

## Introduction

*I have lived here for a day or part of a day,  
eyes closed, arms hanging casually by my  
sides.*

– MICHAEL PALMER, "THE FLOWER OF CAPITAL"

**A**LTHOUGH SURREALISM HAS BEEN TREATED in a great many studies over the years, these remain for the most part specialized studies of particular artists or writers, or sometimes of particular aspects of its activity (such as its art, its politics, its relation to psychoanalysis, its purported misogyny); in general, the pull of aestheticization remains strong, and has perhaps grown even stronger in recent years, as the revolutionary politics that animated much of surrealism's collective activity have faded. There have been very few studies that attempted to engage with surrealism on its own level of complexity, as a synthesis of the political, the aesthetic, and the psychical – as a complex project attempting to found another culture. This is one such study, which I hope will occasion others. While any such study cannot simply accept the terms of surrealism's own discourse, which would only reproduce the movement's self-understanding, it can and must look carefully at its intellectual sources, must try to comprehend the logic that informed its decisions and its actions, and attend to the historical moment of the formulation of its project at any given time. For as one of the more historically conscious artistic and intellectual movements of the twentieth century, the positions taken by its spokespersons (who include André Breton, Louis Aragon, René Crevel, Tristan Tzara, Salvador Dalí, Roger Caillois, and Claude Cahun, of those studied here) are always nuanced by the cultural politics of the moment of their enunciation, and very often by politics in the broader sense of the term, when politics was still at stake.

In other words, this is an immanent study, whose understanding unfolds

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in a close engagement with its subject, which itself unfolds in particular ways at a particular time. Which is not to say that I abjure theory or secondary studies. I have relied on both to elucidate aspects of my study, and could not do without either; and my book is to some extent a running dialogue with one school of thought concerning surrealism, the provocative and controversial contribution made by the editors of *October* (and especially by Rosalind Krauss, Hal Foster, and Denis Hollier). Its primary object, however, is to understand the development of surrealist thought and activity at a moment when, in its second period from 1929 to 1939, it was able to catch a glimpse of what the implications of its radical aesthetic project might be, at the time of its most active and searching attempt to synthesize Hegelian aesthetics, psychoanalysis, and Marxism. Others may and often do prefer the earlier, more anarchic and effervescent moment of surrealism in the early to mid-1920s, particularly that period prior to its political involvements, but I discern in this highly charged decade of the 1930s – which witnessed the rise of fascism and of broad-based antifascist movements, as well as the Stalinization of the worldwide Communist movement – a growing maturity in the surrealists' understanding and use of Hegelian, Freudian, and Marxist sources, as well as the development of a *parti pris* that, while breaking conceptually with bourgeois cultural values and precepts, resisted any instrumentalization of the aesthetic sphere in the political struggle (which would use art as a weapon), in favour of a broader conception of what culture could be. It is just this that might prove still relevant today. My study is oriented towards a better knowledge of this endeavour, which can be understood only, in my view, through a knowledge of what was at stake in this development, and of the intellectual sources that were drawn upon in its elaboration.

The most fundamental shift that can be observed in surrealist art and thought from the 1920s to the 1930s, amongst the many values that are still held in common over the course of these two decades, is from a confidence in the self-sufficiency and superiority of an autonomous, unconscious thought process (such as is expressed in automatic writing and other surrealist techniques), to an acknowledgement of the interdependence of thought and the phenomenal world. This was in keeping with an imperative shared by many revolutionary intellectuals in the 1930s to make thought active, to relate the hitherto separate spheres of thought and action, action and dream, a separation that had been understood to be the hallmark of a separate, modernist art and literature since the time of Baudelaire.

In keeping with this imperative, but in order to avoid turning art into the handmaiden of action – as was demanded by the international Communist movement in the early 1930s, with its call for a politicized art capable of moving the masses to action – the surrealists proposed an alternative understanding of

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art neither as propaganda, nor as expression, nor as autonomy of form, nor as the mirror of nature, but as a form of research into the workings of thought, which would make a contribution to knowledge. This would be an intuitive, poetic exploration of unconscious thought, a task for which the surrealists believed themselves eminently qualified, as they had been engaged in this sort of experimental activity for many years already. However, the terms in which this activity was conceived shifted, and this altered in turn the nature of the work that was produced. The theorization and production of this experimental work even produced some irresolvable conflicts within the group, which led to a series of departures both public and private over the course of the decade, and particularly over the winter of 1934–5 (as Tzara, Crevel, Caillois, René Char, J.-M. Monnerot, and Alberto Giacometti all left the group at this time).

All of this is explored in the pages to come, and is in fact at the heart of this book, which is concerned not simply with politics or experiment but with the attempt to hold the two terms in suspension and in relation to one another. If an experimental art was to be capable of producing knowledge, it had to be received and understood by reason; the poetic, irrational thought made manifest in automatic writing was no longer sufficient in itself. This was agreed all round. The shift produced in the reconceptualization of art as research resulted either in a supplement of interpretation, which followed the still automatic production of poem or artwork, or it incorporated its own interpretation in its mode of reasoning: the internal logical coherence of paranoia, which was proposed by Dalí as an alternative to automatism. These were the two major avenues of experimental research pursued by the surrealists in the 1930s, and the works produced tended to fall into one or the other of these two categories.

In other words, art was no longer simply art, the production of rarefied commodities for connoisseurs (though given the unchanged social relations of art, it goes without saying that this continued to be true as well). It was reconceptualized as a kind of science – that other autonomous sphere of human endeavour – as a form of experimental research contributing to a greater knowledge of human thought.<sup>1</sup> This was in keeping with one of the two relevant models for such a science, psychoanalysis, from which surrealism drew some of its terms and much of its understanding of thought processes, as well as its justification of poetry. (The other model, significantly, was contemporary physics.)<sup>2</sup> In this conception, art would no longer be what it had been hitherto, a separate art belonging to a dying culture, but would realize itself in becoming something other, something that would make a real contribution to the present and the future, both in realizing its true nature as unconscious thought – the source of imagination, in this psychoanalytic understanding – and in the interpretation of such works in the interests of knowledge.

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Moreover, interpretation would not be conceived of as an end in itself, but would be indirectly related to action, the knowledge used to contribute to a less-repressive, happier social structure in the communist future that was sure to come and that could be brought into being through a combination of action and interpretation. Art would not be instrumentalized, but as interpretation it would still bear a relation to action. Art would remain autonomous in its reconfiguration as a kind of science, as poetic research, but it would no longer be separate in the modernist sense, as an end in itself. The knowledge produced in such art would now be a ‘thing-for-us’ in the Hegelian sense, as the means of such research were coordinated to the ends of social transformation; in this way surrealism would be ‘at the service of the Revolution’. At the same time, a place would be preserved for a poetic, nonutilitarian thought and activity in any future régime. My study here describes the attempt to realize this programme in the 1930s (as well as the failures and conflicts it produced), against the political and cultural history of the 1930s.

The leading example offered by the surrealists of this art that would no longer-be-art was the surrealist object, since in their understanding it was a realization and an articulation of the relation between subject and object, action and dream: an intervention of irrational thought into the phenomenal world in a material form. While work in the more traditional categories of drawing, painting, sculpture, and print making continued to be made by surrealist artists in the 1930s, the surrealist objects, first produced in 1931 and reaching a high point with the *Exposition surréaliste d'objets* in 1936, were an attempt to escape the aesthetic limitations of the traditional categories by inventing a new one. Its invention, theorization, and circulation are described at some length here – although I do not attempt to provide a thorough catalogue of activities in this area. I discuss the objects to the extent that they are related to the trajectory of the surrealist project in the 1930s, insofar as they embody many of the aspirations of the group in this period. Produced for the most part individually (or occasionally as a collaboration of two), objects were made by many surrealist artists and nonartists in the 1930s as a form of collective activity that would exemplify the kind of free poetic activity that was to be common property after the end of art.

It will be evident in all that I have said so far that I am interested in the collective aspect of surrealist activity, in its attempt to accomplish something as a group that could not be achieved individually; as Georges Bataille noted in 1946:

It was André Breton who rightly recognized that a poet or painter did not have the power to say what was in his heart, but that an organization or a collective body [*instance*] could. This ‘body’ can speak differently from an individual.<sup>3</sup>

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The surrealists were certainly not alone in this realization, which belongs to their historical moment, but they were able to articulate it more forcefully and more coherently than others, in thinking not just of another way of making art but of another way of life. It is this that marks them out as an avant-garde in the proper sense of the term, that is, as a collective movement that claimed at once to supersede art and to realize it in a generalized creativity, one that depended both on the transformation of social relations and on access to unconscious thought processes.

It is only relatively recently that art history and literary criticism have acknowledged the differences between the aims, interests, and strategies of modernism and the avant-garde in the period between the two world wars, due in part to the foundering of the avant-gardes in the historical circumstances of the 1920s and 1930s, as well as the concomitant triumph of the formalist account of modernism from the late 1930s on. The distinction between modernist and avant-garde strategies, established by Peter Bürger and refined by Jochen Schulte-Sasse, is crucial to this understanding, though it is by no means universally accepted.<sup>4</sup> By means of this distinction, one can begin to see how, for instance, the surrealist object emerges out of modern art (even as it maintains an antagonistic relationship to modernism), out of the avant-garde imperative to establish a position that both superseded art as such and promised a generalized, nonprofessional creative activity in the future. For its goal – the object of the object, as it were – is identical to that of the surrealist movement as a whole: the reconciliation of conscious and unconscious thought, the overcoming of the separation of art and life in a “poetry made by all, not by one”, for which a social revolution is the precondition. The surrealist object, posed between art and politics, is located in a utopian space that is, precisely, nowhere, a space of possibility that is entirely contingent, and whose contingency is realized in the fragmentary and temporary nature of the objects. Those few that still exist are fragile mementos of the claim to supersede the categories of art in a generalized creativity, contingent upon a future that was of course never realized, but whose possibility once brought them into being.

If the surrealist object is located, in an eminently dialectical relation, between art and politics, the supersession of modern art, made possible by revolution, will be achieved through a radical regression to what Breton called in the first *Manifesto of Surrealism* “the sources of poetic imagination”.<sup>5</sup> Art making will be desublimated in this return to what was understood to be the substratum of human creativity and indeed of human existence, sexual desire. In this way, it would achieve a more or less uncontaminated expression of the unconscious thought perceptible behind what the surrealists considered to be the greatest works of art.<sup>6</sup> This is very much the project of automatism, but it was also that of the

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surrealist object, with the important difference that the object was also a material thing, a physical intervention into the world of other objects, and not only into literary discourse. Nevertheless – and this is crucial – the object still bore a critical relation to cubist assemblage; the claim to an avant-garde position was manifested precisely in this ‘*au-delà*’, this ‘going beyond’ painting or sculpture, using a method – collage – invented at the most formally radical moment of modernist experimentation. It is the objects’ critical relation to the dominant categories of art making that is important here, rather than their mere rejection; there is an attempt to sublimate what are understood to be the progressive aspects of modern art – in particular, the principle of collage and the experimental nature of prewar modernism – into the object, which is understood at the same time to be antiformal and antiaesthetic in its rejection of the claims for autonomy made by the partisans and practitioners of modern art.

This study is structured in the following way. I begin with a chapter on surrealism’s relation to modern art, and discuss the first moment of the object’s invention in relation to the imperative to go ‘beyond painting’. There follows a discussion of several of the early objects, which are aligned with surrealist strategies in this period, and which are discussed in terms of their relation to and their difference from modern art. Chapter 2 focuses on the political views and strategies of the surrealists up to and including the first invention of the objects, in their effort to secure a recognition from the revolutionary avant-garde, the Parti Communiste Français (PCF), of their own status as an avant-garde in the cultural sphere. It includes a discussion of the important debate on the left over what constituted a revolutionary culture, as the French Communist Party began in the early 1930s to intervene in the cultural sphere for the first time. Chapter 3 investigates the diverse ways in which the surrealists reconceived their activities as a work of interpretation, one that would make a contribution to knowledge in the scientific sense. The question of what would constitute such a science is explored here; the chapter then examines the consequences of this reconceptualization of surrealist activity for the group, as a number of important and even irresolvable differences emerged that were not solely political in nature but that also involved the very definition of what surrealism was and could be. Chapter 4 looks at the surrealist group in the Popular Front period of 1935–6, as it struggled to hold on to its self-understanding as an avant-garde after the trauma of breaking with the PCF in 1935. Both the political adventure of Contre-Attaque and the surrealist object are discussed with this issue in mind. A surrealist object by Claude Cahun is analyzed extensively as an instance of the effort to maintain a position that would be both politically and aesthetically radical, at a time when the PCF had relinquished its revolutionary politics in order to move into

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the centre of French political life as a component of the Popular Front. The final chapter analyzes the conflict between André Breton's and Salvador Dalí's quite different views on surrealism in the 1930s, through an analysis of two objects in the 1936 *Exposition surréaliste d'objets* that staged this conflict as a struggle between an active paranoia-criticism and a passive automatism. The Conclusion looks at the reorientation of the surrealist movement after 1936, as it moved towards a nonantagonistic relation to modern art, which it was now concerned to defend rather than to overcome – this at a time when the relation between action and interpretation had become difficult to sustain, and when the very idea of the merging of art and life was indefinitely suspended.



My study has to some extent been conceived in relation to what I think is the most provocative and significant body of critical work on surrealism (apart, that is, from the landmark studies by Benjamin, Adorno, and Blanchot):<sup>7</sup> that of the *October* critics and historians, and in particular the books and essays by Rosalind Krauss, Hal Foster, and Denis Hollier. My study – in fact, my thinking about surrealism in general – owes a substantial intellectual debt to their work. My approach is more historical than theirs, less 'theoretical', but the difference chiefly turns on three issues: the question of surrealism's relation to modernism; the question of sublimation or desublimation in surrealist art; and the surrealist recourse to poetry through both Freud and Hegel.

Krauss's rethinking of surrealism over the past twenty years has significantly altered surrealist studies. Her two essays in the 1985 *L'Amour fou* catalogue in particular register a pivotal change both in her own work and in surrealist studies in general. The first, "Photography in the Service of Surrealism", still depends largely on citations from Breton, but it reworks surrealism in relation to post-structuralist thought; the second, "Corpus Delicti", marks the entry of Bataille into the critical discourse on surrealism, at least in English.<sup>8</sup>

Krauss's articles, together with those of Denis Hollier and with the burgeoning of translations of Bataille into English, began a flurry of interest in Bataille as a thinker, some twenty years after the same phenomenon had occurred in France. This coincides with at least a temporary turning away from an interest in the thought of the members of the surrealist group proper, who were often castigated in the very terms that Bataille had once employed against the surrealists.<sup>9</sup> It is an uncritical acceptance of Bataille's description of the surrealists as 'Icarian idealists' in relation to his own 'base materialism' that I wish to question here, for it leads to some serious differences of interpretation over the question of the sublimation or the desublimation of surrealist art.<sup>10</sup>

If Bataille's "La 'Vieille Taupe'" remained unpublished at the time, it is nevertheless extremely valuable for its articulation of his own position in opposition

to surrealism, which becomes materialist in antithesis to surrealism's projected idealism, realist in antithesis to its surrealism, and antidialectical in opposition to its dialectics.<sup>11</sup> The history of Bataille's involvement with and opposition to the surrealist group needs to be comprehended in order to properly understand his polemical text, let alone the evolution of his attitude towards surrealism, which underwent considerable modification over the years (as did the attitude of the surrealist group towards Bataille).<sup>12</sup> His 1930 text is too often accepted uncritically as an adequate description of surrealism (as inherently idealist), when it is the tensions between idealism and materialism that are of interest in surrealist thought in this period, particularly in its relation to revolutionary politics. This occurs even where attention is once again focused on the ideas and activities of the surrealist group, as in Hal Foster's *Compulsive Beauty*.

In *Compulsive Beauty*, Foster establishes a Lacanian-inflected psychoanalytic reading of surrealism that runs counter to some of the movement's own claims. His reading is oriented to the concepts of the death drive and repression, as these are raised in Freud's 1919 article "The 'Uncanny'" and developed in other of his late writings. It is Foster's view that many of surrealism's key concepts, such as 'the marvelous', 'convulsive beauty', and 'objective chance', are related to a recognition of the familiar made strange, that is, to an intimation of the death drive that the surrealists resist in their preference for love, beauty, and reconciliation. Bataille and Roger Caillois are his counterexamples of those who do accept and embrace such a 'desublimation', through their notions of the *informe* and mimicry. Foster writes:

It is at this point where sublimation confronts desublimation that surrealism breaks down, and I mean this literally: such is the stake of the split between official Bretonian and dissident Bataillean factions circa 1929. . . . Although both groups recognize the uncanny power of desublimation, the Bretonian surrealists resist it, while the Bataillean surrealists elaborate it – especially, I want to suggest, along the line of its imbrication with the death drive.<sup>13</sup>

Breton, Foster goes on to say, "ultimately values sublimated form and idealist Eros, and upholds the traditional function of the aesthetic: the normative reconciliation of contrary modes of experience".<sup>14</sup>

I think it can be seen here that Foster's distinction between Breton and Bataille turns upon the latter's categorization of surrealism as idealist, as well as on his rejection of dialectics; the social and psychological reconciliations that are the eventual goal of surrealism are rejected as 'normative', in favour of Bataille's pulling of the high down into the low, which Foster describes as 'desublimation'. My own understanding of desublimation, though, is substantially different, and this is the point at which my interpretation departs from those of Krauss and Foster.



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Both Krauss and Foster take a primarily psychoanalytic view of surrealism in their recent books (although Foster also attempts to understand the possibilities for a social critique offered by surrealism, in reading it through Benjamin). In *The Optical Unconscious*, Krauss rereads desire after Lacan not as an inexhaustible flow of sexual energy but as a universal effect of psychical trauma. While Foster refers primarily to Freud in his reinterpretation of surrealism, he shares this Lacanian understanding of desire with Krauss. It is one in which any possible reconciliation achieved through desire, such as was envisaged by the surrealists, has been successfully deconstructed *après la lettre*.<sup>15</sup>

For Krauss and Foster, specific aesthetic issues, such as the conflicted relation between surrealism and modernism, or the surrealists' recourse to an extraliterary conception of poetry, tend to drop out of their discussion, to be replaced by the psychoanalytic. In *The Optical Unconscious*, this involves a reading away from form to address what, Krauss proposes, underlies *both* surrealism and modernism – the 'optical unconscious' of her title that would, in surrealism's case, involve the psyche's 'automatic' response to signs generated in the imaginary order: "an automatist motor turning over within the very field of the visual".<sup>16</sup> Krauss proposes the term 'readymade', from an early text by Breton on Max Ernst, to replace an understanding of collage as the basis of surrealism. Rather than the generation of something new, an unprecedented image or metaphor, the readymade is that to which the artist or poet *responds*, a recognition of the familiar made strange through repression: "automatism's relation to the visual not as a strange conflation of objects, and thus the creation of new images, but as a function of the structure of vision and its ceaseless return to the already-known".<sup>17</sup> That is, the discussion is displaced from the aesthetic to the psychical, paradoxically in this case by means of a discussion of Ernst's early technique of 'overpainting', which undermines the presumption that collage is surrealism's basic technique, and which also establishes an analogy with the repressed materials out of which the unconscious is constructed, in a psychoanalytic understanding.<sup>18</sup>

In my opinion, this analysis obliterates surrealism's relation to modernism. Krauss proposes not a critical relation of one to the other, through which surrealism bears the very condition of its possibility in an antagonistic relation to modernism, but offers surrealism instead as "the total refusal of its modernist alternative",<sup>19</sup> seeing the readymade as completely other to the modernist blank surface, as a matrix rather than an empty potential.

Breton and Ernst himself both viewed Ernst's 'overpaintings' as a form of collage, in terms of method if not of technique ("it's not the glue [*colle*] that makes the collage").<sup>20</sup> The association of elements did not depend upon a particular technique but rather upon a poetic approach apprehended through the

example provided by cubist, then dada, collage. In my understanding, the practice of collage, discovered by the cubists, allowed Pierre Reverdy to develop his conceptualization of the image as a rapprochement of distant realities, and made the poetry of Rimbaud and Lautréamont understandable to the future surrealists, although the approach to collage in cubism and surrealism was not identical.

It is not a question here of returning to an unproblematic notion of intentionality; rather, it is one of recognizing the significance of the aesthetic discourses within which and against which a surrealist strategy was conceived. Krauss's psychoanalytic reading of Ernst's work is often brilliant, and it offers for the first time, along with Foster's contemporary work, a cogent and coherent approach to surrealist iconography; but I disagree with her attempt to *replace* collage with the readymade, which makes an understanding of surrealism's relation to modernism impossible.

Foster does see surrealism as a 'countermodernism' rather than as a "total refusal of its modernist alternative". He does not develop this, however, choosing to focus instead on surrealism's resistance to the death drive, as well as on its possibilities for a social critique. Because he too underplays the aesthetic dimension of surrealist activity, I think that Foster misreads the sublimation–desublimation question in relation to Breton and Bataille. In my view, it is desublimation that is the project of the objects and indeed of all forms of surrealist imagery, both in their insistence on an explicit sexual dimension and in their critical relation to other forms of art (which includes a negation of formal considerations).<sup>21</sup>

One of the significant differences between the surrealists and Bataille, up to 1936–7 at least, is that the surrealists sought to delay an immediate merging of art and life – while in principle supporting such a merger – whereas Bataille, coincident with the end of *Documents*, wished to bring art to an end in the present, replacing it at most with perversion.<sup>22</sup> This is the substance of his anti-aesthetic position through to 1936 or so, which was articulated especially in the pages of *La Critique sociale*; one consequence of this was his own suppression of his novel *Le Bleu du ciel*, which was written in 1935 but not published until 1957. It is the difference, in fact, between a dialectical and an antidialectical strategy: the contesting of bourgeois culture from within, versus its pulling down and elimination from without, by what Bataille imagines to be the hairy and *inculte* proletariat.<sup>23</sup>

This is the difference, such as I understand it, between the strategies of 'sublimation' and 'desublimation' that Foster opposes to one another. He recognizes that the possibility for a surrealist *social* critique depends upon its inscription within the social world it contests, but he does not extend that perception to