

SURREALISM AND THE VISUAL ARTS

Theory and Reception

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INTRODUCTION

And this [Surrealist] manner of exalting the word “Poetic,” is this not an exemplary instance of the falsification that allows all sorts of merchandise to be presented under a brilliant term? . . . The great name of “Poetry” has been used to great profit in order to get rid of a lot of pseudo-philosophical-scientific-occult-marxist junk.

Raymond Queneau (1935)¹

What they [the Surrealists] defend, in sum, are the rights of poetry, freedom and fantasy. And, in truth, this is an old battle.

Maximilian Gauthier (1938)²

Raymond Queneau’s 1935 condemnation of Surrealism as junk sold under the name of poetry was not merely an expression of personal rancor made by a disillusioned former Surrealist; it was also a condemnation resonant with a decade’s accumulated criticism of Surrealist art and ideas. Poetry, conceived in its widest sense as unrestricted creative expression, was the fundamental goal of Surrealism, a movement explicitly dedicated to Lautréamont’s appeal for a poetry made by all. Charged with a centuries-old tradition of exalted significance, poetry was, as Queneau described it, a “brilliant term.” It was also the term that dominated the art critical and aesthetic discourse of the 1920s and 1930s. From every position on the artistic spectrum critics, theorists, and artists of the interwar period called for a return to poetry and claimed to have defined and mastered the means of its modern manifestation in the visual arts. The Surrealists were from their first appearance participants in a widespread attempt to institute a new truly poetic modern visual art.

When Queneau derided the Surrealists’ poetic productions as profitable “pseudo-philosophical-scientific-occult-marxist junk,” he was reiterating a constant of interwar art criticism that began with the initial responses to the Surrealists’ first exhibition in 1925. Generally described as overwhelmed by incomprehensible theories, Surrealist visual art was commonly portrayed in contemporary criticism, not as poetic, but as a ludicrous attempt at obfuscation and

aesthetic chicanery masterminded by a few poets with no understanding of the concerns of visual art and the terms of its particular poetry. What was most galling for many members of the artistic community in 1935 was the movement's ascendancy in the art world. Not only was Surrealism commercially successful (although hostile critics tended to overstate the commercial success of Surrealist art), but it had become, more significantly, overwhelmingly triumphant as the leading artistic movement of the interwar period. In 1936, André Masson, who had spent years denying and evading the Surrealist label, wrote with pragmatic resignation to his dealer D. H. Kahnweiler, "there is nothing to do or say, it is the term 'Surrealism' that will indicate now and forever a new stage of art."³ By the mid-1930s it was widely conceded that not only was Surrealism the latest modern artistic movement, but that its primary contribution was the restitution of poetry to visual art. Thus, despite a decade of widespread and often stated objections to the Surrealists' artistic productions and theories, Surrealism became the leading representative of the interwar period's universal critical and artistic goal to restore poetry to modern visual art. What had been a movement dedicated to opposing the art world and the prevailing aesthetics of its day ultimately achieved art world hegemony and in itself defined the concerns and priorities of the period.

Masson's reluctant acceptance that the art of his time was defined by Surrealism occurred at just the point when Surrealism had effectively lost its antagonistic avant-garde status. Long opponents of the restrictions entailed by narrowly artistic definitions and interpretations, by the mid-1930s the Surrealists acceded to their de facto role as the leading art movement of the day. Established as the avatars of a new poetic modern art, the Surrealists embraced the opportunity to define the movement's artistic ideas and productions in order to expand their reach to all corners of the globe. In this process their ideas were limited and clarified; the aggressive, often inscrutable theorizing that had characterized earlier Surrealist interventions largely disappeared or was aestheticized. Theories that had begun as part of a significant revolutionary engagement with the terms of aesthetic evaluation and their attendant social and political implications became simplified explanations or literary glosses on Surrealist artistic productions. By the time of the major International Surrealist Exhibition in 1938, Surrealism was so well ensconced as a merely artistic movement that critics saw it as simply more of the same old thing. As Maximilian Gauthier wrote in his review of the exhibition, the fight for the rights of poetry, freedom, and fantasy was an old battle, and, he implied, it was a battle that had long ago been won.

In recent years, Surrealism has been of particular and substantial interest to art historians and others for exactly the philosophical, psychological, scientific, occult, and Marxist concerns Queneau derided as a mere bid for attention and

profit. These concerns, particularly those of psychology and, to a much lesser degree, Marxism, reflect current theoretical interests and also situate Surrealism in the unique position of a modern art movement directly engaged in the extended development of a variety of consciously critical practices.⁴ For many scholars, Surrealism is more than an object of merely historical interest; it is a movement whose ideas and productions are part of an ongoing project in which they too are participants. This project can be broadly conceived as the critical undermining of the rationalist assumptions of Western thought and civilization. The perception of an affinity between contemporary critical thought and Surrealist practice has resulted in an often purposeful blurring of the distinction between theoretical analysis and historical investigation of Surrealist ideas and productions. Many recent discussions of Surrealism seem much less interested in studying the movement and its ideas as an art historical manifestation than they are in employing Surrealist art as exemplary moments in a sort of extended Surrealist project of unveiling the contradictions and psychological motivations at the heart of all representation (understood in its widest sense).

Selective focus determined by contemporary theoretical concerns is of course endemic to scholarship on any artistic manifestation in any period. What is unique about scholarship on Surrealism is the degree to which it has been subsumed into reigning theoretical and ideological positions at the expense of thoughtful analysis of the movement as a historical phenomenon. In comparison with the literature on other significant modern art movements, art historical studies of Surrealism in interwar France have been and remain, despite the recent escalation of studies on the movement, strangely limited. A consideration of the scholarly treatments of the historical and theoretical complexities of Cubism and Impressionism reveals the extent to which Surrealism has been slighted in the art historical literature.⁵ This may be attributed in part to the fact that the Surrealists, and particularly their leader André Breton, articulated their own seemingly irrefutable theory. Unlike Cubism and Impressionism, which were subject to many competing contemporary interpretations and had rather amorphous boundaries as movements, French Surrealism presented itself as a monolithic institution with an explicit program. For the most part scholars have strangely respected this program and in treating Surrealist art theory have tended to simply allow the Surrealists' own words to stand as an essentially unchallenged, and rarely examined, explanation of the goals, intentions, and productions of the movement. The fact that many of the Surrealists' statements on visual art are extremely complex and often obscure has tended to prompt rather simplistic and reductive summaries rather than serious attempts to analyze them.⁶ This passive reflection is in marked contrast to the extensive analysis that has been devoted to virtually every contemporary critical and theoretical statement made in reference to Impressionism and Cubism.

A second, and highly important, reason for the art historical myopia regarding Surrealism is the movement's insistence that visual art and written poetry were equally valid forms of Surrealist activity.⁷ From its inception Surrealism was considered a literary movement, and Surrealist visual art was, and to a large degree remains,⁸ regarded primarily as a literary manifestation. A bias against so-called literary art dominated art historical accounts of modernism well into the 1970s and colored the approaches used to discuss Surrealist art. It was commonly accepted that the significant issues concerning Surrealist art were thematic and iconographic. These issues received significantly more scholarly attention than the conceptual and aesthetic problems raised by Surrealist art, which were most commonly understood in the terms of premodernist concepts of mimetic representation. Theoretical discussions of Surrealism were undertaken primarily in the context of literary studies, and to this day many thoughtful analyses of Surrealist art have been realized in tandem with parallel investigations of Surrealist literature.⁹ This approach is certainly in keeping with the Surrealists' own general convictions regarding the equal viability of poetry and visual art as forms of Surrealist expression and is often useful in highlighting parallels and exchanges between the two modes of expression. Nevertheless such an approach often remains mired in particulars (direct comparisons of specific paintings and poems for example) and, what is more important, fails to account for the complexity of the problems and issues involved in theorizing and establishing a specifically visual Surrealist art.

One of the main theses of this book is the central theoretical importance of visual art for Surrealism. This runs directly counter to the accepted view of Surrealist visual art and theory. Commonly viewed as an afterthought or adjunct to an essentially literary movement, Surrealist art has often been described as a fundamentally quixotic attempt to apply literary concerns and techniques to visual art.¹⁰ In contrast, my analysis of Surrealist art theory and production demonstrates that Surrealism was, from its inception, predicated on the *material* embodiment of poetic thought. The Surrealists conceived poetry itself as a concrete form of mental activity, a conception developed in large part from contemporary theories of visual art as poetry. The concrete manipulative nature of poetic activity, as conceived by the Surrealists, demanded material form for its production and manifestation. Far from being an adjunct to a literary concept, visual art was the most appropriate and effective manifestation of the fundamental Surrealist project, the concrete material realization of poetic activity.

To understand the Surrealist project and the movement's theorization of the concrete manifestation of poetry, it is necessary to consider Surrealism in the context of contemporary theories of modern art. Little attention has been paid to Surrealism and its relation to contemporary non-Surrealist artistic theories;¹¹

in fact, there is a startling lack of considerations of Surrealist art and art theory in their artistic context. Other than the inevitable debates regarding Surrealism's Dada origins, discussions of Picasso's relation to Surrealism, and recently references to Georges Bataille and his dissident group's relation to the movement, Surrealist art and art theory often seem to exist in a vacuum.¹² It is this lacuna that this study proposes to address by providing a careful examination of the development of the Surrealist theory of visual art in the context of the critical expectations and aesthetic concerns of the interwar period in France. In doing so this study focuses on a close analysis of primary sources and the writings on visual art by the Surrealists themselves, as well as the critical response to the movement, and, more generally, the art criticism of the interwar period. It is my belief that such an approach will allow for a more thorough and nuanced understanding of the Surrealist theory of visual art.

Unlike much recent scholarship, this is not intended to be a strong reading of Surrealism, that is, a reading guided by a predetermined theoretical approach. In this regard I may be accused of a degree of theoretical naiveté in presuming to provide a more neutral or accurate presentation of historical material rather than acceding to the inevitable distortions and partialities of my own historical position. To such a charge I wish only to point out that Surrealism has had more than its share of exceedingly partial interpretations and presentations. Scholarship on Surrealism is rich in highly theoretical analyses of Surrealist artworks that, interesting as they often are, demonstrate a troubling tendency to ignore or disdain historical accuracy.¹³ Indeed, it is common throughout the scholarship on Surrealism to find retrospective accounts or statements used as evidence and explanation of much earlier events without any acknowledgment of their historical separation and the distortions such retrospection inevitably entails. It is my conviction that, as a historical manifestation, Surrealist art and theory deserve the kind of attention that takes into account its complexities and developments within the context of its historical situation. Certainly the choice of what counts in such a study is inevitably conditioned by the theoretical and methodological stance of the historian and thus is inevitably partial, incomplete, and subject to revision. In this regard the historian's text is no different from that of any author, but the dialog it initiates with its historical object may be either attentive or overbearing, and it is my intention to be attentive to Surrealist art and its historical concerns. To achieve that end this study presents and analyzes Surrealist texts on visual art and the art critical texts responding to Surrealism in the chronological order of their publication in France during the 1920s and 1930s.

Consciousness of the unfixed nature of the significance of any historical manifestation is a ruling concept of this study, which is dedicated to an analysis of the Surrealists' early position on visual art as, in large part, a strategic process

of discursive negotiation in the context of contemporary critical responses and expectations. Far from being a monolithic entity, Surrealism was in a constant process of self-definition that responded to both external and internal pressures. This responsiveness has perhaps been most recognized in the movement's political negotiations and engagements, but it was equally relevant for the definition and establishment of Surrealist visual art. The importance of understanding the context and chronology of the development of Surrealist art and theory has been generally overlooked, and most scholars have tended to cite Surrealist writers and artists without regard for the date or context of their statements.¹⁴ In doing so they both assume and promulgate the false notion that Surrealism was immutable and somehow removed from the vicissitudes of the movement's contested and shifting position in the Paris art world. To view Surrealist art and art theory as an isolated entity, as is commonly done, is not just to ignore an interesting background, it is to miss some of the central motives for the Surrealists' positions and their multiple revisions. The Surrealists were deeply engaged in contemporary issues and debates on the nature and purpose of visual art, and the effects of this engagement resonate not only within the Surrealists' own art and writing but also within the contemporary artistic discourse. The interplay between competing conceptions of modern visual art was a crucial determining factor in the establishment of Surrealism's artistic identity and the solidification of the movement's aesthetic position in the 1930s.

The most notable omission in the scholarship on Surrealist art is any serious analysis or discussion of precisely the overarching term that was once used to justify the significance of the Surrealists' artistic endeavors, that is, poetry. Much contested in the art criticism and aesthetic theories of the interwar period, the concept of poetry in visual art has been completely ignored in art historical discussions of Surrealism. The related and equally important term, lyricism, has in contrast received some attention,¹⁵ but it too has been comparatively neglected given its centrality for interwar artistic debates and evaluation. Pierre Reverdy's 1923 remarks on lyricism serve as a consummate epigram for the problems attendant on the usage of both poetry and lyricism as critical terms, and they are as valid today as when they were written: "Another word that must change its accepted meaning which is ready to die, used up, effaced, worn like one of those very old medals that seem to have slowly dissolved in our hands. Because they no longer have any precise edges they slip and one fears they can no longer be retained."¹⁶ Four years later, writing about the aesthetic debates of the early 1920s in *Le Surréalisme et la peinture*, the leader of Surrealism, André Breton, claimed the centrality of lyricism and seemed to deny Reverdy's doubts. "Lyricism, which is what recommends to us every work we admire, is not by its nature an indefinable property, and if criticism avoids pushing its little investigations so

far, it is not for fear of profaning what goes straight to our hearts; it is pure and simple insufficiency, of course."¹⁷ Nevertheless, despite his claims for lyricism's essential value and his contemptuous comment on art critics' inability to define the term, Breton gave no more precise a definition than any of his contemporaries. Like Reverdy's effaced coin, lyricism's definition remained obscure, and with its associate, poetry, was only relatively comprehensible through association and inference. To understand poetry and lyricism and their central importance for visual art in the interwar period it is thus necessary to analyze their mobilization in the complex network of contemporary aesthetic assumptions and discursive negotiations. Such an analysis provides a key not only to understanding the Surrealists' aesthetic position but also to the movement's contributions to the definition and significance of modern visual art.

Another central term for Surrealism whose role in contemporary aesthetic debates has not been fully investigated is automatism. Automatism has often been considered the most important Surrealist contribution to the history of modern visual art; indeed traditional histories of modernism saw automatic techniques developed by the Surrealists as a genetic link between modern French painting and the New York School. This conviction has led to much discussion of automatism in the literature on Surrealist art, but these discussions commonly focus on its roots in psychology, on early Surrealist debates on the possibility of automatism in the visual arts, and on technical issues of automatism in the productions of individual Surrealist artists. What has not been recognized is the extent to which the Surrealist concept of automatism in the visual arts was a highly contested issue throughout the Paris art world of the 1920s. Not only were many critics opposed to the notion that visual art could be produced without conscious control, there were also significant critical efforts to redefine automatism and render its revolutionary Surrealist intention innocuous. These efforts were centered in *Cahiers d'Art*, the art magazine most dedicated to the evolution of the formal innovations of modern art. A competitive dialogue developed between the Surrealists and the *Cahiers d'Art* critics that did much to shape the development of Surrealist art and theory, as well as helping to define and establish the movement's historical contribution to the evolution of modern art. It was primarily in the pages of *Cahiers d'Art* that Surrealism, which began as a movement open to all forms of creative innovation in the visual arts, first became restricted to what were defined as literary artistic concerns and divorced from properly modernist (in the Greenbergian sense) innovations in artistic form.

The art critics writing in *Cahiers d'Art* challenged Surrealism from the magazine's inception in 1926. This challenge ultimately centered around a redefinition of automatism that employed a traditional understanding of poetic painting based on suggestive style and directly expressive artistic technique. This understanding

relied on technical mastery and the conscious employment of artistic skill, in direct opposition to the basic premise of Surrealist automatic practice, which was to bypass conscious control and thus evade conventional aesthetic concerns. By directly linking automatism with identifiable, even traditional, artistic techniques, the *Cahiers d'Art* critics defined a new modern style of poetic painting and promoted a group of young artists, the Neo-Fauves, as its representatives.¹⁸ These painters were persistently held up as direct competitors to the Surrealist artists, and although they are now largely forgotten, the challenge to Surrealism they represented was quite effective. The *Cahiers d'Art* critics' transmutation of automatism into merely a new style of modern painting contributed significantly to the Surrealists' disillusionment with the revolutionary potential of direct painterly or graphic automatic techniques. As the critical discourse articulated in *Cahiers d'Art* demonstrated, direct graphic automatism was extremely susceptible to conventional aesthetic evaluation and the ideological and economic traps such evaluation entailed.

One of the effects of the widespread tendency to view Surrealism in isolation from its art world context is to take its historical position as the leading avant-garde artistic movement of the interwar period in France for granted. In conventional art historical accounts of modernism, Surrealism succeeds Dada and precedes Abstract Expressionism in a relatively simple genealogy complete with direct filiations and shared personnel. Surrealism is portrayed not only as a significant artistic occurrence, but as representative of its period; thus, to understand the period it is only necessary to study Surrealism. What such an approach elides is precisely how Surrealism became the representative avant-garde artistic movement of the interwar period. The Surrealists' eventual position of dominance was far from preordained, and an account of how they achieved that position demonstrates the complex contradictions involved in achieving avant-garde status in the early twentieth century.

By the time of Surrealism's inception in 1924, artistic avant-gardism was no longer a clear indicator of rebellion; it was instead a marker for fashionability in a booming art market eager for novelty. The Surrealists were caught between conflicting expectations: one, their own goal to overturn the established terms of aesthetic evaluation, and two, a well-established tradition of artistic avant-gardism that relied on the concept of aesthetic revolution. The history of this conflict as it played out in both Surrealist theory and activities, as well as in the critical reception of Surrealist art, is one of the first instances of the ineluctable contradictions at the heart of a modernism that values artistic innovation as its fundamental motivation. Peter Bürger based his analysis of the essential avant-garde nature of Surrealism on the movement's attempt to abolish the category of art altogether.¹⁹ This was more true conceptually than in actual Surrealist

practice, and the conflicts involved in aligning Surrealist theory and artistic practice is one of the subjects of this study. What Bürger also failed to acknowledge was the impetus of the rhetorical and conceptual understanding of modern art as revolutionary, which made the Surrealists' attempt to abolish the category of art almost inevitable within modernism's own logic. By the 1920s, a position of artistic avant-gardism had become fundamentally impossible, and the only viable way to achieve a truly avant-garde subversive status was to evade (or appear to evade) art completely. The Surrealists' embrace of a revolutionary political position was a carefully considered means of retaining control of their definition of art. By asserting that their productions were not art, the Surrealists hoped to overcome the limits, and brief shelf life, of art as a commodity and thereby maintain Surrealism's revolutionary status.

One of the ironies of Surrealism's success as an avant-garde movement is its curiously retrospective nature. As this study shows, Surrealism was accepted as the defining movement of its day at the exact moment that critics relegated it to the past. The art critical reception of Surrealist art moved abruptly and unselfconsciously from insistent rejections of the movement as an artistically insignificant occurrence to widespread acknowledgment in the early 1930s that it had been the representative modern art movement of the later 1920s. In a sense, recognition of a movement's avant-gardism could only occur retrospectively, once the movement's achievements had been rendered innocuous through limitation, definition and familiarity. The extent to which French art critics of the late 1920s and 1930s were conscious of their role, not just as arbiters of contemporary taste or artistic ideas, but as determining forces in the historical understanding of their period, is one of the more intriguing developments of the art criticism of the day. An aspect of this art historical self-consciousness, and one shared to a large degree by the Surrealists, was a widespread contempt for the present and a corresponding orientation toward past and future developments. In the ever-diminishing present there is no such thing as a lived revolutionary moment except in retrospect. This attitude formed a newly self-conscious basis for the critical and theoretical evaluation of avant-garde art in the interwar period in France.

In its broadest conception this study is about language and its manipulation and mobilization in the competing artistic discourses of the 1920s and early 1930s. Reverdy's observation regarding the effaced and indeterminate nature of lyricism's meaning applies to many of the terms discussed in this study. Poetry and lyricism were historically vague terms employed to support, and exalt, numerous conflicting aesthetic positions, but even seemingly fixed terms were subject to multiple interpretations and usage that inflected their significance to promote specific agendas. Surrealism was itself a term used in a variety of ways and was

often willfully employed to misrepresent and disparage the Surrealists. This was as true after the movement's artistic contribution to the period was established as it was in the early years of Surrealism's appearance. Automatism, long recognized as one of the Surrealists' central contributions to modern artistic practice, was also a key term of the period whose definition and application was widely challenged.

Today the primary meanings of many of the period's most contested terms are those adopted by the Surrealists, a circumstance reinforced by art historical texts that persistently reiterate an established canon of Surrealist definitions, quotations, and exemplary productions to illustrate their significance.²⁰ In reviving the complex situation of the original enunciations that comprised the Surrealist discourse, this study is intended to broaden awareness of the formative role that language plays in the understanding and success of manifestations in the visual arts. The Surrealists' own fundamental conviction that language creates reality, and their dedication to mobilizing that knowledge in their activities and productions, makes such an approach particularly appropriate to an examination of Surrealist art theory. As this study shows, what was written about a given artist or work was often more important than the work itself in establishing its significance. Contrary to a widely held, and rarely examined, conviction, visual artistic production does not and cannot stand unsupported by texts, at least not if it is to enter the realm of history. It is only through the mediations of language that the experience and significance of a work of visual art can become other than transient and personal. A universally maintained reverent silence in the face of a work of visual art would be the most effective way to consign it to historical oblivion.