Indirect Action: Politics and the Subversion of Identity in Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore’s Resistance to the Occupation of Jersey

Lizzie Thynne

Abstract

This article explores how Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore translated the strategies of their artistic practice and pre-war involvement with the Surrealists and revolutionary politics into an ingenious counter-propaganda campaign against the German Occupation. Unlike some of their contemporaries such as Tristan Tzara and Louis Aragon who embraced Communist orthodoxy, the women refused to relinquish the radical relativism of their approach to gender, meaning and identity in resisting totalitarianism. Their campaign built on Cahun’s theorization of the concept of ‘indirect action’ in her 1934 essay, Place your Bets (Les paris sont ouvert), which defended surrealism in opposition to both the instrumentalization of art and myths of transcendence. An examination of Cahun’s post-war letters and the extant leaflets the women distributed in Jersey reveal how they appropriated and inverted Nazi discourse to promote defeatism through carnivalesque montage, black humour and the ludic voice of their adopted persona, the ‘Soldier without a Name.’

Former dadaist and surrealist and close collaborator of André Breton, Tristan Tzara thus dismisses the idea that surrealism had any value in opposing Nazi domination. Like Claude Cahun, Tzara, one of the members of the original surrealist group, stayed in Occupied Europe and was active in the Resistance. Unlike Cahun, however, Tzara broke with surrealism in March 1935 and retained his allegiance to the French Communist Party (PCF). Tzara’s dismissal of surrealism here is symptomatic of the long-standing tensions between Communist orthodoxy and surrealist positions, despite the desire of leading surrealists to link themselves with the party they saw as agent of the social transformation.

Many writers have charted the attempted rapprochements between the PCF and the surrealist group in the 1920s and early 1930s. Following the definitive split between the surrealists and the PCF in August 1935, Cahun (Lucy Schwob) and her partner, Marcel Moore (Suzanne Malherbe) were among those who continued to work with Breton and Georges Bataille in Contre-Attaque, the short-lived group dedicated to opposing the slide to war and to using weapons of fascism such as ‘emotional exaltation’ (‘exaltation affective’) to serve the interests of revolution. In 1940, Jersey, where the women had made their home, was occupied. The tactics they adopted to resist Nazi rule drew on the lessons they had learnt from their own previous creative practice in words and images, which had evolved both independently and alongside surrealism. Cahun herself described her resistance as ‘the
logical consequence of my activity as a writer during the Popular Front period’ ('la suite logique de mon activité d’écrivain à l’époque du Front Populaire’) and more specifically as ‘a militant surrealist activity which we had wanted at the time of Contre-Attaque’ (‘une activité surréaliste militante comme nous avons voulu en avoir lors de Contre-Attaque’).  

Following François Leperlier’s invaluable excavation of Cahun’s life, Claire Follain and Kristine von Oehsen have both explored aspects of the two women’s ingenious campaign as ‘The Soldier without a Name’ against the Occupation of Jersey. What has not been examined in detail are the ways in which this campaign builds on not only Cahun’s previous thinking on how writing engages with politics but also on her longstanding practice, in collaboration with Moore, of ‘imagining I am something different’ (‘imaginer que je suis autre’). She continually reinvented herself through a remarkable series of personae in her photographs and writing from her teens to her death, aged sixty, in 1954. Often captioned as self-portraits these photographs are now considered to have been the product of Cahun and Moore’s relationship. Together Cahun and Moore developed a strategy which combined their artistic practice with the political principles they had held throughout the 1930s. In pursuing these principles they had allied themselves with the surrealists in their arguments against fascism and against Stalinism and capitalist imperialism.

Une crise de conscience

Surrealist thought emphasized the importance of a transformation in consciousness as the key to human liberation and was fundamentally in tension with a narrowly materialist focus on ownership of the means of production and the assumption that the proletariat was the
necessary source of all ideological and economic revolution. The major influence of the work of Sigmund Freud and the centrality of the concepts of the unconscious and fantasy to surrealist practice were at odds with the tendency within Marxist thought to see such concerns as ‘bourgeois’ deviations. The surrealists were, in many ways, ahead of their time in recognizing the importance of the psychic dimensions of individuals’ investments in social systems. Breton was adamant that any social revolution must be accompanied by a ‘revolution of the mind’: ‘Surrealism tends basically to provoke from a moral and intellectual point of view, a crise de conscience of a most general and serious nature and the achievement or non-achievement of that result can alone determine its historical success or failure.’

After the initial phase of the movement where the group seemed oblivious to political events (such as Mussolini’s march on Rome, October 1922, or Hitler’s putsch in Munich, November 1923), it became increasingly clear that the surrealists should interact with what then seemed to be the major force for social change, the Communist Party. But despite their overtures, the surrealists were continually found to be lacking in their adherence to basic materialist tenets. ‘L’Affaire Aragon’ was a key moment in the turbulent struggle on the left over the relationship between politics and art. Turning his back on previous writings, which threw up ambivalent and complex notions of the real, Louis Aragon began to write in the mode approved by the Party. His poem Red Front (Front Rouge) was a purely propagandistic celebration of the USSR and the Russian Revolution and led to him being threatened with prosecution in France. More significant though, for Breton and his former allies, was Aragon’s adoption of the party line in denying the revolutionary potential of an art that was not subordinate to an immediate political ‘message.’

**Indirect action**

It was at this critical point in the struggle over the nature of revolutionary poetry that Cahun and Moore entered the fray and became officially active in fighting the rise of fascism. In 1932 they joined the Association of Revolutionary Writers and Artists (Association des Écrivains et Artistes Révolutionnaires, AEAR), the Party-affiliated literary organization which the surrealists had succeeded in entering after overcoming their doubts as to their ideological suitability. Looking back at this period after the war, Cahun claimed to have allied herself with the left because they seemed the only ones who could effectively oppose ‘le racisme hitlérien’ and because their support for liberty of expression would produce ‘the victory of moral freedom and human rights which have been suppressed by primitive superstitions for centuries, and which were important for me personally.’ The implication is that she saw communism as leading to the sexual freedom which was important to her as a lesbian, a belief which was betrayed by the consolidation of authoritarianism in the Soviet Union.

In the early 1930s, the hope remained that radical forces might prevail and that progressive art might still contribute to a genuine revolution. This is the spirit in which Cahun
undertook her passionate, sophisticated analysis of the relation between politics and poetry, *Place Your Bets*, published in 1934, which brilliantly critiques the assumptions of a crudely propagandistic art, as advocated by Aragon, and defends the practice of the avant-garde. In particular, it anticipates many subsequent Marxist debates on the nature of artistic production and reception in its complex understanding of the ways in which the meaning of a text is beyond the conscious awareness of either the author or the reader. Meaning cannot be fixed permanently but is the product of an interaction between reader, text and context.

*Place Your Bets* was originally written as part of a report for the literary section of the AEAR in February 1933. The notes and the second part of the essay, following in the wake of ‘L’Affaire Aragon,’ take the opportunity to highlight the weaknesses and contradictions of his writing and opinions, and were added a year later. Cahun draws on the Freudian concepts of the latent and the manifest to explore how the ‘secret’ of a poem and thus its potential impact may not be evident from its surface content, however apparently ‘revolutionary.’ She gives as an example *La Marseillaise*, which ‘could become counter-revolutionary when the situation that inspired it changes,’ i.e. presumably when it is sung by nationalists celebrating French ascendancy.14 Poetry cannot fulfil the role of propaganda, she argues – the two are fundamentally distinct:

> This is why I think communist propaganda should be consigned to the *directed thought* of consciously political writers, that is journalists … Whilst poets act in their own way on men’s sensibilities. Their attacks are more cunning, but their most indirect blows are sometimes mortal.15
In *Place Your Bets* Cahun stresses the unconscious elements of literary production and highlights the impossibility of guaranteeing the ideological conformity of an entire work of art and of controlling this through conscious intention. Importantly, the example she gives to illustrate this point is one taken from photography:

> a man thought he had photographed the hair of the woman he loved, strewn with bits of straw as she was sleeping in a field. When the photograph was developed a thousand arms, shining fists and weapons appeared, and he saw that it was a riot.16

The image evokes one of Cahun’s own mises-en-scène of objects such as those made for *Cœur de pic*.17 One of these photographs shows a branch growing out of a pile of feathers, whose ‘leaves’ on closer inspection turn out to be pen nibs (Fig. 3). The juxtaposition of apparently diverse moments/objects – the woman’s hair mixed with pieces of straw and the waving arms and fists of a riot – which are nonetheless graphically similar, also recalls the editing of Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí’s *Un chien andalou* (1929). Similarly Dalí’s paranoiac-critical method involved an obsessional reading which revealed several images within the same configuration. In, for example, his painting *Spain* (1938), three fighting horsemen form the face and torso of a woman. The presence of unconscious elements on the part of the author means, Cahun argues, that it is very difficult to establish whether a poem is revolutionary or counter-revolutionary. She then turns to look at the issue of whether its value as propaganda can be measured by its effect, and she points out the problems involved in obtaining consistent results or in measuring the psychological impact of a piece, and thus its value as propaganda.

The major part of the first section of *Place Your Bets* is dedicated to an incisive and witty critique of those forms of ‘poetry’ that claim to act on the reader in a direct fashion to inspire revolutionary action, that is to be effective as propaganda. The first form she identifies is ‘L’action directe par affirmation et réitération.’18 She equates capitalist advertising statements such as ‘Every elegant woman is a customer of Printemps’ (‘Toute femme élégante est cliente du Printemps’) with communist slogans such as ‘Proletarians of every country unite’ (‘Prolétares de tous les pays, unissez vous’), and sees the latter as having the effect of exhausting the energy of the masses by a kind of ‘revolutionary masturbation’ (‘d’épuiser par une sorte de masturbation révolutionnaire l’énergie des masses’), exhorting action when none is possible or desirable, so that when the moment comes, as in making love, the bolt has already been shot. The second category she identifies, ‘Direct action by contradiction, by provocation’ (‘L’action directe à contre sens, par provocation’) has the same fault as the first in requiring an unthinking reaction and above all reinforcing the binaries of ‘right’ and ‘left’ and preventing the progression beyond existing categories. As such it is also ‘a method of cretinization’ (‘une méthode de crétinisation’).19

Cahun concludes this first part of her pamphlet, then, by extolling the virtues of ‘L’action indirecte’ (‘indirect action’) as the only efficacious means of creating either poetry or
propaganda that is truly revolutionary. This kind of writing, as she sees it, requires an active participation on the part of the reader in divining the subtext of what is being said, and thus pushing them to advance to a higher level of comprehension, or rather of questioning the status quo. She gives various metaphors to suggest this process:

> It’s done by starting it up and then letting it break down. That obliges the reader to take a step further than he wants to by himself. The exits have all been carefully blocked, but you leave him the trouble of opening the front door. Let him desire, says Breton.20

Her two main examples of ‘Action indirecte’ are from Marx and a long-standing icon of the surrealists, Arthur Rimbaud. Both provoke contradiction by suggesting a truth which has not been expressed but merely suggested – as in Marx’s exaggerated praise of bourgeois accomplishments of the nineteenth century: ‘It is they who were the first to show what human activity is capable of: they created quite other marvels than the Egyptian pyramids, Roman aqueducts, Gothic cathedrals … etc.’21

In the second section of Place Your Bets, written in February 1934, Cahun’s refutation of Aragon’s notions of literature become even more central and are the occasion for rejecting completely the idea of art as narrowly functionalist. She argues that, despite trivializing attacks on the surrealists for their supposed degeneracy in evoking ‘despair,’ ‘naked women,’ ‘papier mâché,’ or ‘flying pianos,’ (‘désespoir,’ ‘femmes nues,’ ‘papier mâché,’ or ‘pianos volants’) the journal La Révolution surréaliste in fact deals with wider political issues. In particular, its ‘indirect’ attack on nationalism interrogates the trite evocations of solidarity which Cahun claims can be used interchangeably by either left or right. Moreover, the belief that communists can simply transcend their own origins, ‘leurs tics bourgeois,’ (‘their bourgeois habits’) to preach the correct interpretation of Marxism, is given short shrift. The pamphlet closes with the claim that the dadaists and surrealists have been the most revolutionary so far under a capitalist regime as they have deconstructed the myths of art which have allowed its ideological and economic exploitation. She cites Max Ernst’s frottages, composed of rubbings of rough surfaces, as eschewing the traditional artistic values of permanence and perfection of technique. By being removed from its pedestal, art potentially becomes the province of all and not available to be fetishized and commodified. This rhetorical flourish and utopian vision is followed on the last page, merely entitled ‘Elle’ (‘She’), by a post-script, which after the imagined resolution of the class conflicts that inform the basis of art as we know it, returns the reader to the present. Here poetry is able to provide a kind of imaginative, intuitive knowledge that differs from both science and philosophy, ‘provoking short circuits, “magical” short cuts in human consciousness of the kind of which sexual love and extreme suffering also have the “secret.”’22

The rejection of propagandistic literature in Place Your Bets was much admired by Breton. It was part of the surrealists’ assertion of independence from the growing functionalism of the PCF’s approach to literature. By 1935, the surrealists had been expelled
from all communist organizations for their refusal to renounce their concern with ‘post-revolutionary problems,’ that is, questions of desire, fantasy and the unconscious. The crunch point came when they refused to disassociate themselves from Ferdinand Alquié, who in the last issue of *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution* had praised Breton’s stance against propagandistic literature and criticized ‘the wind of systematic imbecility that blows from the USSR.’

He attacked the Soviet film *Road of Life* for its moralistic view that work is the only worthwhile goal and ridiculed the heroes of the film who enter a brothel only to wreck it and abuse women. Moreover it was the communists, the surrealists argued, who were abandoning revolutionary principles by allying themselves with imperialist France. Only a short time previously, in March 1933, the AEAR had issued a declaration, signed by Cahun amongst others, not only against the burning of the Reichstag and the Nazi terror but also against the imperialism pursued by the Western ‘democracies’ which could not, in their view, represent peace. They rejected the position taken by the Popular Front – the alliance of left-wing parties, including the PCF, formed to combat fascism – which proposed sinking differences in the struggle against Hitler. Such a position, they felt, was counter-revolutionary, betrayed the class struggle and played into the hands of French nationalists; above all, it contradicted the Bolshevik principle of ‘revolutionary defeatism,’ the notion that the proletariat should not fight in a capitalist war and that the working class should be linked by international solidarity and not nationalism.

Isolated from the rest of the Left as war loomed, the remaining members of the surrealist group, among them Cahun and Moore, persisted in their last ditch attempt to give a collective public voice to their revolutionary ideals through the formation of *Contre-Attaque* in 1935 and, subsequently, of The International Artistic Federation (*La Fédération Internationale de l’Art Indépendent*, FIARI) initiated by Breton after his discussions with Trotsky in Mexico. In a 1936 document addressed to a meeting of *Contre-Attaque*, Cahun condemns patriotism, because, according to her, even where it is supposedly proletarian, it leads only to its adherents becoming ‘marionettes des impérialistes’ (‘puppets of imperialism’). This was what she and the others judged the Communist Party, in its endorsement of the French-Soviet pact, to have become. Cahun (and Moore’s) series of photographs, entitled *Poupée* was produced the same year and shows a small mannequin with a skin comprised of newspaper cuttings (Fig. 4).

Prominent along its body is the title page of *L’Humanité*, the PCF’s organ. The puppet’s cap associates it with militarism and the headlines on its arms reference the start of the Spanish Civil war with the fascist rebellion against the Republican government. One implication is an analogy between fascists and the Communist Party, which the figure’s false teeth may also imply is ‘toothless,’ although the figure is deliberately ambivalent.
Cahun, Moore and their colleagues advocated both defeatism and ‘un pacifisme agressif’ (‘an aggressive pacifism’) in opposing both the colonialist ‘democracies’ and a remilitarised USSR. Instead of vilifying ‘the Hun,’ they saw the German workers themselves as the victims of fascism, refusing to adopt a hostile stance towards the whole nation and relinquish their critical faculties in the name of a supposed unity between the liberal democracies and the Left against the threat of Hitler.27 This was arguably a naïve position given the seriousness of that threat by 1936, but Cahun and the other surrealists saw themselves as remaining faithful to the cause of international socialism in the face of the desire of repressive capitalist governments and of the Stalinist state to defend themselves from the workers within their own countries by constructing the enemy as an external, preternaturally evil menace. One of the last pamphlets issued by Contre-Attaque, ‘Under Fire from the French and … Allies’ Canons’ (‘Sous le feu des canons français et … alliés’) criticizes a Stalinist document headed: ‘HITLER AGAINST THE WORLD THE WORLD AGAINST HITLER’ (‘HILTER CONTRE LE MONDE LE MONDE CONTRE HILTER’). The Contre-Attaque pamphlet takes the Stalinist approval of this slogan as evidence that ‘communist politics have definitively broken with the revolution’ (‘la politique communiste a rompu définitivement avec la révolution’) since it meant that the USSR was allying itself with the ‘monde bourgeois’ and the ‘monde capitaliste.’28 The pamphlet concludes with the contentious, and possibly intentionally provocative statement:
‘We… prefer in any circumstances, and without being duped, the brutal anti-diplomacy of Hitler, surely less fatal to peace than the slobbering agitation of the diplomats and the politicians’ (Nous … préférons, en tout état de cause, et sans être dupés, la brutalité antidiplomatique de Hitler, moins sûrement mortelle pour la paix que l’excitation baveuse des diplomats et des politiciens’). By the end of March 1936, the surrealist members of Contre-Attaque issued a statement dissolving the group because of ‘surfascist’ tendencies within the group. This was signed by Adolphe Acker, Breton, Cahun, Marcel Jean, Moore, Georges Mouton, Henri Pastoureau and Benjamin Péret. Mark Polizzotti explains that Bataille had drafted the leaflet ‘Under Fire…’ in Breton’s absence and that Breton was angered by the implied condonement of Hitler. Apparently he signed the leaflet against his will. Cahun and Moore were also signatories, but whatever they thought of this ironic whitewashing of the German dictator, could they maintain this position when the Nazis occupied France and what had become their home, Jersey?

La bonne propagande

In Place your Bets Cahun is at pains to distinguish propaganda from poetry because poetry, she argues, can never be reduced to the ‘mercenary indignity … of a role’ (‘l’indignité mercenaire … d’un rôle’). Six years after she wrote this, in 1940, the political situation in Europe had worsened dramatically. Not only had all hopes of resisting Stalinism been dashed, but the Nazis had overrun Europe. Reflecting on her position in Place your Bets after the war, Cahun questioned the simplicity of her earlier polemic. Having rejected ‘the pious poetry of bad propaganda … there remained the question of good propaganda. I did not go into that as much as I should have done’ (‘la pieuse poesie de mauvaise propagande … restait la question de la bonne propagande. J’étais loin de l’avoir approfondir comme j’aurais dû’). The need for an effective and immediate way to resist the Nazi Occupation made her reconsider her earlier categorical condemnation of propaganda. After being imprisoned for her leafleting, the appropriateness of adopting a more propagandistic style seemed to her to have been proved by ‘the moving experience of the fraternal welcome I received (in prison in 1944) from those in whose name I wrote’ (‘l’expérience émouvante du fraternal acceuil (en 1944, en prison) de ceux au nom de qui j’écrivais’).

The method and content of Cahun and Moore’s resistance strategy showed a wish to produce writing which shared some of what Cahun had identified as desired effects of poetry, but was also designed to have immediate political impact, given the very changed political circumstances of subjection to Nazi government. The intention of the counter propaganda she produced with Moore is not to represent all ‘the enemy’ as vicious aggressors, reinforcing simple binaries between ‘us’ and ‘them’; rather it is to encourage the Germans themselves to doubt the validity of the war, specifically appealing to the rank and file to reject their leaders and disobey orders. The intention is to spur the German troops into action, or rather inaction, without ‘cretinizing’ by facile exhortations but by highlighting the contradictions and injustice of
their position. In one of the last meetings of Contre-Attaque (9 April 1936), she advocates fostering the ambivalence about the coming war amongst those who are wavering: ‘The ambivalence that they feel, that we all feel in relation to the war – and also to rebellion – will no longer appear to be a shameful illness but a potential for living forces.’\footnote{35} The tone of the published account of her contribution to this meeting is more realistic than some of the more strident declarations of the group and maybe signals Cahun’s own sense of both the increasing marginality of their position and inability to have any real influence in promoting pacifism, despite the final appeal to militants to be ready for revolution. Mark Polizzotti comments that ‘despite the union’s exhortations to the proletariat, it is doubtful that workers ever read, or even heard of a single Contre-Attaque broadside.’\footnote{36}

In the dramatically different circumstances of occupied Jersey, Cahun was finally able to find a way of putting into action some of the ideas and principles she had developed with Contre-Attaque, albeit on a smaller scale and with much more limited means than she and her fellow revolutionaries had envisaged in Paris in the mid-1930s. What is more, she was able to witness the impact of her subversive activity not only on the German commanders, who dubbed her and Moore spiritual ‘franc-tireurs’ (‘snipers’),\footnote{37} but, she believed, also on the German soldiers with whom she was imprisoned from July 1944 to May 1945.\footnote{38}

Cahun recorded the details of their activity at the time of the Occupation in much detail in notebooks found when the couple were finally arrested (notebooks now missing, and probably destroyed by the Germans as the capitulation approached). After the war she documented with lucidity, humour and some pride what they had achieved in several autobiographical writings, which are a remarkable testimony to the women’s bravery, ingenuity and unwavering integrity.\footnote{39} From the beginning of the German arrival in July 1940, she began with small acts of subversion – writing the words ‘Without End’ (‘Ohne Ende’) on cigarette boxes and other places to signify the endless war to which the Nazis were subjecting their troops. In a tactic that was to be central to their approach, the phrase ‘Ohne Ende’ was appropriated from a Nazi pre-war slogan, ‘Terror without end or an end to terror’ (‘Schrecken ohne Ende oder Ende mit Schrecken’). This was followed by acts such as putting fake coins which read ‘Down with war’ in the amusement park and in the Catholic church, and hanging a banner in St. Brelade’s church next to their house which read ‘Jesus died for us but we must die for Hitler.’\footnote{40} The German army used St. Brelade’s cemetery to bury their dead and, at night, the women stuck cardboard crosses on the graves painted with the ironic statement: ‘For them the war is over.’\footnote{41}

Cahun and Moore’s most sustained and systematic activity was the writing and distribution of leaflets signed ‘The Soldier without a Name’ (‘Der Soldat ohne Namen’), written mainly in German. Other leaflets were written in Czech, Greek, Spanish, Italian and Russian to give the impression the typewriter was being passed from hand to hand and that there was an international conspiracy. They were distributed by various means, according to their desired addressees: placed in empty cigarette boxes, which were inevitably picked up by
civilians and German soldiers who were short of tobacco; posted into the letterboxes of officers; and pinned to barbed wire fences. Cahun came up with the idea of creating the persona of ‘The Soldier without a Name’ and overcame Moore’s initial reservations about using the alias. Moore knew German, having learnt it from her German governess, and she doubted the wisdom of using ‘without a name’ (‘ohne Namen’); ‘to begin with “Namenlos” (“nameless”) would have been more correct in German’ (‘d’abord “Namenlos” eût été d’un allemand plus correct’).\(^{42}\) ‘The Soldier without a Name’ recalls, but differs significantly from, ‘The Unknown Soldier,’ the emblematic figure who represented the countless dead of the First World War who had sacrificed themselves for their countries. Instead, ‘The Soldier without a Name’ is irreverent, refusing to lay down his life in the name of a dubious patriotism, debunking the rhetoric that justifies the war and exposing it as futile and exploitative.

Underpinning their campaign was a profound belief that Nazism was an aberration, no matter how powerful, that the German soldiers had the capacity to question the versions of reality they were being fed by their masters, and that they, like other human beings throughout the world, were capable of ‘une libération morale complète.’\(^{43}\) This confidence owes as much to an assumption of the revolutionary potential of the proletariat as to a more anarchic conception of an ideal society of free individuals ‘who bow their head to nothing’ (‘qui ne courbent la tête devant rien’).\(^{44}\) In particular, Cahun and Moore realized that disrespect for Nazi authority could be very effectively evoked through laughter; irony and humour were anathema to the literalism and rule-bound thinking of their oppressors. Towards the end of the 1930s, Breton saw black humour as a way of puncturing social myths, such as those perpetrated by fascism, and releasing the unconscious aggression associated with them: ‘such a view was hardly popular; war was surely not to be overcome by telling jokes.’\(^{45}\) Breton quotes Freud’s analysis of humour:

Humour does not only have something liberating about it … but something sublime and elevated. The sublime leads to the triumph of narcissism, to the invulnerability of the ego which victoriously asserts itself. The ego refuses to let itself be subjected, to let itself suffer because of exterior realities, it refuses to admit that the traumas of the external world can touch it; rather, it makes them into occasions of pleasure.\(^{46}\)

Breton cites the following example from Freud: ‘The condemned man, who, as he is taken to the gallows on Monday exclaims: “What a good start to the week!”’ (‘le condamné que l’on mène à la potence un lundi s’écriant: “Voila une semaine qui commence bien!”’). This comes very close to Cahun’s own response to the verdict of the German court at her own condemnation. When the two women were given nine months and six years for possessing a radio, and the death sentence for exhorting German soldiers to shoot their officers, Cahun recalls her reaction: ‘And I said, to conclude, making them burst out laughing again with my feigned naivety, “Are we to do the nine months and six years before we are shot?”’\(^{47}\)

Cahun employs a very dark satire in a post-war document beginning: ‘Have you had any dealings with the Nazis? Did you notice that they have a certain sense of humour? Is it
François Leperlier notes how in this piece Cahun contrasts ‘l’humour non objectif nazi’ (‘l’humour nihiliste’) with ‘l’humour noir.’ Lacking a sense of contradiction, desublimated nihilist ‘humour’ manifests itself in the brutal reality Cahun evokes at the Matthausen concentration camp. Here, among other grimly farcical events, a gypsy orchestra is obliged to play the popular French song ‘I will wait’ (‘J’attendrai’) whilst the inmates watch three of their comrades being hanged for trying to escape. These abominations are only possible because of a failure to imagine oneself in the place of the other, to be able to identify. As Cahun puts it: ‘Have the non-objective humorists ever let themselves feel their bonds with the mass of the herd? Is the humour of others powerless?’ As a black humorist and dialectician, however, Cahun is able to appreciate the ultimate irony confronting the master race: if mass extermination continues, there will be no slaves left, no one to do the dirty work. The master’s existence depends on the presence of the slave.

As Cahun’s mouthpiece, ‘The Soldier without a Name’ is fully aware of the contradictions and ironies of his masters’ positions, using mockery to undermine the Nazi leadership, highlighting German defeats and allied triumphs. ‘He’ makes fun of, as well as ironically reappropriates, the slogans and ideology of National Socialism. The method of Cahun/Moore’s resistance recalls not only the many personae in their own art but also such creations as Marcel Duchamp’s Rrose Sélavy. While the creation of an alter ego more generally owes much to surrealism, its content is also influenced by Marxist theory in its emphasis on highlighting the contradictions both within ideology and between ideology and actual power relations.

The anti-nationalist sentiments which had long informed Cahun and Moore’s position even before the 1930s also remain foremost in the position adopted in their resistance leaflets, where the nation is not defined by its governing class’s reactionary politics. Von Oehsen notes that leading themes of their counterpropaganda are an emphasis on the cultural heritage of Germany and on discrediting Hitler. She comments:

Schwob and Malherbe emphasise repeatedly that the National Socialist culture is quite distinct from the German heritage of Dichter und Denker, ‘the great Germany of Goethe, which the national socialist Grossdeutschland of Hitler strives to smear in vain.’ The objective is to encourage the soldiers to reflect on their sense of self-worth, by evoking German instead of national socialist values.

Out of the small proportion of the couple’s original production of leaflets that is extant, another identifiable tactic is to directly satirize Nazi ideology and rhetoric. One example entitled ‘Lied’ begins bombastically enough: ‘We are the heroes of the Herrenvolks/We are the German soldiers/We have besieged the whole of Europe/And seen the coasts of England.’ The song, however, continues with this chorus where one of the soldiers returns to Germany to find his wife pregnant by another man. The wife ironically uses the National Socialist policy of encouraging women to have large families as an act of national service as an alibi: ‘And when I came home on holiday/My wife had fallen pregnant/Don’t quarrel my laddie, she
said./The Fatherland needs soldiers!'55 At the bottom of one of the copies of this 'song' leaflet is a note written in English by Cahun reading: 'This was distributed during the first months of the North African campaign.' The other verses evoke the hardships endured by the German armies as they freeze in Russia and are blinded in Africa in a futile dance of death to serve their warlords.

Another flyer ostensibly quotes Goebbel's as revising the Nazi slogan 'Strength through Joy' ('Kraft durch Freude') to 'Strength through Flight' ('Kraft durch Verzweiflung'). In other examples, the troops are exhorted to slow down, sabotage the war and stop wasting their lives and get home before their houses are burnt down (Fig. 6).56 The spectre of the German defeat in the First World War is evoked and allusions abound to the Allies' progress in retaking Europe as Nazi fortunes begin to wane. Utilizing simple language and often short lyric forms, the ludic voice adopted by the women nonetheless provokes rather than commands, encouraging the readers to question their roles in the war and the worth of giving their lives for their murderous leaders. The carnivalesque mockery of authority figures who are made to seem grotesque is reminiscent of dada,57 as in this example: 'HITLER leads us ... GOEBBELS speaks for us ... GOERING gobbles for us ... LEY drinks for us ... Himmler? ... HIMMLER MURDERS FOR ... But no one dies for us' (Fig. 5).58 In other leaflets, the dialogue form is used: 'So have we lost the war? /Precisely /Are you really glad about it? /Absolutely /I don't understand. Why? /Because I don't want to waste all my life in uniform!'59 This style recalls the one adopted in a Contre-Attaque document written by Bataille in February 1936 which begins with a series of questions and answers, although in somewhat less humorous vein: 'What does capitalist society offer those who give it their labour? /Bones to gnaw on. /What on the other hand does it offer the holders of capital? /Everything they want, until they are satiated, ten, a hundred, a thousand turkeys a day, if they have a big enough stomach.'60
The creation of an alter ego as a means to resist Nazi oppression – in this case a young German male, belonging to the ‘Aryan’ race – echoes the sustained project of self-invention that Cahun undertook with Moore in her photographic portraits. In another article, we discuss how her major tactic in her photographs is to ‘evoke the unrepresentable by subverting representation from within’ and explore how ‘through paradox, reversal and repetition, [her] multiple identities, her monstrous and abject objects, create mischief, denying the power to control and categorize through the gaze.’ For instance, in her portrait c.1928 she has her back to camera, her shaven head turned back over her shoulder to reveal her Jewish-looking profile, her skin a ghostly white; clearly resembling Nosferatu, she is performing the dominant anti-Semitic conception of the Jew as vampire, deliberately constructing her identity through the reversed gaze of the other. This ironic performance of the abject, which condenses prevailing social fears, like many of her images of herself, at once affirms and challenges the beholder’s sense of a coherent self. During the Occupation, by writing through the voice of a German soldier, who understands German culture, and who uses familiar idioms but deploys them to proclaim scurrilous and provocative attacks on the Nazi war effort, she and Moore achieved a similar effect in unsettling the German commanders. The identity the women assumed inverts the abject one of the Jew previously assumed, taking on instead that of a member of the ‘master race,’ apparently one of their own
but heretically spouting defeatism. In one leaflet, the anti-Semitic discourse, extensively deployed by the Nazis to construct the Jews as parasites, is reversed and the women identify Hitler himself as an ‘…unGerman Vampire who is sucking the blood of our youth.’ (‘…nichtdeutschen Vampir das Blut unsern Jugend saüft!’) Nazism not only proclaimed the purity of the German race but the integrity of the Teutonic body. Cahun’s work is primarily concerned with the fluidity of identity, and after dada, with the disruption of hierarchies of the body, of gender, and of the gaze.

This disruption receives a particularly vivid expression in the text and photomontages of Cahun’s experimental autobiography Disavowals: Cancelled Confessions (Aveux non Avenus, 1930), which have been discussed by many critics. Photomontage had been developed by the dadaists to critique the culture which they felt had been discredited by the Great War, interrogating the classical tradition by juxtaposing elements from high and low culture and contradicting the representational claims of realism. John Heartfield then used the technique for more specific purposes in deconstructing Nazi propaganda. It seems very likely that Cahun was familiar with Heartfield’s work as there was an exhibition of his work in Paris in 1935, prefaced by Aragon. Little of the visual material that she produced during the Occupation has survived but Cahun describes how she collected any German objects she could find, without knowing how she would re-use them, recalling the practice of Duchamp and other dadaists in recontexualizing objets trouvés. Finding the page of a German magazine showing triumphant troops, she crops the photograph to invert its meaning and reveal its contradictory unconscious significance – in an analogous process to the one discussed in Place Your Bets of perceiving a riot in photograph of a woman’s hair:

On the page was a photograph of a marching regiment. They looked full of ardour. I turned it around. I realized that if I hid half of the photo it would completely change the impression it gave. The legs, the boots (without the faces) had nothing that seemed exultant about them. They were covered in with mud (it is true that there was some occasionally even that ultra dry spring), and, isolated from the rest, extremely tired.

In this way, Cahun precisely utilizes the understanding of context and the unconscious as two factors key to the creation of meaning that she had explored in Les paris sont ouverts. The tired feet, highlighted by her cropping of the image, undermine its manifestly propagandistic intention. After framing it, she placed the cropped image in a house that was about to be occupied by German troops.

An episode from her interrogation, which she recounts twice with pleasure, reveals her use of humour directly to mock her persecutors. She is delighted that she can make even these creatures laugh, outwitting them at their own game, at the same time as making their guiding principles seem totally absurd. One of the two complete satirical magazines that the women montaged was intended for a Kommandant Knackfuss (who had since left the island) and was shown at their trial. At this point in the interrogation, they were questioned on the
subject of a leaflet that was the key evidence for their condemnation to death. It calls for desertion with, if necessary, the killing of officers. The lead judge, Cahun recalls, said that such a revolt could not succeed without the involvement of the officers and asked her to respond to this point, to which she answered:

‘I addressed the officers as well. For example, I sent the magazine you have in your hand to kommandant Knackfuss in 1942.’ They burst into laughter. To understand the humour of my answer, you need to know that the magazine in question contained personal insults directed at Knackfuss, – in particular, adverts for products for tired feet where the pun on his surname was used in promotional style.68

The fact that two middle-aged French women of ‘a very unpleasant kind’ were able to successfully pose as a member of the German military without detection for four years, was an affront to Nazi ideology. 69 If the identity of the master could be so adeptly appropriated then the foundations of his power on the basis of an essential difference and superiority over his ‘others’ – Slavs, Jews, homosexuals, gypsies – was undermined. In this way, the tactic of mimicry that they adopted struck at the heart of their oppressors in a way which would not have been achieved with a more direct approach. It was a strategy which naturally evolved from the central preoccupations of Cahun (and Moore’s work) both before and during their association with the surrealists and from the lifelong inclination for, and necessity of, disguise. Carolyn Dean, in one of the best articles on Cahun’s aesthetics, explores her Sappho narrative in Heroines (1925) as a metaphor for Cahun’s own practice.70 In Cahun’s version of Sappho’s story, the poet fakes her own suicide by having a dummy of herself pushed off a cliff. Apparently having taken her own life because of unrequited love for a man, she is free to pursue her love of women. Similarly ‘The Soldier without a Name’ provided a cover for the couple to undertake their daily acts of subversion, effectively disguising their actually very precarious position as lesbians and avant-garde artists.

While they conducted their campaign, Cahun and Moore lived at ‘La Rocquaise,’ a house next to the St. Brelade’s Bay Hotel, where the Luftwaffe were billeted. Their proximity to the German troops, as Cahun recognized, protected them from suspicion because the authorities clearly could not imagine that anyone would have the effrontery to perform such acts under their noses. The German Secret Police (Geheime Feldpolizei) suspected one of their own ranks until linguistic mistakes in the leaflets began to be recognized. Their failure to suspect Cahun and Moore was not least because of the German investigators’ misguided assumptions about gender, class and race and their stereotyped notions of who would be capable of opposing them so persistently. Describing their interrogation and imprisonment, Moore is quoted as saying in an interview after the war: ‘I complained once of the hardness of my plank bed and all the satisfaction I got was the remark: “You have acted like a man you must expect to be treated as a man”.’71 The fact that even after they were arrested the Germans found it so hard to believe the couple were actually the traitors whom they had been searching for two years or that they were acting on their own, testifies to the appropriateness
of the Cahun and Moore’s surreal approach to resistance. The success of their performance in parodying Nazism and mimicking a German identity was the source of much fascination to the women’s interrogators as it was both familiar and uncomfortably subversive of all they stood for.

The couple’s strategy may have been far removed from the more romantic notions of poetry which Cahun had expounded in *Place Your Bets* in 1934, but it owed much to the carnivalesque inversions of high and low and the use of *objets trouvés* which connected dada and surrealism to the everyday. Despite the doubts she expressed in ‘Confidences au miroir’ (‘Secrets in the Mirror’) (1945-6) about whether she had sufficiently addressed the question of ‘good propaganda,’ she had indeed found an inventive means of interrogating Nazi rule that was a form of performative, populist ‘indirect action.’ Cahun recalls, with some pleasure, that when she and Moore were interrogated after their arrest, the German authorities were still preoccupied by one of the false trails that they had planted as ‘The Soldier without a Name’:

They remained very perturbed by one of our inventions … ‘Rendez-vous at Plemont Grotto.’ This invitation was not only written in German but in the same terms as an announcement for a Nazi cultural meeting. We had been lucky to find one of these notices lost or thrown beside a path … Even in August 1944 ‘our announcement’ worried them; they could not believe it was purely imaginary.72

The ability to imagine oneself another, to put oneself in the place of the other, of the ‘enemy,’ was precisely what the German leaders did not have or had suppressed within themselves.
For Cahun and Moore, it was a weapon which proved effective not only in undermining the security of the German commanders but also in empowering the disaffected amongst their ranks. The totalitarian desire to fix subjects and meanings was undermined by the couple’s radical relativism, their ability to blur the reified distinctions of Jew/Aryan, male/female, to hide their radical politics and to pass, when necessary to subvert the absurd categorizations of Nazi thinking, as both ‘quiet bourgeois ladies’ and a seditious young soldier. 73

![Fig. 8: Claude Cahun, Untitled, 1926, Courtesy, Soizic Audouard](image)

1 ‘Loin de moi l’intention de reprocher à qui que ce soit d’avoir quitté la France au moment de l’occupation. Mais on doit constater que le Surréalisme était absent des préoccupations de ceux qui sont restés, parce qu’il ne leur fut d’aucun secours ni sur le plan affectif, ni du comportement devant les nazis, ni sur celui, pratique, de la lutte entreprise entre eux,’ Tristan Tzara, _Le surréalisme et l’après-guerre_, Nagel, Paris, 1966, 74.


3 Lucy Schwob adopted the name Claude Cahun in about 1917. Claude is gender ambiguous in French and Cahun was the name of her paternal grandmother. The surname Cahun (the equivalent of Cohen) emphasized her Jewish heritage, even more than that of Schwob – though the Schwobs were known to be of Jewish descent too. The reasons for Malherbe’s choice of the specific male pseudonym, Marcel Moore, are not known.


‘Le surréalisme ne tendit à rien tant qu’à provoquer, au point de vue intellectuel et moral, une crise de conscience de l’espèce la plus générale et la plus grave et que l’obtention ou la non obtention de ce résultat peut seule décider de sa réussite ou de son échec historique,’ André Breton, ‘Second manifeste du surréalisme,’ in *Manifestes du surréalisme*, Jean-Jacques Pauvert, Paris, 1972, 133.

13 'La conquête de la liberté des moeurs, des droits de l’être humain oppressed par des siècles de superstitions féroces, m’importaient personnellement,’ Claude Cahun, ‘Lettre à Paul Levy,’ in Claude Cahun: Écrits, 716.

14 ‘Pourra même devenir contrerévolutionnaire lorsque la situation qui l’a inspirée sera modifiée,’ Claude Cahun, Les paris sont ouverts, Jose Corti, Paris, 1934, note 1, 8. Steven Harris notes that the PCF leader, Jack Duclos, declared the Marseillaise to be a revolutionary song at a rally consecrating the Popular Front on July 14 1935, another context which Cahun would have certainly considered ‘counter-revolutionary.’ He also discusses the use of the statement ‘La Marseillaise est un chant révolutionnaire’ (‘The Marseillaise is a revolutionary song’) juxtaposed with the ‘La loi punit le contrefacteur des travaux forcés’ (‘The law punishes the counterfeiter of/with hard labour’) on the base of her 1936 Objet. Here ‘Cahun uses the apparent contradiction between the two statements to trouble or undo political identities or identifications, while underscoring their secret affinity as expressions of the law or by those aspiring to power,’ Harris, Surrealist Art, 168.

15 ‘C’est pourquoi j’estime que la propagande communiste ne saurait être confiée qu’à la pensée dirigée des prosateurs conscients, des journalistes … Cependant les poètes agissent à leur façon sur la sensibilité des hommes. Leurs atteintes sont plus sournoises; mais leur coups les plus détournés sont parfois mortels,’ Claude Cahun, Les paris sont ouverts, 8.

16 ‘Un homme a cru photographier les cheveux mêlés de brins de paille de la femme qu’il aime, endormie dans un champ. Le cliché révélé, apparaissent mille bras divergents, des poings brillants, des armes, on s’aperçoit qu’il s’agit d’une émeute,’ Cahun, Les paris sont ouverts, 10.


18 ‘Direct action through assertion and reiteration,’ Cahun, Les paris sont ouverts, 11.

19 Ibid., 14. Aragon is also derided in this manner by Cahun’s colleagues elsewhere: ‘[il] s’est converti aux plus sinistres méthodes de crétinisation des masses,’ Aragon, ‘La Mobilisation contre La Guerre n’est pas la Paix,’ in Tracts surréalistes, 243.

20 ‘Il s’agit de mettre en marche et laisser en panne. Ça oblige le lecteur à faire tout seul un pas de plus qu’il ne voudrait. On a soigneusement bloqué toutes les sorties, mais la porte d’entrée on lui laisse le soin de l’ouvrir. Laisser à désirer, dit Breton,’ Cahun, Les paris sont ouverts, 14.

21 ‘C’est elle qui, la première, a fait voir ce dont est capable l’activité humaine: elle a créé de tout autres merveilles que les pyramides d’Egypte, les aqueducs romains, les cathédrales gothiques … etc … ;’ Cahun, Les paris sont ouverts, 14.


23 Helena Lewis, Dada Turns Red, 121.

24 See ‘Protestez!,’ Feuille Rouge No. 2, March 1933, reproduced in Tracts surréalistes, 238-40.


26 See Claude Cahun: Photographe, cat. nos. 144-46.

27 See ‘Pour un rassemblement révolutionnaire,’ 31 March 1938, in Tracts surréalistes, 526.

28 ‘Sous le feu des canons français…et alliés,’ March 1936, in Tracts surréalistes, 298-99.

29 Ibid., 298
30 Steven Harris notes that Pierre Dugan (known as Pierre Andler after 1937) was responsible for this term and that although the Contre-Attaque manifesto had advocated the use of fascist strategies for popular mobilization, ‘what must have been disturbing was [Dugan’s] notion of a Marxism being put back on its feet by fascism,’ Harris, Surrealist Art, 280, note 29.

31 Mark Polizzotti, Revolution of the Mind: The Life of André Breton, Bloomsbury, London, 1995, 430. When interrogated by Robert Short, Jean Dautry, the author of the pamphlet, and one of Bataille’s circle, is quoted as saying that Breton did however sign a second version of the leaflet after ‘minor modifications’ and that it was only after a further pamphlet, Travailleurs, vous êtes trahis!, written by Bataille, Jean Bernier and Lucie Colliard appeared without his consent that Breton decided to split from the group. See Tracts surréalistes, 505. Claude Cahun and Suzanne Malherbe’s names do not appear on the later pamphlet.

32 Cahun, Les paris sont ouverts, 30.

33 ‘Confidences au miroir,’ 1945-46, in Claude Cahun: Écrits, 584.

34 Ibid., 584.


36 Polizzotti, Revolution of the Mind, 429.

37 ‘Testament,’ unpublished statement by Cahun, ‘written between 16 November 1944 and the following Wednesday,’ held at the Jersey Heritage Trust, f.2. She and Moore were condemned to death by the German military court in St. Helier on November 16 and reprieved, against their will, the following February.

38 Claire Follain writes that Cahun and Malherbe ‘became good friends with many of German soldiers imprisoned for desertion or insurrection, and many claimed the [women’s] tracts to have been the impetus behind their actions,’ ‘Lucy Schwob and Suzanne Malherbe – Résistantes,’ 92.


40 ‘Confidences au miroir,’ 607-8.

41 ‘Für sie ist der Krieg zu Ende.’

42 ‘Lettre à Gaston Ferdière,’ 693. From 1943, the women also began to sign themselves ‘Der Soldat ohne Namen und seine Kameraden’ (‘The Soldier without a Name and his Comrades’) to heighten Nazi paranoia about a resistance movement on the island.

43 Cahun, ‘Réunion de Contre-Attaque,’ 564.


46 ‘L’humour a non seulement quelque chose de libérateur, ... mais encore quelque chose de sublime et d’élevé, ... Le sublime tient évidemment au triomphe du narcissisme, à l’invulnérabilité du moi qui s’affirme victorieusement. Le moi se refuse à se laisser entamer, à se laisser imposer la souffrance par les réalités extérieures, il se refuse à admettre que les traumatismes du monde extérieur puissent le toucher; bien plus, il fait voir qu’ils peuvent même lui devenir occasions de plaisir,’ André Breton, Anthologie de l’humour noir, Jean-Jacques Pauvert, Paris, 1966, 19-20.
47. ‘Et moi, pour finir, les faisant de nouveau rire aux éclats par ma naïveté simulée: ‘Are we to do the nine months and six years before we are shot?’ ‘Lettre à Paul Levy,’ Claude Cahun: Écrits, 721.

48. ‘As-tu déjà eu affaire aux Nazis?,’ Claude Cahun: Écrits, 762. The original title is in English.

49. Ibid., note 3.

50. ‘Les humoristes non objectifs ont-ils jamais été conçus pour faire sentir leurs liens avec le gros du troupeau? L’humour des autres est-il impuissant?’ Ibid., 762.

51. Cahun and Moore’s relationship to the tradition of opposing nationalism in Cahun’s paternal family, the Schwobs, has recently been explored by Patrice Allain in ‘Contre qui écrivez vous?’ De l’esprit pamphletaire à l’insurrection des consciences,’ paper given at the symposium ‘De Marcel Schwob à Claude Cahun,’ Centre Culturel International de Cérisy-la-Salle, 13-20 August 2005.

52. Kristine von Oehsen, ‘Der Soldat ohne Namen,’ f.11.

53. There are 45 examples of the leaflets in the Cahun/Moore papers at the Jersey Heritage Trust.

54. ‘Wir sind die Helden der Herrenvolks./Wir sind die deutschen Soldaten./Wir haben Europa ganz besiegt/Und die Küste von England gesehen’ [sic], Leaflet by Cahun and Moore, held at the Jersey Heritage Trust.

55. ‘Und wenn ich zu Haus auf Urlaub kam./Meine Frau war schwanger gegangen./Zank nicht, mein Bübchen, sagte sie./Das Vaterland braucht Soldaten’ [sic], Leaflet by Cahun (with Moore), held at the Jersey Heritage Trust.

56. ‘Workers, Comrades, Accomplices … Don’t wait until the flames of war have burnt our houses to ashes!/Let your engines slow down … Act sneakily … Stop if you want to stop the war! The soldier without a name, the soldiers with no name,’ Leaflet by Cahun (with Moore), held at the Jersey Heritage Trust, see Fig. 6 for German original.

57. Christian Weikop has analysed the carnivalesque aspects of Dada, ‘Berlin Dada, Bakhtin and the Carnivalesque,’ talk given at the University of Sussex, 8 February 2006.

58. ‘HITLER fuerht uns … GOEBBELS spricht fuer uns … GOERING frisst fuer uns … LEY trinkt fuer uns … Himmler? … HIMMLER ERMORDET FUER … aber niemand stirbt fuer uns!’ The word play here is suggestive - might Himmler murder ‘der Fürhrer’? The verse is repeated with slight but provocative changes in punctuation.


60. ‘Qu’offre la société capitaliste à celui qui lui donne son travail?/Des os à ronger./Qu’offre-t-elle par contre aux déteuteurs du capital?/ Tout ce qu’ils veulent, plus qu’a satiété, dix, cent, mille dindes par jour, s’ils avaient l’estomac assez grand,’ Contre-Attaque, ‘Appel à l’Action,’ Tracts surréalistes, 295-296. Pierre comments in the same volume that ‘the importance of this leaflet is great because it adopts a spoken style which makes it understandable by the working class. But could Contre-Attaque really hope to exert an influence on the workers? At best, articles in the tone of this Appel à L’Action would have had the greatest repercussion if it could be published in the newspapers read by the working class. But neither L’Humanité nor Le Populaire were disposed to open their columns to Bataille, Breton and their friends,’ 504, note b.


62. Claude Cahun: Photographe, cat. no. 68 and the portrait may be viewed at http://www.jerseyheritagetrust.jeron.je/wwwopac.exe?DATABASE=collect&LANGUAGE=0&D
See the film *Nosferatu, eine Symphonie des Grauens*, dir F. W. Murnau, Germany, 1922.

Handwritten draft of leaflet by Cahun (and Moore) beginning ‘Nieder mit Hitler! (‘Down with Hitler!’) held at the Jersey Heritage Trust. It is signed ‘Die Soldaten ohne Namen’ (‘The Soldiers Without a Name’) and a note has been added which reads: ‘This one was typed and stuck on the windows of the police cars.’

See, for example, Honor Lasalle and Abigail Solomon-Godeau, ‘Surrealist Confession: Claude Cahun’s Photomontages,’ *Afterimage* Vol. 19, No. 8, March 1992, 10-13, and Jennifer Shaw ‘Collaborative Self-Images in Claude Cahun’s *Aveux non Avenus,*’ *The Modern Woman Revisited*.


‘Je me suis aussi adressée aux officiers. J’ai adressée, par exemple, l’illustré que vous avez en mains au kommandant Knackfuss, en 1942». Ils éclatèrent de rire. Pour saisir l’humour de mon réponse, il faut savoir que l’illustré en question contenait des insultes personnelles à l’égard de Knackfuss, notamment les annonces de produits pour les pieds fatigués où le calembour au sujet du nom propre était utilisé en style publicitaire,’ Claude Cahun, ‘Lettre à Gaston Ferdière,’ 700. ‘Knacken’ in German literally means to crack so ‘Knackfuss’ might be translated as ‘cracked foot.’

Hans Max von Aufsess, *The von Aufsess Occupation Diary*, ed. and trans. Kathleen J. Nowlan, Phillimore, Chichester, 1985, 61. Von Aufsess was a German officer responsible for liaising with Jersey’s civil authorities on behalf of the German Military Command. Aufsess describes both women as Jewish in his lurid reference to their arrest. However, since Cahun was only of Jewish descent on her father’s side she did not fall within the National Socialists’ ‘legal’ definition of Jewishness, as she acknowledges in ‘La muet dans la mêlée,’ *Claude Cahun: Écrits*, 629.


‘Sentenced to Death by Island Nazis: the Story of Two Gallant French Women,’ *Jersey Evening Post*, Saturday July 14, 1945. Many thanks to the late Joe Mière for passing me this article as well as sharing his memories of Cahun and Moore with me from when they were all imprisoned by the German authorities.

‘Ils resterèrent forts inquiets d’une de nos inventions: ... “Rendez-vous aux grottes de Plemont.” Ce rendez-vous là était non seulement rédigé en allemand mais les termes mêmes d’une convocation de groupe pour réunion culturelle nazie. Nous avions eu la chance de tomber sur une de ces convocations perdue, ou jetée au bord d’un chemin... Mais encore en août 1944, “notre convocation” les inquiétait; ils ne pouvaient croire qu’elle était purement imaginaire.’ ‘Le muet dans la mêlée,’ *Claude Cahun: Écrits*, 629.

‘bourgeoises paisibles,’ Cahun ‘Le muet dans la mêlée,’ 629.
de Jersey,' in Andrea Oberhuber, ed. Claude Cahun: contexte, posture, filiation: pour une esthétique de l’entre-deux guerres, Paragraphes, No. 27, Université de Montreal, 2007. The research on Cahun’s wartime activity was originally undertaken for Lizzie Thynne’s film about the artist, Playing a Part, 2004, supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Board, Jersey Arts and the University of Sussex. (Available from l.thynne@sussex.ac.uk).

Lizzie Thynne is a film-maker and a writer. She is Senior Lecturer in Media and Film at Sussex University, UK. Her films have been broadcast and exhibited at festivals and galleries across the world. Her other work on Cahun includes: “‘Surely you are not claiming to be more homosexual than I?’: Claude Cahun and Oscar Wilde,' in Joe Bristow, ed. Oscar Wilde and Modern Culture: The Making of a Legend, Ohio University Press, Athens, 2009. She has also published on practice as research, documentary practices, women’s employment in television and queer representation in the media. She is currently working on a book on documentary interactions.
Artaud in performance: dissident surrealism and the postwar American literary avant-garde

Joanna Pawlik

Abstract

This article seeks to give account of the influence of Antonin Artaud on the postwar American literary avant-garde, paying particular attention to the way in which his work both on and in the theatre informed the Beat and San Francisco writers’ poetics of performance. Artaud was received enthusiastically by poets such as Allen Ginsberg and Michael McClure, and recruited as a posthumous ally in their distinctive revolt against Cold War oppression, militarism, and conformity. They sourced, translated and distributed texts by Artaud during the 1950s and 1960s, ensuring he reached as wide an Anglophone audience as possible.

Unlike his former surrealist colleagues, who sought exile in New York during the war, Antonin Artaud never set foot in America. His work, however, held a powerful fascination for the postwar literary avant-garde in America which was coming of age during the first decades of the Cold War. Enthusiasm for the ‘dissident’ surrealist rippled through sites of cultural radicalism at Black Mountain College, the San Francisco Bay area, and New York’s Village. This article will explain how the dissident surrealism of Artaud, instead of the orthodox surrealism of André Breton, was received enthusiastically by postwar writers, poets and performers. It will outline the processes of translation and dissemination of Artaud’s work in America, taking account of not only the latent compatibility between his work and that of the literary avant-garde, but the way in which this compatibility was deliberately fostered by the writers themselves, as they enlisted Artaud as a posthumous contributor to their avant-garde revolt against the conformity, militarism, and oppression of the Eisenhower era. Artaud was seen and presented by postwar avant-gardists as having set a unique and valuable precedent, and they duly responded to the template for non-conformism and critique which his life and work seemed to offer. ‘Artaud alone made an accusation/against America/Before me,’ wrote Allen Ginsberg in his journal on April 13, 1961.

Rather than attempting a comprehensive map of Artaud’s appropriation by postwar avant-gardists, this article will focus primarily on the reception of Artaud by the San Francisco Renaissance and Beat writers. Although his work became an important influence on these movements’ interests in anti-psychiatry, ecology, drugs and Mexico, the aim here is to uncover the role played by his work on the theatre in the development of their own work both on and in performance. Particular attention will be paid to their fascination with Artaud’s infamous radio broadcast ‘To Have Done with the Judgment of God,’ recorded for the Radiodiffusion Française in 1948, but banned from transmission by the station’s director, Wladimir Porché, on account of its
scatological and blasphemous sentiment. Despite their explicit declarations of Artaud’s significance to their poetics, the role of writers such as Michael McClure or Ginsberg in brokering the terms of his postwar legacy across the Atlantic, and in igniting what Edward Scheer has called ‘this explosion called Artaud,’ is usually overlooked in scholarship on either the American literary avant-garde, or on Artaud himself.\(^2\) The 1960s counterculture is usually portrayed as his first American sponsor, but the Artaud, or rather Artauds, which its adherents appropriate, descend directly from the literary avant-garde of the 1940s and 1950s.

Many American writers after the Second World War had found little use for Bretonian surrealism in the project of redefining an avant-garde fit for mid-twentieth-century purpose, despite sharing a similar portfolio of interests and beliefs.\(^3\) The San Francisco and Beat poets held in common with the surrealists their aestheticisation of the everyday and the conviction that political repression operated through the regulation of desire, and the standardization of thought and behaviour. However, according to this generation of American writers, who were confronting a context entirely different to the Paris of 1924 which had first given rise to surrealism, Breton’s movement was at best impotent, and at worst it was irredeemably corrupted, both in theory and in practice.

How had it been divested of any traction in the postwar cultural and political context? Figurehead for the San Francisco Renaissance, Kenneth Rexroth explains: ‘the surrealists of the period between the wars … assumed an accepted universe of discourse, in which, to quote André Breton, it was possible to make definite advances, exactly as in the sciences.’\(^4\) The calculations necessary to make the kind of ‘definite advances’ upon which surrealism had pinned its hopes of radical social transformation, pertained to an earlier era in which Marxist analysis still had some kind of purchase on the political and economic landscape. The working class was no longer seen as the guarantor of the revolution which had seemed to go so horribly wrong in Russia, and which would not now happen in America. From the partial defeat of totalitarianism in Europe and the beginning of Cold War politics sprang the Permanent War Economy in America, which, with a cruel irony, now also spoke in terms of ‘definite advances’; this time, not those subsumed within the dialectic of labour versus capital but of capital unchecked. The definite advances desired by what Herbert Marcuse called the technological rationality of mid-century America, were now calculated by the market researcher, the behavioural scientist, and the bureaucrat whose roles were to coordinate the ‘immediate, automatic identification of the individual with his society.’\(^5\) This ‘quantitative extension’ of social needs to supplant individual ones was also identified by Rexroth in his poem ‘The Dragon and the Unicorn.’\(^6\) Rexroth isolates ‘two collectivities/Whose whole force is exerted/To depersonalize and/Quantify persons — the State/And the Capitalist System.’\(^7\) Oppositional strategies must avoid speaking the language of quantification, of scientism or of totalisation, lest they duplicate the same errors as the intended
target of their critique.\textsuperscript{8} ‘Today the world is full/Of the vendors of well policed/Utopias, preachers of/Progress by mass arithmetic,’\textsuperscript{9} he declares, and amongst these vendors he ranks the ‘Quantified, passionate pseudo/Marxists and Freudians.’\textsuperscript{10} In other words, the surrealists, who with their science of the unconscious, historical materialism, and faith in the very modern physics which had created the atom bomb, the ‘Apotheosis of quantity,’ now appeared obsolete.\textsuperscript{11}

However proximate surrealist automatism seemed to the Beat and San Francisco writers’ aesthetic of unrevised spontaneity, the latter were keen to distance themselves from what appeared to be, in Henry Miller’s terms ‘a science of writing.’\textsuperscript{12} The charge that surrealist automatism was paradoxically too coercive, and too strictly policed was often heard from California writers. Miller notes that the surrealists’ ‘doctrinaire standpoint’ produced automatic writing a little ‘too deliberately’ for his liking, arguing that adherence to the demands of a universal unconscious served to disenfranchise genuine creativity.\textsuperscript{13} Likewise, Lawrence Ferlinghetti equates automatism with writing ‘dictated by some psychic source,’ adding that ‘[i]f I were being dictated to by some being or force, I would change the dictation; it wouldn’t come out the way he told me to write it. I don’t like dictators, even poetic ones!’\textsuperscript{14} Robert Duncan also employs similar rhetoric of violence and illegitimate control to describe the strictures of surrealist automatism: ‘The Absolutism of the Imagination which Breton speaks from and for[,] I know too well. And before that Dictatorship, that Revolutionary Dogma of Desire, I am raised, again, a heretic.’\textsuperscript{15} There was little inclination on behalf of these writers to abandon poetic autonomy or, as all good surrealists should, to commute a poet’s status to that of mere ‘recording instrument.’\textsuperscript{16}

Perhaps the final nail in the surrealist coffin was its vulnerability to the new technologies of appropriation which were unleashed following the explosion of not only mass culture, but the rapid development of the market for ‘high’ art in America. ‘Breton and Dali,’ wrote Rexroth ‘made business careers out of purveying charlatan horrors as commodities to rich and idle women and ballet régisseurs.’\textsuperscript{17} This was a criticism of surrealism echoed by Duncan, who publicly decried from the pages of the magazine \textit{Ark}, ‘the romantic revolutionists, Breton and Calas, [who] were taken up and taken in by the culture collectors … and capitalized on their revolutionary personalities.’\textsuperscript{18} In 1960, Rexroth could write of the younger writers in his midst, ‘to whom the whole epoch [of surrealism] is today the adventure of another generation.’\textsuperscript{19} For these writers, surrealism was consigned to a footnote in the annals of interesting, yet now outdated and superseded European aesthetics. Whilst Bretonian surrealism was attenuating in America, however, by the early 1960s interest in Artaud had reached a crescendo.

To revise the model of the historical avant-garde as represented by surrealism, and to render its successor immune from the threats of recuperation by ‘the literary industrial complex,’ the California literary avant-garde pursued a strategy of \textit{revolt}.\textsuperscript{20} ‘Revolt’ exceeded a quantitative or totalising approach to social and personal change insofar as, in McClure’s view, it ‘establishes
a way of life but does not take out revolt-insurance on the gain.21 Tapping a latent, inchoate repository of revolt rather than adherence to political or aesthetic dogma, underwrote the oppositionality of the San Francisco and Beat poets. Beyond the strictly policed surface of Cold War conformity and homogeneity, they sought to establish contact with the rampant heterogeneity of impulses, desires or the new consciousness, which, in McClure’s view, afforded glimpses through ‘the cracks in the structure,’ of ‘extra societal insights … [of] a negative.’22

Artaud’s work was welcomed enthusiastically into this new model for avant-garde activity; he had, after all, some quarter of a century earlier embarked on his own exploration of oppositionality which circumvented the totalising methodology of both Marxism and psychoanalysis. Artaud had rejected surrealism in 1927, earning not only immunity from the criticism leveled at Breton’s movement by American writers, but considerable cultural capital, as Carl Solomon applauds; ‘he even rebelled against surrealism which itself is supposed to be rebellion against society deriving from a rebellion against the “rebel.”’23 Artaud’s break with the surrealists was predicated upon their alliance with Marxism, and Breton’s apparently erroneous decision ‘to seek in the realm of facts and of immediate matter the culmination of an action that could normally develop only within the inmost confines of the brain.’24 Artaud’s privileging of psychic as opposed to material revolt proved attractive to Beat and San Francisco writers, who were also compelled, in Ginsberg’s words, to defend their ‘purely personal’ rebellion from the attempts of the orthodox left to ‘lead the energy away from a transformation of consciousness to the materialistic level of political rationalism.’25 Duncan attributes to Artaud the status of ‘culture hero’ suggesting that ‘it is the Artaud who, in breaking with Marxist and Freudian rationalizations of Breton’s official Surrealism took his sickness itself to be the new revolution.’26 His sickness constituted an inscrutable plane of existence which evaded capture by any discourse or instrument. ‘Everything that science has taken away from us,’ he wrote, ‘everything it isolates in its retorts, its microscopes, its scales, its complicated mechanisms, everything it reduces to numbers, we aspire to win back from science, which is stifling out vitality.’27 The dichotomies between science and vitality, rationalism and insanity, consciousness and materialism which pervade Artaud’s work are echoed in the rhetoric and poetics of the Beat and San Francisco writers. Likewise, his stance against formalism and academicism, discernable from his early correspondence with Jacques Rivière, and amplified in his ‘No More Masterpieces,’ was also akin to the new literary avant-garde’s opposition to the New York Intellectuals and the New Critics’ claims that formal experimentation and abstraction were the only viable pursuits for an operational avant-garde in its bid to save culture from the threat of kitsch.

Artaud’s denigration of the body occasionally sits uneasily with California writers’ celebration of flesh, of meat and of desire, but anyone addressing these topics directly was raised in relief from the climate of conformity during the Eisenhower era. As Paul Goodman observed,
with Artaud, ‘his passion is more important than sound sense’ and even when excoriating the body, the ferocity of his denouncements harmonised with those who were celebrating desire and instincts with equal intensity. Artaud was an eclectic and sometimes contradictory thinker, and his oeuvre precludes a systematising approach. Mike Sell notes that ‘true to the spirit of Artaud, his rescue by a younger generation did not result in any specifiable “School of Artaud,” no “masterpieces” of the kind he despised.’ The importance of Artaud to these writers lay in the extra-textual affects and effects produced by his work, and they pursue an embodied Artaud, interested in traces of blood and semen on his manuscripts, the intensity of his screams and the depths of his suffering. The West-Coast Artaud was a composite rather than singular figure; poets draw eclectically from his work, highlighting some features, and de-emphasising others. Rather than deceased predecessor, Artaud is constructed through a variety of editorial and presentational strategies, as a companion, an almost interchangeable member of the Beat and San Francisco literary avant-gardes. McClure, for example, declared that he ‘saw him as an older brother’ and when Rexroth noted in 1957 that, compared to any other postwar French writer, ‘Artaud … would be more at home here [on the West coast],' he demonstrates how their interaction with Artaud is analogous to extending virtual hospitality to the Frenchman.

Artaud’s work had begun to appear in America during the 1930s and 40s. Eugene Jolas’ transition magazine published ‘The Sea Shell and the Clergyman: Film Scenario’ in its Spring-Summer issue in 1930 and Charles Henri Ford’s surrealist publication View included a communiqué from Artaud in 1942. His essay ‘Van Gogh the Man Suicided by Society’ was translated by Bernard Fretchman and published in Tigers Eye in March 1949, an earlier translation of which appeared in Cyril Connolly’s British based Horizon magazine in January 1948, under the title ‘Van Gogh: The Suicide Provoked by Society,’ translated by Peter Watson. Transition later published Artaud’s ‘Journey to the Land of the Tarahumaras’ in 1948 and Jay Landesman’s New York based Neurotica magazine featured Solomon’s ‘Report from the Asylum – Afterthoughts of a Shock Patient’ in 1950, in which he offered a comparison of his own and Artaud’s experiences in a mental institution. Black Mountain Review published short fragments by Artaud, translated by Rexroth in 1954. Whilst Artaud’s writings about drugs and Mexico, along with his proto-anti-psychiatric views, exerted a powerful fascination for the literary avant-garde as it was congregating on the East Coast, an interest in his theatre manifestoes was also emerging.

The reception and appropriation of his ‘Theatre of Cruelty’ in America has attracted considerable attention from scholars of the theatrical avant-garde, yet usually neglected in their discussion of American cruelty are other avant-gardists who may not have identified exclusively with the theatre, but were undoubtedly performers, if not part-time dramatists. Amongst these we can rank a few writers associated with the California literary avant-garde; Ginsberg and McClure in particular, who played no small part in the sourcing and dissemination of Artaud’s
writing on performance. They, Douglas Kahn argues, ‘mount their own Artaud inspired theater,’ in addition to, and sometimes in advance of, his more famous theatrical disciples such as the Living Theater, Richard Foreman and Allan Kaprow.33

Sell notes that ‘Cruelty landed on American shores in the spring of 1958 and premiered to mixed reviews the next summer.’34 In was during this year that Mary Caroline Richards, onetime head of faculty at Black Mountain College, published her translation of The Theater and its Double. She had in fact begun to translate the manifestoes in 1951, undertaking the project for colleagues involved with the Black Mountain project who she knew would be ‘fascinated by this improbable work.’35 Despite the College’s interest in avant-garde drama and performance, she notes that prior to her translation no one had yet heard of Artaud’s bold new plans for the ‘Theatre of Cruelty.’ Her translation was ‘a little offering in the direction’ of the ‘social renewal’ she found central to Artaud’s proposals.36 Richards’ translation was, however, rejected many times by American publishers for being, she notes, too ‘sophomoric’ before it was finally released by Barney Rosset’s Grove Press in 1958.37

The ‘Theatre of Cruelty’ had in fact slipped, virtually unnoticed, onto American shores well before Richards had been introduced to Artaud by composer and musician David Tudor (who had himself encountered Artaud by way of the French composer Pierre Boulez.) Robert Duncan and Sanders Russell’s Experimental Review published in 1941 a short text by Anaïs Nin, entitled ‘The Story of Pierre’ in which the eponymous character is patently a representation of Artaud. In the story, culled and adapted mostly from entries in her diaries, Pierre makes what might rank as the first remarks in America about the ‘Theatre of Cruelty.’ He is described as being possessed of a ‘vision burning in the pupil of his eye, and the intensity of the man who committed suicide every moment, assassinating himself slowly, by torture, but unwilling to die alone and bringing all others down with him into his death,’ and the proposals for the new theatre convey something of the apocalyptic character of their creator:

I am starting a Theatre of Cruelty. I am against the objectivity of the theatre. The drama should not take place on a stage separated from the audience, but right in the center of it, so near to them that they will feel it happening inside of themselves ... There will be no talking. Gestures, cries, music. I want scenes like the ancient rituals, which will transport people, give them ecstasy and fear. I want to enact such violence and cruelty that people will feel the blood in them. I want them to be so affected that they will participate.38

Receiving little support for his proposals, and distressed by the unnamed narrator’s rejection of his love, Pierre offers terrifying descriptions of his anguish:

I am the one who has reached states one never dares to name, states of the soul of the damned. I have known those abortions of the spirit, the awareness of the failures, the knowledge of the times when the spirit falls into darkness, is lost.
The story closes with his incarceration in a mental institute, a tragic subject of ridicule, as two hospital attendants bid him to walk whilst his feet are bound. ‘He was permitted to fall,’ concludes the story, somewhat ominously. Whilst this veiled introduction to Artaud might have passed under the cultural radar in 1941, by the early 1950s Black Mountain College was an effective conduit for cruelty, overseeing its passage into an enthusiastic American avant-garde.

David Tudor also introduced Artaud to John Cage, another Black Mountain alumnus, and together they produced the legendary ‘Untitled Event’ in 1952 at the College. This was an unscripted multi-disciplinary, multi-media performance in which students and teachers contributed individually to the spectacle, in a series of overlapping presentations totaling 45 minutes. Cage explicitly attributed the blueprint of the event to Artaud, whose vision of a theatre ‘that would not use all of its means toward a literary end,’ he believed they had made manifest. Although relatively insignificant at the time, one of many radical experiments at the College, the event boasts foundational status for the happenings and be-ins which would occur frequently throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Information about Artaud was seeping out from the College and entering wider theatrical avant-garde circles. Richards met with Julian Beck and Judith Malina in April 1958, the year her translation was published. This ‘banal occurrence – three artists discussing art and the avant-garde over drinks,’ argues Sell, ‘would permanently alter the terrain of political strategy in the United States and abroad.’ By November 1958, in a review of The Theater and its Double published in The Nation, Paul Goodman was already describing Artaud as ‘the idol of the theatre people.’

Yet the Living Theater and their associates did not have a monopoly on cruelty. To the postwar literary avant-garde, both in New York and California, performance was a crucial weapon in their arsenal of revolt. On the West Coast, the tradition of the live poetry reading, sometimes with a jazz accompaniment, had been a staple of the alternative scene, encouraged by the efforts of Rexroth, whose Friday night soirees at his home were famous for their heady mixture of poetry, discussion and wine. The significance of performance to the writers who gathered in the Bay Area from the early 1950s onwards exceeded merely a pleasant way to spend an evening. As Daniel Belgrad observed, ‘readings circumvented the time-lag associated with publishing’ and the frequent delays on account of censorship, legal trials or confiscations of magazines. Furthermore, when transposed from the page to stage, from the library to the street, poetry ‘became an actual social force.’ Poetry, viewed as ‘an art of speech,’ noted Rexroth, ‘can only be helped by its restoration to immediate contact with a living audience.’ This immediate contact was vital in the process of transposing personal transformation to the social level. As Lawrence Lipton observed ‘it is enough for the artist to say it, to do it, to live it. Contagion will take care of the rest. These poetry readings are one way of spreading the contagion.’ Spreading the contagion was predicated upon the dissolution of the distinction between performer and
audience. Together they became a collective sign of opposition, a living embodiment of social relations which did not reduce the individual to an integer of fire power or labour power. As William Everson describes:

This accent on the spoken rather than the printed word, the devolution from the fixed standard of the page and its emphasis on dispassionate analysis which the eye implements, meant of course a rise in participation mystique … Now the poetry reading was transformed from recital into encounter.46

With this emphasis on performance came a renewed sense of the pragmatics of speech. To intervene in reality, rather than just reflect it, the poem required the insertion of the poet's physical being into the work, rendering the poem, the poet and the performance inseparable.

We cannot here undertake a detailed comparison between the California writers’ modeling of performance and Artaud’s more explicit formulations for the ‘Theatre of Cruelty.’ For our purposes, identifying their combined emphasis on reaching, and then altering an audience, the downgrading of the script in favour of an invigorated mise-en-scène, and their resistance to creating celebrated masterpieces, in accordance with an outmoded set of aesthetic criteria, provide sufficient context for the following discussion.

Prior to the publication of Richards’ translation of Artaud’s theatre manifestoes, interested writers had access to her unpublished manuscript. Cid Corman’s Origin: A Quarterly for the Creative, No. 11 in autumn 1953 had published a sizeable extract along with some short aphorisms and poems by Artaud, and Rosset’s Evergreen Review published ‘No More Masterpieces’ in Summer 1958. Her translation must also have been shared amongst other writers, since an entry in Ginsberg’s journal in 1956 reproduces an excerpt which had not appeared in either Evergreen Review or Origin.47 These writers were becoming fluent in an Artaudian lexicon, and a respect for the dissident surrealist was emerging as a lingua franca amongst the poets on the West Coast. McClure, who moved to San Francisco in 1952, recalls that that ‘one of my first exchanges with Philip Lamantia on meeting him in 1954 was to ask where I could find more works by Artaud.’48 One such work which reached McClure in the early 1950s was an unpublished translation by Guy Wernham of ‘To Have Done with the Judgment of God,’ subtitled ‘An English Approximation,’ and he recalls responding enthusiastically to its ‘insanely lucid picture of the military madness of the Cold War.’49 Jack Kerouac was the notable exception to this reverence for Artaud. In his poem ‘My Gang’ written in 1956, he spurned Artaud and the pressure on him from his peers to share in their admiration for the dissident surrealist:

Artaud was the cookie that was always/in my hair, a ripe screaming tight/brother with heinous helling neck-veins/who liked to riddle my fantasms/with yaks of mock squeak joy/’Why dont you like young Artaud?’/always I’m asked, because he boasts
and boasts,/brags, brags, ya, ya, ya,/because he’s crazy because he’s mad/and because he never gives us a chance to talk.50

Kerouac’s account of Artaud’s deleterious influence emphasises his embodied, noisy presence on the West Coast, which apparently threatened the audibility and integrity of his eager disciples’ voices and even assaulted them physically (‘always/in my hair’).

The Six Gallery Reading on 7 October 1955, at which Ginsberg famously premiered his long poem ‘Howl,’ could be described as serving a similar function to the Untitled Happening at Black Mountain College, insofar as Artaud arguably presided over both in absentia. ‘[O]pen to the world and the world was welcome,’ recalls McClure, the event saw not only Ginsberg, but Lamantia, McClure, Philip Whalen and Gary Snyder all perform.51 Ginsberg and McClure’s contributions in particular bore witness to the influence of Artaud and contributed further to the dissemination of his modalities of revolt to a wider West Coast audience.

To McClure, Artaud was almost a contemporary, his death occurring ‘only seven years before our Six Gallery Reading,’52 and he states that it was in response to a line of Artaud’s (‘It is not possible that in the end the miracle will not occur’) that he wrote his poem ‘Point Lobos: Animism,’ which he performed at the reading.53 In this poem, McClure expresses his dismay at collective indifference to the natural world: ‘I have been in a spot so full of spirits/That even the most joyful animist/Brooded/When all in sight was less to be cared about/Than death.’54 Concern for death distracts from the more deserving task of appreciating and ensuring life’s continuation. Whilst sharing with Artaud a belief in a duality of the spiritual and the physical, according to McClure, the latter is not the barrier to the former as it is in some of Artaud’s work. McClure writes in a comment on the poem, ‘I wanted to join Nature not by my mind but by my viscera - my belly,’ and what remain resolutely separated by the metaphysics of Artaud’s later writing – the physical and the spiritual – have the potential to combine in McClure’s.55 Concern for the natural world in the immediate present replaces Artaud’s hypothesising about the arrival of a miracle.

McClure later acknowledged the contradiction between his celebration and Artaud’s denigration of the physical, when he noted that ‘though my feelings and beliefs were the opposite of his … he spoke to me profoundly,’ adding that ‘[a]lthough we were all body poets, we looked to Artaud as our immediate ancestor.’56 Kahn accounts for the way in which the potential conflict between the American ‘body poets’ and the ‘anti-body’ stance of Artaud in his Gnostic mode was to some degree overcome, by suggesting that ‘in the context of 1950s America any attention to the body was refreshing, and even though Artaud wished to shed his body, his incredibly prolonged discourse around the moment of this desire rendered the body ever-present, if not desirous itself.’57 Artaud was not so much the obvious choice but the only choice available to those wishing to explore the theme. Kahn also suggests that implicit in Artaud’s ‘To Have Done with the Judgment of God,’ (with which McClure was at this time familiar), are traces of the very
ecological awareness towards which McClure’s ‘Point Lobos’ poem, and much of his subsequent work, were grasping. Kahn argues that:

if we go back and read Artaud ecologically, which is an approach not immediately suggested by his writing, there arises the possibility that Artaud could have very well acted as a legitimization for these early stages of ecological poetry in the United States.\(^5^8\)

When the inaugural issue of *The Journal for the Protection of All Beings*, the ‘Love-Shot Issue’ (1961) published an extract from Artaud’s ‘To Have Done,’ (translated not by Wernham but by Ferlinghetti), it is perhaps no surprise that from his scatological tirade, they select the part in which Artaud describes the Permanent War Economy’s ‘final reign’:

> Of all the phony manufactured products,
> Of all the ersatz synthetic substitutes,
> Where true lovely Nature has nothing to do
> And must once and for all shamefully give up its place
> To all the triumphant substitute products …
>
> No more fruit, no more trees, no more vegetables,
> No more medicinal plants and/or – consequently –
> No more foods,
> But synthetic products to the full,
> Synthetic products to satiety \(^5^9\)

Artaud’s thought lent itself, without too much of a stretch, to the growing ecological consciousness on the West Coast which protested the exploitation and objectification of ‘lovely Nature’ and sought to warn the world before, as in Artaud’s bleaker view, the damage became irreversible.

Like that of McClure, Ginsberg’s performance at the Six Gallery Reading, the now legendary premiere of ‘Howl,’ was also informed by Artaud. Dedicated to Carl Solomon, his companion during his confinement in the Columbia Presbyterian Psychiatric Institute, the poem catalogues the experiences of his ‘generation destroyed by madness.’ It takes the position that, contrary to the explanations of many contemporary commentators for the delinquent behaviour of the Beat Generation, such madness is not pathological, but a rebellion against Moloch, and an affirmation of what it seeks to destroy. Lines such as ‘I’m with you in Rockland/where fifty more shocks will never return your soul to its body again from its pilgrimage to/a cross in the Void’ echo Solomon’s account of his psychiatric treatment, which was itself mediated through Artaud’s work.\(^6^0\) This is the post-Rodez Artaud, whose ‘Van Gogh’ essay was an important source text for the burgeoning anti-psychiatric movement in America. Also manifest in Ginsberg’s poem is a reverence for peyote, in part derived from Artaud. The second part of ‘Howl’ was composed whilst he was under the influence of the drug, an experience for which he had been vicariously prepared by Artaud’s description of the peyote ritual he had participated in during his travels in Mexico.
Ginsberg noted that ‘by 1952 we already had had the experience of peyote partly as a result of translations of Artaud’s *Voyage au Pays des Tarahumaras*.’

Artaud’s theatrical writing also informs the new poetics inaugurated by Ginsberg’s ‘Howl.’ In a comment on the poem, Ginsberg observed that ‘Antonin Artaud’s holy despair breaks all old verse forms … Artaud’s physical breath has inevitable propulsion toward specific inviolable insight on “Moloch whose name is the Mind!”’ Along with Kerouac, Charles Olson, Walt Whitman, and Ezra Pound, Artaud ranked as a notable precursor to the notion of the breath as measure of the long line, the embrace of which enabled Ginsberg to abandon his earlier experiments in formal verse and to introduce the physiology of the body into the composition and performance of his poetry. Of his technique Ginsberg writes:

> the line itself is connected with the breath in that the whole body’s intention is mobilized to pronounce the complete phrase…and if it is a physical breath it means it’s the whole metabolism and the feelings of the body and the heart spasm that’s involved, so that the breath leads, so to speak, directly to the heart, the center of feeling.

The importance of the breath was, Ginsberg observed in 1968, ‘articulate in Artaud’ according to whom the role of the actor, as ‘an athlete of the heart,’ was to seek the correspondences between physical and emotional states and to exteriorise them. This was achieved through attention to the ‘rhythms of the breath’ since, Artaud writes, it ‘is certain that for every feeling, every movement of the mind, every leap of human emotion, there is a breath that belongs to it.’ It is possible that the significance of Artaud’s theatrical writings for the method of composition and performance of ‘Howl’ appeared only retrospectively since, as Kahn notes, Ginsberg had ‘a habit of generously crediting his sources.’ It is evident, however, that he had access to Richards’ translation of *The Theater and its Double* prior to its publication in 1958 because he reproduced in a journal entry dated April 1956, a quotation from Artaud’s manifesto: ‘Our nervous system after a certain period absorbs the vibrations of the subtlest music and in a sense is modified by it in a lasting way,’ commenting himself that Artaud’s manifesto constitutes an ‘Example of ignuschizoid perception.’ However, what he had read before the composition of ‘Howl’ in the months preceding the Six Gallery Reading in 1955 is difficult to ascertain.

Many indicators of cruelty can be identified at the Six Gallery Reading, at which not just wine, but tears and sweat famously flowed. The permanent transformation of the audience and the assault on their whole being was one of the mainstays of Artaud’s ‘Theatre of Cruelty,’ which operated on its audience as a plague would its victims. The commingling of performers and spectators, and the irrevocability of the changes which the night wrought, not just on those present, but on the entire cultural landscape, are evidence that this was an event along Artaudian lines. Of Ginsberg’s performance, Rexroth noted that ‘When he finished the audience of 250 stood and clapped and cheered and wept.’ McClure suggests that Ginsberg’s performance left
the audience ‘knowing … that a human voice and body had been hurled against the harsh wall of America and its supporting armies and navies and academies and institutions and ownership systems and power-support bases.’ The night, in his view, went ‘beyond a point of no return.’ At another celebrated poetry reading, organised by Lipton in Los Angeles, Anaïs Nin was present to witness Ginsberg perform ‘Howl’ which, in her view, ‘had a savage power. At moments, it did seem like the howling of animals. It reminded me of Artaud’s mad conference at the Sorbonne.’

Given their interest in Artaudian theatre, it is not surprising to discover that examples of Artaud in performance were avidly sought by these writers. In the spring of 1961, following Ginsberg’s return to Paris, a new text by Artaud was made available which would exert a powerful influence over many sectors of the postwar American avant-garde. According to Barry Miles, Ginsberg’s friend Jean-Jacques Lebel illicitly procured a copy of the banned recording of ‘To have Done with the Judgment of God’ and played it to Ginsberg, Peter Orlovsky and Brion Gysin who were, Lebel recalls, ‘thrilled at the idea of hearing Artaud’s actual voice.’ Ginsberg shrewdly obtained five copies of the tape, and sent them back to McClure, LeRoi Jones, and Judith Malina. Kahn contradicts Miles’ version of the illegal procurement of the tape, and suggests that it was not until after the events of May 1968 in Paris that the tape was ‘liberated from the vaults of the RTF [Radiodiffusion-Télévision Française]’ and reached the American poets. Admittedly McClure’s own accounts are contradictory: in an interview in 1992, he too alleges that Lebel did not obtain the tape until 1968. However, in addition to Miles’ account, there exists other compelling evidence to support the case that American writers obtained a copy in advance of the events of May 1968. For example, describing his experience in an Indian monastery in a journal entry dated 28 May 1962, Ginsberg likens the sutra chanting, ‘interspersed with horns, cymbals, drums, bells, the great Tibetan sound,’ to the percussion on ‘the Artaud tape.’ Moreover, McClure wrote an unpublished poem (c. 1955-1965), entitled ‘On Hearing the Tape of: LET US HAVE DONE WITH THE JUDGEMENT OF GOD,’ in which he replies directly to Artaud and paradoxically extracts a message of love, peace and redemption from his vituperative polemic.

Furthermore, it is certain that the tape of Artaud’s ‘To Have Done’ was played during a performance of McClure’s drama The Blossom or Billy the Kid, directed by Alan Marlowe and sponsored by the American Theater for Poets. Written in 1959, the play was McClure’s second foray into drama and was, he noted, ‘even more Artaud-like than most people realized.’ On reading The Theater and Its Double he was ‘convinced by Artaud that texts were needed for the theatre and that it would be the poets who would write these texts. I was inflamed with his idea of cruelty,’ and felt that his own poetics could be productively transposed into drama. The date of the Poets’ Theater production is difficult to confirm. McClure writes in an introduction to an edition of the play that it ‘was first performed in a private theater club in New York City, Summer 1963,’ where it ‘shared the evening with a tape of POUR EN FINIR AVEC LE JUGEMENT DE DIEU by
Antonin Artaud as recorded by Antonin Artaud for Radiodiffusion Francaise, 1947. In Recollections of my Life as a Woman Diane Di Prima, co-founder of the theater group, suggests that the play and the broadcast, ‘complete with gongs and blood-curdling screams’ ran from ‘February through May 1964.’ She recalls that due to the impressively sized speakers used in the production, it was not only the play’s audience who heard the Artaud tape, but that:

all of Bleecker Street within a couple of blocks of Gerde’s Folk City was treated to the howling of Antonin Artaud each night that The Blossom was running. It sounded above the traffic, above the rest of the city racket, and in the long dusk Artaud’s work, like he always meant it to be, was a magickal [sic] act.

At any rate these accounts date the performance earlier than 1968. The significance of the broadcast to McClure’s play lay, according to Robert Cordier’s programme notes, in the way in which Artaud’s ‘howlings, supersharpe pintonations … blow through the civic, moral patriotic, equal, brotherly, free, bluewhitered night of la belle France.’ McClure’s drama was itself seeking to puncture illusion and hypocrisy, not only with shrieks or cries, but through ‘projective verse,’ and the way in which this operated on the spectators. McClure’s own statements on the productive intervention of Artaud in American poetics and dramaturgy echo Ginsberg’s. McClure found in Artaud:

a breakthrough incarnate … a way into the open field of poetry and into the open shape of verse and into the physicality of thought. I was looking for a verbal and physical athletics where poetry could be achieved. In their direct statement to my nerves, lines of Artaud’s were creating physical tensions, and gave my ideas for entries into a new mode of verse.

Resembling Artaud’s pronouncements on the ‘Theater of Cruelty,’ McClure declared in the programme notes for the Poets’ Theater production of The Blossom or Billy the Kid:

The Theater will utilize all equipment and all possibilities … Without the spectator the theater is a sculpture and not a living creature.

The new theater must have a nervous system but the spectators will being the physical consciousness to being … The energy of the human spirit will resume its ability TO ACT.

TO ACT IS NOT TO MIMIC BUT TO INVENT!

Sacrificing any claims to psychological verisimilitude or plot development, the play is set in eternity and consists of a series of declarations by, rather than in any recognizable sense exchanges between, Billy the Kidd, and other participants in the Lincoln County War in New Mexico; his former employer, Tunstall, and a married couple, the McSweens. ‘Characters do not
speak,' Michael Davidson argues, in an accurate description of McClure’s drama, ‘so much as
give testimony.’ 87 McClure wishes for the protagonists to be seen as ‘energies’ rather than ‘mortal
beings,’ and more importantly ‘energies’ coterminous with the audience’s reality. Emotion is,
according to McClure, not supplementary to drama, but rather its foundation. The characters
move from one emotional intensity to the next – love, rage, desire, fear – and language is
stretched to the point of incoherence. Governed by the binaries underpinning Western thought,
which insist on the separation of now and then, life and death, heat and cold, language is ill-
equipped to express intensities which resist such compartmentalisation. McClure’s characters, for
example, explore the ‘EVER-INSTANT’ 88 to produce declarations such as: ‘IMMORTAL
LIFEDEATH IN WHITE BLACKNESS’ 89 and ‘HOT ACT IS A COOLNESS WITHIN IT!’ 90 The
screams and the glossolalia from Artaud’s broadcast, evidence that he too had renounced
language, are an aligned strategy to McClure’s, insofar as both intimate something which cannot
be captured by verbal language or rational thought. 91

In addition to its publication in The Journal for the Protection of All Beings and later in
The North West Review in 1963, there were also plans to re-produce Artaud’s ‘To Have Done
with Judgment of God.’ 92 At the behest of assemblage artist Wallace Berman, an ardent admirer
of Artaud’s, KPFK, the independent radio station in Los Angeles, planned to devote ten days of
programming to Artaud in 1962, to which John Fles, Anaïs Nin and Jack Hirschman would also
have contributed. If the French public had been denied the opportunity to hear Artaud’s
broadcast, his West Coast disciples were committed to ensuring that Californians would not be
similarly deprived, by seeking to bring Artaud to as wide an audience as possible. Berman
outlined his plans to produce and direct Artaud’s ‘To Have Done’ using the Wernham translation
in a letter to David Meltzer, in which he notes that he hoped Lamantia would play Artaud since ‘I
think it would be cooler for a non professional to swing behind it a poet who digs Artaud.’ 93 He
also states that he was ‘wanting to take a great deal of liberty with this mother’ and, amongst
other suggestions that sought to preserve the surreality, if not the integrity, of the original piece,
planned to incorporate the sound of a baseball crowd in the production. 94 Whilst it is difficult to
know if this project ever came to fruition, the proposal to splice his monologue with signifiers of
Americana is intriguing evidence of West Coast writers’ strategy to recontextualise the dissident
surrealist, an approach which was not extended to surrealism proper.

In addition to those already mentioned, Artaud continued to appear in little magazines
throughout the late 1950s and early 1960s – examples of these include Evergreen Review, Fuck
Artaud a substantial readership on the West Coast perhaps culminated in the anthology of his
work brought out by City Lights Books in 1965, the first of its kind in English. The collection had
originally been titled ‘Selected Revelations’ and had been first conceived towards the end of
1950s, yet the processes of selecting and translating Artaud’s work, not to mention securing the rights from his estate, took over half a decade to complete. Stephen Barber describes the anthology as ‘one of the most influential books published by City Lights Books in the 1960s,’ thumbed by many a young radical or artist in the Anglophone world. Ferlinghetti had ceded editorship of the anthology to Jack Hirschman, a student and teacher at UCLA, whose selection of material was both idiosyncratic and anomalous, featuring some from the time of Artaud’s association with the surrealists but devoting the greater share of pages to the final writings after his internment at Rodez. The sequencing of the material obeys a logic other than chronological, and as Barber suggests, the book ‘lent itself to multiple, individual readings: short or intensive readings, undertaken on the run, on journeys, or while engaged in creative projects.’

The anthology was lavishly praised by Charles Bukowski in the Los Angeles Free Press, in which he noted that Hirschman ‘has done a beautiful job of assembly … Artaud comes upon us – straight shot, no chaser. The only way to take him.’ Perhaps unsurprisingly it was only tentatively received in the New York Review of Books. Reviewer John Weightman praised the translations, yet could not ‘agree with Artaud’s admirers that his poetry is something significant greater than a flux of words coming from a diseased brain.’ Other criticisms of the anthology inverted Weightman’s emphasis and worked from the assumption that Artaud’s work itself is magnificent, but that Hirschman and Ferlinghetti had failed to do it justice. Some French commentators were displeased with the distribution of Artaud’s supposedly esoteric work amongst a mass American readership, and moreover a readership who claimed such an affinity with this venerated hero of the French avant-garde. Paule Thévenin, who aided Hirschman in the acquisition of material for the anthology, came to detest the final version, feeling that the emphasis on Artaud’s drug experimentation had misrepresented her close friend. Anaïs Nin had the same reservations about Hirschman and his associates’ interest in Artaud. During her stay in Los Angeles she had befriended Hirschman and joined other invitees at a night he organised in honour of Artaud. She wrote in her diary, in the Spring of 1961 that:

they love only his madness and his use of drugs. They knew nothing of the seven volumes of collected works. Artaud would have repudiated them … Would Artaud have admired the drugged generation? If in his lifetime he was misunderstood, I do not think he would have preferred what is said and written about him now.

Susan Sontag and Martin Esslin would also lend their weight to the chorus of voices decrying the abuses of, and cavalier liberty-taking with, Artaud’s legacy by American radicals. Our aim here, however, has not been to arbitrate between competing versions of Artaud, or to lament the ‘doubles that have taken over Artaud’s legacy,’ which has by now become a familiar trope in Artaud scholarship. It has been instead to expose the motivations behind the strategies for the representation and recontextualisation of Artaud in the postwar American context. The
revolt of the literary avant-garde against the academic, political and social establishment, into which Artaud was recruited, was premised upon the flouting of aesthetic, moral or social norms. Born of this strategy, rather than from ignorance or omission, was the privileging of the experiential rather than the textual limits intimated by his work (deconstructive critics, Sontag included, would later invert this emphasis). Beat and San Francisco Renaissance writers’ marked preference for Artaud over Breton functions as a kind of synecdoche for the revisions they had made to the historical avant-garde, and raises in relief the way in which writers such as Rexroth, Ginsberg and McClure wished their avant-garde to practice opposition to Cold War culture and politics. Their revised model of avant-garde activity did not press irrationality into the service of Freudianism, or protest into Marxist dialectics. Revolt depended upon tropes of contradiction which did not derive from psychoanalysis or historical materialism, and these were in plentiful supply in Artaud’s oeuvre. When the San Francisco and Beat poets sourced, translated and engaged with Artaud’s work, there were no restrictions accompanying it. They were free to admire and make use of his dissident surrealism exactly as they wished. Unlike orthodox surrealism, which required membership and obedience from its followers, it was they who were setting the course for their own, and subsequent, interaction with Artaud. The tendency to favour Artaud over Breton, to prefer a dissident rather than orthodox surrealism, is a feature of broader trends in postwar transatlantic cultural and intellectual history, to which the Beat and San Francisco writers contribute a significant chapter.102

A version of this article was presented at the New Perspectives on Surrealism and its Legacies: Fifth Annual PhD Symposium, Tate Modern, London, in June 2007.


3 There were a few exceptions to this general shunning of Bretonian surrealism by the San Francisco and Beat writers. Philip Lamantia, who after severing the ties he had made with Breton and his associates during their exile in New York, later rejoined the surrealist group in 1967. For an account his involvement with the surrealist, see his interview with David Meltzer et al., in San Francisco Beat: Talking with the Poets, City Lights Books, San Francisco, 2001. The African-


6 Ibid., 14.


8 Ibid.

9 Ibid., 128.

10 Ibid., 95.

11 Ibid., 97.


14 Ferlinghetti, quoted in Larry Smith, Lawrence Ferlinghetti: Poet at Large, 60-61.


19 Rexroth, ‘Poets in Revolt,’ a review of Surrealism: The Road to the Absolute, by Anna Balakian The New York Times, April 24, 1960. Rexroth acknowledges that the poetry of Charles Henri Ford, Parker Tyler, Eugene Jolas and Philip Lamantia testified, at one point, to the presence of surrealism in America but this influence had abated well before 1960.


24 Artaud, ‘In Total Darkness, or the Surrealist Bluff,’ in Antonin Artaud: Selected Writings, ed. Susan Sontag, University of California Press, California, 1988, 139.


27 Artaud, ‘Man Against Destiny,’ in Antonin Artaud: Selected Writings, 361.


31 Rexroth, ‘San Francisco’s Mature Bohemians,’ The Nation, 23 February 1957.


34 Sell, Avant-Garde Performance and the Limits of Criticism, 59.


36 Richards, Opening Our Moral Eye, 36.

37 Ibid., 35.


40 Sell, Avant-Garde Performance and the Limits of Criticism, 59.


42 Belgrad, The Culture of Spontaneity, 218.


47 See Ginsberg, Journals: Early Fifties, Early Sixties, 96.


51 McClure, Scratching the Beat Surface, 23.

52 Ibid., 24.

53 Ibid. Douglas Kahn notes that this line of Artaud’s had appeared amongst the selection of short poems and aphorisms in Corman’s Origin.


55 Ibid., 26.


57 Kahn, ‘Cruelty and the Beast: Antonin Artaud and Michael McClure,’ 327.

58 Ibid., 336.


64 Ibid., 146.


66 Kahn, ‘Cruelty and the Beast,’ 334.

67 Ginsberg, Journals: Early Fifties, Early Sixties, 96.


69 McClure, Scratching the Beat Surface, 15.

70 Ibid., 13.

71 Anaïs Nin, The Diary of Anaïs Nin, 1955-1966, ed. Gunther Stuhlmann, Harcourt, New York, 1976, 64. It is likely that the event to which she refers was Artaud’s lecture ‘The Theatre and the Plague,’ delivered on 6th April, 1933.

73 Kahn, ‘Cruelty and the Beast,’ 344.

74 See McClure, *Lighting the Corners*, 168.


79 McClure, interview with David Meltzer, in *The San Francisco Poets*, 254.


82 Ibid., 388.

83 Robert Cordier, notes on Programme for American Poets’ Theater production of *The Blossom or Billy the Kid*, undated and unpaginated. Author’s own.

84 McClure, notes on Programme for American Poets’ Theater production of *The Blossom or Billy the Kid*, undated and unpaginated. Author’s own.


86 McClure, notes on Programme for American Poets’ Theater production of *The Blossom or Billy the Kid*, undated and unpaginated.


89 Ibid., 39.

90 Ibid., 26. Emphasis in the original.

91 See Davidson’s *The San Francisco Renaissance*, 85-93 for a fuller discussion of McClure’s embodied poetics and the development of his ‘beast language.’

92 Oregon University’s in-house magazine, *The North West Review* also published an extract of the Wernham translation of ‘To Have Done’ in 1963 [Vol. 6, No. 4]. This issue was banned by the university authorities, an act widely attributed to the blasphemy contained in Artaud’s text. It is possible, however, that the publication of an interview with Fidel Castro in the same issue was what prompted the censors.


94 Ibid.
95 Stephen Barber, ‘Artaud’s Last Work and the City Lights Anthology,’ in City Lights: Pocket Poets and Pocket Books, 223. See this article for a full account of the anthology’s birth pangs.

96 Barber, ‘Artaud’s Last Work and the City Lights Anthology,’ 225.


103 For examples of postwar French thought which prefer the dissident surrealism of Artaud to the orthodox surrealism of Breton, and unlike Esslin or Sontag, praise Artaud’s American disciples, see Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s two volumes of Capitalism and Schizophrenia, Anti-Oedipus, Continuum, London, [1972], 2003, and A Thousand Plateaus, Continuum, London, [1980], 2002. Similar tendencies are also visible in the Tel Quel group. See Danielle Marx-Scouras The Cultural Politics of Tel Quel: Literature and the Left in the Wake of Engagement, Penn State Press, University Park, 1996, for a useful overview.

Joanna Pawlik completed her DPhil in American Studies in 2008 at the University of Sussex and is currently employed as a Teaching Fellow in the Department of Art History and Visual Studies at Manchester University. She works closely with the Centre for the Study of Surrealism and its Legacies and is involved with its most recent AHRC funded project on queer surrealism. Her research continues to explore the reception of surrealism by American avant-gardists, and she is currently working on a book length project on the role of surrealism, both Bretonian and dissident, in the formation and development of the San Francisco Renaissance and Beat Generation.
Fire Smoulders in the Veins: Toyen's Queer Desire and Its Roots in Prague Surrealism

Karla Huebner

Abstract

This essay explores Toyen’s development of queer themes and places it in the context of her Prague origins. It first looks at its place within the Prague group’s early erotica, then considers early Czech surrealism in relation to interwar Czech sex reformism, feminism, and homoerotic activism, and finally examines how Toyen’s production of artworks can be seen as enacting her queer desire in a tangible form. In closing, it relates Czech surrealist theory and practice to French surrealist ideas. The article also shows how inter-war Czechs participated in the struggle for sexual minority rights.

Toyen’s entire oeuvre aims at nothing less than the correction of the exterior world in terms of a desire that feeds upon and grows from its own satisfaction.
Benjamin Péret, 1953

During the late 1920s and early 1930s, several members of the Czech avant-garde group Devětsil were moving closer and closer to surrealism. Like the Paris surrealists, they took an interest in Freudian psychoanalysis, dreams, and the unconscious. They shared an attachment to such surrealist ‘precursor’ authors as Baudelaire, Lautréamont, Apollinaire, and the Marquis de Sade. And, strikingly, they sought to explore and eventually transform human consciousness via desire. This was particularly the case for artists and writers Jindřich Štyrský, Vítězslav Nezval, Toyen (Marie Čermínová, 1902-1980), and their younger friend Bohuslav Brouk, who became founding members of the Prague surrealist group in 1934. All of them had an ongoing commitment to the examination of human sexuality, which became particularly notable in their proto-surrealist erotic and theoretical works of the early 1930s, when they collaborated on a series of works under the imprint of Štyrský’s privately printed Edice 69.

It was Toyen, however, who expressed what we now would consider a queer sensibility and desire. Toyen was a young woman of rising importance in the Czech avant-garde who had created erotic works as early as 1922, claimed an attraction to women, and was both very popular with and an object of unrequited love among her male peers. Both a founding member of the Prague surrealist group and a member of the postwar Paris surrealist group, she not only adopted an ungendered pseudonym, but stressed her rejection of the heteronormative by speaking in the masculine gender, dressing in both masculine and feminine modes, and telling male friends that she was attracted to women. Secretive about any actual sexual relationships she may have had with either men or women, she was never secretive about desire itself; from
the very beginning of her career, Toyen explored themes of sexual fantasy and transgression, presenting viewers with scenes of orgies, lesbian encounters, phallic toys, and women who are part animal. Her mature surrealist work, while less explicit than the early erotica, developed an elusive but intensely sensuous vocabulary of queer desire, filled with imagery of labia, tongues, and vaginal openings.

It is evident, then, that the intersection of queerness and desire is of signal importance in the work of Toyen. Yet in recent literature, Toyen’s personal sexuality has been increasingly heterosexualized. Her relationships with artistic partners Štyrský and Jindřich Heisler have been assumed to be sexual ones, although Nezval wrote that she insisted she and Štyrský were merely friends.2 Efforts have also been made to link Toyen to other possible male lovers, such as ‘a young man of dark complexion’ encountered by Czech art historians who visited her in the early 1960s.3 The 2005 Jan Němec film Toyen portrayed her as obsessed with Heisler and implied that Heisler was involved in the creation of heterosexual erotica made when he was in fact barely adult, well before he joined the Prague surrealist group in 1938.

In this essay, therefore, I explore Toyen’s queer desire and place it in the context of her Prague origins by first looking at its place within the Prague group’s early erotica, then considering early Czech surrealism in relation to interwar Czech sex reformism, feminism, and homoerotic activism, and finally by examining how Toyen’s production of artworks can be seen as enacting her queer desire in a tangible form, embodying and making manifest countless permutations of this desire in her drawings, paintings, prints, and collages. In closing, I relate Czech Surrealist theory and practice to French surrealist ideas.

Toyen was producing erotic work by 1922, when she completed the orgy scene Pillow (Cushion). The artist’s friend, surrealist Annie Le Brun, observes that in 1919 the painting was entitled Secluded Place, suggesting that the 1922 version is simply the definitive version. Since Toyen turned seventeen in late 1919 and twenty in 1922, this was, as Le Brun says, an incredibly audacious topic for a young woman to paint at that time.4 Nonetheless, it is probable that Toyen was the first of the Prague group to explore sexual themes in a consistently transgressive manner. Though the activities depicted in Pillow were essentially heterosexual, the theme of group sex clearly rebelled against societal norms.

The way for Toyen’s erotica had been paved by fin-de-siècle culture and especially by the Czech decadents, whose fascination with sexuality included both gender ambiguity and a sense of transgression. During the fin de siècle, Paris, Vienna, and Budapest had all been major producers of pornography, while Prague, too, had no shortage of sexually oriented material.5 Czech erotic photography had existed since the introduction of the daguerreotype, and by the latter nineteenth century, imported nude photos were sold at the downtown Prague shop U města
Paříže (At the City of Paris). Nude and erotic/pornographic photos continued to be readily available after Czechoslovakia’s independence in 1918.

As in France and Britain, the decadents had played an important role in bringing sexuality into the public view, and Czech surrealism drew strongly from decadent models and ideas. Decadent interest in intermediate states, such as homosexuality and androgyny, autumn, dawn, dusk, greyness and pastel colours, memory, dying, and the dream, as well as intermediate genres and forms, was shared by Czech surrealists. Prague’s decadent Moderní revue, edited by Arnošt Procházka and Jiří Karásek ze Lvovic, was an influential cultural forum that continued publication until 1925. While the Moderní revue’s aestheticism and lack of interest in the kind of political issues that occupied the surrealists were alien to surrealism, its focus on the imagination, psychology, madness, and sex was akin to surrealism. The Moderní revue had a history of confiscation for indecency, and its 1895 issue devoted to Oscar Wilde was the first publication in Bohemia to discuss the literary treatment of homosexuality. Co-editor Karásek’s Sodoma (1895) was the first openly homoerotic collection of poetry in the history of Czech literature (the first edition was suppressed). Jindřich Štyrský became personally acquainted with Karásek very early and by 1921 was writing of how much good Karásek’s ideas had done him.

Nor was Karásek the only exponent of taboo sexuality at the magazine. Artist and writer Karel Hlaváček, whose sexual impulses were tormented and probably bisexual, designed many of the early covers. In Exile (1897), he depicted a demonic face conceived ‘as an outlaw from a sexual paradise’ whose mouth took the shape of ‘salivating female genitalia.’ His Execution of the Soul (1896-7) presented an androgynous head strangled by phallic, taloned, fingers. Both of these works and their explicit meanings were known to the public by 1900, when the Moderní revue published the recently deceased artist’s descriptions of their genesis.

Other Czech artists also created sexually themed work. Though most of these works were done by heterosexual males, their emphasis on genitalia (both male and female) and their wild playfulness were perhaps an inspiration for Toyen. Male genitals, in fact, were a staple of private Czech erotic imagery. Though the more explicit work was never meant for public display, much of it was known to members of the artistic community. Josef Váchal, for example, designed erotic bookplates for friends of both sexes. As Karásek was a bibliophile and art collector, Štyrský and presumably Toyen would have had ample opportunity to acquaint themselves with his collections, erotic and otherwise.

By 1925, Toyen had gone far beyond the orgiastic heterosexuality of Pillow; heterosexual activity had become just one of many possible erotic options, as became clear in a group of sketches made during a 1925 trip to France, which predated her move to Paris with Štyrský later that year. The sketches explore a wide variety of practices and situations, including lesbian
activities, sailors spraying nude women with semen, men masturbating in the company of women, and even bestiality. As Toyen's sketches from this trip also include scenes from popular revues and a record of her visit to the studio of homosexual Czech artist Jan Zrzavý, it is probable that the erotic sketches include some scenes she personally witnessed or participated in, as well as images of physically impossible fantasies. Their diversity correlates with Freud's theorization of the polymorphously perverse child who takes erotic pleasure from all parts of the body and without the restrictions imposed by societal norms.

Though Pillow predated the Paris works, it appears that Toyen either found Paris especially conducive to the creation of erotica or that most of her earlier erotic works have been lost or destroyed. It seems plausible that, like other Czechs and like foreign visitors in general, she saw the city as a place of sexual tolerance and libertinage. In 1906, Apollinaire had satirized Eastern European fantasies of Paris: 'In common with his compatriots, the handsome Prince Vibescu dreamed of Paris, City of Light, where all the women are beautiful and every one of them is willing to part her thighs.' "14 Those who sought sexual excess or transgression in Paris usually found it; the Polish painter Tamara de Lempicka found opportunities for group sex in 'shabby clubs' along the banks of the Seine frequented by sailors, male and female students, and the occasional society woman. "15 The presence of sailors in some of Toyen's erotic sketches of 1925 suggests that she too ventured into these haunts. She may also, like the writer Anaïs Nin, have explored Paris brothels, whether alone or with Štyrský.

If Toyen was seeking a lesbian-friendly milieu, Paris was decidedly a locale with a recent history of toleration and even fashionability. Male nineteenth-century writers such as Baudelaire, Gautier, and Louŷs, as well as Remy de Gourmont, Zola, and others, had featured lesbian themes prominently, as had female authors including Rachilde, Jane de la Vaudère, Colette, Natalie Barney, and Renée Vivien. "16 By the 1920s, Paris was the home of such notable lesbian couples as Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, Djuna Barnes and Thelma Wood, Hilda Doolittle (H.D.) and Bryher (Winifred Ellerman), Janet Flanner and Solita Solano, Sylvia Beach and Adrienne Monnier, and Margaret Anderson and Jane Heap, to name a few familiar to English-speaking readers. Well of Loneliness author Radclyffe Hall and her partner Una Troubridge, while not resident in Paris, spent extended periods there. "17 The Danish artist Gerda Wegener, now best known for her marriage to early male-to-female sex-change recipient Einar Wegener and for her mostly lesbian-themed erotic illustrations, also lived in Paris during the 1920s. "18 And, of course, Claude Cahun and her lover Suzanne Malherbe/Marcel Moore had settled in Montparnasse in the early 1920s. "19

Czech visitors to Paris were well aware of its homoerotic potential. A 1931 Czech article on gay-friendly locales in Paris noted that next to the Moulin Rouge was the internationally
popular café Graff, where the dancing was ‘boys with boys and girls with girls.’ Toyen’s acquaintance Adolf Hoffmeister, meanwhile, noted the ‘lesbian beauties in men’s clothes’ who frequented other popular cafés.

In addition to her sketches, in 1925 Toyen painted *Paradise of the Blacks*, an orgy scene that combined heterosexual and homosexual activity. Not only did it fearlessly present a variety of taboo sexual acts, but its coal-black jungle Africans were a parodic echo of the pale blonde northern Europeans typical in Renaissance paintings of the Golden Age. Toyen presented Africa as the locale of the real Golden Age, where no one hesitated to perform any sex act.

In 1925, then, Toyen produced a significant body of erotic works, some of which appear to record observed scenes and others of which are clearly fantasy. Though some of these had heterosexual themes, she did not hide her same-sex interests from friends. Around this time, for instance, she asked the poet Jaroslav Seifert to translate a cycle of Verlaine’s lesbian sonnets, three of which Štyrský later published in the *Erotická revue*. She then, however, temporarily abandoned figurative art in favour of Artificialism, a two-person movement founded with Štyrský.

By the latter 1920s, Toyen and Štyrský’s work and ideas were growing closer to surrealism, but were visualized abstractly, for the most part as imaginary landscapes. Toyen’s return to figuration and discernable erotic content in the early 1930s came as she and Štyrský, along with Nezval and several other members of Devětsil, developed a theoretical basis that was increasingly Freudian and increasingly akin to that of Bretonian surrealism.

Around the same time, Toyen began to illustrate erotica for the imprints *Lotos*, *Olisbos*, *Mys dobré naděje*, and *Edice 69*—projects that included Beardsley’s *Venus and Tannhäuser* (1930), Salten’s *Josephine Mutzenbacher: Memoirs of a Viennese Tart* (1930), and Louÿs’s *Pybrac* (1932), as well as the *Heptameron* (1932) and *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* (1930). Of the *Heptameron*, Štyrský noted: ‘Toyen has succeeded in creating a certain type of modern erotic illustration. In her drawings we find in the first place one predilection: a taste for girls’ beauty. The torsos of women, eyes genteel, full of amorous ennui, horrible and perverted in the moment of orgasm, gently befogged in the hour of death ... ’

Precisely what prompted Toyen to turn her attention to erotic book illustration at this time is unclear. From 1926 through 1929 she had emphasized abstraction. Nor was erotic work a significant part of Štyrský’s oeuvre during the 1920s. Around 1930, however, both artists began to pursue erotic subject matter; they also collected a large library of works on sex and the erotic. Štyrský has usually been given the major credit for the pair’s erotic turn, but while it coincided with their move toward acceptance of surrealism, it was clearly a renewal of Toyen’s earlier intense interest in sexual themes. Between 1931 and 1933, Štyrský, who was experienced as
artist, writer, and editor, published both the *Erotická revue* and six titles under the imprint of Edice 69. These projects involved considerable input from Toyen, Nezval, Brouk, and others.

The *Erotická revue*’s three issues included a wide variety of sex-related material from around the world. \(^{25}\) The French surrealists were represented by translations of two of their *Recherches sur la sexualité*, a selection from *Irene’s Cunt* by Louis Aragon, and a selection from the *Immaculate Conception* by André Breton and Paul Eluard. Toyen was one of the main artists represented in the magazine. The contributions marked ‘XX’ were rough sketches from around 1925: a nude man standing on a hotel bed and masturbating in front of a waiting woman; a woman and a sailor on a couch; four beds populated by two heterosexual couples, one male couple, and one waiting woman; and a mostly female daisy-chain echoed by an animal daisy-chain. The second category, signed ‘T,’ mostly dated from the beginning of the 1930s and was considerably more sophisticated in both style and content. These drawings included a sleeping woman dreaming of penises; ithyphallic clowns; and a lesbian trio titled ‘Women of the East.’ There was also a sketch of a woman playing with phallic chess pieces; an image of one white and one black woman lolling on giant penises; a drawing in which tiny African women climb on giant penises growing from the earth; and finally, the highly surreal and now relatively well known drawing of a woman’s face with female genitalia in place of eyes and mouth. The third, much smaller, group was that of drawings openly designated ‘Toyen.’ The only pictures so identified were a hermaphroditic drawing and the three drawings for an excerpt from Malinowski’s legends and stories from Melanesia. These, however, were similar enough in style and content to the ‘T’ drawings that the alert reader would recognize them to be by the same artist. The strictly physical, pornographic fantasy of the early ‘XX’ drawings had been replaced by a more imaginative, fairy-tale type of fantasy in which physical plausibility was left far behind, and in which Toyen emphasized depiction of male genitalia.

Štyrský’s precise intentions for the *Erotická revue* are unclear. Not technically a surrealist project, it hinted at surrealist connections and tendencies, but overshadowed the surrealist works with pieces from earlier centuries and exotic lands. Its diversity of art and writing suggested, however, a desire to go beyond the standard varieties of heterosexual erotica and to embrace rather more outré topics, to begin to bring in forms of sexual behaviour more familiar to readers of Krafft-Ebing’s *Psychopathia Sexualis* than of the popular marriage manuals of the day. Toyen’s sketches were the main visual evidence of a tendency toward the non-normative.

Štyrský also published six works under the Edice 69 imprint: Nezval’s *Sexual Nocturne*, illustrated by himself (1931); Sade’s *Justine*, illustrated by Toyen (1932); František Halas’s *Thyrsos*, again illustrated by Štyrský (1932); a selection from Aretino’s *Ragionamento*, illustrated by Toyen (1932); a selection from Pierre-Jean-Baptiste Nougaret, illustrated by Rudolf Krajc
(1932); and his own *Emilie Comes to Me in a Dream* (1933). Four of these have been reprinted, of which *Sexual Nocturne*, *Justine*, and *Emilie* are the most significant for the study of surrealism.

Inspirations for the series were largely French and surrealist. Bataille’s *Story of the Eye* (1928) and Aragon’s *Irene’s Cunt* (1927) had employed a quasi-autobiographical form of narrative akin to the one Nezval would use in *Sexual Nocturne* and Štyrský in *Emilie*. Nezval’s *Sexual Nocturne*, a tale of small-town boyhood lust, was written somewhat in the style of Breton’s *Nadja*, but with a gothic tone that looked toward his later *Valerie and Her Week of Wonders*. Štyrský’s accompanying collages convey aspects of the text rather than illustrating its specifics. Throughout the novella, in fact, Štyrský ignored Nezval’s narrative in order to present his own critique of marriage as a trap centred on the insect-like reproduction of the species. Though the male is lured by the female, Štyrský represented the male as a creature driven more by his ceaselessly engorged genitalia than by the promise of union with the female.

Toyen’s six illustrations for the Marquis de Sade’s *Justine* depict not only bloody physical injuries but also homosexual fellatio, an activity not condoned by Breton despite his enthusiasm for Sade. Very much in the style of her other illustrations of the period, the illustrations for *Justine* were hand-coloured line drawings.

The final work in the series, Štyrský’s *Emilie Comes to Me in a Dream*, consists of a dream-like narrative accompanied by a collection of photomontages. These emphasized genitalia of both sexes, with a kind of frantic coupling marked on the one hand by suggestions of voyeurism, and on the other by emphasis on orgasm and ecstasy. Eros and Thanatos were joined via imagery of coffins, skeletons, and gas masks.

*Emilie Comes to Me in a Dream* included a significant afterword by Bohuslav Brouk, who would become the Prague group’s theoretician of sexuality and psychoanalysis. Brouk emphasized the importance of the ‘pornophilic’ in combating the ruling classes, and argued that ‘[t]hose who conceal their sexuality despise their innate abilities without ever having risen above them.’ Such people, he asserted, cannot escape either their animality or their mortality. Forcing them to be aware of excremental and sexual acts, he stressed, destroys their fantasies of being superior to the corporeal. Brouk argued that so-called pornophiles and pornophilia ‘attack any mode of non-animality’ people might use to elevate themselves; pornophiles emphasize human nature and thus dispose of old excuses for inequality. He posited that pornophilia could thus be a weapon for the oppressed and claimed that ‘those who succumb to pornophilia are of a more revolutionary bent than those mired in the prejudices of the moribund bourgeoisie.’ Brouk stressed that pornophilic work glorifies sexual pleasure outside the reproductive realm, combating the ruling classes through the pleasure principle. Art, he asserted, ‘mitigates the sadism of pornophilia only in its exploitation of sex’s biological function, which is as unpleasant to
pornophiles as it is to pornophobes. Distinguishing, however, between what one might call unmitigated pornophilia and titillating kitsch, Brouk excoriated the latter as ‘trash pornophilia’ that suppresses its sadistic impulses and thus becomes accessible to exactly the caste that pornophilia attacks.

In this essay, Brouk laid out a class-conscious rationale for the future Prague surrealists’ use of graphic sexual content (both verbal and visual) which would serve them well when they formed a surrealist group allied with the Breton group but also akin to the Bataille faction.

The persistent and so often transgressive eroticism produced by Toyen and the other early Czech surrealists during the 1930s was simultaneously part of and distinct from early twentieth-century sex-reformist efforts. Though sex-reformism has been more thoroughly studied in the German context, it was energetically pursued in Czechoslovakia by both hetero- and homosexual activists. Indeed, First Republic Czechoslovakia (1918-1938) was the scene of considerable interest in matters relating to gender, the body, and sexuality, an interest that was a natural development from fin-de-siècle Czech efforts on behalf of feminism, health, eugenics, and sex reform. The broad topic of ‘sex reform’ included contraception, abortion, venereal diseases, marriage counselling, divorce laws, rights for unwed mothers and their children and for homosexuals, and also improvements in sex education and sexual technique. Sex-educational books were much advertised in a wide variety of periodicals (Fig. 1).

Fig 1: ‘The delights of love—their secrets without consequences!’ Advertisement in the humour magazine Trn 6, No. 43, 1930.
The emphasis in these, however, was on decidedly normative practices, although Czech publications often acknowledged that Magnus Hirschfeld and other sexologists considered homosexuality to be normal when innate. Most heterosexual texts stressed happy marriage, with a subtext of positive eugenics. Thus, Czech discourses about sex and sexuality were almost always—apart from erotica and pornography—closely tied to discourses about health, hygiene, and social reform, and thus by extension to discourses about women’s rights, gender, and class. This was typical of early twentieth-century European discourses on sex and sexuality, as sexologists and reformers moved away from focus on taxonomies of ‘perversion’ and efforts to suppress ‘vice’ and more toward interest in ‘normal’ (primarily but not purely heterosexual) behaviour. Free love, under various names, was also a major topic as theorists and progressives of both sexes sought to define a non-economically based model for heterosexual partnership (Fig. 2).32

![Energol advertisement in the sex-reformist magazine *Moderní hygiena*, No. 9, 15 Jan 1930.](image)
Czech feminists, meanwhile, largely examined sexuality in relation to the family and heterosexual couples, and many of them advocated men adhering to strict monogamy rather than advocating greater sexual freedom for women. By the 1920s, this feminist emphasis on ‘purity’ became one aspect of a generational divide between older feminists of both sexes and the younger, usually less explicitly feminist, generations who came of age during and after the First World War. Throughout the First Republic, older Czech feminists continued to tie feminism to nationalism and to emphasise sexual purity. The younger generation consequently often perceived them as old-fashioned. Nonetheless, while women’s journalism emphasized abstinence and purity, leftist feminist periodicals did not shy away from discussions of sex, marriage, prostitution, and free union.

From 1931 to 1934, two Czech magazines, *Hlas sexuální menšiny* (The Voice of the Sexual Minority) and its successor *Nový hlas* (New Voice), published news relating to the homosexual community. Though not the organs of any organisation, *Hlas* and *Nový hlas* reported on meetings of the Československá Liga pro sexuální reformu (Czechoslovak league for sexual reform, ČLSR) and the Osvětové a společenského sdružení Přátelství (Enlightened and social association ‘Friendship,’ or OSSP). Founded in 1931, the ČLSR was conceived as a branch of the World League for Sexual Reform (founded in 1928) and therefore had goals broader than but decidedly inclusive of homosexual rights. Because the ČLSR was not primarily focused on the homosexual community, the OSSP came into existence in January 1932, taking inspiration from German homosexual organisations, and rapidly became a very active Prague social club.

While *Hlas* and *Nový hlas* gave some space to lesbian and bisexual topics, these were not well covered, and it appears that Czech women were not as actively involved in sexual minority reform efforts or social groups as men. Nonetheless, it is clear that women were involved. The OSSP noted in July 1932 that it would be establishing a women’s group and by September, the group was meeting at Batex on Revoluční in Prague. Author Lída Merlínová addressed lesbian issues from time to time in *Nový hlas*, and also published at least one article on the matter of male and female cross-dressing. While lacking direct ties to the future surrealists, in its September 1933 issue, *Nový hlas* began to advertise Brouk’s *Psychoanalytická sexuologie*, describing the contents as including ‘sexual cohabitation, platonic love, forms of sexual intercourse, homosexuality, sapphic love, perversions, sodomy and more.’ The following month, *Nový hlas* listed it as one of ‘our books,’ along with Mann’s *Death in Venice*.

Other Czech periodicals also occasionally reported on sexual minorities. In 1933, *Nový hlas* quoted from the *Moravská Orlice* (Moravian eagle):
will see not only inverted men dancing, but lesbian women, who are abundant here, also luxuriate in dance with exaltation. Men pet without shyness here, but women, who are better brought up, conceal their feelings.38

Whether the Prague surrealists actually read *Hlas* or *Nový hlas* is unknown, but if Toyen did read *Nový hlas*, she would have found information on lesbian as well as gay venues and groups, as well as lists of ‘homoerotic literature’ that included a wide variety of authors writing on lesbian themes.39 While Štyrský’s personal sexual interests appear to have been heterosexual, he was regarded by Nezval and others as having a strongly feminine nature that complemented the masculinity perceived in Toyen, and thus, for those who accepted Otto Weininger’s theory that amounts of masculinity and femininity in a person must be matched by opposite amounts in the partner, the two created a harmonious pairing.

Toyen’s desire was a major subject and subtext in her art. Her eternal desirousness may have found much of its satisfaction in the act of artmaking, of imagining and imaging new forms of erotic expression. We have seen that in the 1920s, Toyen’s explorations of sexuality ran to sketches of a wide range of activities, and that in the early 1930s she showed a persistent interest in phallic imagery. Not only was this evident in the works published in the *Erotická revue*, but it was also an important element in her illustrations for *Venus and Tannhäuser* (1930); her 1931 circus-themed sketches; and some of the illustrations for *Justine* (1932) and *Pybrac* (1932). In the mid-1930s, Toyen also sketched a woman’s hand caressing a flaccid dribbling penis (1936); a scene of caged penises in front of a masturbating woman; and a sketch of female fingers touching the glans of three penises (1937). In these phallic pieces, she emphasized women’s control of the pleasuring phallus.

With her transition to surrealism, however, Toyen began to explore eroticism in a more veiled and symbolic manner, and only occasionally returned to the creation of straightforwardly explicit sexual imagery, as in *Jednadvacet* (*Twenty-one*, 1938), a collection commissioned as a wedding present for Brouk’s brother. Her surrealist works emphasise a mysterious, obscure, haunting eroticism, and the paintings in particular substitute a sensuous, highly tactile, use of oils for the baldly descriptive delineation of bodily parts and actions that had characterized the sex drawings. It is almost as though the drawings are records of visual experience or fantasy—sketches jotted for future reference—while the paintings are tactile explorations, erotic experiences in themselves.

Furthermore, Toyen usually rendered the male genitalia as human, purely sexual, organs; while they signify desire, their signification is human and almost always a bit comic, not that of a mystic, all-powerful, unattainable, Lacanian ‘primary signifier of all desire.’40 The role of ‘signifier of all desire’ in Toyen’s work goes more plausibly to the image of the vaginal opening,
which took on a greater and greater role over the years. These began, perhaps, with the ambiguous but possibly vaginal form in *Desire* (1934), the curious openings on the owl-like figures in the *Voice of the Forest* series, and include all the obvious or not-so-obvious openings and vaginal forms of the next forty years. Thus, though Toyen fragmented the body, and to some extent fetishized both male and female, if the male surrealists sometimes imposed a fetishized phallus onto the female form, Toyen located the source of desire very differently than the male surrealists.41

Initially, during the 1930s, Toyen’s surrealist imagery stressed emptiness, fragmentation, and a sense of phantasmatic horror. These works are not erotic in the titillating sense of the word, but radiate an aura of sexual angst and pain, often focused on the female body. At this time, Toyen was developing the image of a lone girl, generally prepubescent, who wandered as if lost through bleak landscapes. The solitary girl, probably representing a surrealist dreamer, walks among disturbing juxtapositions of toys and dead animals, and is sometimes herself fragmented and dismembered. This imagery became pervasive in the mid-1930s, around the same time as the formation of the Prague surrealist group.

Everything in Toyen’s work begins to appear in pieces and in the process of cracking and crumbling or dematerializing. None of the illustrations for *Justine* (1932) show a complete figure, but are composed of torsos, genitalia, and faces. And, of course, *Message of the Forest* (1934) includes a girl’s decapitated head. This theme of fragmentation was one Toyen shared with Štyrský during the early 1930s, as well as with Karel Teige’s collage work, and may relate to Brouk’s theory of partialism, in which the extremities and their clothing are stand-ins for the penis, while the torso and head substitute for female genitalia.42 Heads, headlessness, and empty garments can thus refer to the female genitalia, while gloves represent the male (although their openings are female). Both Toyen and Štyrský also hinted at anxiety about scopophilia and voyeurism. By 1933, disembodied eyes begin to appear on fragments of matter or superimposed on pieces of torn material, as in an illustration for Apollinaire’s *Alkoholy* (1933) and for the 1934 book *Čajové květy* (Tea Flowers). * Mirage* (1934) presents a young woman’s head, possibly on a pillar, with eyes apparently gouged out; *Girl’s Head with Spiderweb* of the same year employs the same theme.

As early as 1931, the figure of the headless woman appears in an illustration for S. K. Neumann’s *Žal* (Woe). Headless and armless, this lightly draped figure resembles a modern version of an ancient Greek statue, and is an intermediary between Toyen’s naturalistic illustrations and the delicate, fragmentary, semi-surrealistic imagery she was in the process of developing for her literary illustrations. Similarly, *Wedding Allegory* (1932) juxtaposes a faceless bride with her headless upper torso in a see-through bra. The female body first became a stony
or nebulous torso in works such as *Magnetic Woman* (1934), and then disappeared, represented only by garments and shadows. Yet while women faded out of Toyen’s paintings and drawings of the 1930s, and even figures with heads often lacked faces, they never left entirely. Women continued in the form of shadows and ghosts, becoming particularly notable from the late fifties on.

Empty garments became a favourite signifier in Toyen’s work beginning in the mid 1930s, hinted at with the headless *Rose Ghost* and *Yellow Ghost* (both 1934), and becoming decidedly empty with the collages for *Ani labu’, ani Lûna* (1936), followed by *Dream, Sleeper, The Abandoned Corset,* and *Morning Encounter* (all 1937). In *Sleeper,* there’s no girl, but just a white, fissured, empty cone of a coat topped with a head of reddish hair. *Dream,* too, presents a haunted garment in a barren landscape. The bloody-seeming garment has a childish air but stands up for itself, like an all-too-solid ghost, one encrusted with laundry starch and old gore.

Such hung-up or floating garments had first appeared in the collage *Ani labu’, ani Lûna* (1936) and the painting *The Abandoned Corset* (1937). Katja Zigerlig suggests that Toyen’s use of the corset—which signifies restriction—functions as an affirmation—because the corset is empty.43 ‘Life is elsewhere,’ as Rimbaud, Breton, and Kundera all said. Perhaps, but the corset and the other garments also signify the absent woman or girl and her sexuality. Such garments reappeared in *At the Green Table* and in the collage-painting *Natural Laws* (1946). The preferred motif shifts to one of ghostly figures defined largely by garments and shadows, and to small items of clothing, particularly gloves. Thus, the untenanted garment, in its various forms, became one of the most important themes in Toyen’s work from the 1930s on.

In these works, especially in her later paintings but already visible in Toyen’s pre-surrealist (but so utterly surrealist) drawing of the woman’s face with eyes and mouth made of female genitalia, metaphor and metonymy are simultaneously at work, with parts metonymically standing for a whole and one thing metaphorically like another (female genitalia representing other bodily parts but also having a metaphoric similarity). At the same time, elements such as the raptor’s claw speak of pain and death, while gloves and other items of female attire increase in frequency over time and signify the female body and female sexuality, as, to some extent, does the postwar imagery of interiors, doors, windows, and intense surface patterning. Toyen’s move from the often-dismembered girl of the 1930s to the usually vaporous woman of the postwar period suggests a shift from haunted self (Breton’s ‘who am I’) to haunting self (Breton’s ‘whom do I haunt’).

Toyen’s postwar iconography moved increasingly toward themes of queer desire and eroticism. She had signalled her intent to recombine and regender the figure as early as *Hermaphrodite* (1932); now, both the bold yet veiled nature of the late imagery, and titles such as
Desire, Fire Smoulders in the Veins, and They Touch Me in Sleep revealed her preoccupation with a polymorphous desire that was woman-centered yet never limited to standard understandings of lesbian nature or practice.

Toyen’s early surrealist work had emphasized the figure of the lone girl; now, the postwar successor to the empty girl became the figure of an adult seductress who often appeared in a partly animal form or with animal attributes. In 1957, her series The Seven Swords Unsheathed (Les sept épées hors du fourreau, an homage to Apollinaire) depicted seven faceless phantom women in the nebulous, painterly style typical of her mid-1950s work. The series was a return to erotic content and was a preliminary exploration of imagery and iconography that she would further develop in the 1960s. Subsequent to these phantom women, she created the female figures in The Silences of Mirrors (1958), Paravent (1966), Eclipse (1968), When the Laws Fall Silent (1969, named from Justine⁴⁴), and Midsummer Night’s Dream (1970).

Simultaneously, discrete fetishized body parts took on a new importance. Toyen’s first faceless heads of hair had appeared in the 1930s, suggesting anonymous physical masses; postwar, they developed into fetishized depictions, of which the most notable are the two collages Midi-Minuit. Hair also appears in Debris des rêves and other works of the late 1960s and early 1970s, especially in imagery of birds reaching for locks of women’s hair. 1960s mass visual culture also made its appearance in her collage work, particularly in the form of brightly lipsticked mouths with glaringly white teeth, but also through other sexualized female bodily parts.

Mouths, tongues, and kisses had quietly begun to appear around 1949 with entwined bird tongues. After a brief period of stylized kiss imagery in the early 1950s, Toyen turned to tongues as a notable element of their own. These tongues, whether in Melusine (1957), They Touch Me in Sleep (1957), Furry in the Mirror (1959), or Made Up for the Performance (1962), often combine with vaginal imagery, taking the lips-nether lips concept one step further and suggesting a clitoris that is also a tongue. Tongues appear in other forms as well: bats show their tongues (Frequently Strewn Sheets, 1959; Night After Night, 1960); tongues appear as discrete elements (Mists of Solitude, 1961), purse closures (One in the Other, 1965), and as the end of a knife (Banquet of Analogies, 1970). Les Puits dans la tour/Débris de rêves (1966) features tongues prominently on the cover and lurking slyly in additional prints. This tongue, to be sure, can have a phallic look to it as well. Toyen, like Bellmer, played with reorganization of the body.

Akin to these representations of tongues, an open, often collaged, red-lipped mouth makes its appearance in The Folding Screen (1966), Sur-le-champ (1967), Through the Balmy Night (1968), When the Laws Fall Silent (1969), and the masks for Ivšić’s Roi Gordogane (1976). By 1968, the symbol of the full-lipped closed mouth with protruding tongue had appeared, as in Eclipse (1968) and the print Tir (1972). As Srp points out, Toyen had long since replaced the
human face with masklike imagery, sometimes from her vast collection of clippings, which she saved in envelopes (lips, eyes, corsets, etc.). This avoidance of the life-like face, this preference for blankness and masking, suggests protectiveness of the woman’s true identity in the process of her enacting Riviere’s theorized ‘masquerade’ of femininity.

Vaginal and clitoral imagery came to the fore in Toyen’s late work as well. *Fire Smoulders in the Veins* (1955), probably inspired by a black Schiaparelli dress of 1945 featuring a vertical vaginal zipper, shows a dark object—almost certainly also a dress, given the extremely similar Schiaparelli design and Toyen’s fondness for garments as signifiers—with a white vertical vaginal opening topped by a tiny bow. And, rather than having a head, the green-gowned figure in *The Seven Swords: Melusine* (1957) has gigantic billowy labia with a tongue-like central clitoris; *They Touch Me in Sleep* (1957) presents small abstracted vaginal openings with tongue-like clitorises; while the figure in *Furrow in the Mirror* (1959) has, in place of a head, a well-furred pubic area with a particularly tongue-like clitoris reaching down to a more anatomical-looking specimen in the form of a collar. Discrete vaginal imagery that is often suggestive of the Czech graffiti symbol for the female genitalia also appears in works of the 1960s such as *Dream* (1964) and *Secret Room without Lock* (1966). Less explicitly, glove and other long buttoned openings also take on a strongly vaginal significance in such works as *Far in the North* (1965), *One in the Other* (1965), *Midsummer Night’s Dream* (1970), and the complex drawing and collage of 1976 in which a partially buttoned gown reveals the mostly invisible wearer’s mons veneris. A vaginal collage done for Annie Le Brun includes Le Brun’s notation: ‘*Bijou favori*: ‘La patte méditative d’un grand fauve sur la clitoris’ (1968).

Toyen began to use animals and birds to express eroticism in the 1950s. Images of mating animals appear frequently in the late work, having begun in 1955 with the beetles of *So Far, So Old*. These mating animals include the butterflies of *Paravent* (1966), the wildcats of her untitled collage of 1972, the lizards and frogs of *Vis-a-vis* (1973), and the dogs of the 1976 drawing. However, animals or parts of animals often signify sexuality without explicitly mating. Birds (especially of prey) usually seem to represent the male, leopards the female, but many other types of animal appear in the late work, especially foxes and mustelids, perhaps because of their role in the fur industry and associations with luxurious women’s wraps. In *Elective Affinities* (1970), for instance, mustelids blend into the couch as if in a game of One in the Other.

Toyen’s themes of animals, mutating women, and landscape, in which she portrays birds, fish, and insects as well as mammals, indicate female power as well as vacancy. She made a practice of suggesting presence by absence.

In the 1940s, Toyen began to use a new signifier: the shadow. Her use of shadows had been remarkably infrequent before around 1940, when she began to add somewhat non-
naturalistic shadows to the series *The Animals Are Asleep* and *Day and Night* and other works. In *Paravent* (1966), an apparently male shadow lurks to the left while the faceless female phantom clothed in leopards pulls off her green glove above the head of a lipstick-mouthed leopard, her own foggy head shadowed by two mating moths. The figures in *Eclipse*, meanwhile, are formed by shadows or silhouettes and are definitely not cast shadows; in *When the Laws Fall Silent*, the ‘male’ shadow, with collaged lipsticked mouth, produces a masked bird in lieu of an erect penis, while the ‘female’ figure is represented mainly by a leopard-skin with gleaming human breasts.

Shadows in Toyen’s late work, then, have a life of their own, not necessarily bearing any relationship to solid objects; they are thus a version of the phantoms she had begun to work with in the 1930s. Insubstantiality links here to an ever-present desire, floating from painting to painting like a cloud or miasma.

Toyen’s postwar work also used architectural elements such as doors, windows, walls, and cross-sections, but tended to make walls permeable or transparent, with the external and internal flowing one into the other. This permeability of built spaces became eroticized in subsequent years with such works as *Midnight, the Heraldic Hour* (1961), *Made Up for the Performance* (1962), *Chessboard* (1963), *At a Certain Hour* (1963), *Dream* (1964), *Mid-Minuit* (1966), *Paravent* (1966), *Secret Room without a Lock* (1966), *Eclipse* (1968), *The New World of Love* (1968), *At Silling Castle* (1969), and *Reflection of Ebb Tide* (1969). As Karel Srp points out, in *At a Certain Hour*, the window frame becomes autonomous, no longer linking exterior and interior, while the unusual view of the Bernini sculpture, which removes Apollo, renders the viewer Daphne’s pursuer: ‘Anyone looking at the painting is now Apollo ... Daphne is the artist herself.’

Toyen also often combined her favourite signifiers in the late work. For example, *Made Up for the Performance* (1962) presents a ghostly seated woman outlined by reddish fox faces; a bright rose object that simultaneously suggests a tongue, a feather, and a venus fly-trap curls forward from her waist to form a dark vaginal opening, while in the background rises a kind of enormous suspended vaginal architecture in dim bluish tones.

Toyen’s, Štyrský’s, and Nezval’s erotica of the early 1930s, and Brouk’s Marxist-psychoanalytic theorization of the role of pornophilia, fit within the larger surrealist project of liberating human consciousness by exploring the unconscious and material that had been repressed by the individual or by society. Graphic sexual material was meant not just to shock the bourgeoisie, but was part of a psychoanalytically based investigation of the human mind and desire. This erotica grew in part from the Czech sex-reformist and gay liberation movements of the day. The Prague surrealists’ work, however, went well beyond what most sex reformists and gay liberationists dared print. Even Štyrský’s privately printed *Erotická revue* avoided publication of some of Toyen’s more extreme topics, such as bestiality. Brouk’s critiques of bourgeois
sexuality and marriage were aligned with international surrealism’s vision of sex as liberatory rather than as reproductive or as a cog in the socio-economic machine. They thus vehemently separate Prague surrealist erotica and especially the work of Toyen, the only female artist in the group, not just from the daring but in most respects normative heterosexual erotica of other interwar Czech artists, but from mainstream interwar Czech feminists’ emphasis on moral purity and monogamous heterosexual relationships.

The Czech surrealists, like many of their counterparts in Paris, diverged from Breton, who had claimed in 1928 that he opposed homosexuality and only condoned masturbation if it was accompanied by images of women. Toyen, a queer artist if one ever existed, depicted men and women’s masturbation both with and without imagery relating to a second person, and made manifestly obvious her interest in homoerotic sexuality.

Toyen and Štyrský were widely perceived to have traded gender roles, an estimation supported by Toyen’s insistence on speaking in the masculine gender, her pronouncements that she was attracted to women, and her often masculine style of dress. Toyen’s insistence that she was attracted to women, however, does not in itself tell us how she conceptualized sexual preference. We do not know whether she considered herself lesbian, bisexual, or simply refused to be categorized. Her sketches, however, make clear that she was interested in the topic of sexual encounters between women, and her work in oils, printmaking, collage, and drawing stresses the sensuous erotic pleasure she took in both the invention of sexually expressive imagery and in its tactile creation.

Toyen differed from most of her female peers in her depiction of erotic themes. Male surrealist exploration of the erotic is one of the most striking features of both surrealist art and writing, and given the vital role that the sexual and erotic were theorized to play in the liberation of the human spirit, this is hardly surprising. Certainly, the women in and close to the movement gave the erotic an important role and were more willing to present explicit sexual imagery than were most women outside surrealism. At the same time, women’s art was hardly a mirror image of the men’s; women associated with surrealism never eroticized the image of the male to the degree that male surrealists did the female. For example, while Valentine Hugo created a few erotic works employing the male body, this was never a major theme for her. Likewise, Léonor Fini’s depictions of sleeping or quiescent males relate more to myth than to Eros as a transformative force. Toyen’s phallic imagery is thus perhaps the only work by a surrealist woman of her generation that uses the body of the opposite sex to explore sexuality in a manner at all similar to the men’s use of the female body.

Again, while the female nude sometimes appears in the work of surrealist women, it was not their main way of exploring their sexuality. The female nude occasionally appears in the
work of Frida Kahlo, while the female nudes that appear so frequently in Fini’s work are typically more expressive of self-discovery than transformative eroticism. But as Whitney Chadwick observes, the contrast within surrealism between persistent male exploration of the erotic and female hesitance is striking. Toyen’s own use of the female nude was sometimes erotic, sometimes not, but it was never hesitant. Her interest in the erotic signification of the female body presumably relates to her proclaimed erotic interest in women; it certainly predated her interest in surrealism.

Perhaps, as Chadwick suggests, most women connected with surrealism, unwilling to adopt either conventional feminine roles or the roles envisioned by Breton and other male surrealists, and lacking a tradition of a specifically female erotic pictorial language, were hard pressed to participate fully in surrealist pursuit of revolutionary transformation of consciousness based in sexuality. Toyen’s preoccupation with the erotic, on the contrary, was unwavering throughout her life. Her determination to explore multiple forms of sexuality suggests that she sought to unearth a deep understanding of eroticism and desire.

Czech same-sex and transgressive desire, then, plays a significant if still obscure role in surrealism, and its elucidation will help clarify the workings and meanings of non-normative desire throughout the movement. While early surrealism has often been chastised for its (specifically for Breton’s) early rejection of queerness, the enthusiastic reception of Toyen’s work by Breton and other surrealists indicates that her ability to convey desire—central to surrealist thought—was highly valued and that the queerness of that desire was not scorned.

---


10 Štyrský to Karel Michl, 18 January 1921, Michl fond, LA PNP.


12 Karel Hlaváček, ‘Dopis Stanisław Przybyszewskému,’ *Moderní revue* (1900), quoted in Urban, *In Morbid Colours*, 477. Some viewers perceived the head as feminine, others as masculine, apparently depending on sexual preference.


18 Wegener, who was well enough known in her day, is sometimes mistakenly considered a male artist called Gerda-Wegener, as in Kenneth Silver, *Esprit de Corps: The Art of the Parisian Avant-Garde and the First World War, 1914–1925*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1989. Even a recent study of lesbian Paris presents her work (a cartoon of a female *ménage a trois*) as if it


23 In 1932-3, the Prague bookseller B. M. Klika ran an ad in *Žijeme* announcing the publication of the *Heptameron* for lovers of erotic literature, with 76 daring drawings by Toyen. An ad for the Lawrence book appeared in the first issue of *Levá fronta*. I have not been able to locate a copy to assess the illustrations. It was published as a private print, available by subscription, by Odeon.


25 The three issues of the *Erotická revue* were reprinted in 2001 by Torst.


27 Štyrský’s approach toward book illustration was as follows: ‘No illustration, save kitsch, can ever express the idea of the work. Modern illustration places acute emphasis on the relationship between the work’s principle and its formal expression [...] It] naturally adapts to the intent of the poetic work, yet exists as a work in itself,’ Jindřich Štyrský, ‘The Joys of a Book Illustrator,’ quoted in Jed Slast, ‘Translator’s Note,’ 132.


33 For example, see Věra Babáková, ‘Masaryk a mravní základ ženského hnutí’ (Masaryk and the moral basis of the women’s movement), in *Masaryk a ženy*, Prague, Ženská národní rada, 1930, 260-63, and other contributors to the same volume such as Alois Hajn.

35. ‘Spolková hlídka’ (Society column), Nový hlas Vol. 1, No. 4, July 1932, 16, and ‘Spolkové zprávy: Ženská hlídka’ (Society news: Women’s column), Nový hlas Vol. 1, No. 5, September 1932, 15.

36. Lída Merlínová, ‘Omyly a nevkusy ‘našich’ mužů a žen’ (Blunders and bad taste of ‘our’ men and women), Nový hlas, Vol. 2, Nos. 7-8, July-August 1933, 111-112.

37 Nový hlas, Vol. 2, No. 9, September 1933.

38 ‘Poznámky a informace’ (Notes and information), Nový hlas Vol. 2, No. 12, December 1933, 172-5, reprinting Moravská Orlice’s ‘Kluby a život homosexuálních lidí’ (Clubs and life of homosexual people).

39 During this period the term “homoerotic” (often used in Nový hlas) was often used in contradistinction to “homosexual” to refer to a more sublimated attraction without overt sexual contact, Mark Cornwall, ‘Heinrich Rutha and the Unraveling of a Homosexual Scandal in 1930s Czechoslovakia,’ Gay and Lesbian Quarterly, Vol. 8, No. 3, 2002, 326.


44 Srp, Toyen, 251.


47 Srp, Toyen, 242–44.

48 ‘Recherches sur la sexualité: part d’objectivité, determinations individuelles, degree de conscience,’ La Résolution surréaliste, No. 11, 15 March 1928, 33. A Czech translation of this text was published in the Erotická revue.


50 Ibid., 126.

Karla Huebner teaches in the department of Art and Art History at Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio. She received her MA from American University in Washington, DC, and her PhD from the University of Pittsburgh. Her research interests include Czech modernism, surrealism, women’s history, and the history of gender and sexuality. She is working on a book on Toyen.
Life in the Shadows: Towards a Queer Artaud

Lucy Bradnock

Abstract

This essay resituates the early reception of Robert Rauschenberg's *White Paintings* within the framework of the untitled theatrical event that John Cage and David Tudor organised at Black Mountain College in the summer of 1952, and the writing of Antonin Artaud that was its inspiration. Artaud's polemical theatre manifesto *Le Théâtre et son double*, the English translation of which was begun by the poet M. C. Richards at Black Mountain College in the first years of the 1950s, proposes a shifting position outside of the constraints of conventional signification, and rejects the authority of the text as epitomising a 'petrified idea of a culture without shadows.' Drawing on queer theory, I propose an account of Cage's encounter with Artaud that emphasises cacophony, unrepeatability, and the queer potential offered by the ungraspable shadow. In offering a reading that is based on a queering of Artaud's notion of 'cruelty,' this paper seeks to expand the Duchampian model offered by Moira Roth's 'aesthetic of indifference' and Jonathan D. Katz's 'politics of negation'; the sense of plenitude, immediacy and unrepeatability to be found in these works is less Duchampian, I argue, than it is an articulation of Artaud's 'space stocked with silence.'

*So many points of view, so many details … are probably significant.*

John Ashbery, 'Litany'

Robert Rauschenberg's 1953 exhibition at the Stable Gallery, New York, figures prominently in narratives of the post-war 'neo-avant-garde.' The complex significance that has been retrospectively accorded the exhibition belies the apparent simplicity of the paintings on show – canvasses covered in an even layer of white paint, applied with a roller. Rauschenberg had completed the *White Paintings* in October 1951, during a sojourn at Black Mountain College, an experimental liberal arts college near Asheville, North Carolina (Fig. 1). There, the initial reaction of his peers had been to relate the works to the monochrome of the historical avant-garde, 'which has never meant much of anything to anybody except possibly as a step in art history, as a Mallowitch [sic] white on white which you can't see as a painting.' In New York, a contemporary critical review of the exhibition levelled accusations of 'dada shenanigans,' the iconoclastic stunt of an artist who declared himself that the works were 'not Art.' The weary reviewer, confronted with works 'beyond the artistic pale,' professed bafflement: 'a blank canvas provokes a blank look.' Since then, the *White Paintings* have been characterised variously in the considerable literature devoted to them as modernist monochromes, anti-authorial gestures, responses to the carnage of war and the atomic age, and articulations of Bergsonian duration. They are repeatedly situated within the trajectory of the pre-war avant-garde, still often regarded as
descendants of Kasimir Malevich’s *White on White* (1918); they have been related, albeit by negation, to Surrealism; most commonly they are labelled as ‘neo-Dada.’ What most commentators appear to agree on is that the *White Paintings* are, above everything, Duchampian.

![Fig. 1: Robert Rauschenberg, *White Painting (Three Panel)*, 1951, Oil on canvas, 72 in. x 108 in. (182.88 cm x 274.32 cm), San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Purchased through a gift of Phyllis Wattis, © Estate of Robert Rauschenberg / Licensed by VAGA, New York.](image-url)

Perhaps most influential in the way in which scholars have situated the *White Paintings* has been the perspective of Rauschenberg’s friend and colleague John Cage, whose words inevitably tend to be conflated with those of his younger colleague. Two statements predominate: the first, written at the time of the Stable Gallery exhibition; and the second, in 1961, on the occasion of the exhibition *The Art of Assemblage* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. The earlier statement I shall return to later in its entirety, but for now its final line will suffice to indicate the kind of terminology that has come to inform writing on these works: ‘I have come to the conclusion,’ Cage wrote, ‘that there is nothing in these paintings that could not be changed, that they can be seen in any light and are not destroyed by the action of shadows.’ Contained within Cage’s sentence are those ideas of presence and absence, light and shadow, sight and non-sight, change and stasis that have since dominated the literature on the *White Paintings*. Cage’s 1961 statement is equally enigmatic; in the text ‘On Robert Rauschenberg, Artist, and his Work,’
Cage declares them to be 'airports for the lights, shadows and particles.'\(^8\) It is a phrase that has been taken implicitly to invoke the figure of Marcel Duchamp, whose own experiments with glass and shadows have been retrospectively mapped onto Rauschenberg’s canvases, largely as a result of Cage’s pronouncement. Hovering over the critical reception of Rauschenberg’s *White Paintings* is the Duchampian spectre of *Dust Breeding*, specks of accidental dirt on the surface of Duchamp’s *Large Glass* raised to the status of shadowy peaks by Man Ray’s camera. It is a comparison that has increasingly coalesced into a solid model of interpretation, and one that I set out to dispel here, by letting the shadow of Antonin Artaud, rather than that of Duchamp, fall on the surface of the *White Paintings*.

As Branden Joseph has demonstrated, a significant shift occurred in the discursive framework within which the *White Paintings* were defined in the years immediately following their completion, even before their first public exhibition at the Stable Gallery.\(^9\) Although that exhibition was the first public display of the *White Paintings*, an earlier point of reception can most probably be dated to the previous summer, at Black Mountain College, by virtue of the role that they played in a multi-media performance event that was organised there by John Cage and David Tudor. Sometimes referred to as *Theatre Piece No. 1*, though even this seems uncertain, it is a work that has attained a near-mythical status. Multi-media and collaborative in nature, it combined performances by some of the best-known names associated not only with the 1952 Summer Session, but with the history of Black Mountain College as a whole. In the forward to his 1961 anthology *Silence*, Cage recalled the event’s components:

> [It] involved the paintings of Bob Rauschenberg, the dancing of Merce Cunningham, films, slides, phonograph records, radios, the poetries of Charles Olson and M.C. Richards recited from the tops of ladders, and the pianism of David Tudor, together with my Juilliard lecture.\(^10\)

Each participant contributed a performance of their choice within specified time frames issued to them just prior to the start of the event. Cage’s brief catalogue indicates the participants’ interdisciplinary ambitions: it includes paintings, dance, film, slides, spoken poetry and prose, live piano performance, and pre-recorded sound played on both records and radio. The Rauschenberg paintings to which Cage refers are, most likely, the *White Paintings*. According to the majority of contemporary accounts of the event, they were suspended above the audience in the College’s dining hall (though their exact arrangement is unclear) and used for the projection of slides, or possibly fragments of black and white 8mm film by Nicholas Cernovitch. Most subsequent attempts to pin down the exact sequence of the proceedings have been predicated on a 1965 interview with Cage conducted by Michael Kirby and Richard Schechner and published in the *Tulane Drama Review*.\(^11\) In the main, however, scholars have struggled even to grasp hold of the event’s most basic features. Though the work is almost universally hailed as a defining
moment in the development of performance art, ‘mixed means’ theatre, and Cage’s own theories of chance composition and indeterminacy, its fundamental features remain contested: its title (if there was one); its length; its components; even the date, probably in the latter half of August, though remarkably unrecorded, even in a community brimming with amateur diarists. With no conventional script or musical score, the slips of paper listing time frames during which participants were instructed to ‘play freely,’ constituted the only documentation of the performance; only one is extant.12

If the White Paintings are my intended protagonists, then the untitled event that took place in the Black Mountain College dining hall in August 1952 is their setting. It is not my intention to attempt to map the event as a coherent entity; that task has been admirably undertaken already by William Fetterman, whose 1995 study John Cage’s Theatre Pieces. Notations and Performances remains the most comprehensive record of its logistics.13 What emerge most clearly from his account, based on contemporary diary entries and retrospective oral history interviews, are the discrepancies that exist within and between those accounts and the resulting impossibility of pinning down what actually occurred. No doubt some of these inconsistencies must be put down to the usual lapses of memory, the relative scarcity of photographic documentation (though photography as an artistic discipline was strong at Black Mountain College), and the fact that much of the significance accorded the evening’s entertainment has been retrospective.14 Nevertheless, it seems that the particular difficulty that scholars encounter in this case may be borne of more than the usual challenges of recording performance. That the work in question is resistant to quantitative categorisation at every stage – it is without script or documentation, without name and without medium specificity – places it in an unusual critical void. Variously yet unsatisfactorily characterised retrospectively as ‘a seminal event,’ an ‘ur-Happening,’ as ‘mixed means theater,’ experimental theatre, or as a musical composition, it sits uncomfortably in any of these definitions.15

In seeking a more convincing reason for these discrepancies, it is my intention to consider the event as a work that deliberately defers categorisation, refusing a place in the structures of critical discourse through its situation in the mode of the unrepeatable, the unrecordable and the unnamable. This refusal of categorisation engenders a state of contingency that, I shall argue, characterises Cage’s encounter with the work of the French writer Antonin Artaud. For what is uncontested is that Cage and Tudor took their inspiration for the event from Artaud. Cage himself has made clear the role that Artaud’s book Le Théâtre et son double played in the conception of the work. In a 1969 interview with Martin Duberman, Cage explains:

I was under the influence of that text of Artaud. Which M.C. Richards translated. And which had been brought to my attention by Pierre Boulez ...David Tudor and I and MC were reading Artaud constantly. And it was the influence that led to that event, which is
called the first happening. Because Artaud postulates … the centricity within each event and its non-dependence on other events.16

Given the prominence of the 1952 event in the short time frame between Rauschenberg’s completion of the White Paintings and their exhibition in New York, the absence of Artaud in Branden Joseph’s account of their early reception – which finds inspiration for the paintings in László Maholy-Nagy, Henri Bergson, and Marcel Duchamp – is puzzling. For it was in that Artaud-inspired theatre that the works encountered the most literal embodiment of the positive matter of emptiness and the play of shadows that Cage would highlight in his text for the Stable Gallery the following year. Despite the very real probability of their physical inclusion in the proceedings at Black Mountain, the presence of Artaud’s name and the radical model of The Theater and Its Double during the first period of the White Paintings’ early critical reception remains unacknowledged, eclipsed by predominantly Duchampian readings. It is this lacuna that I wish to address here, by considering the discursive shift that the paintings underwent as one brought about by Cage’s refiguring of the paintings as part of an Artaudian theatrical experiment. In other words, what if the shadows that play across the surface of Rauschenberg’s blank canvases are Artaudian, rather than Duchampian?

At stake here is the recuperation of an early reception history for Rauschenberg’s White Paintings. But beyond this, the nature of Cage’s reading of Artaud is intriguing, given that Artaud plays a significant role in the formation of Cage’s theories of indeterminacy, theories that found their first real articulation in that 1952 event. If, as several scholars have suggested, Cage’s radical redefinition of compositional agency carries an implicit challenge to the construction of subjectivity and identity, then the presence of Artaud in his early experiments with indeterminate performance is crucial. For Jonathan D. Katz, Cage’s challenge to the defined boundaries of identity is one that is articulated in terms of queer sexuality. Thus, for Katz, the silence at the core of Cage’s 4’33” and the absence at work in Rauschenberg’s White Paintings is a queer one.17 Though Katz’s reading is not unproblematic, the theoretical framework that underpins it offers a useful vocabulary with which to speak about Cage’s encounter with Artaud. It is my aim to excavate an Artaudian context for the White Paintings, and to understand the specific nature of Artaudian ‘cruelty’ as it was manifested through their reception at Black Mountain College. If Rauschenberg’s canvases are filled with the cacophony of Artaud (as opposed to the silence of Duchamp), I shall ask, how might Katz’s terminology enable us to think through the ‘cruelty’ of the White Paintings; and how might we understand Cage’s reading of Artaud in light of the queerness that Katz claims is at play? What emerges is a vision of Artaud that goes far beyond practical theatre manual, and begins to occupy a position that might be termed queer.
From Paris to Asheville

In all probability, John Cage’s first encounter with the name of Antonin Artaud occurred in Paris in 1949, during a trip to Europe funded by the National Academy of Arts and Letters and the Guggenheim Foundation. In fact, just as Cage left New York on 23 March of that year, the magazine of art and literature *The Tiger’s Eye* released its latest issue, which included Artaud’s *Van Gogh, the Man Suicided by Society* alongside Cage’s article “Forerunners of Modern Music.” It is just conceivable that Cage would have read through his complimentary copy of the magazine prior to his departure. More likely, it just missed him and this early juxtaposition of Cage and Artaud in print remains a curious instance of historical happenstance. On his arrival in Paris, Cage introduced himself to the French composer Pierre Boulez; the two composers found much common ground. Boulez’s *Second Piano Sonata*, completed the previous year, had drawn inspiration from Artaud in its rejection of melodic and thematic conventions, and Artaud was a familiar name to the intellectual circle into which Cage was rapidly admitted. Among its most well-known members were the composer Messiaen, the painter Bernard Soby, playwright Armand Gatti, novelist Pierre Jouffroy, and the Russian critic and musicologist Pierre Souvtchinsky. Belonging to an older generation, Souvtchinsky had participated in the first performance of *Les Cenci* in 1935, giving him direct practical experience of Artaud’s theatrical model as well as close personal links to Artaud himself. After his return to New York in November 1949, Cage maintained an affectionate friendship with Souvtchinsky, who provided an informed link with the Paris circle.

More directly influential would be Cage’s relationship with Boulez. The two composers would exchange a series of lengthy letters between 1949 and 1954, swapping detailed explanatory notes on compositional strategies and influences. Boulez visited Cage in New York in November 1949, making the acquaintance of David Tudor and M.C. Richards, both also at Black Mountain College. Towards the end of 1950, Tudor began to prepare for his performance of the American premiere of Boulez’s *Second Piano Sonata* in a concert of the League of Composers in New York. In a letter to Boulez dated 18 December, Cage recounts his colleague’s ambition to gain a deeper understanding of the piece by reading Boulez’s articles in the contemporary music journals *Contrepoint* and *Polyphonie*, no small undertaking since it required Tudor to learn to read French. In the latter, in an article entitled ‘Propositions,’ Tudor read the following sentence: ‘I think that music should be a collective hysteria and magic, violently modern – along the lines of Antonin Artaud and not in the sense of a simple ethnographic reconstruction in the image of civilizations more or less remote from us.’ It seems that Tudor responded to Boulez’s statement by conducting additional research. For, as Cage writes in the December letter to Boulez, Tudor had embarked upon ‘a collection and study of Artaud.’ Since, at that time, the publication of Artaud’s work in translation in America was limited to the piece in *The Tiger’s Eye*.
and another in the Parisian transatlantic journal *Transition*, Tudor resorted to copying laboriously on his typewriter the French text of *Le Théâtre et son double* from a borrowed Gallimard copy. Just five months later, in May 1951, Cage reported to Boulez his own engagement with Artaud: ‘I have been reading a great deal of Artaud (this is largely because of you and through Tudor who read Artaud because of you).’

It was shortly after Cage’s second letter that M.C. Richards, a poet and teacher of literature, drama and creative writing at Black Mountain College, Chair of the Faculty between 1949 and 1951, and Tudor’s partner, would begin a translation into English of *Le Théâtre et son Double*. In fact, Richards had encountered Artaud’s name by another route, through the work of the French actor-director Jean-Louis Barrault, an accomplished mime artist, theatre director and disciple of Artaud’s. Richards had seen Barrault perform in a production of André Gide’s translation of Hamlet, while she was staying in Paris in the Spring and Summer of 1948. The sojourn had offered her an opportunity to immerse herself in French culture and to learn the language, though she found upon her arrival a city in which ‘there are so many Americans … that one has a hard time sometimes feeling as if one were in a foreign country.’ Despite her regretful conclusion that ‘the French avant-garde art and theater and philosophy is the concern primarily of a few cafés in Paris,’ she rigorously practised the language in order better to absorb the country’s literature. Frequent letters home attest to the ambitious reading matter of one rapidly improving in the French language: read in their original language, Camus, Flaubert, and Eluard provided linguistic training and the desired cultural authenticity. Back at Black Mountain, Richards read Barrault’s *Reflections on Theatre* as soon as it was published in 1951. Barrault devotes an entire chapter to Artaud, whom he terms ‘the royal representative of [an] anarchist nobility,’ embarking on a lengthy description of Artaud’s appearance and persona that verges on the romantic. Asserting that *Le Théâtre et son Double* ‘should be read again and again,’ Barrault includes it in a list of five works that he recommends to young actors. Richards has recalled her determination to read Artaud and the difficulty that she encountered in sourcing copies of his work in America in 1951: ‘I plainly owed it to myself to inform myself about Artaud. It wasn’t easy in those days … to find anything by him in the US. And it is significant, I think, that when I did locate a copy, it had been typed by a musician from a paperback imported by a dancer.’ In response to her queries, Tudor had written from his tour in November 1951, directing her to his typescript, tucked away, ‘in a small envelope … somewhere in the front room.’

Richards’ translation, though not published in full until 1958, was begun in earnest in the months following her temporary departure from the permanent faculty of Black Mountain College in 1951. Contrary to Mike Sell’s assertion that ‘cruelty’ landed on American shores in the spring of 1958, a considerable part of the text was available at Black Mountain College long before the general public would open the cover of Grove Press’s book *The Theatre and Its Double*. By the
summer of 1952, she had completed a sufficient quantity of the translation to give a reading from it at both Black Mountain College and at the Artists Club in New York.\textsuperscript{33} Correspondence between Charles Olson, the Black Mountain College rector, and Cid Corman, the poet publisher of Origin, indicates that Richards had all but finished a first draft of the entire translation by 1953, though Corman, who was more proficient than she in French and had intended to translate the work himself, was disparaging, labelling it ‘rather inept,’ its sentences ‘awkward or sometimes incoherent.’\textsuperscript{34} He published part of it, nonetheless, in the eleventh issue of Origin.\textsuperscript{35} By 1955, Richards listed the ‘complete translation’ of The Theater and Its Double in the ‘unpublished works’ section of her curriculum vitae.\textsuperscript{36} It is likely that Richards’ interpretation of Artaud’s text during the early years of the 1950s, when she, Tudor and Cage ‘were reading Artaud constantly,’ was still coloured by the words of Barrault, whose chapter on Artaud concluded with the vision of a ‘Total Theatre: a Concerto for Man.’ According to Barrault’s model, drawn from Artaud, the actor takes on the role of instrument, creating music through gesture ‘carried to the extreme limit of its capacity,’ combined with breath, cries and vocal articulation.\textsuperscript{37} It is a description that no doubt held some currency in the first stages of their interpretation of the Artaud text, and one that chimes with the \textit{mise-en-scène} that they would create in the College dining hall during the Summer of 1952.

Richards’s translation of Artaud fell on fertile ground at Black Mountain, not least due to the radical nature of the institution itself. Despite its geographical isolation in a remote part of North Carolina, it was by the turn of the decade acknowledged as an out-crop of the New York artistic avant-garde. The day-to-day operational mode of the College was characterised by an uncompromising belief in radical non-hierarchy, resulting in a richly collaborative atmosphere and an organisational infrastructure that was frequently frustratingly indecisive. The College’s prospectus for the Spring 1952 semester stresses its ongoing strategy of moving away from the overriding authority of the teacher figure, towards a situation in which ‘the student, rather than the curriculum, is the proper center of a general education.’\textsuperscript{38} Unencumbered by the restrictions of a prescribed curriculum that were features of more established higher education institutions, faculty and students at Black Mountain were able to absorb rapidly new theoretical ideas into their artistic and educational project, without such influences being filtered through layers of evaluative bureaucracy. It was, commented Richards, ‘a situation where the external restrictions upon human initiative were absent.’\textsuperscript{39} The rejection of target-oriented learning allowed a focus on collaborative exchange, typified in Olson’s stated belief that ‘it is not things in themselves but what happens between things where the life of them is to be sought.’\textsuperscript{40} Teaching was conducted primarily through informal study groups. Late night conversations between faculty and students were common, and many alumni of the College have remarked that most of the learning happened outside delineated class-time.
Mark Hedden, a former student, recalled his experiences of theatre at the college in an article he wrote in 1969, coming to the conclusion that ‘much of what was good theater at BMC was unstructured, unstaged, going on regardless of audience or plot.’ Drama was, however, a core subject in the college’s programme. It was an area in which the college demonstrated a significant and sustained engagement with experimental practices. The directions of investigation were as eclectic as the changing faculty, but were united by the search for radical new modes of expression, and by the paucity of funds. Often, the latter state of affairs necessitated the advancement of the former. In the years leading up to John Cage’s performance event, there was experimental dance, including workshops and performances by Kathy Litz and Merce Cunningham, and chanting led by Nataraj Vashi. Theatrical productions by staff and student productions included plays by Ibsen, Cocteau, Yeats and Brecht, as well as the more experimental pieces contrived by the Light Sound Movement workshop during the 1949-50 school year. The August 1948 production of Erik Satie’s surrealist play *The Ruse of Medusa,* translated by M.C. Richards, incorporated improvisational work into the rehearsals, though its adherence to a script and reliance on proscenium staging placed it fairly firmly in traditional realms. It points to an increasing interest in avant-garde French sources, a charge led by John Cage, who delivered his notorious lecture ‘Defense of Satie,’ as part of a Summer Session that year devoted entirely to the work of the French composer. Their varying degrees of radicality notwithstanding, all of these projects contributed to the development of a drama programme that had deeply experimental ambitions. Though the extent to which the 1952 event continued those ideas present in these earlier theatrical experiments is debateable, it is certain that the staff and students were not unused to theatrical experimentation, nor to drawing on European sources for inspiration. For a group of people well versed in the ideas of the Bauhaus and of Dada, Artaud would not have seemed a vast leap. For Martin Duberman, the Satie Festival heralded the arrival of a distinctly American phase at Black Mountain College, following what he terms the ‘New England-Germanic’ climate under the rectorship of Joseph Albers. The college, he states, ‘became for the first time since its inception – and, in an important sense, for the first time ever – a decidedly American, and a decidedly radical environment.’ But it would seem that in Satie, and later in Artaud, this ‘decidedly American’ sensibility found a specifically French inspiration.

‘When John did that thing’: the untitled event of 1952

Hedden’s statement that the most innovative theatre at Black Mountain was ‘going on regardless of audience or plot’ was written in 1969 at a moment when Happenings dominated the art world. Hedden’s focus on the performative actions of everyday life shares much with the writing of Happenings artists like Allan Kaprow. Performance, for Hedden, was to be found in ‘walking out … to the exact center of a circular grass plot behind the kitchen and sitting down … The talk at
table, the pick-up softball games on Sunday, the parties, dances in the cavernous dining hall …”

His rhetoric finds echoes, too, in Richard Kostelanetz’s 1968 study of the new theatrical phenomenon that he termed the “theater of mixed means.” Its origins Kostelanetz locates in Cage’s event at Black Mountain College, behind which he finds the European influence of Futurism, Dada, the Bauhaus and surrealism. His analysis draws out a broad refutation of ‘Renaissance-style’ theatrical conventions. It is a stance present in Cage’s identification of Artaud as a direct source. Cage offers the following explanation of the nature of the inspiration that he and Tudor found in The Theater and Its Double:

> We got the idea from Artaud that theater could take place free of a text, that if a text were in it, that it needn’t determine the other actions, that sounds, that activities, and so forth, could all be free rather than tied together … so that the audience was not focused in one particular direction.50

Thus his 1952 theatrical event is no less unstaged, albeit rather more deliberate, than the aimless wander that Mark Hedden evokes. Hedden’s assertion that the best theatre at the College took place ‘regardless of plot’ could apply equally to Cage’s event. The freedom from a pre-determined text, or script, liberated the work from sequential narrative development or the psychological logic of characterisation; it dispensed with the requirement that one thing follow directly from another, allowing instead for a scenario in which the disconnection of elements permitted escape from a singular focus of audience attention.

This freedom from focus was further manifested in the unconventional arrangement of the dining hall, a sort of theatre in the round, adapted so that the action penetrated the space of the audience. While the 1948 performance of Erik Satie’s The Ruse of Medusa had taken place on a raised stage in front of an audience in auditorium rows, those that witnessed the 1952 event did so from different angles. Richards recalls an audience of between thirty-five and fifty staff and students, in a complex seating arrangement that Cage describes as follows in the 1965 interview:

> The seating arrangement I had at Black Mountain in 1952 was a square composed of four triangles with the apexes of the triangles merging towards the center, but not meeting. The center was a larger space that could take movement, and the aisles between these four triangles also admitted movement. The audience could see itself, which is of course the advantage of any theater in the round. The larger part of the action took place outside of that square.51

Cage’s description is accompanied by a diagram that indicates a mutually penetrative relationship between performers and audience, with the seats jutting into the stage space and the aisles turned into spaces of action. The physical distribution of performers around the space of the dining hall at Black Mountain College functions to facilitate the independent action of each performer, allowing multiple centres of theatrical attention. A second schematic representation,
drawn by Richards in 1989, emphasises the way in which the action occurred on all sides of the audience, who are placed in a central position. The disruption of a single point of meaning is thus enacted on two fronts: the dispersal of the performers as well as that of the audience. The action is not only spread horizontally around the hall, but also vertically, by means of a ladder, a lectern, and paintings hung above the audience. Viewers craning their necks to take in those elements not at eye level might miss Merce Cunningham dancing past, or the sight of Tudor on the piano; anyone intent on making out the words spoken by one of the poets, or by Cage himself, or keen to hum along to the piano or phonograph would be frustrated, for no single part was discernable in the cacophonous whole. The number of possible experiences goes far beyond the number of chairs in the auditorium, since it depends to such an extent on the actions and attitude of the viewer. Multiple centres of performance are viewed from a potentially infinite number of perspectives.

For Cage, this radical dispersal of the space of performance served to counter the single centre traditionally offered by the proscenium stage and embodied in the figure of the conductor and the hierarchy of the orchestra. The multiple focus as a means of breaking from the restrictive harmonic conventions of the European ensemble is an Artaudian strategy that Boulez had adopted in the Second Piano Sonata, in which ‘there are no principal parts, no secondary parts,’ and that he had passed on to Cage. Artaud’s call for a radical reappraisal of the performance space ‘utilized in all its dimensions and … on all possible planes,’ belongs to his rejection of an Occidental theatre that is still tied to the notion of a performed text. His demand to end the subjugation of the theatre to the text of a pre-determined script proposes a new mode of expression, one that ‘cannot be defined except by its possibilities for dynamic expression in space as opposed to the expressive possibilities of spoken dialogue.’ An undulating hand-drawn line in the upper region of Richards’ sketch indicates the dynamism of the event. The faltering outlines with which she designates the individual performer’s positions not only suggest a more hasty demonstration but also echo the confusing plenitude of movement and sound that characterises audience accounts. Her sketchiness may indicate more than the vagueness engendered by time; indeed many contemporary accounts also reveal a state of uncertainty regarding its exact sequence. The potter Karen Karnes’ recollection that ‘we didn’t know what was going on,’ is typical of the audience’s bewildered response. Suffice it to say, as Karnes did, that the ‘dining room was set up in some other way,’ and that this some other way characterised Cage and Tudor’s Artaudian ambitions for the event as a whole. Karnes’ phrase is inadvertently revealing, suggesting an alternative to the norm, a way that is deliberately other. As such, it will become particularly significant in my later discussion of Cage’s reading of Artaud in terms of a queer positioning. For now, it will suffice to keep in mind the physical implications of this some other way, and their links with Artaud’s radical theatrical model.
At the most basic level, Cage and Richards’ verbal and diagrammatic descriptions demonstrate a direct correlation between the elements that constituted the event and the explicit staging directions outlined by Artaud in *The Theater and its Double*. On a logistical level, it would seem, Cage approached the book partly as a practical manifesto for creating the *mise-en-scène*. Artaud’s ‘Theater of Cruelty’ calls for a scenario in which ‘the spectator is in the center and the spectacle surrounds him.’ It is a sentiment that could equally describe the arrangement in the dining hall and Black Mountain College. Artaud continues to explain that ‘in this spectacle the sonorisation is constant.’ He demands the simultaneous presentation of sound, light and actions, chosen not for their representational potential but for their ability to act as pure forces that can invigorate both actor and audience:

Thus, on the one hand, the mass and extent of a spectacle addressed to the entire organism; on the other, an intensive mobilization of objects, gestures, and signs, used in a new spirit. … Words say little to the mind; extent and objects speak; new images speak, even new images made with words. But space thundering with images and crammed with sounds speaks too, if one knows how to intersperse from time to time a sufficient extent of space stocked with silence and immobility.

The Black Mountain College dining hall was just such a space ‘thundering with images and crammed with sounds.’ A cacophonous plenitude of sound greeted an audience simultaneously bombarded with the sound of Cage, Richards and Olson’s recitations, Tudor’s piano, Rauschenberg’s phonograph, not to mention the sounds generated by the dancing Cunningham, the whirr of the slide projector and the sound of poets’ feet climbing and descending the ladder. Cacophony, a state that is etymologically deemed negative, instead offered the immense freedom of non-hierarchy, non-representationality, and indeterminacy.

From Artaud to ‘Indeterminacy’

John Cage’s ‘Juilliard lecture’ proclaims the composer’s ambition to free himself from his own preconceived notions of the nature of a sound through the kind of spontaneous listening that was evident in the Black Mountain dining hall that summer. ‘With contemporary music,’ he states, ‘there is no time to do anything like classifying. All you can do is suddenly listen, in the same way that when you catch cold all you can do is suddenly sneeze.’ This resistance to categorisation is also key to the 1952 event, as William Fetterman has shown. There is something amiss in accounts of the Black Mountain event; but our difficulty in apprehending it is not simply due to the discrepancies between various recollections. There is at play an unsettling disjunction between the seeming usefulness of particular details (the ladder, the diagrammatic descriptions of layout, the specificity of the time frames), and the lacunae that still inhibit our access to meaning. We can imagine the sound of Olsen pulling his large frame up the ladder, but are at a loss to know what he
read, or what Tudor played. There was (and still is) ‘no time to do anything like classifying,’ for the meaning of the work is situated not in the performers’ individual words, notes, or movements, but in the indeterminacy that is created from their superimposition. The work takes meaning from just that state of incoherence, created not only by its participants, but also by the audience as they struggle to fix on a single meaning or voice and, with varying degrees of speed, give up that enterprise. Though inspired by Artaud’s mistrust of the script, the work does not simply dispense with the written word; in fact it is full of them. But speech, read from a script (most obviously in the case of Cage, Richards and Olsen) becomes noise. The work thematises the abandonment of the script through the mode of indeterminacy manifested in aural plenitude. That is to say, in place of the representation of characters through symbol or metaphor, the work opens up an infinite field of shifting meaning that escapes fixity and thus retains vitality. It is a manoeuvre that embodies Artaud’s call,

[to] make the language express what it does not ordinarily express: to make use of it in a new, exceptional, and unaccustomed fashion; to reveal its possibilities for producing a physical shock; to divide and distribute it evenly in space; to deal with intonations in an absolutely concrete manner, restoring their power to shatter as well as really to manifest something.61

What the audience at Black Mountain College encountered, and were implicated in, was the incantatory anarchy of Artaud’s model of a ‘Theatre of Cruelty.’ For Cage, as for Artaud, this anarchic cacophony is the result of a theatre that is unplanned, unscripted and therefore entirely unpredictable. It enacts the ‘discovery of an active language, active and anarchic.’62

That the Black Mountain event was a key moment in the development of Cage’s theories of indeterminacy – as they were later articulated in the 1959 composition Indeterminacy and a text of the same name – is not disputed. His ideas on the subject are most explicitly outlined in the lecture ‘Indeterminacy,’ printed in his book Silence.63 Although it does not allude to the 1952 event directly, the text recalls it in several places. Cage asserts, for example, that ‘[the performers] must at least be disposed separately around the audience, if not, by approaching their disposition in the most radically realistic sense, actually disposed within the audience itself.’64 But Cage’s rhetoric is also distinctly informed by that of Artaud’s two ‘Theatre of Cruelty’ manifestoes; ‘Indeterminacy’ might be seen to act as an answer to the challenge posed by Artaud in the second chapter of The Theater and Its Double: ‘why not conceive of a play composed directly on the stage, realized on the stage?’65 Cage’s text primarily stresses the point of performance, rather than that of composition, as the location of indeterminacy; he thus draws a distinction between music that is indeterminate in performance and that which incorporates chance at the point of its composition (such as Cage’s own Music of Changes), but whose performers are instructed by a determinate notation that constricts and directs structure, method, form and materials at the point of
performance.\textsuperscript{66} The distinction is an important one, for while Cage’s experiments with chance composition ally him firmly with those of his friend Marcel Duchamp (one might look to Duchamp’s \textit{Large Glass} or \textit{Three Standard Stoppages} for comparison), the mode of indeterminacy in performance emerges from an engagement with Artaud.

\textbf{Life in the shadows}

In one of the most decisive analyses of the work of Cage’s circle, written in 1977, Moira Roth outlines what she terms an ‘Aesthetic of Indifference,’ according to which the work of Cage, Cunningham, Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns might be seen to function in response to a specific set of cultural inscriptions that were engendered by the political landscape of the Cold War.\textsuperscript{67} In an era dominated by cacophonous hysteria, Roth identifies art ‘characterized by tones of neutrality, passivity, irony and, often, negation.’\textsuperscript{68} Positing ‘cool’ art in opposition to ‘hot’ politics, and the silence of ironic indifference to the noise of moral indignation, Roth’s account is informed by an underlying binary structure that, as we shall see, does not sit well with Cage’s own position. Writing in response to Roth’s essay several decades later, Jonathan D. Katz revised her term to read the \textit{White Paintings} as a radical articulation of queer identity. He proposes ‘a politics of negation, wherein negation functions as an active resistance to hegemonic constructions of meaning as natural or inherent in the work.’\textsuperscript{69} It is a form of queer articulation that does not involve speaking at all, a radical silence on the part of artists who, as Katz has consistently asserted, ‘remade their position as silent subjects under a homophobic culture.’\textsuperscript{70} Thus silence is refigured not as complicity but resistance, as ‘a seduction towards opposition, rather than as a declaration of oppositional terms.’\textsuperscript{71} Katz takes his lead from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s deconstruction of the ‘epistemology of the closet,’ in which she proposes closetedness as a performative state initiated and maintained by silence.\textsuperscript{72} Though Katz recognises a note of essentialism in Roth’s dandified Duchamp, there is at the heart of his reading, as in Roth’s, a Duchampian absenting, or excusing, of content, and the play of the oxymoron:

\begin{quote}
In unexpressive expressionism, silent music, and \textit{White Paintings}, Johns, Cage, and Rauschenberg, respectively, made a statement of nonstatement. In their hands nothingness, emptiness, and silence grew articulate.\textsuperscript{73}
\end{quote}

However, the vision of the \textit{White Paintings} suspended above the proceedings in the Black Mountain College dining hall offers an alternative framing – that of the Artaudian cacophony, a plethora of voices that are rendered incomprehensible through their drowning each other out. The ‘Juilliard Lecture’ that most likely constituted Cage’s own contribution offers a clue to the broader scope of his interests at the time of planning the event, though we must approach it conscious of the paradox inherent in singling out one voice from the multitude. As might be
expected from a declaration of artistic intent made in the same year as Cage's 4'33"*, the lecture presents a radical fusion of the notions of sound and silence. But it also makes explicit Cage's rejection of the sound/silence binary, expounding instead a symbiotic relationship that implies for those white spaces on the page not emptiness, but a potential plenitude of sound: ‘not one sound fears the silence that ex-tinguishes it. And no silence exists that is not pregnant with sound.’

Thus, just as Cage's anthology *Silence* is a rich mixture of literary styles, subject matter and typographical formats, 4'33", the so-called ‘silent piece’ is anything but. It emerges not as the 'empty' gesture of political paralysis that Roth and Katz claim, but as the embodiment of a sense of plenitude, immediacy and unrepeatability that is less Duchampian than it is an Artaudian ‘space stocked with silence.’ In this respect, my reading is closer to that of Calvin Tomkins and, later, Branden Joseph, though neither have linked Cage's writing on the subject to that of Antonin Artaud.

With an Artaudian context in mind, we might return to the full text of the statement that Cage issued on the occasion of Rauschenberg's 1953 exhibition at the Stable Gallery:

No subject
No image
No taste
No object
No beauty
No message
No talent
No technique (no why)
No idea
No intention
No art
No feeling
No black
No white (no and)

I have come to the conclusion that there is nothing in these paintings that could not be changed, that they can be seen in any light and are not destroyed by the action of shadows.

It becomes possible to read Cage's text as an extrapolation of the exclamation that titles Artaud's sixth chapter: 'No More Masterpieces!' In Cage's text, the iconoclastic denial of the conventions of mimetic visual representation are equated with the reliance on an originary authorial voice, with the production of ‘feeling,’ and with the delineation of black and white (Cage's visual equivalent of sound and silence). The trajectory of Cage's statement on Rauschenberg's paintings follows that of Artaud's text, which, alongside the two 'Theater of Cruelty' manifestoes, provides one the most succinct declarations of his iconoclastic position. Artaud's polemic, like Cage's statement, consists of a series of denouncements: of the elitist irrelevance of the artworks of the past (Cage's ‘no subject / no image … no art’); of the concept of taste (‘no taste … no beauty’); of
'purely descriptive and narrative theater – storytelling psychology' ('no message ... no feeling');\textsuperscript{77} of the veneration of the script and the ego of the author or artist ('no talent ... no idea / no intention'); and of the strict delineation between art and life as binary terms (a distinction that is contained at least in implication in Cage's penultimate line, 'no black / no white'). In place of the stifling structures of artistic and linguistic conventions, Cage sets 'the action of shadows,' by which the \textit{White Paintings} are 'not destroyed.' It is a manoeuvre that parallels Artaud's:

Our petrified idea of the theater is connected with our petrified idea of a culture without shadows, where, no matter which way it turns, our mind (esprit) encounters only emptiness, though the space is full. But the true theater, because it moves and makes use of living instruments, continues to stir up shadows where life has never ceased to grope its way. The actor does not make the same gesture twice, but he makes gestures, he moves ...\textsuperscript{78}

The passage reiterates the vitality of the proposed model through a series of key antonyms: full as opposed to empty; moving as opposed to petrified; and the repetition of 'living' and 'life.' The shadow is an ephemeral and constantly changing manifestation of Artaud's double, directly connected to real life, and thus operating outside of the limits of a single or fixed mode of representation.

Denis Hollier has noted the importance of this state of unfixedness to the surrealist project more generally. In his analysis of surrealist paintings and writing, the iconic nature of the cast shadow places it in opposition to the fictional character, whose artificiality is articulated in the inability to cast a shadow.\textsuperscript{79} The shadow indicates the presence of real things, but its fleeting existence, subjected to constant flux, means that it is 'less the representation of an object than the effect of an event.'\textsuperscript{80} Unfixed and unfixable, it is 'a sign that doesn’t survive,' and is therefore bereft of exchange-value.\textsuperscript{81} For Hollier, these semiological properties of the shadow rendered it a crucial motif in Surrealist writing, one that dispensed with the mimetic representation of the novel (filled with characters incapable of casting shadows), and allowed the possibility of autobiographical modes of writing such as that found in André Breton's \textit{Nadja}. Hollier stresses the role of the unknown destination in Surrealist narrative, in which primacy is given to the index over the icon. He draws primarily on the example of Breton and the Surrealists painters, though the scenario that he constructs is also typically Artaudian. In \textit{The Theater and Its Double}, too, the motif of the shadow offers the means to escape the artificial signs of mimetic representation. It is for Artaud, as for Breton, both the method by which the impermeability of the novel is disrupted, and also the result of that rupture. Artaud's result is arguably more extreme than Breton's; for while, according to Hollier, the surrealists' efforts to inscribe the shadow into the body of writing resulted in the mode of autobiographical writing, Artaud's 'Theatre of Cruelty' enacts the destruction of the written word altogether, at the hands of the shadow's indexical link to the real
and its inherent quality of constant change. The theatrical performance is the arena in which this destruction is enacted, and it is in this arena that we witness Cage’s framing of Rauschenberg’s *White Paintings*. In his inclusion of the paintings in the untitled performance at Black Mountain College, there emerges the repeated reinscription of the shadow, a process that enacts a continuous cycle of violent destruction and re-creation.

‘Hallelujah!’ Cage exclaims in his text ‘On Robert Rauschenberg,’ ‘the blind can see again! Blind to what he has seen so that seeing this time is as though first seeing.’ The state of blindness that is shed in front of Rauschenberg’s white canvasses is equivalent to Artaud’s ‘petrified idea of a culture without shadows.’ It is the shadows that inhabit the paintings and Artaud’s ‘Theatre of Cruelty’ alike that repeatedly enable ‘seeing … as though first seeing.’ Just as the conjuring of shadows represents for Artaud the defeat of the ‘petrified’ state of Occidental theatre, so for Cage it articulates an abandonment of the established European conventions of music, counterpoint, harmony and polyphony, according to which voices might be written to complement and develop each other. These stale forms of representation are the state of ‘blindness’ that must be thrown off. In *For the Birds*, Cage draws out the specific political implications of this strategy of composition: ‘noises escape power, that is, the laws of counterpoint and harmony … today, we must identify ourselves with noises instead, and not seek laws for the noises.’ It is a sentiment that is politically anarchic and deeply revolutionary, and that, though made in 1976, resonates with the radical Artaudian project embarked upon at Black Mountain College in 1952. If we are to accept Artaudian cacophony as an important trope in this early reception of the *White Paintings*, we might interpret the shadow as a manifestation of his radical theatre of non-focus and non-hierarchy, a theatre, that is, that ‘escapes power.’ It promises a world of blurred distinctions, one in which nothing is predictable and anything is permissible. Artaud’s target is the ‘petrified idea of a culture without shadows,’ defined (in terms that anticipate Cage’s declaration in the ‘Juilliard Lecture’) as that place ‘where, no matter which way it turns, our mind … encounters only emptiness, though the space is full.’ He continues:

For theater, as for culture, it remains a question of naming and directing shadows: and the theater, not confined to a fixed language and form, not only destroys false shadows but prepares the way for a new generation of shadows, around which assembles the true spectacle of life.

It is this ‘new generation of shadows’ that we find at work in the untitled event of 1952, in Rauschenberg’s *White Paintings* and in the famous ‘silent piece’ that followed them. The shadows that lurk in the wings, ready to flicker playfully across the surface of the *White Paintings*, inhabit the same place as those sounds primed to echo through Cage’s four minutes and thirty-three seconds of silence. By reading the *White Paintings* in terms of Artaud, then, we might begin to refigure Katz’s ‘performative silence’ or ‘politics of negation’ into a performative
politics of cacophony. Such a strategy, rooted in Artaud’s radical theatrical model, harnesses the modes of contingency, improvisation and spatial radicality. It is motivated by the necessity of escaping the language of mastery, whether the regulated compositional techniques of harmony, the traditional boundaries of the prosenium stage, or the limits inscribed on the social body. This last entails the reclamation of the selfhood forbidden by a (hetero)normative script, a manoeuvre that Katz draws out in his reading of Cage in queer terms. Returning to Cage’s Stable Gallery statement on the *White Paintings*, it is the final phrase that arouses the greatest interest in this context: Cage’s assertion ‘no and’ functions as a denial of the binary structure that divides the world up into two separate parts, parts that, through the analogy of black and white, implicitly take on the roles of Self and Other, normative and non-normative. In their place he exhorts acceptance of a state of sameness through the denial of the act of conjoining that would imply an original state of division. In Cage’s refashioning of Artaud, then, we find the potential to escape from a rigid subjectivity through the strategy of indeterminacy and the ambiguity of the unrepeatable shadow. The Artaudian double is made queer by virtue of its rejection of the kinds of binary definitions that shored up social conservatism during the post-war period. Subjugation to the play’s script becomes metonymic for the constraints to which the homosexual body was subjected by a society that outlawed it. Lines and stage directions, intended to keep the actor in his place (on stage and within a psychological narrative framework), become analogous to so many linguistic and legislative lassoes.

For Artaud, as for Cage and those others at Black Mountain College, following the script, and thus remaining in the place designated to you, is not necessarily a good thing. The multiple points of focus occupied by the protagonists of the 1952 theatre event, and by the shadows that infinitely reconfigure the *White Paintings*, deny the possibility that there is a correct place. In doing so, they enact just that ‘refusal of the limitations of the extant catechisms of identity’ that Katz has argued as a condition of queerness. Instead, they activate the peripheral spaces (those behind, amongst and above the Black Mountain audience, and those outside the perimeter of the canvas, where shadows lay in wait). These are spaces that are non-hierarchical, off-centre, queer. Thus the *White Paintings’* occupation of peripheral, provisional and non-focused sites might be read in terms that, in true Artaudian spirit, extend beyond the theatre – or dining hall, or New York gallery – to a space that, informed by an understanding of queer identity, lies beyond the place of normativity. In Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s analysis, the categories of homosexual / heterosexual articulate polarised positions that masquerade as symmetrical, though in fact carry within them the subordination of the former to the latter, and the dependence of that condition of subordination for the latter’s existence. These are categories, labels, roles, that depend ultimately on the command of logos, the commanding word that structures the dominating realm of the Symbolic. As Katz points out, it is this that Cage seeks to escape: ‘Now replaced by a
policy of noninterference, meaning was for Cage freed from any dependence on such a logos, for it was logos, after all, that had marked him as disturbed, marginal, and unworthy in the first place.\textsuperscript{88} It is just this logos, too, that results in Artaud’s ‘petrified idea of culture without shadows,’ and it is freedom from logos that Artaud’s shadows promise.

A queer reading of Cage’s encounter with Artaud is situated, of course, in a specific historical moment, one in which identity is put under threat on several fronts. Cage’s engagement with the works of the French author was not uninformed by Artaud’s own self-declared position as persecuted and silenced. Though the letters from Rodez, which crystallise this marginal position, would not be published until over a decade later, the bare facts of Artaud’s incarceration in the asylum there, and the electro-shock treatment to which he was submitted, were repeated by those who facilitated his early reception in the United States.\textsuperscript{89} It is worth recalling Cage’s friendship with Souvtchinsky, an associate of Artaud’s, and with others in Paris who would have been familiar with his biography. In addition to this, Artaud’s resolute adoption of a constantly shifting position outside of conventional signification places him apart from the more codified heterosexual model of mainstream (Bretonian) surrealism. ‘Surrealism relates to therapy,’ Cage stated, and his rejection of the latter compromised the usefulness of the former.\textsuperscript{90} If we are to accept Sedgwick’s formulation of the closet, then the fact that Artaud was not an overtly homosexual source made him, in all probability, all the more useful in the atmosphere of hysterical right-wing politics that Roth highlights as restrictive and Katz specifies as homophobic. For Richards, ‘[e]very person is involved in a DOUBLE life. ... It makes us actors in a cosmic drama. It gives us, as Artaud put it, a destiny to measure ourselves against.’\textsuperscript{91} This is a somewhat enigmatic statement that is partly informed by Richards’ interest in alchemy; but it speaks, too, to a certain kind of identity politics that is relevant here: the ‘double life’ of the closet refigured as a life energised by the Artaudian double. Katz concludes his 1998 analysis of the queer potential of ‘performative silence’ with a sentiment that takes on a new relevance in the context of this queering of Artaud: ‘the actor who doesn’t speak their lines,’ Katz writes, ‘offers a very particular kind of eloquence, full of possibility and promise, the challenge and hope of an entirely different script.’\textsuperscript{92} A queer Artaud offers an even bolder promise: the challenge and hope of no script at all.

It is in this context that the true nature of Artaud’s model of ‘cruelty,’ so often misunderstood in terms of mere bloodlust, is crucial. Far from a sadistic proposition, in fact, it is rather one about compulsion and commitment, a matter of life and death. The Grove Press edition of The Theater and Its Double includes a letter that elaborates the term: ‘I employ the word ‘cruelty,’ Artaud writes, ‘in the sense of an appetite for life, a cosmic rigor and implacable necessity, in the gnostic sense of a living whirlwind that devours the darkness, in the sense of that pain apart from whose ineluctable necessity life could not continue.’\textsuperscript{93} The pain of Artaudian ‘cruelty’ is not one inflicted on others, but one that is situated within the self flung headlong
against the world. Richards reiterated this in a text of 1963: ‘Our lives are at stake. It is not a matter of aesthetics but of metaphysical forces, of life forces, of renewal.’ Richards reiterated this in a text of 1963: ‘Our lives are at stake. It is not a matter of aesthetics but of metaphysical forces, of life forces, of renewal.’94 Rachel Rosenthal, who would become close friends with Cage, Rauschenberg and Richards later in the 1950s is also adamant on this point. She defines Artaudian cruelty as that situation,

when you do something with such dedication that you are caught up in its wheels, and just have to do it and it’s very difficult and yet you have that sense of responsibility to the art; this is the kind of cruelty he was talking about.95

Artaud’s insistence on theatre as a vital and revolutionary force directly connected to life was crucial to his reception even in its first stages.

The untitled event at Black Mountain College concluded in a quiet and sociable kind of revolution: with coffee, poured into cups that had been placed on the seats from the start (and some of which were by this point filled with cigarette butts and trash). Neatly fusing the café culture of the Parisian Left Bank and the Zen ritual of the Japanese tea ceremony, the imbibing of coffee speaks of collective consciousness and conversation, a final insistence on audience participation, quiet but stubborn. It is surely not quite what Artaud envisaged when he wrote of the theatre as plague, a ‘contagious delirium,’ that affects its audience ‘with the force of an epidemic.’96 Nevertheless, in Artaud’s language in this passage of The Theater and Its Double, we find some of ‘that same insistence’ that Cage did. It is what Artaud termed ‘this total exorcism which presses and impels the soul to its utmost.’97 Artaud’s explication of the theatre as plague contains much that chimes with Cage’s Zen articulation of the constant music of the world, and with the shadows that exist only on the surface of the White Paintings:

The plague takes images that are dormant, a latent disorder, and suddenly extends them into the most extreme gestures; the theater also takes gestures and pushes them as far as they will go: like the plague it reforges the chain between what is and what is not, between the virtuality of the possible and what already exists in nature.98

What developed at Black Mountain, and beyond, may be more a Cagean case of sudden sneezing than an Artaudian plague. But it was no less seismic for that.

Conclusion

‘When I wish as now to tell of critical incidents, persons, and events that have influenced my life and work,’ John Cage mused in 1989, ‘the true answer is all of the incidents were critical, all of the people influenced me, everything that happened and that is still happening influences me.’99 The sources that he cites are manifestly multifarious. In a letter to the journal Musical America in 1951 he reveals a typically eclectic range of allusions. Artaud’s name appears alongside those of Buddha, Voltaire, Eckhardt, Blake, Socrates, W. H. Blythe, Joyce, and his wife Xenia.100 The
broad array of sources – some of which are attributed to single words or phrases that seem parodically brief – creates a cacophony of allusion. It at once points to the futility of quoting and produces a new collaborative voice, a collection of unlikely literary bedfellows that bestows a new identity on each. Elsewhere, Cage expresses an irreverent attitude to the literature of the past: ‘There are oodles of people who are going to think of the past as a museum and be faithful to it, but that’s not my attitude. Now as material it can be put together with other things. They could be things that don’t connect with art as we conventionally understand it.’ Cage’s citation of Artaud is a case in point: the text is dehistoricised, uprooted from its French or surrealist connection, mingled, even allied, with Zen Buddhism. It represents nothing beyond what is on the page, torn from the symbolic implications of historical significance. The dynamic of Cage’s encounter with Artaud is one other than simple repetition, and so avoids the paradox of adhering to an exclusively Artaudian script. It is clear that in this context The Theater and Its Double went far beyond the category of practical theatrical manual, a set of written staging instructions to be carried out, and that Artaud embodied for Cage far more than the ‘apolitical pre-Rodez man of theater’ that Douglas Kahn asserts. Instead, as I have demonstrated, Cage’s encounter with Artaud’s text was one that articulated a complex subjective position that was cruel in the Artaudian sense, but that might also be understood according to the terms offered by queer theory. This encounter, in turn, structured the early framing of Rauschenberg’s White Paintings at Black Mountain College in 1952.

Rauschenberg issued his own statement on the occasion of his Stable Gallery exhibition in 1953, one that is less often cited than Cage’s, but is just as revealing. ‘My black paintings and my white paintings,’ he declared, ‘are either too full or too empty to be thought – thereby they remain visual experiences. These pictures are not Art.’ If they are neither conceptual (thought), nor canonified iconography (Art with an upper case ‘A’), then what, the question is begged, are they? Cage’s early framing of the White Paintings as part of a radical Artaudian performance offers us one possible answer: the White Paintings are cruel. They ‘continue to stir up shadows where life has never ceased to grope its way:’ and in this respect, they are theatre.
thank the conveners of the Association of Art Historians annual conference 2009 session ‘Surrealism and Non-Normative Sexualities,’ Professor Dawn Ades, Dr Jonathan D. Katz, and Professor David Lomas; and Dr James Boaden for the advice and encouragement he has offered.


2 Interview with Carroll Williams, 47, box 15, Martin Duberman collection, PC.1678, North Carolina State Archives [hereafter MD, NCSA].

3 Hubert Crehan, ‘Raw Duck,’ in Art Digest, 15 September 1953, 25.

4 Ibid.


10 Cage ‘Forward,’ in Silence, x.


13 Fetterman, John Cage’s Theatre Pieces, 97ff.

14 The appointment, in 1949, of Hazel Larsen Archer as the first full-time teacher of photography crystallised the strength of the discipline at Black Mountain College, and this continued in the early 1950s Summer Sessions. See Mary Emma Harris, The Arts at Black Mountain College, Cambridge, MA and London, MIT Press, 1987, 188, 217.

16 Transcript of phone interview with John Cage, 26 April 1969, 15, box 13, MD, NCSA.


21 Letter from John Cage to Pierre Boulez, dated 18 December 1950, in The Boulez-Cage Correspondence, 78.


23 Letter from John Cage to Pierre Boulez, dated 18 December 1950, in The Boulez-Cage Correspondence, 78.

24 Letter from John Cage to Pierre Boulez, dated 22 May 1951, in The Boulez-Cage Correspondence, 96.

25 Letter from M.C. Richards to her father and brother, 2 April 1949, box 3, folder 1, Mary Caroline Richards papers, 1928-1994, Getty Research Institute, Research Library, Accession no. 960036 (hereafter MCR, GRI).

26 Letter from M.C. Richards to James Herlihy, 29 January 1949, box 3, folder 1, MCR, GRI.


28 Barrault, Reflections on the Theatre, 50.

29 M.C. Richards, ‘‘For Ararat,’ box 31, folder 3, MCR, GRI.

30 Letter from David Tudor to M.C. Richards, postmarked 13 November 1951, box 26, folder 1, MCR, GRI.

31 Letter from M.C. Richards to Howard Adams, 18 June, 1966, box 3, folder 7, MCR, GRI.

dissident surrealism and the postwar American literary avant-garde,’ discusses other early appearances of Artaud’s work in English translation, and the impact of his Theatre of Cruelty on the performance poetry of writers associated with the Beat movement and the San Francisco Renaissance. Many of her ideas are extremely pertinent to this article.

33 Mary Emma Harris telephone conversation with Mary Caroline Richards, 3 June 1981; M.C. Richards, ‘For Ararat,’ box 31, folder 3, MCR, GRI.


36 M.C. Richards, Curriculum Vitae, box 64, folder 1, MCR, GRI.


39 Mary Caroline Richards, Notes on Black Mountain College, MCR, GRI.


41 Mark Hedden, ‘Notes on Theater at Black Mountain College (1948-1952),’ in Form, No. 9, April 1969, 18.

42 See Harris, The Arts at Black Mountain College, 37-40.

43 The Light Sound Movement (LSM) Workshop was led by Warren ‘Pete’ and Betty Jennerjahn, together with student Mark Hedden, in the 1949-50 school year. It drew on Bauhaus and Dada ideas in its envisioning of the total synchronisation of dance, sound, costumes and light projection.

44 See John Cage, ‘Defense of Satue,’ in John Cage, 80.

45 See Vincent Katz (ed.), Black Mountain College, 187, for a discussion of the LSM workshops as a link between the early theatrical experiments of Shawinsky and Evarts, and Cage’s 1952 event.


48 Hedden, ‘Notes on Theater at Black Mountain College,’ 18.

49 Kostelanetz, The Theater of Mixed Means.


52 Richards’ attribution of the suspended paintings to Franz Kline is unique among recollections of the event.

53 This statement was included in the programme notes for early performances of the Sonata. See Joan Peyser, Boulez: Composer, Conductor, Enigma, London, Cassell, 1976.


56 Transcript of interview with Karen Karnes, 16, box 32, BMCRP, NCSA.

57 Artaud, The Theater and Its Double, 81.

58 Ibid.

59 Ibid., 86-87.

60 Cage, ‘Juilliard Lecture’ [1952], 100. Quoted in Silence, 44.

61 Artaud, The Theater and Its Double, 46.

62 Ibid., 41.


64 Ibid., 40.

65 Artaud, The Theater and Its Double, 41.


68 Roth, ‘The Aesthetic of Indifference,’ 35.


74 Cage, ‘Juilliard Lecture’ [1952], 98.

75 Artaud, The Theater and Its Double, 86.


77 Ibid., 76.

78 Ibid., 12.


80 Ibid.

81 Ibid., 114.


83 John Cage, For the Birds: John Cage in Conversation with Daniel Charles, Boston, Marion Boyars, 1981, 236.

84 Artaud, The Theater and Its Double, 12.

85 Ibid.


87 Kosofsky Sedgwick, The Epistemology of the Closet, 9-10.

The biographical note in *Black Mountain Review*, Vol. 1, No. 2, Summer 1954, 40, is typical in both its content and its brevity: ‘Antonin Artaud died recently, shortly after his release from a French insane asylum.’

John Cage and Allan Gillmor, 'Interview with John Cage' [1973], in *Contact*, Vol. 14, Autumn 1976; John Cage interview by Paul Cummings, 2 May 1974, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. At the time of writing, new avenues are being opened up in the field of queer Surrealism, led by the AHRC-funded research project ‘Surrealism and Non-Normative Sexualities,’ at the AHRC Centre for Study of Surrealism and Its Legacies at the University of Manchester.

M.C. Richards, ‘Antonin Artaud: The Theater and Its Double,’ manuscript for a lecture delivered at the Living Theater, New York, 1959, 13, box 30, folder 3, MCR, GRI.


M.C. Richards, untitled statement on Artaud, New York, June 1963, box 30, folder 3, MCR, GRI.

Interview with Rachel Rosenthal, conducted by the author, 26 February 2009, Culver City, Los Angeles.

Artaud, The Theater and Its Double, 26-27.

Ibid., 27.

Ibid.

John Cage, 'An Autobiographical Statement,' *Southwest Review*, Vol. 76, No. 1, Winter 1991, 59. The statement was originally written for the Inamori Foundation and delivered in Kyoto as a commemorative lecture in response to Cage's receipt of the Kyoto Prize in November 1989. Cage delivered the talk again at Southern Methodist University on 17 April 1990, as part of the year-long celebration of the Algur H. Meadows award for excellence in the arts given to Robert Rauschenberg.

Carbon copy of a letter from John Cage to the editor of *Musical America* in response to a letter from Mr. Shulsky, box 52, folder 3, David Tudor papers, 1884-1998 (bulk 1940-1996), Getty Research Institute, Research Library, accession no. 980039.

Kirby and Schechner, 'An Interview with John Cage,' 54.


Artaud, The Theater and Its Double, 12.
Lucy Bradnock completed her PhD, ‘After Artaud: Art in America, 1949-1965’ at the University of Essex in 2010, following a BA and MA at the Courtauld Institute of Art. She currently holds a Postdoctoral Fellowship at the Getty Research Institute, where her research is carried out under the auspices of the Getty project ‘Pacific Standard Time: Art in Los Angeles, 1945-80.’
Bellmer's Legs: Adolescent Pornography and Uncanny Eroticism in the Photographs of Hans Bellmer and Anna Gaskell

Catherine Grant

Abstract

Hans Bellmer's photographs of his two dolls from the 1930s have become classic surrealist images. Bellmer said of his motives in making the two dolls: 'I shall construct an artificial girl whose anatomy will make it possible physically to re-create the dizzying heights of passion and to do so to the extent of inventing new desires.' By reading Bellmer's photographs alongside those of the contemporary American photographer Anna Gaskell, this article argues that the 'new desires' invented are ones which confuse binaries of identification and desire, circulating around the body of the adolescent girl/doll. To think through the significance of the adolescent girl/doll as a shared trope by both artists, the concept put forward by Julia Kristeva of 'adolescent pornography' (in her essay 'The Adolescent Novel') will be used to inflect the focus on the uncanny that has dominated discussions of both artists. This paper will argue that the doubling between self and other, animate and inanimate, creates a queered eroticism in the work of Bellmer and Gaskell, overlaying narcissism and homoeroticism in these images of proliferating female body parts that deny any straightforward reading of subjecthood or desire.

In her essay 'The Adolescent Novel,' Julia Kristeva concludes with a brief discussion of 'adolescent pornography.' She describes this term in relation to modern novels that take the adolescent or adolescence as their theme, novels such as Vladimir Nabokov's Lolita, 1955. She asks if an adolescent pornography could 'constitute a desire to name, to bring to light a wavering meaning that lies upon the boundaries of words and drives?' For Kristeva, this adolescent pornography 'relies on adolescent erotic games. There is no obscenity, nothing scandalous, and not even any explicit behaviour.' She explains how 'the narrator's identification with his seductress or seducer is an important element, especially since adolescents supersede the categories of codified perversion. They impose themselves onto novelists like metaphors of that which is not yet formed -- a mirage of pre-language or an indecisive body.'

There are key ideas here which I will relate to the photographs of Hans Bellmer's doll, particularly the focus on 'adolescent erotic games,' on 'the indecisive body' and 'the boundaries of words and drives.' These seem to echo Bellmer's own statement: 'I shall construct an artificial girl whose anatomy will make it possible physically to re-create the dizzying heights of passion and to do so to the extent of inventing new desires.' To explore the 'uncanny eroticism' of Bellmer's photographs, something which is re-worked in the photographs by the contemporary American artist Anna Gaskell, I will use Kristeva's idea of an 'adolescent pornography' to bring to the surface issues of narcissism, identification and non-normative sexuality that circulate around the disarticulated body of the adolescent doll/girl. Key to Kristeva's notion of adolescent pornography is the way in which 'adolescents
supersede the categories of codified perversion,’ allowing for a queering of desires and bodies that does not rely on binaries of homo or heterosexuality. In using Kristeva’s notion of ‘adolescent pornography,’ I am following her definition of the pornographic as a use of sexualised body that utilises the ‘illicit’ quality of pornography without necessarily being explicit.5 For Kristeva, ‘adolescent pornography’ foregrounds a use of perverse eroticism as resistance to patriarchal authority, reconfiguring the sexualised body of the adolescent to contest normative conceptions of gendered identity.6

Through this discussion of Bellmer, the legacies of his surreal bodily recombinations can be seen in the work of Gaskell, who reanimates his doll in her use of adolescent girl models, and extends his disruption of the normative girl-body. Since 1997, with the exhibition of her wonder series, based on Alice in Wonderland, Gaskell has been seen as one of the main protagonists in the mid-1990s generation of artists using photography in a directorial mode, with her photographs of adolescent girls based on narratives culled from children’s classics, fairytales, newspaper snippets and ghost stories. As a graduate of Gregory Crewdson’s Yale MFA, Gaskell is often interpreted as following on from his staged, cinematic scenes.7 However, this framing of her work does not pay close attention to her manipulation of both the source material drawn on, and the bodies of her models in her large-scale photographic installations. By reading Gaskell's work through the legacy of Bellmer's obsessive engagement with his girl-doll, a more nuanced understanding of Gaskell's interrogation of the adolescent body comes into focus. Proclaimed as the 'Cindy Sherman of her generation,' Gaskell herself has kept away from allying herself with any group of artists, frustrated at the assimilation of her practice with the derogatorily titled 'girl art.'8 The grouping of a number of women artists who photograph girls under this umbrella was compounded by the exhibition Another Girl, Another Planet, 1999, which was co-curated by Gregory Crewdson, and although Gaskell did not participate, one of her images was reproduced in the catalogue. Talking about this exhibition she says: 'I didn't want to be a part of it, not because I didn't think that there were obvious associations, but I don't think my work is about adolescence, it's a metaphor for something else, I play with it much more, it's not about teenage girls hanging out.'9 By reading her series through both the theorisation of Bellmer’s photographs and Kristeva's concept of adolescent pornography, this analysis of her 'girl art' argues that it is much more than simply 'teenage girls hanging out,' but equally sees the use of the adolescent girl as central to understanding her work.

Bellmer's work has been extensively discussed, with some of the most influential accounts focusing on issues of castration and fetishism – as in Rosalind Krauss's reading.10 This has been extended in the work of Hal Foster and Therese Lichtenstein to consider the ways in which Bellmer’s dolls represent a challenge to the perfected Aryan body, providing a social dimension to their perverse eroticism.11 In this essay, I will look at the significance of the doll's re-assembled body within a logic that borrows from Bataille – with the body seen within a metonymic chain rather than circulating around the missing phallus. This links with
Kristeva's ideas of adolescence being 'an open psychic structure,'\textsuperscript{12} one in which identity is created through 'interacting with another identity.'\textsuperscript{13} This interaction does not follow a normative set of identifications, as 'the adolescent structure opens itself to that which has been repressed.'\textsuperscript{14} This allows for a questioning of sexual identity, with the adolescent standing in as 'a symbol of a subjectivity in crisis.'\textsuperscript{15} This notion of 'an open psychic structure' frames her discussion of adolescent pornography, as a mode of interrogating sexuality that is resistant to normative structures of heterosexuality and sexual difference.

Kristeva's formulation of adolescence also fits with Juliet Mitchell's conception of gender as being distinct from sexual difference: "'Gender," which is now used indiscriminately, has been deployed unwittingly to express a sexuality which is not primarily or predominantly procreative."\textsuperscript{16} In her argument for a sexuality based on lateral, or sibling relations, Mitchell theorises a non-reproductive sexuality, one in which seriality is privileged and identification and desire are brought together rather than held in opposition. As she puts it:

Lateral desire does not involve the symbolisation that comes through the absence of the phallus (or womb); it involves seriality. As part of a series, girls and boys are 'equilateral,' in other words, they are not defined by what is missing. Girls and boys explore what is there, not what is not.\textsuperscript{17}

By following this serial logic and attending to lateral relations – between siblings or peers rather than between parents and children – a conception of both Bellmer and Gaskell's use of the doll/girl can be formulated which does not rely solely on the phallic logic of castration.

Bataille's novel \textit{Story of the Eye} (1929), whilst comprised of many scandalous scenes, also follows Kristeva's conception of adolescent pornography and Mitchell's emphasis on seriality in its first half: up to the point of Marcelle's death and the consummation of the relationship between the narrator and Simone. Until this point, their adolescent erotic games have circulated around the bodies of the three main protagonists, with Marcelle and Simone often doubled. Indeed, when the narrator tries to have sex with Simone in her bed, she cries: "'You're totally insane, little man' ... 'I'm not interested – here, in a bed like this, like a housewife or mother! I'll only do it with Marcelle!'\textsuperscript{18}

By focusing on these serial relationships and the queer potential of an 'adolescent pornography,' the uncanniness often attributed to both artists' work can be read as exceeding the Freudian focus on castration. Instead, the importance of the double and narcissism in relation to the figure of the adolescent/doll will complicate this focus. I will explore the ways in which both artists gradually move from the whole body of the model, to a voyeuristic engagement with the model's bodies, to a dismembering and remaking of their models.

In Freud's essay on 'The "Uncanny,"
he famously discusses ETA Hoffmann's story 'The Sandman.' This story is the source of one of Gaskell's series that I will be discussing later, \textit{resemblance}, as well as being one of the often-quoted inspirations for Bellmer's dolls – in the form of the opera \textit{The Tales of Hoffmann}. In Freud's account, he dismisses the uncanny effect of the automata Olympia, instead seeing the story's uncanny focus to be on
the character of 'The Sandman.' Whilst Freud acknowledges the uncanny effect of the double, the role of Olympia is reduced to being the hero's 'feminine attitude towards his father in his infancy.' 19 This interpretation echoes many comments on Bellmer's own relationship with his father, which he himself describes as feminised in his essay 'The Father.' 20 As Hélène Cixous comments on Freud's blindness for Olympia, 'the beautiful Olympia is effaced by what she represents, for Freud has no eyes for her.' 21 This contrasts with one of Freud's definitions of the uncanny: 'an uncanny effect is often and easily produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced, as when something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality, or when a symbol takes over the full functions of the thing it symbolises, and so on.' 22 This blurring of distinction between imagination and reality would appear to feature strongly in the lure of the automata, and begins to define the oscillation that occurs in the photographs of Bellmer and Gaskell. Bellmer's dolls and Gaskell's adolescent models operate in an uncanny space that places them between animate and inanimate, self and other, child and adult. This oscillation also accounts for a reading of them as not simply a projection of castration anxiety, but moving between this projection and a fantasy of the doll/girl as an autonomous being. To unpack this enfolding of categories, I will briefly explore the role of Olympia in Hoffman's story.

As Mladen Dolar notes: 'Olympia is both the Other to whom Nathaniel addresses his love and his amatory discourse (like the Lady of courtly love) and his narcissistic supplement (love can after all be seen as the attempt to make the Other the same, to reconcile it with narcissism). 23 As has often been discussed, the story revolves around the hero Nathaniel mistaking the automata Olympia for a real woman, something that occurs once he gazes at her through the telescope he buys from Coppola – who may be also be the evil Coppelius who contributes to Nathaniel's father's death at the beginning of the story. 24 Once he looks through the telescope, '[f]or the first time could he see the wondrous beauty in the form of her face; – only the eyes seemed to him singularly stiff and dead.' 25 Falling desperately in love with Olympia he speaks to her at a festival that the Professor Spalanzani prepares in order to present his creation, and still believes that she is a real woman. The illusion is shattered when he sees the professor and Coppola arguing, pulling the doll Olympia between them, as Coppola had provided the doll's eyes and wanted them back: 'Nathaniel stood paralysed; he had seen but too plainly that Olympia's waxen, deadly pale countenance had no eyes, but black holes instead – she was, indeed, a lifeless doll.' 26 The trauma of the event, combined with mistaking his beloved Clara for Olympia once again, compels Nathaniel to throw himself over the railing of a steeple. 27 The story turns on Coppola's telescope, which provides Nathaniel the lens through which to 'see' Olympia. Her passivity is translated by Nathaniel as acquiescence, her beauty appearing to him to both mirror that of his love, Clara, and of himself. Here the double is figured in a number of combinations throughout the text, with the most obvious being the pairing of Coppelius/Coppola, who is also featured as an evil double of Nathaniel's father. The doll Olympia is both a double of a real woman, and the narcissistic
screen for the projections of Nathaniel. This doubling is also made clear in a different manner in the opera that Bellmer watched, in which Olympia is played by two women (one singing, one dancing) and a doll. Here the merging of Olympia as alive and dead, projection site and subject, is made clear. The emphasis on the lateral relations between Olympia, Nathaniel and Clara underlined by the multiplying of actresses to play Olympia, as well as Bellmer attending the opera with his cousin Ursula, who is often cited as one of the key inspirations for his dolls.

In Freud's discussion of this story, the focus is on the equation between the eyes/sight/blindness – both in the magic telescope that Nathaniel buys from Coppola and the blinding of Olympia – and castration. I want to instead focus on Freud’s equation of Nathaniel with Olympia:

This automatic doll can be nothing else than a materialisation of Nathaniel's feminine attitude towards his father in his infancy. Her fathers, Spalanzani and Coppola, are, after all, nothing but new editions, reincarnations of Nathaniel's pair of fathers [his biological father and Coppelius]. Spalanzani's otherwise incomprehensive statement that the optician has stolen Nathaniel's eyes, so as to set them in the doll, now becomes significant as supplying evidence of the identity of Olympia and Nathaniel.28

Here desire for the other is collapsed into desire for the self, with the doll providing the site at which this occurs. Here the double appears as a troubling of the heterosexual narrative, an insertion of narcissism and homoeroticism played out on the body of the adolescent doll. Laura Mulvey points out how the story also disavows the maternal body: 'An eviscerated, mechanised, femininity masks and marks disavowal of both the site of castration anxiety and the womb, the "first home."'29 The element of uncertainty emanates not only from the blurred distinction between the inorganic and the organic but also from the uncertain nature of femininity itself.30 This disavowal of the maternal body is something that I will return to later in relation to Gaskell's work.

The Curiosity of the Doll

Refocusing on the figure of Olympia in 'The Sandman' allows for a consideration of the dynamic that takes place between the story's characters as exceeding that of Freud's focus on castration.31 However, to extend the argument that Bellmer's doll and Gaskell's girls present a more varied range of eroticised identities than that of sexual object for a male spectator, the topic of curiosity is needed, linking back to Kristeva's interest in adolescent pornography as an exploratory endeavour. Bellmer's idea for his first doll involved a panorama in its belly, making clear his intention to reveal its interior secrets. This intention is pictured differently in the drawing Rose ouverte la nuit (1935/6), in which a little girl is shown peeling back her skin to reveal her insides.32 Here it is the girl who becomes the curious investigator, rather than the voyeur. This uncanny image, of the girl looking at her own insides, conflates the physical interior with the psychic interior, something which reflects Bellmer's idea of a physical unconscious. The body becomes the site on which identity can be
explored in a way that blurs the boundaries between reality and fantasy. In Kristeva's discussion of adolescent pornography, she states that the impetus to write in this mode arises when writers wish to rebel against patriarchal authority: 'When modern novels question either themselves or their inevitably patriarchal values (which stem from an inevitably adult society), their writers often claim to be directly seduced by the adolescent or by adolescence.' This identification with the adolescent is one that blurs sexual difference, so that male and female become related in a serial, rather than oppositional manner. This matches with Bellmer's own denial of his identification both with his father and the Nazi regime, preferring instead to inhabit the ambiguously sexualised arena of the doll. For Kristeva, adolescence is an 'open psychic structure,' one in which reproductive sexuality is denied. To explore this taking up of an adolescent position in relation to the doll, I will take up questions posed by Helene Cixous in her discussion of Freud's elision of Olympia:

the beautiful Olympia is effaced by what she represents, for Freud has no eyes for her. This woman appears obscene because she emerges there where 'one' did not expect her to appear, and she thus causes Freud to take a detour. And what if the doll became a woman? What if she were alive? What if, in looking at her, we animated her? By taking seriously the animation of Bellmer's doll, and the curiosity about sexual identity that is performed in his photographs and drawings, the viewer is provided with a way into the uncanny eroticism enacted in the work of Anna Gaskell, focusing on the ways in which the double becomes multiple, serial.

**Gaskell's curiosity**

In Gaskell's drawings, which are done as preparation for her photographs, the motif of curiosity is often present, with girls looking into each other's mouths, up skirts and into dark interiors formed by orifices and clothing (Fig. 1). This is also present in her photographs, with series such as *override*, based on *Alice in Wonderland*, played by a group of seven girls who pull at each others' clothing, hair and limbs, as if trying to physically reveal the secrets of each others' bodies (Fig. 2). I want to consider two series, *hide* (1998) and *resemblance* (2001), to see how her work can be seen to extend the uncanny eroticism of Bellmer's photographs, moving more firmly away from a phallic base for the desires presented.
The doll is both a site of identification for Bellmer and a site of total otherness, an untouchable inanimate object. The title of this article, 'Bellmer's Legs,' points to this doubling: the legs of the doll are both Bellmer's in terms of a voyeuristic possession, and are Bellmer's
in his identification with the doll. It is interesting to note similarities in the development of Bellmer and Gaskell’s practice, with an emptying out and re-symbolising of the model's body occurring in both their photographs. As has been often noted, the sources for Bellmer’s doll are seen as the receipt of childhood toys from his mother, his attraction to his adolescent cousin Ursula, which took place whilst his wife was ill with tuberculosis, seeing the opera *The Tales of Hoffmann*, with his brother, wife and Ursula, and his decision to give up work with the rise of the Nazis. These various events combine elements that Kristeva describes as instigating the creation of adolescent pornography: the questioning of patriarchal values, the interest in the indecisive body, one in which the self and other are ambiguously engaged, and an interest in adolescent erotic games. During this period, Bellmer also drew a series of portraits of girls from a local orphanage. These portraits present the body of the girls as complete and individual, but also part of a series, indicating the way in which the multiplied body allows for Bellmer to play with the signification of the doll as self and other, fantasy and reality. This series has a parallel in Gaskell's early photographs *The Alice Portraits* (1996), which seem to be a similar attempt to empty out the models of their individual personalities through repetition (Figs. 3-4).

Fig. 3: *As the serpent*, 1996 (*The Alice Portraits*) © Anna Gaskell. Courtesy of the artist and Yvon Lambert Paris, New York.

Fig. 4: *She was She and I Was I*, 1996 (*The Alice Portraits*) © Anna Gaskell. Courtesy of the artist and Yvon Lambert Paris, New York.

Gaskell’s decision to photograph these girls came after she was unsatisfied at her attempts to use herself as the model for the character of Alice. The girls that Gaskell used in this early series are all posed in the same blouse, against a black background, the age of the
girls appearing to be around eight to ten years old. Describing the genesis of this series, Carol Squiers (presumably from a conversation with Gaskell) says:

She queried various agencies for child models who could play the role of Alice. Over a period of eight months she took about 30 portraits of the girls who responded. Dressed in a blouse provided by Gaskell, they were lit like some kind of pre-Raphaelite heroines and posed to resemble Julia Margaret Cameron’s vision of Lewis Carroll’s original muse, four-year-old Alice Liddell.37

In another essay, Gaskell is said to have been intrigued by the way the pre-Raphaelites used the same model in for different paintings, with her series reversing this, using many models for one persona.38 Both explanations point to a need to empty the model of a coherent identity – something that did not seem to happen when Gaskell used herself as the model. In this initial configuration of Alices, the model becomes an empty space, an interchangeable unit, styled to provoke visual references but ultimately vacuous, replicating the blank space that the Romantic child has represented. Whilst these portraits do not have the implied violence and narrative drive of her subsequent photographs, there is still an unsettling, eroticised atmosphere, created by the too glossed lips of the girls, a cool stare in one image, the light falling too caressingly on a cheek in another. Individually the images appear pretty, if bland, but in a series the repetition and relentlessly close framing draws attention to the details in each, fetishising each model. As with Bellmer, the girl stands in for an ambiguous fulfilment of identity, a projection space for desire that is also a space for identification.

Bellmer’s Dolls

For both Gaskell and Bellmer, their depiction of individual girls in series then progressed to more fragmented depictions of the adolescent girl/doll. In this way the concern with finding out about the body and desires of their models is made more explicit, and mines the uncanny space of the girl/doll for its serial, queered sexuality. In photographs of Bellmer’s first doll, there is a tension between images which show a voyeuristic or sadistic engagement with the doll as an object of desire, and images in which Bellmer appears to identify as the doll’s double. In the photographs of the first doll, its construction is foregrounded, as in the photograph in which the doll is placed in front of a large blue-print and Bellmer appears, ghost-like, standing next to his creation (Fig. 5). Here the oscillation between the doll as a construction of Bellmer and as a completed object onto which fantasies can be projected is presented simultaneously. The importance of photographing his creation perhaps can be seen to parallel Nathaniel’s falling in love with Olympia once he looks at her through the telescope. Seen through the lens, the obviously inanimate doll is uncannily animated and engaged with, as Bellmer becomes both the constructor and courtier of this strange character. She becomes the material for the interplay of ‘adolescent erotic games,’ ones in which she at first seems to have little part.
The photographs of the second doll continue to reveal the two modes of sadistic voyeurism and uncertain identification. Alongside one of his photographs in the book 'The Games of the Doll,' a poem by Paul Eluard reads: 'It's a girl! – Where are her eyes? – It's a girl! – Where are her breasts? – It's a girl! – What is she saying? – It's a girl! – What is she playing? It's a girl, it is my desire!' (Fig. 6) Here the overlay of the carpet beater on the image stands in for the voyeuristic spectator or photographer, equating looking with the beginnings of a sexual game. Whilst this would seem to be a very sadistic, misogynistic image, there is something so obvious about the carpet beater as to render it in the realm of impotent fantasy. That the carpet beater is just one variation on a range of engagements with the doll is shown in a second image of the same scene, this time with a woman's shoe suspended in front of the camera. Here again we have the overlaying of masculine and feminine, active and passive, circulating around an autoeroticism that is neither straightforwardly heterosexual, nor homosexual. With the doubling of the doll's legs, there is even a question as to the gender of the doll's body in these images, which is no longer fixed as female. Here the playing of 'adolescent erotic games,' with a focus on 'the indecisive body,' presents Kristeva's notion of an adolescent pornography. But still, in these images, there is a sense of the artist controlling the scene, with the doll under his strict control.

In some of the photographs of the second doll, Bellmer appears to present it as more autonomous and ambiguously related to the photographer/spectator, particularly in the
images of the doubled legs. Rather than remaining a symbol of Bellmer's desire – however we might theorise that – there is an increasing animation of the doll in the range of poses in which it is presented. At times the doll, with its strange quadrupled form, appears at home in the various domestic settings – as in an image with the legs placed demurely across two chairs – or appears as the actor in a sexualised scene that no longer reads from a recognisable voyeuristic script; as in an image where the legs hang from a hook, another plaything discarded, like the spinning top shown on the ground (Figs. 7-8). It is here that the reading of the doll as a fetishistic disavowal of castration appears too limited.


Therese Lichtenstein has argued that these images present a hysterical body, one which echoes Bellmer's own ideas of a physical unconscious, in which the body plays out symptoms that often displace their source: "Through the "hysterical" poses of his dolls, Bellmer attempted to investigate the adolescent identity crisis."\(^{41}\) This displacement of sensation or symptom points to the Bataillean logic of Bellmer's eroticism, in which a leg is not simply a penis, but is part of a signifying chain that incorporates a wide range of body parts. However, there is a phallic base for Bellmer, as he explores in his essay 'The Anatomy of the Image':

By analogy, one may surmise that the woman's vagina can likewise determine her own overall image, that her sex can be found between her thumb and index finger, between her hands, her feet when pressed together, in the folds of her armpit; that it is her ear, her smile or the tears that fall from her closed eyelids. But in order for the woman's image to be progressively and categorically subsumed under the sign 'vagina,' the vagina, we repeat, would first need to have been 'simulated' by the male organism ...\(^{42}\)

This is at odds with Bellmer's interest in a hermaphroditic body, one which is often presented in his photographs and drawings, one which is similar to the chains of association in Bataille's _Story of the Eye_, in which, as already mentioned, 'adolescent erotic games' rarely involve...
heterosexual penetration, but instead circulate around eroticised associations between the bodies and identities of the three main adolescent characters. In his text, Bellmer seems to both embrace the serial logic of the body, merging categories, identities and sexualities, whilst still insisting on a phallocentrism that is at odds with this seriality.

**Hide**

This oscillation between a phallic and serial logic is disrupted more clearly in Gaskell's photographs. Returning to the theme of curiosity, in Gaskell's subsequent photographic series to *The Alice Portraits*, the girls interact with each other in a way that merges their identities in a similar manner to Bellmer's dolls. Whereas Bellmer's drawings often merge the little girl with the phallus, either morphing body parts into huge penises or endowing the girl with her own penis, in Gaskell's drawings the focus is on the cavern of insatiable mouths and the dark cave created by the underneath of her model’s skirts. Bellmer maps onto his models his own ambiguous masculinity, so that he becomes both the adult male voyeur and the young female model in an uncanny oscillating identification. Gaskell's relationship to her young models is less certain, as she constructs a serial, vaginal sexual vocabulary which imagines the interior of her girls by displacing the genitals onto other body parts and clothing such as the mouth or skirt. As with Bellmer's dolls the eroticism is combined with an attempt to take the body apart, with many of the images showing girls twisting, peering and pulling at each other. What is instructive in the similarities between their work is the complex relationship between the fantasies constructed within the drawings and the photographed performance that are developed from them. The use of photography places the viewer in a position in which s/he is compelled to engage with the scene of viewing as an eroticised and aggressive act, with the drawings acting as indictors of the initial fantasised encounter.

Gaskell's series *hide* draws on a fairytale in which a King tries to marry his daughter, after being compelled by his wife on her deathbed to only marry someone more beautiful than she is (Figs. 9-10). Only the Queen's daughter fulfils this requirement, which leads to her fleeing from the castle and disguising herself in a donkeyskin. Gaskell took up this incestuous tale turning on the doubling of mother and daughter after she watched the film *Peu d’âne* by Jacques Demy (1970), in which Catherine Deneuve plays both mother and daughter. Like Bellmer's infatuation with his cousin Ursula, the King falls in love with his kin, merging the lateral with the vertical. Rather than embracing her father's desire for her, the princess refuses this Oedipal scene. In *hide*, the photographing of these staged scenes of implied and feared sexual violation resonates with Bellmer’s images of his first doll, constructed to generate a similar voyeuristic, fragmented narrative in which the viewer is implicated in the presentation of sexualised, disturbing scenarios. The story of the girl escaping her father’s advances is doubled, so that in some images the fear of the father's advances is produced by the voyeuristic perspective, as in the image of two girls trying to get into one pair of tights, as if trying to escape the gaze of the camera, and in others, the pair of girls appear to be
investigating each other, ambiguously taking on the position of dead mother and violating father.

There is an obvious difference between Bellmer's photographs of the dolls and Gaskell's photographs, which is her use of actual girls. Rather than animating the inanimate, Gaskell emphasises the inanimate and doubled presence of her models – are they to be seen as two different people, or manifestations of the psyche? Another version of Bellmer's physical unconscious, perhaps. This is compounded by the use of clothing, with tights and underwear focused on as the boundary of interior and exterior. In some images, a second pair of tights appears to stand in for the imagined doubling of the daughter, who tries to maintain her identity in the face of her father's mistaken desire, so that she becomes, like Olympia, the site of projection for desire and identification.

Gaskell's images of girls struggling with each other can be seen as a performance of the fight to create an individual identity, which in part is a struggle to form a coherent sexual identity, spatialising and eroticising the linear story of the adolescent coming to adulthood, as played out in her literary sources. In Gaskell's work, the presentation of a series of photographs to be read simultaneously frustrates any resolution, suspending the narrative at the point of conflict, aggression and desire. Gaskell can be seen to be both identifying with her models, and replaying their voyeuristic presentation, overlaying the heterosexual voyeuristic mode with an aggressive and queer exchange between the models in her photographs and her position in relation to their sexualised performances.

Just as the King in the 'Donkey-skin' stories appears as both the actual man attempting to seduce his daughter, and the patriarch attempting to assert his will over all others, the doll and the persona of Bellmer as the photographer and participant in the photographs appear both as players in personal erotic dramas and as symbols of resistance against extreme societal dictates (Bellmer's resistance to the Nazi regime and to also more
generally to paternal and patriarchal expectations). I would argue that Gaskell uses her models in a similar way – using the implication of narrative to seduce the viewer into reading the scene as 'real,' whilst constantly reminding the viewer through the use of doubling, multiple models, mannered lighting and camera angles, that what is actually being viewed is an uncanny performance. Gaskell's doubled models and use of photography to depict an ambiguously 'real' or fantasised scene returns to Freud's definition of the uncanny as the oscillation between the familiar and strange, and imagination and reality. His other definition, as previously discussed – 'when a symbol takes over the full functions of the thing it symbolises' — links with Juliet Mitchell's discussion of hysteria, complicating a fetishistic reading of the work, as already discussed in relation to Lichtenstein's argument. Mitchell has noted about the hysterical's relationship to the identity/idea that s/he acts out: 'This presentation of another in acting treats the substitute, the fantasy, as though it were the thing itself.' This particular relationship to doubling resonates with the definition of surrealist photography by Rosalind Krauss. Her thesis also focuses on the importance of doubling and the uncanny in the images:

it is doubling that elicits the notion that to an original has been added its copy. The double is the simulacrum, the second, the representative of the original. ... in being seen in conjunction with the original, the double destroys the pure singularity of the first. Through duplication, it opens the original to the effect of difference, of deferral, of one-thing-after-another.

It is this component of doubling – the ability to disrupt the 'original,' to put its 'original-ness' in doubt – that has implications in terms of the doubling of heterosexual, narcissistic and queer viewing structures. In Gaskell's work, the voyeuristic gaze is doubled by the narcissistic identification for the models, with a homoerotic desire for the models as nostalgic versions of the self and as seductive, separate individuals. It is the self-reflexivity that is required on the part of the viewer and the imagined position of both the artist and models that create a situation that Krauss describes as 'the disarticulation of the self by means of its mirrored double.' This conceptualisation of the viewing space maps onto Kristeva and Mitchell's concepts of adolescent and serial sexuality, as well as Judith Butler's performative construction of gendered and sexual identity, showing how the photographic structure of doubling is echoed in the fantasmatic construction of heterosexuality as the original and homosexuality as the copy:

[In its efforts to naturalise itself as the original, heterosexuality must be understood as a compulsive and compulsory repetition that can only produce the effect of its own originality; in other words, compulsory heterosexual identities, those ontologically consolidated phantasms of 'man' and 'woman,' are theatrically produced effects that posture as grounds, origins, the normative measure of the real.]

Butler argues that the relationship between homo- and heterosexualities is in a constant state of anxiety and tension: 'The parodic replication and resignification of heterosexual constructs
within non-heterosexual frames brings into relief the utterly constructed status of the so-called original, but it shows that heterosexuality only constitutes itself as the original through a convincing act of repetition.\textsuperscript{49} This compulsive repetition is duplicated in some of Gaskell's visual strategies, with the use of multiple models in \textit{The Alice Portraits}, and the use of series of images in which numbers of models play one character simultaneously. In both Gaskell and Bellmer's work, this doubling is itself multiplied, so that seriality, \textquote{one-thing-after-another,} is presented rather than the phallic logic of the either/or.

\textbf{Resemblance}

In Gaskell's series \textit{resemblance}, a concern with \textquote{origins,} rather than an idea of \textquote{originality} is explored (Figs. 11-12). This series draws on a number of stories about creation, including \textquote{The Sandman,} the German expressionist film \textit{The Cabinet of Dr Caligari} and Mary Shelley's classic gothic novel \textit{Frankenstein}.\textsuperscript{50} Each of these sources has at its centre a consideration of the double as both a character in the story, and as a projection of one of the characters. Gaskell's condensing of the characters of carer/creator/mother and child/creation into a performance by models of similar age transposes the relationship from a parental one to a struggle between peers, a fight for individuality and identity that is played out on a lateral axis.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{untitled_74.png}
\caption{Untitled #74 (resemblance), 2001 © Anna Gaskell. Courtesy of the artist and Yvon Lambert Paris, New York.}
\end{figure}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{untitled_71.png}
\caption{Untitled #71 (resemblance), 2001 © Anna Gaskell. Courtesy of the artist and Yvon Lambert Paris, New York.}
\end{figure}

In Gaskell's all-female universe, the source material is transformed into a struggle around definitions and representations of female identity. Gaskell has explained the activities of her models as acting out \textquote{the impossibility of making the person who made you.}\textsuperscript{51} Or as described by Jeff Fleming:

Gaskell flips the usual roles: her young girls attempt to fabricate their creators, represented here by other young girls, in an ideal form. According to the artist, they act on the belief that if their creators are perfect, then they will in turn be flawless. To gain control over their histories and the construction of their bodies, the girls must go back to the time of their creation.\textsuperscript{52}
Here, curiosity about sexual identity and sexuality, as seen in the photographs and drawings of Bellmer is extended in an attempt to gain control over representations of the female body.

By imagining the creation of the creator, in *resemblance* the maternal body is invoked, bringing to the surface the disavowed other of the automata, as discussed by Laura Mulvey: 'An eviscerated, mechanised, femininity masks and marks disavowal of both the site of castration anxiety and the womb, the "first home."' Just as Bellmer's photographs and drawings disavow the phallic authority of the father, Gaskell's series interrogates the maternal reproductive power of the mother. In both cases, the adolescent stands in for a sexuality and a sexual identity that is posed against a reproductive heterosexuality and sexual identity based on sexual difference. This fulfils Kristeva's notion of an adolescent pornography that aims to 'constitute a desire to name, to bring to light a wavering meaning that lies upon the boundaries of words and drives.' Or as Mitchell has put it in her discussion of a gendered sexuality, based on seriality: "Gender" is the polymorphously perverse child, grown up.

So, to return to my title, 'Bellmer's Legs,' who do these legs belong to? In both Bellmer and Gaskell's photographs, the doll/girl stands in for an identity that is not clearly defined, a sexualised engagement with another that is not dictated solely by the reproductive, heterosexual logic of self and other. By reanimating a symbol of feminine desirability, only to take it apart, both Bellmer and Gaskell expose anxieties around sexual difference, and the potential for serial modes of identification and desire presented in the figure of the adolescent that queer distinctions between narcissism, heterosexuality and homosexuality. Kristeva's notion of adolescent pornography allows for a reading of the fragmented and oscillating identities and sexualities presented in these photographs as performing a resistance to normative structures of both sexuality and society: 'When modern novels question either themselves or their inevitably patriarchal values (which stem from an inevitably adult society), their writers often claim to be directly seduced by the adolescent or by adolescence.' By returning to the figure of the adolescent girl/doll – one which Freud is 'blind' to – the uncanniness of her relationship to artist and viewer can be read as a presentation of serial sexuality, one in which boundaries are disrupted and sexuality becomes a site of knowledge that is not fixed as either perversion or normative.

---


5 In this essay, I am not engaging with wider debates around definitions of pornography. For a classic account of pornography’s history, see Walker Kendrick, *The Secret Museum: Pornography in Modern Culture*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1987, 1996. His discussion of the history of the term foregrounds its changing definitions. Central to his argument is the use of pornography as a category to separate material from mainstream consumption in institutions such as museums and libraries. In this respect Kendrick’s argument is useful in relation to Kristeva’s focus on adolescent pornography as being a site of resistance to authority and disruption of normative identity.


7 Gaskell is adamant that Crewdson was not a dominant influence on her practice, and that his construction of a group of artists around him at Yale occurred after she had left the course. Instead, Gaskell maintains that her own work on narrative and portrait photography during her time at Yale influenced Crewdson’s directing of these younger artists. Gaskell, conversation with the author, 26 February 2002.


9 Gaskell, conversation with the author.


15 *Ibid.*, 148. ‘After the Oedipal stabilisation of subjective identity, adolescents often begin to question their identifications, as well as their capacities to speak or symbolise,’ 136.


20 Hans Bellmer, ‘The Father’ (1936), in *Hans Bellmer: The Anatomy of Anxiety*, trans. by Sue Taylor Cambridge, MA, The MIT Press, 2000, 211: ‘We probably had a rather adorable air, more girlish than formidable as we would have preferred. But it seemed best above all to tempt the brute from his position in order to confuse him.’
21 Hélène Cixous, ‘Fiction and Its Phantoms: A Reading of Freud’s Das Unheimliche (The Uncanny),’ *New Literary History*, Vol. 7, No. 3, Spring, 1976, 536. Cixous is only one of many commentators who have reassessed the importance of Olympia. As Laura Mulvey has noted, ‘Olympia introduces the question of gender, if only negatively, into Freud’s understanding of the uncanny;’ she ‘is the perfect fetish object. Her wooden, inanimate body is not “wounded,”’ and she acts as a screen for Nathaniel, reflecting directly back to him his unconscious fantasies, enabling the repression of his fears,’ in Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image*, London, Reaktion, 2006, 46 and 49.

22 Freud, ‘The "Uncanny,"’ 244.


24 The story is told through the exchange of letters between the hero Nathaniel, his friend Lothaire and his beloved Clara. The letters perhaps reflect the lens of the eye-glasses through which Nathaniel gazes on Olympia.


27 Laura Mulvey notes how Freud misreads the story, saying that Nathaniel sees Coppelius through his telescope, rather than Clara: ‘Once Nathaniel recovers from the nervous breakdown that had been precipitated by the sight of the two evil father figures fighting over and dismantling Olympia, he is reunited with his living, loving fiancée, Clara. One day, when they climb to the top of a high tower to admire the view, a strange figure in the street below distracts them. Taking out his telescope to look more closely, Nathaniel focuses the lens not, as Freud claims, on Coppola below, but on Clara at his side, whom he mistakes for the wooden doll,’ *Death 24x a Second*, 49.


29 Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second*, 50-1.

30 Ibid., 51.

31 For many commentators, the category of the uncanny features much more than castration. Mladen Dolar again: ‘Freud is gradually forced to use the entire panoply of psychoanalytic concepts: castration complex, Oedipus, (primary) narcissism, compulsion to repeat, death drive repression, anxiety, psychosis, etc. They all seem to converge on “the uncanny,”’ Dolar, “I Shall Be with You on Your Wedding-Night,” 6.


34 Cixous, ‘Fiction and Its Phantoms: A Reading of Freud’s Das Unheimliche (The "Uncanny"),’ 536.

35 Bellmer visited an orphanage in around 1930 and invited a series of girls aged 8 to 10 years old to come and pose for him at his parent’s home: ‘The portrait studies he made of them, and the finished paintings (now lost) in which the anonymous girls are pictured in the

36 Speaking about the pictures of herself, Gaskell explains how she was trying to photograph what she calls a 'non-place': 'I was taking pictures of myself for a long time and I got bored of that. I took these pictures of myself sneezing – I was interested in this in between space where you expect a sneeze, or you expect an orgasm, or you expect ... I was interested in this non-place and trying to articulate that. Then I became more interested in characters that I felt could articulate that, because people were familiar with these characters and these imaginary places, a place where anything could happen, where there is no time. This was how I became interested in the character of Alice and because of her age, I cast these girls,' Interview with author 26 February 2002. In another interview Gaskell puts it slightly differently: 'When I was in graduate school at Yale, out in the middle of nowhere I started taking pictures of myself, but I didn't really enjoy it,' she recalled. 'Still, I had these personal stories that I wanted to tell. So I thought I'd have someone play a familiar character and then I could twist that, combine it with things related to it, and I'd be telling a completely different story,' David Hay, 'Photographs on a Wall, Doors to a Haunted Manor,' *The New York Times*, 29 September 2002, Arts and Leisure section, 37.


40 This is held up by Sue Taylor's assertion that the carpet beater is a toy, and can be seen in Bellmer's *Personal Museum*, 1938. *Anatomy of Anxiety*, 246, note 6.

41 Lichtenstein, *Behind Closed Doors*, 115. 'Bellmer's wild inversions of legs and breasts and his manic doubling and multiplying of them suggest a psychic convergence between castration anxiety and hysteria. Issues of hysteria also have to do with separation, identification, the rejection of repressed sexual desire or trauma, and the fear of growing up into an adult and taking care of oneself,' 116.


43 This equation of sexual play with a desire to 'know' the body relates both to Kristeva's notion of adolescent pornography, as well as to Mitchell's contention that in sibling or lateral sexuality sex and violence are intimately linked.

44 Freud, 'The "Uncanny,"' 244.


47 Rosalind Krauss, 'Corpus Delicti,' 78.


All three of these sources use the structure of letters or oral histories to present the narrative as 'real,' and to bring into focus the unreliability of the narrator. In The Cabinet of Dr Caligari, dir. by Robert Wiene, 1920, the suspicious Dr Caligari has a somnambulist, called Cesare, who appears to predict people’s death. When a number of unexplained murders occur, the finger is pointed at Dr Caligari and his strange companion. However, when watched over by the hero, Francis, neither Dr Caligari or Cesare appear to leave their house. When confronted by Francis and the police, it turns out that Francis had actually been watching over a dummy of Cesare, whilst the real man had been out all night. The trail to find Cesare leads to the local mental asylum, where it turns out Dr Caligari is the director. At the end of the film, Francis is telling the story to another man (which is also how the film begins), and it transpires that Francis is actually an inmate of the asylum, and whilst Dr Caligari is the director, he is most probably not the maniacal character that Francis presents.

Gaskell, in conversation with the author.


Mulvey, Death 24x a Second, 51.


Mitchell, Siblings, 125.


Catherine Grant is a Visiting Lecturer at Goldsmiths, University of London. She completed her PhD, entitled Different Girls: performances of adolescence in contemporary photographic portraits at the Courtauld Institute of Art in 2007. She co-ordinated the seminar group and lecture series ‘Writing Art History’ at the Courtauld between 2007 - 2009, and will be co-editor of a special issue of Art History on ‘Creative Writing and Art History,’ 2011. She is currently working on an edited collection of essays entitled Girls! Girls! Girls!: girlhood in contemporary art and published an article on Anna Gaskell in Feminism Reframed, 2007. She has written on contemporary art for magazines and books including Flash Art and Vitamin Ph and has been a Visiting Lecturer at the Courtauld, LCC, Sotheby’s Institute and The Photographers’ Gallery.
Notions of the Collaborative in the Work of David Wojnarowicz

Fiona Anderson

Abstract

Drawing on the recent Semiotext(e) publication *David Wojnarowicz: A Definitive History of Five or Six Years on the Lower East Side*, edited by Sylvère Lotringer, this article explores various notions of collaborative art practice in Wojnarowicz’s work. It draws attention to his numerous collaborative projects in order to explore the role of an interactive subjectivity in his art and in the community of the East Village art scene of the late 1970s and early 1980s more generally. Beginning with a focus on downtown living conditions, the problem of gentrification and its complex relationship with artistic communities in the East Village, I explore Wojnarowicz’s early fascination with drug culture and criminality and their representation in his early work: the ‘acid jam’ painting sessions led by Carlo McCormick, Wojnarowicz’s work at Civilian Warfare gallery, and the Ward Line Pier Project (1983), a major collaboration with painter Mike Bidlo. Drawing on this socio-economic analysis, the focus then shifts to explore collaboration in Wojnarowicz’s work as a form of ‘citational grafting’; a means of exploring ideas of queer history, genealogy and identity in ‘multigenerational’ collaborations with queer writers that fits with processes of collaboration in Wojnarowicz’s work as a whole. Jacques Derrida’s writings on ‘hauntology’ frame the discussion of works like the photographic series *Arthur Rimbaud in New York* (1978-9), and xeroxed collages of Jean Genet, which concludes with Wojnarowicz’s death bed portraits of Peter Hujar, and explores the impact of HIV/AIDS on this queer collaborative practice.

In his seminal text on downtown New York literature in the 1980s, Robert Siegle looks specifically to the artistic communities of the East Village to foreground the significance of collaborative, communal practice for the artists and writers living and working in the city. Citing a review by Jeffrey Deitch of the 1980 ‘Times Square Show’ in *Suburban Ambush*, Siegle sought to assert the communality of downtown creative practice without reducing its diversity to a monolithic ‘scene,’ quoting Deitch as he mused upon ‘that elusive process by which artists with a certain affinity somehow band together to form an unstructured but synergistic association which might almost be called a movement.’

Siegle’s conception of literature from this demographic as ‘a fiction of insurgency’ is an almost dialectical approach to downtown creative output that prioritises community and collaboration without trapping these practices within hegemonic, normative registers of cultural production, so as not to lose this sense of ‘unstructured’ process. The importance of collaboration for artists and writers living and working in downtown New York in the late 1970s and early 1980s cannot be underestimated and, as Siegle is acutely aware, must be carefully historisised so as not to tip the delicate balance of individuality and community evident there. As Carlo McCormick noted when discussing David Wojnarowicz ‘part of the way you define yourself is by finding your compatriots, your fellow revolutionaries … it wasn’t the collective, but more like a group of fellow transgressors.’
Poet, painter, photographer, film-maker, musician, David Wojnarowicz was a key figure in the so-called East Village arts scene of the late 1970s and 1980s, and an outspoken AIDS activist in the later 1980s, working with Gran Fury and ACT-UP until his death in 1992. Felix Guattari, who contributed an article on Wojnarowicz to a 1990 issue of the journal *Rethinking Marxism*, considered the artist’s practice in general as ‘concretely reinstat[ing] a principle of singularisation in a universe that has too much of a tendency to give in to universalist comfort.’ Reading this in conjunction with Guattari’s other writings, it becomes clear that the writer’s view of the ‘singularity’ of Wojnarowicz’s practice is not a notion of isolated individuality that could be considered as perpetuating modernist myths of authorship, of ‘maintaining the … illusion of the ONE TRIBE NATION [sic]’ that Wojnarowicz so fervently rejected. If it is an individuality of any kind we find in this work, it is that to which Robert Siegle makes reference when he writes of ‘a desire to use art in *refabricating* a basis for individuality in the face of our sharpened sense of the structural determination of our lives.’

What is suspended in Wojnarowicz’s collaborative practice is the double-edged nature of downtown creative production; the simultaneously disquieting and empowering meeting of alienation and community on the Lower East Side, ‘an impoverished and increasingly alienated population.’ Wojnarowicz’s journals expose a mind continuously fixated upon this tension, upon the parameters of the personal and the universal, what Carlo McCormick might have alluded to in his description of the artistic ‘vernacular of Downtown’ as a ‘disjunctive language of profound ambivalence.’ By rendering both unresolved in perpetuity, this analysis of the duality of individuality and community looks to evade homogenous conceptions of community, not to depict the lifestyle and output of artistic communities ‘as an unequivocal good, an indicator of a high quality of life, a life of human understanding, caring, selflessness, belonging,’ akin to the ‘Republican family values rhetoric’ that Miranda Joseph has warned against, but to explore the reciprocal creative and ethical concerns at play in Wojnarowicz’s practice of artistic collaborations in the late 1970s and 1980s.

Studying the legacy of collaboration in Wojnarowicz’s work, in this period and its subsequent historicisation, is made more complex as a consequence of the untimely death of Wojnarowicz from AIDS in July 1992. Pamela M. Lee’s monographic study of Gordon Matta-Clark, who died from pancreatic cancer at 35, provides many helpful insights into navigating the difficult terrain of writing about artists who are deceased yet remain distinctly part of ‘our recent historical horizon,’ and of ‘how to make use of testimonials from their friends and close colleagues.’ For Lee, ‘all testimonials possess some degree of truth value, but they do not so much consolidate a seamless gestalt of the artist as they amount to a historiographic incoherence.’ She continues: ‘What [these testimonials] articulate is how personal memory and sometime melancholy are at work in the most basic writings of history. Pastness and presentness collide so that nostalgic longing and historical distance refuse any easy distinctions.’ In writing on Wojnarowicz, it is precisely this ‘historiographic incoherence’ that
is most useful, since it indicates the importance of straying from the normative, of keeping
fragmented and diverse the mythologies that were created both by him and of him. In taking
apart the myth of a ‘seamless gestalt of the artist,’ collaboration can be highlighted as an
essential component of Wojnarowicz’s practice and to the ways in which that practice is
documented, historicised and understood.

Collaboration and Community
Lamenting the demise of the downtown New York arts scene in her 1992 article ‘The
Bohemian Diaspora,’ Cindy Carr wonders ‘is there such a thing anymore as an artist with a
community?’ Centring upon what she considers to be the ‘dematerialization of the artist’s
milieu’ in the late twentieth century, Carr traces a bohemian trajectory from New York Dada in
1916 through Beat culture in the fifties to Jack Smith in the sixties, marking the ‘shifts and
schisms’ of vanguard New York art practice as reflective of a ‘tug-of-war going on throughout
the world: the trend towards globalization versus the trend towards community … the
pressure to assimilate versus the urge to segregate,’ positing the artistic avant-garde of the
1980s as an exemplary moment of creative communality, sensitive to its margins without
exclusivity. Through analysis of the nature of the rapidly developing new gallery network in
the downtown New York area and the development of artists’ collectives during the period,
coupled with a discussion of the socio-economic nature of the area and the propensity of
many of its artistic residents towards drug and criminal cultures, it becomes evident that the
artistic milieu in which Wojnarowicz found himself in the early 1980s not only facilitated
collaboration but actively encouraged it.

An engagement with these themes of collaboration in the East Village art scene
must be prefaced by acknowledging the criticisms of Rosalyn Deutsche and Cara Gendel
Ryan, who, in their 1984 article ‘The Fine Art of Gentrification,’ critiqued the construction of
the Lower East Side arts scene of the early 1980s as a realm of imagined artistic and
subjective potential, with artists approaching the neighbourhood ‘consciously or
unconsciously … with dominating and possessive attitudes that transform it into an imaginary
site,’ while ignoring the often negative economic impact of their presence in the area. Such
criticisms are important ones, not least for the way in which the detailed socio-economic
research of the authors drew attention away from the hyperbolic praise of East Village
commentators such as Nicolas Moufarrege and Rene Ricard, which, however eloquent, could
be seen to rupture a genuine critical engagement with the work and its environment. The
detailed socio-economic research of Deutsche and Ryan’s piece highlighted the neglect of
political considerations in much of the celebratory writing on East Village art: ‘[a]lthough they
give the neighbourhood a central role in their promotion of the scene, Moufarrege and Ricard
never mention the word gentrification.’ The authors singled out Moufarrege’s misguided
fusion of the self-defined and self-titled ‘East Village’ scene with the geographically specific
Lower East Side in an article from September 1982, when he asserted that, ‘[o]ne must realize that the East Village or the Lower East Side is more than a geographical location – it is a state of mind.’ As an exploration of the gallery networks at play in Wojnarowicz’s practice demonstrates, ‘community’ need not be figured as purely negative and dominating, but rather as a theoretical point of departure that seeks ultimately to avoid and negate lingering modernist fictions of personal artistic freedom and individual liberation. The economic hardships of the non-artistic residents of the Lower East Side and the problem of gentrification need not be disputed, and can instead be incorporated into a wider reaction to neo-conservative economic policy and its impact on the art (and real estate) markets of the period.

In his text Biographical Dateline (1990), Wojnarowicz recalled some of his earliest collaborative endeavours, which followed his entry into this downtown scene, playing shows with his band 3 Teens Kill 4 and tagging downtown buildings with the recognisable tag of a burning house; attacking what he saw as complacency within the New York art world through collective artistic action:

[D]id plan a series of ‘action installations’ with band member Julie Hair – these were illegal actions that were an attempt to shake up the notions of ‘art’ and ‘culture’ that most galleries intentionally ignored. One successful one was stenciling an empty plate, knife and fork on the wall of leo castelli’s staircase and also stenciling a bomber plane and a burning house and recoiling figure and then dumping a couple hundred pounds of bloody cow bones from the 14th street meatpacking district into the stairwell. This was accomplished at 1.00 on a busy saturday afternoon.

The ‘action installation’ came to be known as Hunger, and along with his solo guerrilla project at the Long Island P.S.1 Beast Show in 1982 – dropping numerous ‘cock-a-bunnies’ (cockroaches with paper rabbit ears and tails attached) into the space after being excluded from the exhibition – earned Wojnarowicz a certain reputation for transgressive, quasi-violent attacks on the New York art world, something which he was to develop throughout his career. Julie Hair was, along with Wojnarowicz, a member of no wave band 3 Teens Kill 4, playing frequently in clubs such as Danceteria and the Peppermint Lounge. The proclivity of East Village artists in this period for forming musical groups – Jean-Michel Basquiat, Alan Vega and Nancy Arlen, among others – is suggestive of the interdisciplinary practice of many of these artists and the importance of a nightclub network in establishing an environment and arts space in which to see and be seen, both drawing from and adding to an interactive downtown language of anti-hegemonic activity and experience.

Nightclub art shows at the Mudd Club, such as the Xeroxes show curated by Keith Haring in September 1980, and others at Club 57 in the very early 1980s, provided another means for Wojnarowicz to get his artworks seen, at a time when he was working as a club busboy to make a living. As Sylvère Lotringer notes, these East Village nightclub exhibitions
represented a new attitude towards exhibition space, a ‘crossover … the first transgression of the conceptual ethic and territory,’ and asserts that while the artists featured may have been loosely involved with collectives such as Colab (Collaborative Projects Incorporated) and Group Material, the underlying motivation was a punk-led attitude of spontaneity, inextricably linked to the drug culture and (sometimes) illicit activity of the clubs themselves. Colab was established in 1978 by a group of New York-based artists who ‘banded together as a union … to raise funds, organize exhibitions, and share equipment,’ seeking to tap into the new availability of state and federal grants for arts organisations through the National Endowment for the Arts, money that was simply not available to individuals. Brian Wallis has argued that ‘the emergence of alternative spaces in the mid-to-late sixties was part of a radical utopian effort to circumvent the common gallery system,’ offering artists ‘a new basis for forming collectives to discuss and understand their role as workers within an economically and politically regulated system.’

These concerns continued to be visible in the alternative arts spaces of the early 1980s, such as ABC No Rio, created following the closure by city authorities of Colab’s Real Estate Show, an action mounted by a group of Tribeca artists in a long abandoned building on Delancy Street near the Williamsburg Bridge in 1980. Colab member Alan Moore argued that, [t]he intention of this action [was] to show that artists are willing and able to place themselves and their work in a context which shows solidarity with oppressed people, a recognition that mercantile and institutional structures oppress and distort artists’ lives and works, and a recognition that artists, living and working in depressed communities, are compradors in the revaluation of property and the ‘whitening’ of neighbourhoods.

The savvy co-ordination of exhibitions like the Real Estate Show, however, regardless of its diverse content and politicised tone, was indicative of an organisational prowess and cohesiveness that simply did not interest many of the younger East Village artists, for whom the notion of the collective carried a more disruptive ideological weight than that of the accessing of federal funds. As Dan Cameron wrote of downtown performance space the Limbo Lounge: ‘like many other East Village performance spaces, [it] seemed to arise from the spontaneous combustion of cheap, available space and creative people with time on their hands,’ the clubgoers themselves acting in another collaborative dimension, that of receptive audience providing ‘support for interdisciplinary experimentation.’ While the artists of Colab ‘cohered for pragmatic ends and the desire for a peer group social scene rather than because of aesthetic affinity,’ disarray and disorder compelled the younger artists exhibiting within the club circuit, their notions of the collective more clearly demonstrated in the acid-fuelled collaborative painting ‘jam’ sessions that Wojnarowicz participated in on numerous occasions in the early 1980s, such as the Acid Paintings show at performance space the Limbo Lounge with Luis Frangella in 1983 and Acid Night at James Romberger and Marguerite van Cook’s...
gallery Ground Zero in 1985.\textsuperscript{24} The temporary works produced at these collaborative sessions were violent and confrontational, manipulating a brutal idiom of urban political references and cartoon-like figures in vehement bright colours. Carlo McCormick described the acid ‘installation’ he led at the Virginia Museum of Fine Art in 1984 as ‘a total “fuck you” ... We all showed up and destroyed this beautiful space, painting all over, even on the beautiful wooden floors. It probably took them three weeks to get rid of what we did there.’\textsuperscript{25}

In early 1982, Dean Savard opened his Lower East Side studio apartment up as ‘Civilian Warfare,’ a gallery that sought to ‘cultivate exactly the angst-ridden ambience that its name implies.’\textsuperscript{26} Taking that name from the terrorised cries of a local bag lady – ‘There’s civilian warfare on the streets!’ – the gallery, run with Alan Barrows, promoted a gritty, yet tongue-in-cheek, rhetoric of combative sexualities, identities and themes, showing New York-based artists such as Luis Frangella, Judy Glantzman and Greer Lankton. Wojnarowicz began exhibiting his work at the gallery not long after its inception, with solo exhibitions there in 1983 and 1984. Savard and Barrows looked to establish a gallery that would reflect the urban environment in which the artists were creating the works of art to be shown there. As graffiti pioneer Fred ‘Fab Five Freddy’ Braithwaite noted of the earlier downtown FUN Gallery: ‘They wanted a gallery that was like the work itself.’\textsuperscript{27} Wojnarowicz’s works from the 1982 to 1984 period in which he was closely associated with Civilian Warfare – garbage can lids spray-painted with animal heads and appropriated advertising posters – reference the detritus of the modern city, a multifarious language of consumer waste and urban marginality, similar concerns to those explored at the Ward Line pier project of 1983, that will be discussed later.\textsuperscript{28} Later exhibitions at Civilian Warfare showcased Wojnarowicz’s sculptural works. An advertisement for the gallery, shot by Peter Hujar in 1984, shows a topless Wojnarowicz, his head out of view, holding a reptilian head sculpture, brightly painted and with a globe in its teeth, up to the potential visitor. Interestingly, however, while the violent ambience of Civilian Warfare and the community of the gallery network of which it was a part was undoubtedly of significance as Wojnarowicz’s work advanced, his genuinely collaborative works were not created here, but rather developed from the friendships and experiences facilitated by the East Village network.

As earlier references to the acid-fuelled painting ‘jams’ of the mid-80s suggest, drugs played a major role in the Lower East Side arts scene of the period and Wojnarowicz’s work was no exception. Carlo McCormick was dealing acid at the time and filmmakers Richard Kern and Tommy Turner, with whom Wojnarowicz collaborated in the mid-1980s on films including \textit{You Killed Me First} (1985) and \textit{Where Evil Dwells} (1985), were selling cannabis and taking heroin. In an interview with Lotringer, Kern spoke of Wojnarowicz’s involvement in the drug scene at the time: ‘Let’s be honest here: he was way into speed! And he did heroin with me a few times. He was just like everybody else: he’d try anything.’\textsuperscript{29} Kern’s comments are suggestive of the double-edged nature of drug use for Wojnarowicz; the
communal pull of ‘everybody else’ combined with the alienating effects of such substances. In 1979, Wojnarowicz worked on a film documenting his friends’ heroin use ‘in the abandoned warehouses and shipping lines of the Hudson river. Film was about HEROIN – made it using friends who were flirting with I. V. drug use in the mistaken hopes that it would get them to reconsider the directions they were moving in.’ It is interesting that even within the collaborative framework of creative production and inclusivity explored earlier in this article and the inclination of many artists towards LSD, heroin use acted as a separating, divisive force that facilitated a close artistic connection with fellow users like Kern and Turner, but alienated Wojnarowicz from others. As Kern explains, ‘David had two sets of friends: there was the art scene and then there was the scene that I was in.’ Another artist friend of Wojnarowicz’s at this point, Steve Doughton, confirms the artist’s fondness for speed and notes that ‘David tended to compartmentalize his relationships with friends and seemed to choose his drugs according to whom he was hanging out with.’ The diversity of social groups implied in the testimonies of his contemporaries resounds with Wojnarowicz’s mythic understanding of himself as having ‘erased [his] own borders,’ suggesting an interesting tension in Wojnarowicz’s collaborative sensibility and varied friendships wherein drug use both emerged from a shifting and multiplicitous sense of identity and intimated some segregation.

In early 1983, Wojnarowicz and fellow artist Mike Bidlo invited artists such as Luis Frangella, Keith Davis, Rhonda Zwillinger, Judy Glantzman, and John Feckner to join them in staging an (illegal) artistic repossession of a dilapidated warehouse on Pier 34, a popular cruising spot on the Lower West Side. Its vast space was filled with painted murals, stencil graffiti, and sculptures, before being claimed by police after less than a year and pulled down. Bidlo recalled that he and Wojnarowicz were ‘co-curators, supposedly,’ of what became known as the Ward Line pier project, ‘[b]ut it wasn’t a curated show … It was just something we told people about and got people excited about: the ultimate alternative space, where anybody could come and do almost anything they wanted, if they had the time, the energy, and the effort.’ The works created in the warehouse interacted with the layout and rundown quality of the space; the space was interpreted not as a canvas but as a participatory element in the work’s execution, far exceeding the possibilities permitted in the small storefront galleries of the Lower East Side. Wojnarowicz even spread grass seed through some of the rooms, the ‘disintegrated plaster that had fallen out of the ceiling’ providing sustenance for them to grow ‘in the confines of the building,’ rendering the rooms fields in an ‘industrial meadow’ and a peculiarly multi-authored artwork: ‘[t]hose are some of the gestures that I loved the most and got the least attention because they were the most anonymous – you can’t sign a blade of grass that says Wojnarowicz.’

The project was one of the most profoundly collaborative works of Wojnarowicz’s career, one that appealed to the artist’s ongoing romance with the criminal and the sub-
cultural, the ‘lawlessness and anonymity simultaneously’ that he so desired.37 Perhaps more pertinently, this guerrilla takeover represented a desire not simply to overrule the gallery network of the East Village as it became increasingly mainstream, but to provide variety within it. A 1983 photograph of Wojnarowicz by Andreas Sterzing, recently published in Lotringer’s collection of interviews, shows the artist painting a broken window at the pier which reads: ‘Artists: stay in control of your hearts and minds,’ the opening letter drawn as the symbol of anarchy. Above, the image of a hanged man is labelled as a ‘Victim of Hype.’ Peter Hujar was one of a number of photographers who documented the ‘installations’ and his images of Wojnarowicz’s work there show paintings that relate very closely to the work the artist was showing contemporaneously at Civilian Warfare and Gracie Mansion Gallery; images of pterodactyls and agonised cowheads, along with eloquent graffiti musings. The large-scale murals, which Wojnarowicz termed ‘frescoes,’ made use of the vast space of the warehouse and interacted with its layout and rundown state, the due sense of fear and traces of anonymous sexual activity, of the empty warehouses as cruising space, adding to the illicit undercurrents of the images themselves.38

This reconfiguration of abandoned urban space was not a purely aesthetic gesture but also intimately linked to Wojnarowicz’s broader interest in the parameters of the personal and the universal, both socially and aesthetically, closely connected to his fascination with the collaborative:

exploring art as a record of the times we live in as well as a vehicle of communication between members of certain social structures and minorities: trusting one’s own vision … [finding] increasing hope in my differences and the gradual simultaneous split from the implemented and enforced and legislated social structure.39

As popular locations for frequent anonymous yet intimate sexual encounters, the mythology of the piers as sexual ‘hunting ground’ itself embodies this resituation of the boundaries of the personal and the universal; a secret place that connected Wojnarowicz to a resolute sense of homosexual self at large.40 Melissa Jacques considers the act and experience of cruising at the piers paramount to an understanding of Wojnarowicz’s work, reading his oeuvre as ‘a fragmented performance of resistance’ that ‘rather than seek to establish new boundaries or new models of inclusiveness … represents a world characterised by change, always in flux, always in motion.’41 For Wojnarowicz, it was the nameless sexual encounters in the Hudson River piers and the possibility of combining this environment with his close friendships through the Ward Line project that formed the ideal antidote to the singularity of the modernist artist figure and challenge to the ‘Tony Shafrazi … Mary Boone’ gallery framework he held in such contempt. There lingered ‘the endless forms of chance and possibility as an alternative to construction, the free floating in time/space/image … the possibility inherent in
impossibility,’42 perhaps an Althusserian ‘materialism of encounter’ in its most anonymous
sense.43

Collaboration and Subjectivity

No being-with the Other, no socius without this with that makes being-with in
general more enigmatic than ever for us. And this being-with spectres would also
be, not only but also, a politics of memory, of inheritance, and of generations.44

While the anonymous and the collaborative may seem to conflict, both represent a firm
challenge to the authorial logic of hegemonic subjectivation. The collaborative, like the
nameless, ‘knows there is no outside’ and in its firm eschewal of such formulations represents
what Robert Siegle describes as the ‘implosion of the disciplinary forces that determine
individuality in postindustrial society.’45 Wojnarowicz’s experiences of the piers in his early
artistic career were heavily informed by his readings of the work of queer writers such as Jean
Genet, William Burroughs and Arthur Rimbaud, residents of somewhat different times and
places. Wojnarowicz’s own written accounts of his sexual encounters at the piers present an
idiolect of shadows, spectres and ghostly presences that through its rhetorical manipulation of
notions of presence and absence and historicisation, suggests for these counter-culture
figures an almost physical manifestation within the locales of urban male homosexuality in
late twentieth century New York. The performance artist and playwright Penny Arcade,
reviewing Wojnarowicz’s Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration (1991), described
the artist as having ‘gorged himself on a diet of Jean Genet and Bill Burroughs while trying to
unravel … and make sense of the decisions of his young adulthood.’46 Drawing on theories of
performativity, citation and spectral presence, the appropriative play on notions of role models
and genealogies in Wojnarowicz’s work represents a kind of multiplicitous subjectivity and
‘meta-identity,’47 in its turn functioning as a form of ‘multigenerational’ collaboration.48

These concerns were evident in Wojnarowicz’s testimony as plaintiff in a lawsuit in
June 1990 against Reverend Donald E. Wildmon and the American Family Association,
following the defendants’ publication of ‘a pamphlet of fourteen homoerotic images lifted out
of context from [Wojnarowicz’s] artworks in an attempt to discredit the National Endowment
for the Arts,’ and successful efforts to remove NEA funding from the Artists’ Space HIV/AIDS-
related exhibition Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing the previous year.49 Describing his 1979
collage work Untitled (Genet), Wojnarowicz spoke of the ‘sense of alienation’ that
overwhelmed him as he ‘got off the street’ in the mid-1970s. He notes: ‘I felt the weight of my
experiences and that there was very little chance I could transcend them, or turn them into
something useful with the social structure I was living in or outlive those experiences.’50
Genet’s work itself draws upon similar notions of transcendence. In The Thief’s Journal
(1949), he inverts traditional stereotypes of thief and judge and renders the supposed
deviance of theft quasi-religious by invoking in the act of stealing a ‘nervousness provoked by fear, and sometimes by anxiety, [that] makes for a state akin to religious moods.’

The *Rimbaud in New York* series, produced between 1978 and 1979, represents one of Wojnarowicz’s first forays in the practice of what I have termed ‘metahistorical collaboration.’ The sequence of black and white photographs shows Wojnarowicz with, most likely, three of his friends, wearing a life-size mask of the French writer, in various locations around New York City, sites associated with the city’s gay subculture and places that Wojnarowicz himself frequented: warehouses on the Hudson River piers, dive coffee shops, Times Square; ‘playing with,’ he wrote, ‘ideas of compression of “historical time and activity” and fusing the French poet’s identity with modern new york [sic] urban activities mostly illegal in nature.’ (Fig. 1)


Wojnarowicz’s invocation of the ‘poete maudit’ was part of a wider dynamic reemergence of Rimbaud’s work and image in the late 1970s New York punk scene, led by writer-musicians like Patti Smith, Richard Hell and Jim Carroll, following the example of earlier Rimbaud adherents such as William Burroughs and Henry Miller.
Wojnarowicz’s series was first published in Dennis Cooper’s ‘zine Little Caesar in 1978, after poet Tim Dlugos recommended Wojnarowicz’s work to Cooper, having seen an earlier issue of the ‘zine entirely dedicated to work on Rimbaud by downtown writers, and later in the Soho Weekly News in 1980. An unpublished note for a Rimbaud in New York film, recently uncovered in Wojnarowicz’s archive at New York University, details his plan for shots of ‘rimbaud [sic] along lower west side ... inside piers and in dusk in hallways with milling groups of cruisers.’

Wojnarowicz’s (mis)use of Etienne Carjat’s famous image of the young Rimbaud was an appropriative gesture that sought to facilitate the presence of queer history and literature in dissolute urban spaces and in doing so, to create a sense of a homosexual genealogy, the self-conscious production of a gay legacy that functioned as a multi-faceted study of the nature and process of becoming self as well as of preserving an anti-hegemonic identity. The work looked to reclaim a known homosexual figure from historical stasis at the same time as it created a new form of identity by presenting Rimbaud within contemporary contexts. This radicalizes the strict logic of the historically specific, interpellated subject through rupture and reclaims queer identity from the repressive law of futurity. The perpetually delayed political fantasy of ‘reproductive futurism’ is critiqued by Lee Edelman in No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive (2004) as a means of ‘preserving ... the absolute privilege of heteronormativity by rendering unthinkable, by casting outside the political domain, the possibility of a queer resistance to this organizing principle of communal relations.’

Judith Butler’s conception of heterosexual identity as constructed through a performative set of repetitive gestures that seek to affirm it as the ‘original’ is of relevance here. For Butler, repetitious selfhood implies an identity constituted from a fragmentary relationship to the past, in which ‘a reinforced repetition of the same’ functions to quell a ‘perpetual threat of a disruption.’ In the context of Wojnarowicz and the Rimbaud in New York series, it becomes clear that his appropriation is not a simple repetition of a familiar homosexual stereotype where the historical distance of the appropriated figure can provide a distance that renders the sexuality of the subject somewhat more palatable within a heterosexual matrix. What the combination of past and present in Rimbaud in New York sets up is a re-radicalising of Rimbaud’s legacy that consciously deviates from accepted labels of gay identity and plays with the negative stereotyping of drug use and cruising. Just as the Ward Line project represented a politicised reclamation of a disappearing subcultural space, Wojnarowicz’s Rimbaud in New York series revealed creative strategies for...‘transcend[ing] society’s hatred of diversity and loathing of homosexuals’... demonstrating the value of preserving records of personal experience ... the necessity for ... actively constructing a personal history against the many ways that silence may be imposed.
As Mysoon Rizk has noted, the medium of collage functioned for Wojnarowicz as a superior means of ‘synthesizing his own life and the lives of others’ in order to achieve resonance for his subjects and themes.\textsuperscript{58} The concept brings to mind Frederic Jameson’s desire to ‘rewrite the individual text, the individual cultural artefact, in terms of the antagonistic dialogue of class voices,’ through which ‘the individual text will be refocused as a parole, or individual utterance, of [a] vaster system, or langue …’\textsuperscript{59} For Wojnarowicz, this was figured in terms of what Felix Guattari described as the artist’s proclivity for ‘connecting his singular fantasies to a historical scheme.’\textsuperscript{60}

In Wojnarowicz’s practice, collage, as a methodology of plurality and appropriation, represented the potential for collaboratively constructed histories, that could go beyond hegemonic conceptions of origin and legacy, bearing affinity to Lacanian notions of the future anterior: ‘What is realized in my history is not the past definite of what it was, since it is no more, or the present perfect of what it has been in what I am, but the future anterior of what I shall have been for what I am in the process of becoming.’\textsuperscript{61} In a journal entry from 1980, Wojnarowicz suggests this overlapping, cyclical historicity is present in the \textit{Rimbaud in New York} series as he recalls a meeting with the \textit{Soho Weekly News} prior to the paper’s publication of the work: ‘I explained that it was a vision of Rimbaud with what was known of his sensibilities, only here in New York at this time and place in history. What he’d get into, what areas he’d be drawn to.’\textsuperscript{62} As Wojnarowicz wrote in an early prose poem entitled ‘Reading a little Rimbaud in a Second Avenue coffee shop’: ‘the worlds [sic] going on outside the shop just rushing by in waves of sound & I can’t do anything about it. It could be nineteen twenty or eighteen sixty or now & it wouldn’t make a difference except maybe I wouldn’t be reading what I’m reading where I am.’\textsuperscript{63}

Wojnarowicz’s fascination with Rimbaud and Genet was consolidated during his time living in France in the late 1970s.\textsuperscript{64} The artist’s journals from this period contain numerous musings on the relationship of the Paris of his artistic mentors and that which Wojnarowicz himself experienced some decades later. Journal entries are combined with photographs of Wojnarowicz, their carefully staged iconography suggesting a desire to conflate the two locations through his own presence there, ‘playing with the idea of compression of historical time and activity.’\textsuperscript{65} The impulse to place the masked figure of ‘Rimbaud’ in New York rather than Paris also points to Wojnarowicz’s sense of disappointment at the Paris of the 1970s and his desire to connect his own experiences with those of the French writers he admired: ‘the bare animal need to experience and react within environments that have contact or construction within the past – the areas that one searches for personal history and understanding – these places are not found in Paris – so far as I’ve seen.’\textsuperscript{66} This appears to have reasserted for Wojnarowicz a sense of the need for personal histories as a means of penetrating a discourse of ‘state-supported forms of history’ and maintaining a collaborative identity with these figures through art and writing.\textsuperscript{67}
Wojnarowicz later wrote in the same journal: ‘Brassai, Genet, Cocteau. They wrote of the Paris that I subtly carried in my heart … the split sequence of un chant d’amour [sic] that grew grey and quiet in the small theatre in S.F. The A.R. vision of side streets and crazed men with the spark of guns beneath their coats.’

The complex psychogeography of the piers and the practice of cruising – and his earlier hustling experiences in Times Square – formed a crucial element of Wojnarowicz’s ideology of fragmented selfhood and non-linear history. For Genet, who was incarcerated in the Penitentiary Colony of Mettray between the ages of fifteen and eighteen, prison occupied a similarly prominent place in the psyche, this link helping to facilitate the sense of meta-identity and multigenerational communality present in Wojnarowicz’s collage practice, where the artist could literally conflate these multiple locations and outlooks. As Jeremy Reed has written, the Colony was ‘a remorselessly punitive reformatory with a history of abuse and suicide,’ where incidences of violence and brutal sex occurred nightly, providing ‘not only the template for Genet’s subsequent fiction, but a deviant starting point for his whole emotional conditioning.’ Genet’s film *Un Chant d’amour* (1950), which Wojnarowicz first saw in San Francisco in 1974, is set in a French jail and centres upon the erotic relationships amongst those held there, most notably a prison guard who takes voyeuristic pleasure from observing the inmates masturbating. Reed considers Genet to have ‘delighted’ in the cruelty and severity he experienced at Mettray, a position somewhat comparable to Wojnarowicz’s romanticised and sexualised vision of the criminal activity which haunted the West Side piers and the pitiless Times Square of his hustling youth. A journal entry from early 1980 points to the aesthetic appeal of these visions, the sight of a muscular convict multiplying erotically for Wojnarowicz into thousands of desired bodies, ‘like the bleak lit evolution of a Muybridge series.’

The 1983 work *Jean Genet Masturbating in Mettray Prison* follows the form of a number of Wojnarowicz’s collage works from the early 1980s period; stencilled images superimposed on mass-produced poster advertisements, often connected with the sale of meat or fish, like *Tuna* (1983). The date of the work coincides with the peak of Wojnarowicz’s activity at the Hudson River warehouses and the Ward Line pier project. The stencilled image depicts two naked male figures masturbating in a prison cell, indicated clearly by the barred window in the top right corner of the image, boldly executed in block shading that highlights the languid pose of the foremost figure and the delineation of his penis (Fig. 2). Iconographically, the work bears relation to Wojnarowicz’s *Memory Drawings* series from 1981, published posthumously in September 1992 in the collection *Memories That Smell Like Papers of Surrealism Issue 8, Spring 2010*
Gasoline, in which the artist recalls from memory his own earliest sexual encounters, which are likewise depicted in stark black and white ink. Genet’s face, well known to Wojnarowicz through widely disseminated portraits by Brassai and others, is entirely obscured from the viewer and, save for the descriptive title, implicates both Wojnarowicz and the viewer in the position of the masturbating figure. The absence of the face plays up to notions of the ‘demolition’ of the self often conceived of as present in gay sex, ‘the self-shattering and solipsistic jouissance that is sexuality itself,’ as Leo Bersani has described it. Most importantly, the absence functions to suggest the figure as a referential body for any number of sexual desires and longings, permitting Wojnarowicz to fantasise a collaborative idiom of erotic pleasure and physical oppression that links his own experiences to those of Jean Genet, conflating the two locations by way of the contemporary American poster; a ‘linking of modalized presents (past present, actual present: “now,” future present)’ as Jacques Derrida has termed it. A multigenerational exchange of selves, a collaboration, which through the rhetoric of the ‘promiscuous encounter’ enacts ‘the possibility of a simultaneous identification and disidentification, which, may then involve a reidentification – ceasing to be the fixed, tyrannised subject.’

Fig. 2: David Wojnarowicz, Jean Genet Masturbating at Mettray Prison, 1983 34” x 25”. Photograph: Gracie Mansion Gallery, New York.
An earlier work, produced around the same time as the *Rimbaud in New York* series, suggests a rather different image of Jean Genet but one that likewise plays upon conceptions of multiplicitous subjectivity and collaboration. *Untitled (Genet)* from 1979 is a Xeroxed collage showing the figure of Genet, appropriated from a well-known 1947 photograph by Brassai, standing haloed within a World War II image of soldiers in a ravaged church interior, flanked by armed angels from a fifteenth-century Flemish image and a muscular comic-book figure with a crossbow (Fig. 3). Behind this peculiar scene lies a reconfigured altarpiece where Wojnarowicz has depicted Christ, as Jerry D. Meyer has noted, ‘as the suffering Man of Sorrows transformed into a drug addict complete with syringe and makeshift tourniquet.’

The double presence of sainthood and messianic suffering draws upon Wojnarowicz’s conceptions of the imaginative and artistic potential he considered to be present within the act and process of human anguish, as well as reiterating what Mysoon Rizk has observed in the *Rimbaud in New York* series, that is, ‘the value of preserving records of personal experience.’ For Wojnarowicz, as he argued in his testimony against Wildmon and the American Family Association, the Christian notion of Jesus having taken on ‘all the suffering of all people in the world’ represented a mandate for updating this iconic figure within the streets of the Lower East Side: ‘I wanted to make a symbol that would show that he would...’
take on the suffering of the vast amounts of addiction that I saw on the streets.\textsuperscript{78} The symbol of Christ acts again as a referential body within which is contained the ‘ability of the autobiographical act to mirror communal concerns,’ perhaps the ultimate symbol of the potential for singular experience to connect with a collaborative, social sensibility.\textsuperscript{79} In this sense, Wojnarowicz’s practice of ‘multi-historical’ collaboration functions to loosen the grip of ‘state-supported forms of history’\textsuperscript{80} and the repression of the thus interpellated individual subject, establishing a psychic and aesthetic space where, paraphrasing from Rimbaud’s famous letter to Paul Demeny in 1871, Guattari argues that ‘I is an other, a multiplicity of others, embodied at the intersection of partial components of enunciation, breaching on all sides individuated identity and the organised body.’\textsuperscript{81}

Genet’s defiant claims of heterogeneous selfhood – ‘I am a vagrant, not a revolutionary. How can you expect me to define myself?’ – resound in the image of the writer represented in this work.\textsuperscript{82} The halo around the figure’s head establishes Genet as ‘saint,’ which Wojnarowicz confirmed in his discussion of this image as part of his testimony during the trial against Reverend Wildmon in 1990: ‘I wanted to nominate Jean Genet as a patron saint for people like myself who had brutal experiences living on the street and who were also homosexual and felt alienated.’\textsuperscript{83} The labelling of sainthood is indeed also an ironic one that plays upon the title of Jean-Paul Sartre’s biography, \textit{Saint Genet: Actor and Martyr}, first published in English in 1963. Loren Ringer has observed the depersonalisation of the figure of Genet as rife in Sartre’s study: ‘in a sense, he is frozen in time; with the methodologies of that period, Sartre captures Genet in a portrait as a social pariah.’\textsuperscript{84} Wojnarowicz’s act of appropriation and his collage method is one that seeks to reactivate the historicised subjectivity of figures, like Genet and Rimbaud, whom he considered as role models, a desire that connects to Guattari’s notion of the diverse subject espoused in \textit{Chaosmosis}, where ‘the important thing is not the final result but the fact that the multicomponential cartographic method can co-exist with the process of subjectivation, and that a reappropriation, an autopoesis, of the means of production of subjectivity can be made possible.’\textsuperscript{85}

A comparable method of subjective reappropriation can be traced in Wojnarowicz’s collaborative work, and is explored very directly in the painting \textit{Peter Hujar Dreaming/Yukio Mishima: St. Sebastian} (1982), which takes an image of a close friend and occasional lover, the photographer Peter Hujar sleeping and integrates it into a triad of figures that function as visual signifiers of homosexual persecution (Fig. 4). The incorporation of Hujar’s image is indicative of the intellectual exchange that took place between the artist and the photographer. Above the sleeping Hujar, upon a glowing pink stencil of the penetrated figure of Saint Sebastian, Wojnarowicz has superimposed an image of twentieth-century Japanese writer Yukio Mishima masturbating. The connection with earlier images of the masked Rimbaud figure, also depicted masturbating, is clear: Mishima’s novel \textit{Confessions of a Mask} (1948) is a semi-autobiographical work about a young Japanese homosexual who must hide

Papers of Surrealism Issue 8, Spring 2010
behind a mask in order to fit into society. Like Rimbaud, the story and image of Saint Sebastian had gained a particular homoerotic currency in 1970s queer culture, notably in Derek Jarman’s controversial film *Sebastiane* (1976). The dreaming figure of Hujar is further externalized by his position in regard to the viewer forming the lower left axis of the compositional arrangement, implicating both within this iconic triad of homosexual identity, viewing him as Wojnarowicz may have done, as ‘mentor’ and guide through this network.86

The sleeping Hujar thus appears, as the title suggests, to be dreaming of the two iconic homosexual figures simultaneously, the composite vision intimating a historically transcendent sense of communal awareness that links the identities present in the image, similar in this to many of Wojnarowicz’s other collage-style works and their construction of multiplicitous identities. It is worth considering here Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s queer notion of anti-Oedipal selfhood, that of an ‘orphan’ that ‘produces itself within the identity of nature and man.’87 Deleuze and Guattari orphaned the self as means of rejecting the logic of the family and its paramount position in psychoanalytic discourse. For them, the family functioned as ‘the agent delegated to psychic repression,’ and as such it seems strange that discourses of paternity have performed such an important symbolic role in analyses of

---

Wojnarowicz and Hujar’s relationship, regardless of the twenty-year age gap between them. The triadic composition of *Peter Hujar Dreaming*, the intellectual fantasy that the images of dreaming and masturbation invoke, abandons the teleological, narrowly procreative logic of heteronormative genealogy and, as Lee Edelman has argued of the queer more generally, looks to “[traverse] the collective fantasy that invests the social order with meaning by way of reproductive futurism.”

The acceleration of HIV/AIDS under a negligent neo-conservative political administration prompted a resurgence of the rhetoric of the heterosexual family in political, and even medical, dialogue. In his seminal activist piece *When I Put My Hands on Your Body* (1990) – produced while Wojnarowicz was himself dying from AIDS – a superimposed text upon an image of skeletons in shallow graves invokes the language of normative genealogies in a kind of Foucauldian reclamation, to create for Wojnarowicz and his dying friends a new model for collective history that would serve as witness to their experiences:

> When I put my hands on your body on your flesh I feel the history of that body. Not just the beginning of its forming in that distant lake but all the way beyond its ending … I see the organs gradually fade into transparency leaving a gloaming skeleton gleaming like ivory that slowly revolves until it becomes dust … It makes me weep to feel the history of your flesh beneath my hands in a time of so much loss. It makes me weep to feel the movement of your flesh beneath my palms as you twist and turn over to one side to create a series of gestures to reach up around my neck to draw me nearer. All these memories will be lost in time like tears in the rain.

Both Wojnarowicz and Hujar were remembered in patches of the NAMES project memorial quilt, as was Keith Davis, with whom Wojnarowicz worked on the Ward Line pier project. As Lee Edelman has observed in *Homographesis*,

> AIDS … can be figured as a crisis in – and hence as an opportunity for – the social shaping or articulation of subjectivities because, in part, the historical context within which AIDS in the West achieved its ‘identity’ allowed it to be positioned as a syndrome distinctively engaging identity as an issue.

An interesting reference point for the changing nature of Wojnarowicz and Hujar’s relationship as a consequence of HIV/AIDS is Paul Monette’s *Eighteen Elegies for Rog*, published in 1989 after the death of his partner Roger Horwitz from AIDS complications:

> I had a self once
> But he died when do we leave the mirror
> and lie down in front of the tanks.

For Monette, a changing communal subjectivity is figured as essential to both the process of grieving those suffering from AIDS within the political climate of the late 1980s and to the activism that emerged in reaction to it. Wojnarowicz’s strong sense of the ethical imperative of AIDS activism is made clear in the essay ‘Postcards from America: X-Rays from Hell’ from
Close to the Knives. As an HIV-positive friend contemplates suicide, Wojnarowicz asks him “If tomorrow you could take a pill that would let you die quickly and quietly, would you do it?” “No,” he said, “not yet.” “There’s too much work to do,” I said.94 Similarly for Monette, as Edelman writes, ‘in the aftermath of Roger’s death, the survival through transference of ego erotics invested by Monette in that shared identity prompts his rejection of ‘self’-regard in favour of the political activism of a newly constituted communal self.’95

A queer logic of the communal, re-appropriating the discourse of the family, is explored in Hocquenghem’s proposition of the importance of ‘socialising’ homosexuality and its symbolism, avoiding its analysis as ‘an individual problem.’ Hocquenghem argued in the polemical Homosexual Desire (1972) that,

to deal with homosexuality as an individual problem, as the individual problem, is the surest way to subject it to the Oedipus complex. Homosexual desire is a group desire; it groups the anus by restoring its function as a desiring bond, and by collectively reinvesting it against a society which has reduced it to the state of a shameful little secret.96

This concept is developed further in Bersani’s article ‘Is The Rectum a Grave?’ (1987) in which he argues that, ‘AIDS has reinforced the heterosexual association of anal sex with a self-annihilation originally and primarily identified with … an insatiable female sexuality.’97 Bersani’s argument overlaps with Hocquenghem’s premise of ‘group desire’ as he quotes from Simon Watney’s description of urban manifestations of late twentieth century gay identity as ‘constructed through multiple encounters, shifts of sexual identification, actings out … and a plurality of opportunity (at least in large urban areas)’ in order to ‘desublimate the inherited sexual guilt of a grotesquely homophobic society.’98

Wojnarowicz returned to the image of Hujar in one of his final pieces of a collaborative nature: portraits of Hujar on his deathbed, taken immediately following his death, which Wojnarowicz described elsewhere in Close to the Knives as extending from a desire to capture ‘portraits of his amazing feet, his head, that open eye.’99 These were appropriated later as fragments in a vitriolic political painting that explored this process of seeking and producing a historiographical methodology that could represent both individual and collective experience. Like Hujar’s own portraits, which he conceived of as existing ‘in Life and Death,’ Wojnarowicz’s photographs of the artist’s body ‘commemorate Hujar’s practice by reiterating its own logic,’ capturing it within the images as if part of a shared, hereditary nature, a visual legacy, while also functioning as a ‘literalised, photographic act of mourning.’ (Fig. 5)100
The principle of paternity imagined in accounts of Wojnarowicz and Hujar’s relationship, and in images like *When I Put My Hands on Your Body*, might instead be figured in terms of a rhetoric of excess, not simply in Leo Bersani’s terms of the excess of the non-procreative sexual act, but more significantly in the sense that its nature goes beyond the ‘Oedipal yoke’ of the psychoanalytic familial triad, embodying its various roles simultaneously and Wojnarowicz’s elegiac description of the immediate aftermath of Hujar’s passing points to this:

… a nun rushed in babbling about how he’d accepted the church and I look at this guy on the bed with his outstretched arm and I think: but he’s beyond that. He’s more than the words coming from her containing these images of spirituality – I mean just the essence of death; the fears and joys of it the flight it contains this body of my friend on this bed this body of my brother my father my emotional link to the world this body I don’t know this pure and cutting air just all the thoughts and
sensations this death this event produces in bystanders contains more spirituality than any words we can manufacture.\(^{101}\)

An analysis of the rhetoric of paternity is thus bound by the same tension between the parameters of the individual and the universal that was of such great importance to Wojnarowicz’s understanding of himself as an East Village artist, framing his creative activity throughout his lifetime. A study of collaboration in Wojnarowicz’s practice allows the downtown New York milieu in which he was working to be explored in a manner that, like the delicate suspension of self and society in the artist’s own work, goes beyond hegemonic discourses of singular artistic identity, that ‘seamless gestalt of the artist’ that Pamela Lee rejected in her study of Gordon Matta-Clark, to assert a collective history that speaks to both the personal and universal simultaneously, without compromising the significance of either.


\(^{2}\) Sylvère Lotringer, *David Wojnarowicz: A Definitive History of Five or Six Years on the Lower East Side*, New York; Los Angeles; Semiotext(e); Cambridge, MA; London, The MIT Press, 2006, 12.


Ibid., 210.

Ibid., 214.


Ibid., 299.


15 Ibid., Deutsche and Ryan’s article draws from Craig Owen’s trenchant critique of the East Village scene in ‘The Problem with Puerilism,’ Art in America, Vol. 72, No. 6, Summer 1984.

Ibid. Emphasis added.

The work of the art activist group PAD/D (Political Art Distribution/Documentation) specifically engaged artists’ concerns about gentrification, for example, in their 1983-1984 show Not for Sale: A project against displacement at the El Bohio community centre on East Ninth Street on the Lower East Side. This was set up and run by Charas, ‘the politicised Puerto Rican youth gang turned community service group,’ in which neighbourhood artists were asked to produce anti-gentrification posters. See: Julie Ault, ed., Alternative Art, New York, 1965-1985: A Cultural Politics Book for the Social Text Collective, Minneapolis; London, University of Minnesota Press, 2002.

16 Ibid. Emphasis added.

17 David Wojnarowicz, ‘Biographical Dateline,’ David Wojnarowicz: Tongues of Flame, 118.

19 Lotringer, David Wojnarowicz, 12.


21 Julie Ault, Alternative Art, 164. Emphasis added.

22 Siegle, Suburban Ambush, 14.

23 Dan Cameron et al., East Village USA, New York, New Museum of Contemporary Art, 2004, 86.

24 Ibid.

25 Lotringer, David Wojnarowicz, 14.

26 Cameron et al., East Village USA, 51.

27 Ibid., 84.

28 Wojnarowicz’s own notes for an exhibition of his work in 1988 provide a very succinct analysis of these aspects of his art: ‘Printed matter from daily life is used as collage, sometimes in the shape of creatures, and sometimes buried in layers to suggest memory or things considered while viewing associations of information. Food posters which have an encoded meaning of consumption are used as backdrops for information dealing with consumption on a psychic or moral level,’ David Wojnarowicz, In The Shadow of the

Papers of Surrealism Issue 8, Spring 2010

29 Lotringer, David Wojnarowicz, 66.


31 Peter Hujar is probably the most notable example of those friends opposed to Wojnarowicz’s drug use at this point. Stephen Koch has noted that ‘when Peter became aware that David was being drawn into the frequent use of hard drugs, his reaction was immediate, firm … Either David must stop using hard drugs completely and immediately, or Peter would read him out of his life for good,’ Correspondence with the author – e-mail, 6th June 2007, and Richard Kern observed, ‘David quit [drugs] so that Peter would talk to him again,’ Lotringer, David Wojnarowicz, 66.

32 Ibid., 71.

33 Ibid., 52.

34 Letter to French publisher, October 1978; The David Wojnarowicz Papers: Series I, Box 1, Folder 7; The David Wojnarowicz Papers: Series I, Box 1, Folder 7; Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University Libraries.

35 Lotringer David Wojnarowicz, 29.

36 Ibid.

37 Wojnarowicz, In The Shadow of the American Dream, 128.


40 Ibid.


42 Wojnarowicz, In The Shadow of the American Dream, 128-9.


45 Siegle, Suburban Ambush, 391.


Phrase borrowed from Penny Arcade ‘On David Wojnarowicz’s in *The Shadow of the American Dream*, 110: ‘The bohemian ritual of finding one’s place in the food chain of art history and of apprenticeship at the hip of one’s role models are rarely seen today. Multigenerationalism, the backbone of bohemia, has been replaced by what can only be called a monogenerational scene.’

Lothring, *David Wojnarowicz*, 216. Wojnarowicz was successful and received one dollar in compensation, which he insisted on receiving by cheque so that he could incorporate it into a painting.

Ibid. Emphasis added.


Ibid.

David Wojnarowicz Papers: Series I, Box 1, Folder 11: ‘Journals NYC, 1979.’


Judith Butler, ‘Imitation and Gender Insubordination,’ in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss, New York; London, Routledge, 1991, 13. In her footnotes to ‘Imitation and Gender Insubordination,’ Butler cites Derrida’s ‘The Double Session’ from his *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1981, where he argues that the mime ‘does not imitate or copy some prior phenomenon, idea or figure, but constitutes – some might say *performatively* – the phantasm of the original in and through the mime,’ 30. This is interesting in the context of a problematizing of gender and identity binarism and Butler quotes Derrida thus: ‘He represents nothing, imitates nothing, does not have to conform to any prior referent with the aim of achieving adequation or verisimilitude … There is no simple reference, this speculum reflects no reality: it produces mere “reality effects” … It is a difference without reference, or rather reference without a referent, without any first or last unit, a ghost that is the phantom of no flesh.’

Ibid., 24.


Ibid., 49.


Guattari, ‘David Wojnarowicz,’ 12


Journal entry, 1980, no month given; The David Wojnarowicz Papers: Series I, Box 1, Folder 4; Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University Libraries.
63  David Wojnarowicz Papers: Series 3, Subseries A, Box 4, Folder 94; Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University Libraries.

64  The artist’s first exposure to Genet was in San Francisco in 1974: ‘Saw Genet’s un chant d’amour and it confirmed for me that one could transcend society’s hatred of diversity and loathing of homosexuals,’ David Wojnarowicz, ‘Biographical Dateline,’ in David Wojnarowicz: Tongues of Flame 117.

65  Ibid.

66  Journal entry, September 15 1978; The David Wojnarowicz Papers: Series I, Box 1, Folder 7; Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University Libraries.


68  Journal entry, September 16 1978; The David Wojnarowicz Papers: Series I, Box 1, Folder 7; Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University Libraries. Emphasis added.


70  Journal entry, February 16 1980; The David Wojnarowicz Papers: Series I, Box 1, Folder 13; Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University Libraries.


74  Derrida, Spectres of Marx, xix.

75  Dollimore, Death, Desire and Loss in Western Culture, 326.


77  Mysoon Rizk, ‘Reinventing the Pre-invented World,’ 48.

78  Lotringer, David Wojnarowicz, 217.


80  David Wojnarowicz, ‘Biographical Dateline,’ 118.

81  Guattari, ‘David Wojnarowicz,’ 83.
82 Untitled article on Jean Genet’s involvement with the Black Panthers; The David Wojnarowicz Papers: Series 3, Box 7, Folder 305; Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University Libraries.

83 Lotringer, David Wojnarowicz, 217.


85 Felix Guattari, ‘David Wojnarowicz,’ 12.

86 Correspondence with the author – e-mail, April 30 2007.


88 Ibid.

89 Edelman, No Future, 28.

90 Leo Bersani’s comments on the role of the family in the media at this time are of relevance here: ‘TV doesn’t make the family, but it makes the family mean in a certain way. That is, it makes an exceptionally sharp distinction between the family as a biological unit and as a cultural identity … the family produced on American television is much more likely to include your dog than your homosexual brother or sister,’ Leo Bersani, ‘Is the Rectum a Grave?’ October Vol. 43, Winter 1987, 203.

91 The same text also featured in the posthumously and collaboratively produced graphic novel Seven Miles a Second: David Wojnarowicz and James Romberger, Seven Miles a Second, New York, DC Comics, 1996.


93 Ibid., 108.

94 Wojnarowicz, ‘Losing the Form in Darkness,’ 117.

95 Ibid., 108.


97 Bersani, ‘Is the Rectum a Grave?’ 222.

98 Ibid., 218. Emphasis added.

99 Wojnarowicz, ‘Losing the Form in Darkness,’ 102.


101 Wojnarowicz, ‘Losing the Form in Darkness,’ 103. Emphasis added.
Fiona Anderson is a second year PhD candidate in English Literature and American Studies at King’s College London, writing on waterfront cruising in late 1970s New York. She is a member of the Queer@King’s research group and recently lectured on Wojnarowicz as part of the group’s 2009/10 ‘Queer Discipline’ series. Fiona is currently living in New York, researching at New York University’s Fales Library, the Public Library’s Berg Collection and the archives of the city’s Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Center.
Ron Athey's Visions of Excess: Performance After Georges Bataille

Dominic Johnson

Ron Athey is an artist whose formidable body of work has been staged under the explicit sign of the proto-surrealist writer Georges Bataille. Over the last decade, Athey has produced a series of individual works and curatorial projects that explore Bataille's writings in exquisite, horrific detail. First performed in 1998, The Solar Anus was Athey's first loving homage to Bataille (Fig. 1). A tour de force of unseemly erotics, the performance responded to an esoteric essay by Bataille of the same title. Athey's performance begins with the extraction of an unbearably long string of pearls, streaming like orbs of light from the centre of a large black sun tattooed around his anus. Set against a closed-circuit projection, and accompanied by an eerie soundtrack of macabre violin, an interminable and muddied light issues from his commandingly adorned hole. Revisiting Bataille's thought of the coruscating sun in torrid copula with the earth and its moon, Athey's body becomes the site of a scandalous eruption. Seated on an industrial steel and leather throne, after having removed the pearls, Athey inserts hooks into his face, hitching them with cords to a twisted golden crown. Secured to his tortured head by the tension of his skin, his face is wrought into an alien grimace, a rictus smile in brilliant-cut crisis that acts as the taut screen for some undisclosed perversity, projected from within like the sun. The short piece closes with Athey clapping weighty sex-horns to his patent stilettos, which he slowly and repeatedly forces into his rectum. As Bataille writes of the process of bodily recurrence and the sexual rhythm of all movement, 'The planetary systems that turn in space like rigid disks, and whose centres also move, describing only an infinitely larger circle, only move away continuously from their own position in order to return to it, completing their rotation.'¹ Athey's prostheses rehearse those worn in Pierre Molinier's surrealist auto-portraiture, reframed here by the proximate convictions of vital, living flesh. Shot through with his and our shame, and beauty, and elegant terror, Athey's imposing frame vibrates in the grazed eye of the spectator, lit and punctured by 'the indecency of the solar ray,' and its correlate – in Bataille's terms – the scandal of the phallus. 'Beings,' Bataille writes, 'only die to be born, in the manner of phalluses that leave bodies in order to enter them.'²

Beyond his solo works, Athey has organized various events that celebrate the legacies of Bataille's writings. In 2006, Athey brought an array of performance artists to the Hayward Gallery in London, in an event called The Monster in the Night of the Labyrinth, co-curated with Lee Adams alongside the exhibition Undercover Surrealism. A diverse and excitable crowd attended a series of responses to Bataille, by Athey, Adams, Ernst Fischer, Helen Spackman, and others. Adams presented an interpretation of Bataille's essay 'The Language of Flowers,' installed in a corridor along which audience members filed past in order to access the main space. In the piece, Adams rests on his shoulders atop a velvet
altar, his body pinioned to the core by a plume of lilies, which hang from the high ceiling to delve between his splayed legs. An arresting and visceral sight, it set the tone for the evening, of beautifully morbid spectacle and florid, sumptuous excess. Adams's inverted, penetrated body responded to Bataille with gruesome clarity, to sketch, in visual terms, Bataille's description of the flower's peculiar obscenity, a 'garish withering' that bursts from 'the stench of the manure pile.' A general theme of *The Monster in the Night of the Labyrinth* was the manifestation of beauty as a by-product of bodily processes, a through-line inaugurated by the pristine cruelty of Adams's static performance, and brought to a climax by Athey's *Solar Anus*.

The event was a variation on *Visions of Excess*, Athey's ongoing curatorial project first presented as part of Fierce Festival in Birmingham in 2005, which then toured to Ljubljana and other cities. Its various manifestations have included a return to Birmingham in 2008, and, most recently, a 12-hour version programmed as part of London's Spill Festival of Performance 2009. The Spill incarnation was the most ambitious to date, bringing together more than 20 live performances, as well as a programme of video art. Artists presented live installations, one-to-one performances, and participatory works, in the sprawling corridors of Shunt Vaults. Guided by the inimitable David Hoyle, who hosted the evening, audiences wandered the dank passages below London Bridge, engaging with provocative works that explored the vertiginous excesses of Bataille's writings. Whereas Athey's *The Solar Anus* and Lee Adams's *The Language of Flowers* had sought to illustrate specific images in Bataille's writings, the performances at *Visions of Excess* were more oblique homages. An exception was a new work by Adams, which embodied Bataille's figure of the *acéphale*, as sketched by André Masson (1936). Holding a dagger in one hand, and a flaming heart in the other, Adams's headless body figured a de-etherealised corporeality, a 'low' body unguided by thought. The skull at the *acéphale*'s crotch was re-imagined as a hovering Mickey Mouse head, perhaps recalling a fascination in Kenneth Anger's recent video works as a means of reconceptualising Bataille's legacies, as queer occultism for the age of late capitalism.

Honouring Bataille, the artists created explosive, eruptive works that tested the endurance of performers and audiences alike. The event brought together themes from Bataille's many and varied essays, including sacrifice and self-obliteration, mythical anthropology, heterology and the 'excluded part' – each a variation on Bataille's axiomatic endeavour, to explore the philosophical implications of 'the introduction of a lawless intellectual series into the world of legitimate thought.' In *The Inability to be Looked at and the Horror of Nothing to See*, Zackary Drucker enticed audience members to pluck hairs from her transgendered body, using tweezers, while a numbed voice intoned off-kilter mantras of self-discovery and inevitable crisis (Fig. 2). Drucker gestured to the forces of repulsion, prohibition and exclusion that sequester difference – thus producing obscenity – at the margins of culture. As the audience plucked at the signs of her gender variance, the piece staged the social body's frantic, conflicted attempts to regulate and straighten out its own
fantasmatic stability. Franko B installed a large golden swing in one arch, which was kept in motion throughout the twelve hours by a team of naked volunteers (Fig. 3). As the performers' bodies rocked in deep arcs through the arch, they manifested Bataille's explorations of the obscenity of planets in space, engaged in the violent rhythms of a seemingly perpetual fornication. Suka Off created a powerful performance installation, in which ropes pulled at the red latex skin of Piotr Wegrzynski (Fig. 4). A disconcerting sight, his skin eventually gave way as he was flayed by the mounting tension, as if to birth the subject from the site of destruction, which 'releases to the disappointing immensity of space the totality of laughing or lacerated men.' Left behind were the traces of his mythological production, a crumpled mass of latex that hovered in space. In a human waste project, the bio-artist Kira O'Reilly collected hair, semen, vaginal juices, blood and other human dejecta, upon which she performed a DNA extraction towards the end of the event (Fig. 5). With forensic clarity befitting Bataille's esoteric philosophical programme, O'Reilly focused on the excremental procedures that populate a life, producing a kind of intellectual scatology that evaded rational systems of classification. Her project scientifically honoured the donated samples of bodily dejecta, familiar substances against which, nevertheless, 'crushing interdictions have been levelled.'

Writing in *The Impossible*, Bataille saw the 'intoxicating' limits of excess as a freeing of oneself from the regulatory structures of the law. 'Nothing exists,' Bataille wrote, 'that doesn't have this senseless sense – common to flames, dreams, uncontrollable laughter – in those moments when consumption accelerates beyond the desire to endure.' At *Visions of Excess* such provocations were often enacted through marginal sexual acts, which, when performed in public, retain the power to unsettle audiences. Many performances asked questions about the role of sexual excess in artistic practice, whether by way of Ashley Ryder getting fisted over a number of hours, or the spectacle of Mouse being penetrated by a man in a bear costume, and spraying the audience with water from her vagina, in a high-octane performance in the early hours of the morning. Athey has commented on the importance of including the sexual act in performance. He notes, 'I do think about the experience-levels of audience, but mainly I acknowledge that it's so varied. If the audience provides the possibility of an entire spectrum of experiences, why does the standard focus attend to the lowest common denominator and privilege the inexperienced heterosexual?' Here, Bataille is useful for asking how the pursuit of excess constitutes a formal structure, to be explored towards a more explosive model of performance that disturbs the rhetoric of limits, intimacy and risk often proposed in cultural thinking.

Bataille's writings have provided the basis for an influential art-historical account of the artistic dispersal of form, namely Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss's curatorial study of the 'formless.' For Bois, various modes of the art object's 'slippage' mimic Bataille's notion of the informe, as an operation that enacts a kind of violence against the aesthetic category of form. Brushing modernism against the grain, Bois maintains that the works gathered pursue Bataille's definition of the informe, as 'a term that serves to bring things down in the world.'
For Bataille, the 'déclassé' character of the *informe* threatens to topple hierarchies and oppose the bureauocratic imperative of classification. Bataille’s concept therefore implies not only a physical or architectural slippage, but also a lowering of tone – a possibly demeaning slide from a state of assumed grace or privilege. Hence the heterogeneity of the works included in the exhibition *Formless*, as an array of works seemingly at odds with ‘the modernist master narrative.’ However, Bois and Krauss’s curatorial strategy is at pains to include works that contravene their own imposed rationales – despite, that is, their stated objective to dismantle ‘the larger unities that are the very stuff of art history.’

Performance poses a manifest problem for Bois and Krauss, as their exhibition struggles to find a means that might integrate the live event, or its traces, into the alternative classifications imposed in place of the modernist interpretive grid. Bois states that within the category of ‘entropy,’ for example, ‘we had thought of Allan Kaprow and Dieter Rot – but how could we have presented a happening without casting it in concrete?’ In their anxiety about performance’s refusal of permanent form – the impossibility of casting the event in the concrete terms of the objective trace – perhaps Bois and Krauss reiterate the ‘formal certainties’ of modernism that their project seeks to dislodge. While Bois and Krauss’s revised formalism can admit Claes Oldenburg’s flaccid *Sculpture in the Form of a Fried Egg* (1964), or David Medalla’s kinetic soapsuds column *Cloud Canyons* (1964), the collapse of form and matter cannot cope with the event of performance. Moreover, Bois introduces the theme of the ‘pulse,’ as a category that seeks to dismantle the high modernist unease invoked by temporality in art. Temporality has posed a threat for art criticism since at least the 1960s, as registered in Michael Fried’s notorious 1967 polemic, ‘Art and Objecthood.’ As noted in countless critiques, Fried attacked minimalism – or ‘literalist’ art, the derogatorily ringed term he coined for it – in a defence of art’s formal autonomy, which he saw as under threat of corruption by the ‘infectious theatricality’ that characterises art’s solicitation of the body. The ‘pulse,’ however, is described as ‘an endless beat that punctures the disembodied self-closure of pure visuality and incites an irruption of the carnal.’ Nevertheless, figurations of the erotic body are conspicuously excluded from all categories of their *informe*. Revising Bataille’s thought of the sun’s eternal dry hump against the earth and its moon, Bois and Krauss find pulsatory rhythms in the spinning discs of Marcel Duchamp’s *Rotoreliefs* (1935), and in Richard Serra’s film, *Hand Catching Lead* (1971). Their rather timid appropriation of Bataille cannot extend to an assault as embodied as Athey’s in *The Solar Anus*, perhaps because such a work approaches excluded conditions including ‘the fashion of the [1990s] for the “abject” in art.’ Convenienly, ‘No image of the body is necessary to produce [the] intrusion of desire [for] the pulse alone sexualizes the gaze.’ In place of the scandal of the carnal body, considered regressive after Duchamp, ‘the indecency of the solar ray’ is sought in work that ‘exploits repetitive movement within a fixed frame to work the devolutionary pressure of the pulse effect against the stable image of the human body.’ In locating the ‘visual equivalent of coitus’ in the geometric haze of the *Rotoreliefs*, perhaps Bois’s and Krauss’s notion of the
informe tends away from the gruesome clarity of Bataille's erotic spectacle, and its entailed self-shattering, towards the queasy modesty of metaphor. Implicitly, Athey's provocations are sequestered to an uninhabitable terrain beyond form (which it shatters) and the 'formless' (which it exceeds).

Athey's excesses highlight Bois and Krauss's prudish exclusions, but still leave open the question of relations that may be procured between Bataille's writings and Athey's art – as twin arbiters of those 'moments of intoxication when we defy everything, when, the anchor raised, we go merrily toward the abyss, with no more thought for the inevitable fall than for the limits given in the beginning.' Visions of Excess is an enduring testament to Athey's ability to summon artists and works at the vital limits of a culture, according to the sacrificial economies articulated by Bataille. At Visions of Excess, Athey performed his latest solo performance, Ecstatic (2008 - 2009). The piece begins with a high camp image, whose curious grandiosity is set askew by a loop of electronic sound. Highly pitched yet smooth and rhythmic, the wavering warp and woof of noise seems to correspond to and interrupt the central nervous system, which prickles at the soundtrack's curious verve. Perched atop a rostrum and encased between two vertical walls of glass, Athey brushes a long platinum-blonde wig that cascades across his face. Brushing harder and harder, bloods begins to drip from under the silken wig. Lifting strands of hair, he back-combs the wig into a gnarled halo above his head, as blood streams down his face. The wig, we realise, is clasped to his scalp with needles, which are pulled out with his fingers. The last few are dragged out with the wig, torn free from his head. A steady torrent now issues from the holes in his skin, which he offers to the audience in the monstrous spirit of sacrifice, as an ancient form of concentration that gifts one's body – and one's pain – to sociality (Fig. 6). The blood, shockingly red, pulses to his heart's rhythm, rendered visible by his ordeal. Now mapped in rivulets of blood, his face is serene. His eyes roll gently. Lifting the pane of glass in front of him, he places it beneath himself, and articulates his body into strenuous positions on all fours. Tipping his head forward, the glass is smothered in his blood. Placing the second pane on top of the first, the two cleave together with his gore. Lying down, he shuffles the bloodied glass panes above his body, the blood moving up and down the panes, and from one to another. The rattle of the glass mimics the noises of bodies in the throes of death, and shudders against the sound in the background: the electronic artifice of the soundtrack, and the hushed murmurs of his audience. Restoring the bloodied panes to their slotted stands, Athey kneels, as if in deference or adoration. Pouring a viscous liquid from a bowl, he mixes it with the blood that pools on the platform. Now, lifting skeins of viscera, he searches his body until he finds his anus, and plunges his fist inside himself. Impossibly, he raises his body into a triangle; with one arm and two feet steady on the ground, his asshole is raised upwards, with his right fist still lodged firmly in his rectum. Unlocking himself from this alien posture, Athey kneels again, and covers his head with the wig, which he smoothes in swirls around his face and head.
Mummified in the wig, which is matted in blood and lubricant, he reclines, resplendent, eviscerated on his funeral pyre.

Without explicitly referencing Bataille, *Ecstatic* can be read as an allusive manifestation of themes and images in his early writings. His pose recalls Bataille's description of the sacrifice of the gibbon, perhaps one of his most evocative and horrific passages. In the short account, a female gibbon is tethered in a pit, in the centre of 'a rotting forest [that] offers its deceptive latrines.' Trussed so that her face presses into the soil, while her rear points upwards to the 'solar light [that] decomposes in the high branches,' the 'ignoble' gibbon presents her famous blood-red anus to the skies. Her audience gathers round, 'equally deranged by the avidity of pleasure.' Armed with shovels, they accept the sacrifice of gibbon, and bury the beast alive, bar 'the filthy blood-coloured solar prominence, sticking out of the earth and ridiculously shuddering with convulsions of agony.' Verticality represents, in Bataille's mad ontology, the civilising movement that ruptures the lateral equivalence between the head and the genitals in non-human animals. Lifting the body onto two feet, the head is raised as if in dignity, while the genitals and anus – and their functions – are pushed towards the ground, falsely equating the human head with divinity, and the 'low' functions with filth and defilement. Athey's performance stages the horrific upending of verticality, a forcible return to the horizontality of animal vision allegorised in Bataille's sacrificial image.

Elsewhere, Bataille describes sacrifice as a central social gesture: 'the necessity of throwing oneself or something of oneself out of oneself in excess of art and of performance – his work is crucial for rethinking not only the limits of artistic practice, but also the limits of criticism. Athey's performances and
curated events are exemplary in their pursuit of such solicitations, and give body to Bataille's
mythic incitement, his call for a vertiginous fall into the depths of human possibility.

Dominic Johnson
Queen Mary, University of London


Fig. 5: Kira O’Reilly, *Untitled* (2009), Visions of Excess, SPILL Festival. Photo: Richard J. Anderson.

2 Ibid., 7.


5 Ibid., 83.

6 Ibid., 87.


11 Bois, 'The Use Vale of "Formless,‖' 24.

12 Ibid., 21.

13 Ibid., 25.

14 Ibid., 14.

15 This problem has been recently challenged by Marina Abramović, Hans Ulrich Obrist and Maria Balshaw, who effectively privileged performance over and above the conventional primacy of objects, in a fortnight-long exhibition at the Whitworth Gallery, Manchester. Marina Abramović Presents ... ran from 3 - 19 July 2009, as part of the Manchester International Festival, and consisted solely of durational performances, by Kira O'Reilly, Terence Koh, Amanda Coogan, Alastair MacLennan and others, in an imposing museum space emptied of its permanent collections.


17 Bois, 'The Use Vale of "Formless,‖' 32.

18 Ibid., 22, 32.


20 Bois, 'The Use Vale of "Formless,‖' 34.


22 Bataille, 'The Pineal Eye,' 85-86.

24 Bataille, 'Sacrificial Mutilation,' 68. Emphasis in original.


The years between the two wars, which saw the flourishing of the surrealist movement, were a time of momentous discoveries in the physical sciences. This crucial junction, though not entirely ignored by art historians, has remained until recently only marginally explored. Historians of surrealism have dissected the movement’s political engagement and its reception with reference to psychoanalysis, Marxism and Hegelianism, ethnology and avant-garde art and literature. Yet the birth of surrealism also coincided with two memorable landmarks in the history of science: the institutionalization and popular acceptance of Albert Einstein’s theory of relativity and the emergence of quantum physics. Gavin Parkinson’s Surrealism, Art and Modern Science tells a sweeping story about the surrealists’ reception of the discoveries that changed the field of physics at the beginning of the twentieth century. Following a pioneering tradition inaugurated in the early 1980s by Linda Henderson’s The Fourth Dimension and Non-Euclidean Geometry in Modern Art (1984), Parkinson’s research across the boundaries of art and science stands as a truly interdisciplinary endeavour.

Historians of art and historians of science have often advanced hasty and speculative claims on the relations between surrealism, relativity and the emergence of quantum physics. Parkinson’s concern is to systematize and provide solid evidential support to a body of knowledge that so far has remained only in a conjectural form. With this aim in mind, he draws upon sources that have been entirely neglected by the current scholarship on surrealism and comes up with interesting discoveries. The book opens with a chapter on the history of relativity and quantum physics and their reception in France. Parkinson’s discussion is supported by an extensive survey of the major physics journals and popular science magazines, which give an informative glimpse of the debates that animated scientific communities between the 1920s and 1930s. This sets the context for an evaluation of how relativity and quantum physics were at the heart of surrealism since its formal beginnings.

In 1919, the year in which André Breton and Philippe Soupault’s Magnetic Fields introduced the surrealist technique of ‘automatism,’ the British physicist Arthur Eddington embarked on a legendary expedition to the west coast of Africa to observe the solar eclipse of 29 May. The expedition corroborated one of the predictions of Albert Einstein’s theory of relativity – namely, the bending of starlight in the proximity of large bodies like the sun, which could be observed during an eclipse – thus sanctioning the institutionalization and popular acceptance of his groundbreaking discovery. Eddington’s expedition undoubtedly played a crucial role in bringing relativity to the wider public, including artists. However, Breton’s reception of relativity and its prominent place in Magnetic Fields relied upon solid philosophical foundations.
Parkinson suggests that one of Breton’s early sources was Paul Valery, his mentor between 1914 and 1921. Valery had been especially sensitive to the latest developments in physics. He frequently visited laboratories and fostered friendships with eminent scientists such as Niels Bohr, Jean Perrin, Paul Langevin and Louis de Broglie. Another influence on Breton’s understanding of scientific themes was the philosopher of science (and former physicist) Gaston Bachelard. Anticipating ideas that Thomas S. Kuhn would develop only three decades later in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962), Bachelard’s *The New Scientific Spirit* (1934) revolved around a non-linear conception of scientific change. Drawing on a dynamic view of the history of science (another common point between Bachelard and Kuhn), he characterized scientific change in terms of breaks and revolutions, with new ideas ‘enveloping’ and replacing old ones. Through a meticulous textual analysis, Parkinson shows that Bachelard’s scientific epistemology and his ‘open rationalism’ informs Breton’s ‘Crisis of the Object’ (1936), published only two years after *The New Scientific Spirit*.

In the third chapter of his book, Parkinson revisits a topic with which art historians are well acquainted: the relations between surrealism and politics. He insightfully shows that the surrealists’ political agenda was deeply intertwined with the active engagement in public affairs of left-wing physicists such as Jean Perrin and Paul Langevin, who played a crucial role in securing state funding for scientific research under Léon Blum’s government. Another route that allowed the coming together of surrealism, physics and politics was the single-issue journal *Inquisitions* (1936). Born to spread the ideas of the Groupe d’Études pour la Phénoménologie Humaine established by Tristan Tzara, the journal’s political and pedagogical mission was to bring the new physics to the masses. The issue featured five theoretical articles, three of which addressed scientific themes. Jacques Spitz’s ‘Quantum Theory and the Problem of Knowledge’ delved into the epistemological implications of de Broglie’s wave/particle duality and Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle. Roger Callois’s ‘For a Militant Orthodoxy: The Immediate Task of Modern Thought’ turned to science as a binding social force at a time in which myths could no longer fulfil this task. Gaston Bachelard’s ‘Le Surrationalisme’ invoked an active engagement of human reason by conjoining surrealism with the most radical and innovative aspects of the new physics.

Sir Arthur Eddington was among the scientific figures that affected surrealism most. In chapter four, Parkinson presents his works on celestial mechanics in an entirely new light, which will excite historians of science and historians of art alike. The British astrophysicist is often portrayed as a sober quack bachelor whose life was entirely devoted to science – a characterization that sharply contrasts with the lively iconoclasm of the surrealists. Yet, Eddington’s remarkable talent for storytelling resulted in poetic explanations of complex scientific concepts, which often incorporated sophisticated literary quotations from...
shakespeare, lewis carroll and jonathan swift. this aspect of his work fired the surrealists’
imagination and compelled breton to qualify him as one of the british precursors of
surrealism. eddington’s studies in celestial mechanics found a literary echo in george
bataille’s 1938 text ‘celestial bodies.’ despite the nietzschean flavour of bataille’s
imaginative vision of the workings of celestial bodies, parkinson regards the mystical
connotations of the text as complementary to eddington’s own mystical inclinations, thus
offering an innovative conciliatory portrait of their views.

parkinson returns to quantum physics in chapter five, where he evaluates wolfgang paalen’s
reception of the puzzling wave/particle duality – the idea that light and matter exist as waves
and particles at the same time. paalen’s 1940 figure pandynamique is regarded by
parkinson as a case in point. the painting attempts to capture the wave/particle duality by
depicting it as a set of repeating rings culminating in spheres. whether paalen was successful
in his attempt is open to question. figure pandynamique openly challenged werner
heisenberg’s notorious rejection of imagery to describe subatomic phenomena. indeed,
parkinson stresses that paalen’s works were influenced by the opposite stream in quantum
physics, headed by erwin schrödinger and louis de broglie, who persisted in their search for
an imagery-based description of subatomic phenomena. the chapter ends with an interesting
section illustrating that surrealism, via quantum physics, incorporated theoretical ideas from
logical positivism. parkinson develops this theme in an original way, and yet he does not
seem to make the most out of this truly intriguing connection.

the book’s interdisciplinary take on the vienna circle certainly contributes to defy the
standard portrait of its members as conservative science-worshippers – a view that
dominated philosophical discussions until recently. yet, parkinson overlooks the fact that the
philosophy of the vienna circle revolved around an ideal of intellectual flexibility and pluralism
which had strong social and political connotations. rudolf carnap’s ‘principle of tolerance’
allowed for a plurality of logics in analogy with non-euclidean geometries. similarly, otto
neurath’s defence of political pluralism linked political tolerance to the epistemic pluralism that
characterized logical empiricism. a study of the surrealist reception of this little-explored
aspect of logical positivism has much to offer to philosophers of science and art historians,
and might disclose new pathways of inquiry into the relations between twentieth-century art
and philosophy of science.

the final two chapters discuss salvador dali’s spectacular fusion of relativity and
psychoanalysis, which found its ultimate expression in the 1931 canvas the persistence of
memory. by placing dali’s works in dialogue with roger callois’s science-inspired writings,
parkinson explores the resurfacing of relativity in surrealist art and theory in the 1930s. both
dali’s delire and callois’ rigueur are best understood against the backdrop of their

© chiara ambrosio, 2010
(undoubtedly different) ways of understanding and representing concepts in modern physics. The book concludes with a ‘coda’ portraying the surrealists’ changing attitudes towards science after World War II and in the nuclear age. While Dalí never recanted his firm beliefs in the virtues of modern physics, the movement’s disenchantment with science was bitterly expressed in a 1952 interview by Breton, which marked the ending of the love affair between surrealism and science.

In the introduction, Parkinson promises his readers the first comprehensive history, analysis and interpretation of the relations between surrealism and physics. In this, the book proves successful. Non-expert readers might be occasionally distracted by his sophisticated prose – a feature that is at odds with the clarity of exposition that characterized the works of the scientists discussed in the book. Philosophers of science, on the other hand, will be puzzled with the rather vague notion of epistemology that recurrently emerges from the discussion, and perhaps will demand that epistemological issues find a more solid grounding in the metaphysics of the new science. Despite this, Parkinson’s effort to engage with complex scientific concepts – a task that would terrify most art historians – provides a refreshing interdisciplinary perspective on one of the most debated movements in contemporary art. In this respect, *Surrealism, Art and Modern Science* will certainly open novel and promising paths of investigation into the complex and fascinating relations between art and science at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Chiara Ambrosio
University College London
Most texts on, not to say exhibitions of surrealism that have sought to critically examine the movement have promoted its understanding in terms of desire as a matter of the unconscious or of sexuality. Those texts that address the central political desire expressed in the title of their journal *La Révolution surréaliste* are fewer. These approaches, even when dealt with in combination, run the risk of reading surrealism in terms of an often-reifying rhetoric of revolution or liberation in purely poetic or aesthetic terms. Meanwhile, those histories which have focused on the politics of surrealism have often sadly remained limited to a debate on their affiliation, or not, with various existing political traditions. That is, most critical writing on surrealism has been written from above, from a perspective which identifies and critiques the way surrealism is disciplined by institutions of state (international fairs, war), capital (advertising, mass reproduction), gender, normative sexuality, and so on, or the ways in which the movement interacted with already-existing counter-institutions (the communist party, anarchist collectives).

Simon Baker’s *Surrealism, History and Revolution* stands out against this context in its attempts to describe surrealism from below, employing a genealogical method to draw out its own particular imagination of revolution. He focuses on the surrealists’ use and transformation of images, institutions and values, selecting key trajectories such as the formation and use of a surrealist pantheon; the uses of monumental representation; the street; and the construction of de Sade, vis-à-vis the monument of the Bastille, as a surrealist hero – identifying what we might call a series of surrealist refrains. In doing so, Baker offers an astonishing textual and visual map of surrealism. And where an exemplary text such as Denis Hollier’s *Against Architecture* (1989) might set out a similar critical ground, Baker exposes fascinating specific, concrete, histories of images and objects and their (mis)uses.¹

It is an approach that works across, and even against, the surrealists’ own method of self-description. The territorialising form of enunciation of the manifesto and its associated declarations were, at most, parodies of the existing political form of the party. Rather than beginning with manifestos, the series of refrains presented by Baker read surrealism through these shifting machinic enunciations which uncommonly draw together gestures, images, movements or even statements of position precisely to orient and situate something new which doesn’t correspond to existing political or aesthetic forms. Such a genealogical approach is not only more intimate and historically engaged than one that takes surrealism at its word; it is truer to surrealism’s own methods.
This remapping of surrealism has strong contemporary resonances, and might even suggest trajectories of radical avant-gardism that extend beyond surrealism itself and its particular historical concerns. Perhaps the strongest example here is the surrealist refrain of statuephobia, a ‘bronze iconoclasm’ concerned with the uses of public space, social memory and geographical and visual regimes of discipline. Baker coins this particular surrealist thematic to describe their reaction to the ‘statuemania’ which Gustav Pessard, a historian of Paris, saw as overtaking the city with a massive proliferation of statuary in evidence during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Beginning with ‘the statue’s speech’ in Louis Aragon’s Paris Peasant, Baker explores the surrealist tendency for reappropriation and antagonism towards the statues of Paris, and the critical engagements with historical memory that it constituted. Neither simply criticism nor innocently playful appropriation, these practices functioned as another means for surrealism to compose a collective identity and to place itself historically. Through a fascinating original reading of its texts, works and practices, Baker outlines the shape of surrealism’s statuephobia.

Indeed, this reading of surrealism offers one useful way to read the trajectory of post-surrealist practices that took up its radical claims and took the city itself as a site of practice. Not least of these, the Situationist International gave one of the few examples of what it might approve of as a ‘situation’ in describing a group of students who, in 1969, replaced a statue of Charles Fourier to its original place on an empty plinth in the Place Clichy in Paris, long after it had been removed by the Nazis. A plaque underneath reads, ‘A tribute to Charles Fourier, from the barricades of the Rue Gay-Lussac.’ Statuephobia even extended to those groups affiliated to the SI. Jorgen Nash, of the Scandinavian wing, was responsible for the decapitation of the statue of the Little Mermaid in Copenhagen, whilst from 1964, a nascent
form of the Provos in Amsterdam (soon counting ex-Cobra members Bergen Lucebert and Constant Nieuwenhuys among their number) began by organising ritualistic happenings around the Lieverdje statue, an image of the ‘Dutch public’ donated by a tobacco company, during which they would often set the sculpture alight. Such a concern has continued to mark the ideas and practices of post-Situationist currents of art-activist groups within social movements, although their concerns have usually moved from the role of the state in public space to that of capital, particularly billboards and logos. Perhaps there is a case for looking back at the relationship between surrealist statuephobia and the surrealist advertising-phobia discussed more briefly in, for example, Amy Lyford’s *Surrealist Masculinities* (2007).3

The same struck me as true of the book’s analysis of the construction of a surrealist pantheon. Baker gives detailed accounts of surrealism’s construction of a pantheon of mythic precursors which both places surrealism historically and constructs a surrealist history. This took direct forms in Breton’s poetic lists of proto-surrealists in his manifestos or Jean Scutenaire’s collage *From Marat to the Bonnot Gang* (1934). This history of identification and counter-identification later folded in upon itself as groups in the 1960s that took the surrealist pantheon at its word set it militantly against the later New York reception of surrealism. On the opening night of William Rubin’s 1968 MoMA show ‘Dada, Surrealism and their Heritage’ the exhibition needed to be protected by crash barriers and a tactical police unit from protests in the name of the true spirit of surrealism on the part of the Yippies, the Rebel Worker/Chicago Surrealist Group and Up Against the Wall Motherfucker, art-activist groups fresh from organising a Festival of Life against the 1968 Democratic National Convention, who again had perspectives close to those of the SI.

Baker’s chapter on Sade’s figuration as a revolutionary hero, or as a figure of revolution itself, explores in fascinating detail how this construction – and the later construction of monuments to Sade or analyses of his use value – were made possible by his connection to the Bastille. As a result, these connections themselves have to be picked apart from their mythical retelling, a critical task which Baker takes on in relation to the mythology and self-imagination of surrealism. Many of Baker’s surrealist refrains, unsurprisingly, return to the French Revolution. Despite this central tradition of post-surrealist revolution, which I have suggested exhibits its own engagement with mythic pantheons and statuephobia and focuses on the idea of revolution-as-festival, Baker does not address the well-documented popular festivals of the French revolution. Instead, he turns his attention to some of the darker and more difficult aspects of the surrealist constellation of revolutionary symbols and values which, for this very reason, are more revealing. His genealogical focus on the edge of surrealism rather than on finished images produced by the movement – the images and tropes, for example, of de Sade, and the competition for their symbolic terrain – is in the end more productive than a form of critique which relates the supposedly ‘finished’ form of surrealism to other disciplinary
institutions. Opening surrealism up, as a cabinet of curiosities, Baker’s reading leaves much
more room for points of departure which understand surrealism in terms of political agency
and possibility.

In concluding, Baker is drawn to discuss the street in relation to Contre-Attaque, as a
fragmentary episode that marks a last engagement with the local peculiarities of politics in
France before surrealism arrives in New York and is given a new conceptual currency, not to
say a new level of cultural capital. The excavation of these refrains does not mark a political
surrealism as something archaic, or suggests that such concerns simply end after 1940.
Instead, they constitute a valuable inquiry into surrealism’s initial conditions of composition.
As I have suggested above, it was for others under different conditions to redeploy surrealism
itself as part of their own revolutionary pantheon.

Fig. 3: Quantitative Teasing, somewhere in London, June 2009 (Photo courtesy of Immo Klink).

Gavin Grindon
Kingston University, London

1 Denis Hollier, Against Architecture: The Writings of George Bataille, trans. Betsy Wing,

Juan A. Suárez’s *Pop Modernism - Noise and the Reinvention of the Everyday* is a critical refashioning of ‘historical’ and ‘political’ (271) conceptions of modernism. The book seeks to refute familiar, traditional accounts of modernist ‘elitism’ (2), instead preferring to demonstrate ‘the embeddedness of modernism in popular culture’ (2). Suárez rejects ‘reductive’ accounts of modernism that sought to characterize popular culture as anomalous, or as mere ‘marginalia that had little bearing on aesthetics’ (2). Instead, he undertakes a project of cultural and critical recovery. Decrying the absence in canonical modernism’s now familiar history of ‘the alternative perspectives of women, queers, and artists from the peripheries; the fascination with machinery, fashion, and cities; and the modernist immersion in pop life of the times’ (2), *Pop Modernism* provides a critical reengagement with a number of largely overlooked American artists – ones that figured their practice in relation to the concerns and pressure of the everyday. *Pop Modernism* offers a contextual, theoretical analysis of modernism. Suárez aligns himself with those artists attempting ‘to produce alternative figurations of desire, sociality, and subjectivity – to produce, in sum, a renewal of the quotidian’ (22).

Drawing upon previous accounts of ‘alternative’ modernisms, Suárez demonstrates the manner in which ‘avant-garde and modernist aesthetics often arose from a selective appropriation of popular expressive forms’ (3). Divided into three discrete sections, this study articulates ‘the evolution of a pop-orientated modernism in the United States from the beginning of the twentieth century to the eve of pop art’ (4). The key to understanding the structure of *Pop Modernism* resides in the subtitle of the book: noise. Noise, according to Suárez, designates ‘nonsignifying matter’ (8) in a variety of guises – verbal, visual, and aural. He argues that such nonsignifying matter ‘is another name for the otherness that modernism, as an art of practice, discovered in the heart of the quotidian’ (8). The presence of ungovernable noise in modernist texts, for Suárez, carries with it radical aesthetic and political implications, as ‘[h]ighlighting the nonsignifying in daily objects is a way of wrenching them out of the narratives that govern custom and use and steer our traffic through the world’ (173). Suárez argues for those texts (*Pop Modernism* included) that register the presence of nonsignifying noise in the everyday, as ‘a form of ideological critique that elides the social totality and subjectivity – usual entry points into the political – to recode the molecular aspects of the quotidian, where ideology does its work most unconsciously and persistently’ (173).

Suárez’s argument has a subversive dimension, as well as a surrealistic element, for what is being proposed throughout *Pop Modernism* is a critical defamiliarization technique similar to
the surrealist recoding or re-enchantment of found objects. The critical impulse of *Pop Modernism* is made clear in moments of rhetorical flourish suggesting ‘a plurality of strategies for practicing and inhabiting the immediate’ (271). The tripartite structure of the book should be understood in this occasionally overwrought context ‘where systemic imperatives jam against the intricacy of lived experience’ (271). The first of these sections – ‘Noise Abatement’ – comprises three separate studies of American modernists whose relationship with the ‘noise’ generated by popular culture and everyday life was either one of ambiguity and anxiety or, as in more extreme cases, of outright fear and rejection. The nonsignifying motif of the opening section of *Pop Modernism* is of a visual variety. Drawing upon the cinematic theories of poet Vachel Lindsay (Chapter One), Paul Strand and Charles Sheeler’s film *Manhatta* (Chapter Two), and the filmic camera eye utilized by John Dos Passos in the fictional *USA* (Chapter Three), Suárez argues for a ‘conception of modernity as a milieu of perceptual scattering and shock, dominated by unanchored visual stimuli and floating signs and driven by unprecedented speed’ (21-22). This milieu is epitomized by the rapid movement of the visual cinematic realm and the process of film editing, ‘the cinema replicated the experience of modernity in condensed form’ (22). Throughout the opening section of *Pop Modernism*, Suárez conveys how the ‘intrinsic functioning’ of the visual, cinematic image ‘tended to increase the strangeness of the material world and the speed of contemporary life, and therefore to add up to the confusion of a world without center, guarantees of order’ (22).

Given that Suárez argues that the noisy, visual modernist realm ‘was also an environment in which objects became humanized and harbored unsuspected latencies’ (22) of previously obscured forms of alterity, it is unsurprising that the American modernists of *Pop Modernism*’s first section elicit the author’s sustained criticism. For instance, Suárez writes of the manner in which Lindsay’s ‘conservative’ (22) cinematic agenda sought to neutralize ‘what he saw as the incoherent modern milieu and the disintegrating potential of film’ (22) in favour of ‘traditional high culture’ (22). Following on, the rendering of visual imagery in Strand and Sheeler’s film *Manhatta* is criticized as ‘intent on exorcizing heterogeneity in favor of uniformity reminiscent of the flatness of precisionist painting or the geometry of skyscraper architecture’ (73). Dos Passos’s use of popular mass media is analyzed by Suárez in a similar fashion: ‘One way to read the juxtapositions of modes and techniques in *USA* is to consider them as attempts to bring under control the disorder of the Newsreels’ (97). What is important to grasp in this section of *Pop Modernism* is that no matter how much the modernists in question may privilege coherence and order, analysis (Suárez is here specifically writing of Lindsay) of the cinematic image will always speak of ‘hybridity, complexity, and promiscuity and re-creates the unmanageability of objects and the vectors of acceleration that inform commercial culture and everyday life’ (22). Inevitably, despite the best efforts contained in high-minded modernist texts – Dos Passos’s *USA*, for instance – to staunch the flow of nonsignifying noise and matter stemming for popular forms of culture, ‘everyday noise –
Suárez writes – embodies the internal dissension, the opaque sublimity that prevents the work from fulfilling its avowed purpose of renewing language and making sense out of the quotidian cacophony’ (104). Nevertheless, such an attempt differentiates traditional modernists from what Suárez distinguishes as modernism’s ‘other’ avant-gardes, those who excavated the sources of noise whilst appearing ‘unsettling and disorientating, the bearers of secret histories and latencies that disrupt, in a variety of ways, the narratives of modernity and the linear trajectories of modernism’ (115).

Before Suárez’s study is able to outline the forms of quotidian renewal privileged by the modernist ‘others’ who ‘do not provide stable platforms of revolt or models of authenticity’ (115), however, Pop Modernism takes a detour through ‘The Rustle of the Quotidian.’ In this section, Suárez turns his critical attention toward T.S. Eliot (Chapter Four) and Joseph Cornell (Chapter Five). The emphasis placed on nonsignifying matter in this portion of Pop Modernism is both visual (Cornell) and aural (Eliot). In Suárez’s estimation, modernists like Eliot and Cornell occupy ambiguous critical positions. Due to the presence of new sources of noise, Cornell’s found-object boxes and Eliot’s The Waste Land register how ‘these frequencies modified everyday perceptions and jammed the literature switchboard, powerfully reshaping conceptions of writing, subjectivity, discourse, and cultural hierarchy’ (121).

Suárez’s decision to build his argument around Eliot’s resolutely ‘high’ modernist The Waste Land is initially perplexing. Suárez attempts to avoid ‘the usual hermeneutic’ (123) debates surrounding The Waste Land’s formal construction and meaning by performing ‘a surface exploration of its textual mechanics’ (123). In other words, ‘[t]he point is not to discover what but how the poem signifies’ (123). Suárez outlines how Eliot’s writing mimics and responds to the ‘voice media’ (132) that are often the sources of unintelligible, non-signifying noise which ‘fragment the organic wholeness of oral and written communication’ (132). The radio is one such example and, according to Suárez, the text of The Waste Land replicates the mechanistic functioning of the turning dial as ‘Eliot’s poem zaps through a sort of prerecorded literary archive that seems to be kept on the air at different frequencies’ (132).

Matters are complicated by Eliot’s famous emphasis on tradition. In Suárez’s formulation, however, the poet of The Waste Land ‘himself is the tuning dial here, or else a disc jockey that delights in creating such mosaics of sound and language’ (133). Developing the aural analogy, Suárez argues that ‘[t]ogether with the voices of tradition, automatic receivers pick up noise as well: the communication channels often hiss with static, the sound may be garbled, and the gramophone needle may skip’ (133-134). The disorder of popular culture and ordered tradition are ‘faithfully transcribed’ (134) by Eliot, and reside in an uneasy, unresolved relationship in poems like The Waste Land. Suárez notes the presence of a similar aesthetic operation in the work of Joseph Cornell. For Suárez, ‘[l]ike in Eliot or even in Dos Passos, in Cornell we have again the artist as recorder, only here what is taken down is how the raw
materials of experience connect through the artist, who acts as a registering surface’ (145). What distinguishes Cornell from earlier modernists like Dos Passos and Eliot is, however, the ‘purposefully opaque’ (151) dimension of his art. Unlike the desire for order in the face of encroaching noise of his high modernist forebears, ‘[t]he active viewing Cornell’s works encourage is not geared toward revolutionary enlightenment but toward semiotic drift’ (158). In other words, Cornell’s films and works ‘capture incongruous details that generate indeterminacy and limit their readability’ (158). Suárez argues that Cornell ‘refuses to filter out’ (161) the forms of nonsignifying matter contained in the detritus of popular culture that comprise his work. In doing so, Suárez gestures toward not only the ambiguous treatment of popular materials in early twentieth century art, but also paves the way for their outright embrace and appropriation by dissident urban aestheticians.

The final section of *Pop Modernism* – ‘The Murmur of Otherness’ – details the attempted renewal of the quotidian in the work of lesser known modernist figures like Charles Henri Ford and Parker Tyler (Chapter Six), Zora Neale Hurston (Chapter Seven), and James Agee, Janice Loeb, and Helen Levitt (Chapter Eight). Whereas previous chapters of Suárez’s study chart the anxiety caused by the presence in modernity of ‘an automatic multiplication of objects, an uncontrollable warp of meaningless matter’ (173), the studies in the closing section of *Pop Modernism* provide illuminating juxtapositions of rarified aesthetic experimentalism and unruly forms of popular cultural matter. Ford and Tyler’s novel *The Young and Evil* is representative of what Suárez identifies as a hybrid aesthetic form, and ‘[i]n this respect it is a work of high modernism and a subcultural text, part experimental and part popular’ (181). The controversial sexual content of *The Young and Evil* serves a further purpose, however: it reveals Suárez’s investment in delineating ‘the interface between modernism and the forms of popular textuality arising from queer subcultural practice’ (181). Suárez situates Ford and Tyler’s novel in an urban social space ‘where normality was suspended, where alliances between social, racial, and sexual others created something akin to what we would call a queer polity based on a common fringe identity’ (181-182). Ultimately, Suárez comes to decry what he sees as Ford and Tyler’s ‘insistence on the potential for violence and disintegration in queer desire’ (204) in *The Young and Evil*. Subsequently, ‘only the negative, dissolving potential is present: the art of coming apart, not the capacity for social reconstruction’ (204) is emphasized in Ford and Tyler’s collaborative novel.

Suárez’s self-alignment with subcultural politics informs his perspective towards the intentionally challenging and provocative *The Young and Evil*. Quick to label Ford and Tyler’s radical juxtapositions of form and cultural material as an attempt ‘to sketch out an archeology for the contemporary mixings of high and low art for the queer matrix of postmodern textuality’ (207), Suárez turns his critical focus on the ethnographic works of Zora Neale Hurston. If Suárez’s treatment of Ford and Tyler hinges upon prioritizing gender at the expense of race
(he fails to mention Ford and Tyler’s somewhat problematic appropriation of African American ‘rhythms’ in the little magazine Blues), the opposite can be said of his study of Hurston. Suárez notes how ‘Hurston repeatedly emphasized the hybrid character of black popular expression, which was distinguished in part by its ability to rework and make its own a great variety of styles, characters, icons, and fashions’ (213). Black popular expression is, for Suárez, informed by resolute fluidity, constantly open to rewriting and appropriation. Texts like Hurston’s Tell My Horse forego ‘wholeness, closure, and transparency’ (228), preferring instead to ‘embrace isolated intensities’ and foreground ‘their opaqueness and irreducibility’ (228). Remaining at all times attendant to cultural ‘otherness’ in her alternative ethnographic studies, Hurston appeals to Suárez. This is evident when the latter rather casually refers to the fact that ‘[w]e need, today more than ever, to rethink the imperialistic gesture of imagining others as others … and here is where Hurston may be a great help: with her awareness of an inassimilable element in culture, a sublime object that resists translation and epistemic closure’ (236).

*Pop Modernism* closes with a study of James Agee, Janice Loeb, and Helen Levitt’s film *In the Street*. Suárez praises the quasi-surreal documentary technique of *In the Street* as ‘an automatic recording device that does not discriminate between sense and nonsense, information and noise’ (241). Suárez’s analysis of *In the Street* also serves as a neat reiteration of *Pop Modernism*’s varied and wide-ranging discussions of American modernism: ‘the fascination with urban spaces and street life, the use of ready-made materials (“found” people and scenes), an ethnographic interest in the quotidian, and a surrealist eye for discovering unsettling undertows in its midst’ (241).

Having embarked on a critical search to delineate an extensive range of primary source materials – themselves often neglected in earlier studies of American modernism – Suárez concludes by attempting to order all his chosen texts under the rubric of the quotidian. Suárez’s desire to realign his chosen mixture of forgotten texts of alternative, sexually non-normative, and ethically focused examples of alternative modernism within the contested critical sphere of the quotidian carries with it a host of well known political implications. Drawing upon Michel de Certeau, Suárez notes: ‘The everyday is, after all, a fraught terrain; it is where we make ourselves at home in the world, where the political becomes personal, ideologies are adapted to individual conditions, and where wide-ranging, global changes percolate into the here and now’ (270). Underpinning the critical framework of *Pop Modernism*, such a realignment is occasionally problematic. To his credit, Suárez admits as much when, for example, considering Eliot’s high modernist *The Waste Land*. More significantly, Suárez diminishes his argument somewhat when rhetorically insisting on the ‘global changes’ implied by a consideration of the quotidian, changes hitherto largely unmentioned in *Pop Modernism*. Suárez is surely correct in arguing for the presence of non-
signifying noise in the literature of the everyday, characterized as ‘an elusive horizon, always in motion, and therefore difficult to map – a constant source of disturbance and instability’ (270). However, the static wrought by interruptions of rhetorical noise in Suárez’s *Pop Modernism* is distracting when attempting to map the everyday realm – which has already been described by Suárez as decidedly elusive and contested. The strength of *Pop Modernism* resides, rather, in the informed textual considerations of American modernism, where Suárez gainfully attempts to ‘recast somewhat the image of modernism and to connect recent forms of cultural practice with analogous ones in the early decades of the twentieth century.’ Ultimately, even an unfortunate tendency toward political over-simplification – as in Suárez’s reference to how ‘[m]acropolitics has been undergoing an unprecedented crisis of legitimation since at least May 1968’ (271) – and rhetorical flourish should not detract from the manner in which *Pop Modernism* strives to demonstrate that ‘[f]rom its beginnings, modernism tried to make good the promise of a better life contained in the objects, spaces, and images of modernity, in noise, and in the energies of unassimilated others’ (271).

Alexander Howard
University of Sussex

In 1864, Emile Zola wrote that:

> every artwork is a window opening out onto creation. Stretched taut in the window frame is a sort of transparent screen, through which one can see objects that appear more or less distorted because they undergo more or less palpable alterations in their lines and colours.1

Zola’s ‘screen theory’ represents an early attempt to understand artistic representation in terms of surfaces and openings. The window, which creates a spatial framing of reality and acts as a physical medium through which this reality is experienced, provides the perfect analogy for the creative processes of painting and writing, also spatially defined through the geometric limits of the canvas or the sheet of paper. Zola’s realist stance leads him to consider these opaque surfaces in terms of the transparence of a window, with the artist/poet creating an authentic replica of what s/he sees. This conception of the screen, with its dichotomy of opaqueness and transparence, forms the basis of Haim Finkelstein’s reassessment of surrealist art and thought in the 1920s. Between Zola and the emergence of surrealism, a major artistic development brought about a shift in conceptions of the screen: the cinema. Indeed, as Finkelstein argues, film had a major impact on the formulation of surrealist ideas, particularly the medium’s ability to reveal the mystery lurking behind everyday reality.

The now infamous accounts of the surrealists’ active involvement with the cinema – particularly those of André Breton’s outings with Jacques Vaché, during which they would ‘choose a theater at random, barge in when the movie had already started, and leave at the first sign of boredom ... to rush off to some other theater where we behaved in exactly the same way’ – makes what initially appears to be a study of the influence of the ‘screen’ on their art and writings seem logical (19). The past couple of years have seen the publication of a number of books devoted to the subject of surrealist expression in the cinema, signalling a revival of interest in an already popular area.2 Finkelstein, however, does not tread this path and although he begins the book with a relatively in-depth account of the immense impact of the cinema on certain surrealist writers, such as Robert Desnos and Louis Aragon, the discussion gradually leads away from this focus. The cinema is rather used as a starting point for a more complex understanding of the screen as ‘a spatial paradigm with far-reaching ramifications’ (4). The first chapter thus explores the wider signification of cinematic references in surrealist works, based on the notion of layers and the question of ‘what lies beyond.’ The final passage of Desnos’s 1922 text ‘Pénalités de l’enfer ou Nouvelles Hébrides,’ in which the narrator’s hallucinatory wanderings lead him into a movie theatre and face-to-face with a blank screen, provides the impetus for Finkelstein’s argument concerning
the conscious-unconscious dichotomy underlying the screen metaphor. The ‘forbidden sight revealed behind the screen’ is related to the surrealists’ interest in automatism and the unearthing of unconscious impulses and desires (26). The association of the cinema with the dream – ‘a projection on some internal screen’ – found throughout Desnos’s writings is used to back up this claim (26).

Into this discussion of the screen and projection as representing deeper psychological processes are incorporated various psychoanalytical theories, such as Bertram Lewin’s dream screen hypothesis and Christian Metz’s imaginary signifier. Yet, interesting as these perspectives may be, Finkelstein does not elaborate on them, preferring instead to extract only what is necessary for the progression of his argument, which leads gradually towards the analysis of surrealist works in which some notion of the screen is visually present, be it literally or metaphorically. As the introductory chapter clearly points out, the book maintains a distance from psychoanalytical theory, setting it apart from what Finkelstein sees as a general tendency in recent writings about surrealism to rely on specific theoretical frames, frequently either Freudian or Lacanian. This is indeed a refreshing approach and the freedom with which the argument moves from one conception of the screen to another, picking up on a variety of related theories but never becoming wholly restricted to any, gives the book a lively, diverse feel. Of course, there are drawbacks to this method and what occasionally appear as promising avenues of enquiry are left frustratingly undeveloped. This is especially the case with Lewin’s theory, to which Finkelstein devotes only a paragraph, of the mother’s breast becoming a screen for the breastfeeding child and a projection surface for the dream. Despite the predominance of the dream-screen in surrealist writings, this later formulation of the concept is given no further attention in the book.

As the chapters progress through separate, albeit interlinked, considerations of Breton’s windows, Max Ernst’s mental space, Magritte’s use of layered parallel planes, Joan Miró’s dialectics of opacity and transparency and André Masson’s containment and dispersal, Finkelstein’s notion of the screen fluctuates between physical, spatial and psychological considerations. Of particular interest is the account of the window metaphor informing Breton’s writings on art in Le Surréalisme et la peinture and the influence of Giorgio de Chirico’s work in developing this approach. Finkelstein relates the predominance of doors, windows and obscured openings in these paintings to Breton’s pursuit of mystery behind façades and his interest in that which lies beneath the surface of reality and human consciousness. This position is elaborated in relation to The Child’s Brain of 1914, a painting that had struck Breton when he spotted it by chance from a bus window. The horizontal and vertical planes that appear to cut into the flesh of the man featured in the picture are directly related to the passage in the first Manifesto of Surrealism (1924) in which Breton describes his discovery of automatic writing in terms of the phrase: ‘There is a man cut in two by the
Here, Finkelstein argues for a ‘possible correlation’ (104) between the painting and the text, and considers the former as ‘having directly prompted Breton’s verbal image.’ (105)

The discussion of de Chirico’s influence on surrealist art and writing continues in Finkelstein’s consideration of Ernst’s use of layered space and double figures. ‘It is to de Chirico,’ he states, ‘that Ernst’s early works owe their layered conception, flattening of space, and, above all, the spatial ambiguities and paradoxes they embody’ (131). The most revealing aspect of this discussion is, however, the application of Freud’s visual mapping of psychical localities, as a series of planes in spatial location to one another, to Ernst’s own interests in pictorial representations of the imagination. This theory informs the analysis of the drawing One Man Can Hide Another and the painting Pietà or Revolution of the Night (both 1923), with their ‘layers of “selves” … reflecting different levels of intensity of excitation’ (143). Finkelstein considers this interpretation to fit neatly with de Chirico’s view that all objects have a spiritual or metaphysical aspect that is hidden from normal vision and which is also represented in his works through the presence of double figures. Layers of a different kind are later considered with reference to the skin as a kind of screen, a body envelope, as described by Freud, which signals the meeting point between internal and external perceptions. This is related to Ernst’s interest in skin and peeled bodily layers ‘containing the hidden space of the unconscious,’ as well as his frottage and grattage techniques, which receive surprisingly little attention in this context (150).

Before developing the skin-as-screen notion as it appears in the works of Miró and Masson, the discussion is diverted to a brief consideration of Magritte’s layered spaces, particularly in relation to his interest in mystery and ‘the distinction between the invisible and the hidden’ (160). De Chirico is again seen as a reference point and parallels are drawn between his and Magritte’s approach to representing the unknown. Finkelstein considers Magritte’s comment that ‘we always wish to see what is hidden by what we see’ as ‘the controlling idea underlying many of his spatial strategies’ and as informing the interplay of surface and depth in many of his works (165). Spatial organisation is also related to Magritte’s interest in the cinema, and here the argument neatly finds its way back to Louis Feuillade’s Fantômas films through the 1927 painting The Murderer Threatened, which, in its planimetric structuring of space, evokes an identically staged scene in Part III of ‘Le Mort qui tue.’ The impact of the cinema on Magritte’s art, particularly in terms of his references to Feuillade, is the subject of a number of existing studies and Finkelstein does not offer anything new in this respect. His discussion of the spatial correspondences with the Fantômas films leads into a more general consideration of the way Magritte’s frames-en-abyme in works such as On The Threshold of Freedom (1930) relate to Feuillade’s ‘self-aware screen,’ in which various levels or planes of reality create an ambiguous visual experience and a threatening sense of the unknown (170). Whilst this account is useful in understanding how the organisation of space brings about a sense of
mystery in Magritte’s work, one can’t help feeling that Finkelstein’s argument lacks analytical depth. This is where an exclusive concentration on the spatial ramifications of the screen in surrealist art and thought seems to simplify and obscure the more complex issues lying under the surface.

The two chapters devoted to Miró and Masson further consider the presence of surface and depth in surrealist painting. The relationship with Cubism, from which the two artists emerged, is considered in terms of its spatial ambiguities and planimetric representation, which they continued to exploit in their surrealist works. The ‘Cubist spatial structures,’ argues Finkelstein, ‘constituted for Miró and Masson their twofold engagement with the formal issues of Modernism and with the Surrealist vision and ideology’ (183). In Miró’s work, Finkelstein detects an overriding tension between opacity and transparence, derived from the relationship between the 1924 painting *Woman and Insects* and a passage from Rimbaud’s *Illuminations*, in which a spider’s web is one of the central elements. Miró’s visualisation of the spider’s web as ‘a plane of projection and seeing-through that also functions as a membrane or separator between inside and outside’ provides a framework for the subsequent discussion of his work (186). It also marks a return to some of the key issues raised earlier in the book, such as Freud’s skin-ego and Breton’s two-way mirror. Skin and the body are considered at greater length in the study of Masson’s dialectics of containment and dispersal. Tentatively drawing on Didier Anzieu’s elaboration of Freud’s skin ego, which emphasises the relationship between the baby’s skin and the mother envelope, Finkelstein outlines a framework for understanding the motif of the enveloping membrane found in works such as *La Mare (La Mère)* (1925). This is further related to the ‘flattened, containing form of the screen-windowpane quality of Masson’s surfaces,’ against which the motifs of the picture seem to crowd (231). The sand paintings, which Finkelstein considers as ‘the most tangible, and also the most critical manifestation of skin in Masson’s work’ (232) offer another direction in this area, metaphorising the skin ego, ‘in its capacity of a containing envelope or membrane, in a state of disrepair’ (235).

The chapters on Miró and Masson both conclude with insights into their estrangement from the surrealist concept of automatism, as demonstrated through the gradual move away from the dialectics of opacity and transparence, and surface and depth. This, Finkelstein states, corresponds with surrealism’s change of direction in the 1930s and the dissolution of the screen paradigm. The final section of the book therefore consists in mapping out this new direction, with its emphasis on the external world of the visible, in relation to spatial representation. Focusing primarily on the major theoretical positions represented by Breton and Dalí – their privileging of a socially engaged and conscious transformation of reality rather than a retreat into the depths of the unconscious – the discussion turns towards the presence of spatial illusionism and dream painting. The cinematic references of Ernst's collage novels
brings Finkelstein full circle to a consideration of film space in the sound era, which, by creating depth and breaking through the ‘surface’ of the screen, paralleled the introduction of psychic reality ‘into the space of the visible and the social’ and the general move away from the physical and metaphorical presence of the screen in surrealist art and thought (284).

The exegesis of Finkelstein’s screen paradigm is regrettably restricted to a handful of major players and, whilst it provides a useful re-reading of some of the most crucial works within the surrealist canon, it also leaves open a number of other important questions. For example, the screen to which Finkelstein refers operates in an exclusively male domain and only once, in a discussion of the ‘mother envelope’ in Masson’s works, does he evoke the issue of sexual identity and gender. How the notion of the screen operates in the work of female artists associated with surrealism – Claude Cahun for instance – is worth considering in the context of his discussion. This of course touches on another area to which little attention in paid in the book: photography. References to Boiffard and Brassai appear only in relation to their illustration of surrealist novels and their ability to bring about Breton’s notions of mystery and the ‘Marvellous.’ Admittedly, these areas would risk diluting Finkelstein’s argument, through which he manages to bring together a wide range of concepts and approaches from an original perspective. This is the book’s main achievement, along with its emphasis on the dialogue between visual and literary ideas within surrealist discourse. In this sense, it stands alongside other important word-image studies, such as Elza Adamowicz’s *Surrealist Collage in Text and Image*.4

Kim Knowles
University of Kent

---


Claude Cahun became a post-modern cult figure in the 1990s, thanks to events such as the retrospective Claude Cahun, Photographe, at the Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris (1995). The edgy performance portraiture featuring Cahun crossed the channel to Britain and the Atlantic to America, instantly capturing the imagination of Anglophone audiences. By the time Surrealism, Desire Unbound opened at the Tate Modern in 2001, no surrealist exhibition checklist would have been complete without some object or photograph representing Cahun. Since then, no less than three English-language documentary films have taken Cahun’s life as a focus and the photographic oeuvre has engendered at least a dozen American and British dissertations. Today, scholarly articles in print and on-line continue to proliferate. Over twenty major exhibitions featuring Cahun have explored the terrain where gender play, surrealism, and photography overlap. Most have generated catalogues. Why all the interest now in an artist who had a relatively low profile during her heyday in interwar Paris?

In the 1990s, the 400 some odd extant photographs attributed to Cahun – most, as I have argued in Women Together/Women Apart: Portraits of Lesbian Paris, taken in collaboration with her partner and step-sister, the graphic artist Marcel Moore – seemed to prefigure the theories of gender that were then gaining credence, and struck a chord with a generation of artists preoccupied with the role that images play in processes of gender and sexual identity formation. ‘If Cahun had not existed, we would have had to invent her,’ the art historian Jennifer Shaw has suggested, adding that ‘... the dominant interpretation of Cahun’s photographs fits almost too neatly with contemporary theory.’ Pictures of Cahun in a variety of highly coded costumes and poses visually theorize the artificiality of gender in ways that appear to anticipate by sixty or seventy years the writings of queer theorists such as Judith Butler, author of Gender Trouble, not to mention the strategies of contemporary artists employing masquerade, such as Cindy Sherman and Yasumasa Morimura.

Guided by contemporary cultural imperatives, the recent spate of exhibitions, films, and publications frame Cahun as a gender-bending surrealist photographer, obscuring her primary vocation, which was literary. Born Lucy Renée Mathilde Schwob, Cahun – who adopted a more gender-neutral pen name in her early twenties – was the daughter of Maurice Schwob, publisher of the Nantes newspaper Le Phare de la Loire as well as the regional literary journal La Gerbe. Cahun’s uncle, who deeply influenced the young Cahun, was the symbolist author Marcel Schwob, frequenting such literary figures as André Gide, Remy de Gourmont, and Oscar Wilde. He was also one of the founders of the prestigious literary...
journal, *Le Mercure de France*. From an early age, Cahun provided copy for family publications as well as contributing to important surrealist reviews as *Minotaure*. In addition to 75 published articles, poems, editorials, and works of short fiction appearing between 1914 and 1936, Cahun published two books: in 1919, *Vues et visions*, a symbolist reverie, and, in 1930, *Aveux non avenus*, a surrealist anti-memoir. Both books were illustrated by Moore.

The first book, *Vues et visions*, enjoyed a modest print run of 460 copies, suggesting that the authors and/or publisher viewed this as an 'artist's book' and did not envision mass or even moderate circulation. The book consists of 25 paired verses by Cahun embedded in symbolist-inspired visual frames penned by Moore in black ink, in the style of Aubrey Beardsley. The title *Vues et visions* describes a bifurcated initiative in which picture and text elevate the worldly 'view' to an other-worldly register by placing the mundane here-and-now in dialogue with an ideal of past, while juxtaposing literary and pictorial images. Moore's graphics both anticipate and reinforce the drift of Cahun's poetics. The book's dedication justly acknowledges the importance of the visual partner's complicity. 'I dedicate this puerile prose to you,' Cahun writes to Moore, 'so that the entire book belongs to you and in this way your designs may redeem my text in our eyes.' The interlacing of possessive articles here, like the interlacing of text and images in the book, creates a grammar of intersubjectivity.

This grammar also marks Cahun's second book-length publication, *Aveux non avenus*. This book had a similarly limited print run of 500 copies. Comprised of snippets from journal entries, imagined or real dialogs, letters, poems, philosophical reflections, reveries, biblical tales, and fables, the book amounts to a literary collage. Ten collages created by Moore 'after the designs of the author' announce the book's central organizing tropes and provide faceplates for each chapter. These collages prominently feature elements drawn from Cahun and Moore's vast archive of photographs representing the author. One collage, signed by Moore, served as the book's frontispiece. Here, as in the earlier joint publication, the illustrations and text perform in concert. But what they perform, in this case, is the deconstruction of the very genres into which they intervene: the autobiographical memoir and its visual equivalent, portraiture.

The title of the book, *Aveux non avenus*, announces the project of deconstruction by embodying a contradiction that translates (very approximately) into English as 'disavowed confessions,' or 'cancelled confessions.' 'Disavowals,' the title privileged by the English translator, registers this contradiction with more subtlety. The word 'disavowal' registers both the autobiographical 'avowal' and its denial, alerting readers from the onset to the ambivalence of Cahun's project. She expresses the desire to exist, to memorialize her own existence, but this desire coexists with another: the desire to unmask the authoritative self as a fictional construct. Reflecting on the extent to which images mediate all projects of self-
representation, Cahun writes, ‘The death of Narcissus has always seemed totally incomprehensible to me. Only one explanation seems plausible: Narcissus did not love himself. He allowed himself to be deceived by an image. He didn’t know how to go beyond appearances.’ The recurrent theme of narcissism surfaces again a few pages later when Cahun reclaims ‘absolute Narcissism: Non-cooperation with God. Passive resistance’ as a subversive authorial strategy. By re-coding this and other pejorative terms that have been used historically to maintain social control over both women and sexual dissidents, *Aveux non avenus* challenges naturalized values that remain embedded in cultural discourse to this day.

This is an important book, not only for its conceptual sophistication, its aesthetic merit, its ethical positions, and its vanguard experimentalism, but for also the way it advances the ambition, in the wake of the 1914 - 1918 war, to expose as flawed the Cartesian premises underlying Western claims of cultural superiority. Deploying surrealist poetics of displacement, the text and illustrations do not permit the formation of a rational, one-to-one ratio of symbolic to real, but replicate instead mechanisms of association described by Freud and other contemporary theorists of unconscious psychic life. The book is all the more important in that it was authored and illustrated by two women at a time when surrealism, the European cultural sector, and their society more broadly, were dominated almost exclusively by men.

The book, compiled between the years of 1919 and 1928, must be viewed as Cahun and Moore’s crowning artistic achievement. While the photographs by which we recognize Cahun today were rarely exhibited outside the couple’s home, this book's publication in 1930 Paris confirmed the author's status as a serious contributor to the surrealist movement. At her first meeting with André Breton in 1932, Cahun presented the movement's acknowledged leader with a dedicated copy of this book. The publication found favour with other members of the surrealist milieu as well – most notably Henri Michaux (with whom Cahun attended psychiatric rounds at Paris's Saint Anne's Hospital), René Crevel, and Robert Desnos. It also received accolades from Pierre Albert-Birot, the director of the experimental theatre, Le Plateau, where Cahun performed and Moore designed sets and costumes in the late 1920s.

The level of difficulty (the convolutions, esoterism, and discontinuities of the French prose), in addition to the book's relative scarcity in library collections (even in France), have prevented most English-speaking scholars from factoring *Aveux non avenus* properly into accounts of Cahun's career. English-language scholars to date have relied almost exclusively on the excerpts and interpretations offered by the French authority on Cahun, François Leperlier, whose recently revised and re-released Cahun biography and key contributions to the milestone 1995 Paris retrospective of her photographic work, more or less put Cahun on the cultural map of interwar France. The release, in 2002, of Cahun's collected writings, edited
painstakingly by Leperlier, made *Aveux non avenus* widely available to French-language readers for the first time.¹¹

The release of *Disavowals*, the English translation, while unquestionably of interest to scholars of surrealism and twentieth-century French culture, does little to make the book more accessible. The double and triple meanings that animate the original version simply do not translate. This is not to say that the professional translator, Susan de Muth, has not made a competent effort. She has. But, without extensive annotation the book is simply incomprehensible to contemporary readers. It demands knowledge of surrealism and symbolism, the two literary sources that cross-fertilized Cahun's oeuvre, as well as some familiarity with classical texts, and grounding in the intellectual, cultural, and political history of nineteenth and twentieth-century France. De Muth, because she is not a scholar of the histories and cultures that produced Cahun, could not hope to capture the complexities that made *Aveux non avenus* such a path-breaking literary undertaking. In short, the book requires much more extra-textual support than her scant 160 footnotes provide. As she herself admits in the book's preface, 'the cultural, as well as historical, context in which a work is written (and read) presents its own challenges for the translator. Cahun often addresses the reader's subconscious, relying on associations of ideas, images and meaning; naturally these change with a relocation from post-First World War France to early twenty-first century Britain or America.'¹² The translator has 'not chosen to footnote such instances' but urges the reader 'to bear this in mind.' Difficult, without a little support, to bear in mind the myriad of references, here, to classical mythology (Cahun learned Homeric Greek on the knees of her paternal grandmother, Mathilde Cahun), decadent aestheticism, French and English literature, psychiatry, symbolism, Catholic and Judaic teachings, Eastern religions, surrealism, Western philosophy, European politics, avant-garde theatre, art history, modern dance, and French interwar popular culture – to name just a few. The Tate Modern curator Jennifer Mundy's eleven-page introduction does gesture at providing the necessary historical and literary background and Leperlier's 'Afterword' offers a few valuable points of reference. He acknowledges, however, that 'there is not room here to disentangle in their entirety the collection of sources, contextual indicators, intertextual processes, which all feed into the body of the text and testify to a great capacity for assimilation.'¹³ Having extensively annotated *Aveux non avenus* for reproduction in his edited volume *Claude Cahun, Ecrits*, Leperlier is well aware of the efforts required to assure the success of such literary revivals.

We can only hope that the English publication of *Disavowals* will pave the way for an English edition of Leperlier's informative Cahun biography and an influx of English-language interpretive studies shedding light on the complex web of cultural references that comprise *Aveux non avenus*. One such study is already in the pipeline: *Claude Cahun's Disavowals: Writing, Sexuality and Representation* by Jennifer Shaw (forthcoming, Ashgate). Shaw's
comprehensive analysis promises to attend to the complex interrelationship between the photomontages and writings, situating *Aveux non avenus* within the context of Cahun and Moore’s cultural milieu and historical circumstances. Her rigorous study will no doubt offer new perspectives on the book’s relevance to historical as well as contemporary cultural debates. It will provide a very necessary complement to *Disavowals*.

---


3 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge, London and New York, 1990. While Cahun’s theatrical images appear to prefigure today’s postmodern, feminist, and queer theories of gender performativity and embodiment such as those elaborated by Butler, we should keep in mind that the earliest theories emphasizing the role of social conditioning in the production of gender issued from the same era in which these photographs were produced. For example, the psychiatrist Joan Riviere, regarding the hyper-feminine performance of a female colleague following her brilliant intervention in a male-dominated forum, responded, ‘The reader may now ask how I define womanliness or where I draw the line between genuine womanliness and the “masquerade.”’ My suggestion is not, however, that there is any such difference.’ Womanliness and masquerade, Riviere insists, ‘are the same thing.’ Joan Riviere, 'Womanliness as Masquerade,' reprinted in *Formations of Fantasy*, eds. Victor Burgin, James Donald, and Cora Kaplan, Routledge, London, 1989, 38. The essay originally appeared in *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, Vol. 10, 1929.


5 Cahun, dedication, *Vues et visions*, n.p. ‘À Marcel Moore: Je te dédie ces proses puériles/ afin que l'ensemble du livre/ t'appartienne et qu'ainsi/ tes dessins nous fassent/ pardonner mon texte.’

6 *Disavowals*, title page.

While Freudian theory was required reading in surrealist circles, Cahun's engagement with psychology had a deeply personal dimension. When Cahun was still a child, her mother was diagnosed with schizophrenia and institutionalized. Her father scrutinized the child's development carefully for signs of any hereditary tinge. Cahun's homosexuality, too, was doubtless perceived by many as a degenerative mental illness. To learn from psychoanalysts such as Freud and Lacan (whose name can be found in her address book) and sexologists such as Havelock Ellis (whose work she translated) that psycho-sexual life is patterned, not by biology, but by social relations must have been reassuring. Cahun's critical remove from psychoanalytical theory is none the less evident in her photographic and literary reworkings of narcissism, a notion particularly charged with negative implications for both women and homosexuals.


Disavowals, xx.

Ibid., 210.
Angels of Anarchy: Women Artists and Surrealism. Manchester City Art Gallery, 29 September 2009 - 10 January 2010


Beware of women whose sisters are beautiful
Beware of daughters who have beautiful wives

Valentine Penrose, Dons des féminines, 1951.

Eileen Agar’s Angel of Anarchy (1936 - 1940), from which this show takes its title, functions as the locus of attention in the introductory space of the exhibition. Drawing together the work of Frida Kahlo, Emmy Bridgewater, Leonora Carrington and Penny Slinger, Angel of Anarchy provides the structuring metaphors around which the discussion of these artists is framed. Both concepts, the anarchical thrust of body politics, and the angelic disposition for metamorphosis and flight, are the axes along which further narratives and themes are plotted. This curatorial strategy is further elaborated by Patricia Allmer, the exhibition's curator, in her essay ‘Of Fallen Angels and Angels of Anarchy.’ Taking her prompt from Luce Irigaray, Allmer’s formulation of the angel places an emphasis on ‘flux, multiplicity, transgression, becoming and transformation.’ Establishing these concepts as the major concerns in the exhibition itself, Allmer posits that the fundamental correspondences and connections between many of the works included in the show are rooted in a desire ‘to overcome dualities, boundaries and binaries.’ Thinking about identity and female subjectivity outside of the Oedipal frameworks that enforce the oppositional notions of male and female, Allmer draws upon a Deleuzian model of subjectivity, suggesting a rejection of binary construction, which results in a subject with an infinite possibility of identity positions.

Evolving from landmark studies which addressed the role of women in surrealist practice, such as Whitney Chadwick’s Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement (1985) and the show Mirror Images: Women, Surrealism and Self-Representation (1998), Angels of Anarchy presents familiar concerns, yet is additionally informed by the subsequent scholarly attention bestowed on female surrealists in the last two decades. Angels of Anarchy incorporates a plurality of forms and expression in a variety of media, including photography, sculpture, poetry, painting, and collage. One of the key operations of the exhibition is to present a range of work by women from varying time-frames and geographical regions in order to illustrate the temporal and spatial spread of surrealism. From a curatorial perspective, the combination of familiar surrealists with lesser-known names, such as Czech artists Toyen, Emila Medkovà and Eva Švankmajerovà, was insightful and smart. Medkovà’s piece Haarwasserfall (Cascade of Hair) from the cycle Schattenspiele (Shadow Games, 1949), for example, is a
haunting and deeply disturbing composition that distorts perspective through the projection of shadows and silhouettes.

In the accompanying essay to such works, Donna Roberts pitches these artists in relation to the specific geographical, historical and political concerns of the Czech surrealist group. Exploring the ways in which the female artists associated with this collective reflect the ‘trajectories’ of Czech surrealism, Roberts conveys how female creativity was welcomed and encouraged in Czech practice through collaboration and support. Roberts interestingly identifies a mood of anxiety which pervades these works, noting Breton’s description of Toyen as an artist imbued with a sense of ‘dark foreboding.’ This feeling of unease is realised in Toyen’s L’Avant-printemps (Early Spring, 1945) which depicts rows of recently filled graves in a vast landscape, sprinkled with the solemn hue of blue butterflies. This darkness is also apparent in an exciting animation by Eva Švankmajerová of 1971. Incorporating Czech folklore, the sequence presents the story of parents who accidentally murder their son and, realising their error, commit suicide. Roberts centres on this aspect of black humour in Czech practice. Quoting Vratislav Effenberger, a theoretician in the Czech group between 1950 and 1980, who described black humour as ‘the most authentic weapon of poetry,’ Roberts highlights the subversive potential of humour and how it can be adopted as a discourse with which to question and upset social norms. Indeed, humour, satire and the wry manipulation of form and imagery are recurring motifs in the exhibition. This theme is perhaps most significantly embodied in Meret Oppenheim’s Eichörnchen (Squirrel, 1969), a work which is presented in the exhibition as the male counterpart to her feminine fur lined teacup, Object (Breakfast in Fur, 1936).

Compiling these works in one show demonstrates the narrative complexity and depth in the work of these women artists. Influences are numerous, from the alchemical and occult, to the fairytale, the gothic and mythological. Secreted in an L-shaped nook in the ‘Fantasy’ section are several pieces by Valentine Penrose, Francesca Woodman and Mimi Parent that incorporate classical allusions to, and re-interpretations of, Leda and the Swan. The gothic is invoked in works such as Leonor Fini’s L’Ombrelle (The Parasol, 1947), which depicts the fading glamour of a parasol, and Ithell Colquhoun’s The Goose of Hermogenes: a Gothick Fantasy (1961), a novella which is testament to Colquhoun’s enduring interest in the occult and both folk and Celtic lore. Colquhoun’s combination of alchemy, classicism, and precious jewels, conjures an atmosphere of magic, which is further compounded by the author’s inclusion of typically gothic conventions. The inclusion of such works reveals that, in addition to the more obvious groupings, there are more subtle correspondences between many of the pieces represented in the show. Significantly, in his contribution to the catalogue, Roger Cardinal posits that ‘surrealist art can even come close to the sublime in its quest for a metaphysical or mythic elsewhere, discovering that the door flung open or the curtain torn.
aside can disclose something terrible, beyond our capacity to apprehend.\textsuperscript{5} Cardinal claims that surrealism includes ‘a succession of women who evoke dream places or sites of reverie, their art discloses a secondary dimension of reality\textsuperscript{6} and that in ‘[t]aking its cue from the gothic novel, surrealist art loves to dwell in spaces which harbour a mesmeric otherness, unexplained yet compelling.’\textsuperscript{7} Indeed, space, or alternative spaces of fantasy and reality, is one of the key features of much of the work. Lee Miller’s \textit{Dorothea Tanning, Sedona Arizona} of 1946, for example, is an intriguing photograph that captures Tanning as artist and creator at work in the studio. Her artistic utensils are juxtaposed with domestic objects and crockery resulting in a distinctly feminine interpretation of creative space. Tanning’s jeans and smock are manipulated at the seam to create ragged edges which resonate with the tattered fabric in the portrait of the mother with child she is poised before, establishing a space of maternal longing and female connectivity. Domestic space is similarly explored by Belgian artist Rachael Baes in her paintings \textit{La Polka (The Polka, 1946) and La Naissance du secret (The Birth of The Secret, 1948)}, both of which depict the sartorial signifiers of femininity within a purposefully baron domestic interior. This notion of feminine space is probed in Katherine Conley’s essay,\textsuperscript{8} in which the author explores the spaces of the home and the domestic in the works of Miller, Varo, Tanning and Woodman, whilst Alyce Mahon suggests that, as domestic objects are often utilised in still life compositions, we may describe the genre as ‘inherently feminine.’\textsuperscript{9}

Exterior spaces are explored in several examples of Kay Sage’s paintings that feature dystopian landscapes, such as \textit{Tomorrow is Never} (1955). Yet, ultimately it is Lee Miller’s \textit{Portrait of Space} (1937) that proves one of the highlights. This work encapsulates many of the subtle messages of the exhibition as a whole. The aperture in the fraying gauze through which we peer is indicative of the hymenal remnant; the barrier between interior and exterior, and a specifically feminine divide. Miller’s work encapsulates the focus on the liminal that Allmer seeks to promote in her Deleuzian obliquing of perspectives – creating a different way of looking at the world, a way to frame and map a terrain that is specifically feminine. This theoretical aspect of the work is explored at length in the catalogue essays through the invocation of feminism and its surrounding discourses. Georgiana M. M. Colvile’s evocation of Hélène Cixous’ concept of \textit{vol} (French for ‘flight’ or ‘theft’), for example, suggests through both an angelic and ornithological metaphor that many women ‘acquired artistic skills and sexual freedom from the surrealist group(s), before migrating to personal territories.’\textsuperscript{10}

At times, however, the feminist discourse and reading strategies drawn upon in the supporting literature could have been pushed further within the exhibition itself. It is somewhat lamentable that the opportunity was not taken to emphasise the possibilities surrealism and its techniques offer with regard to the expression of sexuality, and to explore how many female surrealists were attracted to the mode specifically for those reasons. Despite Allmer’s
application of a Deleuzian model of subjectivity, much of the gender difference in the show was framed as physical and Freudian, with insistent visual references to the vaginal and an emphasis on phallic imagery. Understandably, gender difference takes primacy in any show that prioritises the work of artists previously marginalised within a movement because of their sex, and from the moment one enters this space via the deep crimson panels of the introductory corridor, the exhibition is clearly gendered as female. Yet, many of the artists included in Angels of Anarchy play with the visual signifiers of gender and sexual identity in more sophisticated ways than the exhibition allowed, as can be discerned in Claude Cahun’s photographic experimentation. Whilst celebrating eroticisation and female sexuality, the show unfortunately shies away from overtly referencing same-sex desire. The section ‘Portrait and Self-Portrait,’ however, seeks to explore the intricacies and complexities of female friendship and creativity, something that Mary Ann Caws identifies in the work of Cahun, Maar and Miller as ‘eroticism and drama, friendship and intimacy.’

Cahun’s photographic experimentation exemplifies how gender and identity can be assumed through masking and performative strategies, [Self-portrait (kneeling on quilt), c.1928]. In this section, a cluster of Claude Cahun’s work is neatly juxtaposed with two photographs of Frida Kahlo taken by Lola Alvarez Bravo that depict a doubling of Kahlo’s visage: Frida Enfrente del espejo (Frida Kahlo sitting at her Dressing Table Facing her Mirror, c. 1945) and Frida parade junto a muro (Frida Kahlo Facing Mirror in Patio, c.1944). To the left of this pairing is some fascinating and rare film footage of Kahlo. The sequence follows the young Tina Misrachi, the daughter of Diego Riviera’s art dealer, as she is lured into Kahlo’s residence in a manner that is simultaneously maternal and seductive.

The divisions themselves, ‘Portrait and Self Portrait,’ ‘Landscape,’ ‘Interior,’ ‘Still Life,’ and ‘Fantasy,’ are by no means taxonomically exclusive; the groupings are loose, allowing the viewer to make their own connections and interpretations. However, this simplicity proves challenging at times as the categories, rather than serving to communicate the diverse experiences and contexts in which this work was produced, instead reduced connections to arbitrary correspondences and clichéd framings. It must be noted, however, that the catalogue produced to accompany the show offers a more comprehensive reading of the work, and aids an understanding of the decisions behind the arrangements. This is certainly the case for the ‘Still Life’ section that incorporates works exhibiting a gendered engagement with the object, as a retort against a specifically male compositional technique. Mahon’s supporting article gives credence to groupings which otherwise seem rather contrived. This particular section includes some intriguing examples of surrealist practice, such as Lee Miller’s gruesome staging of a removed breast, (Still Life – Amputated breast on Plate, c. 1929) served up on a plate, complete with cutlery. This work is cleverly paired with Francesca Woodman’s composition (From the Three Kind of Melon in Four Kinds of Light Series, 1975 - 78), in which an image of a melon obscures one breast, whilst the flesh from the fruit in the

© Kimberley Marwood, 2010
foreground spills out, mirroring the rotten tissue of the cancerous breast in Miller’s composition.

In addition to painting, sculpture and photography, there are several examples of written work produced by women located in glass cabinets in the central space of the first room. Valentine Penrose’s *Dons des féminines* (*Gifts of the Feminine*, 1951) is one of the texts that feature in these bureaus of literary delights. Whilst emulating the technique of her male contemporary Max Ernst, Penrose’s collage-poem radically departs from his application of the mode, offering a more sympathetic, feminine alternative to his violent images. Each monochrome image is comprised of both objects and landscape, juxtaposing nature and astrology, animals and mythical beasts, visualising the relationship between the work’s protagonists, Maria Elona and Rubia. Significantly, Picasso’s frontispiece to Penrose’s collection is also presented. Picasso’s visual interpretation of the text is one of the only explicit references to lesbianism or an eroticised same-sex relationship to feature in the exhibition, with the artist's lithograph clearly depicting two women in a gripping embrace. Picasso’s interpretation of *Dons des féminines* perfectly exemplifies the divergence between male and female artistic representation of female relationships. What is not made explicit in Penrose, or in the space of the exhibition itself, is addressed starkly by Picasso. This piece is one of the few examples of work by men in the show. Presenting a counterpoint to female practice, it reinforces the idea that, far from operating as a separate group, women surrealists collaborated convivially with their male colleagues. This issue is addressed by Colville, who relates how women surrealists never purposefully defined themselves as a separate school; rather they appropriated or subverted certain ‘male’ techniques.12 This emphasis on collaboration is similarly represented within the exhibition in a section focusing on ‘The Exquisite Corpse.’ Here examples of the surrealist automatic technique illustrate how men and women often worked in unison to create hybrid forms.

The broad historical spectrum and geographical range of the exhibition are striking. The show presents a comprehensive collection of women artists who have or can be associated with surrealism and seeks to redress the typically male dominated surrealist canon. Perhaps one anomalous, yet successful entry was that of Francesca Woodman. In addition to numerous examples of her photography, a reel of moving images is also exhibited. The film begins with the camera claustrophobically centring on the corner of a room. A trickle of liquid slowly intensifies to a pour, before the lens retracts to reveal a pair of legs straddling a pool of water developing at the groin. The reel proceeds to showcase several short performance pieces, one of which sees Woodman enter the frame in boots and coat, before removing them to reveal her naked body. A series of affecting frames ensues, in which Woodman stands naked behind thin reams of white paper. Pressing her naked body to the gossamer canvas and exerting a ghostly presence, she inscribes her name on the paper from above. Woodman
subsequently pierces the screen, ripping through her name, to reveal her bare figure, before posing momentarily and breaking the banner in two. This recalcitrant gesture reinforces one of the aims of *Angels of Anarchy*: to promote a move away from the organised notion of a surrealist group, of naming, labelling, and of fixed identities, and to suggest that any woman working in this mode or with a surrealist spirit can adopt and manipulate these conventions to explore the limits and possibilities of their own sexuality and gender.

Kimberley Marwood,
University of Essex

---


2 Ibid.

3 André Breton, ‘Introduction to the work of Toyen, by André Breton, Benjamin Péret and Jindřich Heisler,’ cited in Donna Roberts, “Neither Wings nor Stones”: The Psychological Realism of Czech Women Surrealists,’ in *Angels of Anarchy: Women Artists and Surrealism*, 76.


6 Ibid., 37.

7 Ibid., 40.


12 Colvile, 64.

Could *The Subversion of Images: Surrealism, Photography and Film*, staged by the Pompidou Centre, undo the mystery surrounding the surrealist image? The exhibition curators, Quentin Bajac and Clément Chéroux, have explored the relationship between surrealism and the camera through more than 350 works from the Museum's own collection, the in-house Kandinsky Library, and a number of international archives, disclosing a universe based on dream and fantasy.¹

These visions of an inner world that emerge from real images transcend the banality of everyday life and invite the viewer that walks through the exhibition's labyrinthine succession of rooms to see beyond appearances. This is the thread that guides us through the gallery space in search of answers to the surrealist enigma. The encounter between the unconscious and the documentary evidence of photography is questioned throughout, as it was by Rosalind Krauss and Jane Livingston in the 1985 show *L'Amour fou: Photography and Surrealism*.² The exhibition design, by the architect Laurence Fontaine, refers to the optical experience by recreating the architectural structure of the eye. This helps the curators of *The Subversion of Images* to provoke the encounter between viewer and the group's aesthetics. The labyrinthine circulation is interrupted at the centre of the exhibition in a circular space, and continues in the last section of the gallery. In contrast to the 1985 show, the nine sections in which the Pompidou exhibition is divided relate the coming together of photography's mechanical processes and the surrealist imagination by considering how members of the

---

1. Could *The Subversion of Images: Surrealism, Photography and Film*, staged by the Pompidou Centre, undo the mystery surrounding the surrealist image? The exhibition curators, Quentin Bajac and Clément Chéroux, have explored the relationship between surrealism and the camera through more than 350 works from the Museum's own collection, the in-house Kandinsky Library, and a number of international archives, disclosing a universe based on dream and fantasy.¹

2. These visions of an inner world that emerge from real images transcend the banality of everyday life and invite the viewer that walks through the exhibition's labyrinthine succession of rooms to see beyond appearances. This is the thread that guides us through the gallery space in search of answers to the surrealist enigma. The encounter between the unconscious and the documentary evidence of photography is questioned throughout, as it was by Rosalind Krauss and Jane Livingston in the 1985 show *L'Amour fou: Photography and Surrealism*.² The exhibition design, by the architect Laurence Fontaine, refers to the optical experience by recreating the architectural structure of the eye. This helps the curators of *The Subversion of Images* to provoke the encounter between viewer and the group's aesthetics. The labyrinthine circulation is interrupted at the centre of the exhibition in a circular space, and continues in the last section of the gallery. In contrast to the 1985 show, the nine sections in which the Pompidou exhibition is divided relate the coming together of photography's mechanical processes and the surrealist imagination by considering how members of the
group applied the photographic image to print and cinema. The scope of sections such as ‘Collective Action’; ‘The Montage Table’ and ‘The Anatomy of Images’ is to echo the visual expression of the movement and the power of its images. This is how the seditious iconography of the surrealists comes to upset the field of our perception and to generate a revolution in the way we see things. Our gaze, by imitation, appropriates Paul Nougé’s formula ‘To see is an action’ and becomes conscious of the force of the images that it generates.

From the entrance, distorting mirrors force the optical experience. Our distorted image follows our steps on the way to the discovery of the movement. We undertake our own revolution, one that brings into play our bodies, as well as our vision. Our relationship with the world is renewed by an exhibition design that opens, both physically and intellectually, onto the surrealist universe. The transformation of the Pompidou Centre’s Gallery 2 into a hall of mirrors determines, from now on, in the retinal field of our eye, the anamorphosis of our body, whose form echoes André Kertész’s Distortions and the work of Raoul Ubac exhibited in the show. The installation is, of course, a free quotation from the surrealist practice of appropriating the illusions of fun fairs, in which distorting mirrors and labyrinths create a mythology of vision and perception. These popular references, which are at the centre of the surrealists’ production, can be found in the series of portraits displayed in the exhibition’s first section, which were shot in the fun fair barracks of Luna Park. Studio portraits in which the likenesses of André Breton, Paul Eluard, Max Ernst and Robert Desnos are inscribed within cardboard scenes highlight the playful dimension of the surrealists’ activities, and the humour underlying the exhibition’s imaginary nine sections. To join forces, to show the solidarity and primacy of the group over individuality could only have been illustrated through photography, which, unlike painting, can be used as evidence and proof. The juxtaposition of fun-fair
portraits with photo booths and Man Ray's *Surrealist Chess Board* (1934) brings us to the core of the matter: the role played by individual bodies and their representation in the construction of the group's collective identity. Prophet and agitator of the surrealists, Breton plays the King on Man Ray's *Chess Board*. His presence pervades the exhibition's first room, whose doors open onto a sprawling network of images exhibited with the intention to interrogate forms of thinking determined by collective action.

In the next section, the simultaneous presence of fixed images and short films investigates the implicit theatricality of works such as Eli Lotar's and Hans Bellmer's 'performed' photographs. The enigmatic series after which the exhibition is titled, *The Subversion of Images* (1929 - 1930) by the Belgian Paul Nougé, highlights the subversion of a production that, while proposing to record the real, departs from reality. The play with theatricality adds to the obsessive surrealist gaze on women, whose fetishized bodies become objects of fantasy. In the photographs of Jacques-André Boiffard and William Seabrook, for instance, an equation between woman and sexual object seems at play, constructed through leather masks and chains. This series of strong images shows the complex nature of the surrealists' relationship with the body. If, as Clément Chéroux claims in the catalogue's introduction, the surrealists said that 'pour changer la vie, il faut changer la vue,' ('to change our approach to life, we must change our point of view') they did so by means of a baffling iconographic vocabulary in which faces disappear beyond masks and fantasies show their true face in order to question our relationship with sexuality and the body. In this second section, a lesser-known series by the Belgian artist Marcel Mariën – in which the naked female body becomes a canvas for enigmatic messages such as 'Mute and blind, here I am, dressed of the thoughts that you lend me' demonstrates that the group's acknowledged phallocentrism sometimes meets feminist reaction. This section makes vulnerable the repeated contention that surrealism is anti-feminist and confirms instead the argument developed by Krauss in the catalogue of *L'Amour fou*.

Aided by the exhibition design, the third section of the show brings together nineteenth-century photographs and surrealist originals and prints with the intention to present an urban mythology that is at once, real, fortuitous and marvellous. The first work in the section, Brassaï's *The Statue of Marshall Ney in the Fog* (1935) echoes the remark by Pierre Mac-Orlan: 'The social fantastic lives in the night of cities.' In Brassaï's work, the city appears as a place of uncanny revelations, in which the chance encounter of Marshall Ney's statue and the neon sign of a hotel emphasizes the presence of poetry. This purely photographic work is the result of disparate elements that constitute a collage in which essence replaces the spontaneous and unexpected results of automatic writing. The surrealists' discovery of the work of Eugène Atget who, like Man Ray, lived in Rue Campagne Première, led the group to embrace a new way of viewing the city, close to Baudelaire's Parisian universe seen through
Walter Benjamin's texts. Flanêurs, prostitutes, commodities and novelties became in the eyes of the surrealists elements of an original vocabulary apt to revive the atmosphere of a hidden, picturesque world.

Arguably, nineteenth-century literature is largely responsible for the surrealists’ visual imagery. They found in the Chants de Maldoror by the Count of Lautréamont new forms of linguistic construction. Lautréamont's prose epic, discovered in 1917 by Philippe Soupault, then by Breton, conveys the atmosphere of a universe in which the world of fantasy and imagination surpasses real life. While Lautréamont assembled through antithesis, the surrealists bring together a variety of concepts and photographic productions to create photomontages, collages and ‘exquisite corpses’; therefore, the reference to 'The Montage Table' in the title of this section should be intended in terms of a single practice reuniting the production of heterogeneous images.

The central space, in which photographs, illustrated magazines and original documents confront one another, demonstrates the strong relationship between the making of the works and their modes of distribution. From one corner of the eye-shaped room to the other, we are invited to consider the importance of the optical experience and the fantastic representation of the unconscious. These different universes create a parallel between photographs that, as in the case of Jean Painlavé’s The Octopus, extract a poetic universe from scientific documents and technical images. Whether internalized, as in Dora Maar’s photomontages, or directed towards a fragmentary world seen in close-up, the surrealists’ use of the mechanical gaze explores the recesses of the unconscious. Substituting the human eye, the camera subverts our habits. It records a concrete world that renews, through a change in the group’s aesthetic scale, our perception of the object of desire. A mysterious room, that celebrates the eroticism and pornography of Paul Eluard's and Man Ray’s visions, completes the subversive presentation with a profusion of phallic images evoking the instincts pertaining to the sexual act.

Such instinctive observation of the world mechanically recorded by the camera concentrates hereafter on the body, reinterpreted according to an original iconographic vocabulary that transforms a hypertrophic reality into a normative vision. Celebrating images of men and women with their eyes closed, the surrealists insisted on a phenomenon that they called 'to see with closed eyes.' This action, constructed in an inner world, has a special place in Dalí’s The Phenomenon of Ecstasy. As Michel Poivert has noted, Dalí's photomontage looks like a scientific synopsis that questions the permanence of visual language through the representation of the ephemeral physical phenomenon of ecstasy. Ecstasy is represented by thirty-two photographic fragments divided in a discontinuous winding of images and ending in a central scene that attracts our attention by means of its larger scale. This fragment, a cut-
out from Brassai\'s homonymous *Phenomenon of Ecstasy*, has a similar function to the unconscious evoked by the surrealist poets. At the same time, it shows the paroxystic nature of ecstasy as consisting, according to its vocabulary definition, in \'a state of emotion so intense that one is carried beyond the sensible world and discovers, through a sort of enlightenment, certain revelations belonging to the intelligible world.\' The rhetorical power of the image clarifies the intention of the surrealists and echoes the text that Dalí wrote to accompany his photomontage in *Minotaure*. There, the author explained that \'Ecstasy is, par excellence, the mental-critical state that the incredible contemporary thought [...] aspires to render permanent.\' The photomontage, then, transforms into a reality the article\'s intention to present ecstasy as a permanent state. The demonstration of ecstasy, which is performed throughout this section by the juxtaposition of works debating the nature of revelation and inspiration, leads us into a section that intends to interrogate the ability of the photographic medium to make the visible invisible.

Automatic writing is reconsidered here in its relation to photographic techniques such as the photogram, and photographic automatism is viewed in terms of the psychic automatism defended by Breton. Thanks to the reception of Man Ray\'s photograms and of his anthology *Delicious Fields*, the section entitled \'Automatic Writings\' clarifies the creative process of the surrealists, who considered the spontaneous appearance of images as the embodiment of their thoughts. The magic of images born from traces of light functions as a metaphor for automatic writing and reveals, as Poivert has noted, the analogy between photography and writing in the theoretical discussions of the group. Presenting a series of images realized without a consciously determined point of view and photographic allegories that highlight the scientific character of the automatic method, this section explores the conditions under which surrealist photography was made and the role that it played in the group\'s aesthetics. In contrast, the surrealists\' interest in the world of the occult is presented in a section that does not always echo the \'mystical\' content of the images. However, the surrealists, Breton in particular, used photography for its scientific value as well as for its medium-like qualities, emphasizing its capacity to reintroduce empiricism in the realm of aesthetics.

The combination of science and the paranormal led the group to question the formal language of photography, overcoming its limits through actual physical transgression, scratching and burning prints and negatives; or elevating anamorphosis to a method of resemblance. In the last section of the exhibition beauty becomes, as Breton had said, convulsive. Once again, we are presented with games relating to the photographic representation of the body and we find ourselves confronting anamorphosis. But here we are also asked to what extent these formal games, so frequently present in surrealist publications – from *Documents* to *La Révolution surréaliste* – also found release in the commercial world. Clearly, advertising and fashion became immediate consumers of surrealist images – think of Dora Maar\'s commercials for
Pétrole Hahn, or Vogue's commissions from Man Ray. Yet, it was the world of commercial publishing in the figure of José Corti, an editor close to surrealist literary circles, who produced a child book by Claude Cahun and Lise Deharme, *Cœur de Pic* (1937). We discover, unexpectedly, several original plates of the book among projections of Luis Buñuel's *Andalusian Dog*, Man Ray's *Sea Star*, and Painlevé's photograph *Seahorse*. The book invites us to contemplate a world in which fantasy, dreams and imagination are intertwined through the confrontation of literary and photographic poems.

This fairy-tale vision of the world ends a trajectory in which the image has accomplished all of its missions: pleasure, inquiry and suggestion. Our gaze has begun its revolution by questioning normative visions of the world, a world that is, from now on, more enlarged than hypertrophied. The exhibition reviews different manifestations of 'the photographic subversive' in the surrealist movement, uncovering the mystery of its elaboration. *The Subversion of Images* brings a new and elaborate look at the photographic medium within surrealism, by interrogating the historiographic and archival material. In this way, the new Pompidou exhibition, even if largely derived from *L' Amour fou*, departs from that show's psychoanalytical methods to explore questions specific to the photographic medium. Furthermore, a richly documented and illustrated exhibition catalogue provides a series of articles which explore the questions open by the gallery installation, and re-presents surrealism to scholarly investigation.

Juliette Lavie, Université de Paris Ouest Nanterre
Translated by Silvia Loreti, University of Manchester

---


8 Salvador Dalí, 'Le Phénomène de l’extase,' *Minotaure*, nos. 3-4, 1933, 76.


Taro Okamoto and his contemporaries in the Post-War era, 1946-54, Setagaya Art Museum, Tokyo, 24 March - 27 May 2007


These three recent exhibitions devoted to two contrasting artists give a sense of the form and depth of integration of surrealism into Japanese culture in the twentieth century.

Ai-Mitsu was perhaps the most important of the painters in the milieu of surrealism in Japan in the thirties (or at least if he wasn’t, any other claimant has a lot to live up to). Certainly he was the one who had most intuitively grasped the message of surrealism in its broadest extent, even if the direct influence of surrealism on his work may be open to question.

Born in 1907 in Hiroshima, his given name was Ishimura Nichiro. He assumed the name Ai-Mitsu when he began to become a serious artist, apparently an abbreviation of the first pseudonym he had taken, Aikawa Mitsuru. It is a name with a complex meaning, which both reveals something of his aims and of his surrealist affinity: ‘Mitsu’ means light, and ‘Ai’ most commonly means love. However, the Chinese character he used has a more complex, and obscure, sense. It means darkness, but in a very specific way; a darkness that is created by the elements, for instance on a cloudy day when there is no break in the clouds, or in the forest where light is blocked out by the profusion of trees. His intentions thus almost seem to be set out in this name he chose for himself, which intimates a contradictory thread that runs through all of his work, leading us along two directions at once, contrasting paths which lie within the light, but it is a light that is obscurely darkened or even closed out.

There is a kind of primary automatism at play in his mode of painting: the working through of observation until it becomes inspiration. The procedure appears analogous to that used by Raymond Roussel in the realm of words; where Roussel worked words over and over until they released an obscure secret, Ai-Mitsu excavated through the layers of projections by which personages and objects shield themselves from the surrounding world until the identity of the thing under scrutiny was brought into question and revealed new possibilities.

His natural medium was the still life, itself a peculiarly contradictory genre of painting, which seems to have attracted him precisely because of the life-death contradiction at its heart. His works are thus as far removed as one can imagine from most of what comes under that rubric.
in modern art. The ‘still-life’ here is precisely that, a life that has been rendered still, fixed in motion, transfixed in a moment of transfiguration, caught between life and death, or vitally alive in death. This is where his affinity with surrealism is most apparent; we might see his work even as being a representation of the supreme point, or perhaps of the point of dissolution when life becomes more life than life due to the proximity of death; it is life asserted at the point of death. This is the moment associated by Bataille with the experience of eroticism (and one work of Ai-Mitsu’s, Lotus and the Sun (1938 - 1939) might almost be an illustration of Bataille, although it is highly unlikely that he could have had any knowledge of Bataille’s work), but Ai-Mitsu approaches it from the opposite point of view to Bataille; in fact it might be more accurate to say that his work reveals death to be present even within life. Furthermore, what for Bataille could only be imperfectly experienced (that is, until the actual moment of death), for Ai-Mitsu was already present in the life experience itself: all living matter is in a constant state of transformation, living and dying in each moment of its existence.

The painting for which he is best known, and which supposedly marks his link with surrealism, is Landscape with an eye (1938), which superficially recalls some of Max Ernst’s paintings of the same period and doubtless Ai-Mitsu was aware of Ernst’s work, but it is a painting that very much emerges from his own concerns and the resemblance to Ernst appears to lie more in a common concern to examine the materiality of things – probing their appearance until they reveal characteristics, or a destiny, that would otherwise be unknown – than in any shallow stylistic influence.

To see this painting, as critics tend to do, as being apart from the rest of his oeuvre, marking a point in his development which reveals a convergence with surrealism which he soon outgrew, appears to me to be a mistake. There is a common inspiration throughout his work that therefore needs to be considered in its own terms as a whole rather than as a concatenation of different influences.

Seen from this perspective, Landscape with a Eye stands as an obverse articulation of one of Ai-Mitsu’s central themes. Here a landscape that appears dead is brought alive through the revelation within it of what appears to be a living eye. However, this startling effect appears to be little more than an explicit rendering of what is more subtly conveyed in works like Flower Garden (1940), in which a butterfly in flight, becomes the life force – even the soul – of a decaying panorama, or Bird (1942), in which, conversely, the skull of a bird seems to take nourishment from a fertile garden.

Ai-Mitsu might also be considered as a portrait painter and portraits of family and friends are something he returned to time and again. His very first work, a portrait of his father thought to
have been painted when he was only ten years old, already reveals a remarkable ability to enter the soul of the subject and to draw out part of its essence through painterly depiction. Even more remarkable is that we can discern in this juvenile work a continuity of affect and nuance with three complex self-portraits painted during 1943 and 1944, which are among the artist’s last works. According to a note in the catalogue, these latter works were political statements, responses of the artist to the sacrificing of art to the mentality of war (in 1941, Takiguchi Shuzo and Fukuzawa Ichiro, the two main representatives of surrealism in Japan, had been arrested as subversives, and artists in general were required to display appropriately patriotic sentiments if not contribute directly to the war effort – the Ministry of War even issued a decree warning artists that they would be denied ration coupons if they continued to produce what it called ‘painting for self-satisfaction’). In these three self-portraits, Ai-Mitsu forcefully portrays himself as closed in on himself, as though having been physically forced not to see. They are almost portraits of a man required to depart from himself. In this they contrast with the openness of the childhood portrait of his father, in which a different sort of departure is conveyed, a departure of the father away from the child (at the time the picture was made, Ai-Mitsu was no longer living with his parents but had been adopted by his father’s brother, and one has a sense, as one looks at this painting, of the father in retreat from the child painting it). Indeed his portraits are uniformly expressive and replete with suggestive inferences of the relationship of the artist and his subject. Particular mention should be made of Woman Knitting (1930), a portrait of his wife of a loveliness not often found anywhere in modern art.

His portraits of family and friends hardly display any other attitude than that observable in his paintings of birds, animal or flowers which themselves may also be regarded as portraits with a comparable concentration and attention to detail as that which he devoted to human beings. Whether he was painting animals, birds, flowers or even fruits, we feel we are not looking at the generality of the object painted but at a configuration of its own particular qualities. His works of 1942 provide good examples, especially those of magnolias and gladiolus, and the very beautiful Butterfly. In contrast, in a series of pictures of a lion (1936) we have to struggle to discern the form of the animal as it becomes mimetically merged with its surroundings.

Stylistically, too, Ai-Mitsu’s work is of enormous significance for its engagement with both Western and Eastern styles of painting. He had studied not only Japanese traditional art techniques, but also those of China, and he was remarkably aware of the dangers of subsuming his work to what he had at quite an early age already perceived as a hegemonic process of Western modernism, although at the same time he refused to reject those elements coming from the West which could be valuable to him in realising his own aims. His work thus retains importance as an example of a commitment to the re-examination of tradition in the context of invasive westernisation without surrendering to a pure continuance
of tradition.

Ai-Mitsu died in 1946 from a sickness he had contracted in Shanghai while at the front, where he had been sent after having been conscripted into the army in 1944. We only have part of his oeuvre, since those works he had stored in Hiroshima were all destroyed by the atom bomb. Even so, on the evidence of this wonderful exhibition he is one of the great, undiscovered artists of the twentieth century.¹

Although they are linked by their attraction to surrealism, it would be difficult to imagine an artist more different from Ai-Mitsu than Okamoto Tarō. But then it is difficult to imagine any other artist who is at all like Okamoto. If as a painter Ai-Mitsu had a dazzling array of styles, Okamoto’s painting was stylistically constrained, all of his work seemingly emerging from the same surge of energy; his work was as much one with his life activity as that of any artist of whom I am aware. But what he lacked in stylistic versatility, he more than made up for in his amazing range of activities, of which his painting was just the tip of the iceberg. He was also a sculptor, a ceramicist, a designer, an architect, a photographer, an anthropologist and a writer with a substantial oeuvre devoted to a range of different subjects.

Taro (unusually in Japan, he is familiarly known by his first name) was born in 1911 into a family with a strong artistic tradition. His grandfather, Katei (1857 - 1919), had been a significant calligrapher; his father, Ippei (1886 - 1948), was a major cartoonist, while his mother, Kanoko (1889 - 1939), was a – somewhat notorious – novelist and poet with whom Taro had a tangled relationship. In 1929 he enrolled at the Tokyo Fine Arts School to study oil painting, but when his parents moved to Paris later in the year, he decided to join them. He stayed in Paris until 1940, when the entry of the Nazis into Paris forced him to return to Japan. While in Paris he studied anthropology under Marcel Mauss and became close to Georges Bataille and Roger Caillois, participating in both the College of Sociology and Acéphale (his own anthropological studies, based on extensive study of the survivals of ancient cultures, including fieldwork in Okinawa and Tohoku, were of considerable importance in helping the Japanese to re-connect with their own traditions in the repressive post-war environment). Of his artistic genesis we have only sketchy details. It is said that seeing Picasso’s works was a turning point for him, and one can certainly see that Picasso’s example must have been elemental to his attitude towards painting, although stylistically Okamoto appears to owe little to any other artist. We know that he joined the Creation-Abstraction group around 1932, but soon afterwards gravitated towards surrealism and participated in the 1938 Surrealist exhibition in Paris. It is, however, difficult to chart his artistic evolution as almost all of his pre-war work was destroyed in the firebombing of Tokyo and is only known at all from copies Okamoto made after the war. In 1946, then, it is almost as though he suddenly appears as a fully formed artist, which is where the exhibition at
Setagaya Art Museum begins.

Okamoto takes the dictum ‘poetry must be made by all’ in its most literal sense. No occultation here: Okamoto shamelessly promoted himself and his art throughout his life and increasingly towards the end when he became a television personality. He was not even above lending himself to advertising, appearing in several television commercials, one of which – for Maxell tapes – must have claims to being among the finest adverts ever made. In it, Okamoto performs a raucous tune on a piano whose sounds as he plays construct one of his art works on the piano lid before exploding into an array of colours typical of Okamoto’s paintings. The matching of music to painting and colour here is remarkable and emphasises the continuity of Okamoto’s life and work as it extended to what most artists would have considered to be nothing but a commercial chore. He also participated in events which, in most artists, would be seen as nothing but publicity stunts: painting a picture in the sky from a helicopter, decorating a car or taking up a challenge to create, in public, a complete work of art in one hour (as a bizarre conjunction we might perhaps consider him as a kind of cross between Picasso and Rolf Harris!).

Self-promotion this might be considered to be, but there was no narcissism here. In promoting himself, Okamoto was being true to his conviction that art should not be precious but should be available to all.

In this respect, seeing Okamoto’s work in relation to that of Ai-Mitsu raises questions about the nature of art and the relation of the artist to his audience. Ai-Mitsu made no compromises; he was harsh with himself and with his art work. Okamoto was equally true to himself, but unlike Ai-Mitsu he recognised no responsibility to the revelation of art itself. In this we might say that he renounced an aspect of surrealism, since his work appears to be a pure ‘means of expression’ and can rarely be seen as an ‘activity of the spirit’ as demanded by surrealism. Indeed, taken as a whole, his work might even be dismissed as superficial and devoid of real content. Certainly it reveals few secrets. A careful examination of the thousands of paintings he left would be unlikely to deliver up any more meaning than a close examination of one of them. To see them in these terms, however, would be to miss the point.

Okamoto was unconcerned about the destiny of art, which for him was not a means of exploration, but a pure explosion of energy. In this sense, he collapsed the distinction between ‘means of expression’ and ‘activity of the spirit’: his means of expression was his activity of the spirit. What emerged at the end of the process was of less importance than the fact of the activity itself, and Okamoto seems to have been largely uninterested in whether his works survived or not (at least specific works: the fact that he desired to have his work preserved in a museum after his death shows that he was well aware of his own overall
importance as an artist). Okamoto is even distinguished by having not one but two museums devoted to his work. The more modest, in Tokyo, is at the studio he had specially built for him in 1954; the other is at an impressive purpose built site in Kawasaki, Kanagawa, the town in which he was born, which opened in 1999 and in which the second of these exhibitions was held.

The two recent exhibitions display different aspects of Okamoto’s activity. The first, at Setagaya Museum, concentrates on his situation within the art world following the Second World War until 1954 and reveals the extent to which he participated in and encouraged a flowering of art during this period, both among Japanese artists and as part of international collaboration. This reflects Okamoto’s view that tradition is what is constantly invented. Here again, the comparison with Ai-Mitsu is instructive. For both artists, tradition was not what had immemorial value and should be preserved, but was rather something to be discovered through penetrating into it. It had an immediate and dynamic quality which could not be directly grasped but only revealed in the moment. Yet, what for Ai-Mitsu was discovered at the instant of its death – or its transformation into something else – emerged for Okamoto through the expression of pure energy.

Dominated as it is by Okamoto’s own work and by the sheer range of work included in it (30 European artists are represented along with 17 Japanese), the exhibition lives up to its title by the fact that it shows the extent to which the energy with which Okamoto participated in and encouraged the development of the art scene in Japan during this period.

During the war, Okamoto had also been forced to join the army and sent to China to fight. If the experience had less tragic consequences for him than for Ai-Mitsu, it was still formative; witnessing the horrors and waste of the war appears to have been primarily responsible for his surrender to the life force and perhaps cemented something he had learned from Bataille: the determination to refuse the tragic and say ‘yes’ to everything, even in the wake of the American carpet bombing of Japan and the dropping of the A bombs. In many of his canvases the memory of war is clearly visible, but the impression conveyed by what is depicted is one of universal energy in motion rather than a concern for the human consequences of the carnage. His attitude may appear to have something in common with that of the Italian futurists, but in fact it was diametrically opposed to it: Okamoto celebrated neither war nor technology but the fact of life as such, irrespective of whatever consequences it might have for humans, or even for life itself. Okamoto in fact was commissioned to commemorate the dropping of the atom bombs in a monumental mural made in Mexico City, which was believed lost and has only recently been re-discovered. It is a work that refuses to sentimentalise the event even as it depicts its horror, presenting it as an elemental human tragedy, but a tragedy that goes beyond the fact of the destruction of life to reveal human
powerlessness in the face of life's own destructive energy, something which completely obviates the human achievement that the splitting of the atom appeared to represent. There is indeed a sense throughout Okamoto's work that the energy source of life may be so powerful that it has to destroy the very thing it has given birth to; even that life depends on the destruction of life, which is the only way in which it can renew itself.

After the desolation of the war artistic activity in Japan was renewed and revitalised with the foundation of new groups and the re-formulation of others. The Avant-garde Artists' Club, founded by Takiguchi Shuzo, Yoshihara Jiro and Hasegawa Suburo in 1936, was re-organised in 1947. In 1948, Okamoto founded the Night Encounter Group, whose title at least appears to represent a desire to continue the activities of Acéphale, and which brought together artists with writers of the Seiki (Century) group. He was also the key figure in a group founded in 1953, the International Art Club. Another pre-war organisation, the Ninth Rooms Group, originally dating from 1938 but re-organised in 1950, included a Tarô Room, for which Okamoto chose the material, often the works of European artists he felt close to, such as Sam Francis, Jean-Michel Atlan and Pierre Alechinsky. Okamoto was linked in one way or another with all of these groups, whose works were placed in evidence by numerous exhibitions during the forties and fifties, and are brought back into the frame by the organisation of the current exhibition which offers a wide panorama and gives a sense of the artistic context of Japan in the decades following the war. The very range of material on display, and the preponderance of Okamoto's work, does not fully allow us to evaluate the contribution made by individual artists other than Okamoto to this outpouring of creativity, nor does it allow us fully to grasp the determinants involved in the cross-fertilisation of ideas which must have been at play during the period. It does, however, suggest that it was a rich period.

The second of Okamoto's exhibitions, at his own Museum, took up the story from 1954 until 1970, although its focus was somewhat different, concentrating on Okamoto's design activity rather than his work in fine art. In 1954, he established the Contemporary Arts Institute in order to bring together and share ideas with other Japanese designers, from which emerged some innovative design work, the most notable perhaps being Okamoto's non-functional furniture. His work as an architect should also be noted, especially the very fine house he built. His work in design and architecture was brought together in 1970 when he was appointed artistic director of Expo '70 and created the 'Tower of the Sun,' a monumental structure celebrating universal creativity which stands as the symbol of his work as a whole and is the culminating point of the current exhibition.

Seeing these two exhibitions – together with the other work on show in the permanent collection at the Okamoto Museum – gives an amazing sense of the dynamism of this man
who seems never to have been short of vigour. It is difficult to believe that he ever suffered from depression or melancholy since all of his work displays the same surrender to the life force, whether it was a matter of his own painting, the establishment of a design group or mountaineering.

Both of these artists deserve to be better known, especially outside of Japan, and all three of these exhibitions made a valuable contribution to the understanding of the respective artists’ work.

Michael Richardson
Waseda University, Tokyo

† Most of the information about Ai-Mitsu in this review comes from the exemplary catalogue of the exhibition: Ai-Mitsu, Shogo Otani, Tohru Matsumoto, Ikiro Arikawa, Koichi Wada, Aya Fujisaki and Arata Kakuda, National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo, 2007. Everything about this exhibition was exemplary – it is a rare thing to find an exhibition that so perfectly introduced and expanded the viewers’ understanding of an artist’s work. It was quite clearly a labour of love that did full justice to the work of a painter of extraordinary power. Please, provide bibliographic details for the exhibition catalogue.

I would like to thank Kyoko Jimbo and Michiyo Miyake for their help with this review.
In 1922 Dr Hans Prinzhorn of the Heidelberg University psychiatric clinic published a groundbreaking book, *Bildnerei des Geisteskranken: ein Beitrag zur Psychologie und Psychopathologie der Gestaltung* (translated in 1972 as *Artistry of the Mentally Ill: A Contribution to the Psychology and Psychopathology of Configuration*), in which he discussed and reproduced selected artistic creations of patients from his and other clinics. The same year, Max Ernst brought the book with him to Paris, creating a stir among the surrealists. Although few members of the original Parisian group could read German, the 187 reproductions in *Bildnerei* were a testament to art created outside of regular (bourgeois) institutions and conventions, and the book’s illustrations in particular are considered to have influenced many surrealists. The exhibition *Surrealism and Madness* at the Prinzhorn Collection, at the historical premises of the Heidelberg mental ward, focused on that influence. Further attention was paid to an important (re)discovery of an inventory list in the clinic’s archives.

In 1929 works from the Prinzhorn Collection were shown in Paris at the commercial *Exposition des artistes malades*. Buyers included Paul Éluard and André Breton, who stressed the importance of asylum art and states of mental illness as sources of inspiration for surrealist aesthetics. The original catalogue mentioned only five exhibits from the Prinzhorn Collection, but as the discovered inventory list shows, a total of 36 Prinzhorn items were on display. The curators of *Surrealism and Madness* took the opportunity to bring those 36 items, as far as possible, into the limelight once more. Some listed works proved to be untraceable due to the anonymity of the artists; but nine different patients (or ‘cases,’ as they were called) and their works could be traced. These included August Klett, August Natterer, Else Blankenhorn and Adolf Wölfli.

The exhibition showed that the works lent to the *Exposition des artistes malades* were deliberately selected on the basis of size and style. All are relatively small (perhaps also to facilitate travelling) and – apart from two objects later characterized as ‘reliquaries’ – all items are on paper or cardboard.¹ The majority of works, originally classified as ‘schizophrenic compositions,’ are colourful, figurative and evocative or even entertaining in character. In other words, despite being created by so-called *aliénés*, they were still recognized and enjoyed as art works. Similar selection criteria might have been applied to the art represented

---

¹ Papers of Surrealism, Issue 8, Spring 2010
in Bildnerei, and as such the presentation of the 1929 works in Surrealism and Madness merged well with the exhibition’s other focus, the possible influence of Prinzhorn’s asylum art upon surrealism. Although the interest of the latter in the former is known and exemplified by the continuing popularity Bildnerei and similar books enjoyed within the surrealist group, direct lines of influence have been difficult to trace. The curators chose to present this possible influence thematically, in small groups of eight or nine works by patients and surrealists combined. One theme was automatism (in writing and drawing), a method introduced by psychiatrists in the nineteenth century and nominated by Breton as a central tenet of surrealism in the First Manifesto. Thus, automatic drawings by Masson were combined with automatic drawings by a number of patients. Another theme, body amalgamations, was explored through the drawings of Hans Bellmer, in combination with August Klett’s Fantastic Drawings Based on Clouds, constructed of an amalgam of stacked up heads and body-parts. Bellmer’s motif of the céphalopode (or head with feet), probably finds its origin in the Kopffüßer (‘head-footer’) described and depicted in Bildnerei. One of the most convincing arguments of visual kinship between asylum and surrealist art is displayed in the exhibition poster: Wunder-Hirthe II by August Natterer (Fig. 1), which has obviously inspired Max Ernst’s Œdipe of 1937.

Fig. 1: August Natterer (Neter), Wunderhirte II, 1911-1915, pencil and water-colour on cardboard, 24.5 x 19.5 cm. Sammlung Prinzhorn, Heidelberg.
Surrealism and Madness was a small-scale yet interesting exhibition, created with much insight and fascinating material. Through careful presentation, it did right by the exhibited material and invited careful study, demonstrating the undeniable influence of Prinzhorn’s asylum art on surrealism.

Surrealism and Madness served as a companion exhibition to Against all Reason: Surrealism Paris - Prague, a double exhibition on a much larger scale (over 350 entries) in nearby Ludwigshafen. The Kunstverein showed surrealist photography, while the Wilhelm-Hack Museum displayed a wide diversity of other surrealist media; and both locations showed French and Czech works side by side. Foregrounded was the fact that both French and Czech surrealism explored an extremely diverse range of media, including painting, drawing, sculpture, film, photography, mixed media, and even exhibition practices. Thus the show featured a reconstruction of part of the (in)famous 1938 Exposition internationale du surréalisme. The actual point of the combined exhibition, however, was to show the importance of Czech surrealism and its (independent) development vis-à-vis the French group.²

The curators thought to show the Paris - Prague dynamics by presenting the surrealist production from the two cities in dialogue, grouped together thematically (in the Kunstverein) and chronologically (in the Wilhelm-Hack Museum), but not divided by nationality. This brought similarities to the fore, to the detriment of certain important differences which highlight the independent development of Czech surrealism. The chronological presentation covering the period between the early 1920s and World War II obscured the more than ten-year gap dividing the development of Paris and Prague surrealism (respectively in the early 1920s and after 1934), presenting the two movements as if they had progressed synchronically. The same can be said for the international success of the respective movements: while the grand heroes of French surrealism are usually located in the pre-War period, the well-known Czech surrealist Jan Švankmajer – whose films were shown in the exhibition – joined the movement only after the War and is still active. The movements did not develop synchronically, a difference only deepened by the War, which drove many French surrealists to the U.S. while the majority of the Czech surrealist group went underground or joined the resistance. French surrealism became international; Czech surrealism flourished more or less secretly and under repressive regimes, and has only relatively recently come under public scrutiny. Furthermore other differences – in politics, group dynamics, or literary milieu – were glossed over in the Paris - Prague exhibition.

Of course, the many close parallels that were shown are also important. As historically documented, there was a considerable exchange of ideas, persons and art between Paris and Prague, which may well have contributed to the remarkable coherence between the
showcased French and Czech surrealism. The transnational character of surrealism was best illustrated in the photography exhibition at the Kunstverein, where French-Czech differences – either in technique or subject – were hardly noticeable. Thus, perhaps in contrast to the intent to emphasize Prague’s independence, Against all Reason emphasized similarities. This strategy conveyed rather well the fact that many existing differences were overcome by responses to surrealism that transcended national divisions.

However, Czech surrealism deserves a larger audience: the works are fascinating and of high quality and diversity. Much Czech surrealist art has been shut away, first behind an iron curtain and now in private collections, and the Wilhelm-Hack Museum and Kunstverein did an excellent job of making it available to a wider audience.

Tessel M. Bauduin  
University of Amsterdam

1 These two objets d’aliénés (‘objects by alienated people’) – little boxes in which an assortment of found objects such as buttons, string, nails, etc., are meticulously arranged – were purchased by Breton. Ingrid von Beyme, ‘Asylum Art as the “True Avant-Garde?” The Surrealist Reception of “Mad Art,”’ in Surrealismus und Wahnsinn/Surrealism and Madness, eds. von Beyme and Thomas Röske, exh. cat., Sammlung Prinzhorn, Heidelberg, 2009, 154-168 (bi-lingual catalogue).

Six Poems by Paul Eluard (1924 - 1926)

Translated by Natalie Boucly

Mourir de ne pas mourir is the first of Eluard’s major poetic works. Like a significant number of Eluard’s early love poetry, it is largely inspired by his first wife, Elena Dmitrievna Diakonova, known as Gala. The couple met in 1912 in Switzerland, where Eluard spent 18 months in a sanatorium as a cure for tuberculosis. They married in 1917 and had a daughter, Cécile, in 1918. By 1921, Eluard had met Aragon, Breton and Max Ernst and became involved in the dadaist movement. In 1922, Eluard welcomed Ernst to live with him and Gala in France. A shared complex sexual intimacy developed between them but in 1924, year of publication of Mourir de ne pas mourir, Eluard mysteriously absconded for a period of about seven months during which he travelled round the world, using funds belonging to his father’s business. Upon his return, Eluard published Capitale de la douleur. In 1929, Gala left Eluard to start a new life with Salvador Dalí, with whom she remained, until her death in 1981.

The translator wishes to thank Madame Cécile Eluard for her kind permission to reproduce, in the original French version, and in the English translation, four poems from ‘Premièrement,’ extracted from L’Amour la poésie (1929), ‘this endless book’ dedicated as such by Eluard to Gala (‘à Gala, ce livre sans fin’).

Paul Eluard, Mourir de ne pas mourir (Dying of Not Dying), 1924.

L’ Amoureuse

Elle est debout sur mes paupières
Et ses cheveux sont dans les miens,
Elle a la forme de mes mains,
Elle a la couleur de mes yeux,
Comme une pierre sur le ciel.

Elle a toujours les yeux ouverts
Et ne me laisse pas dormir
Ses rêves en pleine lumière
Font s’évaporer les soleils,
Me font rire, pleurer et rire,
Parler sans avoir rien à dire.

© Editions Gallimard, Paris, 1926
www.gallimard.fr

Woman in Love

She is standing on my eyes
And her hair is in my hair,
She has the shape of my hands,
And the colour of my eyes,
Like a stone in the sky.

She always keeps her eyes open
And never lets me sleep
Her dreams in bright daylight
Make the suns evaporate,
Make me laugh, cry and laugh,
Make me speak without having anything to say.
La courbe de tes yeux fait le tour de mon cœur
Un rond de danse et de douceur,
Auréole du temps, berceau nocturne et sûr,
Et si je ne sais plus tout ce que j’ai vécu
C’est que tes yeux ne m’ont pas toujours vu.

Feuilles de jour et mousse de rosée,
Roseaux de vent, sourires parfumés,
Ailes couvrant le monde de lumière,
Bateaux chargés du ciel et de la mer,
Chasseurs des bruits et sources des couleurs,

Parfums éclos d’une couvée d’aurores
Qui gît toujours sur la paille des astres,
Comme le jour dépend de l’innocence
Le monde entier dépend de tes yeux purs

Et tout mon sang coule dans leurs regards.

The curve of your eyes goes all around my heart
A circle of dance and softness,
Halo of time, safe cradle for the night,
And if I no longer remember my life
It is because your eyes were not always there
to see me.

Day leaves and dew froth,
Reeds of wind, scented smiles,
Wings covering the world with light,
Boats laden with the sky and the sea,
Dispelling noise and generating colours,

Fragrances hatched of a brooding of dawns
Still nestling on the straw of the stars,
As the day is dependent on innocence
The entire world is dependent on your pure eyes

And all my blood flows in their gaze.

Premièrement (fragments) XXII, XXIX
Le front aux vitres comme font les veilleurs de chagrin
Ciel dont j’ai dépassé la nuit
Plaines toutes petites dans mes mains ouvertes
Dans leur double horizon inerte indifférent
Le front aux vitres comme font les veilleurs de chagrin

Je te cherche par-delà l’attente
Par-delà moi-même
Et je ne sais plus tant que je t’aime
Lequel de nous deux est absent.

Il fallait bien qu’un visage
Réponde à tous les noms du monde.

Firstly (extracts) XXII, XXIX
Face resting against the window pane like a keeper of sorrow
I have overtaken the darkness of the sky
Tiny plains in my open hands
In their two-fold horizon inert indifferent
Face resting against the window pane like a keeper of sorrow
I look for you beyond the wait
Beyond myself
And I love you so much that I no longer know
Which one of us is absent.

A single face necessarily
Answers to all the names in the world.
Premièrement (fragments) VIII, XIV

Mon amour pour avoir figuré mes désirs
Mis tes lèvres au ciel de tes mots comme un astre

Tes baisers dans la nuit vivante
Et le sillage de tes bras autour de moi
Comme une flamme en signe de conquête
Mes rêves sont au monde
Clairs et perpétuels.

Et quand tu n’es pas là
Je rêve que je dors je rêve que je rêve.

…

Le sommeil a pris ton empreinte
Et la colore de tes yeux.

Firstly (extracts) VIII, XIV

My love because you shaped my desires
Placed your lips on the firmament of your words like a star

Your kisses in the living night
And the wake of your arms around me
Like a flame as a token of conquest
My dreams are in the living world
Clear and everlasting.

And when you are away
I dream that I am sleeping I dream that I am dreaming.

…

Sleep coloured your imprint with your eyes.

Reproduced with the kind permission of Madame Cécile Eluard ©.
Subject
André Breton

To Jean Paulhan

May I, with the help of God, become hardened one day. I have been kept in such a fearful state for months! Can it be that sustaining one man like this usurps universal attention? Capable of the most selfless actions, I was undoubtedly chosen for this by the experimenter. This very day, if am persuaded to do so, I will perhaps sacrifice my reason to humankind. But I don’t know the purpose of your manoeuvring. Apparently, no cost is too great for your success. I no longer assume anything, given the scale of your stage-play.

It’s war, you proclaim, and the illusion is maintained by the issue of official notices and calls to the trains. The station ‘extras’ limit their gestures to what appear simulacra of farewells, though from the moment I step away from the performance I would wager that they return to their homes. What an emulation of command: a rousing spectacle that hasn’t taken place – Jaurès might appear to me and I wouldn’t take him for a ghost. There is indeed great peril for Paris. Hearing nothing from the moment they want me to grasp the hint, I surely astound them with my calmness. The daily papers seem at pains to secure my wholehearted involvement. It is a sight to see how their bulletins go to extremes of ingenuity to rouse my passions.

These improbable heroes now try the power of magical words, which deserves better than the refugee poem. I protest at the crudity of your manner in demanding my favours. Unusual powers of discernment make me sensitive to all your faults. Aside from that, I submit to the yoke: from the first transgressive act, the talk is of bloody repression. I am melancholy at being He who is Stranded with No Luggage and No Horse. What use would my refusal be?

... Roaming in what they call the killing-ground, I make a game of the flagrant imposture. Death is too paltry a spectre for me to consign myself to the darkness of the shelters. With my head at least I protrude above these ramparts. ‘Volunteer for all perilous missions’ - with this mention in dispatches, I provide a show of exceptional bravery on the cheap.

People definitely consider themselves to be satisfied. I have the right to some respite from active service. Didn’t I show by my total consent – at the risk of my life, as it seemed - the degree to which I was civilised? On the 21st August of this year, during an unprecedented bombardment, I deliberately allowed myself to be glimpsed on exposed terrain, directing the passing shells with my finger. How charming too were the torpedoes. I pushed them aside quite well; they freshened the air to the point of demanding payment for the pretty ladies who hurry towards you carrying them: ‘La Brise 1917.’ Dazed by the gypsies, lost amid the slopes, a waltzer sometimes fell, his hand clutching his vermilion rose. With skilful artistry they have kept me for months in the grip of the sublime. Though the machinery of death has failed to overawe me with its imposing presence, as they believed. I have, it is true, stepped over
dead bodies. These are used to supply the dissection rooms. Quite a few more of them could have been made of wax. The majority of these ‘wounded’ looked happy. As for the illusion of spilt blood, even in the provinces this contributes to the success of plays by Dumas. Moreover, do not bandages protect against every indiscretion? My supply officer, who bears a large bruise upon his face, may have been punched. What does it cost to make a company of soldiers disappear bit by bit?

1 Translated by Klem James with help from Timothy Ades. Reproduced with the kind permission of Aube Breton-Elléouët.

2 This reference is obscure.
André Breton’s ‘Subject’ (1917): Simulation and the Origins of Automatic Writing

The writings of this circle are not literature but something else – demonstrations, watchwords, documents, bluffs, forgeries if you will, but at any rate not literature.3

‘Subject,’ a short prose text published in 1918 but not collected in any subsequent volume, can be considered as André Breton’s first essai de simulation. Though not yet automatic, it prefigures ‘Les Possessions’ and mimics the same mental condition that inspired Salvador Dali’s paranoïac-critical method.

In general terms, Breton spoke of a viable new alternative to stale literary convention that he had discovered through his firsthand encounter with sufferers of shellshock and other severe forms of mental derangement brought on by the experience of trench warfare while he was stationed at a medical facility at Saint-Dizier in 1917, citing this as one of the main sources of inspiration for his first experiments with automatic writing. ‘Subject’ stands apart by making reference to a particular case whose clinical details Breton subsequently recounted.4 The man suffered from paranoïa or what, in the French nomenclature preferred by the Surrealists, was termed a délire d’interprétation. Its cardinal feature was delusional beliefs that tended to form themselves into a system. Things and events are interpreted in a paranoïd way as having a secret meaning and personal significance for the subject.

By a sort of reversal, underscored by the word simulacre, it was the world external to this subject that appeared to him as a phoney simulation. ‘It’s war, you proclaim, and the illusion is maintained by the issue of official notices and calls to the trains … The station “extras” limit their gestures to what appear simulacra of farewells’ we read in Breton’s ventriloquising of this man’s deluded train of thought. Maimed bodies littering the battlefield, he surmises, have been smuggled out of dissecting rooms or are wax casts. The ostensibly irrational belief that the war was a charade put on for his benefit by a malevolent experimenter has at least a grain of truth to it however. Who among us would deny that in wartime reality is manipulated and distorted? The conviction of Breton’s subject, that what he saw going on around him was a theatrical illusion designed to mislead him, is oddly compatible with postmodern concepts of spectacle and hyper-reality. Such theories mirror the symptomatology of psychosis in that they describe the effacement of reality by an essentially false or illusory spectacle. Reflecting upon the disappearance of reality from a mediatised society, Jean Baudrillard, a main proponent of the simulacrum in postmodern theory, controversially titled a collection of his essays The Gulf War Did Not Happen (1995), which makes for an apt analogy with Breton’s text.5 In the case of Judge Schreber, a famous paranoïac, Freud conjectures that the florid delusions arose as an attempt to reconstruct an external world from which the libidinal cathexis had been withdrawn, a loss of reality that Baudrillard would term ‘the desert of the real itself.’6 Schreber’s suspicion that other people were merely ‘cursorily improvised’ beings is similar to the interpretation that Breton’s patient puts on the

© David Lomas, 2010
situation in which he finds himself. His delirium strives to make sense of a madness that is no longer of his own imagining, but is very much of the order of the real. These ironies of the case surely constituted a strong element of its appeal for Breton.

At the heart of Breton’s aesthetic credo was a desire ‘to create, to destroy artistically.’ A modernist ideology mandating the destruction of the old in order to make room for the new was epitomised by the Italian Futurists for whom war represented the ‘true hygiene of the world.’ Such a facile prescription was no longer an option for Breton’s generation who had lived through the actuality of a pointless bloodbath. Breton’s subject vanquishes an ignoble reality by a refusal to believe in it. Could this have served as a model for surrealism’s principled negation of reality? In What is Surrealism? (1934), Breton plots an intellectual trajectory that led from Berkeley and Hume to Hegel and thence to Marx. For Berkeley, a radical idealist regarded by some as England’s greatest philosopher, the whole world was a vast illusion, a concatenation of pictures and sensory perceptions arranged by God for our benefit. One wonders if this was not at the back of Breton’s mind as he wrote about a subject whose madness radically negates a world for which Breton himself felt total abhorrence. It also strikingly anticipates a theoretical position advanced by Dalí in ‘L’Âne pourri’ where he predicts that the wilful exercise of a paranoïac faculty, its simulation, can serve to ‘systematise confusion and contribute to the total discredit of the real world.’

Although ‘Subject’ prefigures automatic writing, Breton’s style is neither automatic nor delirious – he does not endeavour to replicate the language used by the patient. Instead, the text takes the form of a dramatic monologue, hovering somewhere between outward speech and inner rumination in a manner reminiscent of symbolist theatre and certain works of his mentor, Paul Valéry. The editors of Breton’s Œuvres complètes cite from a correspondence between them showing that Valéry encouraged Breton in the direction of these experiments and may even have been the source of his title: ‘je suis très enchanté de lire que vous prenez du goût à vos détraqués … Mes amitiés, Breton, et si vous m’en croyez, regardez bien vos sujets.’ (‘I’m intrigued to hear that you’ve got a liking for your nut cases … Best wishes, Breton, and if you take my advice, study closely your subjects.’) The word chosen by Breton as the title of the piece, ‘subject,’ suggests the idea of a patient (in French ordinarily they would be referred to as le malade) who is the subject of investigation or experiment. The anonymous, generic nature of the formulation reflects the derivation of the text from the formula of the psychiatric case study with which Breton was familiar. Additionally, it alludes to the abstract philosophical ‘subject’ and leaves open the question of whom, in this instance, the speaking ‘I’ is. Are we dealing with reported speech, or is an elision implied between the author, Breton, and the subject of this discourse? It may be that Breton did not have clearly formulated answers to these questions.

Might the original subject of this monologue have been a simulator? It is a possibility that a military psychiatrist confronted with this patient no doubt would have considered. There are several case histories in Emmanuel Régis’s Précis de psychiatrie (1914), a textbook studied by Breton, that...
conclude with a diagnosis of simulation. Breton confirmed that the neurological centre where he was stationed had patients under surveillance for suspected malingering. Profoundly disaffected with the war effort by this stage, it is likely that his sympathy was with those who resorted to this form of evasion. Certainly, it would seem that he comes to view simulation as a subversive defiance of military and medical authority. Our subject claims to be the victim of a deception but maybe that is just part of a more elaborate ruse. Is his tale of simulation meant to deceive us (the readers, doctors or judges) – or even to deceive himself since it is after all inner speech that is recorded and not what the patient might have said to his interrogators in the case of a deliberate imposture? Ironically, what inclines us to think that this person is not pretending but really is mad is his lack of any fear. Convinced that the whole caboodle is a sham he is not in the least bit afraid of the consequences of his reckless behaviour. Unlike the malingerer whose feigned illness is intended to remove him from a situation of peril, Breton’s subject roams nonchalantly about in no man’s land. He stands above the parapet during a bombardment attempting to guide the shells with his hands (a detail gleaned from the actual case). Of course, whatever truth status we are tempted to ascribe to the discourse, at another level it is a simulation, indeed a form of pastiche, by Breton. The impossibility of saying with certainty exactly who is deceiver and deceived in this creative ‘patter’ of the inner voice anticipates the whole problematic basis of both automatic writing and ‘Les Possessions.’

A number of issues relevant to the simulation problematic were addressed by Breton in a somewhat neglected but fundamental text, ‘Introduction au discours sur le peu de réalité’ (‘Introduction to the Discourse on the Dearth of Reality’). Dated by him to September 1924, it was composed evidently after the Manifesto of Surrealism was written but before it had been published. The discourse to which this text would have served as introduction never came out, and in all probability was never written, although the Manifesto alludes to it: in a highly ludic passage concerning ideas of transience, Breton begs his friends once he is dead to destroy all copies of the Discours sur le peu de réalité. One gains the impression that this ambitious treatise, had it ever been written, would have set down the philosophical premises of the surrealist enterprise, as a theoretical counterpart to the more polemical Manifesto. Echoing certain pronouncements of the latter, the ‘Discourse’ protests loudly against the leaden and imposed nature of so-called reality, which is policed by ‘lamentable inspectors’ – they could easily be the psychiatrists who diagnose insanity on the basis of a supposed failure to adapt to reality. The issue is confronted head on in a section entitled ‘A Problem’ (273-279). Our habitual use of language, Breton says, operates as a conceptual brake on grasping and changing the world. ‘Does not the mediocrity of our universe depend essentially on our power of enunciation?’ he asks (276). Poetry, on the other hand, rebels against the rules of discourse laid down by reigning ideologies (277). As a counterweight to reality, Breton evokes the hallucinatory power of certain images (278). He toys with the idea of fabricating and setting loose in the world objects seen only in dreams (277), a passage often cited as foretelling the 1930s craze for surrealist objects. Curious by its omission from this essay is any reference to automatism. The contestation of a given reality extends to casting doubt on the fixed or durable character of our identity. Why is imagination not
permitted to identify us with someone else, Breton asks (266)? People look at his photograph and say either ‘It’s you’ or ‘It’s not you’ (273). (This self-interrogation resonates with the questioning ‘Who am I?’ in the opening section of Nadja.) Once more, Breton draws upon his psychiatric know-how, referring to the case of a madman he had occasion to observe at the Val-de-Grâce whose magical rituals incited in Breton himself a disdain for reality. Already postulated in this text is a relation of non-contradiction between the real and the imaginary whose resolution the Second Manifesto (1930) would enshrine as surrealism’s ultimate goal.

In 1924, there was a notorious surrealist prank that affords a precedent for the later challenge of ‘Les Possessions.’ A selection of drawings and poems purporting to be by inmates of a Polish mental asylum were presented together with a commentary in the literary review Les Feuilles libres. The article, ‘Le Génie sans miroir,’ was signed with the initials P.E. in order to deflect attention from Robert Desnos who was the real perpetrator of the hoax. The sequence of images bore a strong resemblance to the drawings Desnos produced in the hypnотic séances, which had been resumed in that year. The article, written in the style of a medical expert, indicates a familiarity with the expanding corpus of studies of art and writing by the insane. Desnos perhaps also meant to satirise the romanticisation of madness that went along with a market-driven upsurge in popularity of outsider art among a growing band of connoisseurs and collectors. ‘Le Génie sans miroir’ takes its place within a genre of pastiche and stylistic imitation that was widely practiced in the period, as shown by Paul Reboux and Charles Muller’s popular À la manière de… series of books. It is against such a background that we must see surrealist automatism, with its claims to being an authentic trace of the unconscious, as having to strenuously, but not always convincingly, differentiate itself. Although more straightforwardly a spoof than ‘Les Possessions,’ it anticipates these later essays in simulating madness. In the only section of the Manifesto that makes any reference to visual art, Breton directs the reader to ‘Le Génie sans miroir,’ underlining the significance he attached to an exercise that he may have recognised as bearing a relation to his own ‘Subject.’ Paul Eluard, Breton’s future collaborator on ‘Les Possessions,’ was also implicated as the putative signatory (P.E.) of the article. The whole affair, which succeeded in duping the editors of the review, had something of the practical joke about it. But it was not aimed specifically at psychiatrists – unlike ‘Les Possessions,’ the preface to which invited specialists to diagnose the state of mind of the authors. The real aim there was not to trick psychiatrists or a reading public into believing that the authors must be suffering from the psychopathological conditions in question, but to challenge them to explain how it is possible for ‘normal’ subjects to simulate such disorders if there truly was so sharp a divide between reason and madness. Notwithstanding their differences, however, the scandalous taint of pastiche is what all three exercises in simulation have in common.

No surrealist artist would seem to be further removed from such considerations, or more wedded to an existential ideal of a painfully wrought subjective truth, than André Masson. And yet, Roland Barthes, in an insightful and refreshingly astringent account of Masson’s semiography, discusses the
artist’s work in terms of an inter-text that Barthes sees as effecting a displacement away from the territory of ownership towards a strategic assertion of falsehood: ‘It is no longer consecrated by a narrow ownership (that of its immediate creator), it journeys in a cultural space which is open, without limits, without partitions, without hierarchies, where we can recognise pastiche, plagiarism, even imposture – in a word, all forms of the “copy,” a practice condemned to disgrace by so-called bourgeois art.’

Turning vice into a virtue, this account of surrealist automatism in terms thoroughly compatible with simulation is a salutary corrective to the jargon of authenticity with which it has for too long been saddled. Returning to ‘Subject,’ it would be difficult to exaggerate the importance of this unique, one-off experiment, which, although it precedes the first truly automatic texts, already institutes automatic writing as a practice of simulation. Simulation, its problematics and the dilemmas it raised – of the real and the imaginary; of the self; of the power of mental images, and of language, to bring into existence new realities – were at the basis of the moral and epistemological world-view of surrealism from the first.

David Lomas
University of Manchester

---


4 Breton recounts the details of the patient upon which ‘ce monologue du poilu mental’ (Valéry) is based in the text ‘Exposition X... Y...’ in Point du jour (1934) and, at greater remove, in the Entretiens (1952).


10 It was first published in a number of the review Commerce which, although dated ‘winter 1924,’ did not actually appear until March 1925. See the invaluable notes in Breton, Œuvres complètes, Vol. 2, 1438-9.
11 Breton, Œuvres complètes, Vol. 1, 334.


Eight Surrealist Collages and Poems

elin o’Hara slavick

‘These collages were made while travelling – in Canada, France, Turkey, Germany, Brazil, the Netherlands and in the United States. They can be found in some of the many travel journals I have kept since 1983 and continue to make. Throughout the journals I also found these poems – not that these particular poems were written to illustrate these specific collages – they were not. Here, they provide a heterotopic context, another hysterical surprise, a fragmented landscape, a subconscious or delirious layer, an automatic narrative in the surrealist spirit. Like travelling, poetry and collage are means to collide times, simultaneously forgetting and remembering, to whimsically collect and discard scraps of everything, to combine the unconscious space of dreams and the foreigner's zone with the stranger's perspective and desire to spin a magical narrative out of organic elements, tape, childhood drawings, playing cards, discarded books, book covers, postcards, art historical reproductions, magazines, Xerox transfers, anatomic illustrations, an old bible…’

Obninsk

I picture you looking up at the hovering Russian glass stars that grow light and reflect history at the school entrance. You want to take one star, bring it home to me where it will collect dust and be a lonely artifact. You are where I should be but the makers of the stars have all died and the glass keepers deny my visit. You are in a forgotten city, where Tarkovsky hid his spirit — old breaths and spoiled weeds, nuclear steam, accidents. A world to destroy a world, where a man is lost just by being there.
Dead Father-in-Law
The day breeds us late, 
old heavy animals dragging from one small room to tiny other. 
We collect gold leaf and blank paper, 
our skin stained with dust.

We do not know what to do with our time so we sift through a dead man’s photographs – 
half naked women pretending to be dead, 
tied to the tracks in high heels, buried on the stone beach up to the ankles or hanging upside down, unable to tell the difference between blood and blush, gravity and artificial wind.

The photographs of his family are evidence of the time before the blindness. 
We carry boxes of pornography and linen to the street.
Sex
The scar I trace is a line of light, as if erased.
I count your body in pieces – Byzantine belly, thick fingers, uneven lips, the holes in your lobes, the pattern of hair down your chest to be recognized as clouds, singular and crowded.

You tell me to touch myself as if you were not there. I touch the slippery nest, the soggy gutter, the wet ruby road. You hold yourself and pull, quicksilver, mercury glass.
Going Home In Your Dreams
There are three people in a room
talking about flying and how
as a last resort you swim,
kick air and slap clouds.

Two people sit against a wall
drinking tea, waving.
You know them as you
take the wind to the top of the door,
fall to the knob.

You are the one to fly
like a horse off a cliff,
straddling the lukewarm green sea.
You believe your limbs to be wings.

You hold them against yourself
and still you float.
A mystery. You knock on a door
upon which is written,
‘A teaching man and his precious wife.’

You enter laughing so wide
the table falls in.
Greek Bus
Flowers suck ivory dry to dust.
Exhaust chokes the ocean
and the lady with her legs up on the seat,
collecting sun in the lap of her dress,
sewing her fingers into the hem
while her husband counts the hairs on his legs.

Nothing is happening.
The ocean licks itself clean
like the night cat sucking rabbit bones dry.
Distance never measures itself.
David’s Dream
A poet standing on a platform
in front of a crowd of miners
at a funeral service for a workers poet says,
‘We are not today
what we were yesterday.’

The workers shout, ‘Speak clearly.
We do not understand you.’

The poet says, ‘Today is not like yesterday.
We have lost our red violin.’
Everyone knows the red violin
is the dead poet who wrote poems
they would play folk tunes to
on their violins.

The workers shout,
‘Speak clearly. We can not understand you.’

The poet tries again,
‘We can’t hear the red violin.’
The miners shout back,
‘The blue today is as blue as blue.
The sand beneath our feet
when we come up from underground
is the sound of a thousand
triangles being murdered.’

The poet stops.
He knows this is the dead poet’s poem.
The poet picks up the violin and starts playing.
elin o’Hara slavick is a Distinguished Professor of Art, Theory and Practice at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. slavick has exhibited her work in Hong Kong, Canada, France, Italy, Scotland, England, Cuba, the Netherlands and across the United States. She is the author of Bomb After Bomb: A Violent Cartography (Charta, 2007), with a foreword by Howard Zinn.

www.unc.edu/~eoslavic