

The Subversion of images. Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, 23 September 2009 - 11 January 2010, Fotomuseum Winterthur, 26 February - 23 May 2010, Instituto de Cultura Fundació Mapfre, Madrid, 16 June - 12 September 2010



Fig. 1: Man Ray, *Lee Miller*, 1929 (exhibition poster).

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

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



group applied the photographic image to print and cinema. The scope of sections such as 'Collective Action'; 'The Montage Table' and 'The Anatomy of Images' is to echo the visual expression of the movement and the power of its images. This is how the seditious iconography of the surrealists comes to upset the field of our perception and to generate a revolution in the way we see things. Our gaze, by imitation, appropriates Paul Nougé's formula 'To see is an action' and becomes conscious of the force of the images that it generates.



Fig. 2: *The Subversion of Images. Surrealism, Photography, Film*, Centre Pompidou, gallery 2. (Photo by the author).

From the entrance, distorting mirrors force the optical experience. Our distorted image follows our steps on the way to the discovery of the movement. We undertake our own revolution, one that brings into play our bodies, as well as our vision. Our relationship with the world is renewed by an exhibition design that opens, both physically and intellectually, onto the surrealist universe. The transformation of the Pompidou Centre's Gallery 2 into a hall of mirrors determines, from now on, in the retinal field of our eye, the anamorphosis of our body, whose form echoes André Kertész's *Distortions* and the work of Raoul Ubac exhibited in the show. The installation is, of course, a free quotation from the surrealist practice of appropriating the illusions of fun fairs, in which distorting mirrors and labyrinths create a mythology of vision and perception. These popular references, which are at the centre of the surrealists' production, can be found in the series of portraits displayed in the exhibition's first section, which were shot in the fun fair barracks of Luna Park. Studio portraits in which the likenesses of André Breton, Paul Eluard, Max Ernst and Robert Desnos are inscribed within cardboard scenes highlight the playful dimension of the surrealists' activities, and the humour underlying the exhibition's imaginary nine sections. To join forces, to show the solidarity and primacy of the group over individuality could only have been illustrated through photography, which, unlike painting, can be used as evidence and proof. The juxtaposition of fun-fair



portraits with photo booths and Man Ray's *Surrealist Chess Board* (1934) brings us to the core of the matter: the role played by individual bodies and their representation in the construction of the group's collective identity. Prophet and agitator of the surrealists, Breton plays the King on Man Ray's *Chess Board*. His presence pervades the exhibition's first room, whose doors open onto a sprawling network of images exhibited with the intention to interrogate forms of thinking determined by collective action.

In the next section, the simultaneous presence of fixed images and short films investigates the implicit theatricality of works such as Eli Lotar's and Hans Bellmer's 'performed' photographs. The enigmatic series after which the exhibition is titled, *The Subversion of Images* (1929 - 1930) by the Belgian Paul Nougé, highlights the subversion of a production that, while proposing to record the real, departs from reality. The play with theatricality adds to the obsessive surrealist gaze on women, whose fetishized bodies become objects of fantasy. In the photographs of Jacques-Andrè Boiffard and William Seabrook, for instance, an equation between woman and sexual object seems at play, constructed through leather masks and chains. This series of strong images shows the complex nature of the surrealists' relationship with the body. If, as Clément Chéroux claims in the catalogue's introduction, the surrealists said that '*pour changer la vie, il faut changer la vue,*' ('to change our approach to life, we must change our point of view') they did so by means of a baffling iconographic vocabulary in which faces disappear beyond masks and fantasies show their true face in order to question our relationship with sexuality and the body. In this second section, a lesser-known series by the Belgian artist Marcel Mariën – in which the naked female body becomes a canvas for enigmatic messages such as 'Mute and blind, here I am, dressed of the thoughts that you lend me' demonstrates that the group's acknowledged phallogentrism sometimes meets feminist reaction. This section makes vulnerable the repeated contention that surrealism is anti-feminist and confirms instead the argument developed by Krauss in the catalogue of *L'Amour fou*³.

Aided by the exhibition design, the third section of the show brings together nineteenth-century photographs and surrealist originals and prints with the intention to present an urban mythology that is at once, real, fortuitous and marvellous. The first work in the section, Brassai's *The Statue of Marshall Ney in the Fog* (1935) echoes the remark by Pierre Mac-Orlan: 'The social fantastic lives in the night of cities.'⁴ In Brassai's work, the city appears as a place of uncanny revelations, in which the chance encounter of Marshall Ney's statue and the neon sign of a hotel emphasizes the presence of poetry. This purely photographic work is the result of disparate elements that constitute a collage in which essence replaces the spontaneous and unexpected results of automatic writing. The surrealists' discovery of the work of Eugène Atget who, like Man Ray, lived in Rue Campagne Première, led the group to embrace a new way of viewing the city, close to Baudelaire's Parisian universe seen through



Walter Benjamin's texts.⁵ Flanêurs, prostitutes, commodities and novelties became in the eyes of the surrealists elements of an original vocabulary apt to revive the atmosphere of a hidden, picturesque world.

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

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

Such instinctive observation of the world mechanically recorded by the camera concentrates hereafter on the body, reinterpreted according to an original iconographic vocabulary that transforms a hypertrophic reality into a normative vision. Celebrating images of men and women with their eyes closed, the surrealists insisted on a phenomenon that they called 'to see with closed eyes.' This action, constructed in an inner world, has a special place in Dalí's *The Phenomenon of Ecstasy*. As Michel Poivert has noted, Dalí's photomontage looks like a scientific synopsis that questions the permanence of visual language through the representation of the ephemeral physical phenomenon of ecstasy.⁶ Ecstasy is represented by thirty-two photographic fragments divided in a discontinuous winding of images and ending in a central scene that attracts our attention by means of its larger scale. This fragment, a cut-



out from Brassai's homonymous *Phenomenon of Ecstasy*, has a similar function to the unconscious evoked by the surrealist poets. At the same time, it shows the paroxystic nature of ecstasy as consisting, according to its vocabulary definition, in 'a state of emotion so intense that one is carried beyond the sensible world and discovers, through a sort of enlightenment, certain revelations belonging to the intelligible world.'⁷ The rhetorical power of the image clarifies the intention of the surrealists and echoes the text that Dalí wrote to accompany his photomontage in *Minotaure*. There, the author explained that 'Ecstasy is, par excellence, the mental-critical state that the incredible contemporary thought [...] aspires to render permanent.'⁸ The photomontage, then, transforms into a reality the article's intention to present ecstasy as a permanent state. The demonstration of ecstasy, which is performed throughout this section by the juxtaposition of works debating the nature of revelation and inspiration, leads us into a section that intends to interrogate the ability of the photographic medium to make the visible invisible.

Automatic writing is reconsidered here in its relation to photographic techniques such as the photogram, and photographic automatism is viewed in terms of the psychic automatism defended by Breton. Thanks to the reception of Man Ray's photograms and of his anthology *Delicious Fields*, the section entitled 'Automatic Writings' clarifies the creative process of the surrealists, who considered the spontaneous appearance of images as the embodiment of their thoughts. The magic of images born from traces of light functions as a metaphor for automatic writing and reveals, as Poivert has noted, the analogy between photography and writing in the theoretical discussions of the group.⁹ Presenting a series of images realized without a consciously determined point of view and photographic allegories that highlight the scientific character of the automatic method, this section explores the conditions under which surrealist photography was made and the role that it played in the group's aesthetics. In contrast, the surrealists' interest in the world of the occult is presented in a section that does not always echo the 'mystical' content of the images. However, the surrealists, Breton in particular, used photography for its scientific value as well as for its medium-like qualities, emphasizing its capacity to reintroduce empiricism in the realm of aesthetics.

The combination of science and the paranormal led the group to question the formal language of photography, overcoming its limits through actual physical transgression, scratching and burning prints and negatives; or elevating anamorphosis to a method of resemblance. In the last section of the exhibition beauty becomes, as Breton had said, convulsive. Once again, we are presented with games relating to the photographic representation of the body and we find ourselves confronting anamorphosis. But here we are also asked to what extent these formal games, so frequently present in surrealist publications – from *Documents* to *La Révolution surréaliste* – also found release in the commercial world. Clearly, advertising and fashion became immediate consumers of surrealist images – think of Dora Maar's commercials for



Pétrole Hahn, or *Vogue's* commissions from Man Ray. Yet, it was the world of commercial publishing in the figure of José Corti, an editor close to surrealist literary circles, who produced a child book by Claude Cahun and Lise Deharme, *Cœur de Pic* (1937). We discover, unexpectedly, several original plates of the book among projections of Luis Buñuel's *Andalusian Dog*, Man Ray's *Sea Star*, and Painlevé's photograph *Seahorse*. The book invites us to contemplate a world in which fantasy, dreams and imagination are intertwined through the confrontation of literary and photographic poems.

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

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

¹ *La Subversion des images. Surréalisme, photographie, film*, eds. Quentin Bajac, Clément Chéroux, Guillaume Le Gall, Michel Poivert, Musée national d'art moderne Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, 2009. An interview with the exhibition curators Quentin Bajac and Clément Chéroux is available on the Pompidou website: <http://www.centrepompidou.fr/presse/video/2009907-subversion/> (as accessed on 20.01.2010).

² *L'Amour fou: Photography and Surrealism*, Concoran Gallery, eds. Rosalind Krauss, Jane Livingston, Dawn Ades, Washington DC and Hayward Gallery, London, 1985.

³ Rosalind Krauss, 'Photography in the Service of Surrealism,' in *L'Amour fou*, 15-56.

⁴ Pierre MacOrlan, *Atget photographe de Paris*, Paris, Henri Jonquières, 1930, 19.

⁵ Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire. Un poète lyrique à l'apogée du capitalisme*, Paris, Payot, 1982.

⁶ Michel Poivert, *L'Image au service de la révolution. Photographie, surréalisme, politique*, Paris, Le Point du jour, 2006.

⁷ <http://atiff.atiff.fr/dendien/scripts/tlfiv5/advanced.exe?8;s=2506766025> (as accessed on 20.01.2010).



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

⁹ Poivert, *L'Image au service de la révolution*, 57.

