

Hans Bellmer, Pierre Klossowski and the Vicious Circle. Whitechapel Art Gallery, 20 September – 23 November 2006.

Hans Bellmer, edited by Michael Semff and Anthony Spira, Staatliche Graphische Sammlung München, Whitechapel Gallery, London, Hatje Cantz Verlag, Ostfildern, 2006, 208pp., 295 illus., 250 in colour, £32.00, ISBN-13: 978-3-7757-1794-6, ISBN-10: 3-7757-1794-3.

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

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

Altogether, this arrangement of the Bellmer material, folded into an interlocking structure of other works, like mirrored chambers, worked well: the different parts each benefiting the other. In particular, the *I am Anagram* installation highlighted the new focus which the exhibition signalled on Bellmer's restlessly circuitous drawings, and his related theoretical writings concerning his vision of the body as an anagram: 'a sentence that invites you to dismantle it, so that, in the course of an endless series of anagrams, its true contents may take shape.'¹ This focus brings a new physicality to interpretations of Bellmer, and enables a new, phenomenological reading; which has the potential importantly to displace the emphasis of other, earlier interpretations on Freudian theoretical structures.

Bellmer and surrealism

Bellmer's *Doll* photographs are increasingly often reproduced in histories of surrealism, and have even been hailed as the 'summa' of surrealism in one recent account.² Typically, the photographs are understood on the basis of a reading of the doll as supplying exemplary figurations of a range of Freudian drives and scenarios, including the uncanny, sadomasochism, fetishism, castration anxiety, scopophilia, hysteria, hermaphroditism and the death drive; and are sometimes positioned as key to a traumatic, uncanny unconscious at the heart of surrealism, at work beneath Breton's idealisations of



mad love.³ Bellmer was certainly eager to win acceptance from the surrealists in Paris. He sent his cousin Ursula round the group with copies of his photographs when she visited Paris in 1934, and he appears consciously to have imitated certain surrealist photographs in some of the *Doll* arrangements.⁴ But these points suggest that what we see in the *Doll* photos, rather than an interpretive key to the unconscious fantasy of the wider culture or movement, might be the staged vocabulary of an 'unconscious,' adopted as a readymade artistic idiom, and a language of avant-garde affiliation.

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

These collage-objects and 'sculptures' often reveal links between Bellmer's production and figures usually positioned at surrealism's margins – such as Picasso, for example, whose small-scale 1926 *Guitar* collages incorporating scraps of tulle, string and buttons on cardboard are clearly referenced by Bellmer's own 1936 collage-construction, *Ball-Joint*, shown in the London exhibition.⁵ Such links suggest a reconfiguring of Bellmer's relationship to surrealism; no longer conceived on a 'depth' model, with Bellmer's photography positioned as key to the movement's buried unconscious, nor yet, symmetrically, as pyramidal hierarchy, with the *Doll* photographs at its 'summa.' Rather, we might think, Bellmer's work proposes a more ludic and physical configuration of surrealism: as a movement that constantly displaces its centre to the margins, like a *Rotorelief* hallucination, or like Cardan rings.

Body as anagram

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

The idea of the body as an anagram to be rearranged is such an interesting aspect of Bellmer's writing that it is a surprise it has not been really focused on to date (an important exception is Malcolm Green's excellent essay in the new Atlas edition of Bellmer's artist's books, re-issued last year). The notion is formulated most explicitly in Bellmer's essay 'A Brief Anatomy of the Physical Unconscious, or, The Anatomy of the Image,' which Bellmer worked on between 1942 and 1954, and which was



published in 1957 as a self-standing book accompanied by drawn illustrations. However, Bellmer had begun to formulate the idea first in his earlier essay 'The Ball-Joint,' which was included in his second book *The Games of the Doll* (published in 1949, but largely written between 1937 and 1945).

The theory of the physical unconscious is a complex phenomenological account of experience of the self, doubled and split between psychic and physical reality, which compares interestingly with the contemporary work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jean-Paul Sartre and Jacques Lacan. (Bellmer's discussion of holding a mirror to the surface of the body, for example, recalls Merleau-Ponty's discussion in 'Eye and Mind' of seeing himself caressing the stem and bowl of a pipe, in a mirror; and at the same time suggests the possibility of an interestingly erotic re-interpretation of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy.⁶) At another point, Bellmer gives the example of a reflex action, to illustrate the virtualism and image-producing character of physical experience even when this is without the aid of a mirror:

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

Thus Bellmer explores the idea that all physical experience creates a second, virtual realm or shadowy mirror-image, duplicating itself, or, as he says, 'counter[ing] a real centre of arousal with a virtual one.'⁷ From this develops a theory of the self's interpenetration with others and with the world, which unfolds through sections of the essay headed 'The Images of the Self,' 'The Anatomy of Love,' and 'The Self and the Outside World.' Eroticism is the central matrix in Bellmer's theory, through which, in relationship to a loved other, every area of the body is invested, doubled and found anew.

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

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



sleeping hand, before climaxing in a grain of sugar beneath the tip of a finger resting on the table top.

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

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

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

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

Counteraction and forcible reconciliation of concentricity and eccentricity are pushed to the extreme in Marcel Duchamp's 'Rotoreliefs,' to the point where they are mutually resolved. The principle is as follows: a series of eccentric circles arranged around the false centre B are drawn on a disc with its centre at A. When placed on a gramophone,



the disc rotates around A in such a way that every point within the circles is in concentric motion about A, while appearing to be in eccentric motion around B. Although this theoretically scandalous contradiction results from an illusion, it produces an optical miracle: the surface of the circles rises up like dough or a heaving bosom, only to collapse and rise again at periodic intervals.

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

Ball-joint

To understand the place of Bellmer's *Doll* photographs in relation to the rest of his output (in particular, the constructions, the drawings, and the theoretical writings), it is necessary to differentiate between the two series of his photographs, which are each approximately divided around two different models of the doll. The first doll was wooden-framed, and covered in layers of flax fibre, with a top-coating of plaster of Paris. It housed a small 'panorama' apparatus in its abdomen, which was illustrated as the frontispiece to Bellmer's first book, *Die Puppe*, in 1934.⁸

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

The discovery of the ball-joint at some point in 1934 was undoubtedly a breakthrough: the new design producing a greater suppleness and fluidity, making the doll seem less stiff and constructed, and lending to the doll in the second series of photographs its more supple and seamlessly illusory capacity for reversal and transformation. The ball-joint became a key, erotically-invested mechanical device for Bellmer, who devoted the entire essay published in his second book (*The Games of the*



Doll) to its inspirational workings. The ball-joint also instituted a new regime of visibility. Not only were there more photographs in the second series, after the invention of the ball-joint (approx. 150, many of which were hand-coloured, as compared to approx. 30, black-and-white photographs in the first), but the ball-joint also entirely replaced the old panorama device which had been housed by the original doll, and which the diagram shows so clearly, had turned that doll into a clumsily improvised apparatus or 'seeing-machine.' Now with the panorama device replaced by a giant, globular and rotating ball-joint, a new spectacularity becomes evident in the rapidly proliferating, luridly coloured and increasingly repetitive photographic series that Bellmer produced.

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

In conclusion, then, the Whitechapel exhibition represented a welcome contribution to studies of Bellmer and surrealism more widely. The catalogue contains a very useful descriptive chronology, and whilst the essays in the catalogue too often re-iterate unverifiable myths (that Ursula was not allowed into the studio, etc.), and critical clichés (that the *Doll* series was made in erotic thrall to his desire for his cousin, the doll a stand-in for her, etc.), the whole does succeed in re-focusing attention on Bellmer's drawing, bringing the parts of Bellmer's production into their proper systematic relation and proportion to each other. The exhibition was particularly important and worthwhile for its focus on the anagram – that phenomenological aspect of Bellmer's theoretical writings which is so interesting, especially in relation to Duchamp, and which awaits more work. Finally, the exhibition was welcome for enabling us to see new ways in which photography was constructed – materially produced in dialogue with some other, engineered apparatus (in Bellmer's case, most predominantly, the doll; though the collage-constructions and objects like *The Spinning Top* and *Ball-Joint* are also relevant) – at this point in the 1930s. This suggests we understand photography not as a transparent, visioning instrument, a flawlessly functioning agency of the image, employed to photograph staged scenarios of the unconscious; but instead as a physical and material technology, Bellmer's conception of which



was enabled and fed by the other, different material parts of his practice, such as line, and the ball joint. To say as much is also to propose a different picture of surrealist photography: no longer giving effortless view onto the unconscious fantasy of the movement, or of the viewer, this is a surrealist photography with more grit in its eye, and a definite grist to its mill, working around the material irritation/stimulation of the ball joint, its pattern of image-flow mutually modelled on and by the liquid effusion and repetition, and by the ceaseless circuitry and perversity of Bellmer's graphic line.

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¹ Hans Bellmer, 'A Brief Anatomy of the Physical Unconscious, or, The Anatomy of the Image' (1942-1957), reprinted in Bellmer, *The Doll* (trans. Malcolm Green), London, 2005, 133.

² Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty*, Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1993, xx.

³ See Rosalind Krauss's remarks on Bellmer's photographs in Krauss and Jane Livingston, *L'Amour Fou*, Washington DC and New York, 1985, where she argues that Bellmer's series 'could not be more effectively glossed than by Freud's analysis of *The Sandman* [in his essay, 'The Uncanny'],' 86; and Foster, *Compulsive Beauty*. Subsequent readings by Therese Lichtenstein, in *Behind Closed Doors: The Art of Hans Bellmer*, Berkeley, California, 2001, and Sue Taylor, in *Hans Bellmer: The Anatomy of Anxiety*, Cambridge, Mass.; and London, 2000, have tended to follow this focus on key Freudian texts, and to rely upon the specific Freudian theories of castration anxiety, fetishism, and the uncanny.

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

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

⁶ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'Eye and Mind' (1960), repr. in Galen A. Johnson ed., *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 129-130.

⁷ Bellmer, 'The Anatomy of the Image', 105-106.

⁸ Bellmer, *Die Puppe*, Carlsruhe, 1934.

