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Introduction: Surrealism's Critical Legacy

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Surrealism occupies a distinctive place in the intellectual and cultural history of the twentieth century. As one of the longest-running avant-garde movements, Surrealism spearheaded a revolution in the plastic arts, transformed our understanding of literature and literary form, and became an important catalyst for the emergence of post-1968 French cultural theory. Inspired by the newly flourishing fields of psychoanalysis, ethnography, and modern science, Surrealism drew its energies from cutting-edge intellectual, philosophical, and scientific thought alongside the ferment of the avant-garde, with its incitement of experimental aesthetic form coupled with urgent political provocation. While Surrealism shared in this historical momentum it also endured well beyond many of the short-lived avant-garde coteries that flourished in the early decades of the twentieth century, before serving as an important catalyst for postwar avant-garde movements such as COBRA, Fluxus, and the Situationist International. More recently, the newer interdisciplinary fields of Cultural Studies, Everyday Life Studies, the Environmental Humanities, and Urban Studies have drawn on Surrealism's early attention to urban life, quotidian experience, affective attachments to material objects, and the close proximity of animal/human worlds together with its radical reorientation of cultural and aesthetic value.

This volume examines some of the salient ideas and practices that have shaped Surrealism as a protean intellectual and cultural concept, paying close attention to its prevailing experimental impetus through which it fundamentally shifted our understanding of the nexus between art, culture, and politics. Surrealism's longevity and the ongoing reconceptualization of its constitutive boundaries (invariably articulated through its manifestos and political tracts), in addition to its anti-colonial political position, precipitated an international movement that challenged the Eurocentric

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parameters of modernism and the avant-garde. By bringing literary forms into conversation with other art practices (photography, film, fashion, display) and emerging intellectual traditions (ethnography, modern science, anthropology, sociology, psychoanalysis), the essays in this volume trace the wide impact and legacy of Surrealism across the humanities and social sciences. No other avant-garde movement has achieved this level of temporal and conceptual resilience, making it one of the most dynamic critical concepts of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

As a movement that sought to unite radical forms of politics with a belief in the importance of the imagination, or to make the imagination a site of broader cultural and political renewal, Surrealism distanced itself from the remit of modernism and its attendant claims to experimental formalism and aestheticism. While the entanglements between the avant-garde and modernism proper are perhaps more complex than Surrealism's avowed claims to exceptionalism, its endeavours to qualify and requalify its position created a movement that was continually responsive to the political contingencies of the present. The various critical reassessments of modernism and the orbit of the avant-garde movements within them have done little to give Surrealism its proper due beyond new modernist studies' ever-expanding categories and objects of attention.

More recently, in response to Adorno's pessimistic reflection on the movement in his essay, "Looking Back on Surrealism" (1956), Elisabeth Lenk has argued for a rethinking of Surrealism in terms of Critical Theory's orientation toward historical events. Lenk suggests that if there "is a strict criterion to which both movements, Surrealism and the Frankfurt School, might have adhered, it would be this: cognition of the present."[1] Insisting that both movements undoubtedly "unleashed the May '68 events," Lenk contends that they "add a new dimension to the political" that opens up the darkness and oppressive forms that otherwise block a clear understanding of the present.[2] In promoting process-oriented art practices tied to the primacy of individual and collective freedom, and in pursuing research and experiment as intrinsic to challenging traditional epistemological certainty, Surrealism created a distinctive path for politically driven art practices. These practices preempted the collective goals of the Situationists and the more recent social turn of the participatory art movement. Through its experimental approach to art, which combined ludic, scientific, and

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[1] Elisabeth Lenk, "Critical Theory and Surreal Practice," in *The Challenge of Surrealism: The Correspondence of Theodor W. Adorno and Elisabeth Lenk*, ed., Susan H. Gillepsie (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 37.

[2] Ibid.

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ethnographic registers, Surrealism made creative endeavor the site of everyday struggle against exchange-value and utilitarian forms of progress.

The critical reception of Surrealism within the academy and formal institutions of art has often been at odds with the movement's evolving and eclectic concerns and practices. With the "First Papers of Surrealism" Exhibition in New York in 1942, the centre of the artistic avant-garde appeared to have shifted from Europe to New York, although Surrealism had certainly made its mark on the city before the war along with New York Dada. The movement left an indelible impression in the United States across both artistic and commercial domains, in part due to Julien Levy's masterful promotion of its artworks and personalities. But by mid-century the critical prestige of its concepts began to wane with Clement Greenberg's dismissal of its artworks as academic kitsch, in line with Roger Fry's reductionist modernist categorization of "pure" and "impure" forms of modern art. At the same time, its fortunes in Europe were also shifting. Those Surrealists returning from exile to France in the postwar period were often met with dismissal if not hostility for having left Europe in its hour of need. Simultaneously, the force of their intellectual and political convictions had gradually been replaced in transatlantic circles with the new fascination for Sartre and existentialism. The movement's evident decline in political and intellectual circles transpired into a temporary loss of its critical and provocative edge, and its artworks and textual forms were increasingly domesticated within academic and art institutions.

The revivification of a more dissident Surrealism under the aegis of postmodernism by the *October* group (which included Rosalind Krauss, Hal Foster, Denis Hollier, and others) brought to the fore a new appreciation of Surrealism's darker sibling, via a Lacanian, rather than a Freudian psychoanalytic apparatus, even as it unwittingly contributed to an overstated critical cleavage between Bretonian Surrealism and the so-called dissident offshoot formed around Georges Bataille. But it also precipitated a decisive revaluation of *all* the artefacts associated with Surrealism by virtue of overturning Greenberg's formalist hijacking of modernist art, using the very terms Greenberg had used to describe surrealist painting – retrograde, perverse, corrupt, impure – to reassert the work's critical power. In addition, the *October* group of writers and intellectuals returned to the critical practice of formulating theory alongside the work of artists, a practice that was germane to Surrealism from the beginning.

There are many ways to tell the story of Surrealism, just as there are competing interpretative schools that have shaped how we understand the

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movement today. And while the institutional and academic reification of the ideas and artworks of Surrealism is in some ways inevitable, the point may be to ask: What legacy did Surrealism's seminal concepts bequeath as they morphed, faded, and were revived across its protracted history and beyond? In the inaugural "Manifesto of Surrealism" (1924), Breton equated Surrealism with a "*new vice,*" akin to hashish addiction, in that it propels its adherents to unprecedented levels of revolt.[3] The risks that Surrealism pursued seem unlikely now in our risk adverse temporal moment; but, by the same token, the renewed interest in Surrealism and its legacy (one of many such resurgences across the years) suggests the enduring value of many of the critical concepts, political and aesthetic, that preoccupied Surrealism, and a sense of our own historical moment as ripe for renewed forms of critical thinking and political provocation.

Artificial Hells

The emergence out of Dada looms large in one of the many origin stories of Surrealism. With its antiart shock tactics, chaotic spectacles, and nihilist manifestos, Dada initially emerged as one of the most important responses to the cultural and political malaise of the war and interwar period. And yet in his otherwise exuberant response to Paris Dada, "For Dada" (1920), Breton proclaimed with unusual foresight the self-defeating logic of a movement that could only tear things down. As a movement that frequently announced its own absurdity and self-destruction, Dada was continually sabotaged by its adherents and opponents alike. That was the point of Dada. But as Claire Bishop has argued "the work perceived by its makers to be an experimental failure in its own time (like the Dada season of 1921) may nevertheless have resonances in the future, under new conditions."[4] Bishop's comments about the importance of failure are germane not only for Surrealism's emergence from the ashes of Dada, but in terms of how "the contradictions between intention and reception, agency and manipulation"[5] have come to define Surrealism's broader critical legacy; this is not just within the participatory art movements that followed, but the broader debates that shaped the events of May 1968, via the work of critical theorists such as Henri Lefebvre, Guy

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[3] André Breton, "Manifesto of Surrealism" [1924], in *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1972), 3–47 (36).

[4] Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London and New York: Verso, 2012), 7.

[5] Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 7.

Debord, Michel de Certeau, and Roland Barthes, all of whom bore the imprint of Surrealism in various ways.

What Bishop's analysis rescues from this historical moment is how failure itself becomes almost definitive to the process of interrogation that came to define Surrealism's experimental attitude. Borrowing the title of her book, *Artificial Hells*, from Breton's report ("Les Enfers artificiels") on the Dada season of 1921, Bishop conveys the importance of this historical moment for the ensuing debates about politicized forms of art more generally and participatory forms of art, specifically: "That the 'political' and 'critical' have become shibboleths of advanced art signals a lack of faith *both* in the intrinsic value of art as a de-alienating human endeavour (since art today is so intertwined with market systems globally) *and* in democratic processes (in whose name so many injustices and barbarities are conducted)."[6] The salutary lesson here is not Dada's failure *tout court* but that as an "experimental failure" it bequeathed to us "the intrinsic value of art as a de-alienating human endeavour" beyond its political motivation. This is an important point to make for the historical conditions of Surrealism precisely because it allows us to distinguish between Surrealism's politically meaningful insistence on the autonomy of certain experiences out of which emerged the processes informing its definition of artmaking (which were refined in the wake of its protracted struggles with the French Communist Party, PCF) and individual works of art as instrumentally politically motivated (socialist realism). This was especially true of the Surrealism formulated by Bataille for whom powerful discursive communication occurs only through the failure of utilitarian language in the same way that "sovereignty must inhabit the realm of failure" because although "the slave triumphs [in the Hegelian dialectic], . . . his apparent sovereignty is nothing but the autonomous will for slavery."[7]

A closer look at André Breton's involvement in Dada discloses the antecedents of a new experimental approach (and its failure) that would edge it closer to Surrealism even if Breton would later maintain that the relationship between Dada and Surrealism should be thought of "correlatively, like two waves that cover each other by turns."[8] Breton coined the phrase "artificial hells," itself an inversion of Baudelaire's account of hashish and opium intoxication, *Artificial Paradise* (1860), to describe the

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[6] Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 284.

[7] Georges Bataille, *Literature and Evil*, trans. Alastair Hamilton (London: Penguin Classics, 2012), 174.

[8] André Breton, "Radio Interviews with André Parinaud," in *Conversations: The Autobiography of Surrealism*, trans. Mark Polizzotti (New York: Marlowe and Company, 1993), 44.

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disconcerting experience of events throughout the Dada season of 1921, "whereby the intoxicating atmosphere . . . created what might be called a community of mutually alienated individuals whose greatest source of common attraction was an impulse toward violent disagreement."[9]

Even at this early point in his career, Dada was, for Breton, an important testing ground for the broader ramifications of disorientation (*dépaysement*) and communal experience, with many of the events he organized taking a decidedly public urban form, with a range of advertised excursions and visits involving public participants designed to parody guided tours or *guide à la clé.* For Breton, the point of these excursions was to create a new mode of relationship to a public audience and a new mode of experience in the everyday world, which left the relatively safe confines and expectations of the theatre and ventured out into the unpredictable flux of the urban street. As such, for Breton Dada was always more than mere scandal: "Scandal for all its force . . . would be insufficient to elicit the delight that one might expect from an artificial hell. One should keep in mind the 'odd pleasure obtained in taking to the street' and 'keeping one's footing' so to speak."[10] The "artificial hells" invoked by Breton in his paid report for the fashion designer and erstwhile art collector, Jacques Doucet, also reveal how Dada navigated the tension between provocation and theatricality. Here, Breton shifted it closer to "thought" and "gesture" and it would later morph, under the rubric of Surrealism, into the pull between ideas and action:

> By conjoining thought with gesture, Dada has left the realm of shadows to venture onto solid ground. It is absurd that poetic or philosophical ideas should not be amenable to immediate application like scientific ideas. Surrealism, psychoanalysis, the principle of relativity must lead us to build instruments as precise and as well adapted to our practical needs as the wireless.[11]

If, for this moment of Dada, "solid ground" represented a move away from the enclosed world of the theatre and direct engagement with an incendiary public, these events also involved, for Breton at least, "a reorientation of Dada negativity, a desire to uncover what subsists when conventional meaning and purpose are stripped away."[12] But here the emphasis on

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[9] Matthew S. Witkovsky, "Dada Breton," *October* 105 (Summer, 2003), 125–136 (130).

[10] André Breton, "Artificial Hells. Inauguration of the '1921 Dada Season'," trans. Matthew S. Witkovsky, *October* 105 (Summer, 2003), 137–144 (139).

[11] Ibid.

[12] Michael Sheringham, *Everyday Life: Theories and Practices from Surrealism to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 66.

"precision" and "practicality" also ring out as one thread that will continually keep Surrealism on "solid ground," following Rimbaud's dictum, *changer la vie*, in spite of its enduring investigation of nonrational experience. The street, evoked in Breton's report on the 1921 Dada season, locates the frisson of urban life as a catalyst to "wrest the human spirit from some of its fetters," a pronouncement that would come to preoccupy a great deal of surrealist writing and give shape to a movement that in its essence was open to collective possibility.[13]

Manifestos

The three official surrealist manifestos often serve to bracket the movement's preoccupations, if not a timeline of its development, even as they were contested by the subsidiary strains that expanded its substantive contours – Bataille and the *Documents* authors on the one hand, Aragon on the other, and the regional deviations that reshaped the movement's axes of center and periphery. While Breton's October 1924 "Manifesto of Surrealism" seemingly sealed the movement's decisive split from Dada, no such definitive cleavage ever took place, as Breton reminds us. Indeed, his first manifesto is everywhere colored with the anarchic brush of Dada, from its repudiation of literary realism and the commodification of art markets to its valorization of madness, childhood play, the imagination, dreams, and the unconscious. Moreover, the ongoing tensions that plagued the formative years of the movement, including the ambivalent relationship with Tristan Tzara who would move in and out of the surrealist circle for years to come, in addition to the ongoing collaboration with Marcel Duchamp (the high priest of New York Dada), indicates a closer and more lasting familial relationship between the two movements. The ongoing productive friction between the anarchic and parodic tenor of Dada and the more idealist and communitarian strains of Surrealism, point to Surrealism's emergence from Dada as evolutionary rather than definitive.

And yet Surrealism's inaugural manifesto was a clarion call for a new kind of avant-garde movement if not a new kind of avant-garde manifesto. Under the aegis of Surrealism, Breton offered a radical rethinking of the manifesto's form and scope, including its controlled production, bringing it closer to its socialist prototype, the *Communist Manifesto* (1848). In a political landscape that would become increasingly centralized by the

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[13] Breton, "Artificial Hells," 149.

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Third International (1919–43), with the *Communist Manifesto* designated as the unchangeable organ of truth under Moscow's control, Breton fashioned the manifesto into a striking medium for bold proclamation and reasoned justification.[14] Staking out its proprietary claim to the term "Surrealism" as a way to claim legitimacy for the movement, Breton outlined a radical aesthetic and political revolution whereby the imagination, newly apprehended via Freud's theory of the unconscious, became both an instrument of discovery and a pathway for revolt. In forging "a general phenomenology of the imagination" that was intended to have far reaching implications for art, politics, and everyday life, the "Manifesto of Surrealism" has become an iconic representation of the movement's founding moment and a striking paean to the imagination: "Beloved imagination, what I most like in you is your unsparing quality . . . To reduce imagination to a state of slavery – even though it would mean the elimination of what is commonly called happiness – is to betray all sense of absolute justice within oneself. Imagination alone offers me some intimation of what *can be* . . . ."[15] If the inaugural manifesto staked its claim on the reaffirmation of imagination ("The imagination is perhaps on the point of reasserting itself, of reclaiming its rights"[16]) the *Second Manifesto of Surrealism* (1930), penned by Breton six years later became a somewhat notorious recalibration of the movement as it headed into the complicated landscape of the 1930s. While it is often overshadowed by the scandal of its internecine squabbles and expulsions, the manifesto's darker tone also speaks to a looming turbulence in the political landscape – both close to home as Breton sought to justify the movement's direction in the face of expulsions and breakaway factions alongside its complicated entanglements with the French Communist Party. Defending itself against charges of idealism from both communist orthodoxy and Bataille's dissident faction, the "Second Manifesto" sought to clarify its "modern materialism" in terms of the dialectical relationship of thought and matter. By accommodating a psychoanalytic conceptual foundation within his version of modern materialism, Breton insists "*the problem of human expression in all its forms*" is equal to and necessarily part of "the problem of social action."[17] As Martin Puchner contends, Surrealism's negotiation of the disciplining strictures of the Third International and the tenets of its artistic revolution "proved to be the catalyst for [its] most productive achievements," in spite of the tensions it unfolded.[18] The mediation between independent human expression and dedicated social action is ever present throughout the "Second Manifesto," moving from its commitment to overthrowing the material and ideological paradigms of bourgeois social regulation: "every means must be worth trying, in order to lay waste to the ideas of *family*, *country*, *religion*," to the affirmation of its commitment to material reality: "[Surrealism] plunges its roots into life . . . into *the life of this period*."[19] While direct refence to the imagination fades, it is thinly veiled via the rubric of "the surrealist experiment."[20] If the second manifesto is now read as "more radical and apocalyptic" than its earlier counterpart, in ways that critics have referred to as Breton's "gothic Marxism," this darkness was perhaps initially observed by Bataille in an essay reflecting on the movement decades after Breton penned the second manifesto.[21] Turning to the relationship between the first and second manifestos, Bataille is struck by how Surrealism moves from a belief in "the dictation of thought in the absence of all control exercised by reason and outside all aesthetic and moral considerations" to the second manifesto's injunction to violence: "The simplest surrealist act consists in descending to the street with revolver in hand and shooting at random, as fast as one can, into the crowd." Bataille concludes that this "slippage" between the two manifestos "adds to the difficulty in grasping Surrealism" but also affirms it as "a state of mind" reducible to neither a style nor a group of defined individuals.[22] While Breton's imagined act of violence is of course a fantasy of rebellion (who hasn't at least once dreamed of such an action – he insists), the rhetorical excess of this passage nevertheless reminds us of the slippage between the manifesto's verbal call to arms and the actual revolutionary moment in which habits of convention and obedience are violently ruptured – perhaps signaling the proximity between Breton and Bataille's dialectical thinking at this point, in spite of the histrionic battle that surrounded the publication of the *Second Manifesto of Surrealism*.

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[14] Ibid., 184. [15] Breton, "Manifesto of Surrealism," 4–5. [16] Ibid., 10.

[17] Andre Breton, "Second Manifesto of Surrealism," [1930] in *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, 151 (italics in the original).

By the time of the third (and final) official surrealist manifesto, *Prolegomena to a Third Surrealist Manifesto or Not* (1942), Surrealism had again changed course, accommodating a more expansive interpretation of

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[18] Martin Puchner, *Poetry of the Revolution: Marx, Manifestos, and the Avant-Gardes* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 181.

[19] Breton "Second Manifesto," 124.

[20] Breton, "Second Manifesto," 128. Both Margaret Cohen and Michael Löwy refer to Breton's "gothic Marxism."

[21] Sheringham, *Everyday Life*, 103.

[22] Georges Bataille, "Surrealism" [1948], in *The Absence of Myth: Writings on Surrealism*, ed. and trans. Michael Richardson (London: Verso, 1994), 54–56 (55).

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its remit. Written in exile and attempting to address the profound geographical and conceptual decentering the movement had undergone since its inauguration, Breton charted a more expansive and less partisan conceptual role for what was by now a decidedly international movement. The prominent role of myth in this avowedly ambivalent manifesto carries a tone, if not of defeat, then of redirection, and the formulation of a new unifying myth, a project that had begun in earnest in the 1930s. In his Prague lecture, "Political Position of Today's Art" (1935), Breton claimed that "art is no longer a question of the creation of a personal myth, but rather . . . *the creation of a collective myth*."[23]

Significantly, Breton returns to these themes in New York during World War II, in "Situation of Surrealism Between the Wars," a lecture delivered at Yale in 1942, and in "Prolegomena to a Third Surrealist Manifesto, or Not" (1942), both published in the New York surrealist journal, *VVV*. Here, Breton combines his thoughts on the future of the surrealist movement – indeed, the future of an international avant-garde movement – with an extended exegesis on the role of myth in providing new forms of collective social meaning that foreground the relationships between the internal and external world or what Breton referred to as the "psychophysical field."[24] Like Breton's previous manifestos, "Prolegomena" presents an overview of Surrealism's current state of play, outlining the challenges of the movement's global reach, while also acknowledging that reach as central to the movement's future. "Prolegomena" ends with Breton's introduction of a new mythology, "The Great Transparent Ones," which lays down the foundation for an ontology cognizant of both human and nonhuman agents. The revitalization of myth thus strengthened Surrealism's existing allegiance to the unbridled qualities of the imagination, acknowledging the mysterious forces ("the workings of chance") that both constrain and empower individual freedom, thus regenerating the alienating vicissitudes of everyday life.[25]

Breton's turn to myth in the final manifesto had been inspired in part by Bataille's efforts throughout the 1930s to reinvigorate myth and ritual as foundational to ideas of community and communal experience albeit in

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[23] André Breton, "Political Position of Today's Art," *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, 232 (italics in the original). Breton concludes the essay by warning of Hitler's lethal repression of all avant-garde art and leftist thought, calling for a united front to oppose those who would repress the "invisible force" of "human becoming," 233.

[24] André Breton, "Artistic Genesis and Perspective of Surrealism" [1941], in *Surrealism and Painting*, trans. Simon Watson Taylor (Boston: MFA Publications, 2002), 70.

[25] André Breton, "Prolegomena to a Third Manifesto or Not" [1942], *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, 293.