have colour, which are more repetitive and serial (less sequential), and more full of multiplication and doubling, suggesting a certain lubricious motility of the body – the full relationship between the different parts of Bellmer’s production is made visible. (And it is here we are also able to understand the transfer or slippage between the two halves of the title of Bellmer’s theoretical essay, the ‘brief anatomy of the physical unconscious’ and the ‘anatomy of the image'; the new anatomy of the doll re-structuring the anatomy of the photograph in its own image.)

In conclusion, then, the Whitechapel exhibition represented a welcome contribution to studies of Bellmer and surrealism more widely. The catalogue contains a very useful descriptive chronology, and whilst the essays in the catalogue too often re-iterate unverifiable myths (that Ursula was not allowed into the studio, etc.), and critical clichés (that the Doll series was made in erotic thrall to his desire for his cousin, the doll a stand-in for her, etc.), the whole does succeed in re-focusing attention on Bellmer’s drawing, bringing the parts of Bellmer’s production into their proper systematic relation and proportion to each other. The exhibition was particularly important and worthwhile for its focus on the anagram – that phenomenological aspect of Bellmer’s theoretical writings which is so interesting, especially in relation to Duchamp, and which awaits more work. Finally, the exhibition was welcome for enabling us to see new ways in which photography was constructed – materially produced in dialogue with some other, engineered apparatus (in Bellmer’s case, most predominantly, the doll; though the collage-constructions and objects like The Spinning Top and Ball-Joint are also relevant) – at this point in the 1930s. This suggests we understand photography not as a transparent, visioning instrument, a flawlessly functioning agency of the image, employed to photograph staged scenarios of the unconscious; but instead as a physical and material technology, Bellmer’s conception of which
was enabled and fed by the other, different material parts of his practice, such as line, and the ball joint. To say as much is also to propose a different picture of surrealist photography: no longer giving effortless view onto the unconscious fantasy of the movement, or of the viewer, this is a surrealist photography with more grit in its eye, and a definite grist to its mill, working around the material irritation/stimulation of the ball joint, its pattern of image-flow mutually modelled on and by the liquid effusion and repetition, and by the ceaseless circuitry and perversity of Bellmer’s graphic line.

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4 For example, Bellmer’s Idol of 1937 and Man Ray’s Tomorrow of 1924.

5 For example, Pablo Picasso, Guitar, 1926, tulle, string, button and pencil on cardboard, 14 x 10 cm, Musée Picasso, Paris.


8 Bellmer, Die Puppe, Carlsruhe, 1934.

My drawings are not drawings but documents.
You must look at them and understand what’s inside.
Antonin Artaud, Rodez, April 1946

On 7th June 1946, at the Théâtre Sarah Bernhardt, André Breton, newly returned to Paris, addressed a sympathetic crowd who had gathered in support of Antonin Artaud. Breton asserted that Artaud had gone farther than any other in ‘this threefold objective to transform the world, to change life, to reshape the human mind.’ This rhetoric was no doubt partly inspired by the extreme nature of Artaud’s long incarceration in the asylum at Rodez, alleviated only weeks earlier by his move to more conducive surroundings in the Paris suburb of Ivry. However, Breton’s homage also points to the significance of Artaud’s project of negation, both in the context of Surrealism’s investigation of the realm of the unconscious and in its broader challenge to the very structures of representation. These last few years of Artaud’s life would be extremely prolific; he worked furiously, producing hundreds of drawings and notebooks and revisiting his early treatises on theatre and film.

For several decades following Artaud’s death at Ivry on 4th March 1948, and despite significant critical interest in his writing, Artaud’s drawings and notebooks remained hidden from public view, with much of the material exhibited for the first time during the 1980s. In 1993, his executor Paule Thévenin bequeathed his four hundred and six notebooks and other papers to the Bibliothèque nationale de France, and it is this impressive collection that formed the core of their exhibition. The range of outlets through which Artaud expressed his ideas encompasses a vast range of art forms; the cahiers were shown alongside sketches, portraits, photographs, letters, essays, manifestoes, poems, sound recordings, reviews of theatre, film and art, screenplays, designs for costumes and stage sets, and other personal artefacts. These exhibits were loaned from private and public collections, including the Centre Pompidou’s large collection of Artaud’s drawings (also the bequest of Thévenin). Though these had been exhibited on previous occasions, notably at MoMA in 1996, this was the most comprehensive attempt to date to portray Artaud’s life and work through such a richly broad selection of material. Although the vast impact of Artaud’s work and its significant legacy, in both Europe and America, is still to be satisfactorily documented, this exhibition made a valuable contribution to critical discussion of his work. The exhibition was arranged in broadly thematic rooms, exploring Artaud’s self-portraiture, theatre work, writing on art, and his early career in film. These were arranged around a central section that was more biographical in content, though contained drawings, personal notebooks, letters, as well as the notorious ‘spells’ that seem to encompass all of these media.
That the first works that visitors encountered were the self-portraits established the theme of identity and its disintegration as the defining force behind Artaud’s oeuvre and the exhibition as a whole. This group of large-format, mainly frontal portraits were produced late in Artaud’s life, during his time at Rodez and Ivry, between 1946 and his death in early 1948. His face and neck are depicted in heavy, insistent strokes that iterate his features over and over again, scratching and scarring the surface of the paper. In one such portrait, executed at Ivry on June 24 1947 (cat. no. 6), the lines of Artaud’s face are overlaid with dark leaden smudges while short incisive lines mark out holes and blemishes on his neck. The page is further subjected to brown stains and the dark scar of a burn is clearly visible close to Artaud’s mouth. This damage to the throat and mouth enacts the violent silencing of the artist, who appears in all of the self-portraits with thin closed lips and expressionless eyes, a testament to what Jean-Luc Nancy terms the ‘scar of silence.’

In the same month as he created this work, Artaud described his morbid vision in the text ‘Le visage humain…’: ‘the human face / is an empty force, a / field of death … For the human face, / in fact, wears / a perpetual death of sorts.’ In the self-portraits the fragmentation of Artaud’s own brutally wounded face betrays an impulse that drives relentlessly towards the complete annihilation of the self. Any attempt to view such images as an assertion of Artaud’s identity is undermined by the violence to which these drawings have been subjected. The mirrors that were placed in the dimly-lit exhibition space strengthened this assault on the perceptions of the exhibition visitor, reflecting our own face among the many images of his, as if to implicate us in this betrayal of the self.

If this exhibition may be accused of faltering at all, it was through its attempts to reconstitute an identity so defiantly and deliberately fragmented as Artaud’s. Moving on from our initial encounter with the sense of dislocation in the first room, we entered the central biographical section, which related the chronology of Artaud’s life and introduced those characters who played a significant part in it, including Thévenin, Jacques Rivière, Jean Paulhan, Arthur Adamov, Pierre Loeb, Roger Blin and others. Many of Artaud’s doctors and psychiatrists were also present, represented in a somewhat oversimplified fashion by editions of their medical tomes. These were displayed alongside Artaud’s lengthy letters to which hint at the profound personal effect that these figures had on Artaud; in particular, the doctors René Allendy and Gaston Ferdière encouraged his artistic production, provided him with materials and bore some responsibility for ensuring the survival of the resultant works. The strength of Artaud’s experiences alone – close involvement with the surrealist movement, his extensive travel, and the horrors of psychiatric incarceration and electro-convulsive therapy – may argue to the inclusion of such a biographically oriented section. The room was curated with a straightforward sensitivity to the sometimes shocking material and its display cases combined dry factual accounts with those that hinted at the magnetism that many felt in Artaud’s company. The medical details of his diagnosis and treatment were complemented by a mesmerising and animated account by Anaïs Nin of her first meeting of Artaud in the 1920s, introduced by a mutual psychiatrist. There was a noticeable
focus on testimony in this section, though the relics that were displayed alongside these records – Artaud’s passport, his identity card, his letters and notebooks – seemed to be intended more as shards of his self, evidence of its being rent apart, rather than as a way of rebuilding him.

The narrative of Artaud’s life is, like his work, full of paradoxes and contradictions. In 1936 he visited South America, in order to attend conferences on surrealism at the University of Mexico – on surrealism and revolution, man and his destiny, and the sacred role of the theatre – and subsequently wrote on the subject of the peyote-infused rituals of the Tarahumara. The impression that emerges at this point of a highly engaged intellectual fascinated by the customs of another culture is typical of the extremely lucid theoretical output of much of Artaud’s early life. Such work seems anathema, however, to those relics of the following year, when Artaud made his infamously ill-fated journey to Ireland, returning under detention to the asylum at Rodez. It is from this period, starting in late 1937, that the Spells date, frenzied missives addressed to Artaud’s friends and enemies, real and imagined, calling for their protection or punishment, and begging them to come to his aid and bring drugs. Initially the pages are arranged as letters accompanied by symbolic imagery, but these rapidly merge to produce ambiguous works that are extremely theatrical, mixing words and imagery in a layout that hints at some unknown symbolic meaning. Words are capitalised, underlined, arranged into shapes and frequently obscured by smears of ink and burnt holes. The language is dramatic, oscillating wildly between ritual and blasphemy. The violence which was directed towards Artaud in the self-portraits is now directed out towards the pathology of society as a whole. At the Bibliothèque nationale, held caught in plexiglas against the light, as if being read by their recipients, the fragility of these pages was made clear. The text on one side became visible through the thin paper, working to obliterate its verso in a manner that replicated in the viewing process that which Artaud enacted in the making.

The violently performative aesthetic of the Spells continues in the notebooks that Artaud produced at Rodez and Ivry. In ruled school exercise books Artaud expounds often illegible ideas, frequently revisiting and revising earlier theoretical work. The notebooks’ pages are often extremely incoherent, filled with metaphoric words that invoke sex, sacrifice, scatology and physical brutality, and that frequently break out of conventional syntax and meaning into the realm of glossolalia. Artaud’s handwriting moves along in scrawled lines at all angles across the page, underlined, scratched out, rewritten, and frequently overlapped by hasty sketches and diagrams in dark pencil. Writing is made spatial and voluminous, a performative (that is, theatrical in Artaud’s sense) gesture of negation. Though emerging from language and visual imagery, the resulting pages effect the annulment of both: the act of writing against the text in order to dislocate its hold over meaning. Julia Kristeva’s psycholinguistic analysis of Artaud as being ‘in conflict and thus in dialectic with himself,’ seemed especially pertinent when one was confronted with the visual and linguistic contradictions and internal discord of the notebooks on display. The merging of word and image into pictogram may be seen as
an attempt to escape the confines of language, an urgent drive towards the pre-symbolic, that primal state in which true communication might happen. The frequent appearance in the notebooks of imagery resembling internal organs, vertebrae and shattered bones, as well as the proliferation of nails, dagger-like forms and shattered and impaled figures indicate that, for Artaud, this rupture is situated in the violent crisis of the human body. The violence invoked in Artaud’s words is enacted on the surface of the paper, which becomes analogous to the wounded skin of the body, here, as in the drawings.

Many of the late notebooks echo those theories Artaud had developed in the realm of theatre in the 1920s and 1930s and the exhibition contained a remarkable wealth of early material relating to these texts, for which Artaud was best known for several decades. Letters, scripts, performance photographs, and illustrations of set and costume designs outlined Artaud’s early experimental work with the Théâtre Alfred Jarry, which he founded in 1926 with Roger Vitrac and Robert Aron and with the support of Yvonne Allendy, and which demonstrated a decidedly dadaist impulse. The revolutionary spirit of the ‘real,’ situated beyond the perceived artificiality of theatrical convention, would prefigure the more radical agenda of Artaud’s 1935 play Les Cenci, and his two manifestoes outlining the ‘Theatre of Cruelty,’ published in The Theatre and Its Double in 1938 (not to mention the numerous attempts in the 1950s and 60s to ‘blur the boundaries of art and life’). In this now famous text, it is language that once again structures the constraints which Artaud is trying to escape. He argues for an end to the closed circuit of conventional theatrical representation, in which actors repeat the prescribed words and actions detailed in the text of the script; in its place he outlines a form of theatre that ‘furnishes the spectator with the truthful precipitates of dreams, in which his taste for crime, his erotic obsessions, his savagery, his chimeras, his utopian sense of life and even matter, even his cannibalism, pour out on a level not counterfeit and illusory but interior.’

The nature of Artaud’s project emerges as necessarily all-consuming. A drawing of March 1946, also titled The Theatre of Cruelty, depicts elongated and blemished figures in long coffin-like shapes covered in unexplained markings; jutting out at irregular angles, one upside down, they are situated in a void, the visual embodiment of the ‘dynamic expression in space’ which Artaud craves. Once again, though, there was a striking tension between the coherence of the almost-finished drafts of plays and theoretical texts and the chaos that appeared to dominate the drawings that followed them. In fact, many of the projects that constituted this section of the exhibition were aborted. Artaud would never succeed in fully realising his vision of the ‘theatre of cruelty,’ though his text would eventually become one of the most important sources for performers and artists in both Europe and America.

The immediacy that Artaud had demanded in the theatre is apparent too in his writing on cinema. Between 1924 and 1935 Artaud wrote fifteen film scenarios and appeared as an actor in twenty-two films, both mainstream and experimental. In addition, he produced a significant amount of theoretical
work outlining the potential of the medium to reconstitute the visceral and violent process of dreaming by projecting visual sensations (Artaud’s film theory was rooted in the technology of silent films) in direct collision with the eyes of the spectator. This ‘raw cinema’ as he envisioned it would overwhelm its viewer with an accumulation of imagery, a cinematic immolation.\(^8\) Artaud’s 1926 film *The Seashell and the Clergyman*, shown in the exhibition in its entirety, was supposed to be the concrete realisation of these ambitions, and though the resulting creation of its director Germaine Dulac displeased Artaud, it became one of the most important examples of surrealist film. This was shown in the exhibition alongside extracts of films in which Artaud performed, most famously as Marat in Abel Gance’s *Napoleon* (1926) and the monk Massieu in Carl Dreyer’s *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1927). We were not discouraged in this exhibition from confusing the films in which Artaud starred with the scenarios that he wrote, the mainstream movies with the more experimental productions. Indeed, ironically, it was the intensity of Artaud’s wild eyes and tortured expression as an actor – his face frozen for a moment as the section of film looped in repeated denial of the unique encounter he invoked – that imparted to the exhibition viewer the closest thing to the cruelty he sought in his fragmented writing on cinema.

Similarly, it was a little misrepresentative at times that no distinction was made between the private writings and sketches that Artaud made – partly as a form of therapy encouraged by the various doctors – and those that he produced with a view to public exhibition. This was particularly noticeable in the case of the late drawings that would go on display at the Galerie Pierre, Paris, in July 1947. This confusion, lessened somewhat by the comprehensive exhibition catalogue, was surely the result not only of the sheer variety of material on display, but also of the largely successful attempt to make a valid connection between the lucid theories of Artaud’s early theatre works, and the impenetrable scribblings of his final years. Chronological development was largely eschewed in favour of thematic parallels and medium-based distinctions.

The temptation to consider Artaud’s prolific output in terms of a *Gesamtkunstwerk* informed by his psychological disarray has been a common one for curators and scholars of Artaud’s work: the disjunction between critical and clinical commentaries has been difficult to resolve. Many commentaries, however critical, invite a reception that has at its core the notion that his work is, as Susan Sontag asserted in 1976, intrinsically unreadable.\(^9\) The Bibliothèque nationale, however, successfully reached beyond the limitations of such an interpretation. The exhibition pointedly enacted the sense of frustration and failure that permeates Artaud’s many unrealised projects, and successfully brought out the more subtle strands that run through his oeuvre. Rather than attempting to resolve the various contradictions in his work and life, the organisers of the exhibition adopted cacophony as a deliberate curatorial strategy in order to overcome the paradox inherent in exhibiting Artaud’s work. Quotations from his writings were reproduced over the walls, floor and ceiling of the exhibition space,
in varying colours and sizes, sometimes appearing forceful, at others faint and pleading, attempting to escape the imposed silence articulated by the self-portraits. On one occasion Artaud declared: ‘Je suis vacant par stupéfaction de ma langue’ (‘I am made empty by the stupefaction of my tongue’). Overhead, speakers projected the sound of his voice, veering from dramatic ranting to soft and enticing muttering, making literal the ‘cries, groans, apparitions’ of Artaud’s theatre of cruelty.\(^9\) Fragments of language drifted through the gallery, jostling with the visual images and text on display in its cases. Here, Derrida’s analysis of ‘writing as the other of the living body […] the erasure of the body’ seems to have found its expression.\(^11\) By bombarding the museum visitor with sound, text, and still and moving images, this exhibition hinted at that point of primacy that Artaud sought, ‘the borderline of the moment when the word has not yet been born, when articulation is not longer a shout but not yet a discourse.’\(^12\)

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'Image Ridden' - Enigma Variations: Philip Guston and Giorgio de Chirico

At ease in his jacket and tie, his eyes wide with conversation, Philip Guston stands – in a photograph from 1948 – with his head seemingly cradled in the lap of the Madonna from Michelangelo’s Doni Tondo. Or rather, he stands before a version of the painting dutifully copied by Giorgio de Chirico and hung unselfconsciously on the walls of his smart Piazza di Spagna apartment. Guston’s presence at de Chirico’s Roman home consummated a long-term admiration, an apprenticeship from afar. He first encountered de Chirico’s work in Los Angeles through his friend Lorser Feitelson – a latter-day ‘post-surrealist’ whose own work revealed the thorough assimilation (and transformation) of de Chirico’s metaphysical painting. In 1932 Feitelson took Guston to the home of Walter and Louise Arensberg, where he saw de Chirico’s large-scale canvas, The Soothsayer’s Recompense (1913) – an encounter that would echo throughout his entire career. In the period immediately preceding the triumph of abstraction in America – a triumph in which Guston played more than a bit part – Guston resided at the American Academy in Rome, traveling throughout Italy and studying Old Master painting. De Chirico himself would assume, in turn, the dimensions of a Master painter for Guston: the latter’s 1973 canvas, Pantheon, pays homage to de Chirico as the sole modern counterpart of more ancient luminaries, Piero and Masaccio, Tiepolo and Giotto – his name echoing theirs in a chorus of sonorous Italian ‘o’s [fig. 1].

Figure 1: Philip Guston, Pantheon, 1973, oil on panel, 45 x 48 inches, The Estate of Philip Guston, courtesy McKee Gallery, New York.
Guston’s is not the only pantheon of early and late modernism in which de Chirico looms large. De Chirico’s influence upon the trajectory of twentieth-century modernism – albeit a frequently fraught and antagonistic influence – has been prodigious on both sides of the Atlantic. He has been the unwitting (and usually unwilling) ‘godfather’ of numerous movements and stylistic tendencies, by turns surrealist and fascist. A painter such as Howard Lerner – indebted to de Chirico by way of Guston – reveals the higher mathematics of de Chirico’s legacy, its evolution over several generations. In 1937 the critic Waldemar George claimed that de Chirico’s presence in twentieth-century figuration was rivaled only by that of Picasso. This is an arguable declaration. Yet compared to the amount of Anglo-American study devoted to many of his peers – from Picabia and Duchamp, to Malevich and Mondrian – the scholarship on de Chirico remains comparatively minimal. Part of this reticence lies in a lingering wariness regarding de Chirico’s later career.

By presenting a range of de Chirico’s work – both early and ‘late’ – alongside works by Philip Guston, *Enigma Variations* not only makes an important intervention into the study of Guston’s work, but also helps to reframe aspects of de Chirico’s fated late production. As an artist touched by what Robert Rosenblum once called de Chirico’s ‘Long American Shadow,’ Guston stands out as one of the only individuals to have responded to nearly every chapter of de Chirico’s fitful production, including his latter-day pastiches. Even Guston’s eventual penchant for cartooning was not as inimical to de Chirico’s patrician metaphysics as it may seem: de Chirico completed several caricatures for the satirical wartime periodical based in Ferrara, *La Ghirba*, some of which reveal a popular, satirical spirit not far from the *Krazy Cat* and *Mutt and Jeff* comics that Guston turned to in successive years.

But *Enigma Variations* has scrupulously limited its selection to works by de Chirico which Guston saw or would likely have seen, whether at the Arensberg home, in Italy, or in retrospectives and other collections. A consideration of Guston’s works vis-à-vis those of de Chirico not only raises questions of influence, but sets into relief the polemics that their respective careers have stirred up. Indeed, the exhibition tacitly, but convincingly, proposes a significant parallel between de Chirico’s renunciation of his own, early style from the 1920s onward, and Guston’s equally controversial renunciation of abstraction late in his career. As co-curator Michael Taylor noted in a conference before the show’s opening, art historical scholarship (particularly in the United States) has yet to come to terms with the fact that the term ‘late de Chirico’ in fact comprises a vast scope of time and tendencies, of stylistic departures and returns.

De Chirico’s abandoning of metaphysical compositions in favor of self-imitation and kitschy mythopoetics famously earned him a series of *damnatio memoriae* from his erstwhile enthusiasts, the surrealists grouped around André Breton. Pundits took turns lamenting and lambasting de
Chirico's cynical turn. Many critics writing about de Chirico's work in the 1930s and 40s acted as if his post-1919 production simply did not exist – as if it were simply too bitter a pill to swallow. Guston's apostasy took the more dramatic form of a single exhibition: his 1970 show at the Marlborough Gallery in New York City, where he revealed his renewed dedication to figuration. Numerous friends recoiled in horror at his new work. Lee Krasner is said to have stopped speaking to Guston after this show. Morton Feldman's essay in Art in America the following year cast Guston's transformation under the portentous rubric, 'After Modernism' – a designation that conjures up de Chirico's own unfathomable Judas kiss to early twentieth-century innovation.

But what was scandalous about Guston's Marlborough show was not simply that his new canvases were figurative. It was the nature of that figuration: at once tortured and tongue-in-cheek. His Ku-Klux-Klan figures seemed to both reprise his former oeuvre and to caricature those same works. They looked, in some respects, like a caricature of figuration itself. In de Chirico, Guston found an artist who could pastiche both his own former imagery and the canons of Western art without remorse. Guston's return to figuration undeniably occurred under the sign of de Chirico's work - its insistence upon the ineluctable condition of language as the prisonhouse of consciousness and vision. Already at a 1960 roundtable with various artists, including Robert Motherwell, Guston quipped impatiently, 'There is something ridiculous and miserly in the myth we inherit from abstract art. That painting is autonomous, pure and for itself, therefore we habitually analyze its ingredients and define its limits. But painting is "impure." It is the adjustment of "impurities" which forces its continuity. We are image-makers and image-ridden.'

Guston's guilt at pursuing abstraction in the wake of increasing international strife and misery contributed to his figurative return. But so too did the lesson he drew from de Chirico's images: that figuration could generate its own metaphysical pleasures, anxieties, and incantations, alongside the humdrum march of modernity.

These parallels have their limits. For all of the literary wit (or pedantic affectation) of de Chirico's 'later' work – whether his equine neo-Baroque, his Gladiatorial reveries, or his self-citing neo-metaphysics – his career has always been haunted by the specter of his early paintings, or, rather, by their subsequent renunciation and perversion (by himself and by others). Guston's late work, by contrast, ushered in his own unapologetic sea-change. Despite the innovations of Guston's abstraction, despite the political mordancy of his early murals and their echoes in his later work, there is an inevitably ex-novo feel to his late figuration: a sense that these were the true 'fatality' (to use a term dear to de Chirico) towards which his career marched. For better or worse, it is his post-1970 production for which Guston is and will be remembered – the body of work that, both despite and because of its lumbering intractability, has left the deepest mark in the history of modern painting.
While it outlines the sway of de Chirico’s work on Guston’s early and late production, *Enigma Variations* sets forth an attendant argument for the variety of de Chirico’s contested oeuvre. Even in its careful and controlled scope, the exhibition manages to include a fifty-year range of ‘late’ de Chirico, from his 1925 *The Poet and His Muse* (part of the Arensberg Collection and of great influence upon Guston) to his *Head of a Mysterious Animal* (1975), pullulating with ruins and volutes (in defiance of the early de Chirico’s distaste for archaeological materialism) [fig. 2]. The inclusion of paintings from de Chirico’s last decade of work – *Head of a Mysterious Animal* (1975), *Sun on an Easel* (1973), and *The Return of Ulysses* (1968), in addition to two late gladiator paintings, *Gladiators After the Battle* (1968) and *The Invincible Cohort* (1973) – also underscores the (surprising) overlap of de Chirico and Guston’s late careers, and affords a comparison of their respective, albeit brief, coterminous production.
Guston was born in Montreal, June 27 1913: the year of de Chirico’s first solo exhibition. It was with these early metaphysical works, painted in Paris, that Guston first engaged as a young painter. Like that of many of his American and European peers, Guston’s painting from the period between the World Wars invoked metaphysical space as a theater of disaffected ideologies. With her weirdly outsized calf and unlikely décolletage, the central figure of his Mother and Child — in the show’s first gallery — offers a peculiar take on a familiar motif [fig. 3]. The pair are set into a post-de Chiricoesque space that, by 1930, had inspired numerous painters’ conflations of ineffable angst and absolute calm: from George Grosz to Jean Lurçat, Nicolas de Lekuona to Victor Brauner. Guston’s collaborative mural from this period, The Struggle Against Terror (executed with Reuben Kadish in Morelia, Mexico) owes as much to de Chirico’s compositions as to Orozco or Siquieros. Sadly missing from the show is Guston’s drawing for The Conspirators (1930), which further illustrates his early adaptation of de Chirico’s idiom to decidedly local, political content.

Figure 3: Philip Guston, Mother and Child, 1930, oil on canvas, 40 x 30 inches, private collection, courtesy Philadelphia Museum of Art.
Still, the limited number of images in the show is one of its great strengths. The juxtaposition of Guston’s *Nude Philosopher in Space Time* (1935) [fig. 4] next to de Chirico’s *The Scholar’s Playthings* (1917) perfectly illustrates Guston’s reading (and misreading) of the early de Chirico. The subtle inclusion of a nipple on a hanging light bulb in order to rhyme with the shadow of a female breast; a swirling blue cosmos and moonscape plastered on the room’s back wall; a diminutive pyramid wrapped in string next to a solitary egg: such *bizarreties* exaggerate the true spirit of metaphysical painting, which insisted upon the banality of objects and space as their most strange, spectral aspects. Guston’s later images, too, are populated with a recurring stock of cryptic, quasi-autobiographical signs: light bulbs, clocks, disembodied eyes, paint-brushes. Yet these objects often approximate more closely the spirit of de Chirico’s trains and engineering tools. As in Guston’s *Letter to a Friend* (1977), these simple objects imbue the canvas with elliptical, literary allusions, rooted in a decidedly personal narrative.
Many of Guston’s paintings from the late 1970s, such as *Ramp* (1979), present their wares against a plain, dimensionless background. Guston’s incline takes its cues from similar uses in de Chirico’s canvases, from his 1914-15 *The Duo*, up through *The Invincible Cohort* (1973), both on view here [figs. 5 and 6]. The ramp’s recession serves as a metonymy for, and an exaggeration of, perspectival space. But Guston’s ‘ramp’ doesn’t get very far into space or up the picture plane: it culminates abruptly in a cluster of lumpy forms. Guston is not invested in the believability of these objects and their commingling in space. These singular things – an unwieldy wheel, an abandoned book, a stray shoe – never let us forget their simultaneous identity as painted objects. *Letter to a Friend* dispenses with any gravitational coherence whatsoever. Singular objects – a torso, the lip of a garbage can, a clock, a smoking cigarette – float against a gray picture plane, striated with visible brushstrokes. Even Guston’s *Table and Stretchers* of 1978 – one of his most obvious homages to de Chirico’s paintings-within-paintings – sets his canvas stretchers against an absolutely flat, sky-blue background. Whereas de Chirico’s *Homesickness of an Engineer* (1916), piles up its collection of stretchers in a shallow but teeming corner, Guston frees his objects of any particular position in space [figs. 7 and 8]. They hover square with the picture plane, and, along with the paint cans and brushes set on a ledge above them, call attention to their own fabrication on the canvas’s surface. If one of Guston’s interests in de Chirico’s images lay in that ‘their forms seem to have never been painted,’ his late works - in which paint is most often applied in frank,
thick swathes - betrays none of this sleight of hand.


To be sure, de Chirico’s paintings from the 1950s, 60s, and 70s abandoned the hard-edged linearity of his earlier canvases for looser brushwork and more slack compositions. But even at their ‘lumpiest,’ de Chirico’s figures and objects still cast shadows, still inhabit a receding plane. His *The Invincible Cohort* (1973), with which Guston’s *Ramp* is understandably juxtaposed, presents its inexplicable heap of bodies and trophies in an enclosed room. While de Chirico’s images never serve up the relationship between figure and ground in entirely straightforward terms - the binary of that relationship is never sacrificed – it is the physical premise upon which de Chirico’s metaphysical system depends. De Chirico’s *Sun on an Easel* (1973), also included in the show, offers a further case in point [fig. 9]. If questions of interior and exterior, reality and representation, have been subject to metaphysical prodding, it is the putative physical presence of ‘real’ space that make such prodding possible to begin with. In other words, de Chirico never renounces a conviction in some fundamental, experiential plausibility of his scenes, in their physical and spatial sense. For, it is only in the apparent order of the world, he would say, that we find its obverse: a marvelous and inexplicable non-sense.

One assertion in the show’s press release I disagree with: a remark that de Chirico and Guston respectively ‘sought to reinvigorate painting.’ Both de Chirico and Guston’s later imagery is anything but vigorous. De Chirico’s gladiators, his entropic archaeologists, and his ‘Mysterious Baths’ enervate painting, rather than innervate it. The gladiators in de Chirico’s *The Invincible Cohort*
(1973) appear, as it were, rather 'vincible'; their cloaks are hardly distinguishable from the stray, fluted column that hangs at their feet. These figurations bear a certain acceptance of their own inertia and immobility (plastic or material, representational, and historical). If de Chirico and Guston clung stubbornly to figuration it was to a figuration that admitted – perhaps even embraced and celebrated – its stodginess, its increasing (art) historical obsolescence. It sought, I think, to make that stodginess over into something worthwhile by virtue of a withering irony, and perhaps an attendant sense of persecuted defiance. That said, if de Chirico's 'bad,' late paintings – in all of their permutations and variations – never quite shrug off the ghost of his metaphysical works, Guston's 'bad,' late paintings were the summation and denouement of his oeuvre. Guston’s increasing diffidence towards 'modern art' differs significantly from de Chirico’s vitriolic rejection of 'so-called modernism' (as the artist himself became fond of calling it).

Figure 9: Giorgio de Chirico, Sun on an Easel, 1973, oil on canvas, 25 x 31 ½ inches, Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico, courtesy Philadelphia Museum of Art.

This is a small quibble with an otherwise compelling and incisive show, rounded out by a small but helpful catalogue, featuring essays by the two curators: the first by Lisa Melandri on the context of de Chirico's early impact on Guston, and the second by Michael Taylor on the relationship between Guston and 'late' de Chirico (featuring a few illuminating archival photographs). Rarely does an exhibition featuring two major painters succeed in conjuring up such a lively play of images with a small number of canvases (twenty-six, in all). This derives in great part from the
show’s dynamic hanging. Rather than proceeding with a plodding juxtaposing of canvases one-for-one, the curators have staggered paintings by each artist in small groups, ordered chronologically. In this way, pairs or clusters of works by one artist gain some momentum of their own before being inevitably compared to their opposite number. Strains of influence and assimilation seem to ricochet between and among canvases, across rooms and around corners, rather than simply seep from one image to the next, like a processional slide show. For all of their frequent iconographic echoes and conceptual sympathies with de Chirico’s metaphysical pantheon, Guston’s enigmas look, in the end, quite different. De Chirico never renounced the belief in his imagery – even at most effete, its most decadently self-referential – as a window onto his own peculiar genius. Guston’s humble triumph, by contrast, was to make self-doubt somehow hold up as the stuff of painting. His canvases have not lost their whiff of endearing uncertainty.

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Fantastic Reality: Louise Bourgeois and a Story of Modern Art by Mignon Nixon

The first image in Mignon Nixon’s new study of Louise Bourgeois is a photograph of the artist taken in 1947 in a New York apartment. She is kneeling on the floor in a gesture of mock homage to Joan Miró who is enthroned in an armchair and cloaked in a painted robe with each bare foot resting on a pile of books about Picasso. A note tells us that the photograph was originally published in Artforum on the occasion of the 1994 Miró retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. The re-publication of the photograph, this time at the beginning of an art historical monograph devoted to the work of Louise Bourgeois, provides a neat visual condensation of the framework that structures this study of her practice: surrealism, psychoanalysis and feminism.

The comedic play for the camera between ‘father’/master and ‘daughter’/disciple sets the scene for the first chapter of the book, entitled ‘Discipleship: Deference and Difference,’ in which Nixon undertakes a sustained analysis of the historical, social and psychic roots of Bourgeois’s fundamental challenge to the Freudian Oedipal narrative of the avant-garde as it played out in the work of André Breton and the men of the surrealist circle. As a student in 1936, Nixon tells us, Bourgeois, ‘moved into the Rue de Seine building where Breton operated the Galerie Gradiva and there suffered her first, stinging professional rejection. Finding that she did not rank among Breton’s protégés, she underwent, Bourgeois recalls, a ‘crisis of resented authority.’ Resented authority might well describe the little girl’s stance towards her father in an image from Bourgeois’s 1982 photo essay, Child Abuse, which is the key case study in the opening chapter of the book. Nixon argues persuasively for making a connection between Child Abuse and Freud’s study of the case of Dora in which the daughter of a bourgeois household – not dissimilar to the setting of the artist’s own childhood – is used as a pawn in the father’s sexual game. Nixon points out that by the time Bourgeois made this work at the age of seventy, in the year of her retrospective exhibition at MoMA, Dora’s case was emerging as a classic site of feminism’s engagement with psychoanalysis. The belated acknowledgement of the status of Bourgeois’s work in the story of modern art coincided with the investigation of women as art makers by feminism; an image from her Femme maison series of drawings on canvas, made in the mid-1940s, was used in 1976 on the cover of Lucy Lippard’s ground-breaking work of feminist criticism, From the Centre: Feminist Essays on Women’s Art, and the series title provided the name for Miriam Schapiro and Judy Chicago’s Womanhouse project. Belatedness, Nachträglichkeit (deferred action) is key to Freud’s conceptualisation of psychic temporality and causality. Thus framed, not only did Bourgeois come to be a figure of transference for feminism, but also feminism in the 1970s and 1980s provided Bourgeois with a meaningful context for reworking unassimilated psychic material from much earlier experiences involving crises of positioning both as a daughter in the family in childhood and as a young woman in her profession as an artist in relation to the surrealists.
If we read with Freud, then, Bourgeois’s history in modern art could be defined as traumatic. *Fantastic Reality* has an elegant and beautifully controlled double structure which develops chronologically as a series of case studies of work by Bourgeois from 1947 to 1997. These case studies are framed for analytical purposes by a psychoanalytical concept in each of Chapters one to six thus defining the artist’s work in relation to psychoanalysis as an archaeology of the unconscious. The structure is indebted to Freud’s formulation of psychic time which for feminist scholarship in art history has been valuable precisely because it disrupts the temporal orthodoxy of the critical discourses that had difficulty making sense of Bourgeois’s artistic propositions for decades.

Chapter three is a compelling study of the portfolio of nine engravings with text published in 1947 entitled *He Disappeared into Complete Silence*. It is the most satisfying section of the book distinguished by Nixon’s close attention to the material process of engraving, which is pivotal for her assessment of the status of the series as the beginning of Bourgeois’s reconfiguration of relations between surrealism and psychoanalysis. Bourgeois calls sculpture ‘cutting.’ The action of the burin on the surface of the metal plate in the 1947 series of engravings prefigures the artist’s work in three dimensions and signals a search for a greater ‘level of reality’ in which she could ‘express much deeper things.’ Bourgeois’s term for the intersection of the material and psychic dimensions of her work provides the title for the book: ‘fantastic reality.’ Nixon’s achievement in this chapter is to lay a solid foundation for the proposition developed in the rest of the book: that Kleinian psychoanalysis played a crucial, enabling role in Bourgeois’s project as an artist. Cutting also functions as a metaphor in Nixon’s argument. In her discussion of *He Disappeared into Complete Silence* she writes that Bourgeois begins cutting herself off from surrealism by echoing in the work’s narrative an image from André Breton’s account of a waking dream published in his 1924 *Manifesto of Surrealism*. Whereas fantasy for Breton is *surreal*, an effect of the unconscious mind arising as an image in the mind’s eye, for Bourgeois fantasy is connected to a bodily unconscious materialised as the action of physical cutting in the process of engraving.

Bourgeois’s relation to the surrealist who, she said, ‘could have been my father,’ is more ambivalent. Nixon reads plate seven of *He Disappeared into Complete Silence* as a ‘comic gloss on,’ but also a ‘tribute to’ Marcel Duchamp’s *Large Glass*, which marked his own move out of the illusionism of painting. Nixon takes her cue from Rosalind Krauss’s description of the texts in the series of prints as ‘schizo-stories, the litanies of the bachelor apparatus’ to propose that Bourgeois ‘reauthored’ the *Large Glass* in terms of aggression rather than sexuality, a proposition that has historical support. The schizoid subject had been a focus of cultural interest after World War I, when Hans Prinzhorn studied art made by psychiatric patients. Melanie Klein worked on the same subject in the late 1930s and 1940s. Nixon’s insight in this context is to observe that while surrealism in the 1920s identified with the outsider position of these individuals, and in so doing exoticised them, ‘Klein, by contrast, draws psychosis into the pattern of everyday reality.’ This is precisely Bourgeois’s crucial point of
contact with Klein’s psychoanalysis. It produces Klein, a creative thinker in her own field, and like Bourgeois a mother, as a figure of identification and productive transference for Bourgeois’s artistic project that in turn led back to her own mother who, in the artist’s own definition, ‘was a feminist.’ The argument of the chapter is consolidated in a convincing concluding reading of the 1947 series of engravings in terms of Klein’s 1930 case history of the four year old child Dick who, so inhibited by fear of his own aggression that he cannot play or speak, disappears into complete silence. In analysis with Klein the child finally manages to act out his own aggression incising little pieces of black wood from a toy coal cart with a pair of scissors, an action that recalls both the process of engraving a plate, and its inked-up state in preparation for printing. Nixon offers Klein’s case study as a way of making sense of the ‘alternation between an affectless, objectless milieu and a manic and electric one’ that characterizes He Disappeared into Complete Silence, and the choice of engraving as the medium of the work.

In Chapter four, the Personages and the untitled cut and stacked sculptures of 1950 are read in terms of relations between the psychic economy of loss and reparation that characterizes the Kleinian depressive position. Nixon links this psychoanalytical idea to the historical circumstances of Bourgeois’s wartime separation from her family in France and the simultaneous raising of her own children in New York. The idea of maternal aggression and ambivalence is introduced in an earlier chapter under the heading of fetishism, which makes fascinating use of Robert Mapplethorpe’s contact sheets for his 1982 photograph of Bourgeois with Fillette, revealing an attitude towards the object that is both castrating and protective. Here it is developed in relation to the Portrait of Jean-Louis, Bourgeois’s young son, whittled and gouged from the thin block of wood at a time, we learn, when she was angry with the child. According to Melanie Klein ‘overcoming emotional adversity of any kind entails the work of mourning.’ Nixon interprets Personages, not as ‘memorials,’ portraits of figures from Bourgeois’s past, but as the material residue of the work of mourning, which stresses that above and beyond individual, personal loss they represent the cultural work of living with the guilt of being alive after the war. By contrast, Nixon’s interpretation of the stacked and assembled sculptures of 1950 in terms of Freud’s description of mourning that unfolds bit by bit as a process of reality testing, seems overly literal. But maybe literalism – actual bits and pieces – is a formal weakness of the sculptures themselves that inevitably limits potential readings...which brings us to the death drive.

‘Surrealism split over the death drive: for Bretonian surrealists, the death drive risked shattering the symbolic itself (risked the death of art, and of the subject), while for Bataillean dissidents it plunged art to the level of the low, to the depth of subversion.’ In Chapter five of the book, ‘The Death Drive Turned Against Death,’ we enter territory familiar from Hal Foster’s study of surrealism in Compulsive Beauty, and also from the interest shown in the inscription of the informe in contemporary art by writers associated with the journal October. One of the revelations of the book is the information that in the early 1960s Louise Bourgeois considered training as a child psychologist. The original turn in
Nixon’s own take on what she sees as the ‘evocation’ of the *informe* in Bourgeois work around 1960, is to relate the schism in surrealism over the effect of the death drive to the ‘controversial discussions’ between Anna Freud and Melanie Klein over the implications of the death drive within child analysis that threatened to destroy the institution of psychoanalysis itself.

Again it is feminism that provides Nixon with an interpretive framework for Bourgeois’s *Lairs*, *Soft Landscapes* and *Portraits*. She points to the work of Juliette Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose in the 1980s and their turn away from a strategic engagement in the 1970s with Freud and Lacan’s theories of sexual subjectivity and their social implications for women, towards Klein and her emphasis on the destructive tendencies of human subjectivity and society. Nixon quotes Rose to the effect that Klein put ‘fundamental negativity…at the basis of subjectivity.’\(^{10}\) What is it like to be at the beginning of life? – Klein’s answer is unflinching: it is the stuff of nightmare. Early life is lived, she contends, in the grip of the death drive.\(^{11}\) What is it like, Bourgeois appears to ask with objects like *Portrait*, the near-formless latex wall piece of 1963, to be at the beginning of sculpture? Equally nightmarish: Nixon quotes Lucy Lippard in 1966 when she described such works as ‘mindless, near-visceral identification with form.’\(^{12}\) Thus is the beginning of subjectivity equated with the beginning of sculpture at the level of its materiality, and Nixon’s claim for Bourgeois’s sculptures in the 1960s is that they soften the boundaries ‘between the symbolic and the drives,’ opening onto the possibility of generating symbolic effects from the body inscribed at the level of process.\(^{13}\)

The artist’s 1967 piece entitled *The End of Softness* marked a ‘return to sculptural materials and techniques,’ and it heralds the theme of ‘art object as part-object’ that occupies the following two chapters of the book.\(^{14}\) Departing from an observation by Annette Michelson, Nixon demonstrates that not only in the work of Bourgeois, but through much of American art production in the 1950s and 1960s, ‘the representation of a “body-in-pieces” … runs, like an insistent thread.’\(^{15}\) These representations are responses of various kinds to the precedent set by Marcel Duchamp’s body moulds *Objet-dard* (1951) and *Feuille de vigne femelle* (*Female Fig Leaf*) cast from the breast and vagina of the figure in *Etant donnés*. This thread runs from Jasper John’s *Target with Plaster Cast*, (1955), evoking the archetypal part-object, the breast, as an object both of love and hate, through Eva Hesse’s phantasmatic breast-penis conflation in *Ringaround Arosie* (1965), to Yayoi Kusama’s compulsive accumulations and aggregations of protuberances in which the phallus proliferates to the point where, as Nixon argues, it is lost.

The most interesting, and theoretically productive section of this chapter is Nixon’s framing of Bourgeois’s *Femme couteau* with Klein’s case study of Rita in, ‘Psychological Principles of Child Analysis’ (1926), wherein a little girl ‘insisted on being tightly rolled up in the bedclothes,’ before going to sleep at night as protection against something that ‘might come through the window and bite off her butty (genital).’\(^{16}\) Nixon’s succinct commentary on Bourgeois’s ‘wrapped and enfolded’ knife woman (Lucy Lippard’s description) is worth quoting:
"Femme couteau" offers a representation of female genitalia as the object of narcissistic affection and solicitous concern. It also suggests that the very possibility of thinking about female sexuality is compromised by the absence of such representations. Freud for example, contends that for the child entering the genital stage, only one genital, ‘namely the male one, comes into account.’

This promising reading ends with an uncharacteristic, and for me refreshing ‘what if’ in this at times too seamlessly argued book, in the form of a quotation from Jane Gallop’s 1988 essay ‘Beyond the Phallus’: ‘it remains an open question whether there truly exists any adult sexuality, whether there is any masculinity that is beyond the phallic phase, that does not need to equate femininity with castration?’ At the end of Fantastic Reality this is still an open question. Melanie Klein’s emphasis on the death drive and aggression developed from the perspective of her work as a child analyst, and Nixon argues that the part-object logic of the art of Bourgeois and others in America after World War II can be aligned with a feminist politics on the basis that it has been ‘effective in eroding phallocentrism from below, or before – from a subsymbolic or presymbolic position.’ She maintains with Jaqueline Rose that a return to Klein has freed feminism from being trapped in ‘a post-Lacanian orthodoxy’ evidenced by the turn to the part object and the drives in recent feminist art practice. To which recent feminist art practitioners does Nixon refer I wonder? She herself defines the 1994 exhibition Bad Girls as ‘(post)-feminist.’ The artists associated with Bad Girls may indeed have ‘reopened the question of how psychoanalysis came to be synonymous with sexuality and the symbolic, and so alienated from theories of aggression and the death drive,’ but isn’t this to side-step the ongoing task of theorising feminine sexuality that defines the feminist project? In Femme couteau Bourgeois proves to be more of a feminist than the new bad girls, or for that matter than Mignon Nixon herself.

In the comparatively crude form of the review it is difficult to do justice to such a subtle and intelligent, elegant, scholarly and committed account of the development of the extraordinary body of Louise Bourgeois’s work at the intersection of histories of surrealism and its legacies and those of the discourses of psychoanalysis in the twentieth century. About feminism however, Nixon writes like a bystander, a detached observer of, rather than an active participant in, the psychic life of its own structures of discipleship, deference and difference. Perhaps this is because in her own discipline of art history Mignon Nixon’s ‘mother’ is not a feminist; in Bachelors (1999) Rosalind Krauss made it plain that the art made by women that she discussed in her collection of essays did not need the excuse of feminism to justify its quality and value. While Nixon draws upon the work of feminist cultural analysts in the discourses of psychoanalysis, Rose, Mitchell, Rozsika Parker and Mary Jacobus, the legacy of feminist work in art history – with the exception of Lucy Lippard, and a passing reference to Anne Wagner – is noticeably absent from the book. It is hard to read a chapter entitled ‘Discipleship: Deference and Difference’ without recalling Griselda Pollock’s analysis of the Oedipal, patriarchal structure of the modernist avant-garde as one of ‘reference, deference and difference,’
introduced in her Walter Neurath Memorial Lecture, *Avant Garde Gambits 1888-93: Gender and the Colour of Art History* (1992), and extended in *Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art’s Histories* (1999). In ‘Old Bones and Cocktail Dresses’ (2000) Pollock also considered Bourgeois’s ‘daughter’s’ struggle with Duchamp, an essay in which Nixon’s research on the reception of the artist’s work by feminists in the 1970s is acknowledged.

Considering *The She-Fox* (1985) and *Spider* (1997), Nixon brilliantly concludes *Fantastic Reality* with the proposition that these two sculptures are, in themselves, what Mieke Bal in her study *Louise Bourgeois’s Spider: the architecture of art writing*, (2001) calls ‘theoretical objects.’ Nixon suggests that with these works Bourgeois extends Klein’s work on the maternal-infantile relation as an effect of the death drive, switching the emphasis in the dyad from the psychic phantasies of the child to those of the mother. By so doing she redefines maternal ambivalence as a potentially creative, rather than a pathologically murderous position. ‘The Spider’s nest,’ Nixon writes, ‘holds the anxiety of aggression while holding it back’: it is an image of nurtured ambivalence.

Psychic struggle always shows in the work of Louise Bourgeois, sometimes in an elegant way, as in *Femme couteau*, but more often the pieces are awkward, ugly, messy and even embarrassing. Throughout the book Nixon illuminatingly includes Bourgeois’s own words about her work, like this quotation about making the *She Fox*, the aggressive material presence of which she associated with her mother:

> At that point I had my subject. I was going to express what I felt towards her … First of all I cut her head, and I slit her throat … And after weeks and weeks of work, I thought, if this is the way I saw my mother, then she did not like me. How could she possibly like me if I treat her that way? At that point something turned around. I couldn’t live if I thought she didn’t like me …

There is no doubt that *Fantastic Reality* is a major contribution to the study of the work of Louise Bourgeois, carefully tracking the ways in which it materially tests and rethinks the Oedipal assumptions of surrealism and psychoanalysis. It is, as Anne Wagner rightly remarks in her book jacket recommendation, a critical ‘tour de force.’ Nixon’s arguments are certainly subtle and elegantly wrought. In a book so concerned with psychic violence, however, her writing, unlike Bourgeois’s art making, is strikingly affectless. I am reminded of Klein’s case history of Dick, and wonder, is this in some part a symptom of Mignon Nixon’s fear of aggression towards feminism in her own field of scholarly endeavour?

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Susan Aberth’s Leonora Carrington: Surrealism, Alchemy and Art provides a much-needed resource for the continued study of one of the twentieth century’s most fascinating artists and writers. Aberth’s lavishly illustrated book is the first monograph in English dedicated to Leonora Carrington’s long and prolific career, with the exception of a 1991 exhibition catalogue (Leonora Carrington, The Mexican Years 1943-1985), which included an essay by Whitney Chadwick and an autobiographical interview with the artist. With these texts serving as the basis for Aberth’s study, Surrealism, Alchemy and Art fleshes out such earlier treatments of the artist, integrating biography with analyses of Carrington’s individual works and a thematic assessment of her career.

Aberth’s book opens with image of Carrington as a ‘beautifully savoured gourmet dish’ and as a ‘rare and singular treasure’ (7). Aberth’s point is, rightly, that Carrington’s artistic work has proven both elusive – overlooked by many art historians and critics, and considered unfathomable by others – and exquisite. Aberth’s metaphorical language indicates possibilities for reevaluating Carrington’s unorthodox relationship to traditional aesthetics. As the artist’s numerous texts and paintings devoted to the culinary arts suggest, Carrington’s career might be said to privilege the physical and intellectual pleasure of eating over the disinterested aesthetic judgment of taste. Carrington’s paintings, like her writings, resist totalizing judgments and exegeses, instead multiplying the pleasures (and frustrations) of an ongoing process of interpretation.

Aberth’s metaphors thus correspond to Carrington’s own intellectual project. Her allusions to gastronomy and treasure invoke what Aberth calls the ‘alchemical process of distillation and transmutation’ that abound in Carrington’s work (7). Alchemy, the heretical ‘black art’ of magical transformation, bears not only a material similarity to the art of cooking, with all its alembics and cauldrons, but also a similarly eccentric epistemology: a centuries-long genealogy of texts, recipes, illustrations, and hearsay that form a body of knowledge passed down against the current of religious and scientific orthodoxy. At the heart of this interest in alchemy lies the idea that Leonora Carrington’s art and writing explore not only alternative forms of beauty, but alternative forms of knowledge and understanding as well.

Aberth’s introduction promises that Carrington’s seemingly hermetic works have an internal logic of their own. Yet rather than explicate or articulate this logic, Aberth compares it to ‘the idiosyncratic language of dreams supplied by our unconscious.’ ‘The great secret to Carrington’s
art,’ she continues, ‘is that there is no key with which to decipher her work easily, because there cannot be one. It is not that certain embedded symbols have no meaning; it is that these symbols cannot and do not ‘illustrate’ ideas in the manner we are accustomed to’ (9). Aberth explains that Carrington’s paintings are, like alchemical engravings, ‘profoundly personal interpretations of complex philosophical and magical ideas whose meanings have always been permeable and shifting, encouraging multiple levels of perception’ (9).

Aberth offers a number of suggestions for what these philosophical and magical ideas might be, documenting Carrington’s ties to purism and surrealism, to Celtic mythology, to children’s literature, to feminism, and to the ethnographic study of religion, myth, and magic. The book’s biographical organisation tends, however, to reduce these ideas to influences along the path of Carrington’s life, rather than discussing their conceptual specificity as intellectual projects in which Carrington was deeply involved. Aberth does well, for instance, to move beyond the well-documented discussion of Carrington’s relationship with surrealism, and especially her involvement with Max Ernst; but her study would have benefited from discussing more concretely what it was that Carrington drew from surrealism, as well as what she contributed to it. Likewise, Aberth argues that Carrington’s relationship with Ernst was intellectual as well as romantic, but her biography dramatises rather than downplays their romantic involvement, offering little new analysis of their collaborative intellectual work. Instead, Aberth foregrounds the significance of the Spanish-Mexican painter Remedios Varo to Carrington’s life and work, contrasting the two women’s mutual, artistically productive friendship to the atmosphere of entrapment and obsession that surrounded her relationship with Ernst.

Aberth’s study traces such influences over the course of Carrington’s life, from her English childhood in the 1920s to her post-surrealist career in Mexico and London. Chapter one describes Carrington’s early years, documenting her formal upbringing, her artistic beginnings in school, and her travels to the continent, concluding with her introduction into the surrealist movement in 1936. The second chapter narrates the artist’s ‘escape’ from the haute-bourgeoisie of her childhood into the artistic circles of Amédée Ozenfant and, later, the surrealists. This new artistic lifestyle, Aberth explains, provided a means for Carrington to ‘rebel against her family’ (29), while at the same time, her upper-class training and confidence ‘enable[d] her to interact with a certain ease and lack of self-consciousness with the older male members of the Surrealist circle’ (28). Chapter three discusses the artist’s tempestuous relationship with Ernst and her mental and physical trials during the Nazi occupation of France; Aberth’s brief discussion of Carrington’s 1944 text Down Below, which recounts her escape from France and ensuing incarceration in a Spanish mental institution, is one of the book’s few treatments of Carrington’s writing. Chapter four documents Carrington’s postwar life in Mexico City, offering a useful discussion of the artist’s
close relationship with Remedios Varo. In Mexico, Aberth writes, Carrington was ‘liberated from
the constraints of her relationship with Ernst, far from the controlling machinations of her father
and Imperial Chemicals, and immersed in a new country rich with dynamic and religious hybrids’
(59). Likewise, in Mexico she was ‘fortunate to be welcomed into the existing émigré Surrealist
community living in Mexico City, and through their support and encouragement was able to
achieve a new kind of personal and creative autonomy’ (59). This autonomy becomes the
overarching theme of the book’s brief final chapter, which traces Carrington’s continued
development as an artist from the 1950s to the present.

Aberth’s study admirably strives to view Carrington through a critical lens other than that of
surrealist movement, and the book’s reproductions of a wide range of the artist’s post-1950s work
establishes it as an important resource for establishing the field of study for this important artist
and writer. Of particular interest is its inclusion of Carrington’s 1965 text ‘Jezzamathetics or
Introduction to the Wonderful Process of Painting,’ translated from the Spanish.

The tantalising inclusion of one of Carrington’s later nonfiction texts shows how much there
remains to learn about the artist’s vast body of written and visual work, as well as her contribution
to twentieth-century thought more broadly. Indeed, *Leonora Carrington: Surrealism, Alchemy and
Art* would have benefited from further attention to Carrington’s prose, as well as to the many
literary and nonfiction texts to which her artwork responds. This is especially true of writings on
alchemy. Aberth usefully documents Carrington’s interest in texts such as Kurt Seligmann’s *The
History of Magic*, Pierre Mabille’s *Mirror of the Marvelous*, and especially Robert Graves’s *The
White Goddess*, but tends to describe them as sources for Carrington’s use of alchemical and
magical symbols and themes, rather than as constituting a field of inquiry in which Carrington
participated. For instance, Aberth discusses how Graves’s *The White Goddess* (1948)
represented a ‘turning point’ in Carrington’s career when she read it in 1949, ‘spark[ing] a re-
discovery of her Celtic roots and recall[ing] the stories told to her by her maternal grandmother
Moorhead’ (79). Was Graves’s work simply a mirror, reflecting Carrington’s own childhood
exposure to myth? Or did Carrington interact conceptually with Graves’s text as well? Aberth
points suggestively toward the intertextuality of Carrington’s work, but her study would benefit
from a more thorough discussion of the discourses uniting all these thinkers. Carrington was,
after all, their peer and an important question to ask of her relations with writers like Seligmann,
Mabille, and Graves would be why so many surrealist-influenced thinkers turned their attention
after WWII from psychoanalysis to the ethnographic exploration of magic and the occult (as was
the case for André Breton in *Arcane 17*, Benjamin Péret in his anthology of Mexican folk tales,
and Jules Monnerot in *La Poésie moderne et le sacré*).
Another issue to which Aberth’s study devotes limited attention is Carrington’s politics. Aberth claims, paradoxically, that Carrington is both ‘an early and staunch feminist’ and ‘an outspoken advocate for women’s rights in Mexico’ (63), and yet is someone who ‘eschew[s] direct political involvement as always.’ Aberth mentions the artist’s ‘vociferous support of feminism in both the American and Mexican press’ (103), while championing the artist’s separation from the domain of political involvement. This paradox, which characterizes a wide range of postwar art, is worthy of discussion: what constitutes political involvement? How does Leonora Carrington understand her work as bearing a political voice? As with her treatment of Carrington’s conceptual involvement in modernist ideas, Aberth’s discussion of the artist’s politics is evocative but superficial.

It is to Aberth’s credit that Leonora Carrington: Surrealism, Alchemy and Art provides the means to consider these questions, whether explicitly or implicitly; Aberth’s book invites other scholars to take up the many issues it raises in future scholarship on Carrington’s impressive and far-reaching artistic career.

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From Baudelaire’s famous assertion that ‘the best account of a painting would be a sonnet or an elegy,’¹ to Reverdy’s description of cubism as a ‘plastic poetry,’² writers have often used a literary frame of reference to account for developments in visual art. As a result, their art criticism reveals more about their own literary concerns than it does about the paintings in question. With this in mind, Adamowicz’s study of surrealist writings on art resituates the writings of Breton, Aragon, Bataille, Leiris and others in their original literary and art-critical contexts, exploring the often polemical intertextual references ‘which mean that a text is a network of multiple texts’ (230). Studies that examine, without condemning, the ways in which writers used the genre to promote their own agendas are rare. More often, art criticism is read as a guide to the images that it describes or dismissed for its apparent lack of perspicacity.³ In counteracting this trend, Adamowicz’s book is an important contribution, not only to surrealist studies, but also to the expanding literature on word/image relations.

If all art criticism interprets visual art from a literary perspective, surrealist writing on art is particularly problematic since the poets and critics associated with the movement were suspicious of the very concept of ‘surrealist’ painting. Like their symbolist predecessors, they considered visual art inferior to literature. For Max Morise, for example, writing in the first issue of La Révolution surréaliste (April 1924), visual images offered only a ‘mediated’ reflection of the unconscious mind, unlike words, which could express thought directly.⁴ Moreover, in promoting a global aesthetic that transcended disciplinary boundaries, surrealist writers simply annexed painting to a larger sphere of surrealist activity which they defined as essentially poetic or revolutionary. Just as symbolist critics used poetry as a model for the Gesamtkunstwerk, bestowing upon it a universal quality to which painting could only aspire, the surrealists’ all-encompassing poetic vision assimilated, and therefore subordinated, the visual.

Far from abolishing distinctions between the disciplines, Adamowicz insists on the mismatch between poetic theory and pictorial practice. Noting that surrealist writers on art, from Breton to Desnos, to Aragon, consistently avoid discussing pictorial technique or materials, she argues that the literary definition of surrealism as psychic automatism that took hold following Breton’s 1924 Surrealist Manifesto fails to account for works as diverse in medium and approach as Ernst’s collages, Miró’s dream images and Masson’s automatic drawings.
However, while this observation allows painting a medium-specificity often denied by surrealist writers, it does not fully explore why painting, which Adamowicz describes in Morise’s terms as ‘a form of mediated expression’ (22), supposedly lacks writing’s untrammeled access to the psyche. Similarly, while her argument that Breton’s texts project ‘beyond the picture’ (71) makes the important point that they serve, not to explain painting, but to enhance its mystery, it also reinforces the sense that the visual is merely a springboard for a more far-reaching literary invention (as the painter transforms reality, the poet transforms painting).

More alert to the risks of over-simplification in the literary realm, Adamowicz dismantles the category of ‘surrealist writing’ as a coherent body of literature. Apart from a few key texts specifically devoted to analysing the relationship between surrealism and painting, most obviously Breton’s ‘Le Surréalisme et la peinture’ (1925-7), surrealist writing on art, she demonstrates, more often appears in the guise of a catalogue preface, public talk, correspondence, novel or poem. As a performative ‘text,’ it can even take the form of an exhibition layout or a particular juxtaposition of word and image on the pages of a journal. She therefore considers each text, not as representative of a particular genre, but as the product of a specific encounter or set of circumstances, showing in each case how its argument or analysis is determined less by its ostensible object—an artist, exhibition, or work of art—than by the underlying discursive context of contemporary aesthetic and political debates.

Whether charting the shifting priorities of individual writers, notably Breton and Aragon, or analysing recurrent or divergent themes in the critical literature relating to a single painter, such as Miró, Dalí and Picasso, her comparative case-studies effectively convey the extent to which writers, co-opting artists to their cause, mixed painting with poetry, politics or polemics. Chief among these was the ideological divide between Breton’s ‘orthodox’ position and that of the ‘dissident’ group around Bataille and Documents. Adamowicz demonstrates how this quarrel structured the differing responses of these writers and their associates to Miró and Dalí in particular, contrasting, in the case of the former, fairy-tale eroticism with fetishistic violence, and in the latter, transcendent and materialist interpretations of scatological imagery.

In both of these cases, the artists themselves contributed to the literature on their work, raising the question of how artists’ accounts fit into the self-referential network of texts by surrealist writers that Adamowicz has uncovered. Dalí, she shows, manipulated the debate by adopting, and at the same time distancing himself from, aspects of both Breton’s and...
Bataille’s opposing positions, forging his own theory of the paranoiac-critical method. With Miró, however, it is less clear how his automatist poems might differ in their method or purpose either from his own paintings or from other texts inspired by them, such as those by Leiris or Eluard. Is an image like Eluard’s ‘libellules des raisins’ (‘grape-dragonflies,’ from his poem ‘Joan Miró’) ‘essentially verbal’ (90) because it cannot be related directly to Miró’s iconography, or because it privileges specifically verbal properties of sound and rhythm?

Such details do not detract from the book’s success in mapping the themes and agendas of surrealist writings on art. Consistently sensitive to the complexities and contexts of art criticism, Adamowicz reveals how each text evades direct contact with the image it describes, particularly where matters of technique and material are concerned, connecting instead with other texts in the field. This investigation of the intertextual themes and interpersonal rivalries which structure a body of critical writing on art also makes the work a significant addition to the broader field of word and image studies.

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2 Pierre Reverdy, ‘Le cubisme, poésie plastique,’ L’art, February 1919, in Oeuvres complètes: Nord-sud, Self Defence et autres écrits sur l’art et la poésie, ed. Etienne-Alain Hubert, Paris, 1975, 142. Reverdy insists on the precedence of poetry in the development of a non-representational art: ‘Ce sont les poètes qui ont créé d’abord un art non descriptif, ensuite les peintres en créèrent un non imitatif’ (‘It was poets who first created a non-descriptive art, and then painters who made it non-imitative’).

3 One notable exception addressing the Symbolist period is James Kearns’s Symbolist Landscapes: The Place of Painting in the Poetry and Criticism of Mallarmé and his Circle, London, 1989, which analyses the tendency of Symbolist writers to ‘assimilate visual values within verbal models of meaning as part of their search for a synthesis of the arts’ (ix).

4 Max Morise, ‘Les Yeux enchantés,’ La Révolution surréaliste, no.1, April 1924, 26-7; Adamowicz, Ceci n’est pas un tableau, 13.
Surrealism and the Sacred: Power, Eros and the Occult in Modern Art,

Celia Rabinovitch has produced a bold and innovative critique of the established historiography concerning the surrealist irrational in her suggestion that the discourse had a certain semi-religious character. She firmly locates the surrealists' psychological experiments within the occult revival of the early twentieth century and this, most significantly, includes their interest in Freudian psychotherapy.

In an important chapter she discusses Bruno Bettelheim's accusation that English translators had implicated Freud's account of the human psyche within a materialist concept of human psychology that he did not intend.¹ In supporting Bettelheim's objection, Rabinovitch makes it possible to argue that certain aspects of surrealism, most especially, the sexual mysticism, were founded not on a materialistic Freudian interpretation of desire, but arose from an intuition related to that of religious belief and practice. Consequently, she argues that Freud's importance to the surrealist movement has been exaggerated and that his psycho-analytic theory has been awarded the undeserved character of a unique revelation:

In the occult revival in late nineteenth-century Vienna, Freud's ideas form one element within a broader context that includes alternative religions, para-psychology, and a distrust of conventional rationality and religion.²

The central issue for Rabinovitch is the role of sexuality in surrealist metaphor and she has produced an effective argument concerning the image of the 'daemonic goddess,' the summation of desire and terror. In this context she refers too briefly to Georges Bataille's theory of the erotic which, had she explored its implications further, could have allowed her to develop a more incisive account of the various erotic economies projected among the different surrealists, rather than regarding them as subscribing to a uniform model of desire and sexual encounter.³ (Bataille's erotic mode, one recalls, was founded on the concept of an unformed consciousness hovering between life and death: a decayed, twilight being in a mode of existence that was in the process of becoming something else.)

The least satisfactory aspect of Rabinovitch's thesis, one that flaws the argument to the point of dissolving it altogether in places, is her over-broad definition of the concept of the 'sacred.' She makes repeated forays into the history of different aspects of the irrational in the work of the surrealists in an attempt to produce a working definition of this term. She examines such notions as that of the fetish, the taboo, the daemonic, and the uncanny. Eventually she settles on the idea of an object and a space that is set apart from everyday consciousness within a frame, or an exclusionary boundary. Frames fix an object in 'imaginal space.'⁴ In an analysis
of Meret Oppenheim's altered objects, she discusses the notion of 'unspecified power' as being an essential part of archaic religious experience. She argues that: '... the pervasive sense of significance - the mysterious attraction and fear that is the numinous or the holy - is the most striking feature of surrealist art.'

At another point, she reviews some of Freud's texts, including the most relevant work for her argument, *Totem and Taboo*, in which he had provided a notorious analysis of the ritual actions that are at the origins of religion, specifically, parricide. Rabinovitch seems to ignore the discourse that has resulted from Freud's account, although this could have facilitated a more specific definition of the term 'sacred.'

Julia Kristeva has also examined the notion of 'sacredness' which she regards as a fundamentally repressive concept. She based her argument on Emile Durkheim's study of the origins of primitive religion and its use of sacrificial ritual. Kristeva identified 'the sacred' with an initiating act of sacrifice that was the foundation of the social and symbolic spheres of human life; in Freud’s interpretation that of the killing of the father by his sons. It was this act that violated the previous established social order and inaugurated its replacement. Kristeva argued that the role of the sacred was to mediate between known and unknown worlds and to make law. It was through the notion of the 'sacred,' that leaders of established religion could define and control social space and culture. This belief provided a defence for established values and it legislated what could be represented within the symbolic sphere of social and political engagement.

Etymologically the term 'sacred' comes from the term 'sacer' (sacrifice), while a priest is a 'sacerdos,' one who makes the sacrifice. In whatever way the concept of the sacred is to be regarded, whether as liberating, or as limiting, it is a term that implies a preceding sacrificial action. It is this act alone that consecrates the object, space or person. A cursory review of world religions reveals that there are few, if any, exceptions to the requirement of a primal sacrifice: whether of Isaac by Abraham, or Christ's crucifixion, or Bodhisatvas laying down their lives for other beings. In the Vedas, the Primal Man, Purusha, is the object of sacrifice and from his body the gods constitute the universe, a myth repeated in Gnostic texts where Macrocosmic Anthropos dies to become the world's substance. The same vision is echoed in Norse myth where the slaying of Baldur initiates the final days of strife and the eventual recreation of the universe. Whether it is Native American initiation rites, or those of the indigenous Australians, always it is blood, or its kin, sweat, that has to be poured out (it is hardly necessary to be reminded of Aztec ritual). The sacrifice of one human life sanctifies all life.

Breton was courageous in being willing to sacrifice his individuality in return for union with the unconscious, effectively a type of death. Anna Balakian argues for Breton's fundamental
atheism and Rabinovitch has not altered this view by her argument concerning the spiritualising (even religious) tone of surrealist metaphor. For Breton, the spiritual element existed only within the individual psyche. Surely he did not accept any notion of a transcendent otherness?

In his early work, many of Breton's visions involved imagery of massacre and blood, as in *Poisson Soluble*, but his most important reference to the theme of self-sacrifice and self-renewal appears in *Arcane 17* (1947), written during a purgatorial stay in Canada in 1944. In this familiar text, a Tarot card provides the central icon, that of the Star, a female figure pouring a libation into a stream. Her vase contains the dew of the stars, associated with menstrual blood. She is engaged in a sacrificial rite.

The work of other surrealists also commonly engages with sacrificial metaphors, Salvador Dali in particular, of course, as in his depictions of coital death, or impotence (*Narcissus*) or his direct appropriation of the crucified Christ in the *Last Supper*. Max Ernst's *Oedipus Rex* may be cited as a reference to the ancient myth of self-mutilation. As in the case of Breton, these two artists employed alchemical iconography in which human sacrifice and sexual death were the primary subjects. It should be noted that alchemy, *par excellence*, was a Tantric practice, whether in its Western, Chinese or Indian forms. It was the Tantric god Shiva who governed the Indian arts of alchemy, dance and Tantric sexual acts. (In Rabinovitch's discussion, the term is used to describe a discourse concerned with the transformation of materiality and there is no suggestion of any direct influence from Asian Tantrism.)

Rabinovitch does not refer to Tantrism, although it may well have been relevant to her argument. For, she suggests that the notion of the 'sacred' is employed as a term to inter-link the material world with the spirit. A 'sacred' object is the meeting point of these two opposite states. This issue could have been explored more precisely by taking recourse to anthropological studies of 'Tantric' practices present in all the world religions, among which Roman Catholicism is one of the main exponents in the sacrificial Mass that changes matter into God. Catholicism was a major source in the production of Surrealist metaphor and myth. Bataille's Catholicised sexual discourse fleshes out into a dark, 'left-handed' Tantrism that could be regarded as quite an authentic exposition of the ancient practices (in its own way).

Sacrifice is a Tantric act in the sense that, by this action, a common material object is remade, ritually, into an extraordinary supernatural entity. Henceforward, it exists on two levels simultaneously, both spiritual and material. Though Breton and the surrealists did not refer to the historical phenomenon itself, nevertheless, their notion of sexuality is Tantric in that it is a means whereby to re-formulate physical and psychic forces.
Rabinovitch’s account of the surrealists and their concept of the sacred remains an exceptional book for its extensive review of their encounters with the irrational. She presents an original view of the surrealist world. In rejecting materialistic Freudianism, she displays no small degree of courage. The book is one of a kind and will probably remain an authority.

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2 Rabinovitch, *Surrealism and the Sacred*, 143.

3 Rabinovitch, *Surrealism and the Sacred*, 214.

4 Rabinovitch, *Surrealism and the Sacred*, 176.


6 Rabinovitch, *Surrealism and the Sacred*, 176.


C.L.R. James has observed that 'The proletariat ... always breaks up the old organization by impulse, a leap ... The new organization, the new organism will begin with spontaneity, i.e., free creative activity, as its necessity.' In *Poetry of the Revolution*, Martin Puchner shows this to be as true for the avant-garde as it is for the working class by a study of the manifesto as 'a decision for rupture' in both of these parallel traditions. In his account of the manifesto's successive undoings and ruptures, both forms of manifesto appear as a continuity of discontinuity, where creativity and value are repeatedly constituted in relation to, but necessarily against, their earlier previous form. Almost as soon as the *Communist Manifesto* forms the genre, it begins to undergo a process of temporal, linguistic and geographical diffusion, and a drift into the realm of aesthetics as well as politics with the appearance of the avant-garde manifesto. It is then further transformed into speeches, performances, artworks and a diffuse 'manifesto-style' by the political avant-garde, the best example of which might be the famous one-line graffiti 'manifestos' found on the walls of Paris in 1968. Puchner notes that as such, 'the historicity of the avant-garde is an irony.' But as he describes it, it is a productive irony.

In noting this process of becoming as rupture and undoing, Puchner flirts rather coyly with Deleuzian terminology, for example in describing the manifesto’s successive transformations as ‘the workings of repetition and difference.’ However, he shies away from any explicit account of this history in Deleuzian terms as a process of ‘deterritorialisation’ or ‘becoming minor.’ But as we will see below, his hesitancy before these concepts as a means to understand the avant-garde, and his alternative choice of theoretical tools impacts upon his interpretation of the lineage of both the manifesto and the avant-garde.

The first section of the book deals with the genesis of the manifesto as genre by an interesting exploration of its religious origins in the millennial heretical writing of Thomas Münzter and Gerrard Winstanley. Puchner gives a revealing account of the genre’s composition as the product of the direct political problematic of ‘manifestation’ and social transcendence, moving from various forms of incendiary tract and catechism towards the canonical form of the manifesto. This section of the book also presents an excellent textual history of the *Communist Manifesto* and its initial, quite literal, deterritorialization as it became through multiple translations an international text seemingly without origin. In the section on ‘The Avant-Garde at Large,’ Puchner tracks in great detail the further deterritorialization of the manifesto by the international dadaist movement, from a central statement by one (international) group at one time and place, to a generalised style and approach as it was.
recomposed in different times and places by various groups. Puchner balances this account of the historical imperative behind the genre with close readings of the texts themselves. Besides his equally detailed discussion of the well-documented history of the surrealist manifestos, there are also interesting shorter accounts of Artaud’s ‘manifesto-theatre,’ Huidobro’s Latin American avant-gardism, and Russian left-wing futurism.

Given the explosion of theatrical avant-garde interventions and the production of political avant-garde manifestos in the 1960s, section five of the book, which deals with this period, is disappointingly shorter on history than the previous ones and does not take the opportunity to focus textually on the many avant-garde political manifestos of this period as well as upon the transformation of the role of the manifesto in this period of its deterritorialization. The reasons for this limited discussion at such a fruitful time for the avant-garde political manifesto and political theatricality are unclear. Puchner does however seem to rely heavily for source material on the limited selection in Peter Stansill and David Zane Mairowitz’s collection *BAMN: (By Any Means Necessary): Outlaw Manifestos and Ephemera 1965-70.*

Puchner does mention a number of groups in passing such as the San Francisco Diggers, the Yippies and the Provos, but does not explore their use of the manifesto, even though the Provos produced an interesting declaration entitled ‘What is the Provotariat,’ which relied on Marx whilst breaking with him in announcing the rise of the new class of ‘the provotariat.’ Other avant-garde political groups in this period also produced manifestos worthy of attention. The proclamations of King Mob in the UK, whose similar taking on of the position of a lumpen ‘other’ class took the form for them of a rhetorically overblown dada-influenced return to the form of the catechism (which, as Puchner describes in his first section, was a precursor to the manifesto), asserting that ‘we are everything they say we are and we are proud of it. We are obscene lawless hideous dangerous dirty violent and young.’ Puchner also mentions the group Black Mask in one section, and *Up Against the Wall Motherfucker* in another. But he does not note that this was the same group, and that the name change was to denote an engagement with the very problem of the manifesto. The new group represented a move away from the textuality of theory and critique and towards an increased focus on directly manifesting their demands in theatrical and provocative direct action. Rather than the magazine series *Black Mask,* *Up Against the Wall Motherfucker* turned to militant direct action and only produced articles and pamphlets which facilitated their move ‘Into the Streets’ (as the title of one of these pamphlets declaimed), by, for example, producing a guide to the organisation of an affinity group (a now ubiquitous term in activist circles which this avant-garde group coined). Kommune 1 in Germany took an alternative route, producing a hoax manifesto-pamphlet after a fire occurred in a Berlin department store, entitled ‘When Will the Berlin Department Stores Burn?’, which made it appear that the fire had in fact been started by anti-Vietnam protestors. This group introduced into the political realm the deterritorialization of the manifesto through irony and paradox, which Puchner notes that the
dadaists had initiated in the avant-garde manifesto. In similar terms the Metropolitan Indians, an important group within Italy's Autonomia movement, made playful theatricality an integral part of their slightly later 1977 manifesto, which in the very moment of fixing their demands and identity in a text, refused seriousness, recuperation and fixity by adopting the voice of the ‘Red Indians’ from the Western cinema matinees of these activists’ childhoods, against the ‘big chief paleface’ members of the government. Their manifesto refused to be territorialized, calling for serious changes as well as for ‘historical and moral reevaluation of the dinosaur Archeopterix, unfairly constructed as an ogre.’

The second half of Puchner's section on the 1960s is devoted to the Situationist International. Though noting that the SI never produced a manifesto, he argues that:

The situationists had been rewriting the Manifesto all along through an avalanche of texts ranging from short and provisional manifestos to longer treatises such as Society of the Spectacle, whose 221 numbered paragraphs combined the equally numbered bullets of avant-garde manifestos with the historical sweep and theoretical aspirations of the Manifesto.

Though rightly emphasising the SI's reliance on style by focusing on their use of détournement and their occasional writing on language, Puchner focuses on The Society of the Spectacle as the SI's emblematic text. It has certainly become their most canonical text, at least in the academy. However, the SI produced other texts that are much closer to the form of the manifesto. The Society of the Spectacle is mostly concerned with the task of critique, extending the arguments of Marx’s critique of the commodity-form and Lukács’ critique of reification into a new historical context. It was in these terms that Guy Debord described it as modelled on Capital rather than on the Manifesto. By contrast, Raoul Vaneigem's less studied The Revolution of Everyday Life, often seen as a companion text to The Society of the Spectacle, is the text in which the SI turn to the manifesto’s positive task of revolutionary transcendence, and attempt to manifest and encourage an alternative and an opposition to the society they have critiqued. Alternatively, the Decline and Fall of the Spectacle Commodity Economy was perhaps at the time the most widely distributed and translated Situationist text, and so took the form of a defining statement as it attempted to see manifest in the Watts riots a portentous sign of a spectre of a new kind of revolution. In a discussion of manifestos, these texts would have perhaps provided a more productive focus than Debord’s famous critique.

Puchner's final chapter discusses the New York journal TDR, and its attempts to produce special 'manifesto issue' editions. Puchner also discusses Hardt and Negri's Empire as a contemporary manifesto. The account of TDR's development and its problematic relation to the manifesto is detailed and valuable, but in contrast to the previous chapters, there is a turn
here to institutionalised manifestos in the world of academic publishing. The previous chapters dealt with an independent, antagonistic avant-garde, which was of course by nature outside of existing institutions, at least to begin with. Puchner notes that ‘the late 1990s witnessed a resurgence of the manifesto in the debate about globalisation’, but makes no reference to this beyond Empire. Examples of such contemporary manifestos which are equally a meeting point of the political and the aesthetic are readily available: from the highly poetised manifesto-proclamations of the Mexican Zapatistas, where their textual productions, distributed via the internet, became an essential and even primary part of their material struggle, and a founding point in the manifestation of the global justice movement; to Hakim Bey’s The Temporary Autonomous Zone, a text emerging from an avant-garde literary scene which also became in the mid 1990s perhaps the single most influential text for the emergent global justice movement; to even The Hacker Manifesto, a short manifesto which marks a return to the catechist form (it is also known by its first title, ‘The Conscience of a Hacker’) and was an important and influential text for the ‘electronic avant-garde,’ written by Lloyd Blakenship after his arrest and published in the hacker e-zine Phrack in 1986.

Puchner also presents an interesting theoretical, as well as a historical, account of the manifesto. The manifesto is understood as a subjective moment of striving for objective historical verification:

> How can empty words be turned into actions? To answer this question requires a particular form of Marxian speech act theory, one revolving around these concepts: (1) authority and its revolutionary challenge, (2) performative and theatrical speech acts, and (3) the context and position from which manifestos speak. The theorists who provide models for addressing these concepts are J.L. Austin, Pierre Bourdieu, Kenneth Burke, and Louis Althusser.

Puchner focuses on Austin, looking at the manifesto as a speech act that lacks authority (in the sense of both governmental power and of objective truth or hegemonic social acceptance - in the manifesto these two senses are often aligned). However, the manifesto seeks authority from its subjective position by means of its theatricality, its performativity. He summarises and exemplifies the problem as follows: ‘Now, after I finish this last sentence, there will be no more sentences; we will stop talking and writing and reading, and we will act, as soon as I have said this last sentence: now!’

Having traced the origins of the term avant-garde to the Saint Simonists, in their assumption of a forward position in a supposed linear history, it would have been interesting to note the role of the manifesto as a tool of the vanguard or the avant-garde in correlation with Puchner’s account of the manifesto’s deterritorialization. Those groups who considered themselves avant-gardes or vanguards necessarily saw the manifesto as an ideological tool.
The task was to bring others to their forward-looking views, and to identify others who shared their position. This brings about the problem that Puchner describes of a performative subjective aspiration for authority and leadership by a text that, as yet, has none. The manifesto finds itself rather impotently shouting 'we own the future!' However, the manifesto's deterritorialization, its slide into misuse, irony and playfulness in the 1960s, comes alongside its use by extra-parliamentary groups who do not aim to hold and wield power, but who rather aim to deconstruct the existing power of capital and the state. What is worth noting about these movements in relation to Puchner's account of the development of the manifesto is that their reference point is often no longer Marx, or even surrealism, but dada. The lack of engagement with examples of manifestos from the radical movements of the 1960s and 1970s such as those mentioned above becomes at this point a weakness for the book theoretically. The meaning of the manifesto, and especially its theatricality, changes in this period. As such, ideological conversion becomes less important, and the manifesto can be seen to serve as a means of enunciation for a subject who is already present and active, not as a means of bringing passive subjects into action. The manifesto no longer operates on the terrain of achieving power, but becomes a game with power, of making playful demands, of asserting real demands whilst avoiding recuperation by their apparent or partial fulfilment. In terms of the more or less Deleuzian trajectory which Puchner identifies but hesitates before, this is of course to move away from the 'plane of transcendence'; that is, the dialectical problem of moving from critique to action which Puchner discusses in relation to Marx's eleventh thesis on Feuerbach, to the 'plane of consistency'; a position of immanence where revolutionary subjects are not waiting to be brought into being, but are already present, active and autonomous.

We might note that the contemporary inheritance of the political avant-garde, which is arguably most present in the global justice movement in groups such as Crimethinc or especially Reclaim the Streets, whose performative action and adoption of the rhetoric of the manifesto is their direct inheritance, often turns back to the proto-manifesto (and pre-dialectical) traditions of the millennial heretics in which Puchner locates the origins of the Communist Manifesto. The back cover of the recent book of theoretical reflections on the resistance to the 2005 G8 summit, Shut Them Down!, carries, alongside its radical Deleuzian and autonomist reflections, a picture on its back cover of a banner held aloft at the protests which carries the words of the Digger Gerrard Winstanley: 'Words and writing were all nothing and must die, for action is the life of all and if thou dost not act, thou dost nothing.' The difference between this and Puchner's example of the problem of the relation between speech and action above is an ontological one. For these inheritors of the radical political avant-garde of the 1960s, speech does not come before action or inaugurate it, but accompanies it as reflection, or, in the case of Shut Them Down! and the other 'Reflections on...' texts which became a popular approach following Reclaim the Streets’ events, embodies a form of knowledge produced by, within, and after the event.
Those theorists who have attempted to understand this new movement, which has its roots as much, if not more, in the avant-garde than in Marxism, might provide us with an alternative means to understand the manifesto. In Puchner’s examples of Austin’s theory, speech is only actually productive and performative if it is backed by the government: for example, in marriage vows. The subjective noises of the manifesto are, by contrast, absurd and impotent. Austin’s theory is pan-historical, but for a historical account of the contemporary relation of speech to action, we might turn for example to Paulo Virno’s account of the virtuoso’s performative ‘immaterial labour’ as productive, in A Grammar of the Multitude:

Thirty years ago, in many factories there were signs posted that commanded: ‘Silence, men at work!’ Whoever was at work kept quiet. One began ‘chatting’ only upon leaving the factory or the office. The principle breakthrough in post-Fordism is that it has placed language into the workplace. Today, in certain workshops, one could well put up signs mirroring those of the past, but declaring: ‘Men at work here. Talk!’

Here speech is (under certain historical conditions) productive of surplus value for capital, but may also be marshalled against it as a form of social production that is not powerless and utopian, but constitutive of the multitude’s political refusal of capital. The production of a manifesto is, of course, one form of production that could be bound up with such constitution. As such, Virno notes a connection, rather than a disjunction, between performativity and the constitution of power from below, in essays such as ‘Virtuosity and Revolution.’

Puchner does however, recognise this theoretical problem as a possibility, and not as an impasse. His Marxian speech act may be an impossible demand, but it is nonetheless an imperative one. Puchner returns, at the book’s close, to the difficult position of the determined subject who in turn determines history. The book successfully shows the manifesto as a cultural product of this ‘balancing act’: a material reality of which we must be theoretically and historically aware. In his terms, we must ‘inhabit this paradox,’ as the manifesto itself does, for the future to be thought of as open.

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2 Puchner, Poetry of the Revolution, 22.
3 Puchner, Poetry of the Revolution, 212.

6 See Rosemont, Franklin and Charles Radcliffe (eds), *Dancin’ in the Streets: Anarchists, IWWs, Surrealists, Situationists and Provos in the 1960s as Recorded in the Pages of Rebel Worker and Heatwave*, Chicago 2005.


22 Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 266.


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Special issue edited by Ken Friedman and Owen Smith, ‘Part 1: Fluxus and Legacy’

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Two special issues of the journal Visible Language, guest edited by Ken Friedman and Owen Smith, explore some of the old and new polemics concerning Fluxus, an international grouping of artists who came together in the early 1960s, but still remains marginal to most accounts of contemporary art from the 1960s to today. In the context of an increasing, if delayed, interest in Fluxus, these publications provide a most welcome starting point for an updated appraisal of this elusive movement. Broadly speaking, the first of these issues – which I will refer to as ‘Part I’ – focuses on Fluxus scholarship, the second – ‘Part 2’ – addresses the legacies of Fluxus in contemporary practices today; the two, as we will see, are intricately linked.

Fluxus Historiography

To some extent, the recurring debates surrounding Fluxus echo those encountered in studies of dada and surrealism. The main issue concerns the definition of Fluxus itself: while some see it as a movement, which ended with the death of its impresario George Maciunas in 1978, others conceive Fluxus, like dada and surrealism before it, as an ongoing ‘way of doing things,’ or even more generally a ‘way of life and death’ (Dick Higgins, quoted in Part 1, 214). The ensuing disagreements between historians and partisans of a ‘way of life’ will be familiar to scholars of dada and surrealism. That many Fluxus artists are alive and writing their own accounts and definitions only serves as a reminder that once upon a time, dada and surrealist artists also tried to shape the reception of their work through exhibitions, anthologies and retrospective accounts. As soon as an artistic tendency is conceived as a ‘way of life’ as much as the rationale for the grouping of various artists, personal anecdotes and testimonies from the artists and their friends become as important as their actual production. It is perhaps less surprising in this context that Hannah Higgins, daughter of Fluxus artists Alison Knowles and Dick Higgins, has chosen to gather the personal recollections of other ‘Flux-kids’ as her contribution to Part 1. Hannah Higgins’s central role in the new wave of scholarship on Fluxus alerts us to the multi-layered nature of these retrospective accounts: like many Fluxus artists, she was not only personally involved in the group’s collective projects, but, as an academic, she also adopts a scholarly approach to it. Indeed, while Fluxus artists and friends encourage critical studies, many of them understandably retain their claims to a first-hand engagement with Fluxus, and researchers can only ignore them at their own scholarly peril. Perhaps more than dada and surrealist artists before them, Fluxus artists and friends have played an important role in the critical reception of their work,
whether managing the resources and information required to study Fluxus, or sanctioning the literature by new generations of scholars.

Of course, things would generally be easier if Fluxus artists themselves agreed on the historical facts and features of this ‘way of doing things.’ It has been suggested that there are as many definitions of Fluxus as there were Fluxus artists, but the very number and identity of Fluxus artists is itself a controversial topic. Very broadly, there are two rival groups: the one, led by Jon Hendricks, that believes that Fluxus was defined by George Maciunas’s activities, and the other, led by Ken Friedman, that does not. For the former, Fluxus artists are those who, at some point, had direct contact with Maciunas (whose prolific correspondence thus serves as a kind of biblical reference point). Maciunas, it turns out, liaised with dozens of artists working across the world over a period of twenty years, and if one follows Friedman’s more inclusive definition of Fluxus as an ongoing project exceeding the limits of Maciunas’s remit, then the network expands even more frighteningly. In both cases, the art historian will be likely to experience a brief moment of scholarly panic as she realises that the very qualities of openness and flux that make Fluxus so appealing present considerable methodological problems. At this moment, it will be become clear that studying Fluxus will inevitably involve developing new interpretative tools. Owen Smith’s discussion of the pedagogy of Fluxus and Ken Friedman’s essay on the historiography of Fluxus in Part 1 both address some of these challenges. Significantly, both draw on the concept of experience, which has also been developed by Hannah Higgins in her book on Fluxus. The experiential learning described by Smith certainly echoes current trends in teaching at British universities (I personally was very happy to find out that the Fluxus concerts that I had been organising with my students were wholeheartedly encouraged by my ‘Teaching and Learning’ course tutor at the University of Manchester). Friedman’s comparison between Fluxus historiography and New Historicism seems equally relevant today. The ‘continual use of anecdote,’ which according to Stephen Greenblatt and Catherine Gallagher (cited by Friedman, Part 1, 315) constitutes one of the features of New Historicism, has recently featured in studies that have sought to redefine the methods of art history itself. Both Amelia Jones’s study of New York dada and Gavin Butt’s analysis of ‘queer disclosures in the New York art world’ of the 1950s have suggested new ways of countering ‘rationalising kinds of art history,’ which may indeed turn out to be relevant for studies of Fluxus. Most importantly, Jones and Butt have sought to situate the very notion of experience in a historical context. Similarly, there is a clear need to reconcile such contextualising approaches with the definition of Fluxus as a ‘way of life’ resisting periodisation.

What Hannah Higgins’s Fluxkids’ testimonies demonstrate is precisely the fragmentary, subjective, partial nature of experience. The role of individual particularities lay at the heart of crucial debates among Fluxus artists themselves. ‘I notice with disappointment your GROWING MEGALOMANIA,’ complained Maciunas in a 1963 letter to Ben Vautier. ‘Curb & eliminate your ego entirely,’ he advised, ‘(if you can) don’t sign anything – don’t attribute anything to yourself – depersonalise yourself! That’s in true Fluxus collective spirit.’ It is this very issue that Ina Blom analyses in depth in her study of Ben Vautier’s avowedly megalomaniac work (in Part 1). As she rightly points out, Ben’s obsessive
dramatisation of the impossibility of originality is the most visible symptom of Fluxus’s anxieties about its avant-garde status and appropriation of the everyday as art. If Fluxus historiography, according to Friedman, should privilege ‘individualising approaches’ rather than ‘generalising schemas’ (Part 1, 316), then Fluxus’s ambivalence regarding the role of the individual artist as original creator certainly needs to be addressed. Perhaps paradoxically, this may only be fully explored by following Blom’s monographic focus. Julia Robinson’s study of George Brecht confirms that studies of single artists can contribute to our broader understanding of Fluxus. Studying Fluxus as a whole involves walking a tightrope between the singular and the general, between individual works and collective ideals. Friedman’s claim that ‘those who write on Fluxus must address the full scope of Fluxus and the subtle realities that made it what it is’ (Part 2, 112) is a tall order indeed: Fluxus scholars according to him must consult all available archives and published writings by Fluxus artists even before they can figure out what Fluxus is, let alone provide new insights in the movement or place it within a historical context. This reminds me of an animated conversation about the ‘accomplished woman’ in Jane Austen’s Pride and Prejudice. According to Mr. Darcy, the truly accomplished woman ‘must have a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and the modern languages’ as well as possessing ‘a certain something in her air and manner of walking, the tone of her voice, her address and expressions.’ The Fluxus scholar, it seems, must also have a thorough knowledge of art and music (not to mention ‘film, design, urban planning’ as Friedman points out, 112), and speak a great number of modern languages in order to be able to engage with the cultural specificities of its individual members scattered across the world. Moreover, she must be ready to travel around Europe and North America to research different archives, while retaining ‘a certain something’ that would allow her to engage with the personal experiences of each individual Fluxus artist and reflect about her own experiences in the process. Consequently, it would be tempting to exclaim, like Elizabeth Bennett: ‘I am no longer surprised at your knowing only six accomplished women [or Fluxus scholars]. I rather wonder now at your knowing any.’ The irony, of course, is that Fluxus itself rejected all traditional signs of talent or ‘accomplishment’ in its bid to convince viewers that they too could be artists (Maciunas went so far as to posit the disappearance of artists as the ultimate goal of Fluxus.)

Fluxus Legacies
Following Thierry de Duve’s definition of Duchamp as ‘definitively unfinished,’ it is thus tempting to describe the study of Fluxus as ‘definitively incomplete.’ Like Duchamp, Fluxus poses inherent challenges to art historians; and, like Duchamp, its very ‘unfinished’ nature makes it a fertile ground for numerous legacies. Few contemporary artists, however, have acknowledged an influence of Fluxus, and Part 2, which is dedicated to Fluxus legacies, is one of the first attempts to trace such lineages directly. The very methods developed for this purpose already raise significant problems. To start with, the utility of collecting testimonies by contemporary artists about their interest in Fluxus is undermined by the fact that their works are little known, and readers would require more than a few illustrations to be able to grasp the nature of their relation to Fluxus. Conversely, in Lisa Moren’s compendium of Fluxus works and contemporary practices (Part 2, 28-45), the narrative of influence is lost as the works are detached from their context and no information is provided about the contemporary artists
referred to. Here again, the question of Fluxus’s specificities emerges as the broader issue running through the very definition of Fluxus legacies. For example, one of the premises of Celia Pearce’s essay about video-game-based art (in Part 2) is that these contemporary practices share with Fluxus an interest in play. This may indeed be the case, but does this justify a claim that they constitute a legacy of Fluxus? After all, Fluxus does not hold the monopoly over themes of games and play.

Exhibitions that have brought together Fluxus works and contemporary practices are plagued by similar problems. Authors in the catalogue for the ambitious exhibition 40 Jahre: Fluxus und die Folgen in Wiesbaden in 2002, seem unable to pin down what exactly is Fluxus about the contemporary works included in the show. The use of found objects and readymades, or an interest in the ‘public space’ to which they refer can be found in many twentieth-century practices, from dada and surrealism to conceptual art. Even more ambitiously, Lisa Moren’s juxtapositions of verbal instructions rely on thematic links between Fluxus and contemporary works, which suggest that references to anything from ice and food to pianos and dreams can in themselves be aligned with a Fluxus tradition. This not only conjures a comical image of a successful colonisation by Fluxus of the entire world of everyday objects and activities; it risks obscuring some very crucial distinctions among the practices gathered together. Mathew Barney’s instruction to fill a grand piano with concrete may at first sight bear a resemblance with Philip Corner’s Piano Activities, which famously ended in the destruction of the instrument at one of the very first Fluxus concerts in 1962 (Part 2, 37). That Barney actually specifies that the piano should be made of ‘mother-of-pearl, Honduras mahogany, lacewood, walnut, burl, Chilean laurel maqutal and sterling silver,’ however, surely places this work in a whole other aesthetic field. It will take more than a juxtaposition to convince me that Barney’s precious-looking fetishes have anything in common with Fluxus’s celebration of the everyday.

Even Bertrand Clavez’s sophisticated analysis of the Fluxus legacies in contemporary art (in Part 1) is vulnerable to such criticism. Clavez’s argument, that contemporary artists are in fact all influenced by Fluxus without actually realising it, must be praised for its ingenuity. Fluxus, according to him, can be posited as the model for contemporary practices because it anticipated the global flows of capitalism and exchange. While I agree with Clavez that Nicolas Bourriaud should have acknowledged the importance of Fluxus in his 1998 book on Relational Aesthetics to a much greater extent, I am wary of tracing back contemporary artists’ preoccupations with production and distribution systematically to Fluxus. The model of the ‘business firm,’ for example, was explored in Andy Warhol’s factory as well as in the small publishing enterprises started by Fluxus artists. Only once the specificities of each have been fully understood will it be possible to evaluate their impact on contemporary practices.

Once again, then, we find ourselves invited to define Fluxus and situate it further in its historical context. This is probably the most fruitful lesson to be gained from comparisons between Fluxus and other more recent practices. A striking point of interest to emerge from both Fluxus und die Folgen and Moren’s compilation of scores is the relation between Fluxus and conceptual art. While the rather surprising inclusion, in the former, of works by conceptual artists such as Michael Craig-Martin, Terry
Fox and Cildo Meireles seems to suggest affinities between Fluxus and other practices evolving in the late 1960s and early 1970s, conceptual art often appears to be the missing link in the juxtapositions made by Moren between Fluxus scores and recent works. Andy Goldsworthy may share with Bengt af Klintberg an interest in ice as an artistic material (Part 2, 40), but it is difficult to imagine that the Fluxus artist could be more influential for Goldsworthy than Land artists such as Richard Long. Performances involving the activity of washing the floor by Janine Antoni or Lyne Lapointe & Martha Fleming certainly evoke Ben Vautier’s Audience Piece no.4, which invites performers to ‘clean the theatre very thoroughly’ once the audience is seated (Part 2, 34), but Mierle Laderman Ukeles’s feminist explorations of domestic work seems to be a more obvious point of comparison for contemporary women artists. What these questions demonstrate, then, is the need for further investigations concerning the relation between Fluxus and conceptual art. Fluxus’s relation to feminism also often emerges as an unspoken question. Ben Patterson’s ‘lick piece’ (Part 2, 31) has always sounded embarrassingly old-fashioned to me in its invitation to ‘cover a shapely female with whipped cream,’ but perhaps its juxtaposition with Janine Antoni’s instructions for *Lick* (*Lick a chocolate bust of yourself*) could complicate misogynistic/feminist polarities? It is precisely because they are unexpected, and at times downright far-fetched, that Moren’s juxtapositions can bring these issues to the fore.

There is, of course, an easier way to trace Fluxus legacies in contemporary art: to look for direct references to Fluxus by contemporary artists. Whether in their statements or in their works, artists today seem to reflect the problematic mediation of Fluxus through its museologisation. ‘When I saw all the Fluxus objects in vitrines, I was terribly sad,’ recalls Gabriel Orozco. ‘They had become relics of past life.’ Rirkrit Tiravanija, who was included in *Fluxus und die Folgen* as well as the exhibition *FluxAttitudes* ten years earlier, complained for his part that Fluxus had been ‘completely contained and completely preserved,’ a trend which ‘undermines everything they were undermining.’ Reflecting a generalised shift in contemporary practice, Tiravanija and Orozco both seem to conclude that working with museums directly is the only way to ‘undermine the situation before it undermines you.’ It is certainly worth asking whether these two international artists’ pragmatic dialogue with the museum is reconcilable with the other features that their work shares with Fluxus practices.

A more positive engagement with the museologisation of Fluxus was quite literally enacted by Christian Marclay, who was also included in *Fluxus und die Folgen*. In a 2004 work entitled *Shake Rattle and Roll (fluxmix)*, sixteen video monitors placed in a circle each show Marclay handling a succession of Fluxus objects from the collection of Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. Viewers are immediately made aware that the sounds emanating from each operation are what constitute the main focus of the installation, as the shapes and textures of each object produce a wide range of noises, often unrelated to the object’s primary function. By turning Fluxus objects into unexpected musical instruments, Marclay wittily brings the archived ‘relics’ to life by reminding us that Fluxus’s pioneering appeal to spectator participation is grounded in its conception of artworks as music to be performed. Marclay is not, however, reproducing past concerts, but appropriating Fluxus for his own purposes. If
Fluxus, like dada or surrealism before it, operates like a virus that can take different forms in different places at different times, then Marclay certainly seems to have voluntarily chosen to be infected. Other artists may have been infected without knowing it, and, like scientists, we need to understand the virus itself in order to develop new techniques to detect its multifarious symptoms. In a true laboratory spirit, Friedman and Smith have started an investigation which needs to be carried out by other researchers.

If you experience signs of mirth or puzzlement when exposed to certain forms of contemporary art, please be cautious and contact a Fluxus doctor immediately.

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