D'Un jour à l'autre: A Tale of Love, War and Friendship

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Abstract

Surrealist histories tell us little, if anything, about the friendship that developed between the painters Leonora Carrington and Leonor Fini in the late 1930s, or about the importance of the intellectual and artistic exchange that took place between the two after Max Ernst's arrest and imprisonment in 1939. Fini is primarily noted in surrealistic literature for her refusal to join the movement officially and her resistance to Breton's authority. Carrington's years in France before World War II are most often chronicled in relation to the better-known Ernst.

The friendship is documented in letters written by Carrington to Fini in the autumn and winter of 1939. The correspondence that began in Paris in 1937, and intensified after Ernst's arrest, affirms the strength of the bonds that existed among the surrealists, male and female. It also encourages a reassessment of the significance and enabling quality of female friendships for women artists in the surrealist circle. While the letters do not change the facts of Ernst's imprisonment, or Carrington's subsequent mental collapse (documented in Down Below, published in 1944), they provide important new material about Carrington's creative life and her state of mind during this critical period. They point to the admiration of the younger artist for the already successful and independent Fini. And they register an independent creative intelligence that enabled Carrington to internalize trauma, register its effects viscerally and verbally and, ultimately, transmute its dynamics into artistic expression.

Introduction

The facts are well-known. Indeed they shape one of surrealism’s enduring narratives of love and loss, creative collaboration and destructive power.¹ We know that the young English painter Leonora Carrington met the German Surrealist Max Ernst in London in June 1937 on the occasion of the opening of Ernst’s exhibition at the Mayor Gallery, and that she soon followed him to Paris. There, with her mother's financial assistance, the couple moved into a rented apartment on the Rue Jacob.² Anxious to escape the jealous outbursts of Ernst’s young wife Marie-Berthe Aurenche, and the painter’s conflicts with André Breton over his friendship with the poet Paul Eluard, they purchased (also with Carrington’s mother’s assistance) a traditional but derelict eighteenth-century farmhouse in the village of Saint-Martin d’Ardèche, thirty miles north of Avignon. They began restoration in the spring of 1938 and were in residence by the summer. While Carrington planted a garden, set up the kitchen and painted the occasional panel for the interior (including one bearing a somewhat fearsome image of a composite mermaid/horse/woman), Ernst installed concrete bas-reliefs of fantastic animals on the exterior and throughout the garden. This bestiary, as well as the couple’s paintings, and the collages Ernst produced for the short stories Carrington was writing at the time, provide ample evidence of their mutual involvement in each other's creative practices. Their works mingled themes, images and psychic avatars, from Ernst’s Bride of the Wind and Loplop The Superior of the Birds, to Carrington’s horses. These alter egos, which include images of liberation as well as transitional beings that challenged the oppositional stability of terms like male/female, animal/human, mythic/real were soon absorbed into a developing

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mythology of the surrealist couple. Linking all of these imaginary creations were the bird and horse hybrids that by 1938 were central to both artists’ personal mythologies of individual freedom, as well as surrealism’s embrace of a notion of the couple that challenged dominant post-World War I bourgeois norms.

During the summer of 1939 the house at Saint-Martin d’Ardèche became not only a gathering place for surrealist friends, but the site of a powerful narrative linked to concepts of *l’amour fou* and surrealist collaboration. This narrative has dominated much subsequent writing about the period and its importance to the lives and work of Carrington and Ernst, as well as other surrealist couples. It also traces the end of Carrington and Ernst’s idyll to the outbreak of war in September 1939, and Ernst’s arrest as an enemy alien, and his confinement in a prison camp at Largentière, followed by a stay at Les Milles, outside Aix-en-Provence. Released and allowed to return to Saint-Martin at Christmas, he was rearrested in May 1940, taken to a prison camp in Loriol, and then back to Les Milles. Finally released, but now sought by the Gestapo, who had included his work in the Degenerate Art Exhibition of 1937, he slowly made his way back to Saint-Martin. There he discovered that Carrington, suffering from a nervous collapse, had fled the village with a friend. In Santander, Spain, she was institutionalized in a psychiatric clinic and treated with powerful shock-inducing drugs. When Carrington and Ernst met again, by chance, in a Lisbon market in 1941, he was in the company of the American heiress Peggy Guggenheim, whom he would later accompany to New York and marry. Carrington meanwhile had entered an arranged marriage with Renato Leduc, a Mexican diplomat and friend of Picasso’s, who provided asylum for her in Madrid and then passage out of Europe. The love affair between Carrington and Ernst was over: ‘He wanted us to get together again,’ she later recalled, ‘and I couldn’t do it. You see, after all that had happened, I was no longer the same person. There was no going back.’ Ernst’s emotional response to the chance encounter in a Lisbon street market is conveyed in a letter written to the painter Leonor Fini on 8 May 1941. ‘I have been in Lisbon for three days, but upset and confused,’ he writes. ‘I have found (and lost again) Leonora. ... She is unrecognizable. She lives with Renato Leduc ... she has not spoken about her life for a year. It beats all the Kafka stories. She is defeated.’

**Uncoupling the surrealist couple**

There is, however, a third figure in this tale, one generally mentioned only anecdotally in histories of Carrington and Ernst. Leonor Fini, a former lover and life-long friend to both Ernst and Carrington, played a crucial, if often unacknowledged, role in the dramatic love story that began in Paris, flowered at Saint-Martin d’Ardèche during the summer of 1939, and continued after the war. Her relationship to Carrington and Ernst is also central to a more complete and more nuanced version of the period between 1938 and 1940. The friendship between the two women – affectively, intellectually and creatively rich and important – can be traced in letters written by Carrington to Fini (or rather what remains of a one-sided
correspondence as, to date, Fini’s letters have not been recovered). These letters provide another point of entry into Carrington’s life after Ernst’s arrest. They affirm the strength of the bonds that existed among the surrealists, male and female. They call for a reassessment of the significance and enabling quality of female friendships for women artists in the surrealist circle. And they provide further evidence of the emotional nurturing, and intellectual and creative exchange already known to have existed between women from Jacqueline Lamba and Dora Maar, to Leonora Carrington and Remedios Varo.

As is well-known Fini, who met the surrealists and began exhibiting with them sporadically in 1935 when she contributed work to a group drawing show held at the Galerie des Quatre Chemins, rejected Breton’s authority and refused to officially join the group. Her embrace of commercial activity as a livelihood, and her decision to live within communities of friends and/or lovers (sometimes of both sexes) in which she remained the emotional, intellectual and artistic centre (and to which she provided significant financial support), rather than to identify with Breton’s autocratic and, reportedly, homophobic world, has no doubt contributed to her subsequent marginalization in surrealist histories.

Fini and Carrington met sometime after the latter’s arrival in Paris in 1937. By that date Fini and Ernst, who had become acquainted in 1933 and who were, briefly, lovers, had settled into a close and affectionate friendship that lasted for many years. It was Ernst who introduced Fini to the surrealist circle’s daily meetings at the Café de la Place Blanche, as he would Carrington four years later. He inscribed a copy of Une Semaine de Bonté (1934), his first collage novel, to her with the words: ‘To Leonor Fini. The more I think of her, the more I forget the devil. Max Ernst.’

‘He [Ernst] was sympathique and very friendly toward me and I felt quite sensual towards him,’ she later reported to her biographer, ‘but nevertheless in the end I remained indifferent because he was always involved in four or five adventures with different women and so there was reason to keep my distance.’ Nevertheless the friendship quickly expanded to include Carrington. A photograph taken in Paris in 1952 when Carrington attended the opening of her exhibition at the Galerie Pierre shows the two women posing as mirror images, while journalists reported on the phenomenon of ‘les deux Leonor surréalisent’ [Fig. 1]. Asked years later about this period, both women spoke of the warmth and admiration they had for each other. In an interview with the author in the early 1980s Carrington commented: ‘She was marvelous. You must tell her that even today I think of her often.’ Fini, interviewed at her summer home in St. Dyé-sur-Loire in 1982, observed with passion that in her view Carrington, ‘though never a surrealist ... was a true revolutionary!’
Saint-Martin d’Ardèche

As apprehensions about impending war intensified in the summer of 1939, a growing exodus of Paris-based surrealists began, and friends arrived at the house in Saint-Martin d’Ardèche. Fini, travelling with her male companions, the writer André Pieyre de Mandiargues and the painter Federico Veneziani, arrived and took up residence for some weeks. There they joined the American photographer Lee Miller and the English painter Roland Penrose, along with visitors that included Peggy Guggenheim and Tristan Tzara, among others. While at Saint-Martin, Fini produced a full-length portrait of Carrington. Although subsequently destroyed, the painting’s evocation of a delicate and pensive Carrington offers an interesting counterpoint to the steely and resolute figure of the painter that dominates the other painting of Carrington that Fini executed the same year. That large multi-figure composition, titled La Chambre Noire, or The Alcove: An Interior with Three Women, includes a portrait of the artist in addition to a monumental full-length portrait of Carrington as a medievalized warrior/guardian.  

The idyllic summer ended, as idylls often do, in anger, regret and loss when the unexpected arrival of Tzara sparked a bitter quarrel between Fini and Carrington that resulted in Fini’s abrupt departure. Before fleeing the house with Mandiargues and Veneziani, she attacked the unfinished portrait of Carrington, scraping away its surface with a knife. A subsequent furious letter elicited an anguished response from Carrington and an intervention by Meret Oppenheim. Oppenheim’s letter to Fini calmed the waters and prompted a conciliatory letter that arrived in Saint-Martin d’Ardèche in September, around...
the time of Ernst’s arrest and imprisonment. This letter led to a more intense exchange of letters in a correspondence that had most likely begun the previous year.

While the letters do not change the facts of Ernst’s imprisonment, Carrington’s subsequent mental collapse and the gradual unravelling of the Saint-Martin idyll, they provide important new material about Carrington’s creative life and her state of mind during the critical months after Ernst’s arrest. They point to the admiration of the younger artist for the already successful and independent Fini and reveal the depth of the exchange between the two artists. They also register an independent creative intelligence that enabled Carrington to internalize trauma, register its effects viscerally and, ultimately, transmute its dynamics into art.

On 16 September 1939, writing from a café/hotel in the village of Largentière, west of Saint-Martin, where she had moved to be closer to Ernst, and using the familiar tu form of address that she had rejected during the height of the quarrel, Carrington wrote:

Your letter was the first good thing to happen to me for a long time. I am deprived, tortured and half-mad. ... Listen – I feel closest to you of all my friends. I suffered terribly from our quarrel. Apart from the affection I have for you, I have missed all the magnificent things you do and say. Acknowledging her great relief that the friendship has been salvaged and the ‘quarrel’ resolved, Carrington turns to more immediate concerns. She confesses to feeling like an ‘old dotard,’ to being able to draw nothing but horses which have, she says, become an ‘obsession,’ and to ‘feeling ill at the sight of a piece of cake.’

Both the growing obsession with horses and the physical revulsion at the sight of food would shape her psychic response to the trauma; they also build upon a familiar visual and literary iconography of these years. Beyond all other images in her painting and writing at this time (and later), it is the horse that emerges as the most powerful signifier of psychic energy and freedom. Carrington’s well-known 1938 self-portrait, The Inn of the Dawn Horse, includes both the nursery rocking horse that she has credited with liberating her imagination as a child (here fixed to the wall above her) and a second, similar, horse that runs free through the landscape outside the window.\(^\text{15}\) Many of her short stories, as well as the novella Little Francis, also assign powerful psychic roles to horses. At the same time, the letters to Fini anticipate the psychic and psychological pain she would later chronicle in Down Below (En Bas), the first-person account of her flight from San Martin d’Ardèche and from Europe, published in New York in 1944, and they reveal the mingling of fears of physical fragility and loss of substance with metaphors of devouring, consumption and sacrifice.\(^\text{16}\)

‘Already,’ she continues, in a foreshadowing of the psychic and psychological pain that suffuses Down Below,

I have noticed some signs of madness in myself. I eat alone on the terrace with five cats. At night I walk from one side of this terrace to the other. I count the steps that I take (17) and believe that someone follows me – truly – there is no one, but I cannot convince myself. If only I could see Max this would be less terrible.
Perhaps the most remarkable feature of the letter, given the circumstances and Carrington’s evident emotional distress, is that it reveals her determination to transform her grief and loss into art. She reports that she has begun a short story (or perhaps has returned to an earlier story) whose main characters are based on Fini and Mandiargues. The ruined chateau that lies at the heart of this tale, as well as many of its other images, resonate with the apocalyptic forebodings that have begun to obsess Carrington, as well as with the gothic element in works of Lewis Carroll, Hans Christian Andersen and M. R. James that she reports reading at the time, along with Baudelaire, Lautréamont and Nerval. The increasingly dark images that shape her perceptions of the world around her after Ernst’s arrest also colour her psychic response to the local inhabitants of the region and to the instability of her personal situation: a foreigner and a young woman living along in the French countryside amid conservative and often suspicious villagers, some of whom had not bothered to hide their disapproval of the couple’s casual social attitudes. After communicating her ‘panic’ to Fini, she returned to the story:

I have written a story (in English) with you in it. I had intended to translate it and send it to you, but all these things prevent me from continuing. You had a chateau in a city of ruins and André was there. He bewitched some chickens and some butterflies and we made dinner out of chickens that fell from the ceiling in flames and were hung from a tree made of foie gras, and other dishes with chickens playing a cake disguised as a piano and surrounded by small birds mummified in the positions of dancers. And you caught a chicken in the air with your mouth and threw it. ... You had the head of a cat and hands covered with fur. ... Now I can’t continue, the idea of these chickens turns my stomach. ... I am fatally sad.

The letter ends with observations on the town and on her earlier grief at Fini’s destruction of the painting of her. She concludes:

This [Largenåtre] is rather a nice little town. I have nothing to do except take walks and you know how I detest walks. I talk to the cats which are nervous and won’t let me touch them. I am relieved that, in destroying this painting [the portrait of Carrington], you have not wanted to destroy me. ... I was afraid of dying after this – more now. I also had much grief from seeing this destruction. Write me, Leonor. I embrace you and I do not know how to say how happy I am to have your letter.

The ‘story’ to which Carrington refers probably originated in the period before Ernst’s arrest, a period in which her short stories reveal a growing reliance on psychological displacement. Disquieting, often sinister meanings are projected onto mundane objects, or recontextualized within expressions of culinary excess, gluttony, wicked satire and human/animal substitutions that dominate both Carrington’s early paintings and stories, and accounts of life at Saint-Martin during the summer of 1939. They begin with the first paintings Carrington exhibited with the surrealists in the Paris and Amsterdam exhibitions and include The Horses of Lord Candlestick and The Meal of Lord Candlestick (both 1938). In the former four wild-eyed horses, their manes and tails erect as if electrified, appear to throw off gravity and the laws of nature as they recoil, rear and, in one case, leap into the branches of a nearby tree as a volcano erupts in the distance, emitting a plume of ash that echoes in the lifted tail of the steel grey horse. In contrast, in The Meal of Lord Candlestick, as Susan Aberth observes, the artist...
presents us with an unholy cannibals’ banquet in lieu of the Eucharist; this is Carrington at her most blasphemous and satiric. A group of grotesque female characters, spectre-like in their whiteness and possessing heads both phallic and horse-like, are seated above a table overflowing with perverse and inventive dishes. Although presented on elaborate platters, the food is more alive than dead: a pink flamingo sports a barrister’s wig, a pony wears a wreath of flowers, a duck skeleton sits upright and alert, and a reclining boar spouts vines from his anus. This is the hallucinatory realm of Hieronymus Bosch, with all the internal logic of a nightmare.

In an undated letter written from Largentière, Carrington reports that she has been re-reading Baudelaire’s *Les Fleurs du mal*, and she observes that these poems make her think of paintings: ‘It reminds me somehow of the atmosphere of the works ... the atmosphere of solitude and danger that surrounds inanimate objects.’ She goes on to say that she has a great urge to ‘see these works again,’ and notes, ‘I am starved to see something of this.’ Although Carrington does not specify which work, or works, had inspired this meditation, she does conclude by saying: ‘I pray you, tell me if you make some works.’

Her interest in the question of the relationship between literary and pictorial mood is reinforced when, writing on 5 October from Largentière, Carrington inquires if Fini has received the letter with the Baudelaire poem. She also notes that in the interim she has returned to the house at Saint-Martin d’Ardèche, ‘to take care of the cats and to look for the original manuscript of her story (the one with you and André in it).’ Ernst is now working in the office of the captain, she tells Fini, accompanying this information with a drawing of a hand in the familiar pose of the *mal occhio* or malediction. She expresses dismay that he has been assigned the job of making up file folders for the captain, a task that she refers to as ‘unnecessary,’ but ‘a way of getting out of the shit.’ Although feeling ‘ill and sick to my stomach,’ she is clearly relieved by the prospect of seeing Ernst for ten minutes the next day. Returning to the subject of the story, Carrington continues that she intends ‘to keep on with it and translate it afterwards [into French]’ for Fini. For the moment, she will provide some passages in order to convey an idea of it. It is particularly important, she emphasizes, that Fini understand that the story is set in a strange town of rose-coloured ruins:

I am there with my two horses, and I notice a flock of butterflies which are all headed in the same direction – I follow them and arrive at a fountain where André, happy and covered with butterflies is seated. Walking on I come to a ruined chateau full of cats. I meet you and we look at each other in a mirror. You have a lynx’s head and I a horse’s head. We are very contented and we follow a passage that leads to the kitchen.

André is seated in the middle of a vast room surrounded by chickens, some of them already plucked and walking about shocked and awkward in their nudity. Others are seated on his knees and shoulders. You say; ‘The chickens are dedicating themselves to André, despite the fact that it pleases him to cut their throats with scissors.’ André wearing a dreamy smile, cuts off the head of the closest one. She jumps toward me, covering my sweater with blood. This horrible and headless chicken persists in following me. And there are dishes that André has made: a plump fowl congealed into a dancer’s pose in a purée of duck liver, cream and plover eggs. Its meat is completely covered with a glaze of foie gras and cherry preserves. His stomach is full of Halva and chestnut ice cream ... and the plate is decorated with canaries in the poses of dancers.
The culinary excess continues but, as Carrington notes ‘it is necessary that I translate it slowly.’ The accumulation of references – from a city of ruins and a rose-coloured chateau full of cats, to André seated in a room surrounded by chickens, and to Fini wearing the head of a cat (or a lynx) and hands covered with fur – recalls Fini’s imposing and theatrical diptych *D’Un jour à l’autre* (c. 1938). Whether Carrington had actually seen the painting, either in Paris before the war or later, remains unclear, as does the exact date of its execution.

Fini’s *D’Un jour à l’autre* I & II [Figs 2-3] depicts the interior courtyard and pool of a deserted classical villa in two panels. Flowers, feathers, eggshells and fish bones float on the surface of the water in the first panel. In the second, the pond is filled with (mostly) female figures in somnolent poses.

Fig. 2: Leonor Fini, *D’Un jour à l’autre*, panel I, c. 1938, oil on canvas, each panel 73 x 54 cm (Photo: Weinstein Gallery/Leonor Fini Archives, Paris).
While not ‘portraits’ in any true sense, these figures include windblown females with dishevelled hair and torn clothing that represent Fini’s female avatars of the late 1930s. To the left of the steps, a dark-haired woman in a long gown twists her body and stares into the distance as another woman reaches up from behind to embrace her. To the left, chickens peck at a seated young man who is bound to a chair; on the opposite side of the pool a woman, her hands covered with fur, peers out from beneath a lynx skin. So closely do the pictorial iconography and the images of Carrington’s ‘story’ about Fini and de Mandiarques parallel one another, that it is impossible not to see a connection, even though imposing readings across media, as we know, often reveals more about the spectator than the artist.

Fini’s biographer Peter Webb has stated that the artist told him in conversation that ‘the villa had been ruined by the cruel cataclysm of war,’ a remark that appears to link the painting firmly to this period, but that may also call into question the 1938 date as that year was still a period of some optimism in France about the possibility that a ‘cataclysm’ might be avoided. Although Webb concludes that ‘the most prominent woman is clearly Leonor herself,’ to this viewer the standing female figure in the water is not clearly identifiable as a specific likeness of either Fini or Carrington. One might argue that it shares
features with representations of both from these years. This can be seen in Fini’s many self-images from the late 1930s (for example, the reclining woman in the striped skirt in *Figures on a Terrace* [1938]) [Fig. 4], and in photographs taken of Carrington at Saint-Martin d’Ardèche during the summer of 1939, including Lee Miller’s *Leonora Carrington* (1939) [Fig. 5]. Taken in the farmhouse’s kitchen, Miller’s photograph captures a characteristic Carrington gesture in which she turns her body away from the camera and appears alert to something in the distance.

![Image](https://example.com/image.jpg)

**Fig. 4:** Leonor Fini, *Composition with figures on a terrace*, 1939, oil on canvas, 99 x 79 cm., Edward James Foundation, West Sussex (Photo: Leonor Fini Archives, Paris).
While questions remain as to the painting’s history during this critical period (it might, for example, have left Paris with Fini in 1939), what is clear is that Fini’s painting and Carrington’s ‘story’ are deeply intertwined in the imaginations of both artists, and that they lie at the heart of a friendship of signal importance to both women during these difficult years. That Carrington and Fini exchanged clothing and occasionally posed themselves as twinned images can be seen, both in photographs from Saint-Martin and in others taken after the war [Fig. 6 and Fig. 1]. While the precise dating of the Fini painting remains to be determined, its place within, and its importance to, the relationship between both women remains indisputable.

Fig. 6: Photographer Unknown, Leonora Carrington and Leonor Fini with two English friends at Saint-Martin d’Ardèche, 1939, black and white photograph (Photo courtesy Sir Philip Powell).
Fini’s letter was accompanied by a gift, a rose-coloured knit sweater that greatly lifted Carrington’s spirits, and, echoing Carrington’s earlier insistence on the chateau’s ‘rose-colored ruins,’ quickly found its way into her writing. ‘It [the sweater] is of immense beauty – living animal and marvelously rose-colored,’ she wrote on 7 October, and, as a result of this gift, she has ‘added a pink goat with a fleecy pelt like this knitting to my story. I include it and my caresses inside. I thank you for this gift.’

The story included by Carrington, or more accurately, the excerpt of a story, tells of the arrival of a flock of peacocks on a terrace (Carrington and Ernst kept peacocks at Saint-Martin). In their wings they carry a rose-coloured goat that emits cries of terror. The goat is presented to Salonique who demands the loan of its rose pelt in order to receive Satan. The peacocks are instructed to remove the goat’s pelt and the sacrificial goat is stripped of its beautiful coat by pulling on its tongue in order to draw out the innards and separate them from the pelt. This somewhat diabolical act not only leaves the goat ‘dressed’ only in its bones and flesh, it represents the animal’s silencing and, ultimately, its death as the goat executes a lewd dance and falls dead in front of the preening Salonique, now ‘splendid in the goat’s rose-colored fur.’ Salonique advances, ordering the peacocks to comb his mane and declaring to all that ‘No one has loved like me.’

Speaking to the ‘bird-chimeras’ that are present, Salonique lauds the power over Satan that the rose-pelt bestows on him, but also calls on the birds to weep because the pelt is torn apart inside. The excerpt concludes with a ‘death song;’ but Fini’s gift continues to reverberate in Carrington’s subsequent letters. Three days later, writing from L’Argentière on 10 October, she reports her delight in receiving a letter from Fini that contains information about paintings. ‘I think often about these works while wearing the rose-coloured fur,’ she confides. Clearly uplifted by Fini’s generosity, she reports that she has been working and has seen Ernst, ‘who found my knit sweater – rose – fur – very beautiful.’ Forwarding Ernst’s affection to Fini, she says that he appears gaunt and although she brings food to him every day, he grows thinner and thinner. ‘This torments me horribly,’ she adds, ‘and I cry with impotent rage.’

In the next paragraph, this rage is sublimated into ‘a meal in which there is a dish made with a very beautiful dead woman, who has the flesh of a chicken (de Bresse). Lying in some jam, halva and preserved fruits, she is stuffed with goose and preserved white mice. The story ends in a very tragic way.’ The choice of a poulet de bresse in this context is surely not coincidental. Not only considered the epitome of French breeding (in 1936 experts in France were called in to determine the purity of the breed and to this day it is considered the ultimate both in breeding and in quality), its methods of slaughter are carefully prescribed to retain the unblemished skin. They include stunning by hand, after which the chicken is bled from the nose to the palate to hide the wound and eviscerated (the intestine may be removed through the anal opening to insure that no incision mars the animal’s perfection). Considered in this light, Carrington’s description of the method Salonique employs to ensure the capture of a perfect rose pelt from the goat reads as a grotesque satire on France’s preoccupation with its national bird.
Carrington relates her description of the woman with the flesh of a *poulet de bresse* (generally a capon or male bird) to her current interest in reading Baudelaire and Lautréamont, the latter because ‘his disgust enrages me in a good way.’ Her own ‘disgust’ a month after Ernst’s arrest is amplified in her Swiftian observations about the people she meets on the cafe terrace at Largentière. In the letter of 10 October she also reports: ‘I feel very lost when I leave my room and see the putrefying pork-like faces of these people.’ Later in the same letter, she alludes to the ‘monstrous life she is leading’:

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I am becoming very distracted and believe myself back in the convent, when I carry things to Max to eat, the guards squash the tomatoes and cheese and make incisions in the sausage in order to see if there are not some letters inside! I laugh with rage. I speak to no one and I am filled with contempt for people. This life is unendurable. If only I could speak for an hour, if I were able to name the pigs and say what I think of people, if I could [indecipherable word] on people for their folly and their pestilential and foul mediocrity. ... While waiting I eat plates of bile, thickened and greenish like vomit. I am sickened and I have a permanent diarrhea as if my body is not able to contain all my disgust.

On 11 October she added a brief postscript reporting her exhaustion: ‘Oh Leonor. Truly if rage could kill these monstrosities of people. They believe in the hotel that I am mad because this morning I kicked the table and chairs while breaking an ashtray and a bottle and crying “Shit!”’ ‘I will burn with rage until my destruction is complete,’ she continues, ‘but NEVER NEVER will I become passive or docile. Leonor, you are like me and I embrace you still more with admiration and affection.’

As the weeks dragged on, Carrington’s desperation grew. In November Ernst was transferred to a larger camp at Les Milles near Aix-en-Provence. By this time, the weather had grown cold and Carrington reports that her bones hurt and that, unable to decide what to do next, she has taken to climbing the hill to the prison despite the fact that except for a few guards it is deserted. She has no feelings except hunger, she says, and is sending packages to Ernst. ‘I love you enormously,’ she tells Fini, ‘with tenderness and admiration. I am happy writing you. But this is a very empty letter. I would like to have some energy ... but I long to fall from the earth and to be licked by a beautiful pure horse ... to abandon myself completely ... perhaps even to die but without turmoil.’ The letter ends with a request that Fini write to Ernst at Les Milles.

**Saint-Martin d’Ardèche, Once More**

Ernst’s release and return to Saint-Martin d’Ardèche at Christmas provided a welcome, if temporary, return to normality. By January 1940, when the correspondence resumes, Carrington’s letters indicate that she and Ernst have re-established the previous year’s domestic rhythms. Even so, food remains a constant preoccupation, almost an obsession, as she struggles to maintain her equilibrium. On 30 January she wrote to Fini reporting that (Georges) Hugnet has written a ‘rather stupid’ review of her book of short stories, *La Dame Ovale* (published in 1939), that gives her ‘a feeling of hunger and misery’ and
that she is rereading M. R. James’s ghost stories. She has also made a ‘good dish’ out of rice, chopped onion, black olives, two beaten eggs, black pepper and canned tuna cooked in the oven and finished with a sauce made from tomatoes, small whole onions, olives and cream. In conclusion she notes that her mother ‘has written and sent good things to eat (creammed mushrooms, peas, cake, etc.) and a completely rotten pheasant (it was a voyage of two months).’

In early 1940 Fini travelled to Paris from Arcachon, where she and her companions had taken refuge. On 7 March Carrington noted that she was pleased to have received Fini’s letter and that, in addition to having begun a new story about some ‘pederasts who eat chickens marinated live in honey [and are] then killed by suffocating them in boiling patchouli vapors,’ she had recently cooked some very good things, including an ‘exquisite’ cake, a Bakewell Tart based on an old English recipe. Carrington’s directions include making a pâte brisée based on the one Leonor’s mother had taught the two friends in Paris:

During this period [i.e. the baking of the pastry] mix one handful of butter and a handful of sugar into a paste. Then add one and a half handfuls of almonds, roasted and chopped (rather fine) and one beaten egg. Take the pâte brisée out of the oven and cover it with a thick layer of raspberry jam. On top of this put the almond mix, etc. and put it in the oven (at a very low temperature). It will be cooked when you see that it is slightly risen and golden. Make this tart, I pray you; truly it is very good.

Later she takes up the theme of cooking again: ‘I very much like your painting with the fish,’ she writes, and ‘yes, I would also love to see you; we would be able to make some dishes better than those last summer because there is an oven now and the stove is installed. I like this cooking very much and I become like one possessed at five o’clock in the afternoon when I am preparing the dishes.’ The actual cooking (always inventive) that takes place in the Saint-Martin kitchen, the fictional cooking that nourishes the deep vein of satire and black humour that suffuses the stories written around this time at Saint-Martin d’Ardèche, and the roles of food and nurture in shaping Carrington’s response to the traumatic events of these years, mingle in her letters to Fini and in stories that, as Marina Warner observes, ‘foreshadow the more acute breakdown Leonora suffered in 1940.’  

One of these tales is the short story ‘Monsieur Cyril de Guindre’, the tale of a beautiful elderly man with the face of an ‘albino orchid’ who lives in an isolated country house. It is one of several written at Saint-Martin d’Ardèche between 1937 and 1940 that include themes and images which also appear in the letters exchanged with Fini during those years (the others are the novella ‘Little Francis’ and the story ‘Pigeon Vole’). All of these stories point toward Carrington’s elaborate fictionalizing of gender and sexual ambiguity within contexts of savage satire and gluttonous spectacle.

‘Monsieur Cyril de Guindre’ encapsulates the mingling of the Gothic grotesque and the surrealist uncanny that saturates the work of authors beloved by Carrington and recommended by her to Fini during these years, in particular James, Swift, Baudelaire and Lautréamont. In it she returns to the obsessive preoccupation with youth and old age, desire and sexual ambiguity, that also pervades ‘Little Francis’ and ‘Pigeon Vole’ Cyril is, despite his age, ‘very beautiful’ as he reclines on an ‘ice blue couch.’ Among the
darkest of Carrington’s stories from this period, its themes include incest, madness, the Catholic Church, homosexuality, lechery and gluttony. When Cyril’s friend Thibaut, a young man as precious in dress and behaviour as Cyril, who possesses ‘golden skin like the corpse of a child preserved in an old and excellent liquor’ and ‘wearing an elegant dressing gown the [rosy] color of trout flesh,’ arrives at the house for tea, he demands to know why the garden is ‘infested with nymphs.’

The nymph in question turns out to be Cyril’s daughter, the product of a loveless twenty-year marriage during which his wife was committed to a sanatorium and his daughter placed in a convent, where she became a particular favourite of a lecherous visiting Abbot well-known to Cyril. Cyril’s response to his wife’s pregnancy included a fantasy in which he imagined ‘that I had sexual relations with a mermaid who was forever fondling me with her heavy limp tail, wetting my pink dressing gown.’

The mermaid has multiple points of intersection with the culture of Saint-Martin d’Ardèche in the months before and after Ernst’s arrest. The image surfaces in a letter Carrington wrote to Fini on 10 October 1939, and in which she refers to a ‘new story with a room in rose velour in which there is a very luxurious bed, on which reposes a Siren who sleeps while making clumsy and limp movements of her fish tail. The idea of a wet creature in a velour room pleases me.’

These elements reappear in Carrington’s Portrait of Max Ernst (c. 1940) in Ernst’s rose-coloured feathered cloak with its forked tail [Fig. 7]. And they resonate in the costuming and sexual ambiguity that suffuses a casual snapshot taken in front of the house at Saint-Martin in the summer of 1939 [Fig. 6] that shows Carrington holding hands with Fini and a young, unidentified, ‘female’ visitor. That figure and her companion, identified by Webb as ‘two unknown women,’ were in fact Joan Powell, a school friend of Carrington’s and her teenage brother. The latter was ‘costumed’ by Fini and Carrington for the photograph and his floral summer frock and hat, the latter secured under his chin by a swath of white netting, suggest a slightly ‘gaga’ Englishwoman ‘of a certain age’ in search of roses to clip. Carrington’s gaze rests not on the boy, but on Fini whose hand she also holds as the two women, dressed alike in long skirts and old-fashioned lace blouses, gaze into each other’s eyes. A cascade of spun fibre envelops Fini’s body and falls to the ground like the manes of the wild horses Carrington painted, drew and wrote about.
The snapshot’s play with doubling, masquerade and transgendering, light-hearted as they are here, continues themes that preoccupied the three artists at the time. Here the four ‘female’ figures are carefully posed in front of a sculpture of Ernst’s Loplop, a private symbolic being that often assumed hermaphroditic characteristics in the artist’s personal mythology. In another, related photograph Fini plays actively with the white fibre, piling it over her head in a way that recalls Carrington’s Maremaid (1938), a painted door panel for the interior of the house that depicts a voluptuous hybrid horse with a woman’s distorted features underneath a tangled mane of white hair and a mermaid’s forked tail. Carrington’s painting in turn echoes the theme of Ernst’s sculpture Meermaid (1939) designed for the exterior of the house. The painting, sculpture and photograph, linked iconographically and symbolically here, have echoes in the Portrait of Max Ernst. And although the voluptuous feminizing of animal/human hybrids that appears in Maremaid is not unknown in Carrington’s painting of these years, it is unusual, and far more characteristic of Fini’s hybrids, particularly her hybrid sphinxes with their large breasts, nude female torsos and carefully modelled hindquarters and tails.

Returning to the story of ‘Monsieur Cyril de Guindre,’ we find Cyril calling for his servant Dominique and requesting that he lay out ‘the angora gown ... and the pope’s striped stockings,’ both of which direct attention to the striped stockings which Fini wears in Erwin Blumenfeld’s 1938 photograph of her and in Carrington’s portrait of Ernst. As Carrington’s story moves between horror and desire, a sinister
manservant serves up a ritualistic meal filled with delicate dishes that include the now-familiar ‘poulet de bresse’:

a plump fat chicken with stuffing made of brains and the livers of thrushes, truffles, crushed sweet almonds, rose conserve with a few drops of some divine liquor. This chicken, which had been marinated – plucked but alive – for three days, had in the end been suffocated in vapours of boiling patchouli: its flesh was as creamy and tender as a fresh mushroom.  

As they ate while listening to music played by a little boy dressed as an angel, Thibaut spoke of a suit he intended to have made, a suit intended not for going out in, but for the boudoir:

The trousers are to be made of rosy beige fur, and very delicately striped in another color, like the pants of a Persian cat. The shirt will be of a very pale green like the feathers of a dying kingfisher, half-hidden by an acid-blue jacket, brilliant like the scales of a fish. What do you think of it?  

The image of the trousers originates in a drawing of a long-haired wasp-waisted young woman wearing a flat-brimmed Spanish hat and a pair of gaucho pants made from the striped fur of a cat’s hind legs that Carrington included in a letter written to Fini written on 7 March from Saint-Martin. ‘You don’t believe that a pair of “pantaloons” made exactly like the legs of a cat could be beautiful –?’ she asks: ‘This would be possible to do with a soft fur with long hair and tiger stripes. I think about this when I look at the backside of the cats.’ She concludes with ‘expressions of friendship to André and Federico from Max and I embrace you.’  

Here again the juxtapositions of cats, mermaids, fish and feathers recall Ernst’s sculpture, Fini’s paintings and Carrington’s writings, but they also introduce the dark, foreboding atmosphere that Rachel Carroll evokes in her article on spectacle and savagery in Carrington’s fiction:

In pursuit of the apparent emptiness of femininity Carrington’s narratives discover a double savagery: the literal and symbolic sacrifice of the feminine at the heart of patriarchy and the aggression of the feral woman’s revenge, which places a voracious orality at the vacant center of femininity.  

‘Monsieur Cyril de Guindre’, like ‘Little Francis’ and ‘Pigeon Vole’, focuses on intense and passionate relationships that slide toward incest, transsexuality and bestiality. Half asleep Cyril finds himself ‘compelled, quite against his will, to taste [his daughter’s] lips.’ Opening his mouth and moving toward her, he meets laughter and evasion as he ‘trembles with horror and desire.’ When the abbot arrives, he has ‘a hand long and thin like a woman’s and like the cast skin of a snake’ while Cyril’s daughter Panthilde, dressed in a convent uniform, has lips that are ‘black and gleaming like the back of a beetle.’  

In ‘Monsieur Cyril de Guindre’ Carrington creates an ambivalent construction of both femininity and masculinity in which the margins of the feminine expand into the spaces of a wilderness in which domestic rituals like cooking fail to produce a symbolic order; where appetites of various forms threaten not just social order, but also corporeal, sexual and psychic boundaries. Carrington’s awareness of this shifting territory, and her ability to give it symbolic form, owes much both to the tranquillity of the first year at Saint-Martin d’Ardèche with Ernst and to the artistic and psychological nurture provided by her
relationship with Fini. Carrington’s dream of once again cooking with Fini in the kitchen at Saint-Martin d’Ardèche would not be realized. The second interlude at Saint-Martin ended when Ernst, denounced by a fellow detainee, was rearrested and taken to Loriol in the Department of Drôme, then returned to Les Milles. He would escape twice, but upon his return to Saint-Martin he would find the house abandoned and Carrington gone.

1 I want to thank the many people who have contributed to this essay by making new material on Carrington and Ernst available, and/or by providing advice and assistance on the text. Special thanks to Georgiana Colville, Richard Overstreet, Natasha Staller, David Lomas, Jonathan Katz, Dolores Hayden, Susan Rubin Suleiman, Nancy Cott, Aube Elléouët, Elisa Bourdonnay, and Tirza True Latimer. This essay is part of a longer study of the importance of female to female friendships among the women associated with the surrealists. Susan Rubin Suleiman’s perceptive article ‘The Bird Superior Meets the Bride of the Wind: Leonora Carrington and Max Ernst’ was first published in *Significant Others: Creativity and Intimate Partnership*, eds Whitney Chadwick and Isabelle de Courtivron, Thames and Hudson, London and New York, 1993, 93-117.


3 Interview with Leonora Carrington, New York, 1983.

4 Max Ernst letter to Leonor Fini, Lisbon, 8 May; “coll.privée/Musée des Lettres et Manuscrits, Paris.”

5 Unless otherwise indicated, all direct quotations from letters are from a private collection; “coll.privée/Musée des Lettres et Manuscrits, Paris.”

6 See, for example, *Surreal Friends: Leonora Carrington, Remedios Varo and Kati Horna*, exh. cat., Pallant House Gallery, Chichester, West Sussex, and Farnham, Surrey, Lund Humphries, 2010. Fini’s dislike of Breton and her refusal to officially join the surrealist movement, even though she participated in surrealist group exhibitions beginning in the early 1930s, have clearly impacted her subsequent marginalization in histories of the movement. Nevertheless, as an indefatigable correspondent, her archive has proved a critical source for valuable documentation of this period. I am grateful to Richard Overstreet, Director of the Leonor Fini Archives in Paris, for his assistance in tracing this aspect of the history.

8 Ibid., 34.

9 The newspaper source is unknown.

10 Interview with the author, New York, 1983; Webb, citing Fini’s use of Carrington’s title La Dame Ovale for a painting of 1956 as evidence of the two artists’ continuing friendship, relates that in 2002, Carrington told him that ‘she had always thought of Leonor as a very good friend whom she loved, and had been strongly impressed by her beauty and intelligence from their very first meeting in the 1930s,’ Webb, Sphinx, 196.

11 Interview with the author, St. Dyé-sur-Loire, 1982.

12 These paintings are the subject of a forthcoming article titled “Adieu mes amis:” Leonora Carrington, Max Ernst and Leonor Fini at Saint-Martin d’Ardèche,’ to be published by Manchester University Press.

13 The details of this quarrel are elaborated by Webb in his biography of Fini; Sphinx, 80-84.

14 The letter is cited in translation by Webb, Sphinx, 81. The correspondence, now in a private archive in Paris, was consulted there by the author.

15 Carrington brought the unfinished painting with her from London and finished it in the rue Jacob studio, using as a model a rocking horse discovered in a Paris flea market. Although in many ways the painting responds to Ernst’s influence on her life at this time, an influence that dates to her mother’s gift to her of a copy of Herbert Read’s Surrealism with its reproduction of Ernst’s Two Children Menaced by a Nightingale, it was also during this period that Carrington and Fini became acquainted. Carrington’s identification of the feminine with the image of the horse and its mythological powers also resonates in Fini paintings like Europa (1942), a painting that contains an image of the artist, bare-breasted and wearing a red cloak being carried through choppy seas on the back of bull as her paintings float alongside nearby. The painting also relates to Fini’s 1933 design for a floor mosaic on the subject of The Charge of the Amazons in which a group of muscular women mounted on war horses prevail over male warriors, one of whom lies prone beneath the horses; the image is reproduced in Webb, Sphinx, 33. I want to thank Richard Overstreet for pointing out the interesting parallels and intersections between Carrington and Fini’s mythological identifications of women and horses.


17 See, for example, Roche, Max et Leonora, 74-76.


19 The 1938 date is also earlier than the date that appears in Gérald Messadié’s monograph on Fini published in Milan in 1951, but the accuracy of Messadié’s dating cannot be established at this time.


21 Marina Warner, “Introduction” to The House of Fear, 8.

22 ‘Monsieur Cyril de Guindre’ was first edited and published by Jacqueline Chénieux, in Pigeon vole contes retrouvés, Le Temps qu’il fait, Cognac, 1986, 23-32. An English version, translated by Katherine Talbot, was published in Leonora Carrington: The Seventh Horse and Other Tales, Virago Press, London,

23 Webb, Sphinx, 84.

24 See my Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement, Little, Brown and Company, Boston, 1985, 82; the snapshot was loaned to the author by Joan and Philip Powell.


27 A similar overtly sexualized and disturbing treatment of female/animal hybrids can be seen in Carrington's paintings Down Below and Villa Pilar (both 1941), which allude to the tortures, terrors and other indignities she suffered when institutionalized in Spain.

28 Carrington, ‘Monsieur Cyril de Guindre,’ in Leonora Carrington: The Seventh Horse and Other Tales, 39.

29 Rachel Carroll, “‘Something to See:’ Spectacle and Savagery in Leonora Carrington's Fiction,’ 154.

Whitney Chadwick is the author of Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement, the first full-length study in English of the women artists associated with surrealism (1985) and has written extensively on surrealism, gender and contemporary art. Her other works on surrealism include Myth in Surrealist Painting, 1929-1939: Dali, Ernst, Masson (1980) and Leonora Carrington: La Realidad de l’Imaginacion (1994). She was also the co-curator and editor of the exhibition and book Mirror Images: Women, Surrealism, and Self-Representation, organized by the List Visual Art Center at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (1995). Her exhibition catalogue work on contemporary artists includes essays on the work of Mona Hatoum, Nalini Malani, Leonora Carrington, Maria Elena Gonzalez, Philip Curtis and Lee Miller, among others. She is also known for her book Women, Art, and Society, published by Thames and Hudson and widely translated.
The Fascination of Filiger: From Jarry to Breton

Jill Fell

Abstract

In 1948 André Breton discovered the work of Charles Filiger through a long article by Alfred Jarry written in 1894 in praise of this reclusive artist. Breton's subsequent fascination with Filiger's work may however have been based on the false assumption of Jarry's continued admiration. Filiger's naïve, mediaeval style and religious subject matter matched that of the magazine L'Ymagier, launched by Jarry and the critic Remy de Gourmont. In admiring Jarry's choice of Filiger for the only long article that he wrote on a single artist, Breton failed to realize that Gourmont was probably the prime mover in the affair. He did not notice that Jarry lost interest in Filiger after breaking with Gourmont. Breton also failed to appreciate that many of the Filigers that he himself collected were of a geometric style, different from the earlier religious paintings praised by Jarry. Despite reproducing Filiger's paintings in later texts, such as L'Art Magique, Breton admitted his inability to explain his attraction to them. His inclusion of Filiger's name with only suspension marks after it in a dossier devoted to mediumistic painters is the most potent sign of his hesitation in assessing this strange artist with whose paintings he surrounded his bed.

Early in his career, the Alsace-born artist Charles Filiger (1863-1928), and Maurice Denis (1870-1943), were described by the young critic G.-Albert Aurier as representing a pure and sincere strain of mysticism and as being heirs to the illuminators of the thirteenth century. In his important article ‘Les Symbolistes’ of 1892, Aurier reproduced a religious woodcut of Denis's side by side with Filiger's Sainte en prière. Denis went on to become the theoretician for the Nabi painters and today has a museum named after him. After a brief period of fame alongside Gauguin in the 1890s, Filiger, on the other hand, vanished from public view until rediscovered by André Breton through a little known article by Alfred Jarry.

Precise information about Filiger's life and work has only recently begun to crystallize. Even the spelling of his name is in doubt. At first he signed his paintings with two 'l's, Filliger, but later with only one. The son of a wallpaper manufacturer, Filiger was born in Thann, near the German and Swiss borders, some forty to fifty miles south east of Épinal. He lived his last forty years in Brittany and died there, impoverished, at the age of sixty-five in 1928. He had no home of his own and relied on local families to take him in, moving from place to place. Subject to frightening hallucinations, he spent several spells in mental institutions and was long thought to have committed suicide. In fact he died in great pain after a failed operation at the civil hospital in Brest.

Despite the very favourable notices of his mystical paintings in the 1890s, Filiger's subsequent isolation in Brittany and secretiveness about his work led him to be forgotten by the critics, who had no reason to believe that he was still painting, or even alive. His formative spell in Paris [Fig. 1], when he attended the Académie Colarossi, had the opportunity to visit the museums and exhibitions, and may also have joined occultist circles, was compressed, at the very most, into the years 1886-89. Henceforward he would always carry reproductions of Giotto and Cimabuē, the
artists whose paintings had most influenced him, among his meagre possessions, but would never again visit the originals or the other Louvre masterpieces in person.

Fig. 1: Filiger in his Paris studio, c. 1888, (Photo Routhier, Studio Lourmel and Musée Départemental Maurice Denis).

Filiger’s strange paintings, currently very sought-after, might have sunk into oblivion had Breton not identified the painter as the discovery of Alfred Jarry, one of the writers he most admired, and then proceeded to single Filiger out as the most interesting of the Pont-Aven group. Breton’s pursuit of the painter’s work became a private quest, lasting over ten years, yet his written allusions to it are extraordinarily sparse. Breton was following in the steps of the writer Charles Chassé, whose work on the Pont-Aven group he had read. Chassé had made many unsuccessful attempts to interview Filiger in the 1920s and had to rely on second hand information. During the last thirty years of his life Filiger painted for himself, ceasing to send pictures to the Paris exhibitions and hiding his paintings from the potential representatives of the predatory dealers he imagined were after them. Many of his surviving paintings remained in Brittany in the hands of the families who had looked after him. Breton set himself the task of finding them.
Thanks to Breton’s perseverance, many of Filiger’s paintings have now come into the public domain. Although his painting career began within the Symbolist milieu and he tends to be associated with the Pont-Aven group, his later work, the intricate and repetitive paintings he called Chromatic Notations, and whose dating is problematic, is now as likely to be analysed in relation to Outsider art as to either Symbolist or surrealist. By virtue of the spiritual, even mediumistic quality of his art, Filiger has been set alongside Georges Rouault and Yves Klein as one of the most profoundly mystical painters of the twentieth century.

Breton’s sudden and late interest in Filiger resulted from his reading of the eight volumes of Alfred Jarry’s Œuvres complètes, published in 1948. In volume seven he encountered Jarry’s article titled ‘Filiger,’ originally published in the Mercure de France in October 1894, the only long article that Jarry devoted to any artist. Breton already regarded Jarry as one of the torchbearers for surrealism. He placed absolute faith in his critical judgement. On the basis of his article, Breton began to look for Filiger’s work and marked him out in turn as one of the beacons on the road to surrealism. Jarry’s support for Filiger had been peculiarly short-lived, however. My argument in this article is that his apparent admiration for Filiger in 1894 had been an attempt to please the writer and critic Remy de Gourmont, who was already supporting Filiger and was also helping to advance Jarry’s own career at the time. After 1895, when Jarry quarrelled with Gourmont, there is no further record of Filiger’s name in the index of Jarry’s works. If Jarry had harboured a continuing admiration for Filiger’s work, he would surely have included him in his ‘celui qui …’ (‘the one who …’) list, published in the first Almanach d’Ubu in 1899. The list includes 135 writers, artists and actors of Jarry’s immediate acquaintance, whom he respected enough to anoint with a Homeric nickname (for example Toulouse-Lautrec, best known for his posters, became ‘celui qui affiche’ ['the one who posts'] and Henri Rousseau, ‘celui qui douanait’ ['the one who used to be a customs officer']). The absence of Filiger’s name from this long list is particularly telling.

As far as Breton was concerned, however, Jarry’s 1894 article on Filiger was enough to persuade him of the artist’s absolute worth. After discovering it, he assigned Jarry the prophetic role of ‘initiator and enlightener,’ pointing the way ahead for the plastic arts. Breton placed Jarry and Filiger among the few who had shone a light on a hidden road, uncovered by surrealism, but too long obscured by such movements as Impressionism, Fauvism and Cubism, focusing as they did on external appearances. His préface-manifeste (preface-manifesto) to Mira Jacob’s exhibition of Symbolist drawings at the Bateau-Lavoir in 1958 declares that the exhibition could do no more than aim, as he puts it, ‘to “catch the essence” of [the artists’] thought entirely bent towards their interior life …’ Later published as the article ‘Du Symbolisme’ it carries three reproductions of Filiger’s paintings from his own collection. Breton pronounced Filiger’s work to be the most outstanding to have emerged from Pont-Aven but, apart from likening him to the mediæval illuminators, as Aurier had done, he was unable to find a precise visual equivalent to the artist’s combination of the sensual and the mystical. In L’Art Magique he suggested that Filiger’s work could be regarded as the plastic equivalent of Germain Nouveau’s Poèmes d’Humilis, crediting him with “rediscovering in the moorland flowers and weather-beaten griffons of the Armorican churches the “extreme faraway” of a religion so nearly extinct that it had turned back into witchcraft.” This is his most detailed pronouncement on the
painter. His few references to him outside the context of Jarry’s article belie the considerable number of paintings he persevered in accumulating.

Breton not only collected Filiger’s paintings but hung them by his bed, believing them to emanate a talismanic power, no doubt relating to the ancient magical source into which he thought Filiger had tapped. In total, he eventually acquired twenty-six gouaches, in addition to a watercolour and a sketchbook. He found the spiritual quality of Filiger’s paintings difficult to put into words. He was fascinated by the symmetry and colours of his favourite painting, which he called simply *Composition symbolique* [Fig. 2], but did not attempt to analyse it, limiting himself to a careful description of the objects depicted and their shapes and colours: the sky is ‘royal blue’; the horses ‘moss green’; the ears of corn ‘gooseberry red.’ ‘The whole,’ wrote Breton, ‘is like the filigree work of a crown suspended over a butterfly.’ He would have liked to call it ‘The Talisman,’ he said, if that title had not already been taken: ‘I just let myself be swept along by love,’ he wrote in 1951, ‘my excuse is that nothing else has cast such a lasting spell on me, nor shown itself to be so impervious to my changing moods.’

![Fig. 2: Architecture symboliste aux deux taureaux verts, c. 1900-1914, (Musée des Beaux Arts, Quimper, Photo Calmels Cohen).](image-url)
In his wholehearted embrace of Jarry’s praise of Filiger, Breton failed to notice two things: first, that the paintings Jarry had described of saints and the Holy Family were mostly of an earlier, quite different style from the ones that he himself prized and bought; second, that Jarry’s support for the artist ceased at the end of 1895, at the same time as he broke his professional relationship with Gourmont. Whether Breton would have reconsidered his admiration of Filiger’s paintings in the light of Jarry’s apparent change of heart is difficult to say. The reasons for the break with Gourmont were mainly personal, resulting as they did from the unwelcome advances of Gourmont’s nymphomaniac mistress, Berthe de Courrière, patron of L’Ymagier. Filiger’s requests for financial help had also become impossible for Jarry to meet. A letter from Filiger of August 1895 refers to Jarry’s earlier ‘noble disinterest,’ saying that a sum of 1,000 to 2,000 francs would help him to clear his debts. Filiger writes urgently that he needs a devoted friend more than ever and hopes (vainly in the circumstances) that the writer will not leave him in the lurch.

Can we divide the personal from the professional here? Does Jarry’s flight from an embarrassing relationship cancel out the admiration for Filiger that he had apparently shared with Gourmont? How far had his wish to find favour with his mentor influenced the impact of Filiger’s paintings on him? These are questions to ponder. Breton’s own enthusiasm for Filiger is enough to validate the painter’s label as a precursor of surrealism, but it is important to record that his initial esteem of Filiger was built on a shaky premise. Filiger’s extraordinary and obsessive Chromatic Notations might never have come to public notice if Breton had realized that Filiger was a part of the Gourmont baggage that Jarry deliberately abandoned.

The title of this article, ‘The Fascination of Filiger,’ thus relates more to Breton’s confessed irrational fascination with the painter than to Jarry’s. It also refers to Filiger’s own fascination with the boys he sought as models, one that constantly got him into trouble. When he died in 1928 all the paintings and drawings he had kept were thrown on a bonfire. Why? Mira Jacob, the Filiger expert and collector, quoted her informant as saying: ‘Parce qu’il peignait de petits garçons nus et que ce n’était pas propre’ (‘Because he painted little boys in the nude and it wasn’t decent’). Filiger’s La Prière, showing a naked boy kneeling, [Fig. 3] was exhibited in 1892 and was typical of the many studies of young nude boys that he continued to make. By the time Breton had finished pursuing Filiger’s work, he cannot have been ignorant of the painter’s sexuality, but he let the spell of the paintings and his blind trust in Jarry’s critical instincts overrule his professed homophobia. He is also likely to have learnt of Filiger’s mental imbalance and schizophrenic tendencies, but elected not to discuss his art in that context.
Jarry’s approach to Filiger’s work had been much more cerebral than Breton’s and focused on the notion of ‘simplicity.’ His article ‘Filiger’ was written in reference to a well-known article published three years earlier by the critic Alphonse Germain, ‘Theory of the deformers: exposé and refutation,’ which had attacked Cézanne, Gauguin and van Gogh’s over-simplified forms: ‘As long as they carry on mixing up the simple with the deformed,’ he had written, ‘as long as they distance themselves from natural laws, they will never achieve decorative beauty.’¹⁹ Never one to be satisfied with accepted categories and definitions, Jarry focused his attention on the words deformer, simple and beauty. He turned the term deformer into a compliment and, using it of Filiger, gave it a new twist: as the term for a painter ‘who paints what IS’ (ce qui EST), he wrote ‘rather than what is conventional.’²⁰

When Jarry wrote ‘ce qui EST’ in his article he may have been recalling Édouard Dujardin’s notion of essences in his famous 1888 preview of Louis Anquetin’s exhibition, where he coined the
In his article Dujardin evoked Épinal images, whose painters, he wrote, would try to fix the ‘intimate reality or essence of an object in the fewest possible lines and basic colours,’ the technique that Filiger was following in his paintings of the time. Not normally given to citing the opinions of his contemporaries at length, Jarry reprinted a large extract from the article under the heading ‘D’Art’ in his short-lived journal, Perhinderion (1896), but attributed the fragment to the art critic, Félix Fénéon, in whose Calendrier column of March 1888 the review had appeared. Although a footnote in La Revue Indépendante gave Dujardin credit for the article, described as ‘notes,’ Jarry either believed or knew that the central section that he elected to reproduce had come from the pen of the man he would dub ‘celui qui silence’ (‘the one who is silent’). The gesture of attribution was a very deliberate one.

In his Mercure de France article of 1894 Jarry had already related some of Filiger’s paintings to specific Épinal images. But this early venture into serious art criticism was never repeated. Publishing the theoretical part of the Anquetin review seems to have been a substitute for expressing his own aesthetic values and thus falling back into the category of critic that he wanted to avoid. The desire to ‘catch the intimate reality or essence of an object’ was certainly the same quality that he had admired in Filiger. His inclusion of the extract under Fénéon’s name was quite likely a tacit declaration that his allegiance had shifted from Gourmont, eminent literary critic and founder member of the Mercure de France, to Fénéon and to Fénéon’s more topical rival journal, La Revue blanche. With the support of Fénéon, Jarry was later to become one of its reviewers and then social commentator, writing for the journal from July 1900 until its demise in April 1903.

Certainly the combative, satirical tone of La Revue blanche was to suit Jarry. His writing, including his article on Filiger, was frequently driven by his urge to challenge the existing order. For his early exhibition reviews he had sought out the latest avant-garde painting and selected the more extreme and controversial for comment. There is no denying, however, that he had composed his article on Filiger mainly as a piece of publicity for the forthcoming journal, L’Ymagier (1894-1896), to be jointly edited by Gourmont and himself, and in which illustrations by Filiger and four other Pont-Aven artists whom he mentions would appear. As his first long article devoted to a single artist, it also acted as an important rung on the ladder towards his own literary career. Thirdly, although the article was not explicit, it flew in the face of the existing prejudice against the work of homosexual artists and writers. Jarry’s semi-autobiographical play, Haldernablou, on the theme of sexual attraction between two young men (in fact Léon-Paul Fargue and himself), had been published in the Mercure de France’s July 1894 number and was about to be reprinted in his first collection of poetry and prose, Les Minutes de Sable Mémorial, in September the same year.

Jarry was not actually going against the grain of avant-garde criticism with his article on Filiger. There had been five previous acknowledgements in print of the painter’s outstanding talent. Albert Aurier had been the first to notice Filiger’s drawings as early as 1890. Émile Bernard saw his paintings in Brittany in the summer of 1891 and in December published a long letter in La Plume, praising his Sainte-Famille as a masterpiece and hailing him as a probable genius. Filiger then sent six paintings to the Salon de la Rose+Croix in March 1892, attracting the praise of both Fénéon and Gourmont. As we have seen, Aurier reiterated his admiration for Filiger’s genuine vein of mysticism
in his article 'Les Symbolistes.' Gourmont now commissioned Filiger to provide an illustration for two of his books, _Le Latin mystique_ (1892) and _L'Idealisme_ (1893), and was by this time corresponding with him on a regular basis. As Filiger had at first refused to see Jarry, it is certainly likely that Gourmont wrote the letter of introduction that gave him access to the painter. From the evidence of Filiger’s subsequent warm letters to Jarry, there is no doubt that he saw Filiger in person. In the first of these, written in August 1894, the painter is at pains to assure him ‘I’ve been working hard since I saw you.’

Count Antoine de la Rochefoucauld, who went so far as to give Filiger an allowance for several years, had published a long article on him in the Salon de la Rose+Croix’s journal, _Le Cœur_, a whole year before Jarry’s. It is certainly Gourmont who should receive the credit for pointing Jarry towards Filiger. Breton acknowledged him as co-editor of _L’Ymagier_ with Jarry, but was too dazzled by Jarry’s unexpected long article on the painter to perceive the older man’s role in the affair. Nor did Gourmont receive his due homage from Breton or the other surrealist writers for his role as promoter of Lautréamont after finding the sole known copy of Lautréamont’s _Poésies_ at the Bibliothèque Nationale and then bringing the writer to public notice with his article ‘La Littérature “Maldoror.”’

Breton’s reference to his contribution is a glancing disparagement: ‘Out of the whole Symbolist generation, Lautréamont, the sublime passerby, the great locksmith of modern life, was only noticed by Bloy and Gourmont, who deliberately implied that he was mad.’

It had been Gourmont’s ambition for some time to launch a new journal devoted to naïve religious art, mainly Épinal images. Jarry’s interest in the project was genuine, but definitely in pursuit of his literary advancement. To have the encouragement of such an eminent critic meant that his literary career would be secured. Of the five commentators on Filiger’s work previous to Jarry, four had pronounced it to be the product of a genuine religious impulse. In de la Rochefoucauld’s perception, the artist’s hand could only have been guided by God himself. This is not quite the tone adopted by Jarry, who mysteriously introduces the subject of evil into his discussion: ‘Filiger has not chosen the worse of the two eternals which cannot exist without each other,’ he wrote ambivalently, ‘love of the pure and pious does not [automatically] reject … that other purity, evil.’

After talking to Filiger and also listening to local opinion while he was staying at Pont-Aven, during June 1894, it may have been apparent to Jarry that the artist was struggling between the two.

In Brittany, a permanent aura of scandal surrounded the artist. Whereas homosexuals of his era tended to gravitate towards the obscurity of the metropolis, Filiger had left Paris in 1889, choosing life in rural Brittany, where his unconventional habits caused him trouble and forced him into constant moves, but where his addiction to alcohol and his difficulties nevertheless attracted the compassion of some local families. His flight from the capital followed a violent incident that had brought him into contact with the law. The police had found him unconscious on the pavement with a knife in his thigh and blood pouring from a severed artery in his hand. Perhaps fin de siècle Paris was not as forgiving towards homosexuals as it has sometimes been painted. Filiger left for Brittany almost as soon as he was out of hospital, later making the excuse that life in the capital was too expensive for him. He had already spent the summer of 1888 in Pont-Aven and met Gauguin there. At the small Café Volpini exhibition organized by Emile Schuffenecker at the beginning of July 1889, the
impoverished artist had gone so far as to buy the album of zincographs by Gauguin and Émile Bernard, labelled ‘viewing by request’ (‘visible sur demande’) and his may have been the only purchase at the exhibition.

The date of Filiger’s arrival in Pont-Aven from Paris is recorded in the register of the Pension Gloanec as 13th July 1889. There he found Gauguin again. The possibility of working with the painter may well have been a potent reason for his move. Pont-Aven was becoming increasingly crowded with summer painters, however. Gauguin and Meyer de Haan moved to Le Pouldu, a tiny village twenty-two kilometres further east from Pont-Aven overlooking a dramatic bay. Meyer de Haan had, in fact, already established a relationship with the owner of the isolated Buvette de la Plage. Her name was Marie Henry, otherwise known as Marie Poupée, and she was flexible about payment. In October Filiger followed Gauguin, with Paul Sérusier on his heels. At Le Pouldu the group formed a painterly brotherhood with a solid work routine, relieved by the conviviality of evening conversation, music and song. The companionship of these painters energised Filiger, who, according to the later account of Marie Henry given to Charles Chassé, would engage Gauguin in furious theoretical argument when they were together, but in his absence, could not praise him enough. At this date Filiger was enthused with the stylistic simplification that Anquetin, Bernard and Gauguin were advocating, stripping his pictures of detail. His Paysage du Pouldu of 1890 is an extreme example of the Synthetist style, as it was then known. Its bright areas of colour are arranged into flat horizontal bands [Fig. 4]. The picture is only brought to life by an off-centre tree contorted into an extraordinary shape, reminiscent of Japanese woodblock prints. Indeed Filiger would have had plenty of opportunity to study the prints by Utamaro with which Gauguin had decorated his studio in Pont-Aven in 1888, as well as the polychromatic nishiki-e or ‘brocade pictures,’ which he hung in his attic in Le Pouldu.39

Fig. 4:  Paysage du Pouldu, 1890, (Musée des Beaux Arts, Quimper).
The artists of the Buvette de la Plage gradually covered the walls of the inn with their paintings. Filiger painted a Virgin Mary next to the door and Gauguin decorated the ceiling. After his departure in November the inn became known almost as a museum of Synthetist paintings, drawing a succession of other painters, notably Roderic O’Conor, Mogens Ballin and Wladislaw Slewinski, to see them. Filiger was proud to act as guide and exponent. However, the departure of Gauguin marked the beginning of his isolation and perhaps the start of his determined reclusiveness, for although the artists Maxime Maufr and Jan Verkade briefly took rooms in Le Pouldu in 1891, the cold autumn weather drove them back to Paris, leaving Filiger alone. Verkade wrote that it was a combination of the wild inhospitable coast and the dust and disorder in Marie Poupée’s house that forced him to leave.

Filiger only painted a handful of landscapes during the year of Gauguin’s stay, all of which seem to be experiments in the Synthetist style. Otherwise, his styles fall into two distinct categories: his neo-quattrocentist paintings of saints, Christ and the Holy Family [Fig. 5], which date from about 1890; and the experimental, largely undated *Chromatic Notations* of his later period.

![La Sainte Famille, 1893, Private collection](image)

Fig. 5: *La Sainte Famille*, 1893, (Private collection).
Because of the absence of dating, it is uncertain when Filiger embarked on the *Chromatic Notations*. They are brightly coloured geometrical compositions, in which portraits of humans or animals are broken down into perfectly symmetrical kaleidoscopic fragments, that Filiger called his *crystal grains*. His unfinished *Notations*, which he referred to as ‘my little exercises,’ or ‘experiments,’ show a plethora of tiny notes radiating from the main portrait. These constitute a precious record of his thought processes and method, and are not just messages to himself but to posterity. ‘P.S.,’ reads one on his *Notation* titled *Homme roux or Prométhée* (1915-28), ‘my method has nothing to do with my past research, nor P.G. [Paul Gauguin], nor the Japanese.’ The tiny, near illegible notes also exhort the potential spectator to read his previous annotations on other pictures in order to confirm the progressive development of his experiments towards a new method. He obviously envisaged the whole series of *Notations* as an intricate, step by step process whose careful chronology should not be broken. This may be one of the reasons that he hoarded his paintings so jealously in later life, living in fear of plots by dealers to take them away from him. According to the Le Guellecs, who were the final Breton family to take him in, Filiger’s delusions became so serious at the end of his life, that he would allow no-one but the members of this family to come near him, absolutely refusing to see visitors. If a visitor did manage to gain access to the house, he would accuse him of being the dealer Ambroise Vollard, and of concealing his identity in order to get hold of his pictures.

If a *Notation* did not please Filiger, he would cross it out and do another one on the back of the painting. Auction houses double the price of these particular works. Dating Filiger’s work is fraught as he did not date it himself. In his Quimper catalogue of the *Charles Filiger - André Breton* exhibition of November 2006 to February 2007, the Filiger expert André Cariou did not attempt to date the majority of the *Chromatic Notations*. He believes Jacob’s dating of 1903 for the start of the *Chromatic Notations* to be too early, distorting the perspective of Filiger’s post-Pont-Aven work. It was not possible to date several of the paintings in the exhibition more accurately than 1900-14 or 1915-28.

Given that Breton’s reception of Filiger was through a pre-1895 Jarry filter, the dating of the *Chromatic Notations* is crucial. In Jarry’s article there is no mention of any such paintings. His admiration and critical acclaim were perforce limited to Filiger’s early Synthetist phase and especially to the androgynous saints such as those Gourmont had described in his review of 1892. In particular, Gourmont mentions ‘a John the Baptist preaching,’ exclaiming ‘with what faith!’ There is certainly a sensual intensity in the gaze of Filiger’s saints and angels that does not quite match his apparent aim of removing emotion from the faces of his subjects. Jarry quotes him as advising Eric Forbes-Robertson: ‘Never make your subjects laugh or cry.’ Gourmont meanwhile writes of his ‘so determinedly pure angels’ (‘volontairement purs’) and uses the words ‘wilful’ (‘volontaire’) and ‘pervers’ (‘pervers’) of another of Filiger’s saints. These descriptions seem strangely at odds with the qualities normally associated with saints. Gourmont notes that Filiger’s work certainly throws up inconsistencies (‘incohérences’). He credits him with being a genuine mystic, however, hailing his *Christ aux anges* as a masterpiece [Fig. 6] and his Breton Virgin as worthy of the fifteenth century religious Flemish painters.
After this approbation from such an eminent critic, Jarry was not risking his own critical reputation by praising Filiger, but he had to find his own particular voice for this important article. Three quarters of the way through, he realized that it did not express his voice at all. His final paragraphs are a disavowal of the whole practice of reviewing art. Jarry never embarked on serious art criticism again. He did not, however, retract his praise for Filiger, and Breton, in his strange reticence on the subject of the painter, was perhaps following Jarry’s steps in realizing that he was unable to do justice to the paintings in words. ‘Much better than any dissertation on Filiger,’ Jarry summed up, ‘would be to go and seek our own reflections in the ivory surface of the faces and bodies of Filiger’s Sainte-Famille, reproduced in Le Cœur. I haven’t discussed that painting, because it would have been a totally useless exercise.’

As much as possible, Jarry had recourse to quoting the artist’s own words. To help him, Gourmont had allowed him to read Filiger’s letters, now unfortunately lost. In one, Filiger had

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Fig. 6: Christ aux anges, 1892, (Private collection).
described his creative process as similar to the experience of trying to capture a religious vision – one which left him exhausted:

The disturbance – or the passion that I feel in front of my work – often paralyses my mind and my limbs leaving me unable to work for several days; it is as if my hands were frightened of touching the Dream – and yet we must perforce descend from it – out of respect to our fellows, to face up to the tribulation of attaining the reality of the Dream.51

Dream was one of the permitted subjects of the Salon de la Rose+Croix, set up by the self-styled Sâr Joséphin Péladan in 1892 in opposition to the official Salon at the Durand-Ruel Galleries. It was here that Filiger sent the majority of his paintings for exhibition after leaving Paris. Péladan had compiled a long list of rules. One stated that his Salon wanted ‘to ruin realism, reform Latin taste and create a school of idealist art.’ A further rule stated that the Order of the Rose+Croix favoured ‘first the Catholic ideal and Mysticism. After Legend, Myth, Allegory, the Dream, the Paraphrase of great poetry and finally all Lyricism, the Order prefers work which has a mural-like character, as being of superior essence.’ Péladan required neither jury nor entry fee. He stated that the Order, ‘which grows by invitation only, is too respectful of the artist to judge him on his method and imposes no other programme than that of beauty, nobility, lyricism.’52 Péladan’s philosophy matched Filiger’s own ideals and the Salon de la Rose+Croix proved to be an important showcase for his work. It was here that de la Rochefoucauld encountered it and was impressed enough not only to write his long article on the painter, but to offer Filiger the patronage that enabled him to afford the materials for his gorgeously coloured and gilded paintings, and indeed to buy the works himself.

Filiger’s description, cited in Jarry’s article, of the mediumistic trance-like process through which he created his paintings could not fail to appeal to Breton, given the high value that he placed on dreams and the unconscious. After Breton’s death a draft document on mediumistic painters, dictated to Gerard Legrand in 1956, was found in his library. Filiger’s name figures in it but, frustratingly, carries nothing but suspension marks after it.53 Against the names of the other painters listed, at least one painting is written down as selected by Breton. It is not impossible that he regarded Filiger’s entire œuvre in the mediumistic category.

Jarry’s article is certainly useful as a record of Filiger’s pre-1895 paintings. He lists all the ones that he had seen exhibited in Paris. He may well have been reporting hearsay when he evokes the local peasant population clustering round Filiger’s Épinal adaptations and exclaiming: “What you do is even more beautiful!”54 He would no doubt have described any that he had actually seen. Filiger may not have invited him to see any work that he had in hand.55 Wladisława Jaworska was told that Filiger frequently received postal orders from de la Rochefoucauld in payment for pictures imitating Breton popular prints.56 Filiger’s geometric version of Notre Dame des Ermites, of unknown date, does not at all resemble the Épinal original to which Jarry refers and which is reproduced as a pullout in L’Ymagier no. 3 (April 1895). There the Virgin is indeed ‘draped in folds of red cloth’ as described in his article.57 As Cariou has pointed out, both Filiger’s Notre Dame des Ermites [Fig. 7] and Madone aux fleurs de lys [Fig. 9] seem to be modelled on the same seventeenth-century popular image also reproduced in the third number of L’Ymagier.58
From Filiger’s Épinal adaptations Jarry moves on to discuss his *Sainte Cécile*, which he had seen exhibited in Paris. [Fig. 8] He comments on ‘the Saint’s arm whose sex is uncertain,’ presumably referring to the saint’s firm, masculine grasp of her violin shaft.\(^59\) Perhaps, he speculates, the hand is actually that of the angel standing behind her, ‘angel hand blending with hers.’\(^60\)
Fig. 8: *Sainte Cécile*, 1893, (Private collection. Photo Sotheby’s New York).

In fact the model for *Sainte Cécile* and all the angels was the same boy. Jarry seems to know that Filiger constantly used the same boy model, for he finishes his description of *Sainte Cécile* by saying ‘we have already seen this same mystical and sensual profile of an adolescent boy at Le Barc de Boutteville’s.’⁶¹ Repeating the same face was a device Filiger had borrowed from Cimabue. According to the critic Julien LeClercq, when standing with him in front of Cimabue’s *Virgin with Angels* (1290-95) Filiger had burst out: ‘How Cimabué must have loved that head to paint it as often as that!’⁶² In Le Pouldu in 1894 Filiger actually used three local boys as his models. Joseph Pobla from the hamlet of Keraro, his most frequent model, and very often depicted with his head cocked on one side like Botticelli’s *Venus*, would have been fourteen at the time of Jarry’s article. Not only did Pobla stay with Filiger for long periods of time, the painter even took refuge at his family’s house when he had to leave Le Pouldu.⁶³ The boy models were of course not as angelic as Filiger paints them. In a letter to his friend Jan Verkade, Filiger refers to a different boy who had been staying with him for a month:

> He’s still very handsome; I’ve been able to use him to redo the majority of my faces; but he’s extraordinarily lazy. I have to yell at him like a donkey to make him do a little bit of work, and even so I bend over backwards to be nice to him. Do you think I’m a little king here? Good heavens, no! I’m his absolute slave … ⁶⁴
Filiger’s little Synthetist landscapes, his paintings of saints and the Holy Family and his adaptations of popular prints, were the only paintings that Jarry would have known as early as 1894 when he wrote his article. It was not until 1959, over ten years after reading it, that Breton acquired the two Virgin and Child paintings, Notre Dame des Ermites [Fig. 7] and Madone au Fleur de Lys [Fig. 9], that can be linked to the period of Filiger’s association with Jarry. At the same time Breton acquired Le Juif errant (c. 1907), which Marie Anquetil designates as the first of Filiger’s paintings to tend towards the style of the Chromatic Notations. Filiger admits in a letter of March to April 1907 to his brother, Paul, that this painting is based on a popular image. Once again he was using L’Ymagier as a resource. The portrait is in fact a cut down copy of an eighteenth-century Amiens woodcut, Le Vrai portrait du juif errant reproduced in L’Ymagier no. 5, October 1895. Filiger just copied the head, placing it in an octagonal frame and surrounding it with several brightly coloured ornamental borders.

In his Madone au Fleur de Lys we can also note a high degree of symmetrical patterning and attention to tiny dots of colour, which seem to herald the extreme geometric detail of the Chromatic Notations. Considering that Jarry alluded to them as early as 1894, Filiger’s adaptations of popular prints could perhaps be regarded as an important stepping stone between his quattrocento-style religious paintings and the Notations. If he was constantly producing his own interpretations of Épinal images for money, as Jaworska was told, it is perhaps not surprising that he concretized his later visions in a similar, if more complex, compositional idiom. The precise symmetry, the centrality of the main figure and the placing of the sacred heads in patterned haloes would have represented familiar handholds for him. His method, according to Jaworska, was to take square and compasses and mark out his crystal grains one by one before colouring them with extraordinary minuteness, producing an interplay of complementary colours, sometimes superimposing one on another, sometimes progressively intensifying a single colour.

Fig. 9: Madone au Fleur de Lys, n.d., (Private collection).
Filiger’s obsessively meticulous method of building up his Chromatic Notations attracted the attention of the psychiatrist Alfred Bader in the late 1960s. Bader, who was studying the role of madness in creativity, believed that Filiger’s Notations were symptomatic of schizophrenia. His thesis was that a mind in chaos tends to reach out for a strict formal structure as a means of healing itself. The work of Bader’s artist-guinea pigs, to whom he gave hallucinogenic drugs, almost always tended towards geometric formalism. Filiger is known to have drunk heavily and to have taken ether as well as hypnotic drugs, particularly veronal which sometimes led to erratic behaviour. When he had received some money for a picture, he would often hire a gig with the intention of visiting one of his favourite sitters, but stop at various estaminets on the way. He would later return in a perturbed condition to his kind-hearted neighbours in the village of Saint-Maudet, trembling and telling them that he had been violently attacked and pursued across country by enemies. This account was recorded by a local doctor, Léon Palaux, who devoted a chapter of his social history of the commune of Clohars-Carnoët near Le Pouldu, to the writers, painters and poets who had stayed there.

The Chromatic Notation, known either as Visage de face or Tête inscrite dans un carré [Fig. 10] obtained by Breton is typical of Filiger’s later work and of several gouaches that Breton obtained from the family who last looked after him. Bader believed that the Notations, more than any of Filiger’s other work, demonstrated his attempts to build a self-healing structure in the face of the frightening void with which his mental condition threatened him. Bader perceived the format of the Notations in terms of the geometric mandala. He moreover asserted that the magical effect of the mandala was born of a sort of personal exorcism that could also resonate with the spectator. In his article, he argued that Breton’s particular fascination with Filiger’s paintings may have been caused by this magical effect.

Fig. 10: Notation chromatique, Visage de face, (1915-1928) (Private collection. Photo Calmels Cohen).
There is, however, a more recent hypothesis. Another commentator, Marc Le Gros, believes that Filiger based his structure on a different magical diagram known as the Archéomètre, illustrated in the works of the occultist and Rosicrucian Saint-Yves d’Alveydre, and that although Breton knew this, for mysterious reasons, he decided to say nothing about it.70 [Figs 11 and 12]
Yet Filiger’s *Chromatic Notations* [Fig. 10] are far more complex than the Archéomètre, with minute polygons of varying shapes, sizes and colours that had to be oppositionally replicated in a series of rings around a central face, staring outwards or in profile. In his early paintings of saints, Filiger had lavished detail and ornament on their haloes, emulating Byzantine icons and touching them up with real gold. As I have speculated, the structure of his *Notations* may have developed out of his earlier habit of surrounding his religious subjects with a magnificent aureole. Not known as a churchgoer in Brittany, it seems likely that he gradually moved from Christian to occultist and theosophical iconography.

Comparing Filiger’s geometric designs to the abstract configurations of the Swedish artist Hilma af Klint (1862-1944), the art historian Robert Welsh perceived ‘French occultism’s basic vocabulary of sacred geometry (cross, circle, square, triangle)’ to be predominant in his geometric designs.  

Importantly too, Annie Besant’s and Charles Leadbeater’s book *Thought-forms* (1901) was in wide circulation, containing illustrations not only of the coloured auras produced by varying emotions, but of intricate geometric patterns produced by sound. Filiger’s kaleidoscopic ‘auras’ can be understood much more readily in relation to these theosophical illustrations than to the ‘sacred proportions’ propagated to the Nabis by Paul Sérusier, based on the aesthetic theories of Father Desiderius emanating from Beuron Abbey in Baden Württemberg in Germany.

For a potent evocation of theosophical-style auras, we can turn back to Jarry. He had begun to attend Rosicrucian soirées a year or so before his visit to Filiger in 1894. Theosophical vocabulary surfaces at several points in his early poetry and prose. In a review of 1903, the very year that Jacob marks as the possible (although unlikely) starting point of Filiger’s *Chromatic Notations*, he was
inspired to pen an unusually extravagant description of the fictional characters invented by the writer, Henri de Régnier, for his newly published novel Le Mariage de Minuit.  

In some strange way their exuberant personalities exude their own special atmosphere ... They move at the centre of a halo that matches and magnifies their outline ... Each facet of that corner of the universe where they like to be, remembers them like a melody, because they are, and this gives a musical radiance to their surrounding aura ... In another kind of vibration, they would be portraits, spinning the gilt of their frames like chrysalises to their own measurements.  

'Musical radiance ... spinning the gilt of their frames' – Jarry’s description could equally well apply to the characters and creatures who peer out from the magnificent, crystalline ruffs constructed by Filiger, of which, as far as we know, he was completely ignorant.

For all his reclusiveness, Filiger was a prolific letter-writer. His letters and those of his correspondents to and about him, enable us to build up a picture of his temperament and views. One of his closest friends was the Dutch painter Jan Verkade, who became a monk at the Beuron Abbey but remained in correspondence with both Filiger and the painter Armand Seguin. One particular letter from Verkade to Seguin delivers an extraordinary warning about their mutual friend:

Avoid also the company and influence of Filiger. He is a terrible instrument in the hands of Satan, verily a wolf in lamb’s clothing. I pray for him often and hope indeed that God will save him after all. But for you he is dangerous. Pray for him, but keep away from him. If you are not convinced by what I say, I shall say the same and more to him, but I hope this will not be necessary, as I do not like talking like this about anybody. But this time I must.

Verkade, who worked alongside Filiger for a while and whose paintings of saints are quite similar, wrote a memoir, Le Tourment de Dieu (1923). In it, Filiger is disguised under the name of Drathmann [sic], ('Draht' being the German word for the French 'Fil' or 'thread,' and 'ger' is a corruption of 'gars' or 'fellow'). Verkade wrote that Drathmann had regarded him as a pupil and shown him the affection of a master. He also alluded to a narrowly avoided temptation that had assailed them after a day of intense, intimate conversation. Whatever this incident was, it may be what was worrying him when he wrote his warning letter to Seguin. Verkade also reported Drathmann’s belief that suppressing your emotions was a kind of suicide.

According to Breton’s daughter, Aube Elléouët, Filiger was the only artist on whom her father gathered a dossier of papers. In his brief attempts to classify Filiger, we have seen that Breton either put him in the same mystical category as the beggar poet Germain Nouveau or linked him to Jarry, but the discrepancy between his fascination with Filiger’s paintings and the brevity of his written comment on the artist is striking. It is indeed as if he believed the pictures had an intrinsic magical quality, preferring to let them cast their own spell and to speak for themselves. He was certainly in sympathy with the sensation of inadequacy expressed by Jarry, as he concluded his article on Filiger, regretting what he had written in his attempt to do justice to the painter’s work. In his own article, Breton cites Jarry’s words: ‘It is really absurd that I should be seeming to make this sort of compte rendu or description of these paintings … If I could explain point by point why they were very beautiful, it wouldn’t be painting any more, but literature, and that wouldn’t be beautiful at all.'
Breton’s embrace of Symbolism as a clear antecedent to surrealism, by virtue of its focus on the spiritual, came surprisingly late in his career. Rather than explain the motives behind his obsessive pursuit of Filiger’s pictures in the 1950s, he preferred to quote Jarry’s 1894 assessment of the artist’s work. But the passage of half a century, and Breton’s discovery of Filiger’s later work, were bound to influence their respective attitudes. The young Jarry was writing his first article with an eye to the approval of his then mentor, Remy de Gourmont, and to their forthcoming magazine *L’Ymagier*, with its focus on religious medieaval images. While he recognized that Filiger’s subjects were actually local Breton peasants, the paintings cited by Jarry all depict saints, the Holy Family or the Virgin Mary. By contrast, the faces that stare out from his later Chromatic Notations are sometimes more akin to gargoyles. What both Jarry and Breton shared was an admiration for Filiger’s disdain of external appearances in favour of an internal reality. Jarry wrote that Filiger infused his local models with ‘the eternal animus emanating from the heavens and carried in [popular] memory’ as if they were transparent vessels.\(^7^9\)

In 1892 Aurier had excluded Filiger from the ‘trend towards a slightly pagan form of mysticism’ among what he called the ‘mystical-Catholic’ artists of the nineteenth century, perceiving him as a throwback to the naïve illuminators of the thirteenth century.\(^8^0\) In his final years however, Filiger renounced his Christian mysticism, Chassé was told, devoting himself to a total paganism, whose inspiration he drew directly from his pictures themselves.\(^8^1\) Believing that the artist’s trances had enabled him to tap into a nearly extinct strain of magic that had survived from ancient Armorica, Breton placed his reproductions of Filiger’s paintings under the aegis of *L’Art magique*. By hanging the actual paintings close to his bed, he may have hoped that he could evoke the power of this ancient Breton magic himself. His conviction of the magical power inherent in Filiger’s work and his emotional attachment to it in later life is quite distinct from the convoluted intellectual analysis by the twenty year-old Jarry, as he sought, in his first attempt at art criticism, to explain Filiger’s art in the context of the Synthetist movement, with Remy de Gourmont looking over his shoulder.

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3. «Toutefois, de Pont-Aven émergent entre toutes l’œuvre de Filiger, portée d’un bout à l’autre par les mêmes ailes que “le Cantique à la Reine” de Germain Nouveau, et à quelques fléchissements près, celle de Sérusier” (‘Among all the works that emerged from Pont-Aven, Filiger’s stands out, borne on the same wings as Germain Nouveau’s “Hymn to the Queen,” with that of Sérusier close behind), André Breton, ‘Du symbolisme,’ (1958) in *Le Surréalisme et la peinture, Œuvres complètes*, Gallimard, Paris, 2008, Vol. 4, 784.


10 ‘On n’aspirait de la sorte qu’à retablir les premiers jalons d’une route ici trop longtemps coupée par les passages à niveau du rien (variations à mourir d’ennui sur l’image externe) mais dont tels nouveaux ressorts comme ceux du surréalisme et de l’”abstraction lyrique” suffiraient à nous assurer qu’elle ne s’est pas perdue dans les sables,’ Breton, ‘Du symbolisme,’ 784.

11 ‘L’exposition de dessins symbolistes, au “Bateau-Lavoir”, dans les dimensions qui lui étaient assignées, ne pouvait se proposer que de “saisir l’essence” d’une pensée toute tournée vers la vie intérieure, telle qu’à l’approche du xxᵉ siècle elle s’est cherchée une issue et des moyens d’expansion dans la peinture.’ Bid., 783.

12 See Étienne-Alain Hubert’s note to Breton, ‘Du symbolisme,’ 1369-70.


15 ‘Je m’y laisse entraîner par l’amour. Mon excuse est que rien n’a disposé sur moi d’un enchantement plus durable, ni ne s’est montré plus à l’abri des variations de mon humeur,’ Breton, La Clé des champs, 320.


20 ‘Et nous déroulerons ces notes sur FILIGER parce qu’après tous les peintres “parisiens” il est agréable de voir un qui s’isole au Pouldu; … parce qu’enfin c’est un déformateur, si c’est bien là le
conventionnel nom du peintre qui fait ce qui EST et non … ce qui est conventionnel,’ Jarry, ‘Filiger’ Oeuvres complètes, Vol. 1, 1024.


24 Namely Émile Bernard, Armand Seguin, Eric Forbes-Robertson and Roderic O’Conor.


26 Cited in Jacob, Filiger l’inconnu, 155, n. 21.

27 ‘Filiger: des tableaux de sainteté dans un goût byzantin, humanisés par les quattrocentistes,’ Félix Fénéon, ‘Peinture et mysticisme: les Rose+Croix,’ Le chat noir, 18 March, 1892.


31 ‘Lettres de Charles Filiger à Alfred Jarry,’ in Dossiers du Collège de ‘Pataphysique, Nos 22-24, 10.

32 Antoine de la Rochefoucauld, ‘Charles Filiger,’ Le Coeur, Nos IV-V, July-August, 1893, 8.


34 ‘Le passant sublime, le grand serrurier de la vie moderne, Lautréamont, n’est aperçu de toute la génération symboliste que par Bloy et Gourmont, qui le désignent expressément comme fou,’ Breton, ‘Le Merveilleux contre le mystère,’ Minotaure 9, 1936, 30.


36 Jacob, Filiger l’inconnu, 20.

37 For example Frank Harris’s account of wealthy sodomites fleeing to Paris after the trial of Oscar Wilde has led to misconceptions about sexual tolerance in Paris. See Graham Robb, Strangers. Homosexual Love in the Nineteenth Century, Picador, London, 2003, 36.


40 ‘The paintings of the master and his disciples rapidly made a temple of Apollo out of a vulgar inn: the walls became covered with decorations that stupefied the rare traveller. No surface was spared,’ Armand Seguin, ‘Paul Gauguin,’ L’Occident, March & May, 1903, reprinted in exh. cat. Meijer de Haan: le maître caché, Hazan, Paris, 2010, 144.


44 For a transcription of Filiger’s notes see Fig. 46 *Notation chromatique, double face: tête d’homme roux ou Prométhée*, in exh. cat. *Charles Filiger – André Breton*, 98-9.

45 Jaworska, *Gauguin and the Pont-Aven School*, 246, n. 129.


50 Jarry, ‘Filiger,’ 1028.

51 ‘Le trouble - ou la passion que je ressens devant mon travail - m’engourdit souventes fois l’esprit et les membres, au point de me laisser dans le désœuvrement pendant plusieurs jours; mes mains ont comme peur de toucher au Rêve - et pourtant il nous faut bien descendre – par charité pour nos semblables, jusqu’à la peine d’atteindre la réalité du Rêve,’ Jarry, ‘Filiger,’ 1027.


54 ‘Ce que vous faites est encore plus beau,’ Jarry, ‘Filiger,’ 1026.

55 Filiger’s regret at having entrusted some *études* to Jarry’s friend, Léon-Paul Fargue to take to Paris the previous year, only to hear that he had tried to use them as security against his hotel bill, may have deterred him from showing Jarry his work, despite Gourmont’s intercession. His letters relating to this affair are reproduced in De Freitas, ‘Léon-Paul Fargue et Alfred Jarry autour d’une même passion pour la peinture: 1892-1894,’ 17-20.


59 ‘le bras de la Sainte où le sexe hésite,’ Jarry, ‘Filiger,’ 1026.


64 ‘Il est toujours très beau’: he writes, ‘il m’a servi pour refaire la plupart de mes figures; mais il est d’une paresse extrême, je dois crier sur lui comme sur un âne pour le faire travailler un peu, et pourtant je fais plus que mes moyens me permettent pour lui être agréable. Vous me traitez de petit roi ? bon Dieu ! non, je suis bel et bien son esclave…’ Filiger, letter 10 to Jan Verkade, Summer 1893. Dossier Filiger. Musée Départemental Maurice Denis, Saint-Germain-en-Laye.


66 Cariou, exh. cat. Charles Filiger – André Breton: A la recherche de l’art magique, 53.

67 Jaworska, Gauguin and the Pont-Aven School, 164.


69 Palaux ms., cited in Jaworska, Gauguin and the Pont-Aven School, 245, n. 120.

70 Le Gros, ‘Entre Charles Filiger et André Breton: Saint-Yves d’Alveydre,’ 23.


72 An illustration of Chladni’s ‘sound plate’ is reproduced in the chapter on ‘The Form and its Effect,’ as are the ‘Forms in Sound’ of F. Bligh Bond from his essay ‘Vibration Figures,’ in A. Besant and C.W. Leadbeater, Thought-Forms, London, The Theosophical Society, 1901, figs. 2 & 3

73 Henri de Régnier, Le Mariage de Minuit, Paris, 1903.


75 Cited in a letter dated 24 September 1902 from Armand Seguin to Roderic O’Conor, in Jaworska, Gauguin and the Pont-Aven School, 163.


77 According to a note held by the Musée de Pont-Aven, the philosopher Maurice Savin recorded that Breton had also intended to write a book on Filiger. Cariou believes him to have been too exhausted after writing L’Art Magique to fulfil this intention. Cariou, ‘La Passion d’André Breton pour la vie et l’œuvre de Charles Filiger,’ in exh. cat. Charles Filiger – André Breton: A la recherche de l’art magique, 19-20 n. 8.


79 Jarry, ‘Filiger,’ 1026.


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Modern Narcissus: The Lingering Reflections of Ancient Myth in Modern Art
Silvia Loreti

Abstract
Why has myth continued to fascinate modern artists, and why the myth of Narcissus, with its modern association with narcissism? This article considers the relationship between the Narcissus myth and the lineage of modern art that runs from Symbolism to surrealism through the polymorphous prism of the Greco-Roman Pantheon to which Narcissus belongs. The article offers an interpretation of the role of mythology in modern art that moves beyond psychoanalysis to incorporate the longer span of the art-historical tradition. Addressing issues of aesthetics, gender and sexuality, the following account highlights Narcissus's double nature as an erotic myth that comprises both identity formation and intersubjectivity, as enacted in the field of representation. The myths associated with Narcissus in the history of Western art will help us reconsider his role as a powerful figure capable to activate that slippage between word and image, identity and sociability, representation and reality which was celebrated by the Symbolists and formed the centre of the surrealists' social-aesthetic project.

*Et placet et video; sed quod videoque placetque, non tamen invenio.*

Ovid

In his *Contribution to the Theory of Political Economy* (1857), Karl Marx rejected the idea that the aesthetic pleasure derived from ancient Greek art and poetry proceeded from the political values of the society that produced them. In contrast, he highlighted the importance of mythology in classical art, condemning it as childish and irreconcilable with modern society: ‘all mythology subdues, controls and fashions the forces of nature in the imagination and through imagination; it disappears therefore when real control over these forces is established [in] a society demanding from the artist an imagination independent of mythology.’ In the second half of the nineteenth century, the development of disciplines such as archaeology, anthropology and psychoanalysis seemed to contradict Marx's forecast. The archaeological discoveries of the ‘primitive’ substratum of classical antiquity – the pre-Hellenic worlds of the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey* and the Labyrinth of Knossos – provided physical evidence of myth’s historical validity, while Freud reframed myth in terms of the structure of the unconscious. Thus, far from disappearing, mythology became the centre of new claims for ‘control over the forces of nature,’ whether temporal, spatial or instinctive. In modernist art, the capricious logic of mythic narratives and tropes reflected the contradictions and anxieties of modernity.

Of all the myths of classical antiquity, that of Narcissus is among those that modern artists and intellectuals have addressed most often and most directly. It was not the first psychological theory of narcissism, but Freud’s incorporation of Narcissus into his theory of psychosexual development remains the major modern transformation of the myth. He identified a pre-Oedipal phase between autoeroticism and object-love as ‘primary narcissism,’ which persisted in adult latency as ‘secondary narcissism.’ He considered the first phase to be part of healthy libidinal development, but condemned the second as an aberration characteristic of attractive women and
Following Freud, the myth has been redirected from aesthetics towards ethics or pathology. Famously, Jacques Lacan redescribed narcissism in the more neutral terms of a universal formation of identity through the ‘mirror stage.’ As the foundation of the imaginary order, narcissism is, according to Lacan, a phase of the development of subjectivity during which the child takes possession of the world, while also laying the foundations of the symbolic order pertaining to intersubjectivity. Maurice Merleau-Ponty noted how, by shifting the focus away from sexuality, Lacan interpreted narcissism in ways that make ‘full use of the legend, incorporating the components that Freud had overlooked.

This article moves beyond psychoanalytical approaches to Narcissus to consider his relationship with modern art through the myth’s initial context – the Greco-Roman Pantheon. Narcissus’s relation to a number of fellow mythological figures highlights his double nature as an erotic character that marries identity-formation and intersubjectivity. The myths associated with Narcissus in the history of Western art reveal his power to activate a slippage between word and image, identity and sociability, representation and reality. Symbolist culture celebrated these dynamics, which the surrealists put at the centre of their social-aesthetic project.

In the *Metamorphoses* (finished circa 8CE), Ovid already had Narcissus hover between subjectivity and sociability. He stressed the tension between Narcissus’s isolation and a range of associated figures, not least through the story’s position in the poem. Narcissus appears in Book Three during a series of accounts of divine vengeance. The context is the story of the nymph Echo, who hides Jupiter’s adultery from Juno by verbally misleading the goddess. Juno takes revenge so that the nymph’s once-deceiving voice now only repeats the words of others. The tale of Echo’s sad fate is brought to a close with a mention of her unrequited love for Narcissus. Having been rejected by the handsome youth, the nymph’s frame wastes away through grief and tears, until nothing is left of her but her mimicking voice.

A similar fate awaits Narcissus. Having rejected the love of not only Echo but of many youths too, he is condemned to experience the same pain that he inflicts on his suitors. Out hunting one day, Narcissus approaches a perfectly quiet pool to drink; but ‘while he wished to calm his thirst, another thirst grew (*sitim sedare cupit, sitis altera crevit*, 415) – the love for his own image. At first, Narcissus does not recognise himself in the pool, and ‘loves a hope without body, thinking that what is only a shadow is a body (*spem sine corpore amat, corpus putat esse, quod umbra est*, 417).’ Abashedly, he begins to court his own reflection; believing that it responded to his smiles, he stretches his arms towards it until he tragically recognises himself in the image – ‘I am he!… I burn with love for myself: I arouse and endure the flames (*ipse ego sum!… uror amore mei: flammas moveoque feroque*, 464).’ Engaging in a mirror play that echoes visually Echo’s verbal reflections of his own words, Narcissus, exhausted, prays to be granted the same destiny as the nymph he rejected: ‘If I could only escape from my own body! (*O utinam a nostro secedere corpore possem!* 468)’ he cries, before fading away, bidding farewell to ‘the boy I loved in vain (*frusta dilecte puer*, 500),’ while his echoed words fill the air. ‘Instead of his body,’ Ovid wrote, the Naiads, the Dryads
and Echo ‘found a flower of white petals surrounding a golden cup (croceum pro corpore florem inveniunt foliis medium cingentibus albis, 510).’

Like this flower, the story of Narcissus is both self-contained and surrounded by several figures that make it signify in the narrative economy of Ovid and the art-historical tradition that followed from the *Metamorphoses.* In recent years, feminism has considered Narcissus’s intersubjective component in relation to Echo as his female Other. I will return to Echo in a following section of this article. She is one of several figures who make a fleeting appearance in Narcissus’s pool – figures who reflect mythology’s original collective dimension, which is maintained within the surrealists’ approach to myth, despite its fragmentation into a series of individualistic tropes in psychoanalysis.

**Narcissus cum Orpheus: Narcissus as the Sound of Vision**

Narcissus’s fortune was equalled by another tragic myth of physical transformation, that of Orpheus, which held great currency in the Symbolist circles that would have so deep an influence on the surrealists. Orpheus occupied much of book ten of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, as both narrator and object of narration. Orpheus’s lyrics, Ovid wrote, had enchanting powers over men, animals and even gods. His poetry allowed him to enter the Underworld in an attempt to bring Eurydice, his deceased young wife, back to life. Sadly, Orpheus lost her once and for all when, impiously, he contravened the condition of his grant by looking at Eurydice before leaving the world of the dead. Thereafter, the poet sang in solitude of the loves of the gods for young men. This, together with his disdain for women, made him the leader of a homoerotic cult.

In more recent times, it is this aspect of the Orpheus myth that has attracted the most critical attention. In his reflection on the social function of same-sex desire, Herbert Marcuse, in particular, brought together Orpheus and Narcissus as a performative-contemplative principle capable of recalling the ‘experience of a world that is not to be mastered and controlled but to be liberated – a freedom that will release the powers of Eros now bound in the repressed and petrified forms of man and nature.’ Marcuse considered the two homoerotic myths as the expression of a new sociability based on the unitary character of primary narcissism. ‘Narcissism,’ he wrote, ‘may contain the germ of a different reality principle: the libidinal cathexis of the ego (one’s own body) may become the source and reservoir for a new libidinal cathexis of the objective world – transforming this world into a new mode of being.’ Narcissus’s status is raised by his association with Orpheus: the mythological-artistic tradition and psychoanalysis are reconciled in an attempt to overcome the equation of the myth with narcissism.

Within Symbolism, however, it was the ‘post-erotic’ moment of Orpheus’s story that exercised the strongest fascination. Rather than dwell on Orpheus’s living body, artists chose to represent Orpheus’s corpse, as described in book eleven of the *Metamorphoses*. Orpheus’s death, unlike the quiet fading away of Narcissus who was assisted by Echo alone, happened violently at the hand of a group of inebriated women. However, another group of women, only this time pious, cried upon the dead poet’s body as they had done on Narcissus’s. It was this mournful moment that
the Symbolists celebrated. They depicted the death of Orpheus in anti-anecdotal scenes in which the poet’s severed head and lyre lie on the beach of Lesbos, or are mourned by the nymphs during their journey to the sea along the river Hebrus.

The Symbolists’ approach to the myths of Narcissus and Orpheus can be considered to be the product of a modernist emphasis on vision and a will to merge representation and perception in order to create a *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Symbolism aimed, in Gustave Kahn’s famous definition, ‘to objectify the subjective (the externalisation of the Idea), instead of subjectifying the objective (nature seen through a temperament).’¹⁴ This reversal of the Cartesian *cogito* as revived by French Naturalism finds a parallel in Narcissus and Orpheus’s transfiguration from dramatic narratives into immobile icons. Furthermore, their stories summon up that concurrence of the senses which the Symbolists adopted from Charles Baudelaire: ‘Like long echoes that mingle in the distance / In a profound tenebrous unity, / Vast as the night and vast as light, / Perfumes, sounds, and colours respond to one another’ (‘Comme de longs échos qui de loin se confondent / Dans une ténébreuse et profonde unité, / Vaste comme la nuit et comme la claret, / Les parfums, les couleurs et les sons se répondent’).¹⁵ The narrative of Narcissus *cum* Orpheus contains complex correspondences between the senses of sight and hearing. Narcissus in the pool mirrors Echo’s frustrated pursuit; appropriately, the nymph’s voice echoes Narcissus’s unreturned words; Orpheus’s lyric poetry, in turn, resonates with the world it describes, but his song is drowned-out by the Maenads’ ferocious noise, and his vision of eternity makes the immediate reality of his beloved disappear. In his *Orphée* (1865), Gustave Moreau depicted the mythical poet through these sensorial correspondences. Representing an unrequited visual dialogue between the dead poet and the contemplative nymph, Moreau associated Orpheus’s lyre and closed-eyes to conjure up the resounding, death-defying powers of poetry. Scenes of contemplation over Orpheus’s head highlight the possibility for sight to take on the indeterminacy of words.¹⁶ Here, the painter emphasised the extra-corporeal dimension of the myth’s sensuality by drawing on both sacred and profane iconography to convey its syncretic and androgyne character.¹⁷

The myth of Narcissus is structurally simpler than that of Orpheus, and has proven historically better suited for visual representation. Considering Caravaggio’s *Narcissus* (ca. 1597), for instance, Stephen Bann has explored the development of an alternative ancient tradition of the Narcissus myth to the narrative recounted by Ovid: Philostratus’s detailed description (*ekphrasis*) of a lost painting that depicted Narcissus at the pool.¹⁸ Even more so than Ovid’s drama, the pictorial version of the myth emphasised the deceitful character of the erotic gaze. Arguably, it is the inherent tension between visual clarity and sensorial suggestion as conveyed through painting that attracted the Symbolists to the Narcissus myth. This seems evident, in particular, in John William Waterhouse’s *Echo and Narcissus* (1903).¹⁹ By way of mirroring correspondences, Waterhouse represented the underlying sexual frustration of the story through visual rather than physical relations. Waterhouse distilled the Ovidian narrative in a system of visual echoes that centre on Narcissus’s reflection, offering a very apt example of the ways in which the myth highlights a concern for the self-reflexivity of vision that characterises the early phases of modernism.
Vision, when granted the nuanced, expressive possibilities of poetry, allowed the Symbolists to offer a new treatment of age-old narratives and to present themselves as at once literary and modernist. The surrealists were quick to take their lead. In the work of Constantin Brancusi, which stands, generationally and aesthetically, between Symbolism and surrealism, Narcissus and the severed head of Orpheus appear to be coupled with yet another myth – that of Prometheus. To be sure, while a lost bust of Narcissus and a plaster model for a Narcissus Fountain are documented in Brancusi’s work of the 1910s and he produced several versions of Prometheus during the same period, he made no known sculpture of Orpheus. However, a photograph that Brancusi took of his studio in the 1920s shows the plaster of the Narcissus Fountain ‘overlooking’ two reclining heads that recall Symbolist depictions of Orpheus’s severed head [Fig. 1]. Moreover, the two heads were to be the models for The First Cry and The First Step – two sculptures that, in conjuring up vision, sound, and action within the same figure, perform similar effects to the Orpheus myth.

Fig. 1: Constantin Brancusi, Photograph of the sculptor’s studio in rue Ronsin, Paris, showing the lost cast for The Narcissus Fountain (1920s–1930s), Gelatin silver print, 13½ x 8½ in., matted and framed, ca. 1922-23. © ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London, 2011.
Anna Chave has drawn on the reflective character of Brancusi’s ultra-polished, ovoidal and self-enclosed heads to sketch a reading of the sculptor’s work which emphasises its narcissistic qualities in relation to issues of gender. In the case of the Narcissus bust, however, its later evolution into the bronzes of Mademoiselle Pogany and Princess X was not preceded by a cast of either bust or fountain in bronze. Whether this was a conscious choice on Brancusi’s part, or simply a paradoxical coincidence, is unclear. What matters here is neither the female development of Narcissus (a point to which we will return in a following section), nor the narcissistic function of the medium, but the primacy that the artist seems to assign to what could be called ‘speaking vision’ in determining the identity of his work.

Friedrich Teja Bach has called Brancusi’s photographic depictions of his sculptures ‘programmatic texts without words.’ Around the time Brancusi took this particular photograph, the surrealist Roger Vitrac commented on the limits of language in expressing the ‘bewitchment’ (envoûtement) derived from the spiritual unity conveyed by the mutilated and decapitated bodies scattered around the sculptor’s atelier:

... contrary to certain works whose justification requires an acquired knowledge, the work of Brancusi imposes itself to the highest faculties without the intermediary of intelligence. He has thrown a great bridge between the senses and the mind, which we cross at the speed of lightning when attention allows us to acquire the passive attitude of the Sphinx.

Alexandra Parigoris has read Vitrac’s insights as superseding the Freudian interpretation of Brancusi’s fragments in terms of castration anxiety and the disavowal of sexual difference at the centre of Chave’s interpretation. Invoking Rainer-Maria Rilke’s ‘Archaic Torso of Apollo,’ Parigoris has called attention to the meaning of the ‘fragment’ as anti-anecdotal and related to the ‘phenomenology of vision’ within modernist culture. Further evidence for this interpretation is offered by Paul Valéry’s ‘Fragments of Narcissus,’ which was composed around the time that Brancusi took this photograph, and which constitutes one of the great moments of Narcissus’s Symbolist resurrection. Valéry’s second long poem dedicated to Narcissus – one of three in the poet’s life-long engagement with the myth – presents the figure in frustrated opposition to the vision en abîme offered by its own image: ‘Everything brings me back and enchains me to the luminous flesh / That divides me from the vertiginous peace of the waters’ (Tout m’appelle et m’enchaîne à la chair lumineuse / Que m’oppose des eaux la paix vertigineuse).

The shape of Brancusi’s Narcissus Fountain conveys this circular tension between self and universe, identity and representation. Via the enclosed forms of solitary figures such as Rodin’s Thinker (originally titled The Poet, 1902) and Maillol’s Mediterranean Woman (originally called Latin Thought, 1905-23), with their Orphic references, Brancusi’s Narcissus seems to quote the circularity at play in another unrealised project for a Narcissus fountain: the Fountain of the Kneeling Youth, or Narcissus in Five Reflections (1900) by the Belgian Symbolist Georges Minne, a circle of five replicas of Minne’s own Kneeling Youth.

Rosalind Krauss’s argument about the Bretonian celebration of the ‘perceptual automatism of vision’ is particularly pertinent to our experience of Brancusi’s fragmented sculptures seen
through the camera.\textsuperscript{26} The \textit{Narcissus Fountain} and fellow statues collapse the modernist myth of medium specificity to reassert the wholeness of vision, afforded by the eye in its 'savage state.' This state, to go back to Freud via Breton, eliminates contradiction to replace 'external reality by a psychic reality obeying the pleasure principle alone.'\textsuperscript{27} The sensual vision celebrated by the Symbolists, carved and photographed by Brancusi and theorised by the surrealists, harmonises Narcissus (and Orpheus) with the Marcusean possibility of a return to a state of primary narcissism in which the self can take possession of its surrounding world. This integration of aesthetic dream with vital instincts finds a mirror in what Breton called 'the surreality that resolves the dualism of perception and representation.'\textsuperscript{28} Jean Cocteau, a figure associated with surrealism contrary to the movement's wishes, drew heavily on the Symbolists' association of Orpheus with Narcissus, giving the two myths a new, 'Marcusean' identity by conflating them with his own personal mythology.\textsuperscript{29} In Cocteau's personal mythology, the resurfacing of Narcissus \textit{cum} Orpheus reflects the evolution of myth from aesthetic motif to psychic trope that runs from Symbolism to surrealism.

**Narcissus \textit{cum} Tiresias: Narcissus as the Smell of Sex**

Intervening, like Brancusi, between Symbolism and surrealism, and pre-dating Cocteau's engagement with myths, the poet Guillaume Apollinaire tried to embody the correspondence of word and image in text. He presented himself as the 'Rotten Sorcerer' (\textit{L'Enchanteur pourrisant}) – the title of one of the poems in which he identified with Orpheus,\textsuperscript{30} while proclaiming 'I am a painter too' (\textit{Et moi aussi je suis peintre}), a statement that served as the initial title of \textit{Calligrammes}, his posthumously published collection of poems.\textsuperscript{31}

Apollinaire rose to mythical status during World War I. Convalescing from a head trepanation, the result of a wound gained heroically on the battlefields, in 1916 he became, like Narcissus, the object of a prophecy through a 'premonitory' portrait that Giorgio de Chirico had painted before the war. The \textit{Premonitory Portrait of Guillaume} (1914), which was originally made to illustrate the cover of \textit{Calligrammes}, would later enhance de Chirico's own mythical aura amongst the young surrealists.\textsuperscript{32} Before Apollinaire's profile – which appears in the shape of a shooting target, complete with hole in the head – the painting depicts an ancient statue with blacked-out sunglasses. The poet's masculine jaw line contrasts with the androgynous features of the sculpture. While the statue's truncated bust thwarts attempts at gender identification, the glasses and the poetic licence taken with the hairstyle also prevents ready associations with a specific ancient type. The statue in the foreground conflates the Venus of Milo and the Apollo Belvedere in a representation of a feminised Orpheus, whose androgynous symbolism is manifested in the conch and fish appearing in the painting.\textsuperscript{33} By superimposing female and male iconographies in this 'portrait in absence,' de Chirico presents Apollinaire’s sexual identity as unstable, and links the poet’s 'portraits' and 'blind vision' to the Freudian uncanny – the male subject's fear of castration when confronted by his feminine side.\textsuperscript{34}

De Chirico's 'premonitory' portrait of Apollinaire leads us to discuss Narcissus's formal indeterminacy in relation to issues of psycho-sexual identity. The problematic status of masculinity
post-World War I was the subject of a drama that Apollinaire wrote after recovering from his head wound. *Tiresias’s Breasts* (*Les Mamelles de Tiresias*; premiered in Paris in June 1917), centred on the figure of Thérèse, a woman who decides to transform into a male soldier, leaving her husband with the responsibility of childbearing. The tale illustrated both Apollinaire’s concern with ‘the problem of repopulation’ in war-ridden France and his critical view of official solutions. The character of Thérèse/Tirésias was partly based on the Marquis de Sade’s emancipated Thérèse, who refused to bear children to her lover, and partly on the mythological seer who, in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, proclaims that Narcissus will live ‘as long as he does not know himself’ (‘*si se non noverit,*’ 3. 348).³⁵

In a short passage immediately preceding the story of Echo and Narcissus, Ovid recounted the destiny of Tiresias, a man who, after separating two mating snakes, metamorphosised into a woman for seven years, after which time, striking the two snakes again, (s)he went back to being a man. In light of this experience, Jupiter and Juno once summoned him to arbitrate their disagreement about which gender takes most pleasure out of love. Tiresias’s pronouncement in favour of Jupiter triggered Juno’s characteristic jealousy; the resentful goddess struck Tiresias blind but Jupiter compensated him with inner vision. In this way Tiresias went on to become the most respected prophet of classical antiquity, the one who predicted Oedipus’s bleak destiny and Ulysses’s glorious death.

Unlike the original Tiresias, Apollinaire’s protagonist is a woman who, after her venture into masculinity, goes back to her original gender role. In the process, however, her husband undergoes an irreversible metamorphosis. As noticed by Peter Reed, while the end of the drama shows Apollinaire’s incapacity to reconcile ‘the maternal and female aspirations of women’ in the post-war years, his celebration of the psychic and social benefits of androgynty addresses the possibility of new social and sexual identities for men.³⁶ Conferring the role of the hero on Thérèse’s feminised husband, Apollinaire attempted to reframe masculinity outside the conventional association of sex with gender.

The fact that *Tiresias’s Breasts* was one of the first instances in which the word ‘surrealism’ was used links the drama’s androgynous aesthetic and social concerns with the centrality of sex in the revolutionary aspirations of the emergent surrealist movement.³⁷ This point is reinforced by the fact that another instance in which Apollinaire used the word ‘surrealism’ was the preface of the ballet *Parade* (also 1917). Although Apollinaire’s investment in the ballet celebrated the aesthetic possibilities that this art presented for the interaction between bourgeois and popular cultures by collapsing medium specificity and the distinction of ‘high’ and ‘low,’ to ‘parade,’ as highlighted by Lacan, is a behavioural strategy that relates to a burlesque display of sexual identity.³⁸ *Tirésias’s Breasts* and Apollinaire’s theatrical work lead us to consider the role of gender as metamorphosis and ‘parade’ within surrealism, the first modern art movement to place the exploration of gender at the heart of its identity.³⁹

A parade of sexual identity with narcissistic undertones is strongly present in the work of two artists who were closely associated with surrealism: Marcel Duchamp and Man Ray. Their play
with Rrose Sélavy, Duchamp’s female transvestite alter-ego photographed by Man Ray, destabilises notions of authenticity, both in terms of aesthetics and gender. A case in point is Rrose’s 1921 appearance as the face, and the name, behind the perfume *Belle Haleine – Eau de Voilette* (*Beautiful Breath – Veil Water*) [Fig. 2].


Dawn Ades has drawn attention to Duchamp’s destabilisation of patriarchal notions of gender in the context of political, aesthetic and psychological debates happening in France and the United States in the 1920s, and Amelia Jones has investigated in depth the possibility of reading Rrose Sélavy’s through gender theory. However, as shown by Michal Taylor in an insightful study of the alter
ego’s social ‘identity,’ the extent to which Rrose Sézav was meant to act as a critique of gender stereotypes remains open to debate. In ways similar to Apollinaire’s Breasts, Duchamp and Man Ray’s Rrose seems to address more the inter-war crisis of masculinity than offer a critique of stable gender identity. Duchamp’s performance of Rrose Sézav and her appearance in a spoofing commercial photograph for a fictional scent seems to rehearse both disavowal and recognition of the artist’s own identity with narcissistic undertones. As noted by Ades, Duchamp’s portraits in drag present ‘poses and guises that imply the presence of a mirror,’ which act as extensions of the pool of Narcissus. The use of photographic portraiture emphasised the slippage between self-absorption and the communicative possibilities of narcissism.

The fictional and fictionally gendered Rrose represent a split in subjectivity that references Duchamp’s public persona as the ‘inventor’ of the ready-made, confectioning his very identity through the adoption of ready-made selves – the cocotte and her social evolution, the femme fatale. The narcissistic play between ‘authentic’ and ‘fake’ identity is evident in the five reflections of Duchamp sitting in front of a hinged-mirror setup, in a self-portrait taken in a New York photo shop. Similar to Georges Minne’s replication of The Kneeling Youth in the fountain Narcissus in Five Reflections, Duchamp, the artist behind Richard Mutt – the famously fictitious author of Fountain (1917) – reproduced his own self in mirrored reflections that blurred the boundaries between notions of the ‘original’ and the ‘copy.’ The use of circular reflections to question the distinction between truth and falsehood situates this portrait and the contemporary appearance of Rrose as eau within the tradition of the Narcissus fountain, a site of illusion that originated in antiquity with Pausanias – to which I will return later – and was revived in medieval France by the Roman de la Rose (c. 1275).

Yet, the female masquerade implied by Belle Haleine adds a sexual dimension to Duchamp’s play with his own identity, transforming the male artist’s serious reflection into a risibly seductive female Other. In this ironic play on identity, Belle Haleine performs a role similar to Narcissus’s misrecognition of his own reflection: at once an enquiry into (male) identity and a seductive parade for a mysterious Other that mirrors the self. The (perhaps unconscious) references to Narcissus’s reflections in the assisted readymade are numerous: Rrose’s embodiment of the eau (‘perfume’) Belle Haleine and her encoding of the verb arroser (‘to water’) reinforces both the connection of photography with the pool of Narcissus and the self-reflexive beauty characteristic of Narcissus. The neuter-gendered French name Narcisse and the female-gendered French noun for flower (fleur) link the commercial beauty queen Rrose and her (eau de) voilette/violette (‘veiled/violet water’) with Narcissus’s transformation into the homonymous flower. Andrea Weiss has noted the long association of the colour violet with the history of lesbianism, which goes back to Sappho’s poetry and re-emerged in Shakespeare’s A Midsummer Night’s Dream. Weiss also noted that violets are related to pansies (narcissi) in the Viola family. Interestingly, violets and narcissi appear as interchangeable in Pausanias’s version of the myth, in which Narcissus’s reflection is simultaneously male and female. Pausanias’s Description of Greece, a travel guide to...
the ancient sites of Greece written in prose a century after Ovid, was one of the best-known sources of the Narcissus myth in the early-twentieth century.\(^{48}\)

The Symbolists had already extrapolated the link between Narcissus and the flower that stemmed from him. The correspondence of word, image and smell pervades representations of Narcissus at the turn of the twentieth century: ‘Narcissus … this very name is a tender perfume (Narcisse … ce nom même est un tendre parfum),’ Valéry remarks in ‘Narcissus Speaks,’ whose publication predates the appearance of Rrose as ‘beautiful breath’ by just one year.\(^{49}\) Yet, unlike the Symbolist Narcissus, Duchamp and Man Ray’s Rrose brings the senses together in anti-idealist ways. It turns Narcissus’s enamoured vision of himself into the ‘narcotic’ scent of his cadaverous, vegetable metamorphosis, glossed over by ancient and modern poets. Rrose’s ‘veil water’ overturns the aesthetic essentialism of commercially confectioned ideas of beauty by unveiling the emanation (‘breath’) of an ambiguous sexuality. The ambiguity of her/his beauty is reinforced through the connection between Belle Haleine and la belle Hélène (Beautiful Helen) – a reference to Helen of Troy, the famous ancient beauty who acted as the prize in an ill-fated contest.

Via Helen, Narcissus’s obsession with his own beautiful image (narcissism) is finally, irrevocably linked with the domain of femininity.\(^{50}\) In the mid-1930s Man Ray and Rrose Sélavy would respectively sign the photographs and text of a book, Men Before the Mirror (1934), in which, we are told, narcissism is manifested in the mirror images of men, who are ‘separated from reality and alone with their dearest vice, vanity,’ and trying ‘to take themselves in as a whole,’ emulating the time-honoured tradition of depicting women at their toilet.\(^{51}\) Effectively, the female image imprisoned within the mirror of photography in Belle Haleine links Narcissus with his art-historical avatars – images of women looking at themselves in mirrors and mirroring male desire. The association between woman and mirror leads us to consider the reappearance of Narcissus in modern art in relation to the art-historical tradition of female representation: the category of images to which Rrose Sélavy is the modern, photographic and openly simulacral heir.

**Narcissus cum Venus et Echo: Narcissus as Woman between Vanitas and Cosmic Creativity**

The ‘female Narcissus’ appears in antiquity in Pausanias. The author, incredulous that a man ‘old enough to fall in love’ could mistake a reflection for a real person, gave a heuristic, if admittedly ‘less popular’ explanation, as the author says, of the Narcissus story by introducing the character of Narcissus’s twin sister. When she died, Narcissus consoled himself by looking at his own reflection, pretending that his gaze fell instead on his sister. This ‘female Narcissus’ remerged at the turn of the twentieth century, when Freud put forward his theory of ‘mature’ (second-stage) narcissism as a specifically feminine condition.\(^{52}\) The perversely narcissistic woman, revelling in the powers of her own image, appears as the embodiment of vice in Léon Baskst’s drawing of a bacchante for the programme of the 1911 Ballets Russes’s production Narcisse [Fig. 3].
As in many early productions by the Ballets Russes, the production transfigured classical antiquity through the image of a lavishly sensual Orient. Narcissus, the myth of frustrated erotic vision, was especially apt to stage the drama of modernity’s unrequited love for the Other – be it the ancient past, the ‘exotic,’ or the concupiscent woman. In Bakst’s drawing, the bacchante appears to mimic the final act of L’Après-midi d’un faune, in which the main character performs autoeroticism with a scarf. Similar to the faun, this ‘female Narcissus’ is sexually autonomous. Just as the bacchante in Narcisse mirrors the male protagonist of the ballet, the narcissistic woman is herself a mirror, a mere imitator incapable of independent pursuits. She is Echo as represented by Waterhouse, her body on display, her gaze turned towards Narcissus; and she is the many women whose voices, as Naomi Segal has shown, acted as ciphers for male authors’ desires in nineteenth-century novels.53

Woman as a reflection of artistic creativity is an underlying theme within surrealism.54 She can be found, with direct reference to Narcissus, in the work of Max Ernst. In the still-lifes of Echo that Ernst painted between 1936-37, the nymph finally possesses Narcissus by feminising the landscape of plants and flowers that she inhabits, linking together her own immaterial presence in nature, Narcissus’s dissolution of identity in the pool and his floral metamorphosis.55 In The Attirement of the Bride (1939-40), Ernst drew upon his own queering of the Narcissus myth by
transferring the mirroring woman into the domain of culture. Domesticating the female hybrid within a mirror-enclosed interior – one that occupies a middle ground between Jan van Eyck’s Arnolfini’s room, de Chirico’s irrational architectures, Moreau’s theatrical scenes and Alberto Savinio’s birds/men paintings – Ernst created an image of femininity both alluring and repulsive, in the mode of medieval and Renaissance allegories of vanitas. His painting technique, bringing together decalcomania – which Werner Spies calls an ‘intersubjective method’ – and pictorial naturalism, results in an image that is both ‘natural’ and carefully constructed, referencing dominant male constructions of gendered identity and gender’s simulacral nature concurrently.57 ‘In the measure of my activity (passivity),’ Ernst wrote in 1948, ‘I contributed to the general overthrow of those values which, in our time, have been considered the most established and secure.’58

David Hopkins has analysed Ernst’s Bride in depth as an image that connects Catholic, Rosicrucian and Masonic androgynous symbolism to reflect the artist’s personal and collective ‘submerged masculinist fantasies.’59 She emphasises, through formal and cultural hybridity, the mythological and alchemical union of the opposites as a sign of both deadly sin and fertile creativity. These elements in the representation of femininity – at once personal and collective, sacred and profane – are part of the dynamics of seduction at play within the pictorial tradition that associate Narcissus, woman and painting. This is not without precedent. In the Renaissance, Leon Battista Alberti identified Narcissus with the inventor of painting: ‘what is a painting,’ he asked, ‘but the act of embracing by means of art the surface of the pool?’60 Alberti linked the painter’s labour and the viewer’s enjoyment with the narcissistic pursuit of a self-reflexive love object. There is evidence of this in numerous works of art. For instance, Tintoretto’s Susanna and the Elders (1560-2) can be considered to be a narcissistic representation of a female subject, albeit one that bridges pagan and Judeo-Christian traditions. In the painting, the Biblical heroine is transformed into a reversed Narcissus more aware of herself than of her suitors.61 The two elders, especially the one in the foreground, perform, for their part, the role of Echo, merging with the landscape in a mimetic strategy of ambush.

This mimetic strategy underlines not only the sexual voyeurism of paintings of mirroring women but also the material association of (oil) painting with the pool of Narcissus that served the Renaissance paragone (‘competition’) of painting and sculpture. Paragone paintings aimed to demonstrate the medium’s truthfulness to nature. They depicted varied subjects, from armoured men to images of Venus and allegories of vanitas, to narrative scenes or portraits. The origin of the practice, however, seemed to lie in a lost painting by Giorgione representing a male figure within a landscape, next to a river, reflected three times from three different points of view by the water and two mirrors.62 Diane Bodart, who interprets the image as Narcissus, has recently drawn attention to a description of the painting by Gian Paolo Lomazzo (L’Idea del tempio della pittura, 1590) in which the naked body of the male figure is transformed into a female subject as the symbol for painting.63

Manifestations of Narcissus as his female Others, Venus and/or Echo, have transformed the paragone into a metaphor for representation more broadly. Implicating a slippage between reality and its pictorial translation, painting becomes a field of enquiry for the relationship between
identity and imagination, as well as between gender and sexuality. In *The Mirror of Venus* (1898), Edward Burne-Jones multiplied Giorgione’s solitary soldier into a row of women contemplating themselves and one another, thus representing woman as, at once, Venus, Narcissus and Echo. The Pre-Raphaelite painter, who based the figure of Venus on Botticelli, was certainly aware of Renaissance theories of painting and, by assimilating Venus to Narcissus, he equated her with Alberti’s idea of painting as the idealised reflection of nature.

Another neo-Platonic theory, Marsilio Ficino’s ‘double Venus,’ is often quoted in Renaissance depictions of Venus at her toilet. Ficino distinguished between a ‘celestial’ Venus, who arouses love in her viewers through contemplation of her beauty alone, and a ‘vulgar’ Venus, who is earthly, sensual and associated with sexuality. The association between this ‘double Venus’ and Narcissus seems evident in Picasso’s *Girl Before a Mirror* (1932). At a time of close association with the surrealists and only a couple of years after having illustrated Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Picasso distilled in the likeness of Marie-Thérèse Walter – his young, and voluptuous mistress – an image of metamorphic identity, both formal and gendered, worthy of Apollinaire’s Tirésias [Fig. 4].

Fig. 4: Pablo Picasso, *Girl Before a Mirror*, 1932, Oil on canvas, 162.3 x 130.2 cm, The Museum of Modern Art, New York. © Succession Picasso / ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London, 2011.
Transforming the likeness of his model into a mirror of his own artistic identity at a time of increasingly stylistic polymorphy in his painting practice, Picasso brought together the two Renaissance Venuses and Freud’s Narcissus. Carl-Gustav Jung read images such as Girl Before a Mirror as a sign of the artist’s schizophrenia.66 Yet, the dualistic representation of the two Venuses within the same figure resolves the contradictions between identity and representation by presenting both as part of a vital metamorphosis that moves from adolescent narcissism to life-giving eroticism and old age vanitas.67 Playing Medusa – that other great myth of vision – to Picasso’s Persean ambitions at a time when he was juggling not only different styles but different media too, Girl Before a Mirror is an image that reflects the artist’s ambivalent identity, as much as personal and collective ideas of femininity. In conversation with Christian Zervos in the 1930s, Picasso said: ‘the beauties of the Parthenon, Venus, Nymphs and Narcissus are all lies,’ demonstrating his critical approach to established notions of representation.68 Arguably, however, it was precisely the value of representation as lie, its potential to reveal the elusive character of truth, that interested him:

Do you think I’m interested in the fact that this painting represents two characters? These characters existed, yet [in the painting] they no longer exist. The vision of them gave me an initial emotion, then, little by little, their real presence has lost focus, until they disappeared, or rather, they were transformed into a series of questions.69

The emotion and questions of which Picasso speaks are the (male) artist’s own equivocations and dilemmas, which shift the focus from woman as vain Venus, fully conscious of herself, to Narcissus’s naïve love for the self. Venus is an immortal goddess, but Narcissus shares Echo’s transient destiny and his representation, like that of the nymph, is destined to lose itself in the world.

Rereading Freud’s association of narcissism with woman and its Oedipal corollary of woman as lack, Sarah Kofman pointed out that ‘men’s fascination with this eternal feminine [the narcissistic type] is nothing but fascination with their own double.’70 Kofman substituted the penis-envy attributed by Freud to women with the hypothesis of man’s envy of woman’s preservation of ‘that original narcissism for which he is eternally nostalgic.’71 The implication of this insight is the possibility that narcissism acts as a ground on which subject and object are fused together, their identities blurred, in what Kristeva has identified as Narcissus’s transformation of ‘Platonic ideality into speculative internality.’72 Thus the female Narcissus oscillates between erotic idealisation and a questioning of identity through representation. She has the potential to displace Narcissus’s obsessive fixation with the self by repositioning the myth as a fertile ground for identity creation.

This version of the myth was readily taken up by surrealist women artists.73 The possibilities which the female Narcissus offers for artistic play and identity creation are perhaps asserted most strongly in the series of collaborative (self) portraits made by Claude Cahun and her stepsister/lover Marcel Moore – two women artists who reversed Duchamp and Man Ray’s play with transvestism. As noticed by Tirza Latimer and Jennifer Shaw, Cahun and Moore turn the tradition of women at their toilette and the popular association of narcissism with femininity on their heads, in
order to express new possibilities for female creativity and sexuality. Ades has drawn attention to the fact that Cahun – who misread the death of Narcissus as the consequence of his self-love, rather than of self-recognition in the object of his own affection – refused to believe that Narcissus truly loved himself, opening up narcissism to the possibility of a continuous, fruitful process of identity renewal.

Once again, the process is not without precedent. In the seventeenth century, Diego Velázquez created the painting that perhaps conjures up narcissism and eroticism most directly: *The Toilet of Venus* (or *Rokeby Venus*, ca. 1647-51). Velázquez’s goddess, unlike Narcissus, knows herself, and her viewer, all too well. However, she, like Narcissus, is a figure of both flesh and vision, of lived sensuality as much as of aesthetic pleasure. According to Peter Cherry, Velázquez most certainly knew Ficino’s theory of the double Venus, and employed it to blur the identity of his ‘*muger desnuda*’ ('naked woman'). In this way, the painter’s erotic image stood ambiguously between eroticism and aestheticism in order to evade the strictures of the Inquisition, which had officially banned the genre of the nude. Velázquez’s Venus is ambiguous in another respect too: her back-view. Referencing the ancient sculptural type of the Aphrodite *Kallipygos* ('with beautiful buttocks’), this viewpoint presents an idealised sexuality, that might have appealed to viewers regardless of their sexual orientation.

Back-views of naked, reclining statues are traditionally linked with the Hermaphrodite, a type that literally embodies sexual ambiguity [Fig. 5]. This leads us to consider Narcissus’s relation to the myth of Hermaphroditos, whose metamorphosis into a bi-sexed creature indissolubly links beauty and sexuality.

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*Fig. 5: Hermaphroditos Asleep* (Borghese Hermaphrodite), Roman work of the Imperial period (second century AD), Discovered near the Baths of Diocletian in Rome in 1608, Marble sculpture, L. 1.69 m; D. 0.89 m, Formerly in the Borghese Collection, Purchased by the Louvre in 1807, Musée du Louvre, Paris, Greek, Etruscan, and Roman Antiquities.
**Narcissus cum Hermaphroditos: Narcissus as Erotic-Aesthetic Beauty**

The story of Hermaphroditos, the handsome son of Mercury and Venus (Hermes and Aphrodite), mirrors that of Narcissus in a number of ways. In *The Metamorphoses*, Hermaphroditos partakes of the heuristic character that Pausania attributed to Narcissus as a myth explaining the origins of a legendary fountain. According to Ovid, the fountain of Salmacis in Caria rendered all who bathed therein effeminate, because it was there that the handsome Hermaphroditos, having resisted the love of the nymph Salmacis, was bound with her, forming one single being. His identity merged with Salmacis’s, Hermaphroditos became both male and female. Hermaphroditos’s metamorphosis was the result of the gods’ punishment for a crime similar to the one that caused Narcissus’s infatuation with his own self. Yet, unlike the dramatic tension between vision and eroticism that characterises the myth of Narcissus, Hermaphroditos’s life depended on a total, harmonious fusion of object and subject of amorous contemplation. Michel Foucault was to apply this characteristic of Hermaphroditos to the clinical case of the real nineteenth-century hermaphrodite Herculine Barbin, who died following a surgical operation through which (s)he was made to conform to her juridical status as woman.

The clinical condition of hermaphroditism, considered monstrous in reality, has been sublimated, aesthetically, into the unique beauty of the mythical Hermaphroditos and the art-historical type that derives from him: the Hermaphrodite. In turn, the Hermaphrodite embodies what Whitney Davis has called, in relation to the post-Kantian aesthetic tradition, ‘queer beauty’ – ‘reified or perfected canonical beauty relocated in its corporeal and communal contexts of affective, cognitive, and social significance’. The confluence, in the image of the Hermaphrodite, of an idealist contemplation of the world and its antithesis opens up the possibility of a ‘queering’ of art-history in which, as Davis has noted, ‘idealisation [is] no less queer than camp inflections or outlaw representations.’

Idealisation is the opposite pole of narcissism in Kristeva’s psychic tale of love. Yet, she recognises that both idealisation and narcissism come closely together in the story of Narcissus, in which the figure is enamoured with a mirage of the self. These two poles – the ideal and the narcissistic – have the potential to bring about what Davis calls the ‘aesthetogenesis of sex,’ that process of sexualizing aesthetics while aestheticizing sex, which started in modern Western aesthetics with Kant and Winckelmann, and was systematised by Freud in his model of sexuality. In this process, the normatively communal (Kantian) concept of self-reflexive beauty – which could be assimilated to a narcissistic entity – is queered by desire. Failing to explain homosexual attraction as Freud had wished, narcissism, Davis argues, comes instead to represent ‘the aesthetic and cultural forms’ of the doctor’s high-profile homosexual patients, who constructed their public personas as decadent aesthetes in order to achieve a ‘togetherness’ otherwise denied to them. The sexual, lived and social character of this ‘narcissistic’ contemplation of beauty results, paradoxically, in the opposite of narcissistic solipsism.
As a notion that bridges the aesthetic and the social, queer beauty is contiguous with the concept of ‘convulsive beauty’ that lay at the heart of surrealism’s project to pervert established aesthetical norms in order to demolish traditional psychic and behavioural patterns. André Breton’s concept of convulsive beauty can be thought of as the avant-garde development of ‘queer beauty;’ linking cosmic idealism and narcissism, both convulsive and queer beauty subvert, or have the potential to subvert, the domain of aesthetics by destabilising the cultural order. In different ways but with similar effects, queer and convulsive beauties turn Narcissus’s hypnotic contemplation of the Other into a vertiginous drowning in the depths of the self. For Hal Foster, the link between convulsive beauty and the Kantian idea of the sublime – as the climax of beauty – is based on their being ‘negative pleasures,’ both involving ‘the inextricability of death and desire.’ The sublime beauty of the sleeping Hermaphrodite, which crystallises the narrative entities of Hermaphroditos and Salmacis into one static form, seems to indicate that supreme beauty is linked to a suspension of sexuality into lifeless objects, a movement that also brings to a close the story of Narcissus and underlines the entire structure of Ovid’s Metamorphoses. Foster connects this movement – the narcissistic creation of a unitary subject – with Bretonian surrealism and proto-fascism. However, the aestheticisation of sex in the pursuit of an unbroken subject which is implied by Narcissus cum Hermaphroditos offers the opportunity to ‘convulse’ traditional beauty into critical forms of aesthetic experience that were vehemently advocated by the surrealists under the intersubjective principle of Eros.

Narcissus Secum: the Narcissistic Condition of Surrealism

Nadjia (1928), Breton’s first novel dedicated to love, opens with a hunter, whose prey, similar to that of the hunter Narcissus, turns out to be the hunter himself – or a ‘haunted self’ to quote the title of David Lomas’s book on the splitting and undoing of the self within surrealism. Nadja ends with Breton continuing his amorous and intellectual quest. This incompleteness is the result of an elusive concept of beauty, in which earthly and spiritual pursuits can no longer uphold the distinction bestowed upon them by an incorporeal contemplation of beauty – ‘Beauty will be CONVULSIVE or it will not be (La beauté sera CONVULSIVE ou ne sera pas).’ Breton further elaborated the concept of convulsive beauty in an article he published in Minotaure and incorporated subsequently in Mad Love (L’Amour fou, 1937). There, Breton describes convulsive beauty as ‘veiled erotic, fix-explosive and magic-circumstantial,’ and illustrates the concept through the erotic encounter between a row of men and women, concluding that ‘the one in question finally recognizes only himself.’ Breton thus put forward a principle of identity between subject and object of representation that translates aesthetically in a concept of ‘beauty considered exclusively with passional aims in mind.’ This is convulsive beauty, the activating device of the surrealist marvellous. This ‘reality as representation,’ as Krauss has called it, depends on a subjective encounter with the world in which the eye cannot be separated from the other senses. This way of representing consists of a ‘subjectification of the objective world’ that extends and reverses Kahn’s definition of Symbolism as
the ‘objectification of the subjective.’ At the same time, it transforms the egotistical Freudian concept of narcissistic self-obsession into a narrative of cosmic exchange between the self and the world.  

The year of the publication of L’Amour fou, a photocollaged self-portrait of Breton, previously bound inside Paul Eluard’s copy of The Immaculate Conception (1930) and later published in the Dictionnaire abrégé du Surréalisme (1938), was re-photographed and subtitled ‘Écriture automatique (Automatic Writing)’ [Fig. 6].

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Fig. 6: André Breton, Le Verre d’eau dans la tempête (also known as L’Écriture automatique), ca. 1930, photomontage, 26.5 x 23.5 cm, The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, Gift of Vera and Arturo Schwarz ©ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London, 2011.
Beside Breton – or rather, beside the image of his head superimposed on the body of a scientist – the collage shows a Hollywood movie actress who spies cunningly on the surrealist leader from behind bars.\textsuperscript{100} Lomas connects the image to the surrealist equivalence between scientific vision, photography and automatic writing; Katherine Conley, in a feminist reading of surrealist automatism, has read the image as symbolic of the identification of women by male surrealists with their own unconscious and creativity.\textsuperscript{101} The image also speaks of what Evelyn Fox Keller calls ‘the biological gaze.’ Keller has noted that in the early twentieth century the use of the microscope shifted from detached scientific analysis to a convergence of sight and touch, or hand and eye through which ‘the “secret of life” to which we have so ingeniously gained access’ stops being a ‘pristine point of origin’ and becomes ‘a construct, at least partially, of our own making.’\textsuperscript{102}

This subjective dimension of knowledge and truth is clearly in evidence in the photocollage, in which the gender relations at play are translated into a Narcissian tale of disavowal. Breton’s doctored self-portrait borrows the supposed intellectual prowess of the scientist as a visual sign of sexual power. The actress gazes longingly at his androgynous figure, kept at a physical distance, inviting the viewer to question the ‘natural’ dimension of traditional gendered relations. Impersonating a very visible Echo to Breton’s photographic narcissism, she reverberates with the thunderous echoes of convulsive beauty. Reflections of transgression – visual, verbal and epistemic – radiate outside the image to invade the field of the viewer, who is at a loss to understand the ultimate sense of what s/he sees. Yet, these are precisely reflections: Breton’s figure and his own vision of convulsive beauty as a subjective and gendered pursuit dominate the image, giving him the role of the master in this game of ‘seeing as writing.’

This controlled notion of subversion places Breton’s convulsive beauty between the enchanted realm of Symbolism and the rationalist lineage of myth. It is no coincidence that Breton associated the idea of ‘spontaneous action’ (such as the concept of automatic writing) with crystals as reflective and self-reflective material that might encapsulate the notion of convulsive beauty: ‘Works of art, just like certain fragments of human life when it is considered in its gravest signification,’ he wrote, ‘seem to me without value if they do not present the same longevity, rigidity, regularity and shine on all their faces, interior as well as exterior, as crystal.’\textsuperscript{103} This statement expresses the possibility, or at least the desire, of surrealist creativity to reduplicate its own authorial voice (its subversive ‘originality’) infinitely, a representational process known as \textit{mise-en-abîme}.\textsuperscript{104}

Crystals and \textit{mise-en-abîme} are central themes in André Gide’s \textit{Treatise of the Theory of Symbolism} (\textit{Traité du Narcisse – Théorie du symbole}, 1891), a milestone in the modern history of Narcissus.\textsuperscript{105} In his treaty, Gide elaborated the image of a primeval Narcissus \textit{cum} Adam as the symbol of an artistic yearning to attain truth within and beyond the appearances of the symbolic order: ‘Paradise is underneath appearance. Everything contains in virtue the intimate harmony of its own being, like every grain of salt contains the archetype of its crystal \textit{(Le Paradis est sous l’apparence. Chaque chose détient, virtuelle, l’intime harmonie de son être, comme chaque sel, en lui, l’archétype de son cristal)}.’\textsuperscript{106} Like this crystallized Narcissus, the surrealist concept of convulsive beauty is the source of a continuous wonder with the world, which is, however,
determined by the crystallised assertion of individual drives. Incidentally, Tristan Tzara associated the surrealists with Narcissus early on: ‘[They] are today’s Narcissuses’ – a sentence that implies the surrealists’ collective extension of self-reflexive individuality.107

Conclusion

The ancient myth of Narcissus centred on the psychic difficulty of separating the self from the world, a religious denunciation of the philosophical pretence (hubris) of self-sufficient reason. Narcissus’s fate, condemning the youth to live ‘as long as he does not know himself’ (‘si se non noverit’), dismisses the Delphic imperative ‘know thyself’ by warning that true self-knowledge is a frustrating and anti-social pursuit. The modernist resurrection of Narcissus within Symbolist and surrealist contexts offered a powerful extension of the myth’s ancient significance. It eroded the boundaries between reality, individual cognition and cultural constructions of truth. Yet this, too, could only rob myth of its afterlife. Narcissus represents identity as an unfixed reflection of subjectivity, as he mirrors and co-exists with the polymorphous diversity of the world and holds on to the ego in order to orientate himself in that reflective pool which is the world.

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1 1 ‘I am enchanted by what I see; but what I see and what enchants me however I cannot reach,’ Ovid (Publius Ovidi Nasonis), Metamorphoses, ed. R. J. Tarrant, Oxford Classical Texts., Oxford, 2004, 3. 446-7. All translations, unless otherwise stated, are by the author.


3 Sigmund Freud, ‘On Narcissism’ (1914), in On Metapsychology. The Theory of Psychoanalysis, trans. by James Strachey, eds James Strachey and Angela Richards, London, Penguin, 1984, 65. Previous stages in Freud’s elaboration of the theory of narcissism are to be found in a footnote of the Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality (1910) and the essays ‘Leonardo’ (1910) and ‘The Uncanny’ (1919). Predents to Freud’s theory of narcissism are to be found in the work of Henry Havelock Ellis (1897): Paul Nâcke (1899) and Otto Rank (1914).


7 For Ovid’s modern fortune, Charles Martindale ed., Ovid Renewed. Ovidian Influences in Literature and Art From the Middle Ages to the Twentieth-Century, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1990. Ancient variants of the Narcissus myth were recounted by Greek authors Conon (1st c. BC-1st c. AD), Parthenius of Nicaea (1st c. AD), Pausanias (2nd c. AD). The versions by Conon and Parthenius emphasise the homoerotic component of the myth.


12 Ibid., 169.

13 See, for instance, Gustave Moreau, Orpheus, 1865, Oil on wood, 155 x 99,5 cm, Musée d’Orsay, Paris; Odilon Redon, Orpheus, c. 1903-10, Pastel, 68.8 x 56.8 cm, The Cleveland Museum of Art; John William Waterhouse, Nymphs Finding the Head of Orpheus, 1905, Oil on canvas, 99 x 149 cm, Private collection.


17 Gustave Moreau, Orphée, 1865, Oil on canvas, 155 x 99,5 cm, Musée d’Orsay, Paris.


22 “… Au contraire de certaines œuvres dont la justification demande une connaissance qu’il faut acquérir, celle de Brancusi s’impose aux facultés les plus hautes sans l’intermédiaire de l’intelligence. Il a jeté un grand pont des sens à l’esprit que nous franchissons dans l’espace d’un éclair quand la réflexion consent à prendre l’attitude passive du Sphinx,” Roger Vitrac, ‘Constantin Brancusi,’ Cahiers d’art, Nos 8-9, 1929, 383-94.

23 Alexandra Parigoris, ‘The Road to Damascus - Reading the Partial Figure,’ in Constantin Brancusi. The Essence of Things, Carmen Gimenez and Matthew Gale eds, exh. cat., Tate Modern, 2004, 53-6.


28 André Breton, La Clè des champs, Paris, LGF, 1979, 278.

29 For Cocteau’s association of Orpheus and Narcissus, see David Lomas, Narcissus Reflected, 82-4.
Other poems in which Apollinaire associated himself with Orpheus include the lyrics dedicated to the myth in *Le Bestiaire, ou cortège d’Orphée* (1911) and ‘Le Musicien de Saint-Merry’ (1914), later published in *Calligrammes*.


Giorgio de Chirico, *Premonitory Portrait of Guillaume Apollinaire*, 1914, Oil on canvas, 81.5 x 65 cm, Musée National d’Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou. [http://www.centrepompidou.fr/education/ressources/ENS-surrealistart-EN/image01.htm](http://www.centrepompidou.fr/education/ressources/ENS-surrealistart-EN/image01.htm)


43 The connection between Rose Sélay and narcissism has been noticed by Ades, ‘Duchamp’s Masquerades,’ 101-4 and Hopkins, Marcel Duchamp and Max Ernst, 82-6.


45 For a reproduction of the image, Inventing Marcel Duchamp, 137.


48 This was thanks largely to none other than James Frazer, whose new translation of Pausanias into English provided the basis for subsequent translations into other European languages. See James George Frazer, Pausanias’s Description of Greece, Macmillan, London, 1898.

49 Valéry, Poésies, 17. Rilke also repeatedly referred to Narcissus’s essence as a scent, as for instance in his ‘Narziß’ (1913): ‘Narcissus vanished. From his beauty / without cease the essence exhaled, / dense like the scent of heliotrope. / But his destiny was to see himself (Narziß verging. Von seiner Schönheit hob / sich unaufhörlich seines Wesens Nähe, / verdichtet wie der Duft vom Heliotrop. / Ihm aber war gesetzt, daß er sich sähe).’


58 Max Ernst, ‘Beyond Painting. I History of A Natural History,’ in *Max Ernst: Beyond Painting and Other Writings by the Artist and His Friends*, trans. by Dorothea Tanning, Wittenborn, Schultz, New York, 1948, 10-11.


Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, 115.


For the Borghese Hermaphrodite as one of the models for the Rockeby Venus, see Portús, ‘Nudes and Knights,’ note 43, 67.


Ibid., 23.

Ibid., 104.

Davis, *Queer Beauty*, 3-4. For the ‘aesthetogenesis of sex’ and the different interpretations of “narcissism” in Freudian theory and homosexualist culture,’ see 187-242.

Ibid., 231.


90 Hal Foster, Compulsive Beauty, 29.

91 Hal Foster, 'Armor fou,' especially 83-6.


93 Lomas, The Haunted Self.

94 André Breton, Nadja, Gallimard, Paris, 1925, 90.


96 Ibid., 10.

97 Krauss, 'The Photographic Conditions,' 112.

98 See Kahn, note 15 above.

99 The documentary information on this work in the following discussion relies primarily on David Lomas’s study of Breton’s self-portrait in his forthcoming book Surrealism and Simulation, whose manuscript was made available to me by the author. See also, Dawn Ades, Photomontage, Thames and Hudson, London, 115: Michael Stone-Richards, 'A Type of Prière d’insérer: André Breton’s Le Verre d’eau dans la tempête,' Art History, Vol. 16, No. 2, June 1993, 313-35.

100 Krauss has read the microscope in this image to stand for the camera: Krauss, 'The Photographic Conditions,' 18.


103 'L’œuvre d’art, au même titre d’ailleurs que tel fragment de la vie humaine considérée dans sa signification la plus grave, me paraît dénuée de valeur si elle ne présente pas la dureté, la rigidité, la régularité, le lustre sur toutes ses faces extérieures, intérieures, du cristal.' Breton, 'La Beauté sera convulsive,' 13.

104 Krauss has related the presence of the microscope in the image to the concept of the mise-en-abîme, 'The Photographic Conditions,' 18.


106 Ibid., 114.

107 Tristan Tzara, 'Les Dessous de Dada,' Comoedia, 7 March 1922.

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From the Walls of Factories to the Poetry of the Street: Inscriptions and Graffiti in the Work of Apollinaire and the Surrealists

Caroline Levitt

Abstract

Graffiti, usually viewed as a destructive and illicit art form, was most famously celebrated by Brassaï in his series of photographs of graffiti from the streets of Paris. However it appealed also to the surrealist poets and to Guillaume Apollinaire, often regarded as a precursor to surrealism. This article seeks not only to demonstrate that Apollinaire and the surrealists shared an interest in graffiti, but also to understand that interest as emblematic of a broader fascination with the marginal and anti-monumental, set up in contrast with official inscriptions. It is the contention of this paper that graffiti functions as a metaphor for the rejection of regulations, of constraints, of hierarchy and of logic, all central tenets of surrealist practice which can be found equally in the work of Apollinaire.

Guillaume Apollinaire, in his 1918 collection of writings about Paris, Le Flâneur des deux rives, takes his reader on a walk through the areas of the city that hold particular significance for him. Beginning in Auteuil, he notices the things that have and have not changed during the war and, with fondness, remarks on the stone-walled passageway, the rue Berton, which leads between the quartiers of Passy and Auteuil [Fig. 1]:

As soon as the passer-by walks into the rue Berton, he will notice that the walls that border it are covered with inscriptions, with graffiti as the antiquarians would say. In this way you will discover that 'Lili of Auteuil loves Totor of the Point du Jour' and that in order to mark the fact she has traced a heart, pierced with an arrow, and the date 1884. Alas! Poor Lili, so many years passed since this testimony of love must have healed the wound that scarred this heart.¹

Fig. 1: Rue Berton, 75016 Paris (Photo: Caroline Levitt).

Apollinaire's discovery, in the faubourgs of Paris, of walls covered with etched words and images, echoes that of Brassaï as famously described in his 'Du Mur des cavernes au mur d'usine,' and
Brassaï’s photographs of graffiti can perhaps even provide us with an approximation of the type of things that Apollinaire was observing.\(^2\)

*Le Flâneur* is both a late text and a neglected one within Apollinaire’s oeuvre. A sense of post-war nostalgia and a taste for the marginal are expressed in the first section, ‘Souvenir d’Auteuil,’ which recalls the tone of some of his earlier poems published in *Alcools* (1913): the autobiographical ‘Zone’ and ‘Le Pont Mirabeau’ are especially pertinent examples. The urban peregrinations of Apollinaire in these works combine the past and the present, the personal and the commercial in ways that pre-empt Aragon’s *Le Paysan de Paris* (1926) or Breton’s *Nadja* (1928).\(^3\) Apollinaire’s appreciation of graffiti in *Le Flâneur* is intrinsically connected with his proclamation in ‘Zone’ that advertisements and fragments of text are the poetry of today, and both graffiti and found ephemera were of equal importance to the surrealists. In an article on film from the same year as *Le Flâneur*, Aragon wrote of: ‘the haunting beauty of commercial inscriptions, of posters, of evocative capitals, of very ordinary objects.’ He praised painters and poets who had noted ‘hieroglyphs on the walls’ and stated that ‘these letters which vaunt the value of a bar of soap are worth as much as the characters on obelisks or the inscriptions of a book of black magic: they speak of the fate of the era.’\(^4\)

Inscriptions, whether graffiti scratched into walls, typography on modern objects or monumental or talismanic captions fill the poetry and imagery of the twentieth century avant-garde – Aragon noted, amongst those who had introduced them, Baudelaire, the Cubists and, above all, cinematographers. This article seeks in the first instance to demonstrate that Apollinaire and the surrealists shared an interest in graffiti, viewing it as valuable in its own right, as more worthy even than official-sounding ‘inscriptions.’ The relationship between graffiti and inscriptions is an interesting one that can be expanded by examining their etymological roots. The term ‘inscription’ comes from the Latin *scribere*, to write, whereas ‘graffiti’ stems from the Italian *graffio*, to scratch. Writing is a sophisticated practice, whereas scratching appears crude or perhaps even bestial. Inscribing tends to involve the use of language, whereas graffiti can incorporate pictures of varied legibility. In turn, inscriptions often refer to official dedications, perhaps in the front of a book or perhaps carved more permanently into stone, whereas the implication of ‘graffiti’ is that it has defaced something, possibly even something that has been inscribed in such a way as to denote value and importance. Inscriptions come to stand for high, monumental practices, whereas graffiti denote low, destructive ones. It is to this linguistic irony that Apollinaire wittily refers when he describes the etchings in the rue Berton as ‘inscriptions,’ adding ‘or graffiti, as the antiquarians would say,’ and thus implying that an avant-garde appreciation of the marginal might go somewhat further than an antiquated disdain for all that is not official or monumental. Apollinaire seems to overwrite a history of inscriptions with one that is marginal, personal and ultimately far more exciting, and thus the relationship between graffiti and inscriptions comes to stand for a dichotomy that will carry through to broader themes. Graffiti will be shown to be emblematic of a variety of unofficial, playful and anti-monumental creative practices, all of which are generally held to be at the heart of surrealism but that were equally present in the work of Apollinaire. Writing was for both a means of transgression and liberation, a way of appreciating the marginal and personal over the official and universal and a powerful signifier that could be at once playful and marvellous.
Apollinaire has often been viewed as a precursor to the later movement. Previous authors have examined relationships between Apollinaire and surrealist protagonists, have considered Apollinaire’s reinvention of poetic technique and, importantly, have scrutinised Apollinaire’s coining of the term ‘surréaliste’ in 1917 and his use of it in the subtitle of his play *Les Mamelles de Tirésias: Drame surréaliste*. In contrast to such comparisons between the surrealisms of Apollinaire and Breton, which rely on an apparent similarity that turns out after all to be in many ways rather dissimilar, this article will bring out new and unexpected points of encounter through the use of graffiti as a means of substantiating the underlying ideologies that tie so many surrealist innovations back to Apollinaire. In so doing it will bring to the debate a fresh methodology through looking in depth at certain hitherto neglected texts that pertain to the overarching theme, broadening the possibilities for future considerations of Apollinaire in relation to surrealism.

**Transgression and liberation**

In 1911, Apollinaire had spent four days in La Santé prison, accused of abetting the theft of some Iberian statuettes from the Louvre. Writing for *Paris-Journal* on 14 September of that year, he described his experience, commenting that ‘the first violent emotion that I felt at La Santé came from an inscription engraved into the metal of the bedstead: “Dédé de Ménilmontant for murder.”’ The next day’s issue of the same journal contained Apollinaire’s transcription of a poem he had found, on the back of a piece of paper detailing prison rules, left by another prisoner: Myriès the singer. This, as Apollinaire explains in the 14 September article, inspired him too to while away the hours and overcome in part ‘l’absence de la liberté’ (‘the absence of liberty’) by writing. The resultant group of poems, ‘À la Santé,’ was later published in the volume *Alcools* (1913). The fourth and sixth poems pick up the theme of graffiti in the following terms:

I am so bored between these naked walls …
I listen to the sounds of the city
and, prisoner without horizon
I see nothing but a hostile sky
and the bare walls of my prison.

The bare walls of the interior of the prison contrast starkly with the exterior walls of the rue Berton, covered in writing, and the relationship between writing and imprisonment or liberation is an important one. For Apollinaire, the bare walls are representative of boredom and incarceration, whereas inscriptions, be they on the walls of the rue Berton or on the bedstead of his cell, free the imagination, provoking interest, inspiration and emotion. On the one hand, it is the transgressive actions behind the words that Apollinaire finds at La Santé that are important: defacing the crude furniture that belongs to the authorities and overwriting rules with poetry are exploits that epitomise the illicit nature of graffiti. On the other hand, the very act of writing is then the thing that enables Apollinaire to free his own mind and makes his imprisonment more bearable. We are not told on what surface Apollinaire pens his poems, but it seems likely that this is again something that is to hand rather than something that is intended for the purpose. Writing as an exercise in liberation and as a transgression of convention and logic was at the core of surrealism’s literary origins.
Writing in 1967, Philippe Soupault recalled the impulses that drove his and Breton’s early collaborations and experiments with dreams, notably *Les Champs magnétiques* (1920):

We were struck by the remarkable importance of images and compared those with which popular language is punctuated to those which the poets worthy of that name had created and to those which illuminated our dreams ... These experiments led us to consider poetry as a liberation, as the unique possibility of giving to the spirit a freedom that we had neither known nor hoped to know except in our dreams and of delivering us from all logical devices.9

Soupault draws a connection between two pertinent themes: firstly, that of imprisonment, describing dreams and the poetry that is inspired by them as a means of liberation; secondly, the relationships between high and low culture, between ‘langage populaire’ and poetry, that are so essential to the unconventional poet’s interest in graffiti. A little later in the same text, Soupault commented that it was ‘in memory of Apollinaire’s poem, “Onirocritique,” that we wanted to pay him homage in adopting the term surrealism,’ and that the term had little to do with Apollinaire’s 1917 ‘Drame surréaliste,’ *Les Mamelles de Tirésias.*10

The term ‘onirocritique’ translates roughly as ‘dream analysis,’ or alternatively ‘dream analyser.’ Apollinaire’s poem of this title was first published in *La Phalange,* no. 20, 15 February 1908 and then as the epilogue to the 1909 edition of his *L’Enchanteur pourrissant.*

The poem includes intense, detailed descriptions of impossible scenarios and natural phenomena, and whilst it has been recognized that it is too carefully structured to be a genuine *récit de rêve* (‘description of dreams’),11 its intense yet mystical tone, which epitomises what Apollinaire referred to as ‘surnaturalisme,’ would later characterise much of Breton and Soupault’s automatic writing, in particular *Les Champs magnétiques.*12 When it appears at the end of *L’Enchanteur,* ‘Onirocritique’ represents the victory of imagination over the inconsistencies of mortal existence. *L’Enchanteur* narrates the imprisonment of Merlin (the son of a devil and a virgin) in a tomb, his dead body rotting but his immortal spirit living on. In the fantasy described in ‘Onirocritique,’ the narrative fluidly passes from place to place and image to image, resembling the manipulation of the plausible that can be achieved, as Breton would later stress, through the dream state. As night falls, we read that ‘A hundred seamen met me and having led me into a palace, they killed me there ninety-nine times. I burst out laughing at that point and danced while they cried. I danced on all fours.’13 Not only has the narrator (perhaps Merlin, or perhaps the poet) reached a state of such intense imagination that plausibility and even death no longer have any power, but the primitive, bestial state represented by being on all fours is triumphant over those supposedly in authority. It is now the prisoner who dances, whereas before the ‘lady of the lake,’ holding Merlin captive, had danced on his tomb.

When Breton writes of the absence of convention and restriction at the start of his 1924 *Manifeste du surréalisme,* he attributes to the shedding of such regulations the ability, through the freedom of imagination, to live several lives at once, overcoming, in fact, both mortal existence and, ultimately death.14 The child, or the primitive, holds more power than those who have been weighed down by the codes of civilisation. Through the practices that Breton goes on to describe in the manifesto, he reaches a state in which, he claims: ‘The earth, draped in its verdant cloak, makes as little impression on me as a ghost. It is living and ceasing to live that are imaginary solutions. Existence is elsewhere.’15 Similarly, Breton comments of Nadja that for her, ‘I don’t think there can have been much difference between the interior of an asylum and the exterior.’16 Despite the freedom of Nadja’s imagination, Breton is nonetheless forced to confess that ‘there must, unfortunately, be a
difference all the same, on account of the grating sound of a key turning in a lock, or the wretched view of the garden, the cheek of the people who question you when you don’t want them to. Breton aligns the deprivation of freedom with madness itself, seeing it not as a cure but as something to be overcome.

If the surrealists were, for the most part, locked in social and mental constraints rather than physical ones, one of their particular heroes, the Marquis de Sade, had been subject to extensive physical imprisonment and had found a source of freedom in his subversive writing. In 1909, the same year as L’Enchanteur appeared, Apollinaire published an edition of the works of the Marquis de Sade. In his preface, he explained that Sade had spent twenty-seven years of his life in eleven different prisons, had died in the asylum of Charenton and had his books banished to the enfer (‘underworld’) of the Bibliothèque nationale. Yet, he claimed, Sade loved freedom above all else and was ‘the freest [spirit] that ever lived.’ Sexual perversions and distorted morality characterise Sade’s writing, and Apollinaire summarised Justine and Juliette, two of the stories included in the volume he edited, by quoting one of Juliette’s lines: ‘I have followed the route of vice, my child, and I have never met with anything except roses.’ Such an inversion of morality, a parody of society's hypocritical values, was both a fundamental element of Sade’s appeal to Apollinaire and the surrealists, and the reason for which Apollinaire described him as ‘free’ in spite of the censorship and imprisonment imposed on him: a society mocked by its victims can only ever, Apollinaire suggests, be shown to be weak, demonstrating, conversely, its victims to be in a position of power and consequently of freedom.

Transgression of a Sadean nature is linked to graffiti in a little-known short story by Apollinaire, set not in the streets of Paris this time, but in an underground cave in the forest. On his way to Werp, the narrator of ‘Le Roi-Lune’ (‘The Moon King’) loses his way and decides to seek shelter from the weather and the dark in the entrance to a cave. On hearing music, he goes further in and discovers a network of passageways and caverns, at the heart of which a banquet is taking place. Living food serves itself to the guests, who sit at tables without legs on inflatable rubber chairs, tended to by a Negro slave. The banquet over, the lights are turned off and the cave’s inhabitants adjourn. The narrator, following their voices, discovers ‘the most extraordinary obscene graffiti’ on the walls of a dark, narrow passageway. The various etchings parody the values of France’s monarchy, the Catholic faith and artistic tradition. One phrase reads ‘I would like to make love to the abbess of Gandersheim,’ the Abbey of Gandersheim being a German convent from the Middle Ages, and another ‘I want Madame de Pompadour,’ the official mistress of Louis XV. Elsewhere, Michelangelo is claimed to have ‘given great pleasure to Hans von Jagow,’ and the words are supported with a drawing of an enormous phallus. The techniques of the various inscriptions are described, some having been undertaken in pencil, others in chalk or charcoal and others scratched into the surface of the wall with a metal point. Pierced hearts, phalluses and winged Cupids make up ‘tout un blason indécent et capricieux’ (a whole indecent and capricious blazon), the graffiti body-parts subverting the courtly, romantic blazon and making up a low, crude one that recalls the walls of the factories that Brassaï wrote about.
Rediscovering the libertine residents of the cave, the narrator is disconcerted by their pornographic practices and obscene orgies. However, as a result of an invention that holds and recounts frozen moments in time, he finds himself holding the body of a woman, which he imagines to be Leda warding off Zeus in the form of a swan. Affected by the experience, and even though disgusted by the ‘sotadic graffiti,’ the narrator nevertheless feels compelled to add to them by writing ‘J’ai cocufié le cygne’ (I cuckolded the swan), presumably claiming to have slept with Leda, and thus to have cuckolded Zeus.23 The attempted freedom of the libertines from social constraint, epitomised in the work of the Marquis de Sade, is related here to the practice of writing obscenities on walls, which in turn is defined as an impulsive practice that results from strange and intense experiences.

Making to leave this strange underworld, the narrator finds that he is, once again, lost. Instead of the cave’s exit, he finds the ‘caverne de sorcellerie’ (the cave of sorcery), where he is confronted by the Moon King. Whilst the narrator recognises the figure to be the mad King Louis II de Bavière, he is also an obvious parody of Louis XIV, the Sun King. Using a system of minutely regulated microphones, he takes the narrator on a world tour before realising that he is not wearing a mask in his presence and therefore calling for guards to cut off his testicles. At once a personification of insanity and inversion, the king turns out to be a tribal, primitive sovereign who is free from logic and reality, and therefore, like the narrator of ‘Onirocritique,’ powerful. He is creative, his inventions being at the heart of the adventure in the cave, and once again madness and transgression are held to be both productive and means of overcoming limits. The narrator’s experience takes place at night, and when the morning comes he manages to find his way once more and reach Werp, telling no one of his adventure for some time. The narrator escapes the domain of the Moon King through returning to daylight, or perhaps through exiting the dream world of which the king may well have been a fabrication, although this is never explicitly stated and the narrator is reluctant to attribute his adventure to an ‘origine surnaturel’ (a supernatural origin). In ‘Le Roi-Lune,’ cave art and graffiti, the walls of the cave and the walls of modern Paris (including the rue Berton), are explicitly brought together, and the boundaries between the real and dream worlds are blurred.

Trapped within a prison of a very different kind, this time the trenches in 1916, Apollinaire scratched a crude caricature of soldiers into the lid of his toothpaste tin [Fig. 2].24 The caption, ‘Ah! Dieu que la guerre est jolie’ (Oh! God, this war is lovely), is a quotation (with the exclamation marked moved) from the poem ‘L’Adieu du cavalier,’ in which ‘Ah Dieu!’ in the first stanza is a pun on the dying soldier’s farewell (Adieu) in the second. The poem was originally written in August 1915, whilst Apollinaire was some way from the trenches in the Ardennes forest, but his repetition of the phrase here transforms it from a distant image of a soldier’s death to something far more imminent, that Apollinaire deals with through humour and irony.25 The scratching of the caricature, a momentary release from boredom, is not public in the same way as the graffiti in the rue Berton, nor is it destructive of someone else’s property as at La Santé prison. Rather, it is a creative use of an unimportant surface, which would likely have been discarded had it not been for Apollinaire’s inscription.
Bataille, in his ‘L’Art primitif’ sees graffiti as at once a violent act against the wall, and as a form of ‘alteration’ of it, alteration suggesting a change from one state to another, which might be akin to either decomposition or transformation into something sacred and precious. Susan Harrow, writing on the objects created by Apollinaire during the war, comments that ‘The proliferation of small objects in the war poems speaks urgently of a need to imprint the world with private desire and longing, to alter its surface.’ If the surface of the world, that is to say what Harrow terms ‘the great narrative of history’ can be altered through etching into that surface a very personal ‘micro-history,’ then Apollinaire’s toothpaste tin, whilst it may well have been conceived as an ephemeral and playful means of overcoming boredom, becomes something precious and telling that was deemed initially by Apollinaire and later by Richard Anacréon, its one-time owner, worthy of conservation and of safeguarding through a photograph. The inconsequential becomes precious, litter is transformed into literature, and the distinction between the two is continually collapsed by the work of both Apollinaire and the surrealists.
It might be more accurate to consider Apollinaire’s toothpaste tin in terms not of graffiti, but of another form of instinctive mark-making: the doodle. Indeed Apollinaire’s pictorially constructed ‘ideogrammes’ (many of which were included in Calligrammes) have been described dismissively by Roger Little as ‘amusing doodles,’ lacking in rhythm, a characteristic which, Little claims, is fundamental to poetry. However the very fact that Apollinaire’s toothpaste tin is only one example amongst many of actual doodling in his work suggests that, if the ideogrammes are in fact ‘doodles,’ they should be regarded far from dismissively.

Copious marginal sketches are present in many of Apollinaire’s manuscripts, including Calligrammes and Le Poète assassiné. Some, particularly intricate, appear in the margins of ‘Le Roi-Lune.’ A dancing figure with a thin body and large head is perhaps indicative of Apollinaire’s thought process in conjuring his description of the Moon King. On the following page a beaked face wearing a fedora hat seems to recall the intrepid nature of the adventure and the strange metamorphosis of objects, beings and concepts within the cave. Like many of Apollinaire’s other manuscripts, that of Le Poète assassiné is written on the reverse side of scrap paper, and Apollinaire’s re-use of all kinds of paper, from headed notepaper of the Radio France to geographical plans, suggests his own writing to be in itself a form of overwriting that has greater significance than what it obscures.

Ernst Gombrich, writing on ‘The Pleasures of Boredom: Four Centuries of Doodles’ considers a series of doodles found in the 1727 ledger of the Neapolitan bank as ‘an expression of the play instinct which never leaves us even when we grow up’ and comments that ‘there are two kinds of games which these scribes like to indulge in, one derived from writing, the other from image-making.’ He explains that the images that the doodler produces can never equate to failure, for they were never intended to be anything at all: they merely exist as the result of an instinctual process, and ‘any face you scribble, however primitive or distorted, will impress you as a “creation”.’ Such art is required to conform to no set of rules or principles. Whether or not the doodler is deeply informed by an innate knowledge of image-making conventions, founded in the history of western art, the marginal scribble is perhaps the most authentic and direct record that can be found of an individual’s impulsive mark-making, and as such Gombrich sees the automatism advocated by Breton for surrealism as one of the climaxes of the development of the doodle. Perhaps the collaborative cadavre exquis (‘exquisite corpse’), itself a game, is the epitome of this, in which case Apollinaire’s ideogrammes, be they ‘amusing doodles,’ can be viewed as a stepping stone to this surrealist practice.

Both the toothpaste tin and the poem that Apollinaire finds on the back of a list of prison rules use the material to hand, however inappropriate it might be; they both respond to an impulse for mark-making, undermining the everyday actions of tooth-brushing and conforming to rules. Gombrich writes:

The doodle, like the graffito, is the fruit of opportunity … the doodle may be described as the innocent brother of the graffito. While the vandal is tempted to disfigure a white wall with his rude message or scrawl, mainly to exercise his power and get rid of his aggression, the doodler normally wishes to remain private.

Brassaï, in a poem about graffiti, recognised that the purpose behind writing on walls or inappropriate surfaces is not always vandalism:

To engrave one’s name
one’s love
a date
on the wall of a building,
this vandalism cannot be explained solely by the need
for destruction.
I see it rather as the instinct to survive
of all those who cannot erect
pyramids and cathedrals
to guard their names for posterity.\(^{33}\)

Rather, he suggests, graffiti is a form of unofficial, personal, monument, as valid (as Aragon put it earlier) as the inscriptions on obelisks. As a remnant of Apollinaire’s time in the trenches, the toothpaste tin retains his trace for posterity, just as Lili and Totor’s love was immortalised on the walls of the rue Berton. Claiming the detritus of war and fashioning from it new objects lends a sense of productive power to the soldier in the trenches, returning him to the status of creator and individual rather than nameless victim. It is Harrow’s contention that this is one of the reasons for Apollinaire’s continued references to the minutiae of war in his war poetry.\(^{34}\) The poignancy of such traces is akin to that of the presumably now-executed murderer, ‘Dédé de Ménilmontant,’ whose graffiti Apollinaire reads at La Santé. His mark survives him and becomes monumentalised in Apollinaire’s writing; the insignificant criminal is remembered in the same way as heroes.

**Monuments to the insignificant**

Julian Stallabrass, in his book *Gargantua*, comments on the relationship between value and ephemerality as seen in the connection of contemporary graffiti to both advertising and memorial plaques:

> Such writing is a hybrid practice: like companies, graffiti artists and crews take on corporate identities behind a brand name; like artists, they sign their works, signing a signature in effect, and often date them too, sometimes using Roman Numerals as if on memorial plaques.\(^{35}\)

We are presented with the ironic and paradoxical relationship of an inherently ephemeral art to an attempt to monumentalise and eternalise something by literally ‘setting it in stone.’

The inscriptions that Apollinaire saw in the rue Berton have now been removed, by chipping away the surface of the stone-walls. Presumably those responsible were ‘antiquarians,’ who considered the etchings to be mere graffiti – destructive and inappropriate. However one thing does remain that Apollinaire noted in 1918: ‘a marble plaque denoting the old boundaries of the seigneuries of Passy and Auteuil’ [Fig. 3].\(^{36}\)
For Apollinaire, the rue Berton was a site of nostalgia, a place where he used to walk with friends such as René Dalize, killed in the war, and one of the remaining old streets in an area that was in the process of being rebuilt. Auteuil had not been annexed to Paris until 1860, and it remained, much like Montmartre and Montparnasse, a transitional space between city and country, quite unlike the Haussamnnised centre. The graffiti was evidence of a similarly personal and marginal history, and the fact that Lili loved Totor in 1884 was more interesting for Apollinaire, if not as well known, than the fact that this point once marked out the boundaries of Auteuil’s seigniorial mansions and estates.

Alongside graffiti in Apollinaire’s flânerie are street lanterns:

There are very few of the old street lanterns left … it is a shame that the town has not conserved in its depot, rather than selling them, one specimen at least of each lighting appliance. Apollinaire’s description of the lanterns, almost as the statues of the modern city, and as the potential content of a museum of the street, highlights the kind of nostalgia with which both he and Brassaï are dealing: a personal nostalgia, that yearns not after great men or official buildings, but after those things, however seemingly common, to which an intimate attachment has been formed. The official public monument is one that glorifies that which it commemorates: generally a person or event of supposedly universal significance. Graffiti, in this context, is a form of anti-monument that literally defaces the official monument. However for Apollinaire, both official inscriptions and graffiti are shown to be memorials in their own right; it was these monuments to human lives that were noted also by Brassaï, who traced their evolution by returning to photograph the same site several years after his first visit.
Official monumental sculpture was scorned by both Apollinaire and the surrealists. Writing on Raymond Duchamp-Villon (and on the relationship between sculpture and architecture) in Les Peintres cubistes (1913), Apollinaire noted that ‘the whole world is covered with monuments more or less devoid of any practical purpose.’ One function of monuments is to promote veneration, and traditional monumental sculpture or memorials are optimistic in their nature (anti-naturalist), representing the idealised qualities of their subject rather than their humanity. When monuments become so prolific, then, they become commonplace, and thus their purpose of standing out to mark something extraordinary is undermined. When the Oiseau de Bénin (the Bird of Benin), the character representing Picasso in Apollinaire’s autobiographical roman à clef ‘Le Poète assassiné’ (1916) speaks of the monument he will erect to his poet friend, it is not a marble or bronze allegory, but ‘a profound statue made of nothing, like poetry and like glory.’ Ornamentation and large scale, two of the characteristics that make typical official monuments so noticeable, stand in direct opposition to the small scale and aesthetic banality of the personal ephemera discussed so far in relation to Apollinaire, and to his idea of the perfect memorial.

However for Breton, too, the personal ephemera within Paris is of far greater importance than the city’s famous buildings and vistas. Breton comments in Nadja that not even ‘la très belle et très inutile Porte S. Denis’ (the very beautiful and very useless Porte St. Denis), again a monument at the edge of Paris, could properly explain his attraction to that area of the city. He illustrates his comment with a photograph of the Porte S. Denis, demonstrating the futility both of a gateway that stands alone with no city wall through which it might serve as a thoroughfare, and of elaborate decoration that is meaningless to the inhabitants of modern Paris and which cars and passers-by ignore. The gateway’s lack of function does not seem to pose a particular problem to Breton (nor would one expect it to, given his fascination with the dysfunctional and outmoded), rather the point is that he is puzzled by the way he is drawn to the area, and the monument provides no explanation. Indeed, Nadja is a novel in which official Paris is consistently overwritten by a highly personalised view of the city.

As Simon Baker has noted, Breton begins his walk through Paris in Nadja facing the hôtel des Grands Hommes, where he had lived for almost two years between September 1918 and the Summer of 1920, and thus consequently with his back to that greatest of all humanist monuments: the Panthéon. The photograph included to illustrate this section of the narrative is taken, appropriately, from inside the railings that surround the Panthéon, facing outwards. Elsewhere, the St Ouen flea market, the Sphinx Hotel and a luminous Mazda sign are what will photographically ‘remain’ of Breton and Nadja, although the text itself is set up equally as a remnant of their relationship. As Nadja had put it, ‘everything fades, everything vanishes. Something must remain of us.’ What remains of individuals, in the case of Nadja a retrospective account of an encounter that might otherwise have proved insignificant, is fundamental to the concept of the monument and, according to Brassai’s poem cited earlier, to graffiti.

If Breton’s Nadja included photographs from the outset, it was not until 1926 that Apollinaire’s ‘Le Poète assassiné’ was illustrated with a series of lithographs by Raoul Dufy; four hundred and seventy illustrated copies were published by Les Éditions Au Sans Pareil. The release of Dufy’s
edition was timed to coincide with the eighth anniversary of Apollinaire’s death, on 9 November 1926, a fact explicitly stated on the final page of the printed copies. Thus the book sets itself up as a sort of monument to Apollinaire, the ‘assassinated poet’ of the title, and whilst Dufy’s lithographs remain little known (they have not been included in subsequent re-editions of the text), they often depict celebrated sites of remembrance and commemoration: the Panthéon, the Arc de Triomphe and the Champs Elysées, the Eiffel Tower, the Sacré Cœur and St Peter’s in Rome, to name but a few.

It is illuminating to consider Dufy’s edition of ‘Le Poète assassiné’ in relation to Nadja, which Breton claimed was distinctly not a novel, but a record of a period in his life. Dufy’s illustrations could in many ways be set up in opposition to Breton’s choice of photographs to accompany Nadja. If Dufy depicts celebrated Parisian sites, Breton deliberately does not do so, including instead photographs of his personal wanderings, ‘taken at the special angle from which I myself had considered them.’ It may seem as though Breton is concerned with the everyday whilst Dufy is preoccupied with the monumental. Indeed if, as we have seen, Apollinaire too was more interested in the private than the public, in marginal areas such as Auteuil than in central Paris, Dufy’s lithographs may seem also to jar with Apollinaire’s ideology. However the relationship between text and image in both Nadja and the 1926 edition of ‘Le Poète assassiné’ seems to be more problematic.

The photographs in Nadja are included to suggest documentary reality and reliability, yet in fact do no more than prove the existence of many of the places, people and drawings mentioned in the text – the anecdotes surrounding them could be fiction or truth, and the two merge in the various passages of the book. Meanwhile, Dufy wittily grounds Apollinaire’s own suggestion of the poet’s affiliation with great figures of antiquity in contemporary Paris. Whilst Apollinaire uses pseudonyms (albeit easily decoded ones) for his characters, Breton claims that he wants his book to be an entirely transparent account, neglecting to take on the Latin or Arabic pseudonym that Nadja had suggested for him. However Nadja’s own real name and identity are never revealed through Breton’s text and she is one of the only characters of whom a photographic portrait is not included – the closest Breton gets to portraying her is including the allegorical drawings she herself had made and, in the 1963 edition, introducing a photograph of her eyes. Thus Breton’s anti-novel turns out to be a partially mythologised account in spite of itself, whilst Dufy plays on Apollinaire’s comic claim to mythological greatness and brings the story back to the everyday.

Dufy’s depiction of the Champs Elysées, with a view leading from the Place de la Concorde in the foreground to the Arc de Triomphe in the distance is particularly intriguing in light of the relationship between the personal and the universal, the real and the legendary [Fig. 4].
The plate precedes the section entitled ‘Persécution,’ the first page of which is illustrated with a similar but smaller view. The Champs Élysées comes to represent a site of remembrance, evoking commemorative parades, most often in honour of those who have died fighting for their country. Its function as a site of remembrance for the First World War was relatively new: the burial of the unknown soldier under the Arc de Triomphe had taken place only five years prior to Dufy’s lithographs, in 1921. This tomb and its inscription stand at once for the universal plight of those who fought for France and for a specific but unidentified individual. Dufy depicts the universal and transcendental, but implicit within his image is the personal and apparently inconsequential: what remains of individuals.

The Panthéon, deliberately ignored by Breton, is another of Paris’ celebrated sites to feature in Dufy's lithographs, this time above the beginning of the section entitled ‘Apotéose’ [Fig. 5].
Apollinaire would not be buried in the Panthéon, alongside ‘les grands hommes’ (the great men) to whom France is grateful, although both the inclusion of his name under the list there of ‘écrivains morts pour la France’ (writers killed in France’s defence) during the First World War as well as Dufy’s inclusion of the inscription that runs around the dome of the Panthéon suggest that he is amongst them. Apollinaire’s tomb is to be found in the Père Lachaise cemetery, along with the tombs of many of the great writers and composers, yet is placed not with his contemporary cultural heroes but with ‘les étrangers morts pour la patrie’ (foreigners who died for the country). In place of Picasso’s proposed monument, one of Apollinaire’s own Calligrammes was eventually engraved on the tomb, designed and made by Serge Férat [Fig. 6].

Ephemera, such as Nadja’s drawing of the ‘lovers’ flower, the product of an initially casual and then more deliberate attempt to recreate a mental vision over lunch in the country, become the signs under which, Breton writes, he and Nadja’s time together should be placed.\textsuperscript{45} For both Apollinaire and Breton, personal, graphic representations of experiences and relationships take the place of large statuary allegories of great men and battles. If Dufy uses famous sights of Paris to draw out a personal history, then graffiti such as Lili’s inscription in the rue Berton are capable of doing the reverse: through the use of pan-cultural symbols such as the pierced heart, what was commemorative...
of a personal plight is also indicative of the transcendental force of love. Casual etchings and signs become referents, pointing to something above and beyond themselves.

Fig. 6: Serge Férat, Tomb of Guillaume Apollinaire, 1935. Paris: Cimetière Père Lachaise (Photo: Caroline Levitt).

**Significant ephemera**

One day in 1907, Apollinaire reports in the section of *Le Flâneur* entitled ‘Du “Napo” à la chambre d’Ernest La Jeunesse’ (From the ‘Napo’ to the room of Ernest La Jeunesse), he was walking from the boulevard des Italiens to the rue Grammont, when he caught sight of a piece of paper floating in the wind. ‘Instinctively,’ we are told, he caught hold of it. An enigmatic series of events unfolds. Looking up at the third-floor window of a nearby apartment block, Apollinaire sees a masked figure, who tells him to hold on to the paper because he is coming down to get it; the figure never appears. Investigating, Apollinaire learns from the concierge that the apartment is empty, and when he sees the man, now without the mask, running along the street presumably in pursuit of him, he decides to keep hold of the piece of paper rather than attempting to return it. In a brasserie a few streets away, Apollinaire sits down to look at the fragment he has obtained and to decipher its contents:

> There I saw, traced by a clumsy hand, the following signs: A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q S T U V W X Y Z. Next to these capital letters, a crude drawing of a man, with two
fountains of flames on his forehead next to which the figure 1 was placed just above the figure 5. I was faced with a rebus …

I noticed that all the letters of the alphabet had been inscribed on the paper, except R, that the man with two horns of fire on his forehead represented Moses, and that the 1 over 5 suggested sufficiently, due to its position on the right of the Hebrew legislator, that it meant the first book of the Pentateuch, and the rebus obviously read in the following way: R n’est là, genèse [R is not there, Genesis], which signified without a doubt: Ernest La Jeunesse.

Having thus decoded the rebus, Apollinaire goes to visit, for the first time, the author Harry Caén, whose pseudonym was Ernest La Jeunesse. From the event that surrounds the discovery of the note, Apollinaire constructs a narrative that recounts the start of his friendship with the author, two of whose books, Cinq ans chez les sauvages (1901) and Le Boulevard: roman contemporain (1906) can be found in Apollinaire’s library, each with the inscription ‘À Guillaume Apollinaire, son ami Ernest La Jeunesse.’

The rebus is a form of shorthand that relies on the combination of words and images; it belongs either to casual, playful mind-games, or to the need for encryption and secrecy. It formed the basis for Breton’s later ‘poem objects,’ such as one from 1937 [Fig. 7].

Fig. 7. André Breton, Madame… (Poem-Object), 1937. Dated at lower right 17-1-1937. Mixed media, 28.3 x 19.8 cm. New York, Collection Timothy Baum. Reproduced with the kind permission of Aube Ellouët-Breton.

Thanks to the inclusion of objects, the first line reads as follows:

Madame
Vous m’êtes apparue pour la premi
[ermine]
The first two letters of the word that describes the added object complete the word that precedes it, a pun that fortuitously also works in English:

Madame
You appeared to me for the fir
[stoat]

The reader is left to substitute the end of the word ‘ermine’ or ‘stoat’ for the missing word, ‘fois’ or ‘time.’

Apollinaire views the rebus that leads him to Ernest la Jeunesse as powerful, distinct from the insignificant puzzles found in contemporary newspapers, and descending from a tradition of hidden meanings both for the sake of secrecy and for the sake of the illiterate. Apollinaire refers to the letters on the paper as ‘signs,’ a reminder that writing is at base simply a visual means of communicating meaning. An apparently insignificant piece of paper inscribed with a significant combination of signs thus has the power to change the course of Apollinaire’s day and to lead him to a meeting with the Symbolist author with whom he would remain acquainted until his death in 1917 from cancer, as we learn in the latter part of Apollinaire’s narrative.

The scrap of paper described in Le Flâneur would perhaps have been considered valueless and left to float in the wind by someone other than Apollinaire, yet it turns out to be of great significance, leading him into an apparently real but rather strange and unexpected series of events. In Mes Prisons, discussed at the start of this article, the only potential writing surface to hand (a list of prison rules) had apparently been taken from its mundane purpose, used for the writing of a poem, and then left to chance in the cell, to be found almost six months later, coincidentally by a poet, and then published in a newspaper. Whether these anecdotes are factual or fictive, the values of objects and of creativity are thus questioned and the status of objects fluctuates, being one moment apparently valueless, everyday and ephemeral, but the next valuable, notable and preserved. Such is the status of graffiti and this oscillation was essential to the surrealists’ concept of the marvellous.

Found, ephemeral traces can, then, be on the one hand playful and on the other hand significant in more profound ways. When Aragon wrote of ‘hieroglyphs on the walls’ and claimed the words on everyday objects to be as important as ‘the inscriptions of a book of black magic,’ he both recognised the same power that Apollinaire had found in linguistic fragments and anticipated the magical or talismanic properties that Brassaï would also see in graffiti, relating it to both cave art and psychological cures:

Everything is magical for the child … fairies, devils, monsters are for him so real that he is scared of them … Art alone can exorcise these phantasms. For it is indeed the power of magic that is at the origin of the power of art. To trace a line, a figure, gives to the child a sense of power and domination that belongs only to the magician. It is only through art that he can bend the world to his will … the power that the prehistoric hunter wanted to exercise on his game by tracing its ‘simulacrum’ at the back of caves still works on walls of another type.48

The concept of the artist as magician goes back to Romanticism, and the notion of art as simulacra or effigy emulates Freud’s description of magic in ‘primitive’ cultures in Totem and Taboo (1913).49 In this sense, we might suggest that a wall full of graffiti is effectively a wall of simulacra that might function much as the voodoo doll: ‘for to act on the simulacrum is to act on the person themselves.’50
A photograph of a gallows from the section entitled ‘La Magie’ in Brassai’s *Graffiti* suggests sinister possibilities on this level.

Brassai’s premise for comparing graffiti art to cave art in the first place was its aesthetic similarity. He wrote in his article ‘Du mur des cavernes au mur d’usine’:

In 1933, a stone’s throw from the Opéra, signs similar to those of the caves in the Dordogne, or the valleys of the Nile or the Euphrates, are suddenly appearing on the walls.  

He saw graffiti as evidence of a primitive human instinct that was the same in 1933 as it had been in the Stone Age. Brassai was, of course, not alone in his observation. The then recent Dakar-Djibouti expedition had been extensively documented in the second issue of *Minotaure*, the issue before the one in which Brassai’s article appeared, and had included an article entitled ‘Peintures Rupestres de Songo.’ The article linked cave painting to initiation rites, claiming an ancient sign in the shape of an elephant on a rock outside the village to have been created by the bleeding wounds of recently circumcised boys; the ‘sign’ had since become an important part of the circumcision ceremony, representing a spiritual monument to the power and significance of the ritual. Three years earlier than this, in 1930, Bataille’s article ‘L’Art primitif’ was published in *Documents*, illustrated by an image of Graffiti by Abyssinian children. The significance of children’s graffiti for Bataille’s article lay in his critique of Luquet’s appropriation of the art of primitive man to an understanding of that of children: both were apparently, like the doodle, free of any preconception or intention. The relationship of the inscription to the wound in the Songo story, like the relationship of the vestige of Christ’s face on the shawl of St Veronica to his suffering, serves to reiterate Bataille’s concept of ‘alteration’ as an act of violence against the wall that results in an almost involuntarily and miraculously-produced image.

For Apollinaire, the everyday made magical is perhaps more comic than it would be for the surrealists, but is no less engaged with the methods of transforming or altering the banal to create something marvellous. Peter Read has described the napkin in Apollinaire’s short story, ‘La Serviette des poètes’ (1907) as ‘a Cubist “Sainte-Véronique”.’ The tale centres on four poets, fictional representations of Apollinaire, Max Jacob, André Salmon and Mecislas Golberg, who go, separately, to dine at what seems to be the Bateau Lavier. Their hosts’ (Picasso and Fernande Olivier) poverty means that they must all use a different corner of the same napkin, which eventually becomes so dirty that all four poets catch tuberculosis and die. The stains left on the napkin resemble miraculous portraits of the four poets and, as before, what had originally been a filthy vestige and a cause of death becomes something sacred. Similarly, in a curious article for *Les Soirées de Paris*, entitled ‘Petites recettes de magie moderne’ (‘Short recepies for modern magic’), Apollinaire is, like the surrealists, attracted to the discarded or ignored, which turns out to be fantastic:

The following manuscript was found in front of the omnibus ticket office on the place Péreire, on 10 July this year … We have no idea as to the value of the recipes that you will read. But they seemed to us to be peculiar enough to excite curiosity.

The short collection of ludicrous spells includes one purported to prevent one’s car from breaking down, for which it is necessary to procure the skins of several ripe melons, dry them out, crush them to a powder and mix them with some form of bodily fluid. As is often the case with talismans, it is not the object used that is extraordinary or magical, but the way in which it is prepared and the contact or lack of contact it has with certain people that imbues it with power.
It seems pertinent to conclude with an iconic image that perhaps epitomises the surrealist attitude to the possibilities and implications of graffiti and inscriptions, an attitude that, as has been seen, was shared by Apollinaire. When Duchamp added a moustache, beard and caption to a postcard of the Mona Lisa, he transgressed social codes and ideas of femininity and beauty; he created something specific and encrypted out of something previously assumed to have universal significance. He at once devalued and manipulated one of the Louvre's greatest treasures, constructing from the overused image a challenge to the concept of value and he employed a word game that required deciphering: 'LHOOQ,' when read phonetically ('Elle a chaud au cul,' or 'she's got the hots'), suggests the reason for the Mona Lisa's smile to be that she is sexually aroused. For Apollinaire, found inscriptions are a specific type of ephemera with exciting and valuable connotations. They defy the constraints and regulations of authority, they monumentalise what seems, according to that authority's hierarchy, to be insignificant, and they evoke powerful and suggestive meanings that produce something marvellous and magical from something seemingly destructive and banal.

If the passer-by had walked into the rue Berton in 1918, he would have noticed that the walls that bordered it were covered with inscriptions, with graffiti as the antiquarians would say. In preserving the memory of those inscriptions, Apollinaire created a legacy for their authors and aligned himself with non-hierarchical and unofficial ideals that would so soon come to be recognised as surrealist. However the very fact that Duchamp's LHOOQ is so well known whilst Apollinaire's Le Flâneur des deux rives is so often overlooked suggests that the canon of surrealist pre-cursors has somehow become skewed towards dada, and that Apollinaire's own legacy has been underestimated. My aim has been to reinvigorate considerations of Apollinaire, showing him to have been interested in controversial practices that challenged concepts of art and poetry and that come to stand for the achievements of Bretonian surrealism. Apollinaire's own interests were so close to those of the surrealists that, rather than viewing his use of the term surréaliste as entirely at odds with its later interpretation, it would perhaps be more appropriate to see Breton's adoption of it as another form of overwriting. Apollinaire lived an ephemeral life in comparison to Breton's seventy years, but his contribution was more significant than astute critiques of Cubism and alternately moving and comical war poetry. In examining graffiti as a practice within Apollinaire's oeuvre, this article broadens possible discussions of his affinities with surrealism, and indeed of surrealism itself, and presents a previously unconsidered point of encounter between the two.

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1 Guillaume Apollinaire, Le Flâneur des deux rives (1918), in Œuvres en prose complètes, 3 vols, Michel Décaudin, Pierre Caizergues, eds, Pléiade, Paris, 1977, 1991, 1993, vol. 3, 4 ('Mais que le passant entre dans la rue Berton, il verra d'abord que les murs qui la bordent sont surchargés d'inscriptions, de graffiti pour parler comme les antiquaires. Vous apprendrez ainsi que “Lili d'Auteuil aime Totor du Point du Jour” et que pour le marquer, elle a tracé un cœur percé d'une flèche et la date de 1884. Hélas! Pauvre Lili, tant d'années écoulées depuis ce témoignage d'amour doivent avoir guéri la blessure qui stigmatisait ce cœur').

The surreality of Apollinaire’s walks through Paris has been occasionally noted in relation to other texts, such as ‘Le Musicien de Saint-Merry’ and ‘La Chanson du mal-aimé.’ See for example Michel Décaudin, ‘Germinescences latentes,’ in Daniel Briollet, ed., *Guillaume Apollinaire, Pierre Roy et le surréalisme*, Le Dé bleu, Nantes, 1997, 11-18.


Apollinaire was in La Santé prison from 7-12 September 1911. For the details of the events see, for example, Peter Read, *Picasso and Apollinaire: The Persistence of Memory*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2008, ch. 9.


Guillaume Apollinaire, ‘À la Santé,’ *Alcools* (1913), in *Œuvres poétiques*, Michel Décaudin, Marcel Adéma, eds, Pléiade, Paris, 1965, 143, 145 (‘Que je m’ennuie entre ces murs tout nus… / J’écoute les bruits de la ville / Et prisonnier sans horizon / Je ne vois rien qu’un ciel hostile / Et les murs nus de ma prison’).

Philippe Soupault, ‘Souvenirs,’ in *André Breton et le mouvement surréaliste*, La Nouvelle revue française, Paris, No. 172, 1 April 1967, 664 (‘Nous fûmes frappés par l’importance insigne des images et comparâmes celles dont le langage populaire est émaillé à celles que les poètes dignes de ce nom avaient créées et à celles qui illuminaient les rêves… Ces expériences nous conduisirent à considérer la poésie comme une libération, comme l’unique possibilité d’accorder à l’esprit une liberté que nous n’avions connue ou voulu connaître que dans nos rêves et de nous délivrer de tout l’appareil logique’).


See Michel Décaudin, ‘Germinescences latentes.’
12 Apollinaire initially used the term to refer to the work of Chagall, who saw little correlation between Apollinaire's term and the automatism of the surrealists, see Georges Charbonnier, *Le monologue du peintre* (Paris, 1959), Durier, Neuilly-sur-Seine, 1980, 241. More generally, however, it stood for a heightened sense of the intensity of phenomenal reality that serves to make the real seem strange and mystical: a new reality, in other words, created from the natural elements of perception, yet combined with the fantastic images of the mind. This understanding of the word fits neatly with Breton and Soupault's agenda and is taken from a paragraph concerning *surnaturalisme* in *Les Soirées de Paris*, No. 24, May-June 1914, n. p.


15 André Breton, *Manifeste du surréalisme*, 346 ("La terre drapée dans sa verdure me fait aussi peu d'effet qu'un revenant. C'est vivre et cesser de vivre qui sont des solutions imaginaires. L'existence est ailleurs").

16 André Breton, *Nadja* (1928), in *Œuvres complètes*, Vol. 1, 736 ("je ne pense pas qu'il puisse y avoir une extrême différence entre l'intérieur d'un asile et l'extérieur").

17 Ibid., 736 (Il doit, hélas! y avoir tout de même une différence, à cause du bruit agacant d'une clé qu'on tourne dans une serrure, de la misérable vue de jardin, de l'aplomb des gens qui vous interrogent quand vous n'en voudriez pas").

18 Guillaume Apollinaire, ed., *Les Maîtres de l'amour: l'œuvre du Marquis de Sade*, Bibliothèque des curieux, Paris, 1909, 12, 17. ("il aimait par-dessus tout la liberté;" "cet esprit le plus libre qui ait encore existé"). Until 1913 there was no catalogue of the censored books in the 'enfer,' making them unconsultable. The first catalogue, entitled the 'icono-bio-biographie' was created by Apollinaire himself, with Louis Perceau and Fernand Fleuret in 1913 and included all the books deposited there to date, notably those by the Marquis de Sade.

19 Guillaume Apollinaire, *Les Maîtres de l'amour: l'œuvre du Marquis de Sade*, 20 ("J'ai suivi la route du vice, moi, mon enfant; je n'y ai jamais rencontré que des roses").


21 The text more than cursorily recalls Roussel's *Impressions d'Afrique* (1910), which Apollinaire had seen with Duchamp and Picabia in 1912.

22 Apollinaire, 'Le Roi-Lune,' 308.

23 Ibid., 312.


25 For the dating of this poem, and its inclusion in letters to Louise Faure-Favier, Madeleine Pagès and Louise de Coligny-Chatillon, see the notes in *Œuvres poétiques*, 1096. It was later included in *Calligrammes* (1918).

27 Richard Anacréon was a bookseller and art collector. See, Elisabeth Noël Le Contour, Le Merle blanc de la Monaco du nord.


31 Ibid., 214.

32 Ibid., 225.

33 Brassaï, ‘Poème sur les graffitis,’ in Graffiti (1961), Flammarion, Paris, 1993, 151 (‘Graver son nom / son amour / une date/ sur le mur d’un edifice, / ce vandalisme ne s’expliquerait pas par le seul besoin / de destruction. / J’y vois plutôt l’instinct de survie / de tous ceux qui ne peuvent dresser/ pyramides et cathédrales/ pour laisser leurs noms à la postérité’).


36 Guillaume Apollinaire, Le Flâneur des deux rives, 5 (‘une plaque de marbre marquant que là se trouvait autrefois la limite des seigneuries de Passy et d’Auteuil’).

37 Ibid., 6 (‘Il n’y a plus que très peu de lanternes anciennes … on peut regretter que la ville n’ait pas conservé, dans son dépôt, au lieu de les vendre, un specimen au moins de chaque appareil d’éclairage’).


39 Guillaume Apollinaire, ‘Le Poète assassiné’ (1916), in Œuvres en prose complètes, vol. 1, 301 (‘une profonde statue en rien, comme la poésie et comme la gloire’). As Peter Read has pointed out in his Picasso and Apollinaire, Picasso’s wire maquettes, studies for a sculpture to be placed on Apollinaire’s tomb but rejected as ‘too modern’ by the committee in charge of his commemoration, perhaps came closest to realising the statue that Apollinaire describes. See Peter Read, Picasso and Apollinaire, 177.

40 André Breton, Nadja, 663.


42 The photo is attributed to Jacques-André Boiffard in the 1963 revised edition of Nadja. For the photo, see Breton, Nadja, 654.

43 Ibid., 708 (‘tout s’affaiblit, tout disparaît. De nous il faut que quelque chose reste’).
44 Ibid., 746 (‘prise sous l’angle spécial dont je les avais moi-même considérés’).


47 Apollinaire, Le Flâneur des deux rives, 27-33.

48 Brassaï, Graffiti, 98 (‘Tout est magie pour l’enfant … les fées, les diables, les monstres sont pour lui d’une telle évidence qu’il en a peur … L’art seul permet d’exorciser ces phantasmes. Car c’est bien le pouvoir de la magie qui est à l’origine du pouvoir de l’art. Tracer une ligne, une figure, donne à l’enfant ce sentiment de puissance et de domination propre au magicien. C’est par l’art seul qu’il peut plier le monde à sa volonté … Le pouvoir que le chasseur préhistorique voulait exercer sur le gibier en traçant son “simulacra” au fond des cavernes s’exerce encore sur le mur sous un autre forme’).


50 Brassaï, Graffiti, 99 (‘car agir sur le simulacre, c’est agir sur la personne elle-même’).

51 Brassaï, ‘Du mur des cavernes au mur d’usine’ (‘En 1933, à deux pas de l’Opéra, des signes semblables à ceux des grottes de la Dordogne, de la vallée du Nil ou de l’Euphrate, surgissent sur les murs’).

52 Read, Picasso and Apollinaire, 90-1. ‘La Serviette des poètes’ was first published in Messidor on 21 September 1907, and was then included in the anthology L’Hérésiarque et Cie (1910).

53 Guillaume Apollinaire, ‘Petites Recettes de magie moderne,’ Les Soirées de Paris, No. 7, 1913 (?) (‘Le manuscript suivant a été trouvé devant le bureau d’omnibus de la place Pereire, le 10 juillet de cette année…Nous n’avons aucune idée de la valeur des recettes que l’on va lire. Mais elles nous ont paru suffisamment singulières pour exciter la curiosité’).
research and teaching interests range from the involvement of artists in architecture and media other than oil painting, to the interaction of artists and poets through book illustration, studio spaces and Surrealism.
Surrealism’s Curiosity: Lewis Carroll and the *Femme-Enfant*

Catriona McAra

Abstract
This paper concerns surrealist artists’ and writers’ appropriation of Lewis Carroll. Predominantly focusing on the work of Dorothea Tanning and Max Ernst, it suggests that Carroll’s work appealed to the surrealists’ fascination with their childhood selves, and their wish to identify with the curious character of Alice as *femme-enfant* as a way of subverting their bourgeois family backgrounds. Whether stepping *Through the Looking Glass* or breaking the rules in *Wonderland*, Alice can be read as a transgressive character apt for surrealist appropriation. The paper traces Carroll’s reception in the surrealist movement, and articulates the curious character of the surrealist *femme-enfant* in order to reinscribe her epistemophilia in line with surrealism’s orientation towards research.

Introduction
‘Curiouser and curiouser!’¹ This enchanting exclamation of a fictional little girl of nineteenth-century English literature might have functioned as a motto for surrealism, and indeed the eponymous protagonist of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and the sequel *Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There* (1871) did become an object of appropriation and investment for surrealist artists and writers. Alice’s story begins when, during a boring lesson delivered by her sister, her curiosity is sparked by the unusual sight of a white rabbit with a pocket watch. Alice follows him down a rabbit hole and into Wonderland, a magical underground domain through which she journeys in search of the rabbit. Along the way she encounters a cast of unusual creatures and frustrated aristocrats who put her sense of learnt rationality into question. Eventually she awakens from this dream back to reality, only to tear through a mirror above her mantelpiece in the second book, this time to the world of Looking Glass House, which is similarly nonsensical, its narrative arranged in the shape of a dysfunctional chess game.

The surrealist movement claimed the *Alice* books’ writer Lewis Carroll (Charles Ludwig Dodgson, 1832-98) as an important precursor. Traces of his influence can be found in a stream of surrealist works, and, further, surrealism can be seen to have co-opted the curiosity of his heroine Alice as an investigatory trope, in keeping with its research-based practice. The nineteenth-century bourgeois fiction of childish innocence has been steadily eroded by a succession of critiques,² from Freud’s *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905) to the recent *Convulsive Nursery* conference at Manchester University.³ In fact, Carroll’s texts themselves threaten the myth of the innocent child by way of their epistemophilic dynamics of curiosity.

I want to suggest that this drive for knowledge, enshrined in the literary character of Alice, was appropriated by a number of surrealists from the first and second generations of the movement. Although I am not the first to point out that the ‘little Alice figure’ is a recurrent motif in surrealism,⁴ this paper aims to read surrealism more closely through the lens of the Carrollian narrative and his mathematical treatises, and to emphasise curiosity as an epistemophilic strategy in surrealist visual narratives. By relating Alice to the surrealist *femme-enfant* (child-woman), and
tracing the development of the girl-figure in the work of particular surrealists, I will address problematic areas of both surrealist and Carrollian scholarship. Both Carroll and the surrealist *femme-enfant* have a chequered history of misinterpretation, and it strikes me as interesting that these problems should overlap in the figure of the girl. Furthermore, I aim to show that Carroll and curiosity, as manifested in this Alice character, may be more important to the study of surrealism, its prehistories and its legacies, than previously thought. Though I will mainly address uses of Alice and Carroll in the work of Max Ernst and Dorothea Tanning, I will also look to recruitments of Alice by some of their contemporaries, in order to illustrate Carroll’s pervasiveness in and around surrealism.  

**Lewis Carroll and Surrealism**

The surrealists were quick to recognise Carroll’s importance and the potential of his literature as source material. In the first *Manifesto of Surrealism* (1924), André Breton nostalgically valorised a sense of childlike wonder very close to the Alice-child's point of view. Then, in *Surrealism and Painting* (1928), Breton described Picasso’s cubist painting as demonstrating that ‘the mind talks stubbornly to us of a future continent, and that everyone has the power to accompany an ever more beautiful Alice to Wonderland’, a motif that provoked Georges Bataille to denounce Breton’s ‘retreat’ to ‘the “wonderland” of Poetry.’ To be sure, the scenario of Alice’s *Adventures in Wonderland*, which unfolds through the dream of the protagonist, coincided with the orthodox surrealist interest in dream narratives. Following the first *Manifesto*, references to Carroll began to recur regularly in surrealist art and literature. In 1929, Louis Aragon’s French translation of Carroll’s nonsense rhyme, *The Hunting of the Snark* (1874), was followed by his article in *Le Surréalisme au service de la revolution*, ‘Lewis Carroll – En 1931,’ in which he considered Carroll’s reception in France and how the use of nonsense poetry rebelled against the prevailing tendency to bowdlerise children’s literature.

Carroll’s writings were soon claimed by English surrealists as part of their heritage; in 1935, in one of the first English language studies on the surrealist movement, David Gascoyne referred to Carroll as proof that surrealism had a literary forebear in England. A year later, Carroll was again cited as a key proto-surrealist by both Herbert Read and Julian Levy in their early studies of the movement. That same year, Carroll’s drawing of the Gryphon and Mock Turtle was included in the *Fantastic Art, Dada and Surrealism* exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York – a show which traced the prehistory of the movement, placing Carroll alongside such artists as Bosch, Brueghel, Hogarth, Fuseli, Blake and Redon, as representing a fantastic ‘alternative view’ to Enlightened, bourgeois rationality. Second generation American surrealists such as Tanning, therefore, had an introduction to surrealism bound up with references to Carroll’s *Alice* books. Breton continued to include Carroll in his many lists of influential writers, most especially in the *Dictionnaire abrégé du surréalisme* (1938), which he compiled with Eluard, and the *Anthologie de l’humour noir* (1939/1947), which again cites the Gryphon and Mock Turtle episode. Three poems by Carroll, written during his youth in the 1840s for his journal *The Refectory Umbrella*, then
appeared in French in the December 1939 issue of the surrealist magazine *l’usage de la Parole*.14 Here Carroll’s name appears in the contents pages alongside Gaston Bachelard, Paul Eluard, Marcel Duchamp and others, as if he were himself a member of the movement. Later, Carroll’s fictional Alice character was included alongside Freud, Sade and other surrealist heroes in the mock-Tarot *Jeu de Marseille* (1940-41), which was reproduced in the surrealist magazine *VVV* in 1943.15 That same year Duchamp designed a flyer for an exhibition at the Julien Levy gallery entitled *Through the Big End of the Opera Glass* which cunningly echoed Carroll’s *Through the Looking Glass* (1869), and employed similar chess-like imagery.16 Reflecting on surrealism in 1953, Breton continued to cite Carroll as an important precursor, alongside Lautréamont, Rimbaud and Mallarmé.17

In the secondary literature, Rüdiger Tiedemann has discussed Carroll’s reception in surrealism, but overlooked Alice’s role in the work of late-surrealist practitioners such as Tanning.18 Likewise, in *Surrealism and the Book* (1988), Renée Riese Hubert touched on the surrealist Alice, but sidelined Tanning, primarily focusing on Ernst and Dalí (on whose versions of Alice see below).19 Sarah Wilson has noted the presence of an ‘Alice-like’ figure in Tanning’s work and used Carroll’s text as a way in to Ernst’s importance in England.20 Meanwhile, Marina Warner, and more recently Natalya Lusty, have drawn convincing parallels between Carrington’s fairy tales and the *Alice* books, particularly in terms of the figure of the rebellious debutante.21

Common to Carroll and surrealism was a sense of topsy-turvydom and the carnivalesque, overturning bourgeois rationalism,22 and postmodern Carrollian scholarship has often construed Alice in relation to the nonsense which surrounds her. Gilles Deleuze famously made use of the Alice books in his *Logic of Sense* (1969), in terms of paradox and the undoing of fixed identity.23 Susan Stewart’s book *Nonsense* (1978) surrealistically juxtaposed Bretonian and Carrollian language games, a play of puns and portmanteaus, enabling separate realities to collide.24 Recent readings have not only reclaimed Alice as a desiring body in her own right, but have suggested that she functions as the embodiment of the author or reader. Some of the most interesting interpretations have reread Carroll’s Alice in terms of her ‘dysmorphic’ bodily preoccupations and ‘epistemological crisis.’25

**Alice as Femme-enfant**

It seems significant that surrealism’s interest in Carroll should have occurred around the same time as the **femme-enfant** became a major surrealist preoccupation in the 1930s and early 1940s. Breton, in particular, might not only have been fascinated by Carroll’s nonsense and dream narration, but also curious about Alice as an avatar of the **femme-enfant** described in *Arcane 17* (1945) as a figure who ‘sends fissures through the best organized systems because nothing has been able to subdue or encompass her.’26 Despite the transgressiveness proposed by this statement, Breton’s conception of the **femme-enfant** as an enchanting, liminal and rebellious figure has often been dismissed as a conservative, and ultimately sexist, idealisation. According to Whitney Chadwick, the surrealists search for the woman-child’ was one for a figure whose presence
inevitably, and perhaps more than any other single factor,’ worked ‘to exclude woman artists from the possibility of a profound personal identification with the theoretical side of Surrealism.’

So who or what was this notorious child-woman? Chadwick claims the *femme-enfant* ‘prototype’ to be the androgynous figure that appears in a photomontage under the title *L’Ecriture Automatique* in *La Révolution Surréaliste* 9-10 (October 1927), and further identifies Meret Oppenheim, and Ernst’s second wife, Marie-Berthe Aurenche, as some of the first living incarnations of the *femme-enfant*: the former famed for her fur-covered tea-cup and spoon *Object* (1936) (which one might read through Carroll’s Mad Tea Party episode); the latter associated with Ernst’s collage novel *Rêve d’une petite fille qui voulut entrer au Carmel* (1930) [Fig.2]. There Ernst represented his devout twenty-year-old wife, Aurenche (b. 1910), in the guise of a little girl of a similar age and in similar attire to John Tenniel’s Alice illustrations. Later, between 1936 and 1939, Ernst became romantically associated with the twenty-year old artist and writer Leonora Carrington (b. 1917) who, as we will see, developed an affiliation to Carroll’s Alice due to her English identity. By the time Ernst became involved with Tanning (b. 1910) in the 1940s, she was already in her early thirties – but still considered to be a *femme-enfant*, as a second generation surrealist some nineteen years younger than her husband Ernst. Pablo Picasso was another surrealist associate who had a series of much younger wives and girlfriends, such as the teenager Marie-Thérèse Walter (1909-77) and later Dora Maar (1907-97), in her late twenties when Picasso was in his fifties. Likewise the relationship between Man Ray and Lee Miller (1907-77), where there was a seventeen year age gap. Breton’s fascination with the eponymous character in his novel *Nadja* (1928) also followed this tendency. As well as being of undetermined age, Nadja perches on a slippery scale between fiction and reality. Later, Breton’s wife Jacqueline Lamba (1910-93), whom he met when she was in her mid-twenties, would serve as the apex of this emotional investment in young women. It has been suggested that Carroll himself was in love with the real Alice Liddell, the daughter of the Dean at Christ Church Oxford, a biographical note which was included in the *Fantastic Art, Dada and Surrealism* catalogue.

Were these exploitative relationships? Carrington and Oppenheim were indeed youthful, aspiring artists when they joined the surrealist movement in the 1930s, but that is not to say that they were necessarily taken advantage of. Carrington’s fairy tale ‘Little Francis’ has been read as a criticism of her *femme-enfant* status, but both she and Oppenheim were celebrated by Breton, Ernst and other surrealists for their active preservation of a child-like curiosity conceived as naughty and playful rather than naïve or innocent. As ‘little’ women in their early twenties, their coding as children seems almost deliberately anachronistic. The fourteen-year old poet Gisèle Prassinos (b.1920) would appear more appropriate as an idealisation of the *femme-enfant* as an adolescent. These examples suggest the split status of the child-woman: women represented as children and vice versa. In surrealism this figure is often ambiguous – is she child-woman or sexualised child? Is she a young adult exhibiting childlike behaviour or a precocious minor? Likewise, Carroll’s Alice is a labile figure who literally grows and shrinks, and her manner sometimes belies her years.
The surrealist child-woman was capable of dangerous play.\textsuperscript{33} Consider Simone, the sexually curious, perverse sixteen-year-old in Georges Bataille’s \textit{Histoire de l’oeil} (1928), a murderous nymphomaniac who may be compared with Juliette from Sade’s pornographic novel \textit{Histoire de Juliette ou les Prospérités du vice} (1801) (a child-woman of interest to Breton).\textsuperscript{34} In the early 1930s the surrealists became interested in the case of the eighteen-year-old Violette Nozières, who poisoned her parents so that she could go to a party.\textsuperscript{35} These were \textit{femmes-enfants-fatales}.

As a girl, the Alice figure was assuredly not the privileged protagonist of bourgeois modernity, but in surrealism, as for Carroll, she became an agent of critique and disruption. The image of ‘sugar and spice and all things nice’ was the received ideal or taboo necessary to the transgressive function of the curious girl. One of Dorothea Tanning’s favourite novels, Vladimir Nabokov’s \textit{Lolita} (1955), reinterpreted the child-woman in this regard. Though hardly a surrealist text, \textit{Lolita} dramatised particular perversions that opened onto the field of dissident eroticism spoken to by surrealism. Tanning highlighted the novel’s impact on her contemporaries, which might have included Balthus, who had already produced his own vision of \textit{Alice} in 1933.\textsuperscript{36} The same image of sexual precocity appears in Hans Bellmer’s \textit{La Poupée} project of the 1930s, and in Joseph Cornell’s surprisingly pornographic collages of young girls in the 1960s, such as the explicit \textit{Untitled (Blue Nude)} (mid-1960s) and the suggestive \textit{Battle of the Constellations} (1965).\textsuperscript{37} However, in all three cases, of Balthus, Bellmer and Cornell, persuasive arguments have been put forward for their \textit{identification} with the \textit{femme-enfant}, implying self-feminisation, or at least curiosity about the imaginative agency of little girls.\textsuperscript{38} One might suggest that the surrealists’ fascination with Alice pertained to the way in which she manifested her own curiosity, and indeed curiosity characterised the surrealist project in general. It is the narrative drive of Alice’s desire \textit{to know} that allows us to identify with her. The White Rabbit is the object of Alice’s desire, but he is a cipher for the subtext of the Carrollian quest: the search for knowledge. Laura Mulvey notes the traditional gendering of curiosity as feminine, from the Pandora myth, and Eve’s role in the Biblical Fall, to the Bluebeard story.\textsuperscript{39}

Many of the surrealists are likely to have read or been read Carroll in their \textit{fin-de-siècle} childhoods. The \textit{Alice} books were translated into many languages, including French and German, as early as 1869; Ernst, for example, might have read Antonie Zimmermann’s translation of \textit{Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland}, which was still popular in Germany by the time of his birth in 1891.\textsuperscript{40}
Fig. 1: John Tenniel. ‘You’re nothing but a pack of cards’ in ‘Alice’s Evidence,’ Illustration for Lewis Carroll, Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland, Macmillan and Co. London, 1865.

Fig. 2: Max Ernst. ‘…you won’t be poor anymore, head-shaven pigeons, under my white dress, in my columbarium. I’ll bring you a dozen tons of sugar. But don’t you touch my hair!’ 1930, collage in Rêve d’une Petite Fille Qui Voulut Entrer au Carmel (The Little Girl Dreams of Taking the Veil), translated by Dorothea Tanning. George Braziller, New York, 1984, 81. © ADAGP, Paris and DACS. London 2009.

Later, Carroll’s name appeared in large font on the literary side of ‘Max Ernst’s Favorite Poets and Painters of the Past’ in the April 1942 edition of View magazine. Tanning has underlined the
lifelong importance of Carroll for Ernst, claiming that in the last years of her husband’s life it was Carroll, among few others, ‘who held him.’42 Tanning herself read Carroll in her youth when at work in Galesburg Public Library, and enjoyed the pictures of the Alice illustrators John Tenniel and Arthur Rackham:

Every day sees her at the public library, as employee. There she makes some friends: Lewis Carroll, Madame d’Aulnoy, Andersen, Oscar Wilde. And the pictures! Tenniel, Rackham …43

This was true too of Carrington, who read English children’s nursery classics, including Carroll, during her childhood in Lancaster.44

Fig.3: John Tenniel. ‘The Queen’s Croquet Ground.’ Illustration for Lewis Carroll, Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland, Macmillan and Co. London, 1865.

One might argue that Carrington, Ernst, Tanning and other surrealists used nostalgia as a deliberately regressive strategy to interrogate their class origins. Both Ernst and Tanning grew up in repressive, highly religious, bourgeois households, in the Rhineland and Illinois respectively.45 Alice becomes an interesting figure of identification in this regard. She appears sweet and wholesome but transgresses the confines of her bourgeois nursery, through escape into imaginative, fantastical domains. Tenniel’s illustrations in the first editions of the Alice books have perhaps contributed to the misreading of Alice as innocent and naive. By contrast, as we shall see, when the little girl features in the work of Ernst and Tanning, they appropriate her as a subversive device. She is not
idealised as pure and innocent but represented as ferociously sexualised and fully aware of her actions.⁴⁶


Ernst’s collage novel *Rêve d’une petite fille qui voulut entrer au Carmel*, and Tanning’s painting *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik* (1943), both read as Carrollian visual narratives, not least due to

Fig.5: John Tenniel, ‘The Garden of Live Flowers,’ Illustration for Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There*, Macmillan and Co. London, 1869.
their stylistic quotations of Tenniel. One might compare Tenniel's depiction of Alice being attacked by the cards in court [Fig.1], with Ernst's cover image of the eponymous petite fille being harassed by white birds inside a zoetrope, that philosophical toy of the Victorian nursery [Fig.2]. Werner Spies has demonstrated that the sources for Ernst's collages were nineteenth-century scientific journals such as La Nature, a visual culture broadly contemporaneous with Tenniel's illustrations and Ernst's own childhood. Again, many of Tenniel's Alice illustrations seem now to have anticipated surrealist juxtaposition, for example in the enlarged Cheshire Cat's head floating above the fray in 'The Queen's Croquet Ground' chapter [Fig.3].

Tanning's Eine Kleine Nachtmusik [Fig.4] also appears to appropriate Alice. It is reminiscent of the scene in Through the Looking the Glass when Alice meets the talking flowers [Fig.5]. However, in Tanning's version of events the flower has become overgrown and menacing, and the little girls' curiosity has brought erotic nocturnal knowledge (the flower implies defloration, or even menstruation, according to the archaic meaning of 'flowers'). Carroll's landscapes can likewise be dark, frightening places full of violence, monsters and latent meaning where the Alice-child must trump her obstacles. A similar situation occurs in Tanning's Endgame (1944) in which a giant girl's shoe rebelliously tramples a bishop in a manner reminiscent of Tenniel's illustrations for Carroll's chessboard-orientated Through the Looking Glass. But the femme-enfant, as understood in surrealism, is no longer the polite child of Tenniel's nineteenth-century illustrations. In Ernst's collage novel and Tanning's painting they have rather become 'wise children.'

Alice circa 1941

As I suggested earlier, Ernst tended to identify his partners with Carroll's Alice, perhaps most explicitly during his involvement with Carrington. He painted two portraits of her as Alice in 1939 and 1941. The second version, Alice in 1941, recalls Aragon's article, 'Lewis Carroll – En 1931.' Both Ernst's paintings situate their Alices in fantastical landscapes conjured from the decalcomania method. Carrington appears in both as an eroticised, partially clad, fully developed Alice. Ernst is extending the narrative; Alice after Alice, as a grown-up, more woman than child: 'It is as if Alice were to grow up in Wonderland […] and you were to meet her one day, to re-discover her enchantment, now filled with love and terror. Max Ernst became her guardian when you had forgotten her.'

Though Ernst often idealised his current partner in the guise of the femme-enfant, Alice also served as his alter ego – as she had for Carroll. Ernst's other alter ego, the bird familiar Loplop, appears to nestle the Carrington/ Alice figure in the 1939 Alice work, and by the 1941 version [Fig.6] we find her wrapped in his feathers, no doubt in response to Carrington's earlier Portrait of Max Ernst (1938), which had portrayed Ernst in a red feathered gown.
Though Ernst depicts Carrington as ‘donning his mantle’, the influence was surely reciprocal, and Carrington certainly brought an interest in Carroll to the relationship. Alice became a shared project, as Ernst’s fascination with Carroll intensified. Later, Alice would again be a site of intersection between Ernst and Dorothea Tanning.

Tanning’s self-portrait *Birthday* (1942) [Fig.7] can be compared compositionally and thematically with Ernst’s *Robing of the Bride*. Both include an unclassifiable fantasy creature from a child’s bestiary; Ernst’s being a little green she-goblin, and Tanning’s being highly reminiscent of Carroll’s Gryphon character [Fig.8], further examples of which Tanning would have seen at the *Fantastic Art, Dada and Surrealism* exhibition.
As it does for Carroll’s Alice at the beginning of *Wonderland*, a hallway of doors beckons Tanning’s curiosity. *Birthday* is often referred to as a rite of passage, though is this not perhaps also an example of a Carrollian ‘un-birthday’? Tanning certainly appears more startled than merry, and the mood seems more revelatory than celebratory. As with Ernst’s *Alice* paintings, in *Birthday* Tanning appears more adult than Alice with fully developed breasts on display, again implicitly extending the *Alice* narrative. However, in other important works of the 1940s such as *Jeux d’enfants* (1942) [Fig. 9], Tanning makes her reference to the seven-year-old Alice figure much more direct. The tearing of the wallpaper in *Jeux d’enfants* has been interpreted as a rebellion against the artist’s bourgeois family life in Galesburg, where, as Tanning said herself, ‘nothing happens but the wallpaper.’ This tearing open of a porthole in the bourgeois domestic order, recalls *Through the Looking Glass* where Alice tears through the gauze-like mirror above her mantelpiece in order to enter Looking Glass House.
Mary Ann Caws has indicated the transgressive aspects of Tanning’s ‘terrible little girls’ and their revelation of the house as a feminine body beneath the wallpaper. Here the dialectical tension between inside and outside is made manifest as the little ‘Alices’ battle with the gigantic architectural force, the ‘skin’ of the house. This might be compared compositionally with Tenniel’s illustration of a giant Alice in the hall of doors [Fig.10], and metaphorically with Carroll’s depiction of Alice in the rabbit’s house after her curiosity led her to sample an unlabelled potion causing an onslaught of growing pains [Fig. 11]. Tanning’s little girls tear down the dollhouse architecture inhabited by Carroll’s Alice, not only as an attack on the domestic space, but also with a desire to know the bodily self repressed by bourgeois manners.
Alice’s Spectral Perils

Around the 1950s, many of the child-women ‘Alice’ figures started to visually disintegrate as surrealism itself began to disband. Tanning’s lithograph album Les 7 périls spectraux (1950) depicts just such a breakdown. Though these Seven Perils do not explicitly relate to the Alice narrative, they might still be interpreted in Carrollian terms. This is most especially the case with the Premier Peril [Fig.12] in which we see an Alice-like figure approaching a book-door, driven, one assumes, by her epistemophilic curiosity to feel her way into knowledge. Like Birthday and Eine Kleine Nachtmusik, Premier Peril compositionally recalls Tenniel’s illustration of Alice in the hallway of doors [Fig.13]. Carroll’s little girl enters the book and thus, by metaphoric extension, into the narrative as a fictional ‘character.’ But this character is radically altered as Tanning’s perils progress. By the Septième Peril, [Fig.14] she leaves us with a montage of bodily organs and disembodied orifices, reminiscent of Bataille’s imagery in Histoire de l’œil when Simone inserts the priest’s eye into her vagina and the protagonist hallucinates it as belonging to their dead friend Marcelle.
Fig. 12: Dorothea Tanning. *Premier Peril*, 1950, lithograph, image: 14½ x 10 ¾'' (36.8 x 27.6 cm.), paper: 19½ x 12¾'' (50.5 x 32.4 cm), from *Les sept périls spectraux* with text “Pourquoi Rester Muets?” by A. Pleyre de Mandiargues. © Image courtesy of the Dorothea Tanning Collection and Archive, New York.

Fig. 13: John Tenniel, ‘...she came upon a low curtain she hadn’t noticed before, and behind it was a little door about fifteen inches high ...’ Illustration for Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, Macmillan and Co. London, 1865.
Broadly speaking, Tanning’s disruptive but still diminutive, Tenniel-like renderings of femme-enfants in the 1930s and 40s, stand in stark contrast to the imagery of the 1950s and ‘60s. The monstrous bodily spectre behind Jeux d’enfants has finally defeated the neat and tidy bourgeois child, and the latent narrative, of the body in a state of becoming, has finally come to the fore. Tanning has discussed her painterly turn in terms of a ‘splintering’ of the canvas and abstracting of forms, and as others have pointed out, ‘the Alice-like femmes-enfants transfigure to ripe, naked female bodies’ in this later body of work. Insomnies (1957) is a pivotal example as one can still make out the traces of such an ‘Alice-like’ child, though she has begun to drown in the painterly surface. Abstraction has overwhelmed representation. The very title awakens the viewer from the dream narrative of the Alice books and, by extension, the emphasis on the dream in surrealism, which Tanning was beginning to distance herself from. The boundaries are no longer in the
process of being torn down but are now fully broken, and only fragments of the *femme-enfant* can be found like a vague, blurry memory of childhood.

**Underlying Illogic: Later Appropriations of Carroll**

Ernst also sought to revise Alice around the same time. Following Walt Disney’s sugar-coated feature-animation of 1951, which conflated aspects of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* with *Through the Looking Glass*, and after Magritte’s *Alice au pays des merveilles* (1946) which depicted a giant Alice morphing into a tree, Ernst reinterpreted the stories in *For Alice's Friends*, two paintings of 1957. Here he returned to the less stable underside of the tale, and began to subvert Alice’s contained appearance into a painterly abstraction.

In both versions of *For Alice’s Friends* Ernst makes apparent the more multilayered aspect of the narrative with his scraping technique of *grattage*, reinforcing the forest landscape he uses to set the scene for Carroll’s cast of unusual creatures. They emerge through the undergrowth. Ernst’s geometric renderings of the figures create a general economy of characters in that the figures could stand simultaneously for any number of fantastical pairings that occur throughout the narrative. The numerous ornithological beings no doubt represent Ernst’s own bird mythology. Ernst’s alter ego, the phonetically childlike Lop-Lop, chimes with Carroll’s Do-do, often seen as a representation of Dodgson himself. The Jub-jub in Carroll’s ‘Jabberwocky’ poem continues along similar lines, as did the playful da-da movement with which Ernst was formerly connected.

It has been claimed that Carroll’s mathematical treatise *The Game of Logic* (1886), originally intended for the ‘private instruction of his child friends,’ became one of Max Ernst’s ‘favourite books.’ Alongside the *Alice* fictions, Ernst also appropriated Carroll’s mathematical ideas into his work. In 1966 he illustrated a French translation of Carroll’s mathematical writings entitled *Logique sans peine*, where schematic forms fudge the system of logic in their seemingly random (dis)ordering of the conventional function of illustration. In the same year, Ernst’s friend Duchamp finished his assemblage, *Étant donnés* (1946-1966). In Carroll’s *Symbolic Logic* (1897), translated into French for the edition that Ernst illustrated, the phrase ‘Étant donné’ (a formal phase in French meaning ‘given’) is used to set up a pair of propositions:

Étant donné un couple de propositions de relation contenant deux classes complémentaires et proposées comme prémises, trouver la conclusion – s’il en existe une – qui leur est conséquente.

(Given a Pair of Propositions of Relation, which contain between them a pair of co-divisional Classes, and which are proposed as Premises: to ascertain what conclusion, if any, is consequent from them).

In Carroll’s treatise this syllogistic logic tends toward the nonsensical:
That story of yours, about your once meeting the sea-serpent, always sets me off yawning; I never yawn unless when I am listening to something totally devoid of interest. ...

The Conclusion:
That story of yours, about your once meeting the sea-serpent, is totally devoid of interest.72

Via Carroll, one might suggest that Duchamp’s *Given 1. The Waterfall 2. The Illuminating Gas*, can be read as a syllogism, albeit a faulty, allegorical and necessarily inconclusive one:

Given, first, the waterfall, second the illuminating gas, we shall determine the conditions for the allegorical appearance of several collisions seeming strictly to succeed each other according to certain laws, in order to isolate the sign of accordance between on the one hand, this allegorical appearance and on the other, a choice of possibilities legitimated by these laws and also occasioning from them.73

Like many surrealists, Duchamp was aware of Carroll’s work prior to his association with the movement. In 1913 he made a little-known work entitled *Musical Erratum* which, Arturo Schwarz believes, borrowed the chance recipe from Carroll’s ‘Poeta Fit, Non Nascitur’ in *Phantasmagoria* (1860-63).74 The bachelors in Duchamp’s *Large Glass* (1915-1923) – a Priest, a Bellboy, a Gendarme, a Cavalryman, a Policeman, an Undertaker, a Flunkey, a Busboy and a Stationmaster – half-echo the list of tradesmen in Carroll’s extended rhyme *The Hunting of the Snark (An Agony in Eight Fits)* (1874): a Bellman, the Boots, a Bonnet Maker, a Barrister, a Broker, a Billiard Maker, a Banker, a Baker, a Beaver, and a Butcher. Later, Ernst produced a schematic revision of *The Hunting of the Snark* (1950/68), originally illustrated by the Pre-Raphaelite illustrator Henry Holiday, radically abstracting the traditional appearance of the characters.75

Ernst went on to refigure the Alice-child, reworking some of his *Logic Without Difficulty* illustrations in a groundbreaking series of thirty-six lithographs for *Lewis Carroll’s Wunderhorn* (1970).76 In the history of Alice illustrations they mark another radical departure, abstracting Alice beyond recognition. Here Ernst takes on the role of illustrator, collaborating with the art historian Werner Spies to compile a range of Carrollian texts in English and German. It reads as a late indication of Ernst’s lifelong respect for Carroll and debt to his works. Ernst’s homage to Carroll was perhaps also a retort to Dalí’s lurid illustrations for *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* of the previous year (1969). Though both depict her as a stick-figure, Dalí’s Alice is a shadowy adolescent girl with skipping rope [Fig.15], while Ernst represents her and other characters as amorphous childlike doodles [Fig.16].77


**Conclusion: Tanning’s Surrealist Novel**

Tanning has continued to investigate the child-woman as narrative device, returning to the fairy tale depictions she began in the 1940s. (This is true too of Carrington whose recent bronze sculpture
How Doth the Little Crocodile (1998) repeats a didactic line from Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland.) Tanning’s allegorical, surrealist novel, Abyss (1949/77) republished as Chasm: A Weekend (2004), transports Wonderland and Looking Glass House to a desert fortress called Windcote which, like Carroll’s fictional worlds, is slightly out of time and functions according to subtly altered social codes. Here the seven-year-old Alice-figure goes by the name of Destina Meridian; the protagonist Albert, an emaciated painter reminiscent of Ernst, is drawn into her diminutive world. Curiosity leads him to the little girl’s attic nursery where she shows him her memory box and shares the secret of her imaginary friend, a lion. Interestingly, Tanning predominantly employs an adult male to represent the curious figure in this story, and a little girl to represent the white rabbit: the epistemophilic object of desire. However, she is, if possible, even more manipulative; an Alice with foresight. She displays a childlike curiosity in order to charm Albert but is already knowing and sibylline in character. Albert is later swallowed by the desert chasm, falling down the ‘rabbit hole’ only to be impaled at the bottom. Meanwhile, his fiancée, the blonde haired, naïve Nadine, functions as the adult Alice, but outside the enchanted safeguard of childhood, her curiosity leads to her ultimate gory fate. Nadine gains the knowledge she seeks but at the cost of defacement and death. As Chadwick rightly concludes, ‘the novel can be read as a kind of revenge of the femme-enfant.’

I have sought in this paper to track the surrealist appropriation of Lewis Carroll, and to reconsider Carroll’s publications – the Alice books in particular – as surrealist intertexts. I have taken for my motif Alice’s curiosity, and sought thus to recode the femme-enfant as an epistemophilic figure. Just as Carroll’s Alice books appeal to both children and adults, the surrealist femme-enfant embodies a slippage between childhood and adulthood. Now in her one-hundredth year, Tanning is still appropriating her childhood self, and endowing her femmes-enfants with curiosity, enacting a continuity with – or return to – the surrealist project.

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organising the Convulsive Nursery conference which helped me think through some of these ideas (University of Manchester, May 2010).


5 Later Jan Švankmajer presented his surrealist vision of Alice, Něco z Alenky (1988), but I will not have space in this article to discuss his project in the detail which it merits. Recent research which chimes with my argument here includes Yang Yen-Yun, ‘Uncovering Alice’s Cabinet of Curiosities: On the Sadomasochism of Infantile Imagination in the Film Něco z Alenky of Jan Švankmajer,’ unpublished research paper, Querying Surrealism, Queering Surrealism, Sixth International Symposium, West Dean, Chichester (20 June 2010). See also Suzanne Keller, ‘The Forceful Imagination of Czech Surrealism: The Folkloric as Critical Culture,’ Anti-Tales: The Uses of Disenchantment, ed. C. McAra and D. Calvin, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle, 2011, 75-83.


28 Ibid. For a reproduction of *L’Ecriture Automatique* see 33.

29 Barr, *Fantastic Art, Dada and Surrealism*, 207.


32 Ernst championed the work of both Oppenheim and Carrington, and later Tanning, by writing prefaces and exhibition interpretations for them, see for example ‘Preface, or Loplop Presents the Bride of the Wind,’ *The House of Fear*, 25-26, and his 1944 text *Dorothea Tanning*, extracts of which are reprinted in Jennifer Mundy, *Desire Unbound*, exhibition catalogue, London, Tate Publishing, 2001, 165. Chadwick suggests that Carrington’s rebellious behaviour ‘redefine[ed]’ the *femme-enfant*, 79.

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For an interesting discussion of Joseph Cornell’s late pornographic collages see Andrew Brink, *Desire and Avoidance in Art: Psychobiographical Studies with Attachment Theory*, Peter Lang Publishing, New York, 2007, 140. For a reproduction of *Untitled (Blue Nude)* see Mundy, 314.

Mieke Bal argues that Balthus’ ‘children are self-portraits as much as portraits of his desire. Not simply his desire to possess but his desire to be (like) the children he so admires,’ *Balthus: Works and Interview*, ed. Ediciones Poligrafa, Barcelona, 2008, 141. This argument has also been made recurrently in the extensive literature on Bellmer: Theresé Lichtenstein, *Behind Closed Doors: The Art of Hans Bellmer*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2001, 48-49. See also Sue Taylor, *Hans Bellmer: The Anatomy of Anxiety*, The MIT Press, Massachusetts, 2000, 68, 90. Foster has also argued: ‘Bellmer appears not only to desire the (dis)articulated female body but also to identify with it,’ *Compulsive Beauty*, 109. This concept of the male appropriation of the feminine domain has been widely discussed in surrealist scholarship. For example see Dawn Ades, ‘Surrealism, Male-Female,’ *Surrealism: Desire Unbound*, 171-196. For more on Cornell’s use of Carroll see Analisa Leppanen-Guerra, ‘“The Child Lost in the Garden of Time”: Childhood and the Fourth Dimension in the Works of Joseph Cornell,’ unpublished thesis, University of California, Irvine, 2004, 169.


Warner has linked the ‘apparition of the Cheshire Cat’ to the new cinematic techniques Carroll was interested in as a keen photographer, Phantasmagoria: Spirit Visions, Metaphors, and Media into the Twenty-first Century, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2006, 153. One might also compare this image with a late collage by Tanning entitled Cat (1986).


Levy, 14.

Heath, The Philosopher’s Alice, 28.


Lusty, Surrealism, Feminism, Psychoanalysis, 27.

See Warlick, 163-165.

Bailly has suggested this creature might be a ‘griffin’ but makes no reference to Carroll, ‘Image Redux: The Art of Dorothea Tanning,’ 17.


Tanning cited in Chadwick, 138. See also Tanning, Dorothea Tanning: 10 Recent Paintings and a Biography, ex. cat. Gimpel-Weitzenhoffer Gallery, New York, 1979, unpaginated.


Tanning, Between Lives, 178.

Wilson, Dorothea Tanning: Between Lives, 10.

However, Martin Sundberg’s recent article makes a convincing case for *Insomnias’* continuity with the surrealist dream project. ‘The Metamorphosis of Dorothea Tanning: On the Painting *Insomnias*,’ *Konsthistorisk Tidskrift/Journal of Art History*, 79:1 (March 2010): 25.


Hubert, *Surrealism and the Book*, 179.

Aberth, 128.

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Abstract

The work of the British artist Ithell Colquhoun has been comparatively overlooked. Only in the last few years have a few publications appeared. This paper adds to these studies by reviewing Colquhoun’s negotiation of surrealism and the occult and by exploring the impact that this twofold affiliation had upon her oeuvre. It lays particular emphasis on Colquhoun’s revisionist tactics and her use of the occult as a site for personal enlightenment and reaffirmation as a woman artist. The discussion centres on Colquhoun’s interest in androgyny, a hermetic motif also employed by the surrealists. The paper addresses Colquhoun’s esoteric and feminist appropriation of the concept, delineates her trajectory as an artist and sheds light on the development of her mystical vision.

The British painter and writer Ithell Colquhoun (1906-1988) is best known for her occult preoccupations and her brief association with the London surrealist group in the late 1930s. Her production ranged from an early attraction to natural forms, via the development of a ‘magic realism,’ to experiments with surrealist methods and the esotericism of her novel, *Goose of Hermogenes* (1961). Colquhoun used occultism to ground her position as a woman artist at the social, literary and artistic margin. This paper situates her work in the intersections between surrealism and the occult, and discusses the role of esoteric symbolism in the formulation of her personal artistic vocabulary.

Colquhoun was both an artist and a practicing occultist. The longstanding link between art and the occult had found clear expression in the so-called occult revival of the fin-de-siècle, a movement which resuscitated various unorthodox spiritual beliefs marginalized by mainstream culture. This resurgence of interest in heterodox spirituality appealed to several artists who wished to oppose hegemonic culture, institutionalized religion and scientific rationalism. Occultism’s engagement with the nature of reality, and the expansion of human consciousness, also inscribed it within the modernist enterprise.

In the early twentieth century, ‘occultism’ signified a diverse group of marginal beliefs and practices, ranging from alchemy and the Cabala to astrology, magic and divination. Yet there was a general attitude of mind underlying all these currents, such as the belief in a hidden reality, beyond the phenomenal world, whose forces could be accessed and manipulated by initiates. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries ‘esotericism’ and ‘mysticism’ were also loosely used as alternative designations of the occult, especially in popular publications and speech. Colquhoun herself employed these terms interchangeably. In this paper the occult will be used as a broad term synonymous with esotericism, which usually designates the theoretical aspect of the occult sciences.

Colquhoun’s lifelong interest in esoteric subjects predated her acquaintance with surrealism. Her curiosity for the ‘tradition of secret knowledge’ was triggered in the mid-1920s while she was attending Cheltenham Ladies College. Keen to acquire knowledge of the field, she began perusing ‘all the alchemical texts [she] could lay [her] hands on.’ In 1928, during her studies at the Slade School of Art in London, Colquhoun became a member of the Quest Society – an esoteric
group with theosophical underpinnings. By 1930 she was knowledgeable enough to publish her first occult essay in The Quest magazine. Colquhoun’s initial encounter with surrealism took place the following year during a stay in Paris, but her interest in the movement crystallised when she attended Salvador Dalí’s 1936 London lecture, where she was impressed by his paranoiac method. In 1939 she exhibited with the English surrealists; that summer she visited André Breton in his studio in Paris, where she encountered automatism and a new automatic method called ‘psychomorphology’. Colquhoun was strongly attracted to surrealism, and balanced her fascination with the movement alongside her esoteric studies. These two interests were compatible for several French surrealists at the time. For their British counterparts, alignment with the occult proved a thorny issue in 1940, when a meeting of those connected with the London surrealist group was held at the Barcelona restaurant in Soho’s Beak Street – a landmark event both for the history of surrealism in Britain, and Colquhoun’s career.

Two years before the meeting, the Belgian surrealist E.L.T. Mesens, secretary of the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels, had settled in London and become involved in the group’s leadership. With the intention of organizing surrealist activity in Britain, he took over the London Gallery and launched The London Bulletin, which functioned as ‘the British surrealist mouthpiece’. After the outbreak of the Second World War, fearing the group’s dispersal, Mesens called the Barcelona restaurant meeting, with the aim of group cohesion. He demanded that those present adhere to certain rules, the more controversial of which were: allegiance to the proletarian revolution; no participating in any other group, including any secret society; and no publishing or exhibiting except under the auspices of the surrealist movement. This meeting was decisive for British surrealism since, as Michel Remy has put it, ‘it was the only public attempt to define surrealism in situ.’ It also marked the break of certain artists with Mesens (and the organised surrealist group in Britain), among them Colquhoun. Colquhoun rejected all three prescriptions. Concerning the prohibition against occult pursuits, she explicitly stated that ‘I wished to be free to continue my studies in occultism as I saw fit.’ Her esoteric leanings and refusal to comply with Mesens’s rules led to her expulsion from the London surrealist group in 1940, one year after she had joined it. As a result she was not included in the exhibition held at the Zwemmer Gallery on 13 June 1940, nor asked to contribute to the special surrealist issue of The London Bulletin. Perhaps her withdrawal from the group was inevitable; yet it did not diminish her commitment to painting and writing according to surrealist principles.

In 1942, her relationship with the newcomer Toni del Renzio – an ambitious young surrealist of Italian and Russian descent whose initiatives challenged Mesens’s authority and caused a rift within the English surrealist group – perhaps widened the division. The boycott of Colquhoun and del Renzio by the leading members of the English surrealist group was enduring, and cost them humiliation during a surrealist poetry reading organized by del Renzio at the International Arts Centre in 1944, which was sabotaged by Mesens and his friends, and exclusion from the International Surrealist Exhibition in Paris in 1947. Even in 1948, after the dispersal of the London surrealist group and her divorce from del Renzio, Roland Penrose refused to accept
Colquhoun’s painting *Autumnal Equinox* for the exhibition ‘40,000 Years of Modern Art’ held in the Academy Hall.\(^{23}\)

Colquhoun was not discouraged. Eager to show her work, she acted independently, exhibiting with the London Group and taking part in group shows at the Royal Academy of Arts, the London Museum and various smaller galleries throughout the 1940s.\(^{24}\) From the 1950s, Colquhoun spent considerable amounts of time in Cornwall until she moved permanently into a new studio in Paul in 1959. In Cornwall she found her habitat, and her artistic endeavours culminated in exhibitions in Great Britain and abroad, notably with the Women’s International Art Club, Aubin Pasque’s Fantasmagie group and the Newlyn Society of Artists. In the 1970s she had several solo exhibitions, the most important of which was her retrospective at Newlyn Orion Gallery in Penzance (1976).

Despite her growing sense of independence, Colquhoun never severed her connections with surrealism, and continued on a surrealist trajectory until her death. She maintained contact with Breton, corresponded with French and British surrealists, and experimented with surrealist methods, such as automatism and the exploration of chance effects.\(^{25}\) In 1949 she reviewed automatism in her text ‘The Mantic Stain,’ which drew parallels between the treasury of ‘mind-pictures’ brought up by surrealist automatic methods and the imaginative interpretations involved in divinatory practices and alchemical transformation, and described a new technique named *parsemage*.\(^{26}\) In the 1960s, she became fascinated with Marcel Duchamp and the idea of the readymade, and also used enamel paint in a semi-automatic way to invoke, as she wrote, what Breton called ‘Convulsive Landscape’.\(^{27}\) In the 1970s and early 1980s she collaborated on British periodicals that aspired to re-launch surrealist activity in England, such as *TRANSFORMAcTION* and *Melmoth*.\(^{28}\)

In a text written in 1976, Colquhoun illustrates her ties with surrealism and explains her split from Mesens’s surrealist group. She is very quick to point out that the ban against her ‘was never authorized by Breton, recognized leader of the surrealist movement.’\(^{29}\) She also argues that it was Mesens’s ‘quirk’ to oppose the occult ‘aspect of surrealist activity,’ and that he did so although ‘Breton, Dominguez, Dr. Mabille, Masson, Seligmann and other continental surrealists pursued such researches without query.’\(^{30}\) Showing her awareness of the occult dimension of surrealist practice, Colquhoun seeks to legitimise her own esoteric interests by appealing to several well-known surrealists, and especially Breton, as common sympathisers.

Colquhoun was more detailed about the influence that esoteric symbolism exerted upon surrealism in her text ‘Surrealism and Hermetic Poetry’ (1968), citing as examples Breton’s writings, from his *Manifestos* to *Fata Morgana* and *Arcane 17*; Nicolas Calas’s *Foyers d’Incendie* (1940); Benjamin Péret’s *La Parole est à Péret* (1943); Kurt Seligmann’s *History of Magic* (1948); and Pierre Mabille’s studies.\(^{31}\) Obviously, she was acquainted with Breton’s call for the occultation of surrealism and the investigation of the occult sciences in the 1930s,\(^{32}\) as well as his use of esoteric vocabulary to convey his renewed vision for the world in the 1940s and after.\(^{33}\) If surrealism’s relation to the occult has sometimes provoked scepticism,\(^{34}\) there is no doubt that the surrealist coterie, especially in France, appreciated the allegorical or poetic potential of esoteric themes and
saw the occult as a genre of transgression and a site of radicalism and subversion. In order to establish a link with surrealism, Colquhoun deliberately situated her own fascination for the occult in a surrealist context. However, unlike several surrealists, her engagement was sustained and rigorous: she became an avid reader in hermetic literature, joined a number of occult groups and gradually integrated an esoteric metaphysics into her imagery.

Colquhoun’s familiarity with the occult was wide-ranging, covering, *inter alia*, alchemy, magic, Rosicrucianism, the Cabala, Gnosticism, the Tarot, astrology, Madame Blavatsky’s theosophy, Christian mysticism and Celtic lore. This accumulation of arcane knowledge is evident in her novel *Goose of Hermogenes* and in *Sword of Wisdom*, the biography she wrote for MacGregor Mathers, one of the leaders of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. Her personal papers (including essays and notes on esoteric symbolism, divinatory practices, magical rituals and paranormal phenomena) and her private collection of books also provide substantial evidence of her erudition on occult matters. Moreover, crucially, she applied for membership to various occult sects. Initially she was encouraged by her distant cousin, Edward Garstin, who was the Secretary of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn and an occult scholar. Despite her rejection by the Order, she was admitted to diverse esoteric circles: in the 1950s she joined Aleister Crowley’s Ordo Templi Orientis and Kenneth Grant’s New Isis Lodge; in the 1960s she participated in rituals held by the Druid Order, was made a deaconess of the Ancient Celtic Church in 1965, and became a member of several Masonic lodges; in 1977 she was ordained a Priestess of Isis by the Fellowship of Isis.

Colquhoun’s enthusiasm for esoterica remained consistent over the years, but her rift with the London surrealist group was a turning-point towards a more thoroughgoing assimilation of occultism into her work. Working on the periphery of the movement gave her the space to investigate occult subjects, her art and writing flourishing outside aesthetic prescription. The occult shaped her artistic production in significant ways but never annulled surrealism’s influence whose methods and subversive energy resonate throughout her oeuvre.

Colquhoun’s identity as a woman artist and an occultist who resisted traditional female roles further reinforced her sense of social marginality. She questioned a patriarchy that identified ‘introverted’ men with genius but did not afford ‘introverted’ women any place. She also criticized surrealism’s masculinism, remarking that ‘Breton’s vision of the “free and adored” woman didn’t always prove a practical help for women, especially painters,’ and that among the surrealists ‘women as human beings tended to be “permitted not required.”’ Her marginal position gave her a critical perspective on received ideas about femininity and creativity, prompting a revision of surrealist and esoteric tropes.

Colquhoun’s treatment of a particular hermetic motif recurrent in surrealist imagery might cast some light on this process of revision. I am talking about the androgyne or hermaphrodite, the *locus classicus* of which is Plato’s *Symposium* and in particular Aristophanes’s speech: the Athenian comic playwright reveals that human beings were originally powerful, spherical and of three sexes – male, female and androgynous – and were split in half by the jealous gods. This fragmentation set in motion the perpetual quest for the other half and the heterosexual or homosexual union to achieve completion. Notions of originary androgyny and subsequent division
into two sexes appear across Western religion, philosophy, art and literature. They are also central to hermeticism – the corpus of alchemical, astrological and neoplatonic works attributed to the legendary Hermes Trismegistus – at whose heart lies an idea of androgyny as the union of two primordial forces of Nature, the masculine and the feminine. These two principles – conceived as complementary opposites – were usually personified as King and Queen or Red Man and White Woman. The alchemist sought to unite the male and female aspects of the *prima materia*, with the ultimate goal of bringing forth the philosopher’s stone, or its equivalent, the androgyne.

Medieval and Renaissance alchemy, the art of transmutation, configured the coincidence of opposites as the wedding of two sexes, and depicted it as the royal marriage and copulation of King and Queen [Fig. 1].


The coition was sometimes described as an incestuous union between brother and sister twins. Ultimately, the perfect completion of the *opus* was marked by the creation of the androgyne, usually portrayed as a double being, half-man, half-woman [Fig. 2].
The surrealists were intrigued by the erotic character of Aristophanes’s myth as well as the sexual imagery employed in alchemy to symbolize the union of opposites; such imagery was widely disseminated in the literature of popular esotericism [Figs. 3 and 4]. Scholarship on the androgyne entered the surrealist context in a 1938 Minotaure article by Albert Béguin, which discussed the androgyne as a symbol in which all contraries were resolved and brought into harmony; it also offered a historical overview of the myth and provided an illustration of the divine androgyne, Adam before the Fall [Fig. 5]. The surrealists recast this transcendental idea in terms of Eros’s power to reconcile the sexes, incorporating it into their mythologizing of love. But despite the surrealist reliance upon Plato, the original myth’s erotic possibilities were distorted by Breton who praised only heterosexual coupling, thus discarding homosexual union.
Fig. 4: The Hermetic Androgyne, manuscript, *Dritter Pitagorischer Sinodas von der verborgenen Weisheit*, late 17th century. Reproduced in Givry, *Le Musée des Sorciers, Mages et Alchimistes*, frontispiece.

Fig. 5: Androgynous Adam before the Fall. Reproduced in Albert Béguin, ‘L’ Androgyne,’ *Minotaure*, No. 11, 1938, 11.

The ideal of reciprocal heterosexual love that pervaded Breton’s writings – and surrealist poetry in general – found expression in the figure of the androgyne. Artists such as Victor Brauner
and Max Ernst also used the motif as an emblem of a completeness that could be realized through heterosexual copulation. Such images are endowed with sexual connotations in a juxtaposition of male and female features [Fig. 6] or show the cannibalisation of the female by the male [Fig. 7] in a futile attempt to form a seamless whole. The regeneration of the male self through the female other is usually the primary focus, rendering woman subordinate, a model that obviously could not suit women artists.

Colquhoun was fascinated by androgyny and was familiar with both its pre-surrealist and surrealist manifestations. However, she did not uncritically reproduce the hermetic originals or their surrealist variants, but produced her own revision of the thematic. This revision centred chiefly on the surrealist androgyne as formulated by the mostly male members of the movement in the 1920s and 1930s and appears to have been a form of the ‘internal dialogism’ by which women surrealists negotiated masculinist surrealist iconographies. Colquhoun used tactics of reversal, subversion and humour against phallocentric thinking and, further, moved beyond the gender binary to construct her own androgyne myth primarily inspired by her experience of esotericism. This ‘esoteric’ perspective was distinctly personal and reflected a growing feminist awareness.

Fig. 6: Victor Brauner, Entre le jour el la nuit (Gemini), 1938, oil on canvas, 45.72 x 54.29 cm. Collection of Albert A. Robin. © ADAGP-OSDEETE 2011
Historically, nineteenth-century occultism provided a locus for women to explore issues of gender, power and sexuality and to legitimize female public articulacy; it also valorized them as privileged with special abilities. This line of thought, which put emphasis on gender difference, ran counter to the contemporaneous anti-essentialist feminism that sought to address the question of woman in a context of civil rights and rational discussion. Although the belief in women’s innate alliance with the occult was itself contradictory, invoking arguments against and in favour of women, it was often appropriated by women to support their demand for equal treatment in the social and political arenas.

Androgyny in particular was explicitly associated with women’s concerns as early as the nineteenth century. Feminist thinkers employed it to proclaim art an endeavour that need not have a gender; women writers and artists also observed its egalitarian symbolism and saw it as a solution to the sexual battle taking place in the fin-de-siècle. In the twentieth century, androgyny retained its appeal as an image through which women could voice their critique and visions of gender and sexuality. In particular, women surrealists, such as Leonora Carrington, Remedios Varo, Leonor Fini, Valentine Penrose and Meret Oppenheim, all looked to the figure of the androgyne.

Colquhoun endorsed esoteric symbolism as potentially liberating and provided several hermetically inspired examples of the androgyne motif. For example, at the end of the 1930s and the beginning of the 1940s, she produced three series of watercolours that explored love, gender equilibrium and wholeness through an adaptation of hermetic imagery. In Alchemical Figure: Androgyne (1941; Fig. 8) the mystical fusion of two opposites brings forth the androgynous whole.
In pictorial terms this union is translated into the overlapping of two figures in profile within a black egg-shaped space. Colquhoun selects blue and pink to designate gender polarization but joins the differently coloured silhouettes in a way that evokes the blurring of identities and their total merging. In *Diagrams of Love: Christian Marriage II* (c. 1940-42; Fig. 9), the androgynous human bust. This time conjunction is indicated by the motifs of crossed lips and pairs of eyes as well as by gender ambiguity which implies the dissolution and integration of polarities. In both instances androgyny suggests Colquhoun's wish to erase sexual difference and to move beyond dualism to a holistic model.

Fig. 8: Ithell Colquhoun, *Alchemical Figure: Androgyne*, 1941, watercolour, 37.3 x 23.3 cm. TGA 929/4/10/6, Tate Archive, Tate Britain. Image reproduced courtesy of the National Trust, United Kingdom
This model offers an alternative to those surrealist readings of androgyny which privileged the male principle, thus perpetuating the barriers between the sexes. Colquhoun’s investigation of sexuality and her denunciation of gender disparity are also expressed in several paintings she exhibited this period which provide, as Dawn Ades points out, ‘a mocking response to the prevailing imagery of eroticism within surrealism.’58 This is the case in *The Pine Family* (1941; Fig. 10), which illustrates three truncated tree-like human torsos, one feminine, one hermaphroditic, the last masculine, lying next to each other, displaying their resemblances and differences. Labels written in French denote the torsos’ genders. One, which reads ‘celle qui boite’ (‘she who limps’), is attached to the female torso, whose right thigh is severely mutilated. Another label, ‘L’Hermaphrodite Circoncis’ (‘the Circumcised Hermaphrodite’), belongs to the castrated androgynous trunk. The last one, planted on the thigh of a castrated male torso, reads ‘Atthis,’ referring to Attis, the Phrygian cult-consort of the goddess Cybele.

The conjunction of androgyny, pine trees and castration recalls the story of Attis’s self-castration beneath a pine tree, which Frazer related in *The Golden Bough*.59 However, Colquhoun
does not overtly depict the myth; rather, the myth constitutes the image’s latent structure. Colquhoun takes up the theme of castration and emphasises its tragic effects. Ironically, only female genitalia seem to remain intact and unaffected by the tragedy. Colquhoun employs humour and double images in a surrealist vein and also appropriates techniques used by the surrealists to destabilize establishment culture, such as fragmentation and repetition. Locating her work within the surrealist aesthetics of dismemberment, she nevertheless redistributes castration anxiety across all three ‘sexes.’ These torsos are simultaneously amputated phalli and mutilated bodies – and they all lack the penis.

Fig. 10: Ithell Colquhoun, *The Pine Family*, 1941, oil on canvas, 46 x 50.5 cm. The Vera and Arturo Schwarz Collection of Dada and Surrealist Art, Israel Museum, Jerusalem. Photograph reproduced courtesy of the Israel Museum, Jerusalem.

Colquhoun’s painting portrays a highly sexualised but doomed family, ironising Freudian phallocentrism. Her ironical stance is reinforced by the labels she attaches to her gendered torsos: ‘Atthis’ associates the castrated male with a eunuch, playing out the theme of the god’s emasculation, actually caused by the powerful Mother Goddess Cybele; ‘the circumcised
hermaphrodite,’ an expression used by Isidore Ducasse to satirize the nineteenth-century female author George Sand who cross-dressed and adopted a male pseudonym, identifies the castrated androgyne with a woman being masculinised to confront a male-dominated literary milieu.63 ‘she who limps’ very likely points to Colquhoun’s wish to ‘disable’ the surrealist muse, since it can be read as a satirical twist on ‘she who advances,’ a phrase used by the surrealists in the 1930s to describe the mythical image of Gradiva as the ideal woman.64

Colquhoun’s repudiation of a male-defined sexual theory which outweighs any notions of balance and by extension freedom is clearly articulated in an unpublished text she wrote at the time, ‘The Divine Marquis and the Myth of Liberty.’65 Colquhoun challenges ‘the surrealist conception of liberty’ which relies upon the supposedly liberating theories of Marquis de Sade; she also openly criticizes Breton and ‘the surrealist theorists’ for their admiration of Sadean doctrines, arguing that they pose threats to health and life, divide the world into ‘tyrants’ and ‘victims,’ and do not offer goals desirable to the ‘victim-class’ into which the physically weaker, including children and mostly women, are usually forced. This text is significant because it shows that for Colquhoun surrealism expressed a distinctly masculine perspective and the sexual revolt proclaimed by the surrealists around Breton did not fully engage women’s needs and desires.

Colquhoun would convey her ideas more lyrically in the 1943 text, ‘The Water Stone of the Wise,’ which inscribed a liberatory sexuality in an androgyny posed as the myth – drawn again from alchemical and astrological symbolism – of the Siamese Twins:

No more tyrants and victims, no more the fevered alternations of that demon-star which sponsored the births of de Sade and von Sacher-Masoch; but the hermaphrodite whole, opposites bound together in mitigating embrace by a silk-worm’s thread. … Oedipus will be king no longer but will return to Colonnus [sic]. The new myth, the myth of the Siamese Twins, will make of him a forgotten bogey …. In one of the planets’ airy houses live the Twins, a boy and a girl, perpetually joined by an ectoplasmic substance which is warmed by the solar and lunar currents of their bodies. They cannot part, nor do anything apart ….66

The text was written for the surrealist section of New Road 1943, which was compiled by del Renzio to express his total allegiance to Breton and his principles. In line with the surrealist search for a new mythology, Colquhoun puts forward the new myth of the Twins as a replacement for the old myth of Oedipus, displacing the patriarchal structure of the Oedipus story with the coincidence of male and female principles in the androgyne.67 Although her new myth echoes Breton’s wish for the supersession of all oppositions and the perfect union with the beloved, it also rejects the surrealist heroes Masoch, Sade and Oedipus as icons of sexual inequality.68 Moreover, it locates true freedom in a condition where all contradictions are merged and annihilated into an undifferentiated unified state. Colquhoun expresses her faith in androgyny as a transcendent, equalising principle that defies the very gender system.

Colquhoun further revised and elaborated her vision of androgyny in her occult novel, Goose of Hermogenes. The book was published in 1961, although several excerpts were produced
as early as 1939 and published in art journals.\textsuperscript{69} In a mythopoetic style the novel weaves together her fascination for esotericism with surrealist modes such as automatism, the Gothic, and dream narratives, recounting the heroine's adventurous journey to an island where her alchemist uncle resides. The story, organized according to the twelve-stage subdivision of the alchemical opus, reads like a collage of dreams filled with bizarre discoveries and strange chance encounters. Each one of the twelve chapters corresponds to a different stage in the transformative process and leads a step forward to the accomplishment of the ultimate goal, so that the narrative parallels the alchemists' quest for the philosopher's stone.\textsuperscript{70} Its title, Goose of Hermogenes, affirms this reading but also discloses a second layer of meaning.

Colquhoun opens her novel with a citation that is of key importance for the interpretation of the work:

\begin{quote}
It is our door-keeper, our balm, our honey, oil, urine, maydew, mother, egg, secret furnace, true fire, venomous dragon, theriac, ardent wine, Green Lion, Bird of Hermes, Goose of Hermogenes, two-edged sword in the hand of the cherub that guards the Tree of Life.\textsuperscript{71}
\end{quote}

This epigraph is taken from Eirenaeus Philalethes's 'Metamorphosis of Metals' and describes Mercury, one of the central alchemical symbols.\textsuperscript{72} According to Colquhoun's card index of Edward Garstin's unpublished \textit{Alchemical Dictionary},\textsuperscript{73} Mercury adopts diverse guises: it stands for the alchemical Queen and the feminine principle, but it also signifies the \textit{prima materia}, the universal agent of transmutation and the elixir produced at the end of the opus. In all these cases it is considered as hermaphroditic since it contains in itself both male and female seeds of metals or partakes as mediator of both natures.\textsuperscript{74} Significantly, the object of the heroine's quest is illustrated as both feminine and androgynous.

Three chapters, ‘Conjunction,’ ‘Putrefaction’ and ‘Congelation,’ develop the theme of androgyny. ‘Conjunction’ is actually a fairy tale incorporated within the main narrative and chronicles the romantic relationship of two people destined to complement each other. Colquhoun is quick to distinguish their ‘elective affinity’ from the Occidental notion of ‘romantic love,’ and links it with Platonic Eros. She argues that this species of love goes back to ‘the magian consciousness’ of the Near East,\textsuperscript{75} and that it is embodied in the myth of ‘two beings contained in a single sphere to form a hermaphrodite whole, the androgynous egg.’\textsuperscript{76} This is Colquhoun’s first explicit account of love as a formidable psychic connection dissociated from the carnal aspect of sexuality.

The following two sections focus on the heroine’s search for her other half. In ‘Putrefaction,’ the alchemical stage of corruption and death, Colquhoun presents conflict, torment and decease as integral to the process of transmutation.\textsuperscript{77} It is in this chapter that the protagonist realises her need for fulfilment, as well as her ancestral relation to the lunar woman of alchemy. Putrefaction is followed by congelation, the stage of the solidification of the conjoined contraries, where the heroine is given the chance to fulfil her wish for a soul-mate.\textsuperscript{78} The desired fusion is never consummated, a failure indicating that the union with the other half is unobtainable in real life.
The succeeding chapters relate the protagonist’s experiences in the uncle’s demesne, and her growing desire to escape. Eventually, in the last chapter, she manages to flee, only to arrive at the starting point of her journey, as the narrative becomes an *ouroboros*. Significantly, the title of the concluding chapter, ‘Projection,’ is the alchemical stage which brings the entire operation to a successful close; in practical alchemy, it marks the attainment of gold; in spiritual alchemy, it symbolises inner wholeness, the integration of the self and absolute freedom.\(^7\)

Colquhoun subtly blends alchemical projection and self-liberation, pointing to a spiritual interpretation of alchemy.\(^8\) Moreover, in the last chapter, she likens her heroine to a goose, echoing the book’s title and indicating that the object of transubstantiation has been the protagonist herself.\(^9\) In this light, the heroine's astonishing ordeals constitute stages in the process of self-exploration, whereas the quest for the ideal partner is deemed inessential and utopian, since the other half lies within the self. This is evident in the novel as a whole, and especially in the potential love stories. Although at first the protagonist realizes her need to love and be loved in the fictional romance of the ‘Conjunction’ chapter, her growing affection for another person never develops into a real relationship. Colquhoun elegantly sets up a romantic love story only to subvert it. As the story progresses, the heroine acquires knowledge of nature’s secret life and of herself, and in each chapter she moves a step forward in her spiritual advancement. *Goose of Hermogenes* serves as an allegory for the reconciliation of opposed forces within the psyche.

The context of Colquhoun’s involvement with occultism reinforces this reading. As she confesses in *Sword of Wisdom*, she joined secret societies because she sought enlightenment.\(^1\) Her pursuit of illumination was further stimulated by studies concerned with the psychological interpretation of alchemy, such as those of Herbert Silberer and Carl Jung.\(^2\) The historical connection between occultism and analytical psychology proceeded from shared aims of personal transformation and the perfection of the self.\(^3\) Israel Regardie’s *The Middle Pillar* (1938) was the first book to discuss this relationship, arguing that Jungian analysis and hermetic magic ‘comprise … a single system whose goal is the integration of the human personality.’\(^4\) Colquhoun, who read Regardie, was no doubt sympathetic to Jung’s ideas and explored Jungian androgyny as a metaphor for the developed human being.\(^5\) However, she was also apprehensive of women’s unequal treatment within a patriarchal society that praised ‘individuated’ men but handicapped ‘individuated’ women.\(^6\) Her concern surfaces in her novel, which can be read as a feminist retelling of the alchemical Work and the individuation process.

In the 1930s Colquhoun wrote that alchemical writers ‘infuse new meanings into ancient legends,’ and her work similarly reinvested androgyny with her own meaning.\(^7\) Her vision was exemplary of ‘esoteric feminism,’ a term coined by Janice Helland to describe Leonora Carrington’s mature oeuvre in which the artist appropriated an esoteric language to articulate issues of female power and creativity.\(^8\) Colquhoun displayed her ‘esoteric feminist intent’ in the 1940s when she proclaimed the displacement of the phallocentric myth of Oedipus with her image of balanced unity, the Siamese Twins. In the 1950s, as she entered a stage of artistic and personal maturation, her androgyny pertained to psychic wholeness, encoded as the goose of Hermogenes.
Importantly, her androgynous ideal contained a liberatory potential for women, a potential also explored by Leonora Carrington and Remedios Varo. From the 1960s onwards critics debated the relevance of androgyny for feminism, in terms of whether it provided an egalitarian ideal or a patriarchal myth in disguise; as a result, the androgynous myth has been variously scorned and espoused. One should not, however, reduce androgyny to a single unified myth, bearing in mind that it has proven to be a polyvalent motif constantly modified and redeployed in various contexts for different purposes. Androgyny should therefore be read in context. In Colquhoun’s case her reconfiguration of the concept relies upon heterodox spirituality rather than political activism, yet nevertheless counters the dominant Oedipal order. Although Colquhoun’s androgyny involves an initial investment in binary gender, it goes on to dissolve stable meanings and identities, forming a third, fluid (non-)‘sex.’ It also offers a path of self-realisation to the female subject.

Colquhoun was drawn to occultism because it offered women an avenue for self-discovery and spirituality in contrast with other religious and secular contexts. She further allied herself with the surrealists in their project for the transformation of human consciousness but was careful to distance herself from Freud’s materialist emphasis on sex. She did not deny herself erotic pleasure, but her approach came closer to Tantra – that is, viewing erotic fusion as a spiritual practice, symbolically resolving cosmic antinomy. The spiritualisation of experience was essential for Colquhoun’s feminist reworking of hermetic and psychological notions of self-development. While she was not a political feminist, her revision of patriarchal tropes, and synthesis of an alternative myth, bespoke her personal vision as a woman surrealist and occultist. Although Colquhoun’s optic was positioned on the margins, her approach was not polemical but visionary, viewing art and the occult as vehicles for women’s personal growth, self-sufficiency and creativity. This ideal finds its way into her unique artistic vocabulary, which rewrote mainstream narratives and eloquently exemplified the commingling of esoteric feminism with surrealism.

I would like to thank Professor Dawn Ades for her continuous encouragement and help with my doctoral research that gave rise to the present paper, her careful reading of the text and her invaluable feedback. I would also like to thank the staff of the Tate Archive who allowed me access to Ithell Colquhoun’s archival material and collection of books and particularly Krzysztof Cieszkowski for his generous assistance.

Colquhoun herself employs the term ‘magic realism’ or ‘super-realism’ to describe her works of exotic plants and flowers of the 1930s where she used superimposed glazes of colour; see Ithell Colquhoun, Surrealism: Paintings, Drawings, Collages 1936-76, unpaginated.


On the relation of occultism to esotericism and mysticism, see Owen, The Place of Enchantment, 20-2. In its strictest sense mysticism refers to the transcendent experience of the divine and the complete fusion of oneself with the Infinite. See ‘Mysticism,’ in Galbreath, ‘A Glossary of Spiritual and Related Terms,’ 376-77.


Her occult interests were probably invoked by a newspaper account of Aleister Crowley’s Abbey of Thelema in 1923 and her reading of W. B. Yeats’s early essays a year or two later; see Ithell Colquhoun, Sword of Wisdom: MacGregor Mathers and the Golden Dawn, Neville Spearman, London, 1975, 15-6.

Colquhoun herself reveals that she was first acquainted with surrealism through the booklet ‘What is Surrealism’ by Peter Neagoe and through small exhibitions where she had the chance to see paintings by Salvador Dali; see Colquhoun, Surrealism: Paintings, Drawings, Collages 1936-76, unpaginated.

Chadwick, Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement, 126, 128: Remy, Surrealism in Britain, 204. See also Colquhoun’s own account in Colquhoun, Surrealism: Paintings, Drawings, Collages 1936-76, unpaginated.

She participated in ‘The Living Art in England’ exhibition and in a joint exhibition with Roland Penrose at the Mayor Gallery.

On Colquhoun’s meeting with Breton, see Colquhoun, Surrealism: Paintings, Drawings, Collages 1936-76, unpaginated. The notion of ‘psychological morphology’ was developed by Roberto Matta in 1938 in collaboration with Gordon Onslow Ford. Matta used the term to describe spaces filled with biomorphic figures which, he believed, revealed invisible realms, like the inner word. Colquhoun defines it as ‘an effort to tap that level of consciousness sometimes perceptible between sleeping and waking which consists of coloured organic (non-geometric) forms in a state of flux.’ See ibid. See also Roberto Matta, Psychological Morphology, translation by Gordon Onslow Ford, Archives of the Lucid Art Foundation, Inverness, CA: Gordon Onslow-Ford, ‘The Painter looks within himself,’ The London Bulletin, Nos 18-20, June 1940, 30-1.

For example Max Ernst, Victor Brauner, Pierre Mabille, Kurt Seligmann, Yves Tanguy and André Masson.


17 Remy, *Surrealism in Britain*, 209

18 Alongside Colquhoun, Eileen Agar, Herbert Read, Reuben Mednikoff and Grace W. Pailthorpe refused to comply with Mesens’s guidelines. Nonetheless, Agar and Read were accepted back later, whereas Mednikoff and Pailthorpe severed their connections with surrealism. See *ibid.*, 211.


20 The opening of the surrealist exhibition at the Zwemmer Gallery was followed by the publication of the triple issue of *The London Bulletin*, Nos 18-20, June 1940. See Remy, *Surrealism in Britain*, 211-13.

21 It is very likely that Colquhoun’s rift with Mesens deepened after her affair with his rival, Toni del Renzio. Scholars, however, usually comment on Colquhoun’s role in the feud: Ray suggests that del Renzio fell out of favour with Mesens because he was romantically involved with Colquhoun; Remy argues that the affair was the principal reason for the deterioration of the relations between the two men. Levy, relying upon his correspondence with del Renzio, corroborates that Mesens ‘had had designs on Ithell Colquhoun’ but also points to Mesens’s homosexual desire for del Renzio. See Ray, *The Surrealist Movement in England*, 234; Remy, *Surrealism in Britain*, 226; Levy, ‘The Del Renzio Affair,’ 24.

22 Levy, ‘The Del Renzio Affair,’ 13, 21, 22.


24 She exhibited at the Leicester Galleries, Whitechapel Art Gallery, Leger Galleries, Redfern Gallery, AIA Gallery and others.

25 On her communication with Breton, see Colquhoun, *Surrealism: Paintings, Drawings, Collages*, 1936-76, unpaginated. For her correspondence, see the following items from the collection of Ithell Colquhoun’s unpublished papers, which she bequeathed to the Tate Archive: TGA 929/6/12 (Victor Brauner), TGA 929/1/1084-1092 (Conroy Maddox), TGA 929/1/1141-1144 (Robert Melville), TGA 929/1/1843-1848 (Herbert Read) and TGA 929/1/1339-1351 (Gordon Onslow-Ford).

26 In *parsemage* powdered charcoal or chalk is sprinkled over a bowl of water, and then a board or paper is passed just below the water surface. See Ithell Colquhoun, ‘The Mantic Stain,’ *Enquiry*, Vol. 2, No. 4, October-November 1949, 15-21.


28 See TGA 929/2/2/3 and 929/2/1/40.


30 *ibid*.

31 Typescript essay at TGA 929/2/1/60.

33 André Breton, Arcane 17, Brentano’s, New York, 1944; André Breton, L’Art Magique, Club Français du Livre, Paris, 1957.


35 The English surrealists did not show an equal fascination for the occult with the exception of Gordon Onslow-Ford who drew themes from mystical texts, such as Ouspensky’s Tertium Organum; see Linda Dalrymple Henderson, ‘Mysticism, Romanticism, and the Fourth Dimension,’ in The Spiritual in Art, 229-33. Perhaps Mesens’s strict directives condemning associations with any other group or system of thought other than surrealism did not provide the space for the expression of such interests. On the other hand, the independent-minded del Renzio, aware of Breton’s call for the occultation of surrealism in the 1930s and perhaps through Colquhoun’s influence, openly asked for a ‘hermetic immersion in metaphysics’ in his Incendiary Innocence (1944). See Remy, Surrealism in Britain, 226-22.

36 Breton had a passion for the occult as evidenced from his private library which contains numerous studies on hermeticism, the Cabala, Gnosticism, Martinism, Rosicrucianism, the divinatory practices, magic, spiritualism, psychical research and the paranormal. See André Breton: 42, Rue Fontaine, Vol. 2, CalmelsCohen, Paris, 2003, 201-23. Nonetheless, he showed suspicion over the religious overtones of metaphysics and mysticism, and on various occasions he dismissed any possibility of extraterrestrial interventions in human life. See, for example, André Breton, ‘Interview with René Bélance,’ in What is Surrealism? Selected Writings, 256. On the other hand, Colquhoun explored the existence of supernatural entities, like fairies, angels, ghosts and poltergeists; see TGA 929/5/8; 929/5/2/1-4; 929/5/22.


38 See TGA 929/5 and Ithell Colquhoun’s book collection at the Tate Archive. Her library contains works by renowned Renaissance hermeticists, like John Dee and Paracelsus, popular compendia and scholarly studies by nineteenth-century occultists and occult authors (Stanislas de Guaita, Papus, Eliphas Lévi, Arthur-Edward Waite, MacGregor Mathers, Aleister Crowley), theosophists (Madame Blavatsky, Annie Besant, Anna Kingsford, G.R.S. Mead), and twentieth-century experts on esotericism, like Israel Regardie and Serge Hutin. It covers a wide spectrum of topics from Western esotericism to Eastern spirituality (Buddhism, Hinduism) and practices (Yoga, Tantra, I Ching) to comparative religion, mythology, archaeology, folklore, philosophy, fantastic literature, surrealistic publications and psychology.

39 See related papers at TGA 929/5/21; 929/1/618-630; 929/5/10/1-7; 929/5/9.

40 For Remy it was precisely her mystical, almost religious inclination toward the occult that ‘was sufficient to bar her from being a surrealist, in the sense of having an exclusive commitment to the emancipation of the mind and the freeing of the imagination from any closed system,’ see his Surrealism in Britain, 316. Although Colquhoun’s occult initiation made her work ‘cryptic’ and often inaccessible, it was chiefly her absence from collective surrealist exhibitions and publications that did not properly introduce her work to the public. It is not accidental that other women surrealists
who exhibited and published under the auspices of the English and French surrealist groups were invited to participate in International Surrealist Exhibitions and were more often included in surveys of surrealism, for example Eileen Agar and Emmy Bridgewater in England, Leonora Carrington and Meret Oppenheim in France.


46 On the union of opposites as an incestuous fusion, see Abraham, *A Dictionary of Alchemical Imagery*, 106; on alchemical twins, see *ibid.*, 206.

47 Fulcanelli’s *Le Mystère des Cathédrales et l’Interprétation Ésoterique des Symboles Hérmetiques du Grand-Oeuvre* (1926) and Grillot de Givry’s *Le Musée des Sorciers, Mages et Alchimistes* (1929) held a major attraction in the surrealist circle. Breton owned copies of these works as well as translations of primary sources (Cornelius Agrippa, Paracelsus, J.-V. Andreae, Nicolas Flamel, Basil Valentine, John Dee, Michael Maier), nineteenth-century writings on the occult sciences (Stanislas de Guaita, Eliphas Lévi, Oswald Wirth), contemporary alchemical treatises (Eugène Canseliet) and modern studies of esoterica (Robert Amadou, Robert Ambelain). See *André Breton: 42, Rue Fontaine*, Vol. 2, 7-8, 12, 201-23. On a comprehensive account of the occult literature circulating in France in the first decades of the twentieth century, see Warlick, *Max Ernst and Alchemy*, 23-33.


54 For examples see Basham, *The Trial of Woman, passim:* Owen, *The Place of Enchantment,* ch. 3; Dixon, *Divine Feminine,* ch. 7.

55 Feminist thinkers, such as the republican Maria Deraismes, openly supported women artists’ demand for equality by having recourse to the metaphor of androgyne; see Tamar Garb, *Sisters of the Brush: Women’s Artistic Culture in Late Nineteenth-Century Paris,* Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1994, 111-2.


57 TGA 929/4/10/1-6; 929/4/11/1-10; 929/4/17/1-20.

58 Ades, ‘Notes on Two Women Surrealist Painters,’ 40.

59 Sir James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion,* Abridged edition, Macmillan and Co., London, 1922, 347-48. Although Colquhoun did not own a copy of this work, she was widely read in classical literature and myth and she most likely knew Frazer’s compendium which was a standard source at the time.

60 For examples of the surrealist aesthetics of dismemberment, see Amy Lyford, *Surrealist Masculinities: Gender Anxiety and the Aesthetics of Post-Word War I Reconstruction in France,* University of California Press, Berkeley, California, 2007.

61 Remy remarks that Colquhoun spoke French and it is not coincidental that ‘pine’ is one of the slang words in French for ‘penis.’ Remy, *Surrealism in Britain,* 245.

62 According to the most oft-quoted version of the myth, it was the jealous Cybele who drove Attis mad to punish him for his infidelity, so that he mutilated himself beneath a pine tree and bled to death. To honour the goddess, her priests ritually castrated themselves in like manner. See Frazer’s English translation of the myth as recounted in Ovid’s *Fasti* 4, 215-46, in *Ovid’s Fasti,* William Heinemann, London and Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1931, 204-07. See also Frazer, *The Golden Bough,* 347-52.

63 In *Surrealism: Paintings, Drawings, Collages 1936-76* Colquhoun quotes part of Isidore Ducasse’s list of Romantic poets and their caricatures, including George Sand, from his *Poesies.*

64 Chadwick was the first to make this connection, see *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement,* 129. Gradiva was a fictional character of Jensen’s homonymous novel which was discussed by Freud and inspired the surrealists in their mythologizing of woman: see ibid. 50-55.

65 See manuscript at TGA 929/2/1/22.


67 Colquhoun’s text also responds to del Renzio’s idea of the ‘New Myth, monogamy … intimately related to liberty …’ See Toni del Renzio, ‘The Light that Will Cease to Fail,’ in *New Road 1943,* 183.

68 On the surrealist fascination with the Marquis de Sade, see Neil Cox, ‘Critique of Pure Desire, Or When the Surrealists were Right,’ in Jennifer Mundy ed. *Surrealism; Desire Unbound,* Tate Modern, London, 2001, 245-73. On women artists’ responses to the male surrealist appropriation of de Sade’s sexual proclamations, see Chadwick, *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement,* 107-10.

69 See, for example, the following texts by Colquhoun: ‘The Double Village,’ *The London Bulletin,* No. 7, December 1938-January 1939, 23: ‘The Volcano,’ and ‘The Echoing Bruise,’ *The London
Colquhoun’s twelve-stage subdivision of the alchemical process relies upon Basil Valentine’s *Twelve Keys*: see Colquhoun, *Sword of Wisdom*, 282.


See TGA 929/5/1.

For a thorough examination of the symbolism of Mercury, see also Abraham, *A Dictionary of Alchemical Imagery*, 124-8.

In her *Sword of Wisdom*, 287, Colquhoun identifies Tantra with the ‘magian strain of oriental culture … in art, philosophy, feeling …’ which, she thinks, has been misinterpreted by European writers who incorrectly stress only one of its five aspects, sexuality.


On congelation, see *ibid.*, 45-6.


This perspective is also asserted in her *Sword of Wisdom*, 284, where she describes the true alchemist as the one who has the ability to ‘manipulate forces on “the confines where matter ends.”’


Colquhoun acknowledges Silberer’s and particularly Jung’s role in contemporary explorations of the psychological aspect of alchemy in ‘Surrealism and Hermetic Poetry,’ 3-5 at TGA 929/2/1/60.

It is widely accepted that Jung was influenced by the turn-of-the-century occult revival and the theories he formulated borrow heavily from his knowledge of esoteric literature. It is therefore not surprising that scholars saw analytical psychology as a secularised form of occultism. On comprehensive accounts of the affinities between the occultists’ and psychologists’ goals, see B.J. Gibbons, *Spirituality and the Occult from the Renaissance to the Modern Age*, Routledge, London and New York, 2001, ch. 7: Owen, *The Place of Enchantment*, ch. 4. However, Jung’s immersion in metaphysics and nineteenth-century occultism led certain scholars to argue that the Jungian analytical school assumed the status of a religious cult which defied its founder, thus inaugurating a great controversy over Jung; see Richard Noll, *The Jung Cult: Origins of a Charismatic Movement*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J., 1994. For a critical assessment of Noll’s argument, see Sonu Shamdasani, *Cult Fictions: C.G. Jung and the Founding of Analytical Psychology*, Routledge, London and New York, 1998.

In the 1950s, Colquhoun underwent psychotherapy and discussed her dreams with the Jungian psychiatrist Alice E. Buck. For her correspondence with Buck and her personal notes on Jungian analysis, see TGA 929/1/235-252.

See handwritten notes at TGA 929/1/245.


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‘Down to the Cellar:’ the architectural setting as an embodied topography of the imagination in two films of Jan Švankmajer

Dagmar Motycka Weston

Abstract

The work of the well-known Czech film maker and artist Jan Švankmajer is informed by his surrealist preoccupation with the primary phenomena of embodiment, experience and the imagination. He believes that the apparently inanimate things and places which we encounter in the given world have a life of their own. Having witnessed certain events, and been touched by people in different psychic states, they accumulate memories which they are then able to communicate to us. He always emphasizes the most primary senses – in particular touch and hearing – above vision, and delights in obliterating the artificial boundary between ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ experience, between reality and dream. Švankmajer often portrays the architectural settings in his films – the always animate world in which his stories are played out – as the echoes and extensions of his characters’ landscapes of the imagination, so that in some cases they almost become characters in their own right. In doing this, he is intuitively alluding to the presence of a latent world, in which human experience and imagination are situated. As with the topography of dream, the structure of places within the stories is often disjointed and disorientating. In his use of architecture, Švankmajer is particularly attuned to deep symbolic archetypes – the dark cavern, the tower, the theatre of the world – which are part of the latent world. The paper briefly examines Švankmajer’s thematic sources - particularly Mannerism and surrealism – for their understanding of the mysterious and animate nature of the experiential world. It then interprets the structure of Švankmajer’s topography in two of his short films, Down To the Cellar and The Fall of the House of Usher.

Fig. 1: Jan Švankmajer under the alchemical sign of the auroboros in front of his Kunstkammer in Horní Staňkov, Southern Bohemia, summer 2008. Photo by the author.
If you are trying to decide what is more important [whether to] trust the experience of the eye or the experience of the body … the experience of the body is more authentic, uninhabited by aestheticisation.

Jan Švankmajer¹

For me objects always were more alive than people. More permanent and also more expressive. They are more exciting for their latent content and for their memories, which far exceed the memories of men. Objects conceal within themselves the events they have witnessed. That’s why I surround myself with them and try to uncover these hidden events and experiences … I have tried in my films to ‘excavate’ this content from objects, to listen to them and then illustrate their story. In my opinion, this should be the purpose of any animation: to let objects speak for themselves.

Jan Švankmajer²

The work of the Czech surrealist film maker and artist, Jan Švankmajer, is informed by his preoccupation with the primary phenomena of embodiment, experience and the imagination [Fig. 1]. He believes that the apparently inanimate things and places which we encounter in the given world have a life and memories of their own, and speak to us. While film is primarily a visual medium, he values its power to evoke and mediate the other, more primary and primitive senses – in particular touch. True to his surrealist beliefs, Švankmajer always delights in obliterating the artificial boundary between ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ experience, and in highlighting the fantastic dimension of reality. He often portrays the architectural settings in his films – the always-animated world in which his stories are played out – as the echoes and extensions of his characters’ imaginative worlds, so that in some cases they almost become characters in their own right. In doing this, he is intuitively alluding to the presence of a latent or pre-reflective world, in which human experience and imagination are situated. As with the topography of dream, the structure of places within his films is often disjointed and disorientating. In his use of architecture, Švankmajer is particularly attuned to deep symbolic archetypes or situations – the dark cavern, the street, the ‘theatre of the world’ – which are part of cultural memory and tradition. He believes that successful artefacts must have a plurivocity which only analogy can provide and says of his films that ‘all interpretations are true.’³ In this paper I will explore these themes and their phenomenological roots with respect to two of Švankmajer’s short animated films, Down to the Cellar (Do pivnice, 1983) and The Fall of the House of Usher (Zánik domu Usherů, 1983).

The Prague surrealist movement has continued to exist and evolve since its origins in the 1920s. In addition to the traditional surrealist themes, its content and preoccupations are inspired by, and respond to, a local cultural context. Chief within this is the city of Prague, which André Breton once described as ‘the magic capital of old Europe.’⁴ There, reminders of a lively twentieth-century avant-garde intersperse with the rich Hermeticist, Mannerist and Baroque past that still permeates the old fabric of the centre and inform Prague’s contemporary culture.⁵ Perhaps because of the difficult political conditions in Bohemia during much of the twentieth century, surrealism, with its emphasis on the liberation of the person and of all aspects of the imagination, has retained much of its subversive
power. With its interest in the structure of the real, surrealism has always had a strong affinity with phenomenology, especially in its critique of rationalist reductivism and of perspectival vision, and its investigations into the phenomena of pre-reflective experience. One of the Czech surrealist group’s stated aims is to investigate the ‘phenomenology of the imagination.’ Švankmajer has always been faithful to the Romantic belief in the primacy of the imagination, and particularly in the artist as being possessed of a privileged, regenerative vision. He has lived his life as an expression of his surrealist ethos, rejecting materialism and seeing his creative activities not as the production of ‘Art’ but as a vital vehicle for self-knowledge. He has aimed – through a kind of alchemical transformation – to enrich the experience of daily life.

The affinity between film and direct experience, and film’s unique potential to evoke lived space and time, have been noted since its early days. Film is constituted through temporality, spatiality and movement, and is thus able to approximate the varied textures of human experience. Cinematic techniques, such as editing and the juxtaposition of image and sound, give film a unique power to evoke the phenomenal continuity between the inner and the outer experience, between ‘reality’ and the imagination, which has been identified by phenomenological study. It also has a mysterious power to partake in the intercommunication of the senses in the unity of the perceiving body.

The latent world of experience

The power of Švankmajer’s best films rests to a large extent in his marvellous, intuitive ability to evoke and articulate some of the deep structures of the pre-reflective or latent world. Phenomenology sees human life as being deeply rooted in the web of references and meanings, or the constant, implicit background that is the world of daily experience:

That the primary domain of experience, its unity and order, is already established on a pre-reflective level is a direct challenge to the conventional view, which attributes that unity and order to intellectual synthesis … In much the same way as the world of praxis, the pre-reflective world is structured as a qualitative and communicative reality that is only to a limited extent accessible to reflective understanding. The implicit (tacit) level of the pre-reflective world is highly structured, but not articulated in a way possible to express in language and thought.

Dalibor Vesely has reinterpreted this key phenomenological theme through the notion of situations. There are certain typical, durable, even archetypal structures in daily life (such as sitting down to eat, or reading in a library) which are informed by the universal conditions of human existence and which, over time, crystallize experience and tradition. Together they comprise the latent world:

The latent world, which is the origin of dream, represents the reality of the world in its most natural and complete givenness. The key to this givenness is the inexhaustible richness of articulated experience contained in concrete situations in which we always find ourselves. Situations are the framework in which our experience is sedimented, finds its identity, and makes possible the origin of cultural memory.
Within the pre-reflective world of given experience our understanding of the order of things is animated by a multitude of latent affinities and correspondences. Imperceptible to reductivist rationalism, these are open to expression through poetic thinking and metaphor. This means that things within the world are constantly communicating with each other on many levels. Such aspects of the latent world can be articulated or made explicit through the works of art or architecture. To describe the texture of this communicative field by means of analogy has frequently been the aim of surrealist art. It is well illustrated, for example, by the frottages and collages of Max Ernst, or by the works of Švankmajer himself [Fig. 2].\textsuperscript{11} Similarly, the understanding of things in the world (and of nature itself) as animate, even sentient entities, which played such an important role in Hermeticism and Mannerist culture, for example, can be traced back to such a communicative structure of the latent world. The phenomenal continuity between inner, imaginative (supposedly ‘subjective’) and outer (supposedly ‘objective’) experience can be traced to the same origins.\textsuperscript{12} This is a world-view that Švankmajer has always sought to express in his works. His characteristic deployment of a mixture of live action and stop-motion animation in itself suggests this seamless blending in experience of the ‘plausible’ side of reality and that where fantasy and dream take over.

Fig. 2: Jan Švankmajer, \textit{The Androgyne}, puppet, 1990. Reproduced by permission of Jan Švankmajer.
The ‘Phenomenology of the Imagination’ in Švankmajer’s films – *Down to the Cellar (Do pivnice)*

![Image](image_url)

Fig. 3: Jan Švankmajer, *Down to the Cellar*. Courtesy of Slovak Film Institute.

I would now like to turn my attention to two of Švankmajer’s films to explore the ways in which he seeks to evoke and reflect the imaginative worlds of his characters. The short film *Down to the Cellar* is close to his heart, and one that he describes as particularly autobiographical. It is loosely based on the popular folktale of Červená Karkulka (Little Red Riding Hood), with a vulnerable child heroine who is also resourceful, determined and brave. Drawing on this disturbing archetypal situation, the film is at once an account and a memory of traumatic childhood experience, and also an exploration of something more universal: the dark underworld of the human imagination, represented here by the primary symbol of the cellar. It is thickly laced with black and objective humour, dear to the surrealists. The film concerns a pre-adolescent girl’s journey into the basement store of an old apartment building to fetch potatoes. Typically used for the storage of coal, wood and foodstuffs over the winter, such cellars were usually built of brick, with wood-slat compartments lining long windowless corridors. They are an immediately recognizable, very palpable part of the shared childhood memory for many central European city dwellers. Švankmajer himself recollects such a basement in the building where he grew up in the Vršovice district of Prague, and being sent there as a child on similar errands. The film is a seamless blending of reality and nightmarish visions conjured by the imagination of a child, as during her journey the girl encounters a series of fantastic subterranean creatures, uncooperative and aggressive objects, and strange, menacing characters. The blending of fantasy and animated sequences with the apparently mundane is very effective here in extending the boundaries of the real.
The dark cellar archetype

The central archetypal situation in the film is that of the dark subterranean cavern. The cave is one of the primary symbols that arise spontaneously from our contact and reconciliation with the primordial, cosmic conditions of our existence that are present for us in the latent world. This theme has a rich symbolic tradition in myth, linked (as in the story of the Cretan labyrinth) with the hero’s initiatory confrontation of primary dark forces and fears, and ultimately also with regeneration [Figs 3-4].\(^{18}\) The deep symbolic content of buildings (and in particular of the dwelling) as analogous to the imagination and the locus of reverie has been memorably explored by writers such as Gaston Bachelard and Mircea Eliade.\(^{19}\) Švankmajer’s interpretation of this topos is, however, rooted in a psychoanalytical understanding. He is evidently interested in the Freudian overtones of the cavern as the unconscious that contains bizarre, threatening and latent sexual elements, and where the light of day cannot penetrate to dispel primeval fears.\(^{20}\) As in his later film Otesánek (2000), where the monstrous tree-creature Otík is imprisoned in a similar cellar and begins to devour visitors, the cavern is a setting for potentially horrific events beyond the control of reason. The ordinary wood-slat partitions take on the connotations of prison bars, or of chinked walls through which hidden interiors can be glimpsed. The power of the image of the cellar in the film is greatly intensified by the daily familiarity of the setting to its audience.\(^{21}\)

Fig. 4: Jan Švankmajer, *Down to the Cellar*, the cavern. Courtesy of Slovak Film Institute.

The frustration of vision

To represent the world of the cellar and to convey the feeling of the girl’s perplexing and frightening experiences, the spatiality of the film is often characterized by ambiguity and a lack of visual definition. The theme of the visual disorientation which accompanies heightened corporeal states of arousal or fear was among those explored by artists working within the surrealist sphere, such as André Masson and Pablo Picasso [Fig. 5]. It is given a distinctive treatment in Švankmajer’s film. An overall or outside view of the building or its layout is never shown.
Once the girl descends below the ground floor into the realm of shadow, the space in which she moves is fractured and disorientating, with connections and escape routes obscured by darkness. The moment when she first enters the cellar is a good example of this. With her diminutive hand she pushes the enormous wooden door, which opens with an echoing creak. She turns on her torch and uses it, shakily, to explore the entirely dark, decaying brick interior. The torch light shines forward, but also seems to illuminate her face from below, giving it a ghostly, distorted appearance. The cone of torch light (and the camera) now follow the movement of her gaze, rapidly picking out of the gloom a series of disconnected details – an old tap, a wall recess, something unidentifiable in the corner. The darkness here has a double function: it obscures the visual image, stimulating the action of the imagination and, on a deeper level, it alludes to the symbolism of the primordial darkness or chaos. A partly glimpsed series of wall meters takes on in the gloom the appearance of fabulous monsters which inhabit the underworld. Such menacing creatures soon appear in the concrete form of the scuttling, toothy-mouthed shoes which fight noisily over the girl’s dropped bread roll. She then sees a ceiling bulb and turns it on. Later on, she encounters the sinister versions of two neighbours who were introduced earlier in the film, transformed by dark imaginings. The sequence which follows is a particularly powerful example of the visual disorientation which often accompanies the primary experience of intense arousal or fear. The girl runs breathlessly through a passage. The action is filmed through the slatted screen of the partition, which makes the image of her flight fragmented and incomplete. There is a strong sense of disorientation (hers and ours) when she stops and turns around, as blows and a strange mixture of a child’s and dog’s yelping cries are heard. She then unlocks and rushes into her own compartment with extended arms, apparently to save herself from being attacked by chopped wood. As the fight subsides, the girl looks around and realizes she has perhaps seen reflections in a mirror. These running and fighting scenes are edited as a rapid succession of short segments. They have a sketchy, indeterminate quality which suggests rather than fully describes what is happening, expressing also the girl’s own fear and agitation.
The spatiality of the cellar is inward looking and also at times corporeally disorientating. In its dark corridors, only small portions of the route become illuminated along the journey, and one can only see a few steps ahead. There are also logical disjunctions in the continuity of this space. This evokes the irrational and episodic quality of dream. When denied a comprehensive visual image, the imagination is free to invent. Hidden, labyrinthine corridors branching off the main route are suggested. As vision is restricted, the other senses—hearing, touch and, to a lesser extent, the smell of smoke and of mustiness—come into their own in describing this subterranean region. The film contains no music, but from the beginning an aural landscape—a mixture of apparently real, recognizable sounds—takes over from the visible in giving this place its distinct and very palpable character. The lack of dialogue adds to the universality of the situation. When the girl pushes open the creaking door to enter the dark world of the cellar, the ordinary daily sounds of the building subside, replaced by the exaggeratedly loud sounds of the cavern. The shuffling of her tentative footsteps is intensified, while the dripping of water echoes in the darkness, conjuring up an unseen cavernous space. The camera lingers on some pipes attached to the brick walls, and this is accompanied by a deafening sound of a toilet flush and water rushing down the pipes. Švankmajer also uses scale disjunction effectively to suggest the topsy-turvy nature of this hidden world. Towards the end of the film, through a mixture of a high viewpoint and the inter-cutting of the cat in a small-scale model of the cellar, he has the animal become gigantic and threatening, completely filling the passage and pursuing the terrified girl. The rising camera angle at this point also makes the converse true: the girl shrinks, Alice-like, to a tiny size [Fig. 6]. Thus the spatial settings and the camera technique of the film contribute to the powerful evocation of the phenomenal structure of the character’s over-active imagination, and remind us effectively of our own primary experiences of fear.
Švankmajer made his adaptation of Edgar Allan Poe’s story of ‘The Fall of the House of Usher’ in 1980 when, having been banned by the communist authorities from making films on his own themes for the past seven years, he turned his attention to the presumably less contentious source material of the classics. However, the resulting film adaptation has a powerfully disturbing, surrealistically subversive effect. Poe’s story is a particularly macabre example of Gothic fiction’s preoccupation with intense atmosphere and turmoil, and lends itself well to a cinematic interpretation through the use of analogy. It is a study of all-pervading bodily malaise, and the eventual disintegration of the central character into madness and death. An intense atmosphere of unease is conjured up in the story, often through the evocation of sensory experience, with the damned Usher clan personified by the landscape, architectural setting and objects of their estate. The story partakes of the Romantic tradition of the ruin, where melancholy crumbling architecture often evokes the power of natural forces and the futility of human resistance. Poe makes quite clear the archetypal analogy between the building and the imaginative world of the characters, and this becomes a focus for Švankmajer. The story begins with an anonymous narrator who is called to visit a childhood friend, Roderick Usher, at his family seat, to find him in a condition reminiscent of that of the decaying house. It has little plot. Instead its power lies in the intense evocation of an indeterminate anxiety. This climaxes with the chilling revelation of the premature entombment in an underground vault on the estate of Usher’s ailing twin sister Lady Madeline, and the subsequent collapse of both the family and of the house into the surrounding swamp. Švankmajer tells the story without the use of actors, except for the vivid voiceover reading of Poe’s abridged text by Petr Čepek. It is the landscape and the house themselves which become the film’s most vivid characters. In the context of the phenomenology of the imagination, the film is also remarkable for its evocation of corporeal experience through visual image, sound and the visualization of touch.
The life of inanimate things

Švankmajer was drawn to this story because he remembered its powerful atmosphere, and because his own feelings about the strangely sentient character of inanimate things accorded with that expressed by Poe. He believes that the apparently inanimate things and places that we encounter in the given world have a life of their own. Having witnessed certain events, and been touched by people in different situations, they accumulate memories and emotional imprints which they are then able to communicate to us. This is also one of the reasons why he is drawn to such expressions of ambivalent animation as Mannerist curiosities, puppets and the Golem legend. Finding and giving expression to the latent life in inanimate matter is, of course, the essence of animation, as Švankmajer observes.

He saw the Poe story in terms of the animated swamp and the life of stones, both expressive of an unmotivated, pervasive horror. In the story, Usher notes the sentient quality of both organic and inorganic things, evoking the powerful atmosphere of the ancient grey stones of the home of his forefathers covered with fungi and surrounded by decaying trees, reflected in the surrounding tarn. This atmosphere permeated the waters, walls and the whole fabric of the estate, having a malignant effect on the psychic state of the family. This passage of the text is accompanied in the film by images of natural elements, such as tree roots, bark and moving mud, evocative of animal and even human attributes [Fig. 7]. Švankmajer is immersed in the world-view of Rudolfine Prague. In Mannerist and early Baroque culture the world order was seen as one great unbroken chain of being, whose elements were animated by analogies and correspondences, and in which the metamorphic powers of nature were revered and imitated by human craftsmen [Figs 8-9]. He has always emphasized the latently animate or anthropomorphite nature of daily things in all aspects of his work. This view corresponds to a notable phenomenon of perception, in which the rigid boundaries between rational categories of objects do not pertain. The latent world of human experience, as we
saw, is structured through analogy and characterized by a myriad of correspondences connecting all things. This sensibility pervaded European culture until the advent of modern reductive scientific rationality, and was embraced later by the surrealists.

Švankmajer sees animation precisely as a way of bringing this mysterious life of things to the surface. His interpretation of the Poe story is to a large extent based on this idea. The landscape and the house itself are linked and remarkably animated. In the opening sequence, the hoof prints of the visitor’s invisible horse appear in the process of being stamped into the muddy ground, suggesting an imprint on a living memory. The house briefly appears reflected on the rippling surface of the water, mingling with its flotsam. This sequence also contains extreme close up images of a raven’s head with the bird’s alert eye. The next sequence, in which the voiceover reading introduces the house, is accompanied by a kind of visual tour. Here the agitated camera enters the building and glides rapidly around its semi-ruined fabric, scanning its once noble but now decrepit features, its lens becoming the visitor’s gaze [Fig. 10]. It proceeds from a heavy gothic cellar to the upstairs rooms, passing through doors that open creakily before it. The camera looks obliquely up at the door lintels and ceilings, producing a sense of vertiginous movement and occasional disorientation. The text then turns to a description of the altered condition of Roderick Usher, who is here personified by an ornately carved, dark wooden chair. The camera begins slowly to explore the detail of the chair, gliding over a series of round carvings that are reminiscent of the raven’s eye we saw earlier [Fig. 11]. The suggestion here is that, like the chair, the raven too is an evocation of the house of Usher. The watchful bird of the opening scenes disintegrates in the final animated sequence of the film into a pile of feathers and straw stuffing. The analogy between two such unrelated things as a bird and a carved ornament is facilitated by the poetic ambiguity of the black and white film. The unseen Madeline Usher is likewise personified by a series of apparently animate, evocative objects. She is associated with a decrepit door through which she leaves and later re-enters. Her closed coffin is seen
proceeding by itself to her burial place, her features etch themselves into the walls of the house, and her name appears in the dry mud and leaves, giving them each their most explicitly anthropomorphic aspect. At one point we see the skeletal face of death inscribing itself onto the wall of the house [Fig. 12]. During the final cataclysmic scenes of the film, we also see wood shattering horribly into a pile of splinters, metal sheeting wrenching itself off wood doors, tree roots wrestling in the writhing mud, and furniture leaping from the windows to sink into the swampy waters below, the distress and disintegration of objects echoing that of human beings [Fig. 13]. Most notably, however, the dramatic life of apparently inert matter is suggested by an innovative sequence of animated clay that coincides with Usher’s singing of the poem ‘The Haunted Palace,’ which foreshadows his own descent into madness.

Fig. 11: Jan Švankmajer, *The Fall of the House of Usher*. Reproduced by permission of Jan Švankmajer.
The raven’s head and Usher’s chair

Fig. 12: Jan Švankmajer, *The Fall of the House of Usher*. Reproduced by permission of Jan Švankmajer.
The face of death on the wall.
The inter-communication of the senses

The surrealist movement has often been critical of the dominance in modern culture of vision over the other senses. The perspective illusionism, associated with a degraded, reductivist conception of lived vision, was often dismantled in surrealist works in favour of a non-perspectival spatiality structured through the fragment. Surrealist objects and exhibition designs devised a variety of means of involving the other senses, with tactility playing a primary role. In the same spirit Švankmajer has dedicated a number of years to intensive personal explorations – often through games, surveys and the hands-on experimentation with friends within the surrealist group – of the role of the tactile in the human imagination [Fig. 14]. At the time of this work, he was intuitively aware of the findings of modern phenomenology in this domain. He increasingly came to see touch as the most ‘corporeal’ and primordial of the senses, the one thorough which ‘from birth we seek a sense of emotional security in the tactile contact with the mother’s body’ and the means of our ‘first emotional contact with the world.’ Švankmajer speaks of the need to divest hands of their narrowly utilitarian function, and to cultivate their use as instruments of tactile communication. The wish to bring touch into play in his films in a significant way initially seemed paradoxical, as film appeared at first to be a mainly audiovisual medium. He found Poe's psychological studies very rich in the evocations of tactile experience, and particularly the way in which it is intensified in times of psychic distress. In reading Poe’s work he realized that tactile imagination does not depend exclusively on direct contact between our own body and things, but can be mediated through the other senses. In this way, he sought to bridge the antagonism between the subject and object, and to endow his films with a dimension of embodiment. In Animus Animus Animač he referred to the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, whose study of the phenomenology of perception cast doubt on the notion that touch was possible exclusively through the direct tactile contact with an object. In Hmat a Imaginace (1994), Švankmajer compiled a wide-ranging anthology of ‘tactile art,’ some of which, like the materially suggestive paintings of Jan Van Eyck, very effectively communicated the tactile experience of material and texture through visual means. He further expounded the phenomenon of what he called ‘tactile memory,’ which ‘reaches into the most remote corners of our childhood; from there it...
springs in the form of analogies at the slightest tactile stimulus or the provocation of tactile imagination, and thus enables ‘tactile art’ to communicate.\textsuperscript{53}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{svankmajer.png}
\caption{Jan Švankmajer, \textit{The Tyranny of Utilitarianism (The Tactile Chair)}, 1977. Reproduced by permission of Jan Švankmajer. This is one of a wide range of tactile objects made by Švankmajer during the 1970s.}
\end{figure}

Švankmajer’s views on tactile experience are comparable to those of phenomenology. Speaking of painting, Merleau-Ponty notes the pre-reflective way in which in perception some works of art have the power to offer to our sight ‘its inward tapestries, the imaginary texture of the real.’\textsuperscript{54} According to him, the body ‘is borne towards tactile experience by all its surfaces and all its organs simultaneously, and carries with it a certain typical structure of the tactile world.’\textsuperscript{55} It is this pre-existing structure of the latent, tactile world, on which Švankmajer’s film relies. Merleau-Ponty also emphasized the essential interconnectedness of the senses as part of a unified body in direct experience: ‘there is not in the normal subject a tactile experience and also a visual one, but an integrated experience to which it is impossible to gauge the contribution of each sense.’\textsuperscript{56} He noted that the ‘unity and identity of the tactile phenomenon do not come about through any synthesis of recognition in the concept, they are founded upon the unity and identity of the body as a synergic totality.’\textsuperscript{57} In other words, tactile stimuli are informed by the other senses (and also by memory and the imagination) as part of the essential unity of the body.\textsuperscript{58} This accounts for the synaesthetic nature of perception. Our body’s grasp of the unified tactile structure of things makes it possible for us to ‘see’ and ‘hear’ their material qualities. ‘The senses intercommunicate by opening on to the structure of the thing. One sees the hardness and brittleness of glass, and when, with a tinkling sound, it breaks, this sound is conveyed by the visible glass,’ Merleau-Ponty wrote.\textsuperscript{59} Phenomenological studies thus confirm Švankmajer’s view.
Tactility in *The Fall of the House of Usher*

Švankmajer’s preoccupation with tactile experience was fully translated into film for the first time in the *Fall of the House of Usher*. Throughout, visual images and sounds are used to evoke imaginative experience. However, the sequence of animated clay, which coincides with Usher’s song, is an explicit attempt to induce – via the visual sequence of animated hand gestures – an intense corporeal involvement of the audience through the palpably tactile experience [Fig. 15]. In the film, as the narrator recalls the verses of the poem ‘The Haunted Palace,’ an armful of potter’s clay appears to spring from a well, and fly through the window into the house, where it proceeds to be kneaded by many invisible hands. Švankmajer speaks of his interpretation of this important moment in the story, the analogical foreshadowing of Usher’s madness, by conjuring up the character’s nervous tension through the means of a series of “tensional” hand gestures imprinted into the clay. Here it must be recalled that in addition to making films, Švankmajer is also an artist and ceramic sculptor, used to making and expressing things with his hands. At an early stage in the sequence, recognizable hand prints appear in the clay but the shapes quickly become more complicated and abstract. During the serene early verses of the poem, the impressions in the clay are relatively shallow, and the surprising, unearthly movement is gentle and largely symmetrical. The musical accompaniment – the plucking of (Usher’s) guitar – is gentle and melodious. However, as the verses turn to the alarming psychic disintegration of the king in the poem, the movement of the clay becomes more violent and erratic, with deep grooves and extreme close ups. One is aware of the physical force required to manipulate the clay. Towards the end the tumultuous clay suggests a monstrous devouring maw. The accompanying music (backed up now by a dissonant *glissando* on the strings, resembling the buzzing of angry wasps) evokes the ‘discordant melody’ mentioned in the poem. The film’s soundscape, incidentally, also relies on the phenomenal interdependence of the senses, with sound interacting with visual imagery to produce bodily experience. The unsettling device of the clay animation is very effective at conveying – through the visualization of tactile gesture – the sense of bodily turmoil, and is
one of Švankmajer’s most original contributions to animation. It is debatable, however, whether this effectiveness was initially due more to its strangeness and novelty, than to its communication of tactile stress. The Fall of the House of Usher was one of the most powerful and innovative of Švankmajer’s films of the 1980s, with its themes of the tactile and madness opening up new domains for his creativity.

What is the significance of Švankmajer’s work to architecture? In exploring the topography of the imagination, his work asserts the unity of experience in the world, and the constant intercommunication of our senses, memory and imagination. In the two examples explored here, Švankmajer confirms the very dominant position of architectural places and situations, with their archetypal dimension, as the primary symbolic currency of our lives. He also implicitly celebrates the richness of the material imagination of the world that we inhabit. His films illuminate the importance of analogy and metaphor in perception and thus also in architecture, if the latter is to provide us with existential orientation.

There has been much written recently on the possible relationship between surrealism and architecture. Some of this has focused on the formal similarities between buildings and surrealist art. This somewhat facile, ‘Mae-West-lips-sofa’ style of interpretation, has positivistic overtones. It focuses on the most superficial aspects of both, and tends to treat them in formal, aesthetic terms. Such an approach was always rejected by the more philosophically aware among the surrealists, who argued that their work was not ‘art’ and should not be aestheticized. In his best work, by looking at the textures of the experiential world, Švankmajer points the way towards an altogether subtler, more profound interpretation. I would argue that an approach like his, which explores the very textures of the material imagination (or the ontological dimensions of human existence), represents a much more
meaningful lesson about the potential communicative power of architecture, and its profound importance in our lives.

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3 ‘Interview with Jan Švankmajer,’ in Dark Alchemy, 139. I am very grateful to Jan Švankmajer for allowing me such generous access to his home, work and thought.


5 While connections with French surrealism were cultivated during the interwar years, there is much in Czech surrealism that is firmly rooted in the cultural and literary traditions of Central Europe. The Czech puppeteer tradition, folklore, the legends of Dr Faustus and the Golem, and an Expressionist sensibility, for example, play a palpable role.

6 The totalitarian authorities saw surrealism as incompatible with positivistic communist ideology and censored its work. Today, the surrealists continue to act as a cultural conscience, questioning the authenticity and values of a culture eagerly embracing the Western model of consumerist materialism. See for example Švankmajer’s critique of ‘our sick civilization’ in his text ‘Lekce Faust,’ Analogon, 7/IV, 1992, 75-6.

7 This closeness between surrealism and phenomenology is particularly strong, perhaps, in the Central European context, where the philosophical ideas of Edmund Husserl and Jan Patočka still inform the culture. André Breton frequently referred to surrealism’s interest in the phenomena of direct experience, and after the war he explicitly acknowledged a certain affinity between a surrealist outlook and some of the ideas of Martin Heidegger. See André Breton, Entretiens, Gallimard, Paris, 1969, 258.

8 Petr Kral, ‘Questions to Jan Švankmajer,’ in Afterimage 13, 32.

9 Dalibor Vesely, Architecture in the Age of Divided Representation, MIT, Cambridge, Mass., 2004, 82-83. He further argues that the term ‘latent world’ is to be understood to mean the totality of references with which we are always involved and which are most conspicuously articulated in language, 456.

10 Dalibor Vesely, ‘Surrealismus a latentní realita snu,’ pre-publication draft, c. 2008, 2 (author’s translation).


12 The site of my experience when I am, for example, sitting at a window and looking out is impossible to pin down as either within or outside me. My perceiving body participates in the street scene below, and that scene enters and interacts with the ‘inner’ reality of my thought, reverie and memory.
The little girl, beautifully played by Monika Belo-Cabanová, is dressed in a red dress and shoes, and we see a red beret hanging in her apartment.

Švankmajer sees a sarcastic sensibility and the liberal use of black and objective humour as chief traits of Czech (as opposed to the more lyrical French) surrealism. ‘Interview with Jan Švankmajer,’ in Dark Alchemy, 110.

By the time of making the film, it was difficult to find an authentic, unmodernized cellar of this sort in Prague. This was one of the reasons that the film was made in Bratislava. Jan Švankmajer in conversation with the author, June 2008. See also Ibid., 124.

The content of the film is as follows: the small, blond girl with plaits, chewing on a crescent roll, leaves her apartment and walks down a winding stone staircase to fetch potatoes from the cellar. On her way she encounters two neighbours, the first of whom is a middle-aged man who smiles at her and produces a wrapped sweet from behind her ear. The second is a woman washing the stairs and looking at her disapprovingly. Both notice the number of the cellar key in her basket. At the entry to the cellar the girl is joined by a black cat. She turns on her torch as she descends into the darkness. Several tooth-mouthed shoes scurry around the corridors. She sees an unmanned shovel loading coal into a container. She then sees the male neighbour in his pyjamas in one of the compartments. He gurgles, gets onto a bed and covers himself with coal. He then motions to her to join him in an adjoining child’s cot. There is a bucket of wrapped sweets nearby. Backing up in fear, she sees the infernal figure of the woman neighbour in the compartment behind her, waving her arms alarmingly around a smoking, flaming stove. The woman begins to make dough out of coal dust, eggs and water, and cutting out briquette shapes reminiscent of buchty (familiar Czech yeast pastry), which she then bakes in the coal burning stove. The finished briquettes are added into the coal bucket and used as fresh fuel. As the woman sees the girl, she selects a briquette, sprinkles it with sugar and goes to hand it to her. This is followed by a disorientating sequence in which the girl runs toward her own compartment. She opens the potato chest and struggles to fill her basket, while the potatoes keep escaping back into their container. The black cat we saw earlier meows menacingly and grows to gigantic size. Looking down a long corridor, the girl is overtaken by a group of scurrying coal bins, and is pursued by the giant cat. She runs toward the safety of the light. She drops her basket and the potatoes escape back into the darkness. She sits down dejected on the cellar stairs. She garners her strength and goes back down, followed by the cat.

The cellar here may also be compared to the dark wood in the Little Red Riding Hood tale (or even to the wolf’s belly). Mircea Eliade has noted the common structure and themes of folk tales and myth. See for example his Myth and Reality, Harper & Row, New York, 1963, Appendix 1. Myths themselves are interpretations of cosmic symbols and play an essential role in situations. In Švankmajer’s own work, the cavern is often linked with the alchemical laboratory.


Švankmajer’s admiration for the work of Freud is well known, and his most recent feature film, Surviving Life, is based on the themes of psychoanalysis and dream. In a Freudian manner, he believes in and speaks about the existence of the ‘unconscious,’ the vital spring of which dreams are the most notable manifestations, and he often refers to it also in his work (conversation with the author, June 2008). This is at odds with a phenomenological view that sees the notion of a dichotomy of personal conscious and unconscious as tainted by nineteenth-century positivism, and which understands all human experience, including dreams and primary symbols, as arising from the latent world.

13 ‘Interview with Jan Švankmajer,’ in Dark Alchemy, 123. Do pivnice also bears many similarities with the story of Alice in Wonderland, another of Švankmajer’s perennial interests and subject of a later feature film. In Czech the film is often known as Do sklepa.

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“The deeper you enter into the fantastic story the more realistic you need to be in the detail,” said Švankmajer of his emphasis on the recognizable detail of the everyday world in his films. See, Dark Alchemy, 141.

This is just one example of the masterly lighting that is so important to the atmosphere of the whole film.

See endnote 17.

The impact of this sequence is intensified, as elsewhere, by ‘real animation.’ In this Švankmajer animates live actors by the stop-motion technique, to create a slightly jerky, otherworldly movement that gives the scene a sense of heightened strangeness, or to accentuate the ambiguity between living and inorganic things.

Švankmajer’s use of rapid editing to create a sense of bodily disorientation and agitation is reminiscent of the use of montage in Russian constructivist cinema, which he cites as one of his early interests.

This is particularly the case with a later sequence, where the uncooperative potatoes seem to defy gravity in rolling up the side of the wooden chest (and one imagines how the animation must have been done on a horizontal surface).

The opening credits sequence, for example, shows the front door of the girl’s apartment, which appears to open by itself. It is only in the next shot that we realize that the person leaving it is a child, and below the visual field of the camera.

Švankmajer made illuminating comments on his thinking about this film in an interview with Vratislav Effenberger, reprinted as ‘Švankmajer on the The Fall of the House of Usher,’ in Afterimage 13, 33-37. Here he noted that many naturalistic adaptations of the Poe story had failed, and that from the beginning he chose to take a very different approach.

In this context one is reminded of Martin Heidegger’s view of indeterminate anxiety as a primary state of attunement with the world. See his Being and Time, trans. by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1962, Part 1, Chapters V and VI.

Petr Čepek was later very effective in the eponymous role of Švankmajer’s film Lekce Faust, during the making of which the actor suffered great pain and died, reflecting what Švankmajer considers to have been the film’s uncannily ill fortune.


Jan Švankmajer in conversation with the author, 2008. See also endnote 2.

Švankmajer, ‘Švankmajer on the The Fall of the House of Usher.’

Ibid.


On a different level, correspondences are also suggested between the house and swamp, and between the house, the landscape and Roderick Usher.


38 This principle, which pervaded the culture of curiosities of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, is also one which Švankmajer has embraced in the organization of his own *Kunstkammer* in Horní Staňkov.

39 See endnote 2. Quotation reproduced at beginning of this article.

40 The raven has a rich iconographic tradition of which Švankmajer is aware, both in alchemy and as a sinister or magic element in Central European fairy tales.

41 Here the image of a winter landscape seen through a window suggests the continuity between the house and its setting, and between the inner and outer world of Usher.

42 The use in this film of black and white photography accentuates the phenomenal continuity between all things in the latent world. Inspired by the work of surrealist photographers such as Emila Medková, Švankmajer has always delighted in the depictions of shadowy stairs and corridors, evocative surface textures, and chance conjunctions of fragments to be found during an urban stroll. His 1965 film, *J.S. Bach: Fantasia G moll*, which was dedicated to Medková and which highlights the infinite variety and melancholy richness of the run-down streets and cracking stucco walls of Prague by setting them against Bach’s music, is the best example of this trend in his work. The elimination of colour enables one to focus on the patterns of light and shadow, and makes analogical kinship between disparate things more evident. In the *Fall of the House of Usher*, the rich spectrum from black to white in addition evokes the gloomy, turbulent atmosphere of Expressionist and of Gothic genre cinema. Darkness, making clear vision difficult, is a very important component here, and is at times relieved by the blindingly bright flashes of lightning.

43 This sequence is reminiscent of surrealist ‘assisted ready-mades,’ in which found objects or surfaces are subtly altered to amplify their qualities or extend their meaning. The animated manipulation of wall surfaces goes back to some of Švankmajer’s earlier films, such as *J.S. Bach: Fantasia G moll*, 1965.


45 This period of exploration during his ban from film-making, culminated in Švankmajer’s book *Hmat a imaginace: Uvod do taktlního umění* (*Touch and the Imagination*), Kozoroh, Prague, 1994. It also generated a body of plastic works and found its way into a number of Švankmajer’s films. See also Eva and Jan Švankmajer, *Anima Animus Animace*, Slovart Nadace Arbor Vitae, Prague, 1998, esp. Section V.
Švankmajer rarely speaks of phenomenology as an inspiration. He is, however, fully immersed in a culture in which such interests were present, and as a dominant member of the Prague surrealist group, is intensely aware of the closely allied surrealist position on perception.


Švankmajer’s other adaptation of a Poe story, *Kyvadlo, jáma a nadéje* of 1983 (based on ‘The Pit and the Pendulum’) uses similar techniques.


Švankmajer worked on this film with the animator Bedřich Glaser, who would become a frequent collaborator. However, in this case he himself animated the clay. ‘Švankmajer on the *Fall of the House of Usher*,’ 36-37. He considers this sequence a key one in both the story and the film, as it introduces madness. He called it an analogy within an analogy.

Švankmajer, *Hmat a imaginace*, 195-9. Švankmajer also relates how during the filming of the sequence, the gestures were constantly slowed down by the animation technique, instead of being enacted all at once in one relieving action. The slowing down of tension, however, caused an intensification of stress, which built up into cramps in his fingers. The whole animation led to his considerable emotional exhaustion.

The sense of hearing plays an important role in the Poe story and equally, the soundtrack provides an essential dimension to Švankmajer’s film. While the key area of sound is beyond the scope of this
paper, one may say that the filmmaker generally rejects naturalism in sound in favour of a deliberately artificial, oneiric soundscape that contributes to the evocation of atmosphere and heightening of experience. Often a collage of sound fragments, the soundtrack works though analogy. The Usher mansion itself, for example, has many voices. Sounds are sometimes multivalent and ambiguous, evoking several meanings at the same time, as when a repeating banging sound which accompanies Madeline’s moving coffin is gradually recognized as both the hammering of nails from the outside, and her desperate beating from inside. The soundtrack operates on similar principles to the assemblage of the visual imagery of the film, helping to evoke the topography of a disturbed imagination.

63 Extreme corporeal distress is also suggested in the film through the tactile analogies of the apparently spontaneous crushing of wood and ripping apart of metal sheeting. In one animated sequence, the wooden handle of the hammer, which had nailed shut Madeline’s coffin and is associated with Usher, disintegrates into a pile of splinters, while the coffin effectively explodes. It is interesting that the tactile analogies are achieved through animation.

64 These themes would become central to his later feature films, Spíklenci slasti (Conspirators of Pleasure) and Šílení (Lunacy). The making of the film also left a lasting mark on the Švankmajer’s own life. It was while searching for an appropriately atmospheric location for the shoot that he and his artist wife Eva came across the estate in Horní Staňkov in Southern Bohemia, which over the next twenty-five years they would transform into their ‘ideal palace,’ and where they would build their Kunstkammer.


67 See for example endnote 1. Quotation reproduced at beginning of this article. Surrealism’s rejection of the merely aesthetic is already evident in the 1924 manifesto. See André Breton, Manifestoes of Surrealism, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 1972, 26.

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Jazz Naked Fire Gesture: Improvisation as Surrealism

Michael Szekely

Abstract

Although it is more often the case that surrealism is framed primarily in accordance with its literary and visual artistic practices, it is my view that the relationship between surrealism and music—improvised jazz, in particular—provides an extremely fertile milieu for an exploration of surrealism as theory, philosophy, and experience that has been greatly overlooked. The blurring of experiential realms so significant to surrealism, which such concepts such as automatism, collage, objective chance, and the Marvelous attempt to express, can found through music and improvisation as inheritors of what Breton once called the 'verbo-auditive.'

1

The conventional wisdom is that the early surrealists were rather uninterested in music, especially instrumental music. Granted, there is very little documentation as to the connection between surrealism and music. But where such a connection can be found, the outlook is not so sanguine. The best general clue we typically encounter is André Breton’s remark to the effect that music was “the most confusing of all forms.” Of course, such a sentiment is not so far off from modern philosophy’s own confusion as to the significance of music, which also entails (even to this day, though less so) a preference within philosophical aesthetics for Western European classical music. Music here is often relegated to a kind of abstraction. Considered to be at once immediate yet elusive, so strikingly sensuous yet non-representational, music is said to express a kind of language unique unto itself and yet seemingly suggesting something quite different from language. In his Aesthetics and Subjectivity, Andrew Bowie posits that the problem of purely instrumental music represents a crisis in the notion of philosophical truth itself:

From a union of music and language, where language is the senior partner, emerges (with the advent of modernism) a divorce, in which the formerly junior partner becomes autonomous and is no longer bound to represent what a verbal text can express. ... A potential fundamental change in the idea of truth is the result. ... If music without words is a higher form than music with words, then music seems able to usurp the word’s role as the locus of truth.

Bowie, whose book’s focal point is German Idealism, attests to the seemingly untenable dichotomy that developed as a result of modernism. On the one hand, Hegel posited ‘Reason’ as that to which all things move (and ultimately the very source of their movement). Music, then, ultimately fails philosophically, because of its ‘subjective inwardness,’ thus obviously failing the ‘Dialectic.’ On the other hand, the tradition of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche stresses force, will, a certain ‘irrationality’ – as exemplified by Nietzsche’s Dionysian – in music.
In 1946, Breton published an article in the American magazine *Modern Music* entitled ‘Silence is Golden.’ In it he proposes a ‘recasting of certain principles of the two arts,’ music and poetry. These two expressions have a common bond in song, he continues, and if explored in such a manner, would reconcile the ‘mouth of Orpheus’ and the ‘lyre of Thrace,’ a reconciliation ‘accomplished at a very high emotional temperature.’ In other words,’ writes Anne LeBaron, ‘he wishes to erase the distinction between poetry and song.' Breton notes that surrealists rely upon the tonal value of words, and, along these lines, compares the ‘inner word’ of poetry to ‘inner music.’ After all, poetry, Breton observes, is subject ‘to the same acoustical conditions of rhythm, pitch, intensity, and timbre’ as in music.

Thus, when Breton remarks that ‘great poets have been “auditives,” not “visionaries,”’ he means that vision is, in a sense, an *effect* of this immediacy, not a cause. In a rather intriguing passage, he actually hails ‘verbo-auditive automatism’ as surpassing ‘verbo-visual automatism,’ even as pertains to surrealist *imagery*. We might be led to consider here that, as the greatest catalyst for surrealist imagery and painting would be poetic automatism, so the greatest catalyst for poetic automatism might be music. Notably, over a decade earlier, in ‘The Automatic Message,’ Breton anticipates this idea:

> It always has seemed to me that verbo-auditive automatism creates for the reader the most exalting visual images. Verbo-visual automatism never has seemed to create for the reader visual images that are from any viewpoint comparable. It is enough to say that I believe as fully today as I did ten years ago – I believe blindly … blindly, with a blindness that covers all visible things – in the triumph *auditorily* of what is unverifiable visually.

Thus, as it turns out, Breton may not have been so ‘confused’ about music and the sonic realm as he may have let on. These earlier reflections on poetic surrealism coupled with the later discussions of the ‘verbo-auditive’ suggest a move from word and image to sound and idea – of idea as movement, which culminates in sound. We are reminded of the quest for immediacy so prevalent in surrealist experience, and we are invited to imagine music (and particularly, I will claim, improvisation) as its link to sonic phenomena. Meanwhile, despite its formative and well-documented interest in Hegelian-Marxist dialectics, I would suggest that the connection between surrealism and music might actually prove closer to Nietzsche on this score. More accurately, surrealism enters this discourse at the crossroads of idealism and realism, rationality and irrationality, subjectivity and objectivity, where, in what we might call the *marvellous musical event*, abrupt juxtaposition meets felt encounter. And this leads us more directly to another salient aspect of Breton’s ‘Silence is Golden’ essay: the recuperation of sound/sonic phenomena – and ultimately, of music – as a facet of surrealism in *their own right*.

But again, history has perhaps only recently (and barely at that) caught up with Breton (who himself had to come to something of an about-face on the subject) on the issue of surrealism of music. The history of musicological and aesthetic criticism concerning the relationship between surrealism and music has often demonstrated a privileging of ‘word and image,’ which is to say, of the linguistic (and signifying) and visual realms, and typically focusing on classical music.
In the September 1966 (notably, and surprisingly, twenty years after Breton’s essay) issue of Artforum, dedicated primarily to surrealism, the composer/musicologist Nicholas Slonimsky wrote an article (admittedly still surprisingly rare for its kind) about surrealistic aspects found in music, namely modern classical music. He describes musical surrealism as initially being a reaction against the ‘Contented Music, the music of the salon, the cult of the virtuoso, the art of tonal tranquilization.’ The works Slonimsky cites as representing such a reaction include Shostakovich’s ‘The Nose’ (an opera taken from a story by Gogol; listen: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LnJR71DPEu8), Prokofiev’s ‘The Love for Three Oranges,’ and Stravinsky’s ‘Petroushka.’ Although he later mentions the more contemporary explorations of Satie, Varèse (listen and watch: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a9mg4KHqRPw), and Ligeti, Slonimsky’s emphasis on such elements as dissonance, juxtaposition of tonalities, and asymmetric rhythms within symmetric meters – as those that ‘suit the surrealistic action’ – risks undermining and oversimplifying the potential for a more robust exploration of the relationship between surrealism and music. In one sense, such discourse limits its discussion to the technical, analytical terminology of form and analysis associated primarily with the Western classical tradition, and which, moreover, thus relies more specifically on a notational tradition, as opposed to an oral tradition, for example. Differently put, Slonimsky’s criticism suggests that descriptions of surrealism must inevitably stem from the ways in which certain technical elements of music are implemented – the consequence or ‘final product’ as an ‘event’ of surrealist musicality. Following this example, much less musicological and aesthetic description has attempted to show how the experience of the musical process, which is essentially readily available to both musician and audience, might be akin to the surrealist experience itself, which apprehends the event as necessarily an end in itself.

In her essay on surrealism in music, Anne LeBaron takes aim at the rather simplistic view of musical surrealism initiated by Slonimsky, whereby (to use one exemplary gesture) ‘if it’s dissonant it must be surreal.’ In other words, dissonance here resembles, curiously enough, something much more akin to the juxtaposition of images in much of the visual art of surrealism. Furthermore, as LeBaron comments: ‘When he [Slonimsky] remarks, “The dissonant texture and rhythmic asymmetry of the score contribute to the surrealistic effect of the music,” his rationale begins to resemble the proverbial kitchen sink.’ Of course, LeBaron’s “negative” criticism vis-à-vis Slonimsky ultimately leads to her own more affirmative treatment with respect to the ways in which surrealism can be linked to a variety of musics, from early (Satie, Antheil), mid- (Cage, Varèse) and late (Kagel, Berio) twentieth-century classical music, to improvised jazz, to postmodern ‘plunderphonics,’ and beyond. With this in mind, my aspirations for the present essay have been much more modest than LeBaron’s, because I am primarily concerned with the connection between surreality and improvised jazz in particular. And yet, for this very reason, emphasizing this connection also entails a certain provocation of its own, presupposing as it does a broader shift, a reorientation, in terms of surrealist aesthetics. Indeed, part of LeBaron’s strategy entails wrestling certain key notions taken to be fundamental to the surrealist enterprise –chief
among them, *automatism* and *collage* – from their usual links to poetic and/or visual surrealism and reappropriating them toward an exploration of surrealist (and, in some cases, “postmodern”) musical practices, which are not necessarily examples of Western art music.

3

‘Automatism,’ writes LeBaron, ‘the alloy that welded the infrastructure of surrealism, has its most direct musical parallel in free improvisation [improvised jazz],’ which ‘might elicit an even speedier transfer from the unconscious into sensory production (sound, in this case) than either visual or literary automatism.’ Perhaps here would be a suitable point to acknowledge two things. First, although ‘improvised jazz’ seems the most apt term to describe the work of the music and musicians that concerns me, similar ventures have been variously called ‘free jazz,’ ‘free music,’ ‘improvised music,’ ‘collective improvisation,’ etc., to whatever degree of understanding, or misunderstanding, these terms engender. Second, although I do, in fact, focus on music roughly tied to more avant-garde currents in the American jazz tradition, it should become clear that what is, at least initially, most valued in this music’s connection to surrealism is, generally speaking, *improvisation* itself. And with this in mind, I hope the reader will permit me to digress here just a bit further.

Interestingly enough, LeBaron notes how it is actually Slonimsky who ‘takes a far broader approach to defining a musical surrealism than I do, even equating serialism with surrealism.’ Along these lines, I suppose I am making a similar move with respect to improvisation, which I take to be an extremely far-reaching concept, to the point where, in some sense, I apprehend composers such as Cage or Varèse as also being tied to a notion of improvisation. I acknowledge here the push by Cage and other contemporary composers toward a certain ‘objectivity’ in music that entailed imitating the processes of life itself, with as little mediation as possible. One way to read Cage’s goal here is as a denial of self-expression. We limit subjective whim precisely in order to open the door, shall we say, to ‘natural’ expression. Such subjective whim, Cage might have argued, is to be readily found in improvised jazz. Although the relationship between Cage and improvisation would warrant another study entirely, it might be argued here that the methods utilized by this particular approach to composition are even more blatant declarations of self-expression than is found in improvisation. Although Cage’s desired outcome was a music born of ‘chance operations,’ it was thoroughly the result of a self-motivated decision by Cage the composer to implement such techniques.

Echoing Breton’s description of surrealism as ‘a *living* movement – that is to say, a movement undergoing a constant process of becoming’ – Aesthetic Automatism, a more recent offshoot of surrealism, posits ‘a living “aesthetic” – but one which has a very different meaning than commonly applied. Rather than falsely implying some illusive concept of objective “beauty” or “rules of art,” for us the “aesthetic” becomes something personal and unique to each individual, developing from the same explorations, experiments, and evaluations which form the “self.” Thus, whereas the great paradox of Cage’s ‘objective’ art was that he himself birthed it – and surrealism would not begrudge him this –
improvisation has no guilty conscience here. This is because, first, subject-formation and individuality are necessarily balanced with, and defined by, external, ‘objective’ phenomena and collective dynamics. Second, because of the immediacy of improvised jazz, these relationships themselves are never settled: automatism as more action than act, as more process than end. Musical (improvisational) surrealism is particularly suited to articulating the shifting from moment to moment of surrealism in time and relation: automatism as a state of liminality. But what has also been articulated here is the very space wherein automatism meets collage, where process meets form.

Ultimately, what is at stake in improvised jazz is an ongoing relationship between freedom and necessity. It is in this sense that improvised jazz offers its own formative take on le hasard objectif (objective chance), a sonic twist on extended collage form, a musical exquisite corpse. Roger Shattuck likens objective chance to coincidence, and describes it in terms of lingering ‘over accidents, chance occurrences, whims, and hunches, moments that appear to break the pattern of events. Their anomalous randomness [driven by automatism] deprives them of meaning, yet their singularity fills them with heightened significance…’ 15 Another definition of surrealist objective chance is given by Michael Richardson, who describes ‘points of convergence that break open the realist straitjacket and make us aware of this continuity … to express the way that necessity manifests itself as chance and vice versa.’ 16 This relationship of choice and chance may be manifested in a variety of musical circumstances. For the improviser, the tools, skills, technique, and passion are all thrown into music-making the moment any communication begins, and at every moment thereafter. American composer and musician Bill Dixon has said, ‘You can play everything you know.’ What else could this mean but that all of the experiences one has had, including the framework of technical language and knowledge attained through music alone, are potentially, audaciously, if impossibly, summoned, brought forth, as part of the creative expression of improvising? The critic Ben Young further expounds this methodology, describing how ‘skills honed through decades must be at the fingertips to be spontaneously deployed in improvising,’ where any and all preconceptions based in experience, skill, talent, intent, etc. collide with the immediacy of the moment. 18

Automatism + collage = assemblage. In improvised jazz, the musician and her collaborators are, at once, individuals, or better, singular voices, each able to occupy a variety of musical roles and offer a variety of musical textures, but also operating within a collective, each singular voice of which already displays her own multiplicity as well (multiplicity on multiplicity, difference on difference), while also engaging in the collective experience of the audience. Again, thought and action are more immediately intertwined – at times so proximate as to be nearly indecipherable. In textual terms, the instance of sound-making is at once the signifier of the next (post-structural musical surrealism?). In ontological terms, the traditional mind/body distinction is undermined. We cannot, for instance, talk about sonic phenomena without talking about sonic affect. But one cannot so easily parse out such an affect either. Here, the ‘haunted’ subject of surrealism has its musical analogue in the individual (or ‘individuated?’) musician within a larger collective. Breton the improviser seeks out Nadja through a
sonic labyrinth of disruption and connection, through musical lines and webs. This is not the ‘Self,’ the ‘I,’ the Cartesian ego, or the atomized individual so very prevalent in the canon of Western philosophy, but rather a kind of subjectivation bound to a process of collective self-determination, which, as Jesse Stewart comments, ‘might well be applied to jazz, particularly free jazz and its derivatives, which involve constant negotiation between the freedoms accorded to the individual improviser and those of the group as a whole.’\(^\text{19}\) True, we speak in part of the texture and timbre that a musician produces, as well as her actual musicality, how she intones, attacks, phrases, etc. But we also mean something else. In music, especially improvisation, the method of surrealist automatism and the plane of juxtaposition and ‘derangement’ (i.e. surrealist experience) becomes a *bricolage* of various musical, physical, social, erotic significations that hits us as a non-cognitive (but not necessarily anti-cognitivist) rush. What the music *is* becomes inextricable from what the music *does.* Where the music *has been* becomes inextricable from where the music *goes.* This is why we can speak of surrealism’s entrance into music as one of *immanence,* an ontology of musical becoming—which is to suggest a music not affective by measure of what it refers to externally, or transcendentally, but rather how it establishes, creates, explores, connects, and opens up its own horizons. Music is, to repurpose Deleuze and Guattari, ‘immanent only to itself.’\(^\text{20}\)

4

Also interesting in the discovery of Breton’s ‘Silence is Golden’ article was the introduction by the Chicago surrealist Franklin Rosemont (who also notably edited the collection in which the essay can be found). Here, Rosemont – with a certain ‘corrective’ intent in mind – makes reference to certain pioneers of improvised jazz in America, including Miles Davis, Cecil Taylor, and Joseph Jarman, as well as modern precursors, such as Thelonius Monk and Charlie Parker:

> Breton, who boasted that he never went to concerts, nonetheless made it a point to attend jazz performances during his exile in New York. And when Matta returned to Paris with recordings by Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Bud Powell and Thelonius Monk, bop was warmly welcomed by the surrealists...The surrealists of all countries increasingly have recognized in black music a fraternal movement and a complimentary adventure.\(^\text{21}\)

Works such as ‘Black Dada Nihilismus’ (listen: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=98oK6zZXmQw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=98oK6zZXmQw)) on the New York Art Quartet’s self-titled recording,\(^\text{22}\) or Joseph Jarman’s ‘Non-Cognitive Aspects of the City’ (listen: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jk5J9f5LFpl](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jk5J9f5LFpl)), or Cecil Taylor’s poetic notes and music for the recording *Unit Structures,*\(^\text{23}\) may now be reevaluated in terms of a broader surrealist aesthetics of music. The first two of these examples incorporate spoken word alongside collectively improvised musical structures. Initially, I was hesitant to reference such formats, as my project here has been to make a claim about the link between surrealism and improvised jazz, which tends to be instrumental. Although it might seem a fitting testament to Breton’s ‘verbo-auditive’ precursor, music incorporating words would seemingly fail to represent that ‘crisis in philosophical truth’ about which Andrew Bowie
wrote: words ‘spare’ music from the non-representational abyss in remaining a focal point for our conceptualization. However, these pieces—notably still within a format of collective improvisation—defy simple ontological status. First of all, the spoken text does not lead, but is rather another voice like any other, swept up in a continuous flow of sound, melody, and rhythm. The spoken text of improvisational collage does not function like the typical pop voice. Movement here is defined by interrelatedness, an interaction and blurring of components, while still allowing for various singular components to take a more central role at various moments, building up the intensity of the performance, first here, then there. The music operates non-hierarchically. Better yet, the musical roles do not so much take turns at ‘centering’ as they do actually becoming one another (recall assemblage). In fact, it is certainly an underlying contention here that improvised jazz, with its extremely varied manifestations, has defined itself by, and developed from, this notion of interdependence. ‘Freedom’ – an unfortunately overused expression – in jazz means nothing without being a creative, collective, and collaborative effort. ‘Freedom’ is no Romantic individualism. If we revisit the spoken text in improvisation, we see that it nevertheless establishes itself on a singular plane within a larger, collective utterance. At times, the words seem to define a musical and philosophical space all their own, while at other moments they are expressly interwoven—almost assimilated—amidst the other parts.

In his book *The Freedom Principle*, John Litweiler describes Jarman’s ‘Non-Cognitive Aspects’ in a manner that suggests its link to surrealism: ‘Disjunct and ambiguous sounds open to images of spiritual desolation, until “Exit the tenderness/for power” brings a drum roll and a blinding flash of Jarman’s alto sax. Piano and bass move as the poem moves in the “quiet city” section, capturing “pain,” rumbling at “doom” ... Four distinctive personalities are revealed in this work’s immensely fluid medium of free space.’ And I would add a fifth personality: the words themselves: ‘verbo-auditive.’ Such a ‘fluid medium’ marks a continuum that is saturated by the perpetual tandem of tension/resolution. The use of space becomes something of a medium unto itself, affecting the music’s direction and evolution. Similar to the way in which surrealist experience attempts to suspend thought in order to expose the marvelous qualities behind phenomenal encounters, the improvised music of Jarman and others suggests a ‘suspended, faintly mysterious’ space at some moments, and a more assertively probing space of ‘separate, simultaneous movements’ at others. Indeed, Jarman’s use of the designation ‘non-cognitive’ implies multiple layers of meaning, not least of which is a kind of ‘metacommentary’ about music itself. That is, one might say – though my sense is that much Anglo-American aesthetics would perhaps differ on this score – that a primary quality, the initial affect, of music is precisely its noncognition. Before the sights and images of it turn to representations, to the making-actual of our experience, there are the noncognitive aspects of the city, its virtual aspects. *This* is its ‘music,’ we might say: sound, sweat, howls, clanging, chatter, but also joy, pain, pleasure, loss, ephemerality, liminality. Hence it is no surprise that Deleuze and Guattari talk about music as a-signifying:
What is preserved by right is not the material, which constitutes only the de facto condition, but, insofar as this condition is satisfied (that is, that canvas, color, or stone does not crumble into dust) [in music, notes, tones, textures, rhythms, pulsions, skin, teeth, but also repetitions, recapitulations, counterpoint, cadences, etc.], it is the percept or affect that is preserved in itself. Even if the material lasts for only a few seconds it will give sensation the power to exist and be preserved in itself in the eternity that coexists with this short duration. So long as the material lasts, the sensation enjoys an eternity in those very moments. Sensation is not realized in the material without the material passing completely into the sensation, into percept or affect. All the material becomes expressive. 

In Cecil Taylor's work, instrumental improvisation alone embarks on these multi-directional vistas. Taylor's ensemble septet on recordings like Unit Structures introduces various thematically open structures via the exploration of different combinations of instrumentation. Amidst an undercurrent of polyphonic exchange, the music evokes a sense of urgency that is at once immediate and ephemeral. As Litweiler describes, 'There’s no possibility of a straight line of development. This is a long series of ambiguities and disruptions ...' Taylor himself was a key figure in introducing a concept of multi-layered rhythm to jazz, in which time and tempo become subservient to a more expansive pulse. A variety of tempos operate within a ‘larger’ tempo, it might be said, not in the least limited to more traditional Western rhythmic patterns. In fact, rhythm is injected with arhythmia: polyrhythmia. Time and tempo give way to (or dissolve into?) movement. Moreover, the responsibility of such movement reflects a collective rationale, and thus might, at any moment, be located in any or all of the instrumental components. It is worth noting here that in her book As Serious As Your Life, Valerie Wilmer subtitles her Chapter 3, which focuses on Cecil Taylor, 'Eighty-Eight Tuned Drums.' Ultimately – and we can reiterate Bill Dixon's maxim here -- technical elements are exposed as being that much more at the service of an existential and phenomenological musical search. In fact, Unit Structures (listen: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KCYCii1Uk3I) features another extension of this idea through Taylor's own liner notes for the recording. Although they outline and suggest a similar development to the instrumental music, his notes form a surrealistic poem-improvisation all their own. 

... Facing down, the ground springs tired chains. Voices spring from the eye there, at corners—sleep. Hoarseness becomes rhetoric seasoned/as first distinct words lacerate grim oppression reality a behind vision tomb widowed enfeoffment jettisoned ... 

... inform the region, announce love to its clay like reptilian landscape, my zebra necked stasis, a jewel among vine where fragrant roots steady stroll hummin’ stretched skin visionary water falls, call quiet leaves to choir, a set ritual song cycle in tongues the heat Harlem long ages past rested glory from ... 

... The unknown, ever before life force our spirit considers action in reaction. Unchangeables as we proceed to grip memory identifying images then sight appearance, voice ... Where are you Bud? ... Lightning ... now a loner ain falling thru doors empty of room - Jazz Naked Fire Gesture, Dancing protoplasm Absorbs. 

The birth of new compositional forms spawned by Miles Davis and ‘modal jazz’ opened up a most intriguing musical space, in which so-called traditional and avant-garde improvisational
approaches became intertwined. For instance, the ‘spontaneous surrealism,’ as Litweiler describes it, of
the drumming of Tony Williams, who worked in the famed Davis-led quintets throughout the 1960s, is
more like Andrew Cyrille’s (the drummer for the Taylor groups during this period) ‘free playing’ than
would be commonly held. Although Williams is dubbed somewhat understandably a ‘modernist’
 drummer, his use of shifting meters, extended phrasing, and immediate (and sometimes disruptive)
antiphony is the musical counterpart to that ‘explosive-fixed’ and ‘convulsive’ quality that surrealism so
prized (listen: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x_whk6m67VE).

Here, Anne LeBaron is right to describe the surrealist concept of ‘convulsive beauty’ as
especially profound in the context of music: ‘action playing against fixity.’ True, the musical context in
which Williams was operating was certainly different from that of Cecil Taylor’s groups. If nothing else,
the Davis group utilized a more conventional instrumentation and displayed a more obvious orientation
around ‘swing’ rhythm, however elastic – in short, what Derek Bailey would call ‘idiomatic.’ However, it
is nevertheless apparent that a kind of musical objective chance prevails here as well, as various
‘limitations’ within the music provide a springboard precisely for explorations in freedom, as the singular
voice within the collective is at once exposed for the singularity of its own narrative while lending
coherence to an expansive group dynamic.

Positing the continuous meeting of randomness and hidden order – this is the surrealist notion
that exemplifies the most profound reality of improvisational jazz. It is an order yet to be discovered. It is
an order that becomes transformed upon the moment of discovery. This should not preclude the
extension of music to certain modes of surreality commonly relegated to literary and visual forms. On
the contrary, it beckons us to rediscover that desire, that imagination, which not only contains a wealth
of experience and possibility in itself, but which is precisely what allows us to make meaningful
extensions in our everyday lives, whether we ascribe such extensions as rational, logical,
organizational, conceptual, or not. Hence Ron Sakolsky’s quoting the poet Ted Joans about how
improvisational jazz entails “surrealizing a song”…using the transformative powers of our imagination
as the basis for reclaiming our creativity in a world of miserabilist compromises’ (Coltrane’s take on “My
Favorite Things” is a famous example of this: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ol6xkVRWzCY). Hence saxophonist Ornette Coleman’s interest in ‘the “beautiful accidents” by which the psychic
automatism of spontaneous improvisation reveals what surrealists call the Marvelous.’ Hence ‘hip hop
turntablists who cut up, remix and creatively sample a song…”surrealizing” that tune through a
technological process of layered improvisation…’

In his piece ‘For Wild Music,’ Swedish improviser Johannes Bergmark emphasizes music as
providing a forum for the blurring of unconscious, corporeality, and communality:

Man needs a wild consensus—a wild spirit of community ... to respect and appreciate nature in
psyche as well as in consciousness ... a continuous, restless and pleasurable examining
curiosity. The music representing these has its undeniable roots in the wild rhythms existing in
an incessant polyrhythm in the whole system of the body: heart; lungs; intestines; muscles; sensory and motoric nerve functions, including the little isolated part called thinking.\textsuperscript{37}

A surrealist treatment of music takes its cue from the improvisers – from jazz to hip hop and beyond – precisely in order to more fully realize the breadth of surrealism’s aesthetic and philosophical ramifications. As Breton wrote:

Daily life abounds, moreover, in just this sort of small discovery, where there is frequently an element of apparent gratuitousness, very probably a function of our provisional incomprehension, discoveries that seem to me not in the least unimportant. I am profoundly persuaded that any perception registered in the most involuntary way—for example, that of a series of words pronounced off-stage—bears itself the solution, symbolic or other, of a problem you have with yourself. You only have to know how to get along in the labyrinth.\textsuperscript{38}

In true surrealistic fashion, the articulation of the link between surrealism and improvised jazz may yet allow for a great many ‘small discoveries,’ not only to be cited around the next corner, but also heard and felt in our very blood, sweat, tears, and howls. Improvisation as surrealism.

\begin{thebibliography}{9}

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\bibitem{3} Breton, ‘Silence is Golden,’ in \textit{What is Surrealism?: Selected Writings}, ed. Franklin Rosemont (New York: Pathfinder, 1978), 268.


\bibitem{5} Breton, ‘Silence is Golden,’ \textit{What is Surrealism?}, 268.

\bibitem{6} Breton, ‘The Automatic Message,’ \textit{What is Surrealism?}, 108.

\bibitem{7} See Nicholas Slonimsky, ‘Music and Surrealism,’ \textit{Artforum}, September 1966.

\bibitem{8} Ibid., 80.

\bibitem{9} LeBaron, ‘Reflections of Surrealism in Postmodern Musics,’ 34.

\bibitem{10} Ibid., 35.

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\bibitem{12} Ibid., 35.

\bibitem{13} Breton, ‘What is Surrealism?’ \textit{What is Surrealism?}, 118.

\bibitem{14} http://www.skypoint.com/members/barrett/aarc/aarcmain.html (link no longer available)
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18 Liner notes to Bill Dixon’s *Vade Mecum* (Soul Note Records, 1994).


21 Franklin Rosemont, Introduction to Breton’s ‘Silence is Golden,’ *What is Surrealism?*, 265.


23 Blue Note, 1966.


25 Ibid., 181.

26 Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, 166-167.

27 Ibid., 211.

29 See Valerie Wilmer, *As Serious As Your Life: John Coltrane and Beyond* (New York: Serpent’s Tail, 1992).

30 Taylor would continue such practices, as well as implementing poetic preludes, interludes, dancing, and mixed media in his compositions, throughout his career.

31 Liner notes to *Unit Structures*.

32 LeBaron, ‘Reflections of Surrealism in Postmodern Music,’ 65.


35 Ibid., 52.

36 Ibid.

37 See Johannes Bergmark, ‘For Wild Music,’ dated 10/16/97, http://www.users.wineasy.se/vertsurr/music.htm (link no longer available)

Michael Szekely’s primary research and teaching interests are in cultural and critical theory, aesthetics (especially the philosophy of music), and contemporary continental philosophy, with more particular interests in French poststructuralism (especially Gilles Deleuze and Roland Barthes) and the Frankfurt School (especially Walter Benjamin). He has published articles in such journals as *Jazz Perspectives, Social Semiotics, Textual Practice, Rhizomes, Contemporary Aesthetics, Popular Music and Society,* and the *Oxford Handbook on Music Education Philosophy* (forthcoming), and is currently writing a book on Barthes and music. Szekely is also a practicing musician and composer, with particular interests in collective improvisation and popular music.
The *Surrealism Laid Bare* symposium series provides a regular measure of orientation for British and international scholars working on or around surrealism. One always leaves having been exposed to a wealth of new material and ideas. Moreover, in this writer’s opinion, one also gains a sharpened sense of purpose to one’s own engagement with surrealism. The symposium takes on a different theme each time. On this occasion the symposium sought a ‘queer querying’ of surrealism. Apparently unintentionally, this topic, or perhaps more accurately, this *approach* to surrealism has caused some ‘controversy’ (does controversy exist anymore?), although, as we shall see, less in terms of the ‘queering’ of surrealism than in its wording of that queering.

Part-funded by the AHRC Research Centre for the Study of Surrealism and its Legacies, the conference theme dovetailed with the Centre’s current research project addressing surrealism’s relationship with queer sexuality. While the transposition of the Centre’s interests to that of the symposium could be seen as a narrowing of viewpoint on surrealism, it may also be seen as an admirable attempt to invite surrealism and its scholars to step out of their ‘comfort zones.’

Signs of the controversy surrounding the symposium’s rubric were present from the outset. After warmly greeting delegates, director Sharon-Michi Kusunoki announced the disappointing news that renowned Czech surrealist and filmmaker Jan Švankmajer would not be making his billed headline appearance. Kusunoki and Krzysztof Fijalkowski informed us of the known details behind Švankmajer’s last-minute decision; namely, a disagreement with a perceived spurious compartmentalisation of surrealism in the symposium’s literature. Although explicitly concerned with scholarship on and around surrealism, the organisers of the symposium generally invite a renowned artist to open the proceedings. In 2007, this was Tacita Dean, in 2005, Susan Hiller. The prospect of an appearance by Švankmajer was exciting because, unlike previous guest artists, he *is* a surrealist. I will discuss the main details of Švankmajer’s cancellation below.

A trip to Pallant House gallery in Chichester on the morning of Saturday 19 June came as a remedy to the disappointment of the opening evening. Delegates had the chance to look at the three exhibitions of surrealist work then on display – *Surreal Friends: Leonora Carrington, Remedios Varo and Kati Horna*, *Surrealism in Sussex* and *Lee Miller Photographs* – before gathering in the gallery’s lecture room for the symposium’s first panel.

Over two days nineteen papers were delivered across seven panels. Add to this three round table discussions, several opportunities to view films (many made by delegates) and three square meals a day. Fortunately, Saturday evenings at the symposium are always set aside for fun. On this
occasion there was a surprise celebration in honour of Dawn Ades who retired this summer from her post as Professor of Art History at the University of Essex. Christopher Green publicly recounted the story of how Ades, as a doctoral candidate in the late 1960s, landed a fortuitous audience with Salvador Dalí upon her unscheduled arrival at his house as a consequence of being mistaken for a model (who, incidentally, did not turn up). Ades’s husband, Timothy, then took to the stage to recite his formidable translation of Robert Desnos’s ‘La Complainte de Fantômas,’ calling upon the audience to shout out the notorious (anti?) hero’s name on his cue. This was followed by an ingenious and delicious Dalí-inspired dinner organised by Janine Catalano, Kusunoki and the West Dean catering staff headed by Jo Dempsey.

There is not the space here to summarise every paper, or indeed panel. Rather, I aim for a general assessment of the symposium and put forward what I see as being at stake in the queer–surrealism conjunction. This will lead us into a wider discussion of the controversial aspects of the symposium that, having raised some questions in surrealist circles, led to Švanmkmajer’s sudden cancellation. Before proceeding, it should be noted that every paper brought something valuable to the table and taken together demonstrated the fecundity of this line of enquiry (for the most part independently from the activities of the Research Centre for the Study of Surrealism and its Legacies) and that discussion was lively and generous.

The symposium’s queering of surrealism throws into relief the emergent contours of the compelling, but problematic emphasis given to the movement’s legacy. In other words, this approach raised tangible questions over what we mean by and how we qualify a ‘legacy.’ Looking solely to the symposium’s papers we see a number of strategies at work which are indicative of wider scholarly practices: we find attention being given to ‘queer,’ often marginal material authored by established surrealist figures and their elected forebears; we find queer figures with some degree of affiliation to the surrealist movement being, as it were, invited back to the fold; likewise, we find figures explicitly influenced by surrealism but working outside the movement being comparatively discussed; along similar lines, we find comparative resonances between disparate works being reviewed; while another strategy aims at reconstructing the queer milieux that have existed in immediate geographic or discursive proximity to surrealism; last, but not least, we find unabashed queer readings of surrealist work.

Queer studies exists to ‘queer’ established fields of scholarship, society and culture. The purpose of this is to allow us to reconsider, and perhaps reinvigorate, the contemporary value of a given socio-cultural sphere (‘historical’ or otherwise). In other words, the function of a given field now; not what it did, but what it does and can do. Queer studies is not reserved solely for the discourses of homosexuality, or so-called non-normative sexuality; most significantly it strives for open, post-feminist study of sexuality, identity and their construction. Consequently, and given the way in which the academy currently operates, it is unsurprising that a contact between surrealism and queer theory should be established.

In this respect the symposium missed an opportunity. Very few contributors appeared to be working out of a ‘queer’ perspective. One might say that the symposium was not queer enough; or, rather, that there was no disciplinary clash. Such an interface would have been valuable for scholars...
of both ‘queer’ surrealism and queer studies. It would have offered the former access to a wider cross-section of current queer debate and exposed the latter to antecedent surrealist and avant-garde ideas bearing great similarities to many of the principles of queer studies. Indeed, there is every indication that queer studies would benefit from paying greater attention to the contributions of the historical avant-garde. After all, it is impossible to understand the work of the majority of artists responsible for visualising contemporary ‘queer culture’ (before queer theory) without consideration of their connections to the avant-garde project.

The Artists that spring to mind are filmmakers Kenneth Anger, Gregory J. Markopoulos, Jack Smith, Andy Warhol, photographers Claude Cahun, Robert Mapplethorpe, painter Francis Bacon. Furthermore, queer theory – like many disciplines – frequently calls on the work of figures such as Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, Jacques Lacan and Julia Kristeva without consideration of their debt and engagement with surrealism and the avant-garde. Calvin Thomas’s recent book *Masculinity, Psychoanalysis, Straight Queer Theory: Essays on Abjection in Literature, Mass Culture, and Film* (2008) even goes so far as to draw heavily on Bataille without any consideration of his place within the avant-garde and surrealism. Thomas opts to rely on Kristeva’s reading of Bataille instead. The point here is that by championing the interventions of these thinkers, queer theory automatically situates itself within the avant-garde debate. Failure to fully engage with this heritage would surely be folly.

To return to the issue of surrealist legacies: it must be asked whether the purpose of such a project is to indefinitely expand the roster of surrealist lives and works or whether, rather, it is to discern and come to terms with the surrealist principle (outlined by its exponents) as it continues on its journey. Perhaps I have phrased this opposition badly, for upon reflection it becomes hard to differentiate between these two aims. However, there is a difference: the first is premised on an isolatable surrealism; the second, on significant or pronounced surrealist elements that may be traced, but not extracted from a given topic. This ambiguity draws us near to Švankmajer and the surrealists’ misgivings over the rationale behind the symposium’s theme.

In a collective email statement Švankmajer, Bruno Solařík, also of the Czech-Slovak Surrealist Group, along with the Leeds and Paris Surrealist Groups voiced their view that *Surrealism Laid Bare* was ‘misrepresenting’ surrealism by ‘establish[ing] a spurious distinction between “Bretonian orthodoxy” and “Surrealism itself”’ and that Švankmajer’s attendance [would] only serve to add misplaced credibility to this and some of the other misrepresentations in the programme. In a subsequent email Švankmajer (on behalf of the Czech-Slovak Surrealist Group) added: ‘The attitude of the organisers to authentic surrealism tends to directly confuse it with the outlandish aesthetics of fashion experiments.’ These accusations cannot be easily brushed aside, for on rereading the symposium programme with these criticisms in mind some of its assertions do seem somewhat heavy-handed.

The claim that the organisers of the symposium misunderstand surrealism is, however, highly problematic. It suggests not simply that one group of people have a better understanding of surrealism, but that one group of people are in position to judge who understands surrealism better. Is not one of the interventions of surrealism to try to dismantle such modes of interaction and claims to
truth? (At the same time we must not forget the surrealists’ tradition of passionate opposition to material or events they deem offensive). In the symposium’s favour, the papers and their conclusions were diverse and well-handled and it seems fair to add that Švankmajer would have found both an ‘open platform’ (upon which to raise any misgivings) and an inquisitive audience made up of enthusiastic supporters of his work.

I would like to briefly address the issue of the compartmentalisation of surrealism (into ‘Bretonian orthodoxy,’ ‘dissident surrealism,’ ‘queer surrealism’ and so on). This is important not only because it sits at the heart of the dispute outlined above, but because it also impacts on how we approach the surrealist legacy. The Aragon epigraph opening this report (taken from what became Le Paysan de Paris, 1926) explicitly calls upon a plurality of surrealisms. This suggests that from its earliest days surrealism was not one, but many. Reflecting on the writing of Le Paysan de Paris, Aragon later remarked that following ‘the constitution of a real surrealist group’ he found ‘newcomers ... who were constantly trying to demonstrate their orthodoxy at the expense of Philippe [Soupault], Paul [Eluard] or [him]self.’ When Aragon speaks of the newcomers’ orthodoxy he is explicitly referring to their attempts to please Breton. Thus, it seems reasonable to posit a ‘Bretonian orthodoxy.’ When we factor in the many ‘excommunications’ of surrealists from this ‘orthodox’ group (Dalí, Matta), the so-called ‘dissident surrealists’ (Georges Bataille, Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes), or simply those who rarely played ball (Marcel Duchamp, Pablo Picasso) it seems both appropriate and helpful to try to establish some means by which to understand their distance from the heart of ‘official’ surrealism. Of course, distinction between these various surrealisms should not be hard and fast, but remain open to the wider surrealist project. A ‘queer surrealism’ is only conceivable after queer theory and serves to elucidate particular strands of culture perceived to suggest or require such a classification.

The controversy over Surrealism Laid Bare’s ‘queer querying’ of surrealism begs the question as to whether the dispute will evaporate or grow into something more substantial. Surely increased debate between surrealist writers and artists and scholars of surrealism can only be productive? A question also arises over the relationship between scholarship and risk. All too often academia plays ‘safe’ (how many times have I done so over the course of this report?) Projects that stick their necks out, that instigate clashes of opinion, are refreshing, challenging, even playful. I see an opportunity for surrealism to have a substantial impact on queer theory – a discipline that has yet to take full account of the avant-garde, and where a filmmaker such as Švankmajer may be discussed in a single page using Félix Guattari’s account of Dadaism and garner the following conclusion: ‘Svankmajer [sic] is interesting as much because of the asemiotic as the break with semiotic ... the movement, the jolly stop-motion, the random sounds and the texture of the plasticine – or indeed the texture of the stop-motion and the jolt of the plasticine.’ I hope that those engaged with surrealism will work towards making this impact as big as possible.

I have sought to present a balanced report. To this end I am grateful to the following people for their correspondence and/or discussions with me about the symposium and the issues it raised: Dawn Ades, Kenneth Cox, Nicholas Cullinan, Krzysztof Fijalkowski, Sharon-Michi Kusunoki and Michael Richardson. Special thanks to Felicity Gee, Eric Robertson and Eva Bartussek.
Details of the speakers and papers is available at http://www.westdean.org.uk/Surrealism%20Laid%20Bare/QueryingSurrealismLeaflet.pdf

Email dated 16 June 2010. (This email was not sent to Kusunoki, but was read out by Fijalkowski at the start of the symposium.)

Email dated 17 June 2010. (Again, this email was not sent to Kusunoki, but was read out by Fijalkowski at the start of the symposium.)

Švankmajer and his colleagues’ boycott consisted of Švankmajer informing Kusunoki of his decision to cancel the day before he was due to arrive for the symposium, followed by a turning-down of Kusunoki’s invitation to Švankmajer, Solařík and British surrealists to hold an open debate over the disagreement as part of the symposium.


To the Editors of *Papers of Surrealism* - online Journal

I have recently had the opportunity to read the text: ‘Querying Surrealism/Queering Surrealism. Sixth Biennial Symposium: Surrealism Laid Bare, West Dean, Chichester, United Kingdom, 18 - 20 June 2010,’ in which, it would appear, there is a complaint concerning the reason for my decision to decline the invitation to attend the symposium:

The claim that the organisers of the symposium misunderstand surrealism is, however, highly problematic. It suggests not simply that one group of people have a better understanding of surrealism, but that one group of people are in position to judge who understands surrealism better.

Despite this, there was never any assertion or indication that one or another group has a patent on the understanding of surrealism.

Instead, what was said, literally, was that it is good enough to study the source material instead of pursuing ignorance and a certain chicanery as to the facts. Therefore, it is not the case of putting one opinion above another, but rather the difference between knowledge and ignorance of the surrealist point of departure – which is objectively the same for everyone that opens their eyes.

The only reason for my responsible decision to decline the invitation to attend was the detection, (just in time), that the *Surrealism Laid Bare* symposium had – in this sense – its eyes wide shut.

Please see the attachment, in which this case was already objectively expounded in July 2010 and which, so I was informed, had previously been circulated to all the participants at *Surrealism Laid Bare.*

Yours faithfully,

Jan Švankmajer.

Prague, 21 September 2011

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Gifts of the Spirit: Automatic Writing: Whitworth Hall, University of Manchester, 27 June 2011

Lisa Newman

Tag 1 (to be read to writers in zone one)

I had a dream in which I spewed ectoplasm: I opened my mouth and a manifesto poured out. At first I didn't know to whom, then I realized it was He, the One I had levitated with, from an earlier dream that had caused my life to change.

The topic seemed to be about maintaining high voltage ecstasy, but I was talking too fast ... then ectoplasm came pouring out of me, forming architectural shapes in front of me that formed into block letters. The manifesto had manifested. It declared to Him that the intensity of love would have to be maintained.

Ron Athey, Gifts of the Spirit script

In the recent performance, Gifts of the Spirit: Automatic Writing, U.S.-born-now-London-based artist, Ron Athey, orchestrated twenty-nine performers into what he referred to as a ‘machine’; a corps united in the task of using automatism through writing, typing, and glossolalia to produce new distillations of texts stemming from Athey’s own memoirs in an attempt to decode and unpack his childhood experiences as an ecstatic.

Athey’s upbringing within the Pentecostal church, his estranged mother, and his Aunt Vena’s prediction, prior to his birth, of his future as a powerful minister within the church prior have all been explored in earlier performances, such as Four Scenes In a Harsh Life (1994), Deliverance (1997), and Joyce (2002). However, what was noticeably different in Gifts of the Spirit was the lack of emphasis on Athey’s own physicality and the absence of the social politics surrounding queer sexuality and AIDS, which led to his infamy as a bugbear for conservative Senator Jesse Helms and the subsequent re-evaluation of federal funding for experimental arts in the United States in the early 1990s.

In these earlier works, Athey gained notoriety for the extremely visceral, and often challenging, presence of his bleeding HIV+ body. These performances were often presented in a blur of spectacle, physical wounding, camp, and allusions to martyrdom which were shared by other artists of the era, such as Diamanda Galas, Felix Gonzales-Torres, and David Wojnarowicz, who spoke out against the government’s stigmatization of homosexuality and silencing of AIDS victims.

In both versions of Gifts of the Spirit – the first having originated as part of an AiR residency at Queen Mary University London in 2010 – Athey’s own body is subsumed by the larger collective of the performers, and his voice vacillates between an emotionless reading of excerpts from his memoir, in which phrases are left unfinished to be completed by the rest of the cast as an ‘exquisite corpse,’ and bursts of ecstatic glossolalia. His trademark bleeding is replaced by a more subtle, but no less evocative, offering of words and memory.

The roots and crossroads of automatic writing in surrealism, psychoanalysis, and various spiritual practices are not ignored by Athey, though no one approach or canon is singled out. Athey has referred to himself as a ‘mystical atheist,’ not ascribing to any one belief system and having
rejected formal religion as a teenager. What he does claim to question, in both life and research, is ‘can proper phenomena be constructed/conjured Designed?’

The process of organizing and training the cast of the Manchester performance happened largely through a series of emails, with an initial invitation sent through various social networks and to targeted individuals by Athey, myself, and another co-organizer, Nick Kilby. The provocation given by Athey was fairly straightforward:

In Gifts, there is a premise that acts as the starting point, and a fantastical goal: to use the collective unconscious of the writers as a means to resolve the structured text. To not only use the writing machine as spectacle, but to activate processing text, straddling this stodgy one and an alternative reality.

Submissions came from people throughout the Northwest and as far away as Bristol and Scotland, with only one person having been involved in the London performance. Applicants were asked to send a few words about their interest in the project, their background, and also needed to consent to undergoing light hypnosis during preliminary workshop exercises and the performance. These emails were then forwarded to Athey for his approval. Previous performing experience was not required, and while the majority of the participants did not have Live Art backgrounds, many were familiar with the ideas of the ‘cut-up’ techniques of William Burroughs and Brion Gysin and concepts of automatic writing developed by Andre Breton and the surrealists, or had experimented with various forms of automatism in other creative practices.

Once a cast was confirmed, they were invited to a mandatory two-day workshop prior to the performance. The workshop was held in a rehearsal space on the University of Manchester campus, rather than in the Whitworth Hall where the piece would be shown, and was co-directed by Athey and Mancunian writer/performer/hypnotist, Sue Fox. Each of the two seven-hour days began with physical exercises, borrowing from Ashtanga yoga and Qi-Gong practices, which then evolved into breaking in to small groups of three to take turns massaging one another. The purpose of these exercises, which Athey has employed in other workshop environments, is to break down barriers and inhibitions between performers, and, I would also posit, to acknowledge the body as a site on which to build, and later integrate into the larger ‘machine,’ a process requiring a certain synchronization of movements and tempos.

After the initial exercises were completed, the floor of the rehearsal space was covered in giant rolls of paper. Participants were then given markers and instructed to lay down on the paper with their eyes closed, making sure to leave sufficient room around them to write. Fox then began speaking in a low, even voice, leading the group in a form of guided meditation or relaxation. They were initially told to envision themselves somewhere warm, somewhere safe. When the language became more visceral, sexual, and even grotesque participants were then instructed, with their eyes still closed and in a (presumably hypnotic) trance state, to begin writing, making marks, or drawing.
I should make it clear that as the lead organizer of the event, I was not a direct participant myself, and, as the only one who did not undergo the entirety of either day of workshops, can only offer an outside perspective. I have supplemented my retelling of the events here with testimonies from those who experienced the workshops and performance from within, in order to give a more in-depth and panoptical view of the process.

From my position outside of the exercise, I was surprised at the variety of actions that were manifested during this phase of the workshop. Some participants engaged in repetitive gestures, digging through the paper with their marker; others drew around their bodies, defining their space through line; some wrote clearly, interjecting fragments or words from Fox’s narration, or writing their own text; others made patterns or small drawings.
As Fox explains: 'There is no plan in the hypnosis other than to get people into freefall into the unconscious and very often artists and writers can access that zone anyway but I wanted to try all kinds of ideas to get them using alternate options like with the qigong.'

After this first foray into hypnosis, Athey and Fox asked the group to share their experiences with the exercise. Many said that they had not felt so free to write since they were children, and this sparked a kind of gentle euphoria which appeared to be shared by all the participants. As Joey Hateley reflected, post-performance: 'I left my old safe familiar patterns of writing from the “inner-self” behind while looking for something that was outside of myself, and at times I felt perhaps that I was channelling [the] collective consciousness of the group, led by a sort of shared belief or spirituality that was bigger than ourselves.'

Most described the hypnosis not so much as a sensation of ‘going under’ or becoming unaware of one’s surroundings or actions, but rather a deep state of relaxation that allowed for a suspension of inhibitions and greater creative flow. For Roberta D’Angelo, ‘the fact we were induced really helped and the automatic writing process was so liberating in a sense that I wasn't thinking at all about what I was writing, I was just writing.’ Though the majority of outcomes were positive and produced effective results, one participant was affected negatively, stating that the hypnosis released emotions which had been suppressed up until the workshop and subsequently withdrew from the project.

The preparation of the glossolalia choir involved a slightly different process to that of the writers, and, as Athey professes, was one of the more experimental components of the performance since it had not been a part of the original version at Queen Mary. In the workshop, the vocalists experimented with methods to loosen their voices in both cacophonous and controlled bursts of sound; comparable to the actions of the writers, typists, and editors who generated, translated, and cut-up the text into new distillations of Athey’s primary narrative. As with the automatic writing, the goal of this was to use automatism to generate an ecstatic state akin to the ‘channelling’ of outside forces in seances, though without any pretence or assurance that actual spiritual invocations would occur, and also avoiding any imagery of the New Age movement. Athey explains:
I learned a lot of workshopping at Queen Mary. I think I realized the ‘authenticity’ of the experience relies on knowing how to get in the zone, but the zone not becoming so familiar that it can be acted, or have a hammy element. It can verge right on drum circle energy which isn’t what this machine vibrates on.

It is this sense of ‘authenticity’ that troubles many critics and creators of Live Art, which generally eschews acting in favour of a blurring of art and life, often in autobiographical works such as this one. The difficulty in achieving this in this performance was finding the balance of theatrical and aesthetic components – the use of scripts, lighting, sound, and the Victorian opulence of the Hall, for example – with an openness of orchestration that could allow for an unknown outcome, and potential revelation, to emerge.

![Image of Ron Athey's performance](image_url)

**Fig. 4:** Ron Athey, *Gifts of the Spirit: Automatic Writing*, Whitworth Hall, Manchester, 27 June 2011. Photograph © Roshana Rubin-Mayhew.

In the performance, the four members of the choir were seated at a ‘seance table,’ (complete with automatic writing planchettes built and hand-delivered by local occultist, Peter Leckie) along with Fox and Athey, in order to become both the instigators and end-points for the flow of text.
By operating as a point of delivery and reception, the choir needed to be capable of transcribing and translating the outcome of Athey’s words as they filtered through the automatism of the writers, typists, and editors who reconstructed the texts in cut-up scripts to be read, sung, and uttered by the choir.
A second role of the choir was to provide direction to classically trained pianist Othon Mataragas, who alternated between playing the massive pipe organ which fills the front wall of the Hall, and an upright piano on the stage, both of which created a sound-scape for the piece. Mataragas wore boxing gloves to avoid slipping into any of the precision deeply embedded within him as a musician, and allowing for improvisational playing of both instruments.
What was unanticipated, Athey professes, was the lack clarity of the resulting messages delivered by the table, though this created a constructive failure from which to build on:

I think the idea of the machine was still working, but I realized the seance table wasn’t just another piece of the machine; it was where the information and the pulse that runs the machine came from. It had to run tightly, and at one point it had maxed and had no plan of how to come down, no way to communicate to Othon. So I found a revelation and a glitch in that, and my own presence, which I hadn’t (and still haven’t) reckoned with in this piece. Perhaps in that way I do infuse the memoir with a lot, I take it to represent me and my previous work, previous ways of working through that prophecy. But I have to commit to my physical attendance in it, beyond reading.

For the majority of the performers, this failure went unnoticed. The variety of interpretations by the vocalists appeared to be congruous with the overall flow of experimentation and spontaneity of the performers. What most found surprising, however, was the short duration of the live piece after having spent seven-hour days immersed in writing and hypnotic states. As Alex Simmons recalls: ‘Time took on a very different meaning in performance, and from start to finish I could have sworn only a few minutes had passed.’ The 50-minute long performance seemed to be almost a teaser, or preview, of what could have easily evolved into a multi-hour event. Not wanting the piece to become an ‘endurance’ performance, (referring to a form of Live Art which engages in repetitive or evolutionary actions which are physically and/or mentally challenging and often span hours, if not days), Athey ended the piece ten minutes early with a simple ‘thank you.’
To return to Athey’s question regarding whether or not phenomena can be constructed, it should be noted that in its design, this performance was developed by Athey not as a solution to this dilemma, but as research. Perhaps the process of engaging multiple minds and bodies in the task of filtering, interpreting, (and perhaps even channelling) the mysteries of his childhood through an embodiment of what Breton referred to as ‘pure expression’ allowed by automatic practices did offer a glimpse into the unknown; a tangible, audible mapping of ecstatic experience.\(^5\) Or, perhaps this will become an ongoing experiment where the goal is to strike a balance between the ‘machine’ and the riddles of the language fed into it by its enigmatic creator.

*Gifts of the Spirit: Automatic Writing* was performed on June 27, 2011 in Whitworth Hall at the University of Manchester. Cast: Ron Athey, Agata Alcaniz, George Arnett, Michael Barnes-Wynters, Joanna Brown, Roger Bygott, Eleanor Byrne, Lewis Church, Roberta D’Angelo, Luci Fiction, Sue Fox, Mark Greenwood, Joey Hateley, Rachel Holmes, Peter Jacobs, Nathan Jones, Alice Kemp, Nick Kilby, Pavlos Kountouriotis, Llewyn Máire, Othon Mataragas, Michael Mayhew, Russell McEwan, Jonathan McGrath, Teemu Metsälä, Rachel Parry, Olivier Richomme, Charlotte Rodgers, Phaedra Shanbaum, Alexander Simmons, and Nina Whiteman. Supported by the National Lottery through Arts Council England, Arts and Humanities Research Council, Centre for the Study of Surrealism and its Legacies, Gyrlz Peformative Art, Glorious Trauma, with additional thanks to the University of Manchester, Kim By the Sea, Peter Leckie.

Author’s note: Unless otherwise noted, all quotations are from post-event emails sent to me by participants during the week of 2 – 7 July 2011 for the purpose of being included in this article.

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1 Ron Athey, *Artist CV and Biography*, 2011.


3 Athey, call to performers text sent during 10 – 22 June 2011.

4 *Ibid*.

Surrealism is often held to be an essentially literary phenomenon, and surrealist visual art to play second fiddle to the movement’s verbal manifestations. This view has been fostered partly by theoretical statements provided from within the surrealist group, whose initial refusal to define surrealist art in terms of particular techniques or forms seemed to imply that it was an empty category. From the point of view of contemporary critics outside the movement, surrealist painting was ‘literary,’ meaning that its agenda was set by theorists or littérateurs, and that it was not rooted in properly pictorial concerns. This perception was not corrected by accounts, again from within the movement and from sympathizers such as André Lhote, suggesting that the essential defining quality of surrealist painting was its ‘poetry,’ once again seeming to yoke visual production to a model of creation understood primarily in terms of writing. Kim Grant’s book argues persuasively that surrealist theory and criticism valued visual art precisely for its ability to provide a concrete manifestation of ‘poetry’ (understood as unbound, imaginative thought), and that in this respect it was seen as equal, if not sometimes superior, to the poetic qualities of surrealist writing. At the same time, Grant demonstrates the extent to which surrealist works of art were thoroughly mediated and perhaps even constituted by the theoretical and critical texts that circulated around them, and by literary concepts – ‘poetry,’ its attendant term ‘lyricism,’ and also ‘ automatism,’ understood since the Manifeste du surréalisme in terms of automatic writing – held to be essential to the surrealist work of art. As such, text and image may be equivalent as vehicles for poetry, but surrealist art is certainly not to be considered as independent from surrealist texts, as Grant demonstrates the central importance of art discourse to both the production and the consumption of visual works of art.

Surrealism and the Visual Arts proposes a historical recontextualization of surrealist art and its theory, which is long overdue. This kind of analysis has been precluded by a number of factors, including a tendency by scholars to take surrealist positions for granted, to view the movement as both monolithic and self-contained with respect to other contemporary art movements, and to use analysis of surrealist works of art as an occasion to exercise theoretical hobby-horses of various kinds. The sheer scope of the task Grant sets herself might also be a factor, as the book replaces these approaches with a sweeping historical account that considers surrealism in relation to conceptions of art as ‘poetic,’ stretching back to Diderot, via Baudelaire; to other contemporary art movements such as Purism and the expressive naturalism that dominated the art scene in the late 1920s and 1930s; and to the art theories that accompanied these movements. Grant carefully excavates trends and tensions in a broad range of texts, some published under the aegis of surrealism, but also many written from alternative perspectives and published in the major art reviews of the period (L’Art vivant, L’Amour de l’art, Cahiers d’art and Minotaure), showing how surrealist positions on art were articulated through a dialogue within the movement itself but also in response to criticism from without. It also shows how the movement’s position within the art market shaped its theories of visual art, and traces the process
of institutionalization whereby the surrealist position gradually became amalgamated with that of critics writing for *Cahiers d’art*.

Part I examines the historical development of ‘poetic’ painting as an art critical concept, from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries through to Breton’s early writings. Grant’s discussion demonstrates that painting and poetry have constantly vied for pre-eminence in art theory: for Diderot, painting is a privileged mode of expression because the imagination is populated by visual images, whereas for Baudelaire ‘poetry achieves pre-eminence ... because it is not limited to sensual experience and is thus able to give freer rein to the imagination’ (17). The rivalry between poetry and painting raises its head again in relation to Pierre Reverdy’s theory of the poetic image as a conjunction of disparate elements, which may be realized either visually or verbally. Although poetry and painting may seem to enjoy a theoretical equivalence here, Grant argues that this is not in fact the case, since for Reverdy painting is subject to the imperatives of formal harmony and unity, whereas (verbal) poetry is not, being purely ‘conceptual.’ While Breton’s pre-surrealist writings adopt the Reverdian concept of the poetic image, he firmly rejects the idea that there might be eternal laws or formulae governing visual art (an idea taken up by the Purists in their journal *L’Esprit nouveau*), in favour of unbounded imaginative creativity, for which text and image were held to be equivalent expressions.

The equivalence of text and image in surrealist theory has often been overlooked: in the *Manifeste*, Breton barely mentions visual art and seems to define surrealist creation in terms of automatic writing alone. But in Part II, Grant shows that Breton’s example of a poetic image created via psychic automatism (‘There is a man cut in two by the window’), while formulated in words, is essentially visual in nature. Moreover, Breton asserts that had he been an artist rather than a poet, he might have expressed the image visually. Texts and images are thus acknowledged as equally valid manifestations of the activity of the unconscious mind. Despite this, the possibility of a surrealist visual art was queried in the early issues of *La Révolution surréaliste*: taking automatic writing as the model by which all surrealist creation was defined, Max Morise wondered whether visual art could measure up, while Pierre Naville insisted that the visual arts were too restricted by their own rules to be appropriate vehicles for the expression of the unfettered unconscious. This debate led to Breton’s more affirmative stance in *Le Surréalisme et la peinture*, which defined surrealist art not in terms of its putative capacity to ape automatic writing (indeed, it is not defined by a particular technique or style at all), but rather in terms of its ability to perform an equivalent function to surrealist texts in bringing about an imaginative transformation of reality. This unwillingness to define surrealist art in terms of technique was accompanied by a refusal, in written responses by Péret, Breton and Desnos to the first surrealist art exhibitions (1925), to adopt traditional critical stances, or to discuss the works on display in terms of aesthetic theory. As Grant demonstrates, these texts instead provide fictional narratives which respond poetically to works of art, so that the ‘poetic’ or imaginative creation of the artist in turn sparks the imaginative process of the spectator-writer – perhaps engendering a verbal equivalent to the visual work of art.
Over the course of her discussion in Parts III and IV, Grant shows the extent to which the question of visual style and technique caught the surrealists in a double bind. The absence of any distinctive surrealist artistic style left the movement open to criticisms that it was essentially literary, because artworks produced under its aegis seemed to be bound together only by their creators’ shared allegiance to a theory. There were, however, a number of attempts to define surrealist art more decisively: in the late 1920s surrealist art was increasingly associated with a style Grant labels ‘dream verism’ (characterized by realistically depicted elements in unexpected conjunctions), and this was followed in 1930 by Aragon’s attempt to define surrealist art in terms of collage (in *La Peinture au défi*), and by further efforts in the 1930s to propose techniques such as frottage and decalcomania as models. And yet these definitions were not without their pitfalls: a style could quickly become a convention, which would not only restrict the artist’s imagination, but could signal to critics that the movement had become rigid and non-revolutionary.

Grant’s discussion in the second half of the book also tracks the gradual amalgamation of surrealist and more conservative viewpoints, as critics who had once vehemently opposed surrealism began to adopt some of its premises. ‘Dream verism,’ for instance, was co-opted by many critics to justify the new emphasis on reality in contemporary conservative painting, while surrealist art was also used as evidence that the French spirit of innovation was alive and well despite the downturn in the art market in the wake of the 1929 crash. The critics of the *Cahiers d’art* began to devote increasing attention to surrealist works of art, admitting their aesthetic value (albeit judging them according to traditional pictorial criteria), and eventually accepting the basic idea of automatism as a materialization of imaginative thought (although never relinquishing their insistence that this must be combined with a studied use of proper artistic technique). The process of surrealism’s recuperation into the artistic mainstream also operated via the review *Minotaure* (in the pages of which Breton made some notable concessions to the principles of aesthetic evaluation), and via the movement’s inclusion in the *Histoire de l’art contemporain: La Peinture*, published in 1933-1934 by *L’Amour de l’art*.

At the end of the book, Grant returns to the question of visual-verbal equivalence in surrealist theories of art. Breton’s ‘Le message automatique’ (1934) appears to go back on ideas expressed in the *Manifeste*, by implying that verbal poetic images could be just as visually evocative for the reader as painted images were for the spectator; furthermore, Breton suggests that visual images could disrupt the pure verbal flow of automatic writing. The essay has most often been read as a statement to the effect that ‘automatism was essentially verbal and thus that visual art was a less direct or effective Surrealist means’ (332). Yet, as in the *Manifeste*, Breton takes pains to point out that his statement only applies to himself as poet – and that for artists, visual imagery may take priority in the mind. That this is the most likely interpretation of Breton’s highly ambiguous text is confirmed by Grant’s discussion of the 1935 lecture ‘Situation surréaliste de l’objet,’ which reasserts the absolute equivalence of visual and verbal creation, and therefore the legitimacy of surrealist visual art alongside literary manifestations.
Surrealism and the Visual Arts weaves together a number of threads of discussion, not all of which it has been possible to mention here. It is not an easy read, and its theoretical focus will inevitably make it dry to some readers' tastes. Some of the theoretical positions it describes might have been more swiftly summarized (for example in the early chapters, where Grant pays a lot of attention to teasing out the different positions occupied by Reverdy, the Purists, Dermée and Breton in relation to concepts of 'lyricism' and 'poetry'), but for the most part the author makes light work of mapping out a host of art critical perspectives, whose terms of analysis are often frustratingly slippery. Her discussion is particularly lively and engaging in those instances where it presents a detailed examination of art objects as they reflect theoretical developments – for instance, when she considers Magritte’s ‘Les Mots et les images’ in relation to dream verism, or examines the significance of editorial choices and layout in La Révolution surréaliste. Grant’s approach, which takes in both surrealism and its critical adversaries without reducing these to a simplistic opposition, is extremely illuminating, as are many other aspects of the book (the surprising connections it establishes between surrealist art theory and eighteenth-century notions of ‘poetry’ in art, of the imagination as visual, and of the task of the art critic, for example). In its detailed discussion of the concept of automatism as evolving from an expression of imaginative thought to a more interactive dialogue between the imagination and concrete reality, and in its revision of the standard account of the role of visual art in surrealism, it provides a crucial addition to scholarship on surrealism. Although it overlaps in many respects with Elza Adamowicz’s nearly contemporary Ceci n’est pas un tableau, it offers a chronological account of critical responses to surrealist art which, while more narrowly focused on the period between the early 1920s and mid-1930s, provides a much more thorough examination of surrealism’s dialogues with its critical adversaries, and this makes its contribution highly distinctive. Finally, Grant’s wide-ranging discussion of the ways in which visual and verbal media competed for priority in art theory from the eighteenth century through to the mid-1930s will make Surrealism and the Visual Arts a useful point of reference for those working in text and image studies more generally.

Katherine Shingler
University of Nottingham

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Perhaps the central concern of Language Poetry has been a utopian claim, most clear in prose of the ‘High Language’ writers Ron Silliman, Charles Bernstein, Bob Perelman and Barrett Watten, for the potential of experimental, difficult writing to effect real political change in the ‘real’ world, without compromising such work’s experimental and difficult qualities: for Watten ‘the power is in the line, the power to get things done.’ In fact, the assertion seems to be that it would be through the experimental and difficult elements in such work, and the consequent change in consciousness that the participatory reading and understanding of it would entail, that the change would be actuated. Such a grand aim cannot but be problematic, and the apparent unrealisable nature of this scheme has been criticised, while the Language writers themselves have been pilloried for not holding to their utopian ideas in their maturity. David Arnold, in Poetry & Language Writing: Objective and Surreal, acknowledges these problems, consciously drawing the reader’s attention to these difficulties and simultaneously proving their depths. He writes that the classic ‘LangPo’ assertion that theory might disseminate avant-garde negativity throughout the social totality sounds a little optimistic but it prompts some interesting reflections for anyone currently working in the British system of higher education. With the commitment of the New Labour administration to a national rate of 50 per cent participation in higher education, it would seem that the potential for academics to affect the social totality is also likely to rise. (12)

Arnold, despite his circumspection, underlines the extent of the failure of the Language project to achieve its stated aims; in the light of the current international dismantling of the academic community the political ineffectiveness of the attack on reference seems unarguable.

Arnold’s project here, however, is not overtly to test this utopian goal and its failure, but rather to trace a lineage between the salad days of high surrealism and Language writing. Arnold’s route between surrealism and Language writing is unconventional. Previous attempts to chart the lineage from the poetic avant-gardes of the early twentieth-century to Language writing have placed Ezra Pound at the centre of this development; typically charting a smooth parabola from Imagism and the Cantos-method to Pound’s protégées the Objectivists (with Louis Zukofsky pre-eminent among them for the core Language writers), and Gertrude Stein serving as a balance to Pound’s overbearing masculinism and historicism. Language poet, and de facto historian of the movement, Bob Perelman’s The Trouble With Genius foregrounds this lineage with important essays on Pound, Joyce, Stein and Zukofsky, while his The Marginalization of Poetry: Language Writing and Literary History contains only one brief mention of André Breton and multiple lengthy excursuses on Pound. French structuralism, post-structuralism and the Frankfurt School supposedly provide the theoretical underpinning for LangPo’s theoretical positions, as is made clear in Ron Silliman’s and Charles Bernstein’s early prose works and those essays collected in Bernstein and Bruce Andrews’ The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book.
Poetry & Language Writing: Objective and Surreal partly follows this consensus view, but adds some additional stages that challenge it profoundly. Arnold gripes that ‘when surrealism appears in the writings of Language’s “poet-critics,” it often features as a well meaning but compromised enthusiasm which touched upon some useful techniques without realizing their true import.’ (13) This criticism seems fair, and Arnold’s mission to explain surrealism’s ‘true import’ to the LangPo cadre is a necessary one. Thus Arnold begins his history of experimental American poetry with surrealism, moving from French high surrealism to the less celebrated indigenous American variety (exemplified for Arnold by the magazine Blues, edited by Charles Henri Ford), and then on to William Carlos Williams, a poet whose influence on Language writing is little explored.

Williams was of course directly involved in the Objectivist project, initially as mentor to Zukofsky, then as occasional Objectivist himself and later as collaborator with Zukofsky, who offered crucial editorial advice to Williams on a number of his mature projects. Thus the jump to Objectivist verse that Arnold performs in his fourth chapter is made somewhat more comfortable, with primary links between Objectivist verse and surrealism few and tentative. Stein, however, a frequently acknowledged influence on Language writing, would seem a more obvious link to surrealism than Williams, and Arnold would have to argue somewhat harder than he does here to prove his Stein-less and Pound-light version of Language writing’s inheritance.

Arnold’s central tool towards proving this connection is ‘The Surreal-Objectivist Nexus,’ a machinery set out in the fourth chapter of Poetry & Language Writing. This chapter aims to suggest a set of shared beliefs that can be perceived in differing quantities in Objectivist and surrealist theory, somewhat after the fashion of Zukofsky’s poetic ‘integral’ in “A” which Zukofsky uses to define the complex relationship between music and language in his work.\(^4\) While the chapter approaches Zukofsky compellingly and at length and Arnold usefully addresses various Zukofsky works and connections, including his 17 early poems in Blues, some of which were not republished and remain relatively unexplored, his Nexus is not unstintingly persuasive. Arnold’s sensitive description of the centrality of desire to Zukofsky’s early Objectivist writing is profound and an important addition to the body of Zukofsky criticism, but his attempts to locate a strain of surrealism in his poetics are at best preliminary, and sometimes tangential. That Parker Tyler appeared, somewhat peripherally, among the Objectivist cohort becomes a central piece of evidence for Arnold as he argues for his Surreal-Objectivist Nexus, but the sheer contingency of the grouping makes it difficult for this fact to perform the heavy-lifting Arnold requires from it.

The widely accepted connection between the Language Poets and the Objectivists is also problematic in Arnold’s description. This alignment, while more conventional, and in line with various Language writers’ own testimony, is as difficult to assert as the connection to surrealism – the fact that the Objectivists are so notoriously a grouping of convenience presents one problem. Similarly, Arnold’s opposition of the Objectivists’ ‘objective’ to the ‘subjective,’ specifically refused by Zukofsky and all of the other Objectivists bar Charles Reznikoff, is another significant obstacle to his argument. The
characteristic surrealist tension between ‘objective and subjective’ is put into relation with the Objectivists’ supposed ‘Objectivism’ (itself a coinage refused by the Objectivists, but used throughout by Arnold: the Objectivists, according to Zukofsky wrote ‘Objectivist verse;’ there was never such a movement as poetic ‘Objectivism’). This confusion brings Arnold’s reading of the Objectivists uncomfortably close to Ayn Rand’s echt Objectivism; a very different proposition indeed.

Zukofsky’s early prose is difficult, but it is clear that the lexical sources for his rubric are ‘objects,’ ‘objectives’ and ‘objectification;’ not the ‘objectivity’ of Rand’s usage, and not, necessarily, ‘objection.’ In an explanation of Objectivist verse written at the request of Williams in 1956 (suggesting a problematic timeline for Arnold’s assertion of Williams as integrally an Objectivist) Zukofsky writes that:

Objectivist Poetry = <equals> poetry – and that’s that. A poem has an expressed shape, form, love, music (or what other word have you?) And that goes for a poem in any time, for any time – granted the other guy knows the language. Otherwise nothing is said, the “poem” so-called is empty, misshapen. It ought to be the same when we’re all – not we but the deluge <is> – buzzing around in interstellar space. Only heavens knows what words if any they’ll be using to make up the shape, and the order (movement) another indissoluble aspect of it.5

In addition, the Objectivist tendency which Arnold identifies could more accurately be described as an specifically ‘Zukofskian’ inheritance in Language writing; it is hard to detect a great deal of the kinds of conceptual textual experiment for which Zukofsky’s “A” has become notorious in the poetries of Reznikoff, Carl Rakosi, Lorine Niedecker and Basil Bunting. George Oppen’s work comes closer but is still a fundamentally different (and, in maturity, opposed) project to Zukofsky’s. Arnold, appropriately then, focuses on Zukofsky’s work from among the Objectivist cohort, with a few comments on Oppen’s work – privileging Zukofsky’s prose explanation of his movement’s poetics above any of the others.

And while Arnold provides some exemplary readings of Zukofsky’s Blues pieces, these are short Imagistic poems clearly derived from Pound, and which are difficult to distinguish from the mainstream of second-generation modernism. It would be his far later and fundamentally different work, principally Catullus (1969), “A” 22 & 23 (1975) and 80 Flowers (1978) – works written when the Language writers were already beginning their publishing careers – that would provide useful models for Language writing.

Along with his unconventional tracing of the pre-history of Language writers Arnold’s grouping of Language writers themselves is challenging. Arnold approaches Michael Palmer, Susan Howe and Barrett Watten in three sensitively argued and thematically independent stand-alone essays at the close of this volume. Of these writers only Watten, co-founder and editor of This, Language writing’s first journal, its first number appearing in 1971, is unarguably a Language writer, but all three of the essays are useful and represent this volume’s most compelling criticism and, as Arnold admits, ‘one
of the primary motivations for [his] study is to qualify and extend the history of Language writing.' (113)

The thematic approaches that Arnold pursues in these final three chapters speak to a profound and characteristic ethical concern in American poetic avant-gardism. In 'Michael Palmer’s Poetics of Witness’ Arnold suggests that the ‘non-predatory reading’ Zukofsky argues for is retained by Palmer and put to work in a politically engaged urge towards testimony. In the next, related, essay, ‘Scorch and Scan: The Writing of Susan Howe,’ Howe is celebrated for her consideration of the importance of the visual to the lineage Arnold traces. Thus ‘it could be that Howe’s careful scanning of the scar marks of Puritanism have paved the way for Williams’s typological interpretation … of Surrealism as an “epidemic” that will return writing to the purity of the word.’ (137)

Arnold’s final chapter, “Just Rehashed Surrealism?” The Writing of Barrett Watten’ provides the study’s de facto conclusion and introduces his subject matter proper. Here Arnold uses Walter Benjamin extensively to assert a shared theoretical underpinning to surrealism and Language writing:

Crucial for my understanding of the Surreal-Objectivist nexus is Benjamin’s belief that Surrealist praxis could have a genuine materialist element. The image sphere recognizes both the integrity of the world of objects and the political charge of that world. Indeed, the dialectical parity of subject and object, as Benjamin conceives it, has a kind of premonitory force for the legacy of Objectivism. As we have seen, contemporary writers such as Bob Perelman and Michael Palmer have, in their own readings, sought to tease out rather than exile the subjective dimension of Objectivist poetics. Had their modernist precursors had access to Benjamin’s reading of Surrealism, they might have been more receptive to the objectification entailed by Surrealist practice. (144)

The imbrication of Objectivist verse and the objective here is perhaps over-egged, but the rest of this argument is revelatory. Arnold’s assertion of a surrealist aspect, ‘rehashed’ or otherwise, in Watten’s work and in ‘High’ Language writing more generally is persuasive and justifies the volume. The book is a valuable contribution to the understanding of American poetics and is indispensable to any readers attempting to formulate the historiography of influence in the American avant-garde.

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André Breton’s correspondence, embargoed until fifty years after his death, will be available for publication in just a few years time, 2016. If this possibility threatens substantially to renew our understanding of his place in the ideas and history of surrealism, here is a tantalizing first glimpse of this promise: the 61 letters, 31 postcards and two telegrams that make up his correspondence with his daughter Aube (who along with Breton’s widow Elisa remained free to dispose of the letters he addressed to them as they wished under the terms of his will).

From the outset, the book will invite some readers to readjust their perspectives. The study of surrealism has constructed many stock representations of Breton, and not always generous ones: you can choose from Breton the complex poet, Breton the ardent romantic, Breton the magnetizing leader, Breton the intransigent moralist … But Breton the father? Given, on the one hand, a current interest among scholars in representations of childhood within surrealism, and, on the other, that it remains fashionable for critics to conflate Breton’s contribution to the movement with the whole of Parisian (even global) surrealism, the better to isolate and critique the supposed orthodoxy of a ‘Bretonian surrealism’ – a move with at least a hint of Œdipal drama – this might be precisely the time for what at first sight looks like an unpromising assessment of Breton’s status as a father-figure.

Lettres à Aube, presenting in effect no more than a tiny fraction of Breton’s complete correspondence and precisely those highly personal letters that do not deal directly with the historical, political or theoretical moment of surrealism, might first perhaps be read within a pair of apparently conflicting contexts, represented by several other texts. For instance, Breton’s clear antipathy (shared by many of his friends) to the idea of family, and parenthood in particular, forcefully stated in the fourth of the surrealist debates on sexuality, 15 February 1928. Asked by Pierre Naville for his opinion of the idea of having children, Breton answers that ‘I am absolutely opposed to it. If it ever happened to me despite everything, I would make sure I never met the child. Public Welfare has its uses. The sad joke which began with my birth must end with my death.’ This was a view echoed by the rest of the session’s participants, and Breton conformed to the general surrealist position of finding the principle and perpetuation of the family – enslaved by bourgeois morality, but also redolent of the conflictual childhoods many surrealists had experienced – entirely repugnant. Yet already in 1928 Breton allows himself an escape clause: ‘Nevertheless, I reserve the right to change my mind. It seems to me possible that in a case of passionate love, where by definition all things are thoughtless, the woman’s opinion might prevail over mine.’

The second of this book’s contexts, highlighted since the opening paragraph of Breton’s first Manifesto, is the privileged place of childhood (some might argue, particularly the childhood of girls) for surrealism, and one can well imagine that like many other fathers-to-be Breton’s intransigent views would have been overturned by the intense and intimate relationship begun by the birth of his daughter in December.
1935. In the face of the breakup of Breton’s marriage to Jacqueline Lamba, and Aube’s shuttling to and fro between continents during much of the 1940s, from the evidence in this book and elsewhere, his ties to his daughter seem to have been close, indulgent and strongly protective (in short, yet somehow against the grain of expectations, hardly unusual). That this was an intimacy that Breton was prepared to set within a wider and deeper context, however, is spelled out in the beautiful closing text of L’Amour fou addressed to Aube, the letter to ‘Écusette de Noireuil’ that ends with the celebrated exhortation ‘I wish that you be madly loved’ – an emotion that on the basis of Lettres à Aube it could be tempting to try and extend to other forms of love than romantic.

As this book’s editor Jean-Michel Goutier suggests in a short but thoughtful postscript essay, the letters it contains witness the encounter between the external and internal realms, the private and the public that is also already implicated in this final section of Mad Love, addressed at the same time to a future Aube – the sixteen year-old of 1952 – as a personal message of devotion, and a public summation of surrealist exigency, driven by hope and necessity as the 1930s unraveled towards seemingly inevitable disaster, written for an open readership of 1937.

Spanning nearly thirty years, from letters and postcards to Aube as an infant (addressed to the ‘dear little fairy’) to those written to her and her husband, the poet Yves Elléouët, in the years before Breton’s death, the correspondence follows the rhythm of separations: Breton’s months traveling to Mexico via Cuba; his call-up on the outbreak of the Second World War; the painful distance from his daughter following the failure of the marriage, resolved when Aube moved back to Paris for good at the end of the 1940s; and finally the periods spent by Breton at his house in the Lot, at Saint-Cirq-Lapopie. These later letters emphasize just how much time Breton spent in this village home away from Paris, and not just during summer vacations; accounts of flora, fauna, pets, trips to the river to fish for agates, as well as of numerous visitors all point to a whole aspect of the poet’s daily life that would merit some of the scholarly attention paid to the world of 42, rue Fontaine. It was during one of these stays that Breton got caught up in the affair of the Cabrerets caves, in which he found himself prosecuted for allegedly having defaced its ‘prehistoric’ drawings (he considered them to be fake), documented in some detail here.

Recurring themes include allusions to Breton’s persistent poverty, the constant round of meetings, friendships and everyday responsibilities, and above all – during the period of Aube’s teenage and early adult years – his anxieties and cajoling over Aube’s success at school, by turns supportive and exasperated over her mixed academic fortunes, sprinkled with reminders of the necessity for gaining qualifications. None of this will surprise today’s parents, but this is not the Breton we’ve been used to. At least one published example of an exchange with a child – the ‘Lettre à une jeune fille d’Amérique’ of 1952 addressed to the 12 year-old Maguelonne Car in Washington, in which he cites Rousseau, Lewis Carroll and Rimbaud in a discussion of the intellectual formation of children, and guides her on a choice of artists (Miró and Matisse a good start; wait a few years for Picasso) – shows how Breton developed an interest in education that went beyond the straightforward critique or rejection of social norms more usually associated with surrealism. Other received wisdoms are also challenged: the man who
supposedly detests music welcomes Léo Ferré as a guest and raves over the records of Laura Betti, while the rejection of the notion of the family doesn’t prevent a recurrent feeling of responsibility towards Breton’s own father, with Aube frequently enjoined to keep in contact with her grandfather. The reader will notice that Breton pointedly avoids referring to himself as ‘papa’ or ‘père’ (the latter an appellation that might call to mind an uncomfortable mixture of priest and Ubu for many of his peers), but signs with an ‘André’ that suggests seeing his daughter as an equal at a time when this must have been unusual.

Assembled with care, the large format paperback (designed to the scale of a sheet of writing paper) often highlights the visual aspects of surrealist writing. Postcards are reproduced in facsimile recto and verso – one can imagine their sender to have chosen them with care; letters written on surrealist group headed notepaper, with its changing graphic devices, add their play of typography and image, while some of Breton’s missives, especially to the younger Aube, include collage elements that will no doubt enlarge debates over Breton’s visual practice. Where his literary manuscripts often show complex iterations, deletions and additions, the selected letters shown in facsimile here feel clear, free of hesitation or revision. It would be misleading to treat such letters on the same level as the literary works, but at the same time this is also Breton writing directly and from the heart. Moments of reflection on outside events are recorded, such as his dismay at the moon landing of 1959 (‘Nothing can change the fact that at this very moment these gentlemen have sullied one of the two great sources of light. … It is the whole of poetry that is offended.’ (127) Every now and then, even if it is in the context of circumstances, and above all of a father’s anxious wish for a daughter’s happiness, the overlay of the universal and the personal comes into sharpest relief, as when he counsels Aube in July 1956 (she has just failed an exam) that ‘one of the greatest philosophical principles, to which surrealists as much as Marxists, for instance, have rallied, is that freedom is necessity made actual (la nécessité réalisée). It really is true, believe me, that any other “freedom” is an illusion. Think about this in depth.’ (98, Breton’s emphasis)

One might wish overall for a more comprehensive set of annotations – the brief notes mostly add information on names cited in the letters, where it might be very useful to have a more expansive sense both of the facts and events they mention, and indeed of Aube’s biographical details, since this is first and foremost a book for and about her; but as a fragment of a much larger correspondence to come, this is already enough to set the mind racing.

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2 André Breton, La Clé des champs, Pauvert, Paris, 1979, 275-279.

The shiny dust jacket of the book, featuring a cadavre exquis – painted in 1929 with colourful gouache on black paper by André Breton and Louis Aragon – is a perfect embodiment of the Exquisite Corpse to which the anthology is dedicated. With its catchy, mainly orange and green tones, this vertical Exquisite Corpse mixes words and drawings, texts and images in such a way that exemplifies all the key aspects of the surrealist game. The word ‘ventre’ is written in the middle part of the figure, as if it were a caption for its belly. Two cherries embody the stomach and hence represent the process of eating. Yet, the consumption suggested here also alludes to the original Exquisite Corpse of 1925 that famously yielded the phrase from which the game took its name: ‘le cadavre exquis boira le vin nouveau’ (‘the exquisite corpse will drink the young wine’). The moon painted in white at the top of the page is full rather than new, and the bright colours on the black background suppose that the fluorescent ‘body’ of the Corpse is devouring the night. The round moon forming the middle letter of the possessive ‘nos’ – as if the final X of the Latin nocturnal ‘nox, noctis’ had slipped away, transforming itself in the doubling of the cherries. At the same time, the inscription of the plural possessive hints at the collaborative aspect of the game. Creation is the result of a surrealist group activity which subverts customs and reveals ‘the new’ via an aesthetic process of consumption. In the case of this anthology, the cover of the books is hence itself a great illustration of what exquisite corpses encapsulate.

The brainchild of a panel on ‘The Revival of the Exquisite Corpse’ for the Rethinking the Avant-garde conference held at Notre Dame University in April 2000, The Exquisite Corpse anthology is collaborative at its very roots. Mixing genres, disciplines, and approaches, and addressing both the visual and the
audible, it is no wonder that Paul D. Miller (aka DJ Spooky) has given an exhilarating forward to the volume. Just like the cadavre exquis breaks down preconceived concepts by, paradoxically, following rules and being strictly structured, the heterogeneous essays in the anthology are carefully organised into sections. Scattered with a few black and white illustrations and endowed with a solid bibliography and index, the book is divided into four parts, and includes a good introduction which clearly resituates the famous surrealist parlour game. Kochhar-Lindgren, Schneidermann and Denlinger are acutely aware that ‘[t]he composite figure … is both a marker of the historical avant-garde and an epistemological apparatus that lives beyond its initial historical moment.’ (xix)

Analogous to an Exquisite Corpse itself, the anthology manages to be a coherent whole even though it presents a wide range of approaches, tones and theories. As a result, the book is both academic and playful: the product of an extended postmodern parlour game between scholars, academics, curators and artists. In addressing ‘The Ludic,’ Part One enables a return to the history of the concepts of chance and play at stake in the surrealist parlour game. Going beyond surrealism and entitled ‘Artistic Collectivity and Literary Creation,’ the second part focuses on the collaborative act of ‘folding’ that the game of cadavre exquis requires. In the third part, ‘Academia,’ two essays illustrate the pedagogic significance of the Exquisite Corpse and the fourth and final part, ‘Recomposing the Body,’ considers the performative power of modern and postmodern Exquisite Corpses. While it should not be forgotten that many concepts reverberate and recur throughout the book, this review will follow, in a linear way, the clear and well thought outline chosen by the three editors.

Part One

In her essay ‘From One Exquisite Corpse (in)to Another: Influences and Transformations from Early to Late Surrealist Games,’ Anne M. Kern traces the importance of Freud’s view of vision and cognition to surrealist ludic practice. She provides a sophisticated analysis of a range of Exquisite Corpses drawn by surrealists as well as considering the accounts of the poetic game of verbal and visual association called ‘The One in the Other,’ published in 1954. She demonstrates that the collective aspect of these games enabled surrealists to produce images not available to single individual minds:1 ‘A playful attitude loosens up the gears, as it were, and the collective intensity and sense of the presence within the group allows for the marvelous to be conjured up, not unlike certain practices of divination.’ (7)

In ‘This is Not a Drawing,’ Susan Laxton comes back to the materiality of the Exquisite Corpse and more precisely to its montage and folds: ‘[t]he folds that crease the figure and the field of the cadavre exquis indicate a play of productive and destructive processes, and the ludic term can be used literally here because the fold is exactly the manipulation through which chance enters this particular instance of drawing.’ (35) This essay’s focus on folding offers the reader a powerful insight into the aesthetic playfulness of Exquisite Corpses.
Ken Friedman’s ‘Events and the Exquisite Corpse’ shows that surrealists and Fluxus artists shared parlor games, had a common ancestor in collage, as well as a fascination with chance operations. Yet, by reviewing the history of performance and the tradition of the event, Friedman reasserts distinctions between the surrealist Exquisite Corpse and the more recent Fluxus practice. According to Friedman, Exquisite Corpse are to be seen as ‘Neo-baroque’ forms which ‘involve multiple streams of complex information, often working at crosscurrents to build dense layers of competing and conflating experience.’ (72) While these creations are ‘unique’ in time and connected to the precise group of people who undertook them, events ‘are an intermedia form, an open structure allowing artists and composers to generate work that anyone may realize.’ (72) Because events can be reinterpreted by anyone (the structure of the event-score allows co-creations), this essay also provides a quite charming, lengthy, and hands-on taxonomy of ‘ways to select, realize, and present events.’ (56) Which is to say, that Fluxus is still alive.

Oliver Harris’s essay ‘Cutting Up the Corpse,’ articulates the ways in which the cut-ups of William S. Burroughs and Brion Gysin might testify to a legacy of surrealist parlor games. Comparing Simone Collinet’s account of André Breton’s first discovery of the Exquisite Corpse with Gysin’s own narrative of the first Cut-Ups, Harris reveals how such discoveries necessarily carry with them an obsessive repetition: ‘The original experiences inaugurated a dialectical relationship between surprise, novelty and repetition. The game or method is found “hysterically meaningful,” comes to fascinate the practitioner, and is taken up obsessively, like a drug.’ (93)

**Part Two**

Ingrid Schaffner’s contribution functions as a metaphor of the Exquisite Corpse process. Not only does it revive a previous essay presented alongside reproductions of drawings from her 1993 exhibition of six hundred Corpses at the Drawing Center, but it also features a text on ‘Collage’ by Elizabeth Finch which was included in the exhibition catalogue.² In other words, ‘The Corpse Encore / Apres [sic] Exquis’ can be seen as a collage of images and writings by two different authors while still readable as a whole. Schaffner’s essay expertly provides an overview of what Exquisite Corpses meant for surrealists. According to Finch – who focuses on the question of photography and the grotesque – the Exquisite Corpse enables a feminine subversion of social customs: ‘[c]ollective and complicated, as opposed to singular and reductive, the cadavre exquis transgresses the traditionally masculine construct of modernism.’ (125)

Ray Ellenwood’s ‘The Exquisite Corpse is Alive and Well and Living in Montréal’ offers a few chosen reproductions of enthralling cadavres exquis produced between 1982 and 2004 by Montréal artists. Ellenwood reasserts the influence of post World War II surrealism on the Quebecois Automatist group...
and shows that while their 1948 ‘Refus Global’ manifesto deplored surrealist ‘literariness,’ the artists still enjoyed experimenting with typically surrealist forms ‘such as photomontage, collage, decalcomania, and especially automatic writing and drawing.’ (129) Because of its figurative nature, Exquisite Corpse was not played by Automatists, but Ellenwood tackles the modern revival of similarly ludic and collaborative creations in Montréal. For example, Janine Carreau, Annick Gauvreau, Pierre Gauvreau, Luc Guerard and Alexandre Boisseau have managed to renew Exquisite Corpse techniques by translating them into three dimensions, and redrawing their relationship to space and time. The artists do not ‘play’ together simultaneously but work independently and a-synchronously on separate kaleidoscope like panels which are later assembled at the very end of the creative process. Ellenwood argues that the revitalization of the process has made it possible for the Exquisite Corpse to continue to function, in 2009, as a stimulus for artistic collaboration.

In his essay ‘An Anatomy of Alfred Chester’s Exquisite Corpse,’ Hibbard addresses the genesis of Chester’s novel Exquisite Corpse (1967) and establishes that gaming is at the core of its creation. Acknowledging that surrealist aesthetic and ludic practices were ‘response[s] to a variety of specific biographical and historical conditions as well as literary influences’, he suggests that Chester’s captivating postmodern novel is informed by a similar context, deriving from his stay in France in the fifties and his interest in French literature, Jean Genet’s writing in particular. (148) Hibbard shows that ultimately Chester’s writing was a way to ‘crawl … back into that space of childhood’ praised by surrealists, and as a result, his novel establishes an interesting bridge between surrealism and postmodernism. (153)

“Together in their dis-harmony”: Internet Collaboration and Le Cadavre Exquis relates Michael Joyce’s account of the way Exquisite Corpses still enable ludic collaboration between artists in the age of the Internet. Coming back to ‘Lautréamont’s poetry of many not one’ as an example of surrealist collaborative process, Joyce articulates the primacy of autopoesis over semiosis in the genesis of surrealist metaphor. (167) This essay wittily dissects several collaborations between the writer and other artists (such as Anita Pantin, Alexandra Grantr, Sanja Milutinović Bojanic, Linda Walker and Zeljko Markov) and succeeds at making the multimedia (yet simple) richness of the Corpse tangible.

Part Three

In ‘Academia’s Exquisite Corpse: An Ethnography of the Application Process,’ Craig Saper dissects Jesse Reklaw’s 2006 ‘applicant’ project, where photographs of PhD applicants are paired and captioned with samples from the letters which recommended them. Saper brilliantly articulates the ways in which Roland Barthes’s thorough analysis of the punctum can help us understand what happens when we look at found captions with found photos: ‘School teaches us to see through naturalization; the punctum process, a captioning strategy, punctures the supposed absence of myth.’ (198). The power of the
surrealist game lies in its ability to expose ‘the process without adding to the photos and captions,’ and it reveals ‘the locus of a nightmare: intimate and bureaucratic.’ (199)

 Appropriately, on the other side of the admission process, David Schneiderman and Tom Denlinger relate an online collaboration between students from six liberal art colleges. This collaborative project engages with questions of autonomy and authority as well as aesthetic value, since students are asked to create a media product which will be interpreted by anonymous peers from other campuses. Entitled ‘Dead Men Don’t Wear Pixels: The Online Exquisite Corpse and Process-based Institutional Critique,’ the essay mixes form with content, since its two authors wrote it collaboratively, following a constraint method very close to the Exquisite Corpse.

Part Four
Kimberly Jannarone’s ‘Exquisite Theater’ shows that the surrealists’ refusal of the theater can be seen in a new light when the concept of Exquisite Corpse is carefully analyzed. Jannarone argues that the game represents ‘a framework that invites participation from varied sources’ and hence ‘can be seen as the premise for a theatrical event.’ (225) This analogy with the theatre challenges the assumption that Exquisite Corpses eschew individualism, since the preparation of a theater play requires a collaboration of individualisms, which are combined into a final common stage-product. Addressing Jean Cocteau and Antonin Artaud’s work in the theatre, Jannarone shows that a monstrous ‘collective individuality’ was already at play in the preparation of Cocteau’s 1917 *Parade*, while Artaud’s 1927 *Ventre Brûlé* manifested *le merveilleux* in the spirit of the Exquisite Corpse on stage: ‘Artaud … let the actors develop their contribution as surrealist artists playing the Exquisite Corpse might.’ (235)

‘Howling: The Exquisite Corpse, Butoh, and the Disarticulation of Trauma,’ by Kanta Kocchar-Lindgren, focuses on Butoh, a dance first performed in 1959 as a traumatic reaction to the destructions of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Considering the scream as well as the fragmentations of a grotesque body, Kocchar-Lindgren shows that the folds in surrealist Exquisite Corpse epitomize howling in a manner similar to the Butoh performance: ‘Butoh, like the Exquisite Corpse, emerged out of historical trauma, in which both meaning and the concept of body as a unified whole became irrevocably shattered.’ (250-1)

In ‘“You Make Such an Exquisite Corpse”: Surrealist Collaboration and the Transcendence of Gender in *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*’ – the last article in the anthology – Don Dingledine suggests that invoking the Exquisite Corpse enables the creation of an identity beyond gender boundaries. Dingledine argues that Hedwig, the lead singer from the 1998 off-Broadway hit *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (as well as the 2001 rock musical by John Cameron Mitchell and Stephen Trask) seeks to escape the binaries of identity by becoming an Exquisite Corpse. In the musical’s climactic song, entitled ‘Exquisite Corpse,’ Hedwig claims the state of Exquisite Corpse and dismisses the drag elements of her identity by ‘ripping off her dress,
smashing her fake breasts, and tossing aside her signature blonde wig.’ (265) There, Hedwig appears as beyond Breton's ideal ‘primordial androgyne’ because genders are not so much blended as transcended. As a matter of fact, ‘[r]eassembled as an Exquisite Corpse, Hedwig’s body serves as a model for rebuilding communities fractured by systems of thoughts that divide rather than connect individuals.’ (273) Dingledine’s article is both a precise analysis of the musical – focusing on the lyrics, music and key moments – and a clever return to the aesthetics of collage and Exquisites Corpses, as Jacqueline Chénieux-Gendron and Mary Ann Caws have described them.5

No publication has, to date, addressed the diversity of surrealist cadavres exquis and, in view of this fact, this anthology is remarkable.6 An effective contribution towards tracing both the histories and legacies of the Exquisite Corpse, this book also encourages follow-ups and invites followers in a pleasing algorithm of refolding. But maybe, the true poetic strength of these surrealist creations is still to be found in their fleeting and uncatchable quality. As Ingrid Schaffner has astutely remarked: ‘these works exist as uninterpreted records, novel apparitions of point sublime, that spot on the distant horizon where everything – rational and irrational, conscious and unconscious, abstract and concrete – converges.’ (108-9) Just as Breton yearned for such a point sublime but was aware that this could not be taken for granted, the Exquisite Corpse, always on the verge of unfolding its mysteries and forms, carries with it an everlasting source of uncanny, marvelous encounters. No dice need be thrown for chance to be always at stake; and in the end, at the very momentum of revelation, the sparkle triumphs.

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2 Elizabeth Finch, untitled contribution to The Return of The Cadavre Exquis, The Drawing Center, New York, 1994. This catalogue is the outcome of the exhibition of cadavre exquis which took place from 6 November to 18 December 1993 at the Drawing Center in New York. It presented 600 collaborative drawings created over a period of two years by contemporary artists, as well as a choice of surrealist Exquisite Corpses. (http://www.drawingcenter.org/exh_past.cfm?exh=204)

3 Signed by sixteen Quebecois artists often self-declared Automatists, ‘Le Refus Global’ (or ‘Total Refusal) is a manifesto published on 9 August 1948 in Montreal, rejecting both establishment and religion. (Reprinted in Paul-Emile Borduas, Refus Global; Projections Libérantes, Parti pris, Montréal, 23-32 and also available online http://www.dantaylor.com/pages/frenchrefusglobal.html)


As Anne M. Kern has pointed out ‘no exhaustive compilation of archived and/or published Surrealist games has been made. Emmanuel Garrigues edited and annotated an indispensable volume of Surrealist games in French for the *Archives du surréalisme* series (published by the NRF imprint of Gallimard) in 1995, but it does not contain any drawn Corpses. In 2004, Editions Jean Michel Place published a new account of Surrealist games by Georges Sebbag. The most widely known ECS [aka Exquisites Corpses] are those published in the various Surrealist journals, including RS [aka *La Révolution Surréaliste*], *Variétés* (a Belgian journal), and *Surréalisme au service de la révolution*. The most insightful book-length study on Surrealist ECS in English is certainly Elza Adamowicz’s *Surrealist Collage in Text and Image: Dissecting the Exquisite Corpse, 1998,* Anne M. Kern, ‘From One Exquisite Corpse (in)to Another: Influences and Transformations from Early to Late Surrealist Games,’ note 31, 26.

Students of Greek surrealism have long argued that it is no mere parochial offshoot of the international movement. Nor is it simply a collection of important, great and not-so-great writers, who may be interesting all the same. Surrealism in Greece in the 1930s injected a large dose of Dionysian energy into the stern, neo-classical intellectual climate of the day. In the words of Nanos Valaoritis, one of those included in the anthology and, alas, the last surviving member of that pioneering group after the passing of Hector Kaknavatos (also included) earlier this year:  ’The Dionysian element invaded all areas: existential, aesthetic, philosophical, linguistic, dramatic.’

Through the back door opened by surrealism, the Other became accessible again to Greek intellectuals and writers, who until then were engaged in reverential fantasies of ancient glories, producing formal structures that excluded the fantastic and the irrational. Cracks in that intellectual armour had already begun to appear in the nineteenth century in the work of obscure authors, such as the anarchist Cephalonian poet Micelles Avlihos, and even central figures, such as the national poet Dionysios Solomos and the prose writer Emmanouel Roidis, but surrealism finally blasted these cracks open. This anthology captures that explosive moment and its reverberations, and in so doing puts forward an important claim not only about the impact of surrealism on the hotly contested and notoriously politicised conceptualisations of ‘Greekness’ in the interwar years (and beyond), but also, and perhaps more significantly for the Anglophone reader, about the remit of the French-inflected surrealist enterprise itself.

As Nikos Stabakis argues in his introduction, with ‘the use of “indigenous” themes … by Greek surrealism’s foremost figures … a crucial inversion takes place: to the earlier French surrealists’ repudiation of the classical heritage, Greek surrealism answers by promoting an alternative, expansive, and indeed subversive interpretation of this very heritage’ (1). In Odysseus Elytis’s work, for example, history is intertwined with place to create a new mythopoetics, as in the seminal ‘Santorini,’ where the fusion of the two leads to a new cosmogony, or in ‘Land of Viotia,’ where ancient drama is present (neither poem is included in Stabakis’s selection). Nikos Engonopoulos sees his ancestors from the same angle but he adds an element of irony and subversion. He does not so much mix the ancient with the eternal ‘topos’ but with the new times. The old heroes are often present in his poems, but apart from performing their heroic deeds they are also prone to commenting on the events of the century in a rather absurdist way. Andreas Embirikos also tends to mix the old and the new; in collections such as *Writings or Personal Mythology*, for instance, from which Stabakis includes ‘Neoptolemus/A King of Greeks,’ heroes of distant times reappear but their travails are thoroughly modern.
The editor of this anthology is to be commended for attempting what was clearly a monumental task and a labour of love in equal measure. *Surrealism in Greece* seeks to introduce to the English-speaking world this significant period in Greek literature which Stabakis (echoing Valaoritis) argues has permeated every sinew of the public and literary life of the country. At the same time, he is careful to observe that the ‘impressively wide influence surrealist imagery has exerted on mainstream Greek poetry’ (and beyond, we would add) is ‘alarmingly reminiscent of the “Chinese Whispers” game, whereby the original explosion is too often evoked and eventually replaced by its tiny echo’ (2). It is all the more surprising, then, that Stabakis himself falls victim to the same misapprehensions he so adeptly identifies by including in his selection writers whose qualifications for fitting the surrealist rubric are the result of stretching the meaning of surrealism by Procrustean proportions.

The editor, *de facto*, opts for a rather wide definition of surrealism, evident from the incorporation of names such E. Ch. Gonatas, but also Elytis, who wrote on the periphery of surrealism and never considered themselves surrealists as such. True, they may have adopted surrealist techniques in their writings but they did not make the conscious decision to belong. This wide choice is not necessarily a bad thing but Stabakis does not explain the criteria used for inclusion or exclusion in the anthology, but rather simply implies them by his choices. Following this apparent logic, one notable omission is that of Yorgos Licos, a poet clearly more closely connected to surrealism than, say, Eva Mylona, included here, ever was. Another significant omission is that of the prose writer and poet Melpo Axioti, whose pre-war works, the novel *Difficult Nights* (1938), the novella *Shall We Dance, Maria?* (1940) and the book-length poem *Coincidence* (1940), were very much in the surrealist mould. And while the 1960s ‘Pali’ group is included as a collective, Nicos Stangos, an important member, is not. The anthology, indeed, employs a very relaxed definition of surrealism that ends up including in the movement some very disparate voices such as the austere modernist Alexandros Skinas or the intellectual playboys of the 1960s, Yiorgos V. Makris and Dimitris Poulisakos.

Of the major figures who have not been extensively translated before, the anthology offers substantial extracts from their work. Nikos Engonopoulos, for example, commands some fifty pages, Andreas Embirikos about forty, while Nicolas Calas whose poetry, unlike his theoretical work in French and English, was written and published almost entirely in Greek, takes up almost thirty. Calas, who first appeared as a revolutionary leftist poet before converting to surrealism, is represented here by his later, more traditional surrealist poems rather than his free modernist and Kavafy-esque earlier work, a sound editorial choice.

That said, it is not as clear why Stabakis did not use the translations of Calas’s French poems of the late 1930s by William Carlos Williams, which were attempted by the American poet in collaboration with Calas as an exercise in cultural and formal translation, and are now included in the second volume of Williams’s *Collected Poems.* An opportunity to highlight the dialogical and international spirit (and letter) of the surrealist enterprise, wherever it may have flourished, was missed with this
decision, though it should be added that Stabakis’s translations are invariably highly accomplished. This is particularly the case with the renditions of Elytis’s writing, represented here by extracts from *Cards on the Table* (1936-1974) and *Orientations* (1940), the latter already made available in English by, among others, the noted translators of modern Greek poetry, Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard. Opting for his own version over what has heretofore been considered the ‘standard’ translation of the Nobel prize-winning poet’s work has paid dividends, offering a fresh and, to our mind, possibly superior alternative to the English-speaking reader.

Similarly well translated here is the work of Nanos Valaoritis, tireless energizer and bridging figure between the first and second generations of Greek surrealism, and still going strong. Valaoritis’s richly allusive, effervescent and expansive writing is well represented by Stabakis’s choices, which include extracts from his critical essays on surrealism and on Valaoritis’s friend and surrealist *extraordinaire* Andreas Embirikos. Valaoritis writes with the authority and verve of the life-long practitioner but also from the perspective of a genuine internationalism forged through immersion in creative and pedagogical pursuits in three languages and four cultures – Greek, French and Anglo-American. He is in that sense a pivotal contributor to this volume, a fact reflected in Stabakis’s reliance on Valaoritis for pithy summaries or phrases in many an economical introduction to the writers anthologised here. The entry for Mando Aravantinou, for instance, is pretty much left to speak for itself, with barely a paragraph by way of introduction to short extracts from a work of rare intelligence and rigour, her *Scripts* (A, B, C, D, E) (1962-1974).³ Stabakis does not include the full publication history of Aravantinou’s writing in his Bibliography, nor does he mention her critical work, most notably as a James Joyce scholar, which clearly speaks to, if not underpins, her unique experiment in linguistic consciousness.⁴

These are minor quibbles, however; as with any anthology, there are omissions and oversights or indeed opinions with which one would want constructively to take issue. But this is more than a simple academic exercise. *Surrealism in Greece* seeks to expose to a new readership writers, visions, projects, friendships, cultural and political interventions that the editor rightly believes deserve a wider audience. He has to be commended for delivering this ambitious project of selecting and translating writings in the peripheral Greek language into the dominant English with accuracy and generosity, thus enabling, one hopes, a more inclusive approach to the lives and legacies of surrealism worldwide.

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3 These were reissued in a single volume as Grafes, A-E (Scripts, A-E), Marathias, Athens, 1998.

4 See, for instance, her meticulously researched The Greek of James Joyce [Ta Ellinika tou James Joyce], Hermes, Athens, 1977.
Leonora Carrington’s *Three Women around the Table* (1951) depicts a scenario at once fabulous and mundane as three ‘women,’ or human/animal hybrids, seated around a kitchen table, channel energy from the black sun amid an array of foreboding crows. The canvas provides an apt illustration for the central theme of the *Surreal Friends* exhibition; a presentation of the work of three talented surrealist artists, whose intense friendship, facilitated by their refuge in Mexico City, inspired works which develop Bretonian doctrine by investigating alchemy, mysticism and witchcraft combined with the quotidian female experience. The exhibition comprises a substantial number of canvases by the English painter, Leonora Carrington, forming the largest body of her work to be shown in the UK in almost twenty years. Carrington’s pieces are accompanied by those of her close friends, the Spanish painter Remedios Varo and the Hungarian photographer Kati Horna. All three artists were involved with the surrealist movement in Paris, before finding themselves cast as refugees in the unfolding turmoil of the Second World War. *Surreal Friends*, timed to coincide with the two-hundredth anniversary of Mexican independence from Spain, highlights the role of the country which opened its borders to exiled intellectuals in 1939, thus ensuring the safety of the ‘surreal friends’ and galvanising the artistic production of all those who sought refuge there.

Building on the gamut of literature dedicated to highlighting the role of female artists in the surrealist movement which has emerged since Whitney Chadwick’s groundbreaking study, for example, that of Caws, Kuenzli and Raaberg, *Surreal Friends* sheds further light on the oeuvre of female surrealist artists by considering their work through the lens of friendship in exile.¹ In her study of the life and work of Remedios Varo, Janet Kaplan presents a chronological overview of the artist’s work, narrating the extraordinary tale of her life as a journey which culminated in the inner peace Varo eventually found in Mexico City.² *Surreal Friends* presents the journeys of three women, whose paths crossed due to an unexpected twist of fate, resulting in a creative collaboration that Teresa Arcq deems ‘unique in the history of art.’³

The exhibition is located on the first floor of Pallant House Gallery, nearby the stately home of collector Edward James. The space is accessed via a staircase lined with Horna prints, each providing a visual representation of the strong bond that existed between the three women. Such an
entrance creates a first impression of privileged access to what feels like a family album. As Stefan van Raay, *Surreal Friends* co-curator, notes in the accompanying literature: ‘As refugees in a new country, they created a surrogate family between themselves,’ adding, ‘Horna provides us with the visual proof of the subject … with snapshots of the ‘surreal family;’ photographs of social milestones and the staged scenes.’\(^4\) The inclusion of the prints on the stairway is perhaps intended to reinforce the significance of this bond as the decision was taken to display the work of each artist individually. When questioned about this curatorial strategy, van Raay and co-curator Joanna Moorhead responded that they believed that each body of work deserved to be considered independently, adding that the works were presented together in the accompanying literature.\(^5\) Although this strategy may have resulted in a lack of emphasis on the mutual influence in the works displayed, particularly between Carrington and Varo, the decision certainly benefited Horna, the lesser-known of the three. Indeed the accompanying literature interrogates the artists’ reciprocal influence and collaboration, including essays interspersed with work by all three artists.

Sprawling across three rooms, Carrington’s paintings are displayed in chronological order, in a manner reminiscent of Kaplan’s theme of the journey. Van Raay notes that the main difference between Carrington and Varo is that ‘Carrington’s work is about tone and colour and Varo’s is about line and form.’\(^6\) A collection of this size effectively shows the way in which Carrington’s palette has changed and developed throughout different periods of her life, shifting in tone from murky grey hues to brilliant reds and vibrant neon, varying according to era or subject matter. The first pieces on display set the tone of worry and mental strain that epitomised the Second World War for the young artist. The garish and unsettling *Down Below* (1940-1942) depicts Carrington’s vision of the asylum in Santander where she was confined for a time, providing a vision of a world turned upside down, populated by nightmarish characters. The painting is accompanied by the paper and ink drawings, *Map of Down Below* (c.1943) and *Brothers and Sisters* (1942). The inclusion of the drawings helped contextualize her early work, providing links both to her writing (a lifelong endeavour) and her involvement with the surrealist movement. The map, for example, was originally published, alongside a brief account of her period in the asylum, in the surrealist magazine *VVV*. These early pieces include the striking *Green Tea (La Dame Ovale;* 1942), which continues to explore issues central to her most famous painting, *Self Portrait (Inn of the Dawn Horse;* 1936-1937). Rendered in a bright palette of blues and greens which characterises this period, the later piece features a mummified figure with a headdress in the form of a Venus Flytrap, accompanied by a white horse and an aggressive black creature, evoking a threatening female sexuality and the constraints of the bourgeoisie – themes legible in the earlier self-portrait.

A tonal shift is noted in pieces such as *Tuesday* (1946), *The Giantess* (1950) and *The Elements* (1946), created with earthy tones and minute detail reminiscent of Hieronymus Bosch. Such works painted in Mexico City during Carrington’s period of early motherhood are frequently set in the domestic sphere, often including a group of three women as in *The House Opposite* (1945), *The Old Maids* (1947) and the later *Grandmother Moorhead’s Aromatic Kitchen* (1975). As Moorhead notes,
‘Domesticity and motherhood, which sometimes prove the shackles to a woman’s creativity, seemed instead to liberate the potential of the Surreal Friends.’ The continuing re-emergence of alchemical symbols in a domestic setting reveals the link that Carrington and Varo saw between painting, cooking and alchemy, a notion crystallised in Carrington’s use of egg tempera, as demonstrated in the dazzling reds of *Bird Pong* (1949). The only overt reference to Mexico in the body of work is provided by *The Magical World of the Maya* (1963), a piece which radiates colour over a Mexican landscape replete with Boschian miniatures and Mayan symbols, effectively demonstrating the depth of the artist’s research into her subject matter. Striking blacks are juxtaposed with faded yellows in the final works such as *Night of the Eighth July* (1987) and *Cabbage* (1987), which, with the vibrancy of prehistoric art, hang alongside the earthier yellow ochre of *The Magdalens* (1986) and *Kron Flower* (1987). The latter pair, like her 1974 novel, *The Hearing Trumpet*, provides a rare insight into old age from the female perspective with the cracks of the aging pavements echoed in the tired faces of the old women gathered there.

The Remedios Varo collection, although not as exhaustive as that of her *alma gemela* (soul mate), provides yet another unique opportunity to view works which are rarely seen outside of Mexico. Like Carrington, her earlier paintings touch upon themes such as sexuality and the constraints forced upon women by bourgeois society. *The Souls of the Mountains* (1938) is an oneiric vision of phallic protrusions housing self-portrait figures, constructed with a sombre palette and hints of fumage. In *Hibernation* (1942), a similar nocturnal landscape is occupied by crumbling turrets that display the technical training instilled in Varo by her engineer father. The image of constraint, captured in a woman bound by vines and encased in a translucent vessel, is highly reminiscent of Carrington’s mummified *Dame*. Later works begin to touch upon the esoteric ideas that would most interest Varo during her time in Mexico. *The Hermit* (1955) effectively demonstrates the meeting of surrealism and the esoteric, which would characterise her later work, combining decalcomania, (a technique initially introduced to the surrealists by Varo’s good friend, Óscar Domínguez) with the hermetic imagery that gives the hermit’s face, in mother-of-pearl, a symbolic shimmer. The stand-out piece in the first room is certainly *Harmony* (1956), a large and intricate painting bursting with detail, where an androgynous figure is depicted placing objects on a magical stave, in an effort to find the invisible thread which unites all things, while a mystical figure, revealed by labial folds in the wall, looks on. The combination of exquisite detail and luminous energy makes *Harmony* an excellent choice to introduce Varo to a new audience, as it displays the range of her skill and imagination.

Another highlight of the Varo collection is *The Creation of the Birds* (1957), a painting which provides an insight into the sophistication of her artistic imagination as an owl/human hybrid distils colours from the stars through an alembic, which together with light refracted from a microcosmic star is used to give life to birds. This painting shows the meticulous nature of Varo’s craft, as the owl’s feathers are painted with minute brushstrokes, possibly with a single-haired brush. The body of work touches upon some of the themes that were important in Varo’s craft, such as the inner quest in *Encounter* (1959).
and even includes one of her more tongue-in-cheek paintings, combining surrealist techniques and black humour, Au Bonheur des Dames (1956).

The final room of the exhibition challenges expectations as the splashes of colour and mystical imagery are replaced by a series of monochrome prints. What is most striking about the photographs by Hungarian Kati Horna is their diverse range of techniques and subject matter; from playful portraits, such as Those Without Guilt (1934) and Pedro Friedeberg Disguised as a Zebra (1968), surrealist compositions like Ode to Necrophilia (1962), to serious frontline photojournalism like First Artillery Line on Monte Aragón (1937) and photomontage such as The Aragon Front (1938). It may seem an unusual decision to exhibit the work of a photographer alongside two painters in this manner. Yet Horna's early works on the frontlines of the Spanish Civil War capture the emotional upheaval the conflict caused for artists like Varo and Carrington. The selection of prints from the Fleamarkets of Paris series recreates the Bretonian playground to which all three had grown used in Paris in the 1930s, while the inclusion of images such as Sugar Skulls (1963) references their new cultural surroundings in Mexico City, deemed by Breton surrealist par excellence. On one level, the inclusion of Horna in the show serves to provide 'proof' of the lives that the three led. However, by displaying works such as Artificial Paradise (1960) – an unsettling image reminiscent of Sylvia Plath's Bell Jar – and others playing with masks and inanimate objects, such as Remedios Varo in a Mask by Leonora Carrington (1957), Doll (1933) and La Muñeca (1950s), this exhibition spotlights a skill akin to that of contemporaries like Lola and Manuel Álvarez Bravo.

The geographical scope of the exhibition is mirrored in the range of techniques and materials it encompasses, from basic pen and ink to semi-precious materials such as gold leaf and mother-of-pearl. The inclusion of stage sets and masks provides an insight into the other activities in which the artists were involved, but perhaps more emphasis could have been placed on the collaborative texts produced by Varo and Carrington, especially given the publication this year of a collaborative theatre script which is included in a volume of texts by Varo. Another relatively underdeveloped area, particularly given the emphasis on surrealism, is the artists' investigations into sexuality, a subject refreshingly addressed in Horna's Ode to Necrophilia. The work shows a curious juxtaposition of animate and inanimate as a mask accompanies a semi-nude female in an unmade bed.

One of the many successes of Surreal Friends is its interrogation of the female experience in relation to space. Thus, Arcq notes that Varo and Carrington’s ‘paintings often feature fantastic architectures where interior and exterior spaces merge.’ Carrington’s The House Opposite (1945), for example, questions the rigidity of the domestic sphere, allowing its protagonists to cross borders and penetrate liminal thresholds, challenging ideas presented in previous exhibitions such as Subversive Spaces: Surrealism and Contemporary Art. Lamentably, the selection of Varo’s canvases provides more of an overview than a study of her work, as the notion of an interior journey or quest of self-discovery is hinted at but not explored fully. However the inclusion of key pieces will hopefully act as an introduction to her world for a new audience. The great success of the exhibition lies in bringing to
light the intriguing prints of Kati Horna, a photographer with great sensitivity and an eye for the uncanny, who deserves her place among the creative talents of the ‘surreal friends.’

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5 Joanna Moorhead and Stefan van Raay answered questions during sessions held at the exhibition opening in Pallant House Gallery on 19 June 2010.


14 Subversive Spaces, the Whitworth Art Gallery, University of Manchester, 29 September - 13 December 2009.
The Barbican Art Gallery’s summer show The Surreal House continued their recent focus on modern architecture and the cross-pollination of ideas and disciplines. Looking to explore the various roles of architecture within and around surrealist practices, the collection of chosen objects reflected a particular curatorial style characterised by multi-media, trans-historical juxtapositions. The usually expansive, brutalist aesthetic of the Gallery’s ground level exhibition space was given a significant make-over with the installation of a bespoke ‘surreal house,’ designed by architect firm Carmody Groarke, producing a series of dimly-lit rooms each with their own thematic title. Such a choice enforced a particular vision of what the surreal house might be: confined, claustrophobic and fragmented, an approach rooted in André Breton’s interpretations of Freud, both of whom asserted an authoritative command over the exhibition. Chief curator Jane Alison declares in the opening pages of the catalogue:

A vessel for … dreams, fears and desires, The Surreal House is everything that the functional house of the twentieth- and twenty-first-century is not. This extraordinary dwelling is home to the elusive quality André Breton named the ‘marvellous.’ In search of it, the surrealists brushed aside convention and championed the playfulness of childhood, erotic love, popular culture and the art of the psychologically unstable.

The purpose of the marvellous here is to challenge the perceived stability of functional, modernist architecture, where it is mobilised in ‘the “negation” of the real, or at least of its philosophical equation with the rational.’

Such a task was principally undertaken from two directions, the inside and the outside. Moving through Carmody Groake’s structure on the lower level, the visitor was presented with works that addressed issues of the subversive home and its associated themes of claustrophobic domesticity and the uncanny. Moving to the Barbican’s upper level balconies enabled the visitor to climb out of the house and look down upon it, so to consider it from the outside. Up here, the modernist identity of the Barbican was left unmasked and themes of building, the built and its subsequent ruin took over. Although perhaps a somewhat contrived approach to the issues at hand, the decision to sculpt space in such a way produced some surprisingly engaging effects. For example, lyricism could be found in the upstairs enclave entitled ‘A Home for Birds,’ in which Joseph Cornell’s aviary-themed boxes and Man Ray’s Ostrich Egg occupied the figurative rooftop of the surreal house below.

If the themes and treatment of the subject matter invoke a sense of déjà vu, it is because of the possible comparisons between The Surreal House and the Whitworth Art Gallery’s 2009 show Subversive Spaces: Surrealism and Contemporary Art. In the latter, the exhibition was similarly split between surrealist attitudes to inside and outside spaces, resulting in the domestic-themed section...
‘Psychic Interiors’ and the urban-focused ‘Wandering the City,’ both of which ‘explore[d] the Surrealist preoccupations with blurring the boundaries between our conscious and subconscious, through the acknowledgement of the ways in which layers of memory and fantasy imprint themselves on the surface of our lives and our spaces for living.’ Where the Barbican’s show diverged from the Whitworth’s was in the proclamation that *The Surreal House* was ‘the first major exhibition to throw light on the significance of surrealism for architecture.’ Such a claim was most prominently represented by Rem Koolhaas’s adoption of Salvador Dalí’s paranoiac-critical method for the construction of the Villa Dall’Ava in the late 1980s, however, this was one of only a few examples of surrealism’s explicit influence on architectural practice in the show.

Many more comparisons could be made between the two exhibitions. Here, it suffices to say that the shows’ different origins mark them apart. *Subversive Spaces* developed out of a specific academic context in which attention was paid to the legacies of surrealist practice, and the differing historical trajectories of the movement were handled with care. *The Surreal House* was more concerned with a curatorial narrative that relied on formalistic couplings and a particularly edited historical account. It is worth pointing out here that the choice of the term ‘surreal house’ as opposed to ‘surrealist house’ is significant, for although surrealism featured heavily in the exhibition it did not constitute the show’s guiding principle. It also seemed that the particularities of surrealism itself were not fully addressed, most forcibly felt in the amalgamation of dissident surrealism within the show’s Bretonian narrative. Instead, the exhibition pondered what its version of a ‘surreal house’ might be, which, the curators seemed to conclude, stands in opposition to rationalist, modernist principles.

This agenda was explicitly set out in Jane Alison’s catalogue text, in which she argues that the surrealist house was positioned as modernism’s ‘other:’ ‘a convulsive theatre of the domestic, defined initially in opposition to Le Corbusier.’ Whilst Le Corbusier was producing ‘machines for living’ and ‘planning to flatten the centre of Paris to create a utopian metropolis based on rational principles, the surrealists were pitting themselves against him,’ and whilst modernist projects tried ‘to iron out all the folds,’ the surrealists celebrated what could not be, or should not be, eliminated: the outmoded, the ornamental, the uncanny and the in-between.

One of the problems of approaching surrealist space in opposition to modernist space is that a binaristic logic emerges in which objects and themes are viewed through the lens of being either rational (modernist) or irrational (surrealist). This appeared most troublingly in the exhibition’s treatment of gender, where the figure of woman became symbolic of irrationality, counter to the rationalist character of a presumably male modernism. For example, the bespoke ‘surreal house’ itself is explicitly coded as female, having, as it does, a breast for a doorbell: Marcel Duchamp’s *Priére de Toucher*. Ed Kienholz’s *The Wait*, a tableau depicting a fatally obstinate, unmistakably female mode of dwelling positioned the maternal body at the heart of the exhibition space. The central figure made of jars and bones could surely only be read this way considering that the viewer would have just seen Edward Hopper’s *House by the Railroad*, known to most as the influence for the Bates’ mansion in...
Hitchcock’s *Psycho*: a home haunted and controlled by the decaying corpse of ‘mother.’ In the room entitled ‘Femme Maison’ ([Woman Home]) we are presented with the canonised combination of Louise Bourgeois and Claude Cahun, diligently followed by Francesca Woodman, the go-to female artists when dealing with issues of surreal domesticity. My issue here is not with the works themselves, but with the stagnancy with which they are so often treated, for continually framing these artists as women dealing with domesticity not only undermines the potency of the work but effectively serves to ‘keep them in their place’ and enforce an antiquated, anti-feminist narrative.

Upstairs in a room entitled ‘Mother,’ the discussion of gendered space was framed in a more alarming manner when the architectural practices of Frederick Kiesler and Robert Matta were bracketed by the attitude that ‘this architecture of the mother offered a clear and radical counter position to functional modernism.’ Although this statement is not an inaccurate one, there was no attempt to define this attitude historically, or even to challenge it. Rather the binary of modern/male/culture and nostalgic/female/nature was left unfettered. On the whole, *The Surreal House* presented surrealist attitudes to gender as homogenous and uncomplicated, divorced from the usually sophisticated manner in which gender was challenged and made porous as a way of resisting bourgeois norms. In *The Surreal House*, gender was not discussed or questioned but left at a firmly delineated standstill.

However, underneath some rather reductive and problematic attitudes, some particularly smart decisions were made, even though they were often overshadowed by sensationalist juxtapositions as evidenced by the formalistic, mammary pairing of René Magritte’s *En Homage à Mack Sennett* and Sarah Lucas’s *Au Naturel*. This example highlights the problem of anachronism that pervaded *The Surreal House*: whereas often such non-chronological curatorial rationales may serve to strengthen the ties between influencer and influenced, or to tell of a particular art-historical trajectory, in this exhibition pairings were sometimes at the service of making a particular point, occasionally resulting in the regrettable neutralising of the individual objects. However, when this strategy was considered more carefully the results were quite often insightful.

For example, a nuanced pairing occupied the entrance to the exhibition, whereby the visitor was presented with Rodney Graham’s sculpture and photograph of *In the House of My Father*, a delicate, rudimentary palm-sized house made of the artist’s skin whilst in hospital suffering from sickle-cell anaemia. Next to this, a loop of Buster Keaton’s *Steamboat Bill Jr.*, in which the house-as-refuge falls apart around the actor, narrowly avoiding crushing him as the conveniently placed window passes over his body. Straightaway, then, the visitor was offered a version of the surreal house as both a decaying body and a collapsing structure. In this pairing, the surreal house was not represented in the clichéd manner of haunted or just plain odd, as it was too often the case inside the exhibition, but as fragile and mutable, a structure dangerous because of its susceptibility. This form of house is not threatening because of hidden secrets, ghosts or monsters; rather it threatens because it unravels our expectations of stability, safety and reason. It is when the exhibition exploited this view that it excelled; when *The Surreal House* was not just a place that seemed strange, uncanny and dark, but
one in which meaning fell apart. For after all, the surrealist marvellous was not in the service of being opposite to the rational; it was a challenge to causal reality used to provoke an eruption of contradiction. Its purpose was to unravel rationality from the inside and expose its falsity.

Where discussions of the rational versus the irrational were most successfully felt was in *The Surreal House's* examination of humour and play. However, the proclamation that ‘*The Surreal House* seeks to reinstate play as central to surrealism,’ seems to ignore the wealth of scholarship that has already done this. Dismantling the perceived seriousness of modernism was central to the surrealist project, and best representing this attitude here was Jan Švankmajer’s 1971 film *Jabberwocky*. Set in a convulsive nursery, the pleasurable and nightmarish experience of a childish imagination, unfettered by rationality and sense, spills out of the stop-animation that breathes life into toys, furniture and clothing, dismantling conventions of reason and sobriety along the way. The humour of Noble + Webster’s *Metal Fucking Rats* turned play on its head, for rather than finding kernels of irrationality in the rational, they find order in the formless as a pile of rubbish casts a shadow of rodents copulating. In this work rather than disassembling sense, play seeks to reveal meaning in what initially seemed worthless, although what appears is an image of subversive, bestial sexuality. Upstairs, the works of Joseph Cornell and Duchamp’s *La Boîte-en-Valise* were testaments to an infantile obsession with the collectible and containable, private fetishistic worlds that equally have less to do with a dismantling of sense but suggest a system of order to which we, as rational, thinking beings, are not necessarily privy.

In another, very different dismantling of the modernist principles of functionalism, Brian Tschumi’s *Advertisement for Architecture* worked to tell of the afterlife of the modernist structure, highlighting the role of the ruin in Breton’s marvellous. Whereas the ruin was explored less successfully downstairs in the room entitled ‘Haunted House,’ upstairs the engagement was more sophisticated and dispensed with clichéd uses of the uncanny as a gothic vision of the ‘unhomely’ to instead probe the role of uncanniness in an exclusively twentieth-century context. Declaring that ‘Architecture only survives where it negates the form society expects of it,’ Tschumi’s work reminded us that the dustiness and decay of the triumphs of modernist architecture (in this instance Le Corbusier’s Villa Savoye) expose the inherent flaws of its ideology. Dust will always come back – it is the thorn in the side of modernism’s clean aesthetic: it is its uncanniness. Here, then, the surreality of the work is not a nostalgic counter to modernist rationality, but an insistent realism that emerges from within the very work of modernism itself. Mladen Dolar perhaps puts this best in saying:

> Psychoanalysis was the first to point out systematically the uncanny dimension pertaining to the very project of modernity, not in order to make it disappear, but in order to maintain it, to hold it open … But what is currently called postmodernism … is a new consciousness about the uncanny as a fundamental dimension of modernity. It doesn’t imply a going beyond the modern, but rather an awareness of its internal limit, its split, which was there from the outset.

Bearing this attitude in mind, it is perhaps worth ending with a note on the sponsorship of *The Surreal House* by one-stop furniture empire IKEA. In my opinion, where *The Surreal House* missed a trick
was to not investigate the late-capitalist commodification of domesticity in the contemporary home, so well critiqued by Miriam Bäckström in her photographic series IKEA Throughout the Ages. Perhaps it is IKEA’s fragmented, idealistic exhibition tableaux that are the ultimate surreal houses: uncanny, severed spaces of commercial activity dressed up, animated, to appear lived-in and private. Perhaps, though, my thoughts on The Surreal House are best summed up by the sardonic words of Fight Club’s Narrator: ‘Like so many others I had become a slave to the IKEA nesting instinct.’

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5 Bush, ‘Foreword,’ in The Surreal House, 8.

6 The pairing of Dali’s The Sleep with Koolhaas’s Villa is in itself problematic, for rather than explaining the significance of the paranoiac-critical method itself, or how Koolhaas mobilised it, the formal juxtaposition of these works suggests that the extent of Dali’s influence was the use of crutches or stilts to make the building physically unstable, by-passing the significance of the Lacanian-influenced systematisation of confusion.

7 Most notably the pairing of Dora Maar’s Le Simulateur and the videos of Gordon Matta-Clark.

8 The inclusion of stills from the 1960s television series The Addams Family makes this clear.


10 Ibid.

11 Ibid., 21.

12 Examples of this approach within The Surreal House were represented by the inclusion of works such as Zoe Leonard’s Preserved Head of a Bearded Woman and Maurizio Cattelan’s Charlie Don’t Surf.

13 Ibid., 25.

14 It is worthy of note that it is Tschumi’s work that allows the single reference to Georges Bataille in Jane Alison’s catalogue text, for Tschumi draws from Bataille’s dissident take on surrealism rather than Breton’s. That this is the sole reference to Bataille is to the exhibition’s downfall, and I for one could not stop wondering how improved the show would have been if Bataille and the informe had more of a role to play. Histoire de l’oeil is mentioned accompanying Hans Bellmer’s poupée
photographs, but in a room under the title ‘Mad Love’ that appears to be dedicated to convulsive beauty. Whether this is Breton’s particular view of convulsive beauty or a more colloquial engagement with the term is up for debate, especially when the room contains the sexual, amorphous, contemporary porcelain sculptures of Rachel Kneebone which bear a debt to Bataillian eroticism rather than Bretonian beauty.


The Spaces of the Unconscious presented a series of multimedia installations by artist Kathleen Fox made in response to, and as an extension of, Freudian legacies of the unconscious within surrealism. As we entered the main exhibition space, the strong glare of a reading lamp illuminated a portrait of Sigmund Freud. The portrait combined drawing, photography and x-ray material; the light revealed its multiple layers and hinted at the exhibition’s spatialization of the Freudian model of the unconscious. The exhibition was divided into three main sections: a partially lit conscious space, a darkened unconscious space, and a glass-cabinet integrated across the two compartments. The opaque surface of the portrait presented Freud’s facial features. The light reflecting off his forehead could be read as a reference to the illumination of an unconscious space and, similarly, the beam of light shining on his mouth might be a reference to la parole-plein; a Freudian process of accessing the unconscious. These two focal points of the portrait looked forward to the principal installations of the exhibition; three optical boxes which contained illuminated moving images accompanied by sound, and Freud’s oral prosthesis. The latter was one of three objects on display in a glass cabinet alongside Fox’s Response to Freud’s Prosthesis. The portrait therefore provided a rich introduction to the exhibition space.

Looking over past exhibitions at the Freud Museum, there seems to be a number of recurring themes; a string of exhibitions presented objects owned by Sigmund Freud, whilst others dealt with questions of space.¹ These reflect the growth in current scholarship on Freud and his objects. However, among a list of both past and future exhibitions, The Spaces of the Unconscious stands out as a unique investigation on several fronts. In addition to combining the display of Freud’s objects with a spatial representation of the unconscious, the exhibition is also the first to bring surrealism to the table.² Part of a wider research project funded by The Henry Moore Foundation and Norwich University College of the Arts, the exhibition has been a long time coming.

In Fox’s practice, the investigation of the dream and the unconscious are said to be central to her exploration of identity and exile. Placing her within the ‘critical context of surrealism’ this exhibition presents a fraction of Fox’s ongoing work, which engages with the unconscious as a geographical space as well as an archaeological site.³ Her, almost scientific, approach derives from combining organic media with technology in ways which suggest ‘sedimentation and human imagination as the natural layering of the unconscious.’⁴ The focus of the exhibition is on space as explored within Freudian theory and surrealist techniques. The mixed-media installation aims to question and investigate the spaces of the unconscious as a ‘psychical topography’ and to locate ‘systems of psychic activity in the real spaces of the body and the world.’⁵ Following the recent interest in Freud’s objects, academic interest in his London house has shifted from his immaterial collection of,
in Roger Cardinal’s terms, more public psychic documents, dream scripts and parapraxis, towards his private, material collection of antiquities and objects. It is presumably due to this shift that Fox requested to use a single room for the exhibition, which was once Freud’s bedroom.

Fox’s work does not in any way attempt to define a space of the unconscious, but rather upholds experience as key. This is paramount to understanding the artist’s practice which can be traced as a continuous investigation into the unconscious by means of everyday objects and natural surroundings. Though Fox may cringe at those who try to pinpoint her work as a ‘surrealist vision,’ the process of her production is undeniably based on surrealist techniques, influenced by free-association, automatism, decalcomania, as well as the ready-made and video assemblages.

This modest exhibition in the intimate space that was once Freud’s bedroom, unpacks some of the legacies of his material objects and immaterial objectives. Freud’s suitcase, which sits on the entrance floor, symbolises some of these ideas and refers to Fox’s earlier assemblage series *Good Enough to Eat* (2008). Three assemblage boxes from this series, which were later additions to the exhibition, build coincidental connections and manifest uncanny resemblances to Freud and his objects that resonate with issues of identity and exile. References to works by Joseph Cornell, for example, illuminate the assemblage boxes as products that speak of trauma in the unconscious spaces of the mind. These boxes contain highly personal belongings and intimate body parts, ranging from the hair of a Jewish bride, to the semen of a young boy and the milk teeth of a child. These material or organic forms of unconscious trauma may be comforting for some, but at the same time unnatural and dreadful for others.
A glass cabinet [Fig. 1] presented three of Freud’s objects alongside a number of Fox’s responses to them, collectively titled *Response to Freud’s Prosthesis*. These three-dimensional objects were displayed in a single case, divided into two parts; Freud’s oral prosthesis, a metal porcupine from his study and his boots appeared in the space dedicated to consciousness, while Fox’s response objects fell in the space of the unconscious. Strong lighting in the display cabinet cast shadows that penetrated the two realms, establishing an interchangeable quality between the objects. Among Fox’s *Response to Freud’s Prosthesis*, we find ‘Jack,’ a 40-year-old mummified cat, which, as if from an Edgar Allan Poe tale, was discovered inside a wall in what Fox calls a ‘death position.’

Several visual and auditory effects build connections between the unconscious and conscious spaces, suggesting an additional third space that projects themes of death, decay and rejuvenation. Through the black membrane made of skin-like latex that divided and slightly veiled each space from the other, high-pitched metallic sounds filled the room. Sound is, in fact, a significant part of Fox’s work, often produced by a combination of objects such as wine glasses and traditional African instruments. The sound that illuminated this exhibition space was created by Gareth Fox from the resonant quills of the metal porcupine that once resided on Freud’s desk in his consulting room [Fig. 2].

![Fig. 2. Sigmund Freud’s metal porcupine sculpture. Photo courtesy of the artist.](image)

The metal porcupine, the only piece in Freud’s collection which is not an ancient relic, was used as a thumb piano, also known as a Mbira. The pointed hairs of the creature became metal keys that produce the sounds of the ancient African idiophone instrument. This music is a catalyst for spiritual awakening, and invites the viewer into the space of a communal gathering. In my conversation with Fox, she related Jan Švankmejer’s description of working with the elusive quality of the unconscious to the ‘PING!’ sound of the keys, which indicate an encounter with a mode of creativity. Thus the ‘PING’ of the porcupine becomes for the viewer an initiation into the ‘space of illusion with dream-like qualities.’

Freud’s discrete material objects, which have on many occasions been referred to as ‘Freud’s toys,’ encapsulate multiple layers of individual and cultural memories. Michael Calderbank’s review of the *Freud’s Sculpture* exhibition at the Henry Moore Institute in 2006 suggested these objects have the
power to ‘provoke the mind to wonder into the more distant recesses of the imagination.’ In The Spaces of the Unconscious the inclusion of Freud’s objects carried a similar objective, though the viewer’s sensory interaction with objects was somewhat preconceived by Fox’s response objects.

As the journey progressed towards the ‘spaces of the unconscious,’ the viewer was lead to view three moving-image installations through peepholes, which expanded psychic space to infinite fields of colours and layers. The room becomes a space ‘controlled’ by the artist, where the viewer loses direction over their sight and orientation. The three illuminated boxes presented a restricted view of pre-recorded images through a single aperture that invited the ‘voyeuristic possibility of experiencing another’s secret world.’ These cuboids, which are designed after eighteenth century boîtes optiques, invoke a sense of reverie and daydream. The videos are layered images of photographic frames that jump in sequence, fragmenting continuous time, like a half-forgotten dream, with the missing frames functioning as irretrievable information.

The first of the video sequences, Bag Angel, is a compilation of one hundred still photographs of a plastic shopping bag caught in a river current. The moving-image is viewed through a slim lens giving the image incredible depth and can only be seen clearly at a specific angle. The slightest movement completely disorients the experience of this everyday object that could easily be an ancient relic fluctuating in the space of memory. Each time the object is perceived, its colour, shape and texture change while retaining certain qualities. The accompanying sound was that of rubbing wine glasses with various amounts of water in them, translating the glassy and glossy texture of the viewed image.

Man and Bird Kaleidoscope is the second of the two box installations mounted on the ground. This revolving multimedia work comprises a series of drawings made from an earlier collage assembled from a photograph of a dead baby bird, superimposed on a Victorian photograph of an anonymous man discovered in a junkshop. The drawings portray the hopes and dreams of the baby bird to fly and flourish, a hope ending here in failure and despair. Humour comes dressed in black, as Kathleen Fox chuckles over the dead baby bird’s futile journey.

Equally hopeless and unaware, the tiny figurines and sediments of organisms from her early mixed-media mud drawings also reflect on the insignificance of human life within the universe. Examples of these were hung around the house in dialogue with the objects in the main exhibition room. Cock ‘n Bull Teaser (2008), a mixed-media wash reminiscent of Marcel Jean’s decalcomania studies from 1936, is one of four works that were later included and not made as part of the original installation. The mixed-media images were produced by coating the canvas with river mud and allowing organisms to inscribe random traces over the surface. The result is then fixed in wax and drawn over the natural form of the composition.
The inscriptions made by slugs and worms are various and identifiable, creating figures that are layered and imprinted with traces. Titles such as *Mind the Gap* play on the struggling figures in the images in a dark, amusing way [Fig. 3]. Collages of random figures are superimposed over the washes, emerging out of the blue, as bystanders of these unlikely and fantastic events.

Each work is regarded by Fox as ‘an ontological site,’ where organisms and traces carry the significance of the origins of life, while the superimposition of found materials acts as a parody of this self-importance. Both the slugs and the found materials are immersed in these sites and are incapable of asserting any control over the understanding of the larger composition. The bodies comically fall into or simply trace the inscribed gaps left by the slugs that once crawled over the surface, creating an ongoing dialogue between the product and the process of its production.

The third multimedia installation, the short film, *Shards of Memory*, also traces impressions made by organisms through a complex process that produces a series of hieroglyphics and blots of ink similar to many of the automatic drawings made by André Masson in the 1920s, as well as Unica Zürn’s later sketches [Fig. 4]. The layering of images produces a virtual space that echoes the production of Fox’s mixed-media mud drawings made two years earlier. In the second half of the short film, the movement of the organisms are clearly visible while the image slowly inverts into negative form. This installation combines the free-association of automatism with the play of light and movement of Man Ray’s Rayographs, creating an original and fascinating depth within real and imaginary space.\textsuperscript{11}
Tracing our way around ‘the spaces of the unconscious’ became as natural as the organisms that inscribed random traces in river mud, although the curatorial principles at times ran against this current.

There are a few strategies that formed the curatorial method of the exhibition. The first derived from the penultimate chapter of Freud’s last book, *An Outline of Psychoanalysis* (1938). This text, which discusses the psychical apparatus and the external world in terms of a splitting of the ego and id, was written in Freud’s London house, connecting the book with the exhibition space that contends to explore its contents. The second point of Freudian thought which the exhibition emphasises is the much earlier idea of a ‘psychical topography,’ discussed in the nineteenth *Introductory Lecture on Psychoanalysis* (1917). Freud’s ‘crude, yet convenient’ spatial metaphor of a house is physically applied to the exhibition space, but conveniently reversed. The ‘conscious’ occupies the entrance, while the ‘unconscious’ is pushed back into the darkened depths of the room. Freud’s original order, where the unconscious is signified by the entrance hall and the conscious by the ‘drawing room’ with a ‘door keeper’ to parole what is revealed to the conscious, was significant to his description of repression. This reversal, in many ways a practical decision, unintentionally disassociated the display from the text on which it was based. However, what seems to be an abbreviated yet constructive use of Freudian theory does in fact reflect an early surrealist interest in Freud. Michael Richardson’s presentation at the conference accompanying the exhibition elaborated this notion further; in ‘Gradiva Rediviva: an Alchemical Encounter,’ Richardson discussed Freud’s reading of *Gradiva* in *Dream and Delusion* (1906) in tandem with various...
adaptations of the same story in surrealist practice. Richardson rightfully pointed to the alchemical qualities of the story, which were ignored by Freud and contrarily celebrated by the surrealists, to claim that ‘the surrealist understanding of the unconscious was profoundly different from that of Freud ... however, this use reflected not a misapprehension of his theory, but a profoundly different approach to its application.'

The exhibition certainly falls along these lines, where the Freudian model is simultaneously reduced and expanded in its application.

The overall room, echoing the themes and mixed-media of Fox’s work, is malleable to the viewer’s perception – the light, sound and texture of each space leak into each other and can be recognized by the viewer as information exchanged between the unconscious and the conscious. Thus the application of the Freudian model of space becomes clear; whatever the viewer perceives in each of the two domains penetrates the membranes of both dream and reality.

The enigma of how the spaces of the unconscious might be spatialised, embodied and experienced was adequately explored by the exhibition. The exhibition offered very brief and obscure information about the display, which forced the objects and their content to be puzzling for the viewer, and equally disorienting. Thus the exhibition intentionally did not communicate a clear idea or objective, but rather a dream-like blur of several merged images. Emphasis was placed on the viewer’s experience, an especially important function of the illuminated boxes that resonated the dream-like atmosphere of the room. Though the objects in themselves were successful in producing the desired effect, whether the overall exhibition generated the anticipated experience for the viewer is questionable.

*The Spaces of the Unconscious* creatively presented various interchangeable spaces that extended beyond its initially insipid divide of a lit conscious and darkened unconscious space; the small scale objects and installations intimated vast spaces that simulate the unconscious. With the ‘PING!’ of the porcupine, the viewer moved from large objects to small peepholes, as the experience of space simultaneously and paradoxically grew. The exhibition expands our initial experience of Kathleen Fox’s Freud portrait, immersing the viewer into the multiple layers of Freudian and surrealist legacies.

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2 The exhibition was conceived as part of a wider research project ‘The Spaces of the Unconscious,’ bringing together a number of specialists in the fields of surrealism and cultural geography. The project, feeding into the cross-disciplinary research on surrealism generated by the AHRC Centre for the Study of Surrealism and its Legacies (Universities of Essex and Manchester
and Tate), is coordinated by Professor David Pindar (Queen Mary College), Dr Jill Fenton (University of London), Professor Steve Pile (Open University), Dr Krzysztof Fijalkowski (Norwich School of Art) and Dr Michael Richardson (Goldsmiths’ College).

3 Michael Richardson and Krzysztof Fijalkowski, from unpublished ‘Exhibition Proposal’ (consulted with the courtesy of the curators.)


5 Ibid., 3.


8 Special thanks to Kathleen Fox for a private tour of the exhibition and discussion of her work. All quoted comments made by Fox refer to this discussion.


10 Michael Richardson and Krzysztof Fijalkowski, quotation from unpublished ‘Exhibition Proposal,’ consulted with the permission of the curators.

11 As observed by Prof. Dawn Ades in conversation with artist Kathleen Fox during a private viewing of the exhibition.


14 Ibid.

15 Michael Richardson and Krzysztof Fijalkowski, Kathleen Fox, 4.
Salvador Dalí: The Late Work. High Museum of Art, Atlanta, Georgia, 7 August 2010 - 9 January 2011.

Since 2004, the year of the centenary of Salvador Dalí’s birth, a number of American museums have hosted various exhibitions intent on re-evaluating the Spanish artist’s oeuvre and attempting to situate his work in terms of artistic merit, influence, and his relationship to popular culture and postmodernism. In particular, there has been a great emphasis on Dalí’s creative output after his departure from the surrealist movement circa 1939.

The first of these exhibitions was Dalí: Mass Culture, held at the Salvador Dalí Museum, St. Petersburg, Florida, in 2004-2005, which looked at the artist’s commercial endeavours and work with mass media, and their possible influence on what has been called the ‘great divide’ between ‘fine,’ and popular art and culture. In sharp thematic contrast to this was Dalí: The Centenary Retrospective, held in the spring of 2005 at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, which largely aimed to help legitimize Dalí’s often spurious reputation as an artist by focussing on his technically and aesthetically finest work, and his paintings in particular. The museum also hosted a scholarly event to complement the exhibition. Entitled The Dalí Renaissance: An International Symposium, the event resulted in a publication subtitled New Perspectives on His Life and Art after 1940.¹ This was followed in the winter of 2005-2006 by Pollock to Pop: America’s Brush with Dalí, also at the Salvador Dalí Museum, an exhibition that mapped the lines of influence and convergence between Dalí and American modernist, Pop and postmodern artists. Finally an exhibition and symposium were held at New York City’s Cervantes Institute in early 2006, both of which focused upon Dalí’s first major literary work of his post-surrealist period, his 1942 autobiography The Secret Life of Salvador Dalí.

The most recent exhibition in this trajectory was Salvador Dalí: The Late Work, staged at the High Museum of Art in Atlanta, Georgia, between 7 August 2010 and 9 January 2011. This was a ‘blockbuster’-scale exhibition held in collaboration with the Salvador Dalí Museum in Florida, and the Fundació Gala-Salvador Dalí in Figueres, Spain, also with the intent of highlighting the customarily overlooked second half of Dalí’s corpus. The exhibition was curated by Elliott King, a Dalí scholar well-known for his efforts in revitalizing the reputation of Dalí’s later artistic production, in partnership with the staff at the High Museum. David Brenneman, Director of Collections and Exhibitions at the High Museum and the exhibition’s managing curator, managed to secure some extraordinarily high-profile loans from museums around the world. The result was a remarkable collection of paintings, drawings, prints, film clips, photographs and ephemera, all presented in a lengthy succession of galleries worthy of the scale and grandeur of some of the mural-sized works on display.
Compared to the previous exhibitions, this was the most comprehensive and ambitious when it comes to the re-evaluation the Spanish artist’s work, or what has been called the ‘New Dalí Studies.’ Its aim was clear: to prove that Dali’s post-surrealist work deserves respect, and to question received notions of Dali’s late and commercial ventures as reductive or venal versions of his surrealist-era output. The focus was on what Dali deemed his ‘classic’ paintings of the 1940s, his often supremely religious Nuclear Mysticism of the late 1940s and 1950s, his society portraits, and his engagement with mass culture and Pop Art in the 1960s and 1970s. Ultimately, it suggested that the creative product of the second half of Dali’s career has much conceptual merit and aesthetic value, that it prefigured many
now-current styles and media, and that it had a significant influence on the Pop Art movement, postmodernism and contemporary art.

Dali’s ‘late work’ was defined here as roughly anything post-1939, the year the artist parted ways with the surrealists after spending a decade as one of the most important members of the group. The storyline was based on a chronological narrative that followed Dalí’s painting style and subject preferences, and touched upon his work in design and his print portfolios and books, all the while attempting to position him in terms of his relationship with celebrity, mass media, popular culture and his anti-modernist directive. This narrative was told with over one hundred works of art, including forty-odd paintings and a number of drawings, prints, magazines, photographs and similar materials. While the focus was on Dalí’s artwork, from the introductory gallery of the show, The Late Work also insisted upon the primacy of Dalí’s personality and the artistic merit of his showmanship. It achieved this by introducing him via the lens of Philippe Halsman, the photographer with whom Dalí collaborated for many years, resulting in some of the most memorable photographs of Dalí’s career, as he twisted his famous moustache into dollar signs, flung cats into the air and arranged naked women into trompe l’oeil human skulls.

Visitors were then introduced to some of Dalí’s early paintings as a preamble and contrast to the late ones. These included his abstract, pre-surrealist Femme Couchée of 1926, and a smattering of other works executed during his surrealist period, such as his tiny and mysterious Morphological Echo of 1936. Those who visited later in the calendar year were fortunate to view the exhibition when Dalí’s most famous painting was installed, on short loan from the Museum of Modern Art in New York. This was Persistence of Memory, featuring Dalí’s ‘melting watch,’ which has remained a Dalinian trademark, not to mention a symbol of surrealism and a cultural touchstone in American art, since it was first acquired by the New York art dealer Julien Levy in 1931.

By the early 1940s, Dalí formally announced that he had ‘become classic,’ with the intent of turning to academic and renaissance-inspired painterly styles. An atheist up to that point, Dalí then embraced, and drew upon the subject matter of Catholicism, one of a number of things that led his former avant-garde colleagues to view him as a supporter of Spanish dictator Francisco Franco’s officially Catholic regime. Once this had been established, visitors were introduced to the primary focus of the exhibition, the one-man style Dalí called Nuclear Mysticism, characterized by often immense canvasses featuring a mélange of Dalí’s surrealist trademarks, religious imagery, personal iconography, and references to nuclear science and genetics. Most notable among these were a number of paintings executed in Dalí’s meticulous 1950s-era academic style, some of which span up to thirteen feet in height, and which reference Italian renaissance religious painting. Perhaps best know among these were Christ of St. John of the Cross (1951), with its God’s eye perspective, Assumpta Corpuscularia Lapislazulina (1952) featuring the rhinoceros horn motif and ‘atomically’ fragmented figuration typical of this period, and the Madonna of Port Lligat (1950), where Dalí’s wife and muse Gala poses as the mother of Christ among a sort of deconstructed Renaissance retable.
While exceedingly visually appealing and clearly (judging from visitors’ reactions) awe-inspiring, the galleries dominated by these sumptuously overstated works served to underscore Dalí’s exuberant and intentional embrace of what is perhaps best described as kitsch. This is most pronounced in works such as the roundly sentimental *The Ecumenical Council of 1960* which – beneath its awkwardly-placed figures and Dalinian iconography – floats a roster of Sunday School religious images of doves, clouds, classical arches floating in the sky, and stacks of tumbling, watery clouds (Fig. 1). Likewise with the exhibition centrepiece, *Santiago El Grande*, featuring an astoundingly over-the-top medieval armature (referencing the geodesic domes that Dalí loved), towering behind its
subject, Saint James, who sits on a rearing white horse over whose private parts has conveniently wafted what might be described as a ‘modesty cloud’ (Fig. 2). While proclaiming Dalí’s reference to Italian renaissance painting, both are also exemplars of what influential American art critic and anti-kitsch activist Clement Greenberg described in his famous 1939 essay ‘Avant-garde and Kitsch,’ as ‘using for raw material the debased and academicised simulacra of genuine culture.’

Besides sheer bedazzlement, Dalí’s gleeful embrace of the outré was intended, no doubt, to delight the masses and épater the champions of abstraction and geometric modernism he evidently disdained. This became even more pronounced in the following gallery, where the artist experiments with the conventions of traditional portraiture, as he does in his colourful caricature of Jack Warner, who duly sports a gleaming Hollywood grin in his portrait of 1951. Likewise in La Turbie of 1949, a rendering of the noble Sir James Dunn, who sits swathed in a glimmering classicizing sheath, while his overstated gravitas is undermined by the comical large-toothed horse carved in relief on the Roman ruins beneath him. While Dalí proved that he was soundly proficient in the portrait genre, he was also clearly toying with it, reconfiguring convention to create something subtly comic, highly novel, and often surprisingly beautiful.

The Late Work was a fine testament to Dalí’s embrace of both academicism and of ‘selling out’ to commercial interests. While not unusual, and by no means unacceptable in the contemporary milieu, Dalí did this at a time when American critics and the vanguard – not to mention André Breton and what was left of the surrealist circle – largely found such transgressions galling. ‘All kitsch is academic, and conversely, all that’s academic is kitsch,’ wrote Greenberg, who included ‘popular, commercial art and literature’ (i.e., popular culture) under the same rubric. As King writes in the exhibition catalogue, about Dalí’s religious paintings in particular, ‘one must appreciate their sheer audacity for attacking practically every artistic aspect that formalism held dear.’ The storyline of the exhibition certainly led the viewer to this conclusion, and demonstrated how Dalí’s unabashed embrace of the academic combined with his love affair with the popular succeeded in raising bad taste to the level of high art.

Plainly, Dalí welcomed and cultivated a sort of kitsch or caricatural sensibility in the fine art idiom long before it was acceptable or even understood, outside a small vanguard, as a potentially ironic or parodic posture. This was further pushed home as the exhibition moved into Dalí’s Pop- and proto-Pop inspired work and his role in the discourses of postmodernism. There was due emphasis here on ‘firstness:’ his use of the Benday dot system in 1958 in The Sistine Madonna, executed a good few years before Roy Lichtenstein or Sigmar Polke adopted the same, and Dalí’s dabbling in new media such as holographic art (in a work featuring rock star Alice Cooper of all people), and video art. Indeed, the screening of Dalí’s 1960 film Chaos and Creation – cited as perhaps the first ever example of video art – outlined in no uncertain terms Dalí’s ardent anti-modernism. In it, he sends up abstract painting, geometric abstraction and action painting using a motorcycle, popcorn,
Pennsylvania pigs, and a bewildered female model in a skimpy costume, all stuck in a life-size, Mondrian-inspired grid that gets splattered, via the motorcycle’s wheels, with a sticky mess.

After dazzling the visitor with Dalí’s technical prowess, effortless interdisciplinarity, and the outsize subject matter and grandiose scale of many of his canvasses, *The Late Work* raised some familiar questions about evaluative criteria for art history and its slippery canon. It is certainly tempting, for example, to view America’s recent fascination with Dalí’s later work as an effort to recover a lost strand of American art history. Evidently, buried deep in the nation’s collective consciousness is the memory that throughout the 1940s and 1950s, while America’s avant-garde artists were primarily doing their abstract, expressionist, minimalist or formalist ‘thing,’ Salvador Dalí was perpetually in the news with his latest *frisson*, performance, TV game show appearance, fashion extravaganza, society portrait, personal newsletter, jewel, or monumental Nuclear Mystical canvas. Most significantly, as the exhibition and its catalogue drove home, budding artists like Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, James Rosenquist, and later Jeff Koons, were growing up with Dalí’s familiar figure as a recurring presence in the mass media, and making this anti-modernist renegade a model for their own highly influential work and careers.

As North American art history and theory move further away from modernist paradigms largely defined by Greenbergian formalism and Breton-style ethics, the later work Dalí produced which had been quietly written off as embarrassingly reductive, commercial and gauche, begins to look surprisingly vanguard. According to the museum press kit, King states that ‘where Dalí was once deliberately out of step with modern art, today we can look back on his “late” work and appreciate its innovations and antecedence to more contemporary concerns.’ If we ‘move beyond Dalí’s veneer of self-promotion,’ he continues, ‘or, better still, understand it as integral to his artistic project, the work can be recognized as some of the most intelligent and dynamic of the twentieth century.’ For this very reason, in future it is quite possible that Dalí’s later work may well come to be seen as more important and more influential than his earlier, ‘legitimate’ surrealist output.

Ultimately *Salvador Dalí: The Late Work* roundly succeeded in encouraging an appreciation for Dalí’s post-surrealist vision, exceptional creativity and indisputable skill. Paradoxically, it also suggested that the very things that the art establishment often sought to dismiss in Dalí’s post-surrealist production, such as his humour, parody, populism and commercialism, were perhaps the very ones that made him profoundly influential in the domain of art in the last few decades. For these reasons, and the sheer exuberance and spectacle of it all, it is most unfortunate that *The Late Work* was not a travelling venture, and might have enjoyed a much-deserved wider audience. For those who missed the exhibition, however, there is a very fine medium-sized catalogue produced by the High Museum in conjunction with Yale University Press. This includes one hundred and twenty one colour illustrations, and a lengthy and informative essay on Dalí’s later work by King, as well as contributions by Dalí scholars William Jeffett, Montse Aguer Teixidor and Hank Hine.


4 Ibid.

Ballad of Fantomas

By Robert Desnos

Translated by Timothy Adès

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Finale

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

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

By Robert Desnos

Translated by Timothy Adès

Translator’s Note

This is one of surrealism’s essential texts.

The group around André Breton started sessions of hypnosis or self-hypnosis on 25 September 1922. It was René Crevel’s idea, and at first he was voluble, but Desnos had earlier practised automatic writing, transcribing some of his dreams, and he soon became the one who spoke, drew or wrote under hypnosis. On the 28th they got him to write a poem.

Marcel Duchamp had invented Rrose Sélavy (Éros, c’est la vie; arrosez la vie ...) as a fascinating female alter ego, and pronounced the first few crude examples of her intricate, spooneristic, poetic tongue-twisters. On 7 October, Picabia asked Desnos for more of these, and Desnos said at once ‘Dans un temple en stuc de pommes ...’ Soon the puns were flowing, especially if Breton was present. A hundred and seventy-four sentences appeared in Littérature no. 7, Dec 1922. ‘Words have finished playing,’ wrote Breton: ‘words are making love’; and in 1924: ‘Surrealism is the order of the day and Desnos is its prophet.’ And later: ‘Anyone who never saw his pencil, hesitating and prodigiously fast, commit these amazing poetic equations to paper, and who could not rule out premeditation as I could, might well appreciate their technical perfection and wonderful skill, but cannot imagine how much it all meant at the time, and the positively oracular importance it took on,’ (Nadja, 1928). But the novelty and the effect had worn off: Desnos became aggressive, the audience nervous. The sessions ended after some alarming incidents early in 1923. Breton said he, Éluard and Desnos would write no more: Desnos dissented.

‘I wasn’t afraid to mystify,’ Desnos said later. ‘The mystifier may unwittingly do important things.’

These translations have been done very freely in the hope of catching the poetry, originality and mystery of the original.
Rrose Sélavy

1. In an apple-plaster temple the pastor distilled the sap of psalms.  
Dans un temple en stuc de pomme le pasteur distillait le suc des psaumes.

2. Rrose Sélavy asks if Baudelaire’s ‘The Wicked Blooms’ hath unblockéd wombs: hopefully, Omphalé, you’ve a view.  
Rrose Sélavy demande si les Fleurs du Mal ont modifié les mœurs du phalle: qu’en pense Omphalé?

3. Travellers, pamper the Pamplona fillies with peafowl feathers.  
Voyageurs, portez des plumes de paon aux filles de Pampelune.

4. Is the solution of a sage the pollution of a page? [un page, a page-boy.]  
La solution d’un sage est-elle la pollution d’un page?

5. I love sir’s bosom that wears opossum.  
Je vous aime, ô beaux hommes vêtus d’opossum.

6. QUESTION FOR ASTRONOMERS: Will Rrose Sélavy for decades enter the annual cadastre in the astral quadrant?  
QUESTION AUX ASTRONOMES: Rrose Sélavy inscrira-t-elle longtemps au cadran des astres le cadastre des ans?

7. Oh, my knackered noddle, star-struck nacreous nodule.  
Ô mon crâne étoile de nacre qui s’étiole.

8. Where Rrose Sélavy lives, they love wolves and fools who are heaven’s and all men’s outlaws.  
Au pays de Rrose Sélavy on aime les fous et les loups sans foi ni loi.

9. Will you harass Rrose Sélavy as far as the decimal numbers nothing dismal encumbers?  
Suivez-vous Rrose Sélavy au pays des nombres décimaux où il n’y a décombres ni maux?

10. Rrose Sélavy wonders if the demise of seasons decides the destiny of demesnes.  
Rrose Sélavy se demande si la mort des saisons fait tomber un sort sur les maisons.

11. Pass me my Barbary quiver, says the barbaric vizier.  
Passez-moi mon arc berbère, dit le monarque barbare.

12. Thunderous planets above scare the quails, lovers of Rrose Sélavy’s wondrous plants whose leaves are scales.  
Les planètes tonnantes dans le ciel effrayent les cailles amoureuses des plantes étonnantes aux feuilles d’écaille cultivées par Rrose Sélavy.

13. Marcel Duchamp, marchand du sel: Rrose Sélavy knows the salt-seller well.  
Rrose Sélavy connaît bien le marchand du sel.

14. EPITAPH: Torment Rrose Sélavy no more, for enigma’s my genius. Nor can Caron con it.  
ÉPITAPHE: Ne tourmentez plus Rrose Sélavy car mon génie est énigme. Caron ne le déchiffre pas.

15. Adrift on endless waters, will Rrose Sélavy eat first her hands, then her fetters?  
Perdue sur la mer sans fin Rrose Sélavy mangera-t-elle du fer après avoir mangé ses mains?

16. Aragon harvests in extremis the spirit of Aramis on a bed of tarragon.  
Aragon recueille in extremis l’âme d’Aramis sur un lit d’estragon.
17 André Breton doesn’t come dressed as a mage to combat an image of the thunder-hydra, bitter and barking.
André Breton ne s’habille pas en mage pour combattre l’image de l’hydre du tonnerre qui brame sur un mode amer.

18 Francis Picabia, too frank for
A confidant of beavers, or,
Red-caped and draped in toison d’or,
A prancing Cassis picador.
Francis Picabia l’ami des castors
Fut trop franc d’être un jour picador
À Cassis en ses habits d’or.

19 Rosse Sélay wonders if love is the fly-paper that prepares soft sofas for foreplay.
Rosse Sélay voudrait bien savoir si l’amour, cette colle à mouches, rend plus dures les molles couches.

20 What set your complexion withering, little girl, boarding where your eye came by another ring?
Pourquoi votre incarnat est-il devenu si terne, petite fille, dans cet internat où votre œil se cerna?

21 The riverside diversion of a racecourse, there’s Rosse Sélay’s resource.
Au virage de la course au rivage, voici le secours de Rosse Sélay.

22 Rosse Sélay may don prison’s drab garb, yet her mount ranges on mountain-ranges.
Rosse Sélay peut revêtir la bure du bagne, elle a une monture qui franchit les montagnes.

23 Rosse Sélay passes the palm that lacks the glamour of martyrs to Lakmé the lamb-herd of Chartres on the Beauce’s flat metal calm, by name beauty.
Rosse Sélay décerne la palme sans l’éclat du martyr à Lakmé bergère en Beauce figée dans le calme plat du métal appelé beauté.

24 Do you think Rosse Sélay knows those ticklish jokes that make for tingling cheeks?
Croyez-vous que Rosse Sélay connaisse ces jeux de fous qui mettent le feu aux joues?

25 Rosse Sélay is perhaps the apprentice apache who flanned her brat with the flat of her hand.
Rosse Sélay c’est peut-être aussi ce jeune apache qui de la paume de sa main colle un pain à sa môme.

26 Does the canoodling of shoddy wenches condone the idling of shady haunches?
Est-ce que la caresse des putains excuse la paresse des culs teints?

27 Time is an agile eagle in a temple.
Le temps est un aigle dans un temple.

28 What if Rosse Sélay, on a night of Yule, steers for the snare of the snow-white pole?
Qu’arrivera-t-il si Rosse Sélay, un soir de Noël, s’en va vers le piège de la neige et du pôle?

29 Ah, lover! All over!
Ah! meurs, amour!

30 Why’s it my luck to pick from the pack, at hazard, a friend more fickle than the lizard?
Quel hasard me fera découvrir entre mille l’ami plus fugitif que le lézard?

31 A curate in a chalet sees the cachet of delicacy in the lees of his chalice: does he meet his celestial match with malice?
Un prêtre de Savoie déclare que le déchet des calices est marqué du cachet des délices: met-il de la malice dans ce match entre le ciel et lui?
This crater affords the Missouri its source and Sarah’s court its mystery.
Voici le cratère où le Missouri prend sa source et la cour de Sara son mystère.

Nomads en route for the North, do not pause at the port to trade your pomades.
Nomades qui partez vers le nord, ne vous arrêtez pas au port pour vendre vos pommades.

Rrose Sélavy sleeps well as a small fellow out of a well wolfs her loaf at twelve.
Dans le sommeil de Rrose Sélavy il y a un nain sorti d’un puits qui vient manger son pain la nuit.

If silence is golden, Rrose Sélavy lowers her eyelids for close-down.
Si le silence est d’or, Rrose Sélavy abaisse ses cils et s’endort.

Craning on the careen, the poet seeks a rhyme: do you see Rrose Sélavy as the queen of crime?
Debout sur la carène le poète cherche une rime et croyez-vous que Rrose Sélavy soit la reine du crime?

When caravels were making fast at La Havana, were caravans snaking past Laval?
Au temps où les caravelles accostaient La Havane, les caravanes traversaient-elles Laval?

EASTERN QUESTION: At Santa Sophia a kirkstall of cork’s a seat of insanity.
QUESTION D’ORIENT: À Sainte-Sophie sur un siège de liège s’assied la folie.

Rrose Sélavy proposes that the perishing compost of passions become the nourishing repast of nations.
Rrose Sélavy propose que la pourriture des passions devienne la nourriture des nations.

What is this unfounded tide whose sour flow floods Rrose’s steely soul?
Quelle est donc cette marée sans cause dont l’onde amère inonde l’âme acérée de Rrose?

Benjamin Péret’s regimen is perfect: his early bath is his yearly bath.
Benjamin Péret ne prend jamais qu’un bain par an.

P. Éluard: poet, the élite of the sheets.
P. Éluard: le poète élu des draps.

EPITAPH FOR APOLLINAIRE:
Weep dirges, giants and geniuses, on the void’s edges.
Pleurez de nénies, géants et génies au seuil du néant.

Amorous voyager on the tender chart, why nourish your nights on a cinder tart?
Amoureux voyageur sur la carte du tendre, pourquoi nourrir vos nuits d’une tarte de cendre?

THE MARTYRDOM OF ST SEBASTIAN: The garters suit him but his bust’s wrong.
MARTYRE DE SAINT SÉBASTIEN: Mieux que ses seins ses bas se tiennent.

Rrose Sélavy has seen the archipelago where sea-queen Irene with an ash-sprig rules her isles.
Rrose Sélavy a visité l’archipel où la reine Irène-sur-les-Flots de sa rame de frêne gouverne ses îlots.

From Everest mountain I am falling down to your feet for ever, Mrs Everling.
[Desnos composed this one in English.] 

Would André Breton be already damned to tonsure in hell cats of jade and amber?
André Breton serait-il déjà condamné à la tâche de tondre en enfer des chats d’ambre et de jade?
49 Rrose Sélavy calls on you not to mistake the verrucas of the breast for the virtues of the blest.
*Rrose Sélavy vous engage à ne pas prendre les verrues des seins pour les vertus des saintes.*

50 Rrose Sélavy wouldn't bet egotism gets you a wet bottom.
*Rrose Sélavy n’est pas persuadée que la culture du moi puisse amener la moiteur du cul.*

51 Rrose Sélavy can’t believe the religion of catholics arose from the contagion of relics.
*Rrose Sélavy s’étonne que de la contagion des reliques soit née la religion catholique.*

52 Seized with reckless love, the Alpine parson spreads his frocks to the rocks to ease his loins.
*Possédé d’un amour sans frein, le prêtre savoyard jette aux rocs son froc pour soulager ses reins.*

53 RROSE SELAVY’S MOTTO:
Beyond the polite to be decent
Beyond the poet to be dishonoured.

DEVISE DE RROSE SÉLAVY:
Plus que poli pour être honnête
Plus que poète pour être honni.

54 Forego the absurd parabolas, go for Rrose Sélavy’s misheard parables.
*Oubliez les paraboles absurdes pour écouter de Rrose Sélavy les sourdes paroles.*

55 EPIPHANY: In the small hours, dreams moor at the mole to unload beans.
ÉPIPHANIE: Dans la nuit fade les rêves accostent à la rade pour décharger des fèves.

56 In the paradise of diamonds the carats are amorous, the spiral is crystal.
*Au paradis des diamants les carats sont des amants et la spirale est en cristal.*

57 Roman persimmons taste to pages as if gnawed in rages by jaws of Moors.
*Les pommes de Rome ont pour les pages la saveur de la rage qu’y imprimèrent les dents des Mores.*

58 Let rockets be fired, the crooked-faced races are tired!
*Lancez les fusées, les races à faces rusées sont usées!*

59 Rrose Sélavy declares her skull’s nectar is the elixir that bitters the sky’s bile.
*Rrose Sélavy proclame que le miel de sa cervelle est la merveille qui aigrit le fiel du ciel.*

60 At Rrose Sélavy’s ‘agapê’ or love-feast, papal paste is tasted in an agate-glazed sauce.
*Aux agapes de Rrose Sélavy on mange du pâté de pape dans une sauce couleur d’agate.*

61 Learn that Rrose Sélavy’s celebrated gesture is etched in celestial algebra.
*Apprenez que la geste célèbre de Rrose Sélavy est inscrite dans l’algèbre céleste.*

62 People of Sodom, fear the fire of heaven, prefer the fever of the rear.
*Habittants de Sodome, au feu du ciel préférez le fiel de la queue.*

63 Keep to the ramp, rulers and rules braving the cellar with no lamp.
*Tenez bien la rampe rois et lois qui descendez à la cave sans lampe.*

64 Is your tribe forever at a tribunal, dear downhearted departed?
*Morts férus de morale, votre tribu attend-elle toujours un tribunal?*

65 Rrose Sélavy links persons … with the Tropic of Cancer.
*Rrose Sélavy affirme que la couleur des … est due au tropique du cancer.*
Classy torsos on tables of nurses, you will be carcases in hearses!
Beaux corps sur les billards, vous serez peaux sur les corbillards!

Maladies issue from every orifice of cadavers’ palaces.
Du palais des morts les malaises s’en vont par toutes les portes.

Rocambole blows his cornet to start carnage and swims clear, cartwheeling off a lofty crag.
Rocambole de son cor provoque le carnage puis carambole du haut d’un roc et s’échappe à la nage.

Rrose’s desire of love for ever dies of cirrhosis of the liver.
De cirrhose du foie meurt la foi du désir de Rrose.

Lovers with tuberculosis, use your phthisical advantages.
Amants tuberculeux, ayez des avantages phthisiques.

In the Elysian fields, Rrose Sélavy wears deceaseful weeds.
Rrose Sélavy au seuil des cieux porte deuil des dieux.

Savage gales range over Rrose Sélavy, who reaches without outrage the age of oranges.
Les orages ont pu passer sur Rrose Sélavy, c’est sans rage qu’elle atteint l’âge des oranges.

Jacques Baron’s fun, bayonet-jerks on gun!
Ce que Baron aime c’est le bâillon sur l’arme!

Morise’s ideas are iridescent with obsolescent promise.
Les idées de Morise s’irisent d’un charme démodé.

Simone’s silences launch the crunch of demonesses’ lances.
Simone dans le silence provoque le heurt des lances des démones.

Mad broads with eyes undaubed sail through yards and yards of fire in yawls.
Les yeux des folles sont sans fard. Elles naviguent dans des yoles, sur le feu, pendant des yards, pendant des yards.

Evil opinions of singsongs prise open villains’ prisons.
Le mépris des chansons ouvre la prison des méchants.

The sport of the departed is to spread and be rotted.
Le plaisir des morts c’est de moisir à plat.

Janine, we do all love her, the day-lily’s such a wheedler.
Aimez, ô gens, Janine, la fleur d’hémérocalle est si câline.

On what pole does the ice-pack splinter the poets’ smack?
Sur quel pôle la banquise brise-t-elle le bateau des poètes en mille miettes?

Rrose Sélavy knows the goblin of gloom cannot gobble the globe.
Rrose Sélavy sait bien que le démon du remords ne peut mordre le monde.

Rrose Sélavy tells us the world’s rattle is the ruse of male rulers embattled in the whirl of the monthly muse.
Rrose Sélavy nous révèle que le rôle du monde est la ruse des rois mâles emportés par la ronde de la muse des mois.

LA RROSE DICTIONARY: Latinity - the five Latin nations …
DICTIONNAIRE LA RROSE: Latinité - Les cinq nations latines. La Trinité – L’émanation des latrines.
To command all the magic of boules, imagine the candle of the males. [Boules: the lobbing game]

Nul ne connaîtrait la magie des boules sans la bougie des mâles.

Rrose Sélavy submerged the moral wheedler in a mere of mineral water.
Dans un lac d’eau minérale Rrose Sélavy a noyé la câline morale.

Into the sport of every Croesus Rrose Sélavy slips the very heart of Jesus.
Rrose Sélavy glisse le cœur de Jésus dans le jeu des Créus.

ADVICE TO CATHOLICS: Sagely await the day of faith when death shall have you enjoy the scythe.
CONSEIL AUX CATHOLIQUES: Attendez sagement le jour de la foi où la mort vous fera jouir de la faux.

Rrose Sélavy’s going down a mine, making ready for Armageddon.
Au fond d’une mine Rrose Sélavy prépare la fin du monde.

Ernest, says his pretty sister, by your third right digit, buy my birthright.
La jolie sœur disait: « Mon droit d’aînesse pour ton doigt, Ernest. »

Cravan wends on the wave and his cravat waves in the wind.
Cravan se hâte sur la rive et sa cravate joue dans le vent.

In Vaché’s roguish drawls, words crashed like waves on rocky shores.
Dans le ton rogue de Vaché il y avait des paroles qui se brisaient comme les vagues sur les rochers.

Give some alms to the rich and etch in the rocks the effigy of Simone.
Faites l’aumône aux riches puis sculptez dans la roche le simulacre de Simone.

QUESTION: Mystical cancer, how long will your song be a mystery canticle?
QUESTION: Cancer mystique chanteras-tu longtemps ton cantique au mystère?

ANSWER: Aren’t you aware your misery preens like a queen on this mystery’s train?
RÉPONSE: Ignores-tu que ta misère se pare comme une reine de la traîne de ce mystère?

Is a watery death a wreath for the doughty?
La mort dans les flots est-elle le dernier mot des forts?

The act of the sexes is the axis of the sects.
L’acte des sexes est l’axe des sectes.

Sweeter than glory are the shrouds and shadows of the globe.
La suaire et les ténèbres du globe sont plus suaves que la gloire.

Our brows harbour cemeteries that a maze of boundaries on summits omits.
Frontières qui serpentez sur les cimes vous n’entourez pas les cimetières abrités par nos fronts.

Will the morning of caresses reveal to us the carmine of goddesses?
Les caresses de demain nous révèleront-elles le carmin des déesses?

The eyeliners of goddesses lull the idleness of goners.
Le parfum des déesses berce la paresse des défunts.

The militias of goddesses disregard the delights of missals.
La milice des déesses se préoccupe peu des délices de la messe.
On her trapeze Rrose Sélavy appeases the distresses of our divine mistresses.
À son trapèze Rrose Sélavy apaise la détresse des déesses.

Do poesy’s Vestals take you for vesicles, Petals?
Les vestales de la Poésie vous prennent-elles pour des vessies, ô Pétales

Love’s images, fishes, will your poisonless kisses make me lower my eyes?
Images de l’amour, poissons, vos baisers sans poison me feront-ils baisser les yeux?

In the land of Rrose Sélavy, males scour the shores in warships, females pick and scratch at sores.
Dans le pays de Rrose Sélavy les mâles font la guerre sur la mer. Les femelles ont la gale.

For all malefactors, atonement; for all male punters, an ointment.
À tout miché, pesez Ricord. [À tout péché, miséricorde: for every sin, there is mercy. Ricord: famous doctor.]

Words, are you myths which match the myrtles of death?
Mots êtes-vous des mythes et pareils aux myrtes des morts?

Can Rrose Sélavy’s artful talk turn a swan into a stork?
L’argot de Rrose Sélavy, n’est-ce pas l’art de transformer en cigognes les cygnes?

The laws of our desires are dice of no leisure.
Les lois de nos désirs sont des dés sans loisir.

Impatient heirs, usher your forebears into the chamber of thunders.
Héritiers impatients, conduisez vos ascendants à la chambre des tonnerres.

I live where you live, urchin whose mug is the magic of journeys.
Je vis où tu vis, voyou dont le visage est le charme des voyages.

Phalanx of angels, prefer the phallus to the angelus.
Phalange des anges, aux angélus préférez les phallus.

Do you know the jolly lovely faun of folly? She is yellow.
Connaissez-vous la jolie faune de la folie? – Elle est jaune.

Does your bloodstream carry cowbells at your blubbing’s beck and call?
Votre sang charrie-t-il des grelots au gré de vos sanglots?

Does piety in dogma consist in pitying dogs?
La piété dans le dogme consiste-t-elle à prendre les dogues en pitié?

For the fleshly calèche it’s a long lane, will the carnal car go far?
Le char de la chair ira-t-il loin sur ce chemin si long?

What are cuckolds thinking?
Hints for women cooking: Don’t mimic the apostrophagic madeleine, copy the carnivorous virgin.
Qu’en pensent les cocus?
Recette culinaire: plutôt que Madeleine l’apotrophage, femmes! imitez la vierge carnivore.

You crows rifling fine torsos’ haunches, when will you stifle your torches?
Corbeaux qui déchiquetez le flank des beaux corps, quand éteindrez-vous les flambeaux?

Prometheuth! Promitheth, promitheth!
Prométhée moi l’amour.
O laugh, the waves, coachmen are chortling! Olaf, the waves, catch many rattling! All of the waves crash ricochetting!

Ô ris cocher des flots! Auric, hochet des flots au ricochet des flots.

The species of fair fools loves phials and false pieces.

L’espèce des folles aime les fioles et les pièces fausses.

DEFINITIONS OF POETRY FOR:
DEFINITIONS DE LA POÉSIE POUR:

Louis Aragon: Hear the scales play hopscotch at the edge of souls.
À la margelle des âmes écoutez les gammes jouer à la marelle.

Benjamin Péret: Belly of flesh, flurry of brush.
Le ventre de chair est un centre de vair.

Tristan Tzara: What harms earth worse than a glass-work or a verse-work? What say you, earthworm?
Quel plus grand outrage à la terre qu’un ouvrage de vers / verre? Qu’en dis-tu, ver de terre?

Max Ernst: The red ball rolled and bowled.
La boule rouge rouge et roule.

Max Morise: For a disappointed fig, dig a fascinating dyke.
À figue dolente, digue affolante.

Georges Auric: Isn’t this the import of the muses:- behind the museums’ portals, the bed-rolls of mortals?
La portée des muses n’est-ce pas la mort duvetée derrière la porte des musées?

Philippe Soupault: Geese and zebus are neguses in this rebus.
Les oies et les zébus sont les rois de ce rébus.

Roger Vitrac: Don’t take the moon’s halo hung to light the lagoon for the poets’ halo sung too like the moon.
Il ne faut pas prendre le halo de la lune à l’eau pour le chant «alla» des poètes comme la lune.

Georges Limbour: The Norman’s destiny is the North’s mendacity.
Pour les Normands le Nord ment.

Francis Picabia: Numbers in bronze make a ragamuffin bonze: I rubbed out the second reverend, are you ready, Rrose Sélavy?
Les chiffres de bronze ne sont-ils que des bonzes de chiffes: j’ai tué l’autre prêtre, êtes-vous prête, Rrose Sélavy?

Marcel Duchamp: On the road was a blue bull by a blanched bench. Tell me now, what reasons for white mittens?
Sur le chemin, il y avait un bœuf bleu près d’un banc blanc. Expliquez-moi la raison des gants blancs maintenant?

G. de Chirico: Remit your outrage twenty times on your métier.
Vingt fois sur le métier remettez votre outrage.

Paul Éluard, when will you call repetitions Preteritions?
Quand donc appellerez-vous Prétéritions, Paul Éluard, les répétitions?

O lapse of senses, wager years on wordless pensées.
Ô laps des sens, gage des années aux pensées sans langage.
Rivers! Come and bring the pawnbrokers the poor broken bridge-crumbs.
Fleuves! portez au Mont-de-Piété les miettes de pont.

A fairy’s blushes burn as a bonfire blazes.
Les joues des fées se brûlent aux feux de joies.

Mysterious are the hysterias of foundered mortals under nettles.
Le mystère est le hystérie des morts sous les orties.

In the silence of highland snows, Rose Sélavy smiles at the science of filing nails.
Dans le silence des cimes, Rose Sélavy regarde en riant la science qui lime.

Our misfortunes are hair-combs of hoar-frost in fuddled tresses.
Nos peines sont des peignes de givre dans des cheveux ivres.

Fair ladies! False horses in your fiery tresses.
Femmes! faux chevaux sous vos cheveux de feu.

Say the trances of confusion, not the contusions of France.
Dites les transes de la confusion et non pas les contusions de la France.

From what plain will the platinum Reginas rise to our retinas?
De quelle plaine les reines de platine monteront-elles dans nos rétines?

Fear is a pure femur under ingrate granite.
La peur, c’est une hanche pure sous un granit ingrat.

Man Ray’s gaze unsleeves the mayhem-ranters, romancers orating in the harsh breeze.
Les menteurs et les rhéteurs perdent leurs manches dans le vent rêche quand les regarde Man Ray.

Lover, if you suffer pain, never fear the river Seine.
Si vous avez des peines de cœur, amoureux, n’ayez plus peur de la Seine.

To a heart that pays, nothing is worth its aim.
À cœur payant un rien vaut cible.
(À cœur paisible, rien ne vaut tant:
To a heart at peace, nothing is worth the same.)

Vile force does more than gentle sense.
Plus fait violeur que doux sens.
(Plus fait douceur que violence:
Gentleness does more than violence.)

Wordplay, wet spray.
Jeux des mots jets mous.

Soft, sunlit, bland, oft built on sand.
Aimable souvent est sable mouvants.

Robert Delaunay: Rowboat Water-born! Beware the barb.
Robert Delaunay: de l’eau naît, gare à hameçon.

My fear in the mirror appears as a marine vapour.
Ma peur se reflète sur le verre comme un vapeur sur la mer.

DEFINITION OF ART BY RROSE SÉLAVY:
The merciless cow with tuberculosis loses in one month half an udder.
La vache tuberculeuse traite sans pitié jusqu’à perdre par mois la moitié d’un pis.
Desnos does not pale as he deals with desires on his pole.
_Sans pâlir, Desnos a fait mourir sur son pal bien des désirs._

Scale the ladder, Drieu la Rochelle, to shock the Lord.
_Monte à l’échelle, Drieu la Rochelle, pour étonner Dieu._

Will Rrose Sélavy discover the alcohol river quaffed by choleric llamas in America?
_Est-ce que Rrose Sélavy découvrira en Amérique le fleuve d’alcool où boivent les lamas cholériques?_ 

Praying in pews with bibles is like spraying the eclipse with pebbles.
_Aller jeter ses prières à l’église, autant jeter ses pierres à l’éclipse._

In an abbess’s cranium, a crab grapples an ass.
_Dans le crâne de l’abbesse se livre le combat du crabe et de l’ânesse._

Rrose Sélavy has learnt that nobility’s noble title is no buttock’s notable tackle.
_Rrose Sélavy a découvert que la particule des nobles n’est pas la partie noble du cul._

Poor pawns in art pare as their share the lion’s part.
_C’est dans l’art que les pions se taillent leur part du lion._

Why are life’s ifs and buts the problem prey of pale bolts and nuts?
_Pourquoi le problème de la vie est-il la proie des vis blêmes?_ 

On the anti-artistic ice-pack, Rrose Sélavy starts an Antarctic savings bank.
_Rrose Sélavy fonde une banque antarctique sur la banquise antiartistique._

Rrose Sélavy tarts up the fates and her dart starts the feasts.
_Rrose Sélavy met du fard au destin puis de son dard assure ses festins._

The period of debauches pips the stupor of poor wretches.
_L’heure du stupre prévaut sur la stupeur des pauvres hères._

Mankind’s thoughts take kindly to a schoolkid’s impots.
_Les pensées des hommes aiment les pensums._

What’s the fatal dogma of Christ, after all, but the mere crystal of fops?
_Le dogme fatal du Christ ce n’est après tout que le cristal des fats._

Assassin of psalteries, have you slaughtered the salvation of saints?
_Assassin des luths as-tu tué le salut des saints?_ 

Max Ernst’s cavernous eyes assess the caves of statues’ amusement, carved with his Muse’s maxims: Ernestine.
_Les yeux caves de Max Ernst estiment les cavernes où s’amusent les statues et où s’inscrivent les maximes de sa muse: Ernestine._

Is a predilection for the female the dilemma of fiction and the numeral?
_La dilection des femmes est-elle le dilemme de la fiction et des nombres?_ 

The human brood is a phantom squad with a squirt of blood.
_Les enfants des hommes sont une somme de fantômes et de sang un peu._

Female phantoms perched on elephants scriven on heavens the mysterious omega that fits planetary equations.
_Juchés sur des éléphants les fantômes femelles inscrivent au ciel l’oméga mystérieux égal des équations planétaires._
The self-regard of Rrose Sélavy forges clear as the circle closes like a shroud.
*L’orgueil de Rrose Sélavy sait s’évader du cercle qui peut se clore comme un cercueil.*

The gross legate from the cloister has all the éclat of a goitre.
*Le gras légat sorti du cloître a vraiment l’éclat d’un goitre.*

Swells don’t respect tolling knells when looking-glasses won’t reflect their longing glances.
*Les fats ignorent la vertu des glas quand les glaces refusent de refléter leur face.*

At the stars’ gala this name is written in astragals: Gala.
*Au gala des astres s’inscrit en astragales ce nom: Gala.*

The knife in severing the souls’ affliction unveil to pals affection’s fiction?
*La lame qui tranche l’affliction des âmes dévoile-t-elle aux amis la fiction de l’affection?*

Without rage in agony, place against blank pages’ irony the silence worse than mirth.
*À l’ironie des pages blanches oppose, sans rage agonie, le silence pire que le rire.*

The hurricanes that occlude Orion don’t obtrude on our vision.
*Les orages qui masquent Orion à nos visages n’en suppriment pourtant pas la vision.*

This wall is so fragile! Waves, field-mice so agile, seeking your fate by night.
*Qu’il est fragile ce mur! flots mulots agiles qui cherchez votre lot dans la nuit.*

Gastronomers! Will astronomers’ dreaming snores drown you on marine sea-shores?
*Gastronomes! les rêves des astronomes vous noieront-ils sur les grèves?*

**DEFINITIONS OF POETRY FOR:**

Paul Éluard: Love’s throes, in what late hours did I browse your sloes?
*Affres de l’amour dans quelle nuit ai-je savouré votre fruit âpre?*

André Breton: And no better matter than to drop the mitred nutters (whoops!) into a hopper.
*Le plus beau titre des hommes, c’est de jeter à la hotte (hopp!) les pitres coiffés de mitres.*

Robert Desnos: Love’s limbs, how soon shall I limber love’s noose?
*Corps d’amour, quel jour me pendrai-je à la corde d’amour?*

Jacques Baron: Female torsos just like cameos tough male torsos like female cameos.
*Jacques Baron: Les corps des femmes comme des camées le corps des forts comme des camées de femmes.*

Simone Breton: Daniel Defoe, devise a daffy simoon for Simone.
*Daniel de Foe inventez un simoun fou pour Simone.*

123 calls up at once the number 1234 for spirits smitten with lucidity. Esau died for lack of water.
*123 appelle immédiatement le chiffre 1234 pour les esprits épris de lucidité. Esaü est mort, manque d’eau.*

[‘Esaü’ is pronounced S-A-U. Adding O, ‘eau,’ would have made him ‘saoul,’ drunk.]

It’s far handier than to look at the chest, horned with breasts clairvoyant in cornea, of stars not yet born here.
*C’est encore infiniment plus commode que de regarder la poitrine, encombrée de seins clairvoyants en cornée, des étoiles non encore nées.*

Bemused apple-peels of abbeys, your boo-hoos bamboozle bees.
*Pleurs ébahis, pelures des abbayes, vous trompez les abeilles.*

Where La Parysi’s is, there is paralysis.
*Où est la Parysi’s est la paralysie.*
Enamelled rails, you sail like untrammeled royals above our travails.
*Rails d’émail, vous passez comme des rois sur nos émois.*

What is secreted by the Andean or Pyrenean eagle’s secret perineal gland?
*Que secrète la glande secrète du périnée de l’aigle des Andes ou des Pyrénées?*

Rrose Sélavy’s miracles are vows mauve as éclairs.
*Les miracles de Rrose Sélavy sont des aveux mauves comme les éclairs.*

O Telemachus, tell me cameos.
*Télémaque, tel est camée.*

To our birds at rest on reeds, what good is the dormant dormouse whose eyes are as gold?
*Qu’importe au repos de nos oiseaux sur les roseaux le loir, aux yeux comme de l’or, qui dort?*

When Man Ray is coming away, we’ll see a Far West war-fest.
*Quand Man Ray is coming away ... on pourra voir un Far West war festin.*

In a sub-zero cattle-stall, Tristan Tzara rattles his last.
*Dans les stalles de glace râle Tristan Tzara.*

Love in the fingers of foes, what rogue rifled the wafers?
*Amour aux mains hostiles, quel malin déroba les hosties?*

Does the public fate of a community affect the pubic heat of common property?
*Les malheurs des concitoyens n’influent pas sur la chaleur des cons mitoyens?*

Love! lobster in frozen fjords.
*Amour! homard dans les fjords froids.*