

The Guarantor of Chance: Surrealism's Ludic Practices¹

Susan Laxton

Abstract

The historical link between Surrealism and poststructuralism, apparent in the psychoanalytically informed ludic practices of both the Bretonian and Batailleian strains of the movement, has been central to the rewriting of Surrealism as the 'other' to modernist discourse – and to an understanding of the movement's importance to the wildly expanded field of art practices of the 1970s and 1980s. Through their ludic practices, from automatist driven *errance* to firmly regulated games activated to guarantee chance outcomes, Surrealism turned play against itself, initiating processes and gestures that resisted the means/ends rationality driving institutions of art toward homogeneity, standardization and commodification.

Surrealism's Postmodern Dialectic

Last year I attended a conference in honour of the philosopher and critic Arthur Danto where a contemporary painting was disparaged with the comment that it was 'no better than a bad Magritte.'² For a moment, there was silence. The audience shifted in their seats; the speaker faltered. The spectre of Surrealist painting had been called forth – nobody asked what made a Magritte good or bad – everyone understood the terms of the dismissal. In spite of the fact that Magritte's paintings are among the best known and most widely exhibited works associated with the Surrealist movement, the critical position that maintains Surrealist painting as the standard for 'bad art' persists in contemporary academia. And by this phrase 'bad art,' I mean to evoke judgments of both taste and morality.

This is not a position that should be mistaken for a Greenbergian hangover – the opposition that valorised abstraction as 'pure opticality' and denigrated Surrealism as kitsch has long been exhausted.³ Rather, the issue lies with easel painting itself as a privileged medium within art institutions, and the refusal of those institutions by radical artists working in the first decades of the twentieth century. More specifically, it has to do with painting's own uncomfortable history within the Surrealist movement: a history scarred by polemic reversals, embarrassing compromises, and internal dissention. For, when André Breton performed his recuperation of painting in *La Révolution surréaliste* over the heads of Max Morise and Pierre Naville, compromising early commitments in order to draw Picasso into the movement, he virtually guaranteed that the greater part of Surrealist painting would be excluded from the subsequent art historical re-evaluation of the movement in the 1970s and 1980s.⁴ That reassessment would be based on the recovery of Surrealism as an *avant-garde* movement, and the criterion for inclusion – that the work meet certain standards of 'resistance' – demanded that art practices be understood as the only available sphere from which to recode a cultural field driven by commerce.⁵ Easel painting, affirmative of the status quo, could never approach the transgressive power of collage and photography. Measured against this standard of institutional critique, Surrealist painting was of course condemned for conforming to the pictorial demands of the museum and the art market, but the apparition that sent a shudder through the auditorium at Danto's



conference was Surrealist painting as the sign for the inevitable co-optation of all avant-garde movements.

Of course, the standards set by critics such as Rosalind Krauss and Hal Foster who wrote Surrealism back into the history of modern art in the 1970s and 1980s are inseparable from their own historical context as postmodern subjects and from their simultaneous reception of the wildly expanding and commercially driven field of contemporary art practices – conditions that made institutional critique seem particularly urgent. Advanced art in the postmodern field interrogated modernist autonomy by revealing strategies of construction and displacing the doxa of authenticity and originality. Instead, it addressed the production of meaning and the conditions from which meaning emerged, following on the rigorous questioning of representation initiated by post-structuralist theories.

Accordingly, the simultaneous reassessment of Surrealism recovered an alternative strain of art production latent in the dominant art historical discourse – a strain that sought to fold art into life through the embrace of the experiential, the degraded and the everyday. In retrospect, this alternative range of practices seemed to affirm the ultimate *contingency* of meaning against the *certainty* or *totality* of meaning proffered by modernist aesthetics; that is, they appeared self-reflexive, not self-referential. From the far-flung reaches of the Dada movement, Marcel Duchamp's readymade interrogated the determinants of the work of art. And from the margins of Surrealism, the dismantling of cognitive autonomy was recognized as well, through the movement's psychoanalytically-driven surrender of visual and experiential mastery to the mechanisms of the unconscious. It was through these alternative practices – strategies and processes, not canvases and sculptures – that Surrealism gained status as an avant-garde movement, initiating a critique of artistic and cognitive autonomy that resonated with postwar advanced art.

The link between Surrealism and postmodernism was succinctly made by Hal Foster in his 1983 introduction to a collection of essays gathered under the name *The Anti-Aesthetic*.⁶ Arguing through the theories of Jürgen Habermas, Foster claims that the autonomy of culture itself in the first decades of the twentieth century 'provoked, at least in art, a counter-project in the form of an anarchic avant-garde.' He continues: 'Although repressed in late modernism, this "surrealist revolt" is returned in postmodernist art (or rather, its critique of representation is affirmed), for the mandate of postmodernism is also: "change the object itself".' Both the historical avant-garde and its postwar neo-avant-garde counterpart engaged the task of bodying forth the 'death of the subject,' the loss of 'master narratives,' and the difficulty of opposition in 'consumer society'.⁷

One of the leitmotifs of what would come to be described as a postmodern reintegration of art with life was the appearance of acategorical art practices that freely mixed formerly discrete mediums – or ignored them entirely. With the rise of hybrid and unclassifiable forms such as the combine of performance and video or the dematerialising gestures of conceptual art and installation, the framing functions of easel painting and sculpture were declared effectively bankrupt – unable to adequately incorporate the structural freedoms now necessary to address the voracious institutional field. Likewise, when the contours of an alternative strain of modernism began to show themselves to



historians looking back on Surrealism, they took the shape not of the discourse of mastery and control implied by the high finish of Surrealist painting, but of art production that had been marginalized in the discourse: most emphatically, photography and collage, but also frottage and the erotically charged found object.⁸ Surrealist painting was discredited as a reactionary return to academic and institutional norms, a rejection with historical support in the form of the writings of the so-called renegade surrealists led by Georges Bataille, who had excoriated Breton's group on the grounds of its sublimation and romantic idealism.

Bataille's *informe* reads as a *desublimating* operation that opens form onto space, eroding the boundary between figure and ground, inside and outside, art and life – exposing those boundaries as conventions. From their place outside the traditional categories of works of art, avatars of the *informe* effectively critique the institutional codes and lines of power underlying those categories. Thus within Bataillean Surrealism, painting could be accounted for only if it displayed a structural heterogeneity – rather than a depictive one, which would be designated as a transformation of base material into the merely visual – and a proclivity to waste that challenged the prevailing ethos of instrumental reason and exchange value.⁹ The 1996 show *L'informe: mode d'emploi*, an exhibition that had been in germination since the early 1980s, posed the operations of the *informe* point for point against the founding myths of modernism: opticality, verticality, unification and the visual gestalt – yet that resistance was liberally demonstrated with *postmodern* art. Thus Raoul Ubac's 1939 *Brûlage* and Robert Morris's 1967 *Felt Tangle* were linked not through their medium, style or historical contingency but through their shared resistance to assimilation by the dominant culture.¹⁰

It could be said, then, that a well-limned set of concepts guided the art historical project that wrote the Surrealist past as the history of the postmodern present. Through the miasma of shifting historical contexts an impulse to 'change the object' could be traced through formal and institutional challenges, unconventional mediums and an insistence on the contingency of meaning. But perhaps most importantly for Surrealism, these new interpretive frames would be joined by art history's embrace of psychoanalytic theory as a challenge to the humanist notion of cognitive autonomy.¹¹

Following on the post-Lacanian acknowledgment of the centrality of repetition compulsion and the uncanny to psychoanalysis, Surrealism was reinterpreted on the basis of the movement's engagement with the *full* range of Freudian theories – as opposed to the focus on the abundant literal dream depictions that had become a cliché of Surrealist art history. Photography, arguably the single most important critical medium actively refracting the *postmodern* scene, made its critique of authorship by foregrounding its reproductive dimension – the repetition of an absent original that is inherent to the medium. Once again, the implications for Surrealism were recognized and activated, and the movement was reinterpreted on the basis of its formulations around chance and repetition. With chance understood not as fully random coincidence but as the unconscious contriving to place the subject in situations favourable to a traumatic return of the repressed, understood, that is, as an avatar of the Lacanian 'automaton,' then the extent to which Breton had recoiled from this dark side of desire seemed clear and condemnatory. In withdrawing from the impulse to death and destruction that is implied in the full formulation of the pleasure principle, Breton would additionally forego the



direct historical links to the postwar Lacanian revival of psychoanalysis. Again, the writings of the Bataille group, which fully acknowledged the implications of the death drive, were received as a refusal to sublimate the base and the carnal into libidinal desire, a refusal that extended to resistance against the constant pressures on art toward homogeneity and subordination.¹²

The Surrealist Ludic

The displaced role of human volition – and its cousins, artistic intent and originality – that was central to the psychoanalytic formulation of chance and the uncanny was of course also key to the post-structural critique of humanism and had become a touchstone of postmodernist critics, particularly in terms of the relevance of painting to advanced art. Yet it would be a mistake to assume that those artists aligned with Georges Bataille were the only – or even the first – Surrealists to have recognized the potential for critique inherent in the deployment of chance. When modernist easel painting took its first blows from the historical avant-garde, Breton's Surrealism was at hand, and the response of the then-nascent movement was identical to its postmodern 'repetition': a turn to alternative practices. By this I mean not only Breton's early engagement with photography and collage but the activation of automatist-based strategies that were in place even prior to the formulation of the first Surrealist manifesto: ephemeral gestures that, in resistance to object-production, remain only as a trace of their process; procedures that reject the omniscient author through the immediacy of their production. These are the strategies that I am designating as the Surrealist ludic – an early deployment of chance meant to militate against means/ends rationality. Play in Surrealism traces Breton's avant-garde engagement from its first instances in automatist wandering to its systematic application in the form of firmly regulated games. And Surrealist play as it is presented here, in appropriated photographs or in the drawings produced by the game called *cadavre exquis*, reveals direct links to postmodern art practices that have critiqued, rather than affirmed, art institutions.

But the analysis of ludic Surrealism must be prefaced by a clarification of what exactly is meant in an art historical context by play, a task that has never been undertaken within the visual arts, yet is necessary in order to retrieve the ludic from a vernacular that equates it with whimsy, leisure, or entertainment.¹³ Play in fact has a long association with art through aesthetics – a relation that began with the coupling of the two terms in Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, a conflation which was maintained through Schiller's institutionalisation of disinterest to ultimately become concretised as a set of practices in the art for art's sake movement at the turn of the last century.¹⁴ The humanist/autonomous definition of play that aligns it with the civilizing impulse in culture survives intact well into the postwar period, and is best summarized by Johan Huizinga:

Play is a voluntary activity or occupation executed within certain fixed limits of time and place, according to rules freely accepted but absolutely binding, having its aim in itself and accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy and the consciousness that it is 'different' from 'ordinary' life.¹⁵



Play comes by its connotations of frivolity and un-productivity to this dominant characteristic: it exists at a remove from a reality driven by practical necessities and its activities have no consequences in that reality. It is conceived as bounded or, to use a term familiar within the discourse of modernism, autonomous. In philosophy, play is any pursuit undertaken for its own sake: it is neither conceptual nor sensuous; it has no stake in intellectual or material worlds; it doesn't *matter*.¹⁶ Clearly, this ludic is inadequate to the goals of an avant-garde bent on shattering boundaries, indulging desire, and probing the grounds of 'pure thought.' But if we press on play's apparently sturdy ramparts, they wobble. For following on play's opposition to reality, a number of other oppositions commonly held against the ludic have emerged, extrapolated from the master notion that aligns the satisfaction of practical needs with biological naturalism and with the stability and authenticity of empirical truths. Seen from this perspective, opposed to fundamental knowledge supported by the reliability of material evidence, play is perceived as unstable, as in the play of meaning; fragmented, as in the play of light; insubstantial, as in the play of music; or as artificial or inauthentic, as in illusion or 'make-believe.'

These attributes characterize play as eccentric specifically in its *lack* of limits – in direct contrast to the aesthetic grasp of play as a bounded activity. This designation sets play against the normative, the rational, and the ideal as well as, in its apparent unconcern with external conditions, against political entities. This characterization, too, persists up to and throughout modernist discourse. In fact, at the threshold of the twentieth century, just before Surrealism emerges on the scene, play as a signifier is internally riven. The contradictions inherent to the term are reflected in the very range of philosophical approaches that make use of ludic theories: play is claimed as the underlying justification for such radically opposed concepts as Schiller's autonomous aesthetics and Nietzsche's Dionysian excesses.¹⁷ The ludic drives are historically something to be contained, harnessed or released; their significance is determined solely by context. Even within the relatively limited discipline of art, play's variability rubs through, as when for example musical diachrony, dynamic and ephemeral, is inertly framed as an abstract totality autonomous from material content.

In fact the breadth and flexibility of play as a signifier threatens to dissolve even these meanings in the multiplicity of its references. To play is to engage – to put into play; yet to play is to *disengage* from consequence. Play is artificial, as in mimetic illusions, yet it is characterized as a primal impulse. It is useless and it produces nothing, yet is understood psychologically as a form of practice, trial action for life. It is constructive, as when the smooth play of machine parts keeps up production, and it is destructive, as when too much play in a part can bring the whole to a catastrophic halt. Play claims to be free – it cannot be coerced – yet it is valued for the restrictions that keep it circumscribed from life. In spite of Huizinga's insistence (and Schiller's and Kant's before him) that play is bounded and regular, circumscribing an ideal field, its overarching characteristic is *indeterminacy*. Accordingly, play is repeatedly defined in aesthetic and cultural discourse by what it is *not*, rather than by an essence: there is nothing at its centre; it signifies the absence of essence. Play's conundrum, then, is also its power. Its position as the signifier of excess beyond binary opposition has made it a central reference for post-structural thought, notably that of Jacques Derrida,



with the play of the signifier providing the unstable basis for the arbitrariness and ultimate contextuality of meaning at large.¹⁸

This alternative dimension of the ludic, the strain that was tapped by the avant-garde as a fundamentally subversive phenomenon, was not without its precedents in the discursive field from which Surrealism was to emerge: Nietzsche's aesthetic theory acknowledged play's full range of signification, sorting out the fundamentally ludic cosmos into Apollonian illusion and Dionysian excess.¹⁹ Nietzschean play, in its sounding of the depths of violence and tragedy, would become a touchstone of the Bataille Surrealists. But it was the play theories of psychoanalysis, also engaged with opening up the conundrum of the pleasures of 'unpleasure,' that would resonate with the Surrealists gathered around André Breton, and these are the theories that would ultimately inform the better part of the Surrealist games.²⁰

In their ludic practices the Surrealists would find an unrestricted medium for their critique of reality. Yet this medium, play, was nevertheless thoroughly modernist itself. Play, according to the terms by which it is joined to art through aesthetics, shares the structure of modernist self-referentiality: a bounded field of signs cut off from reference to – and consequence in – material reality. To theorize the ludic as critique in the modern context is to explore the paradox of the deployment of play against play, with the regulated and autonomous ludic as the basis for art institutions undermined by a disorderly counter-model that underpins Surrealism's occupation of play as an avant-garde strategy.

The first of these strategies, in place by 1924, is Surrealist *errance*, an aimless wandering in the city's streets meant to encourage the eruption of unconscious images into the perceptual field.²¹ *Errance* was an extension of automatist strategies into physical space, a revaluation of perception and apprehension that, in its privileging of the immediacy of experience, stood firmly against representation itself. As such, the practice was so ephemeral as to have left few traces. Yet like all Surrealist strategies engaging the unconscious, *errance* was tied to the imagistic.

In describing automatism, the psychiatrist Pierre Janet maintained that it is only through the *conventions* of perception that we experience time as linear and the visible world as a continuous field – without preconceptions, reality would appear radically fragmented, in a condition of disaggregation, as subconscious processes became indistinguishable from the consciously perceived world.²² Through the disengagement of will that marked *errance*, the Surrealists sought this breakdown between imaginary objects and real objects, a breakdown that would fully satisfy the avant-garde criteria for the rejoining of art with everyday experience. Any record of *errance* therefore would necessarily appear as a disaggregate assembly of emphatically ordinary images, scraps lifted directly from the urban field in an attempt to evade conventions of perception and organization. Two texts of the mid-to-late 1920s, André Breton's *Nadja* and Louis Aragon's *Paris Peasant*, approached this montage-like immediacy through their diaristic structure – but importantly, *Nadja* also leaned on photographic illustrations. But a third, entirely photographic record of *errance* also exists, contemporary with these – a text that records an experience of the city structured by the psychic apparatus in its own likeness – an obscure album of Eugène Atget's photographs bound together by Man Ray in 1926.²³





Fig. 1 Eugène Atget, *Avenue des Gobelins*, 1925, silver printing-out paper print, 22.8 x 17.8 cm, George Eastman House, Rochester, New York, Man Ray Collection.

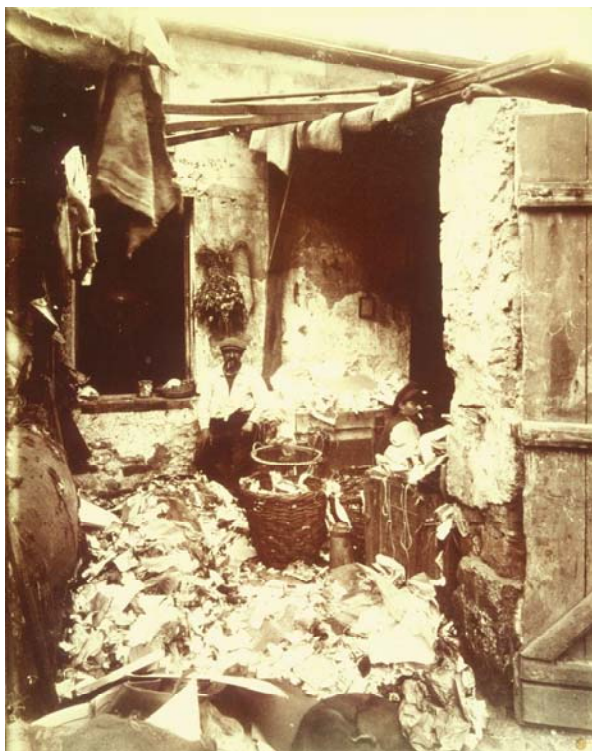


Fig. 2 Eugène Atget, *Porte d'Asnières – Cité Trebert*, 1913, albumen print, 21.7 x 18 cm, George Eastman House, Rochester, New York, Man Ray Collection.



The assemblage of more than forty photographs is mounted in exactly a manner to evoke the reception of the city by a Surrealist 'in a state of grace with chance.'²⁴ Its choice of subjects feels arbitrary: unnamed women in doorways, window displays (**fig. 1**), anonymous architecture; and it is repetitive within those categories. The places that it documents range from a travelling circus encamped at Rue de Vaugirard in Montparnasse, to the ragpickers' settlement in the far reaches of the 17th arrondissement northeast of the city (**fig. 2**), to a hairdresser's shop on the Boulevard de Strasbourg just east of Les Halles. And the disaggregation of the collection also extends to its temporal logic: the images range in the dates of their production from 1899 to 1926, in further resistance to closure and unity. The only shared term for the sites seems to be one already present in Atget's own archive: that of a conspicuous displacement – from the well-toured boulevards and monuments that had grounded Paris as homogeneous and refined, to its marginal, gritty and diverse back alleys – effectively delivering a Paris mildly repellent in its banality.

Man Ray's appropriated text – an album of images identified as Atget's but assembled under the sign of Surrealism – represents an exportation of the archive into the field of artistic practices and a radical displacement of authorship. The motivation behind the selection of the images is recondite to the point that the album resists composition and composition's articulation of meaning. Rather, the book-form of the album, which would normally assure the rational unfolding of meaning, here reconstructs a site of Surrealist play – the aleatory 'emergence' of the photographs and their conversion into a Surrealist text. For the images that comprise the album, in their random, redundant and apparently unmotivated disorder, indicate not purposeful selection, but a kind of aimless drift through the city of Paris that was for sale in Atget's studio.²⁵ The fragmented and arbitrary structure of the album indicates a submerged 'illogic' that links the images associatively across their subject matter, much in the oblique manner of unconscious processes.

Disaggregation of the visual field in surrealist *errance* was understood as perception opening transgressively onto the occluded city, in a material instantiation of psychic processes. Writing in the 1970s, some fifty years after his break with the Surrealists, the philosopher Henri Lefebvre still considered this overdetermination of the urban field as a crucial element in his critique of everyday life.²⁶ Through Lefebvre, Surrealist *errance* ripened into the politically charged Situationist *dérive* of the 1950s and 1960s, a spatial *détournement* equally resistant to representation, one that marked out the 'psychogeographic' potential of the urban grid. But it was the activist philosopher Michel de Certeau who made the connection to play explicit. For de Certeau, the sense of never settling implied by the body in *errance*, its state of being always in 'movement-between,' was critical to the political valence of passage through the city. His claim was that urban wandering, recast as a 'pedestrian enunciation' operates in excess of utilization, 'displacing meaning in the direction of equivocalness.' When walking is unmotivated, de Certeau wrote, 'it "authorizes" the production of an area of free play on a checkerboard that analyses and classifies identities,' imposing 'a local authority' as against 'functionalist totalitarianism.'²⁷



Grafting psychic processes onto the 'horizontal' or 'geographic experience of human life' has its postmodern heritors most obviously in the Situationist *dérive*, or in its contemporary, *New Babylon*, a ludic utopia planned by Dutch artist Constant Nieuwenhuys whose inhabitants could change the configurations of the city on whim. But *errance* is also active in post-studio practices such as Vito Acconci's 1969 *Following Piece*, in which Acconci allowed the movements of an arbitrarily chosen passer-by to determine his own passage through the city, or Robert Smithson's 1967 photo-essay *Monuments of Passaic*, an anti-tour through a degraded industrial landscape in New Jersey. The critical potential of revealing what is normally unacknowledged in the urban field would eventually emerge in the public interventions of for example, Gordon Matta Clark, who described his building cuts as a process of 'undoing,' and Adrian Piper, whose 1970 *Catalysis* series sought to derail the isolated complacency of the city dweller. In fact, the dynamic object resistance initiated with *errance* would resonate with the ephemerality of a whole range of post-war performance art, and the appropriative move by which the Surrealists claimed the city as a field of signification was the necessary precedent to the revelation of social systems in the photographically documented work of Hans Haacke and Martha Rosler.

As rich a vein as the urban coordinates of the purposeless proved to be, by the end of the 1920s Surrealist *errance* had been eclipsed by the theory of 'objective chance,' just as its psychoanalytic basis, Janet's automatism, had been replaced by Freudian theory. It would seem that within a mere half-decade the founding notion of Surrealism as essentially dynamic and therefore representable only through an index of process had disappeared. Yet there are indications that it was not abandoned but only submerged, slipped in as the automatic structure underlying another pastime: the systematic playing of games. The most widely and continuously practiced of these was the game of *cadavre exquis*, 'an infallible means,' as Breton recalled, 'for sending judgment on holiday and for completely liberating the metaphorical activity of the mind.' The drawings, he asserted, were endowed 'to the highest degree with the power of *dérive*,' the subjection of the self and its representations to the vagaries of pure circumstance, as against even the predetermination of unconscious motives.²⁸



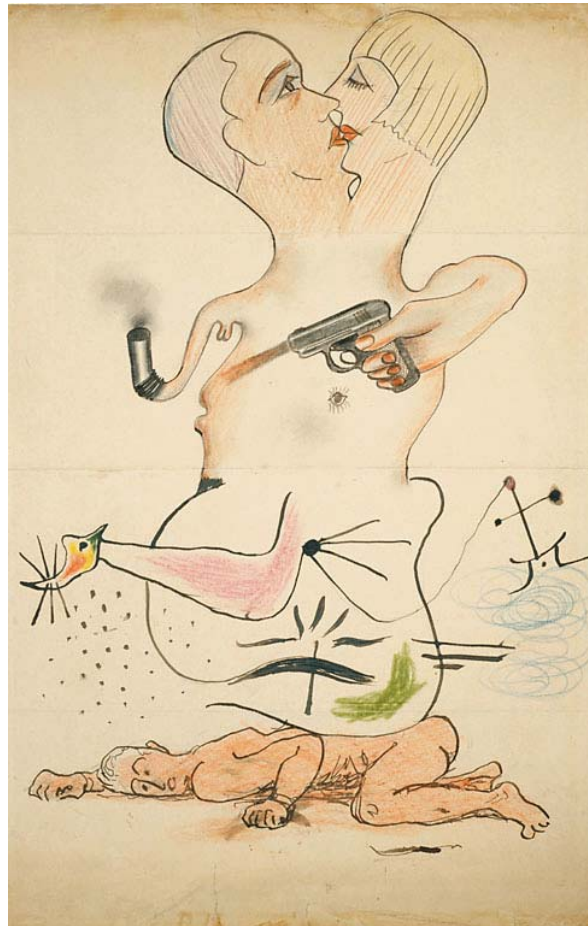


Fig. 3 May Ray, Yves Tanguy, Joan Miró, Max Morise, cadaver exquis, c. 1928. Pen and ink, graphite, coloured pencils and coloured crayons on paper, 36.2 x 23.1 cm, The Art Institute of Chicago (reproduction, The Art Institute of Chicago)

Appropriated in 1925 from the parlor game *petits papiers*, and unique among Surrealist language games for having a visual counterpart, the regular play of *cadavre exquis* displaced even the automatic drawings from which it indirectly derived. Like automatic drawings, the *cadavre exquis* deployed machine-like depersonalization and an insistence on the unpremeditated mark to disable the twinned authority of unique signature and compositional order that had defined the fine arts since the sixteenth century (figs. 3,4). Assembled from the discrete contributions of a number of players according to predetermined rules, each *cadavre exquis* attests to the act of putting pencil to paper in a manner intended to produce sheer inconsistency of signature, style and skill, of mimesis and abstraction, the painstakingly modeled and the utterly flat – provoking a casual violation of tone as the drawing shifts from all the lyricism of which a line is capable to willful and unrepentant scrawl.

But the play itself is severely regulated. The players pass prefolded sheets, and each draws a portion of the figure, hides the contribution behind a fold, then passes the sheet to the next player. Now, each player has a page marked and hidden by somebody else, and must draw on the next blank section, using the remaindered ends of the previous drawing as a starting point. Thus a certain



degree of autonomy is preserved for the 'head' of the figure, but this does not hold for the 'body' of the work, which becomes increasingly overdetermined as play continues. When everyone has put down their pencils, the sheets are unfolded and, as Breton put it, 'one judges the viability of the monster thus produced.'²⁹

Where exactly is chance in this game? The rules that govern the *cadavre exquis* structure and dominate the associative range of iconography registered in the course of play. The game effects a reassuring rhythm, predictable and consistent; an assertion of stability that would seem to be incompatible with the aleatory dynamism associated with free-play, and which reveals an alliance with convention and mechanical automation that should run counter to the discourse of liberation informing Surrealist practices. Yet there is a latent subversiveness to the game that accounts for its continued play long after the Surrealists had given up on tapping the unconscious.

Unlike the deregulatory experiments in automatism, games hold no pretensions to unbridled and primitivist origins – they are self-acknowledged artificial constructions. Their power lies in their ability to generate and establish *new* conventions, a license to freedom purchased by their spatial and temporal boundaries – by their open existence outside the discourse of naturalism that encloses material reality. Any condition lived inside a game is provisional; for the duration of the game behaviours not socially permissible elsewhere can have free rein – so long as this is written into the rules.³⁰ In a sense, then, the extreme regulation of games is moot, for arbitrariness underlies the initial constitution of the rules. As such they have the power to open up unprecedented courses of action and modes of representation from within the bounds of the system they articulate; phenomena that can later be exported from the game in the form of newly rehearsed systems of meaning. If 'surreality' sought a utopian representational mode that approached immediacy through the production of unpremeditated texts, the game and its regulations could be designed to put it into effect: the regulations acted as a *guarantor of chance and chance's repetition*. Thus every *cadavre exquis* testifies indexically to the process of its making – through the folds that slam and lurch across the figure – yet each identically regulated round of the game yields a different result. The paradox is structural, and its mechanical reliability explains the game's appeal long after Surrealism itself had ceased to be compelling as an avant-garde movement: Picasso was still playing in 1947 with Dora Maar; Robert Motherwell, William Baziotes, Roberto Matta, Jackson Pollock and Lee Krasner played, as did Gerhard Richter and Joseph Beuys, as late as 1979.³¹

Like montage, if the *cadavre exquis* is valued as an avant-garde practice it is because it specifically demands a mode of reception radically different from that of a unified object. In the organic work of art, anticipating the comprehension of the whole guides the comprehension of the parts, as, say, the *cadavre exquis*, in its verticality and its anthropomorphic iconography, raises the expectation that the image will represent a figure. Yet repeatedly the *cadavre exquis* frustrates that expectation, as it substitutes 'monsters' for that which was previously assumed as given: the unity of the human form. The figures are received as ludicrous because their specific parts are set in perceptual and cognitive tension with the whole of the object and its meaning. The reception by the



viewer forces a critique of conventional expectations – there is no essence, no centre to the image, there are only parts set in a chain of part-production. The buckled page introduces ambiguity into representation – between figure and ground, material and ideal, originality and reproduction – releasing the monolith of denotation into the proliferation of play outside meaning.

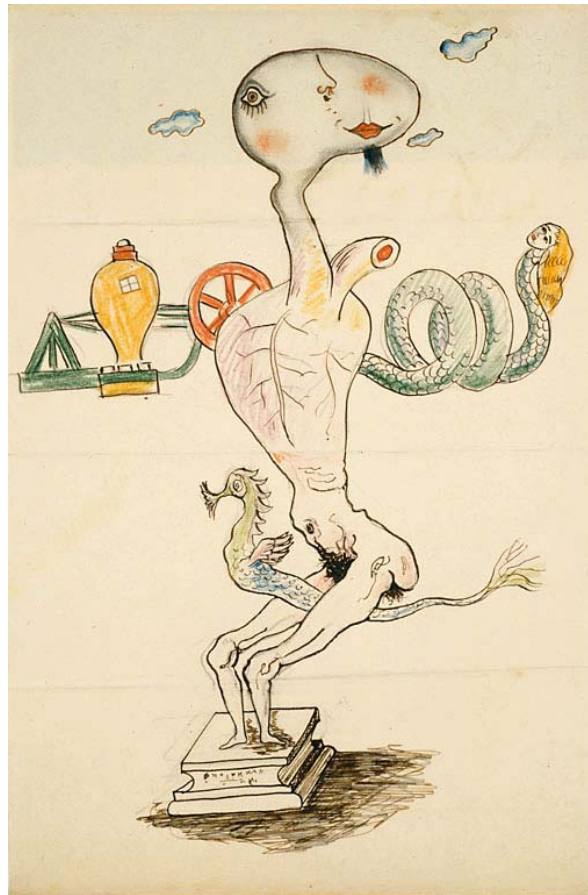


Fig. 4 Yves Tanguy, Man Ray, Max Morise, André Breton, cadaver exquis, 1928. Pen and ink, graphite and coloured crayons on paper, 31.1 x 20 cm, The Art Institute of Chicago (reproduction, the Art Institute of Chicago).

The course of the game amounted to a repeated staging of textual production: an acknowledgement of the work of art as a construction, as a physical manifestation of intertextuality. These ideas, circulating at the nascent moment of post-structuralist theory, would burst into the postwar field in the form of a renewed interest in play as evidenced by the wide translation in the late 1940s of Johan Huizinga's sociological study *Homo Ludens*, a cult text of the Situationists, the appearance of Roger Caillois's ethnologically inflected *Man, Play and Games*, in 1958, and Jacques Derrida's extended treatment of the play of meaning, first made explicit in 1968 with his essay, 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences'.³² Games would simultaneously resurface in art production, literally in Fluxus projects like Georges Brecht's 1963 *Water Yam*, in which



cards with brief instructions directed the play, or in Oyvind Fåhlström's *Planetarium* of the same year, which generated an infinite variety of combinations from only two perspectives – words determining images or images determining words. Both were preceded by the curtly scripted 'Happenings,' which depended on the active engagement of the audience to produce an unpredictable amalgam of action and reception. Sol Lewitt's directives for wall drawings, meant, like the *cadavre exquis*, to be executed by people with little or no skill, also share in regulation's self-effacement and mechanical reproduction: 'the idea,' as Lewitt said, 'becomes a machine that makes the art.'³³ And the range of process art that showed itself in the 1970s exists, like the *cadavre exquis*, mainly as a degraded trace of its own making – for example in William Anastasi's *Un sighted Drawing* of 1968, where a precisely folded page is repeatedly marked by a pencil jiggling in the draftsman's pocket, producing a prescribed but indeterminate outcome.

To the extent that 'use-value' – defined as that which is consumed 'on the spot,' never entering the cycle of economic exchange – is a touchstone for avant-garde production, it may seem perverse to consider play, which is useless and repetitive, as resistant to the circulation and homogeneity essential to the mature money system.³⁴ But Walter Benjamin, addressing the commodification of art objects in his essay, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,' irrevocably released use-value from its connotation as utility, finding the unique status of the artwork not in instrumentality but 'in ritual, the location of its original use-value.'³⁵ The regulated action of Surrealist games reactivates the parameters of ritual, throwing new light on Benjamin's characterization of the group's activities as 'profane illumination.'³⁶ And the Surrealist games lay outside the system of production and consumption in two important ways. So long as their outcomes remained ephemeral, they resisted evaluation and could not be smoothed into commodities. Even the *cadavre exquis* drawings, thanks to the 'debasement' devices of the fold, were regarded as byproducts which long resisted recuperation as curated art objects. Their value was as a mnemonic trace of process and intersubjective relations. Second, those elusive play outcomes could not be predicted. Chance is the definitive element in the ludic; and in spite of attempts to tame chance into the calculable probabilities of economic game theory,³⁷ play continued to perform destructively – not only at the level of provocations aimed at the propriety of the bourgeoisie, but at a level directed against the broader political category of repressive conventions and the institutions of power that keep them in place. As Denis Hollier has argued through Marx, use-value functions in objects as a property so inseparable from its material support that it 'is only realized in the consumption, that is, the destruction, of the thing' – that is, in a degree of violence done to the object, a violence inflected by pleasure.³⁸ Surrealist games, as pure experience exempt from exchange value, played out their self-destruction as well, gleefully taking down with them the monolithic structure that had held art to play through autonomy and disinterest.

If the problem of autonomy in the visual arts can itself be traced to the ludic, then the relevance of Surrealist play as an avant-garde strategy lies in the use of play to explode accepted notions of the ludic/aesthetic from within. Easel painting was never exempt from the system of exchange that depended on disinterest to sustain commodity culture – a culture that has become so



pervasive in the postwar years that it threatens to compromise the very possibility of critique. Any movement toward once again foregrounding Surrealist painting must acknowledge the historical link between Surrealism and poststructuralism – between not only Dalí and Lacan, but Lacan and Masson, or between Miró, Bataille and Leiris; or via Foucault's reception of Magritte. Through those links, Surrealist painting stands a chance of being understood as having been positioned in resistance to the accelerating standardization of culture that still dominates and manipulates contemporary experience. To risk ignoring the specific conditions of Surrealism's importance to the postwar revolution in meaning would be to risk relegating Surrealist painting to nothing less than a conservative retrenchment on a par with the interwar 'return to reason'³⁹ or, more seriously, to risk complicity with the ongoing commercial and institutional co-optation of the movement.

¹ Sections of this essay were delivered at the Association of Art Historians 29th Annual Conference in London, April 12, 2003, in the session that asked the question, 'Just what is it that makes today's surrealism so different, so appealing?' I'd like to thank the session chairs, Simon Baker and Neil Cox, as well as the speakers and audience for the lively discussion that ensued.

² Arthur C. Danto: *Art, Action, History*, conference, Columbia University, New York, 3-5 October, 2002.

³ Clement Greenberg, 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch' and 'Surrealist Painting' in *Collected Essays and Criticism Vol I, Perceptions and Judgments 1939-1944*, John O'Brian (ed.), University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1986, pp. 5-22; 225-31.

⁴ Morise rejects painting as incommensurate with automatism in 'Les Yeux enchantés,' *La Révolution surréaliste* no. 1, Dec. 1924, and Naville famously declares, 'everyone knows there is no surrealist painting...' in 'Beaux Arts,' *La Révolution surréaliste* no. 3, April 1925, p. 27. Breton displaced Naville as editor of the journal and his 'Surrealism and Painting' appeared in the next issue. Maurice Nadeau traces the 'Naville Crisis' in *The History of Surrealism*, Richard Howard (trans.), Belknap, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1989, pp. 127-132. The reassessment of Surrealism in the visual arts was initiated by Dawn Ades in 1978 with the exhibition *Dada and Surrealism Reviewed*, Arts Council of Great Britain and Hayward Gallery, London, 1978, followed by Rosalind Krauss and Jane Livingston, *L'Amour fou: photography and surrealism*, Abbeville Press, New York, 1985, in which photography was shown to be central to Surrealism's resistance to the modernist paradigm.

⁵ This characterization of an historical (as opposed to modernist) avant-garde is drawn from Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Michael Shaw trans., University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1984, but it should be noted that even Clement Greenberg, as early as 1944, acknowledged Surrealism's 'anti-institutional, anti-formal, anti-aesthetic nihilism.' Greenberg, 'Surrealist Painting' in *Collected Essays and Criticism Vol I, Perceptions and Judgments, 1939-1944*, John O'Brian (ed.), University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1986, p. 225.

⁶ Hal Foster (ed.), *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, Bay Press, Seattle, Washington, 1983.

⁷ Foster, *The Anti-Aesthetic*, pp. x, xi. Regarding the emergence of an avant-garde impulse in postmodern art, Foster departs from Bürger, who flatly denied the possibility of a critical art practice in a contemporary milieu dominated by spectacle and the culture industry. See Benjamin Buchloh's critique of Bürger's position, based on the postwar reappearance of 'key paradigms' of the avant-garde (among them the readymade, collage, assemblage and photomontage) in his introduction to *Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry: Essays on European and American Art from 1955 to 1975*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, 2000.

⁸ See for example Rosalind Krauss, 'The Master's Bedroom,' *Representations*, No. 28, Autumn 1989, pp. 55-76; Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious*, MIT Press, Cambridge and London, 1993, and Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England, 1993.

⁹ The single Surrealist painter who has approached this devolution of painting into base material would be André Masson, whose automatist sand paintings attempted to extended the exploration of 'pure thought' onto the *horizontal* surface. For Masson's extended exploration of automatism and his alliance with Bataille, see David



Lomas. *The Haunted Self: Surrealism, Psychoanalysis, Subjectivity*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2000.

¹⁰ Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss, *Formless: A User's Guide*, Zone Books, New York, 1997.

¹¹ See Rosalind Krauss, 'The Master's Bedroom,' *Representations*, No. 28, Autumn, 1989, pp. 55-76.

¹² Again, the earliest references are Krauss and Foster, particularly Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious*, as well as her 'Corpus Delicti' in Krauss and Livingston, *L'Amour fou*, also Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty*, followed by Bois and Krauss, *Formless: A User's Guide*.

¹³ Considering the prominent place play has had in post-structural critique and the dominance of those theories in the art history in the past two decades, a full examination of play as a signifier in the visual arts is long overdue. A comprehensive study would be vast, which may explain why most approaches (including my own forthcoming study on play as an avant-garde strategy) have been contextually specific, or have limited their discursive analysis with an overarching, often restrictive, thesis. An example of the latter, addressing aesthetics, is Mihai Spariosu, *Dionysus Reborn: Play and the Aesthetic Dimension in Modern Philosophical and Scientific Discourse*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 1989. Addressing play more generally, at a cultural level, the two best-known texts are Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*, Beacon, Boston, 1955; and Roger Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, Meyer Barash trans., The Free Press, New York and Illinois, 1961; to which I would add Jacques Henriot, *Sous couleur de jouer: la métaphore ludique*, Librairie José Corti, Paris, 1989. In the former category, referring to Surrealism, see Emmanuel Garrigues, *Les jeux surréalistes: Mars 1921 – Septembre 1962*, Éditions Gallimard, Paris, 1995; Jacqueline Chenieux-Gendron and Marie-Claire Dumas (eds), *Jeu surréaliste et humour noir*, Lachenal and Ritter, Paris, 1993; Alastair Brotchie, *Surrealist Games*, Redstone Editions, Boston, 1993. Only the last two address the visual arts.

¹⁴ 'When we judge free beauty (according to mere form) then our judgment of taste is pure. Here we presuppose no concept of any purpose for which the manifold is to serve the given object, and hence no concept [as to] what the object is [meant] to represent; our imagination is playing, as it were, while it contemplates the shape, and such a concept would only restrict its freedom.' Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, Werner S. Pluhar trans., Hackett, Indianapolis and Cambridge, 1987, §16, 77. Schiller's program for a 'State of Aesthetic Semblance' depends on the breakdown of human endeavor into a carnal 'sense-drive' and its opposing 'form-drive' brought into reconciliation by a 'play-drive'. See Friedrich Schiller, *On The Aesthetic Education of Man In a Series of Letters*, Elizabeth M. Wilkinson and L.A. Willoughby trans., Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1967. Gene Bell-Villada traces this lineage from Kant through Schiller to the French academy through Victor Cousin and Théophile Gautier as well as Baudelaire in G. H. Bell-Villada, *Art for Art's Sake & Literary Life: How Politics and Markets Helped Shape the Ideology & Culture of Aestheticism, 1790-1990*, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 1996.

¹⁵ Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, op. cit., p. 28.

¹⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, op. cit., §9, 62.

¹⁷ See in particular Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, Walter Kaufmann trans., Random House, New York, 1967.

¹⁸ The initiating text would be Jacques Derrida, 'Structure Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,' in *Writing and Difference*, Alan Bass trans., University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1987, pp. 278-293, and is elaborated throughout Derrida's *Of Grammatology*, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak trans., Johns Hopkins, Baltimore and London, 1974. The question is put directly to Kant (how can art be at once bounded and 'without end?') in Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod trans., University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1987.

¹⁹ Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, is the text that lays out his aesthetic theory, but Nietzsche's references to play are consistent throughout his work, reappearing with particular force in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Walter Kaufmann trans., Modern Library, New York, 1995; *Ecce Homo*, Kaufmann trans., Vintage Books, New York, 1967, and *The Will to Power*, Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale trans., Random House, New York, 1967.

²⁰ Freud's 'play' texts, in which he follows Schiller and then Nietzsche in aligning play and art, are Sigmund Freud, 'Creative Writers and Day Dreaming,' (1907) in *Art and Literature*, Penguin Freud Library Vol. 14, James Strachey trans., Penguin Books, New York and London, 1991; Sigmund Freud, 'Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious' (1905), Strachey trans., *The Penguin Freud Library Volume 6*, Penguin Books, New York and London, 1991; and Sigmund Freud, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' (1920), in *On Metapsychology: The Theory of Psychoanalysis*, *The Penguin Freud Library Volume 11*, Strachey trans., Penguin Books, New York and London, 1991.

²¹ The term *errance* is Michael Sheringham's from *Parisian Fields*, Reaktion, London, 1996, p. 92. In most accounts of the Surrealist movement *errance* is either collapsed into or eclipsed by objective chance (Sheringham does the latter). I make a distinction between them, following Michel Beaujour, in order to stress the



early Surrealist emphasis on experience, performance and manifestations as opposed to later preoccupations with objects and representations. See Michel Beaujour, 'From Text to Performance' in *A New History of French Literature*, Denis Hollier (ed.), Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, 1994, pp. 866-871.

²² See Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle and Modern Culture*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, 1999, pp. 39-40; 126; 323.

²³ The album, now absorbed into the collection at George Eastman House in Rochester, New York, is something of a mystery. The original order of the photographs is unknown, as are the precise dates they were acquired. See Susan Laxton, *Paris as Gameboard: Man Ray's Atgets*, Wallach Gallery, New York, 2001.

²⁴ André Breton, *Conversations: The Autobiography of Surrealism*, Mark Polizzotti trans., Paragon House, New York, 1993, p. 106.

²⁵ Man Ray himself recalls the experience of Surrealist *errance* as a 'slumming operation' refracted through photography: 'At the instigation of Jacques Prévert ... we roamed about the more shady sections of Paris with my camera, shooting scenes haphazard and fraught with some hazard' [sic.]. Man Ray, *Self Portrait*, Little, Brown and Company, Boston, 1963.

²⁶ Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life, Vol. I*, John Moore, trans., Verso, London and New York, 1991. Lefebvre's alliance with the Surrealists is contemporary with the assembling of Man Ray's *Atget* album, dated to the co-drafting of the 1925 manifesto *La Révolution d'abord et toujours*.

²⁷ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1984, p. 106.

²⁸ André Breton, *Le Cadavre exquis, son exaltation*, Galleria Schwarz, Milan, 1975, p. 12. In the text I refer to the game by its French name in order to emphasize its punning engagement with drawing through the word 'esquisse', a dimension lost in translation. Unlike *errance*, the game of exquisite corpse has been the subject of some scrutiny, most recently in Jean-Jacques Lebel (ed.), *Juegos Surrealistas: 100 Cadáveres Exquisitos*, Fundación Colección Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid, 1996.

²⁹ Philippe Audoin makes the comment about viability and judgment in 'Surréalistes,' his entry on surrealist games in *Le Dictionnaire des jeux*, René Alleau (ed.), Tchou, Paris, 1966, p. 484. The rules of the game are set out in a number of documents and recollections, the most often cited being the definition from the *Abridged Dictionary of Surrealism*: 'Game of pleated paper that consists of a number of players composing a phrase or drawing, without any of them able to render the whole collaboration or to know the nature of the preceding collaborative contributions. The classic example, which gives the game its name, is "The – exquisite – corpse – will – drink – the – red – wine",' *Dictionnaire abrégé du surréalisme*, Galerie des Beaux Arts, Paris, 1938, p. 6. Tristan Tzara's more specific 'recipes' for the game, separate versions for the written and the drawn forms, can be found in Breton, *Le Cadavre exquis, son exaltation*, pp. 18, 24.

³⁰ John R. Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1969, p. 33. Searle uses the rules of games as an analogy for conventions in language systems, a comparison that would have interested the Surrealists a great deal. He does not, however, account for the element of chance in games, and his otherwise useful analysis therefore fails to account for unintended meaning. Following Derrida, who in his critique of Austin (and by extension Searle) dramatically loosens meaning from intention toward reception, opening it in a number of ways to radical distortion and miscommunication, chance is reintroduced and affirmed, and the analogy between game and language holds. Jacques Derrida, 'Signature Event Context,' *Margins of Philosophy*, Alan Bass trans., University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1982, pp. 307-330.

³¹ Reproductions of *cadavres exquis* to which Picasso and Maar contributed can be found in Jean Jacques Lebel et. al, *Juegos Surrealistas: 100 Cadáveres Exquisitos*, Fundación Colección Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid, 1996, pp. 170, 171, 205. The description of Motherwell's weekly exquisite corpse sessions with Baziotes, Krasner and Pollock is in Dickran Tashjian, *A Boatload of Madmen*, Thames and Hudson, New York, 1995, 317, 325. The illustrated reference to Beuys and Richter is in Ingrid Schaffner, "In Advance of the Return of the Cadavre Exquis," *The Return of the Cadavre Exquis*, The Drawing Center, New York, 1993, p. 21.

³² Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*; Roger Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*; Jacques Derrida, 'Structure Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences.'

³³ Sol Lewitt, 'Paragraphs on Conceptual Art,' first published in *Artforum*, vol. 5, no. 10, Summer 1967, pp. 79-83, rptd. in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood eds., *Art in Theory 1900-1990*, Blackwell, Oxford, UK and Cambridge Mass., 1992, p 834.

³⁴ Denis Hollier, 'Surrealist Precipitates: Shadows Don't Cast Shadows,' *October* 69, Summer 1994, pp. 113-114.



³⁵ Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,' in *Illuminations*, Harry Zohn trans., Hannah Arendt (ed.), Schocken, New York, 1969, pp. 217-251, cited in Hollier, 'The Use Value of the Impossible,' *October* 60, Spring 1992, p. 11.

³⁶ Walter Benjamin, 'Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia' in *Reflections*, Edmund Jephcott trans., Peter Demetz (ed.), Schocken, New York, 1986, p. 179.

³⁷ See Ian Hacking, *The Taming of Chance*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge and New York, 1990.

³⁸ Hollier, 'The Use Value of the Impossible,' p. 8.

³⁹ Kenneth E. Silver, *Esprit de Corps: The Art of the Parisian Avant-Garde and the First World War, 1914-1925*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1989.

Susan Laxton is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Art History and Archaeology at Columbia University in New York, currently finishing a dissertation on the role of play in surrealist art practice. Most recently she has curated the exhibition *Paris as Gameboard* at the Wallach Gallery in New York, where Man Ray's album of images by the photographer Eugène Atget was displayed for the first time.

