

Centre for the Study of Surrealism and its Legacies

SEVENTH ANNUAL PhD SYMPOSIUM

SURREALISM AND DISSIDENT SEXUALITIES

**FRIDAY DECEMBER 4th 2009
SAINSBURY CENTRE FOR VISUAL ARTS, UEA,
NORWICH**

PROGRAMME



10.30 – 11.00 Registration, Tea & Coffee

11.00 – 12.00 Session One

Rachael Grew, The University of Glasgow
'Androgyny and Parthenogenesis in Surrealism'

Esra Plumer, The University of Nottingham
'Mastery over Madness: Reading Zürn's Performance through Bellmer's Photography'

12.00 – 2.00 Lunch (provided for speakers)

Opportunity to visit the exhibition **"Subversive Spaces"**

2.00 – 3.00 Session Two

Laila Pedro, The City University of New York
"*Là où le sens s'effondre*": René Crevel regards another'

Michael Eades, The University of Nottingham
'Haunting Streets, Hunting Texts: Sex and the City in Breton, Bataille, and Acker'

3.00 – 3.30 Tea & Coffee

3.30- 4.30 Session Three

Majella Munro, The University of Essex
'Surrealism, Psychoanalysis and Japan'

Darren Thomas, Queen Mary University of London
'Transforming gender and gender transformations in Cornell's *Rose Hobart*'

4.30 – 5.00 Plenary Lecture

Prof. David Lomas, The University of Manchester
'Dissident Sexuality and Surrealist Photography'

5.00 – 6 Concluding Discussion

Rachael Grew, 'Androgyny and Parthenogenesis in Surrealism'

The use of parthenogenesis, or asexual reproduction, in Surrealism is an issue that is only just beginning to be explored in any depth. Parthenogenesis appears in Surrealism when the artist appropriates the procreative abilities, or denies the creative influence of the opposite sex, thereby constructing a non-normative, androgynous sexual identity. However, although the usurpation of female reproductive powers by certain male Surrealists, such as Duchamp and Ernst, has already been acknowledged and investigated, the reaction of their female contemporaries has not received the same degree of attention. This paper intends to address this fragmentation of parthenogenesis within Surrealism by considering the re-appropriation of procreativity by women artists, arguing that their aim was to create an exclusively female form of creation.

This re-appropriation of reproductive capabilities was not a reactionary opposition to the liberated lifestyles of many women Surrealists, but instead informs a new, specifically female vision of the *femme enfant* / *femme fatale*: a complex combination of masculine and feminine to create an ambiguous, androgynous whole. This paper will focus on the symbolic nuances and the iconography surrounding images and notions of androgyny in the work of Leonor Fini and Ithell Colquhoun in order to draw out an alternative reading of non-normative, parthenogenic sexual practice.

Rachael Grew is finishing a PhD in the History of Art at the University of Glasgow. Her research engages with concepts of gender, identity, sexuality and power in art, specialising in Surrealism. Her doctoral thesis investigates androgyny in Symbolist and Surrealist art, focusing in particular on the differences in the portrayal of the androgyne by male and female artists, and the influence of alchemy. She has had articles published in *Quest*, the online postgraduate journal of Queens University Belfast, and in an edited volume of conference papers entitled *The Apothecary's Chest: Magic, Art and Medication*. Another of her conference papers is due to be published at the end of the year in an e-book commemorating the 7th global conference on *Monsters and the Monstrous: Myths and Metaphors of Enduring Evil*.

Esra Plumer, 'Mastery over Madness: Reading Zürn's Performance through Bellmer's Photography'

On the cover of *Le surréalisme même*, issue 4, there is a photograph of a form that can only be identified as a body by the stretched skin revealing the bumps of a curved spine and a deep cut that splits a woman in two; two buttocks that are trussed up, like the wings or legs of a bird before cooking, tightly bound together. A singular continuous string ravelled around the flesh multiplies this cut around the body, pluralizing her. This form belongs to Unica Zürn, whose work and writings, like her body, undergoes a sort of mitosis, repeatedly dividing and multiplying. This image is part of a series of photographs Hans Bellmer referred to as *Unica Litogée*, a self-defined title meaning Unica bound or tied. The verb 'ligoter', to truss, refers to the female body as meat, flesh, an object of desire or passion and points to the sadomasochistic relationship between the two artists. Bellmer's photographs of Zürn go beyond his images of the dolls, where the body is not only fragmented but her sexuality is multiplied, reflecting on not only Bellmer's practice but on Zürn's as an artist. *Unica Litogée* represents Zürn's use of her identity and femininity as a performative artefact where the role of Hans Bellmer, among other male figures within her career, become instrumental.

The relationships of Zürn with Bellmer and Michaux are key to reading these images in their representation of a play on domination and sadomasochism – where submission becomes a form of silent expression. This paper will present the series *Unica Litogée* in the context of Zürn's use of automatic writing and drawing to demonstrate the functionality of the line in her own practice as well as the use of her body as medium.

Esra Plumer is in the 2nd year of a PhD in the Department of Art History at the University of Nottingham. She completed a BA in the History of Art and Theory at the University of Essex, and an MA at the University of Nottingham in which her dissertation critically examined the malleability of the term 'uncanny' in Mike Kelley's 2004 exhibition of the same name. Her PhD is entitled *Automatism in the writing and drawings of Henri Michaux, Antonin Artaud and Unica Zürn*, and her research interests include art of the mentally ill, institutional critique, psychogenic production and post-Second World War European writing and drawings. Her current research includes a focus on the work of Unica Zürn and her use of the technique of automatism as an artistic strategy.

Laila Pedro, “*Là où le sens s’effondre*”: René Crevel regards anOther’

Georges Bataille’s break with André Breton illuminates a defining space in Surrealist artworks, opening a discourse of radical artistic sovereignty that embraced, depended upon, and repositioned its own marginalization. This paper examines the space of juxtaposition created by the marginalized sexuality of René Crevel’s particularly and peculiarly Surrealist gaze, in which meaning and the boundaries between subject and object simultaneously meld into and melt away from each other. An analysis of “otherness” –sexual, ethnic, and gendered— in the works of Bataille and Crevel reveals the parallel structures of the construction and re-situation of the feminine Other in Bataille’s work and the juxtaposed feminine/African Other in Crevel’s work. Taking Bataille’s *Histoire de l’oeil* as an instructive, if problematic, aesthetic manifesto and point of departure, I examine the dynamics of the Other gazing at “anOther” in Crevel’s novels *Mon corps et moi*, *Êtes-vous fous?* and *Babylone*. Beginning with what I see as Bataille empowering the feminine by making the generally marginalized female body the active and inspiring nexus of *Histoire de l’oeil*, I examine the reconstructed center of rebellious Surrealism. Crevel’s re-positioning of his own othered body, vis-à-vis other, differently marginalized bodies, represents a re-centering, re-appropriation and glorification of the rejected self. In *Mon corps et moi*, he takes his own body apart, building a sort of dismembered lyrical autobiography that re-constructs that self as a valid, autonomous whole. Gazing at a lyrically imagined, Africanized female body in *Babylone*, Crevel’s narrator reveals the marginalizing tendency of his own marginalized gaze, even as he attempts to re-position this body in a position of power. The complexity of the dialogue between self and other in these works subverts both the rigid hierarchies of mainstream Surrealism and the broader notion of any clear delimitation between the two. In creating a space where power and representation are shifting and ambiguous, these texts begin to articulate in both aesthetic and narrative terms the structure of the abject articulated in Julia Kristeva’s *Approche de l’abject*, demonstrating the ongoing importance of Surrealism’s relationship to psychoanalysis.

A native of Havana, Laila Pedro is a doctoral student in the French program at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. She specializes in representations of the body in late-19th- and early-20th -century French and Cuban art and text, particularly Surrealism and Dada in France and modernismo and related currents in Cuba. She also works on literary translation of Surrealist poetry and prose.

Michael Eades

'Haunting Streets, Hunting Texts: Sex and the City in Breton, Bataille, and Acker'

This paper is a study of intertextuality, subversive exchanges, and rapprochements between a series of authors influenced by Surrealist approaches to sex and the city. Beginning with an analysis of George Bataille's short work of erotic fiction *Madame Edwarda* my paper suggests that this 1941 text – which is structured around a nocturnal walk through the Parisian district of St. Denis – can be revealingly positioned in relation to André Breton's more famous work of urban 'haunting', *Nadja*.

Through the exploration of a series of topographic and thematic 'coincidences' occurring between *Nadja* and *Madame Edwarda*, I explore the possibility that Bataille's text might itself be seen as subversively haunting the footsteps of Breton's earlier work. Central to this enquiry is a consideration of how the vastly differing moral attitudes of Bataille and Breton to dissident sexual practices and sexualities manifest in their literary approaches to writing the city. In this light I engage Feminist critiques of both Breton and Bataille, considering the differing plays in *Madame Edwarda* and *Nadja* on the familiar Surrealist trope of spectral urban wandering in the company of a mysterious and eroticised female.

In the light of these subtle 'rapprochements' between Breton and Bataille, the paper then turns to the much more explicit plagiaristic return to the latter's work in the postmodern feminist fiction of Kathy Acker's 1994 novel *My Mother: Demonology*. In this book Acker appropriates the voice of the writer Laure (Colette Peignot), Bataille's lover and collaborator in the 1930s. Through her détournement of this woman's writing, Acker explores a radical feminist subjectivity that can be read, my paper suggests, as a critical response to Surrealist writings of the city and the eroticised/sacralised women who populate them. In adopting an authorial stance that allowed her to plagiarise freely from their texts, I argue that Acker forged a route that allowed her to wander subversively through the literary topography of a predominantly male avant-garde – not 'haunting', but aggressively 'hunting' the legacies of these texts.

Michael Eades is a PhD candidate in Critical Theory at the University of Nottingham. His research uses case studies of avant-garde artistic communities based in twentieth century Paris and London to explore approaches to the apparently paradoxical notion of 'transgressive community'. Georges Bataille's experiments in the 1930s with dissident, formless models of community – for which, according to Maurice Blanchot, the Surrealist group remained 'the loved or hated prototype' (Blanchot, 1988) – form the starting point of this research, which goes on to consider responses to problems of community in the Mass-Observation movement, the London Psychogeographical Association, and the 'urban shamanic' collaborative ventures of Iain Sinclair.

Majella Munro, 'Surrealism, Psychoanalysis and Japan'

The Japanese case is much neglected in studies of Surrealism as an international phenomenon. Contemporary revisionist studies of Surrealism in its international manifestations continue to ignore Japanese production. Certain cultural, racial and social stereotypes are used to argue against the possible inception of Surrealism in Japan before 1945. In particular, Japanese social and political organisation and censorship laws under the wartime government are used to claim that Japanese Surrealist practice could not be informed by Communism, eroticism, or psychoanalysis, which are seen as the definitive intellectual tenets of the movement. This paper engages specifically with the supposed absence of erotic and Freudian inspired production as a way of revising and challenging this convention. Whilst it is undeniably true that orthodox Freudian psychoanalysis was, and remains, a marginal clinical practice, high and pop culture interest in psychoanalysis is marked. Salacious psychoanalytic accounts of female criminality, for instance, made popular reading during the later 1930s, and the case of Abe Sada, whose infamous murder and castration of her lover propelled her to global celebrity, will be considered in detail. The extent of interest in psychoanalysis amongst early psychologists may also not be sufficiently recognised due to the merging with Japanese tradition and culture achieved by their work. In assimilating psychoanalysis Japanese practitioners rewrote theories such as the Oedipus complex, substituting characters and concepts from Buddhist and Shinto narratives for those from European patrimony used by Freud. Rather than making Japanese psychoanalytic theory deviant, this type of assimilation in fact highlights the extent to which Freud's ideas are culturally biased, allowing progress towards the universal theory Freud desired. This paper examines the existence of both psychoanalysis and eroticism in pre Second World War Japan, discussing premodern Japanese erotica and the interest with things "erotic, nonsensical, and grotesque" in art and popular culture of the 1920s in order to chart a history of depictions of sexual deviancy, and analysing the impact and influence of these on Surrealism in Japan.

Majella Munro is an art historian, journalist and Japanologist, whose research focuses on censorship and cultural repression. She is interested in art production under totalitarian political regimes and the use of pornography as a sociological resource. Majella began PhD research at the University of Essex on the role of the Japanese avant-garde during the Second World War in 2008. Her first book, on Japanese erotic art, was published by Erotic Review Books in November 2008. Majella is also a founding editor of *Modern Art Asia*, an online peer-reviewed postgraduate journal dedicated to Asian art history.

Darren Thomas, 'Transforming gender and gender transformations in Cornell's *Rose Hobart*'

In this paper I will be exploring the implications of Joseph Cornell's appropriation/transfiguration of found footage in *Rose Hobart* in relation to gender identity. I will be concerned with establishing a bi-sexual reading of the film, positing it as an ambiguous site/fantasy of contested ideological gender representations, revolving around the Rose Hobart of the title. In Cornell's 'cutting free' of Hobart from the patriarchal discourses of the Melford film (where she is clearly figured as 'object of desire') a number of issues relating to her 'new' status are raised: firstly, the view that Cornell's *re-construction* of her is a renewed form of patriarchal will-to-mastery as fantasy/fetish; secondly, as a kind of fan's idealised film-portrait, celebrating her star-performer status; thirdly, as a figure of identification, – a desire *to be* her; fourthly, in Feminist/Queer terms, it is a form of transformation, of a fixed, unitary gender identity, whereby; Hobart's gender ambivalence troubles Master Discourse. A combination of all these positions exists, and in many ways, a surrealist reading of the film, supports this, viewing Hobart as both an oneiric figure, idealised, fetishised, haunting (as with Nadja and the other women associated with amour fou) the 'dreaming' author/spectator with her poetic, quasi-magical powers and as a disruptive agent of latent desire, unsettling rigid, conventional, moral norms and values. In different ways Rose Hobart is seen as a locus of unbounded surrealist desire: she inhabits and yet escapes the markers and threshold spaces which separate and define male, female and bisexual gazes into a kind of uncharted liminal realm. I shall be utilising my own theory of 'bisexual switching,' which posits a 'mobile' spectator who actively negotiates the various (gender) identities *dialogically* with the text/film maker. Extending the discussion on gender identity, I will consider the contribution of my own practice (film and collage).

Darren Thomas' research (especially the notion of 'bi-sexual switching') builds on work on gender identity and spectatorship, initiated in his dissertation for his first degree, considering representations of gender, influenced by feminist/psychoanalytical perspectives in texts by Bunuel and Ionesco; and further developed in his MA/M.Ed. (Media Education) dissertation, considering gender identity in *The X Files*. He is currently in the third year of a PhD (entitled: 'Border crossings: re-presenting gender in surrealist film') and this paper is based on ongoing research on gender identity in surrealist film, where he considers several surrealist films, including: Luis Bunuel's *Un Chien andalou* (1929), Georges Franju's *Les yeux sans visage* (1960) and Terry Gilliam's *Tideland* (2005). His research investigates how these films problematise any simple, unitary (fixed) sense of (gender) identity, blurring boundaries between masculine/feminine as process and flux; and, ultimately evaluates their transformative potential for the spectator. He is a founder member of the London Surrealist Group, having close ties with other national and international surrealist groups, including the Leeds, Paris and Czech groups (to name a few). He also writes poetry, paints, makes collages and has made a number of films (he is currently working on a film: 'The dream key,' which is part of the practice element of his PhD).