Surrealism and Misogyny

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Fig. 1 Surrealists around a painting by René Magritte. Published in *La Révolution surréaliste,* 1929.

A composite illustration published in *La Révolution surréaliste* in 1929 (Fig. 1), of photographs of the Surrealists arranged in a rectangle around Magritte's painting of a naked woman, has always seemed to me very telling. This work indicates that the surrealist movement, like so many other twentieth-century avant-garde movements (Futurism, Dada, Expression-

Fig. 2 Man Ray, *Waking Dream Séance,* 1924. Collection Lucien Treillard, Paris.

ism, etc.), was a men's club. The Surrealists lived in their own masculine world, with their eyes closed, the better to construct their male phantasms of the feminine. They did not see woman as a subject, but as a projection, an object of their own dreams of femininity. These masculine dreams play an active part in patriarchy's misogynistic positioning of women. It is precisely in Surrealism, with its emphasis on dreams, automatic writing, the unconscious, that we can expect to find some of the least inhibited renditions of male fantasies, and thus gain a good understanding of male desires and interests.

Surrealist art and poetry are addressed to men; women are only means to bring about these works. Woman is seen by the male Surrealists only in terms of what she can do for them. She is their muse – who also happens to know how to type, as in Man Ray's photograph of 1924 entitled *Waking*

Dream Séance (Fig. 2). The woman (here, actually Simone Breton) comes the medium, the hands, through which the dreams of the Surr ists are preserved on paper. She is, so to speak, a recording machine. of course has no dreams of her own, but faithfully encodes male drea Women are to the male Surrealists, as in the longstanding traditions o triarchy, servants, helpers in the forms of child muse, virgin, *fem enfant,* angel, celestial creature who is their salvation, or erotic ob model, doll – or she may be the threat of castration in the forms of ubiquitous praying mantis and other devouring female animals.[1] Bret relationship with the *femme-enfant* Nadja is illustrative: Nadja's me distress is used by Breton as a way to the unconscious. She is a vision she can answer for him *his* questions, tell him who he is. Women, acc ing to Freud's and Lacan's own misogynist stories, are closer to the un scious than men, because they have not entirely entered the symb order. Lacan, who published his first texts in the surrealist magazine *M taure,* indicates in his *Seminaire livre XX* that the female subject nei succumbs to as complete an alienation from the real, the organic wh nor enjoys as full an association with the symbolic as does the male ject.[2]

The Surrealists saw the actual demands of French women for so emancipation in 1924 as merely bourgeois. They preferred to celebrat male hysteria as *attitudes passionelles,* as *l'amour fou,* in the last issue o *Révolution surréaliste.* When their attempted marriage with the Fre Communist Party failed, they turned in the *Second Surrealist Manifes* 1929 to erotic desire as their means of transforming human consciousn Dali became for Breton the incorporation of this desire through his p noiac-critical method, a technique of self-induced delirium in which masculine ego molds the images and realities of the external world to respond to his own inner needs and desires. Dali's *The Great Masturb* of 1929 (Fig. 3) depicts Gala Eluard, soon to be Gala Dali, as his he savior, in a "psychodrama of frustration and mingled fear and desire in presence of the loved one."[3] In this painting, a monstrous head bea Dali's features is supported horizontally by its rigid nose. From the bac the head arises Gala's head, caressing the genitals of a male figure. image of erotic desire and feared impotence, the painting, accordin Whitney Chadwick, reveals Gala's dual roles as the stimulator of the er desire that initiates the delusional process, and the link between inte and exterior reality,[4] since she is emerging directly from Dali's own m *L'Age d'or* on which Dali collaborated with Buñuel, contains a scene unlike that of *The Great Masturbator,* in which a woman sucks the toe statue.

In her book *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement,* Chadwick shown that only after having left the surrealist circle could women br out of the role of serving muse to become artists in their own right.

Fig. 3 Salvador Dali, *The Geat Masturbator,* 1929–32. Oil on canvas. Private collection.

Miller, who first sought an aesthetic reality rather than a personal identity in Surrealism, played, acted out the male's object of desire, and her body became Man Ray's canvas for the play of shadowy lines. Miller's later insistence on her own freedom led to her refusal to be positioned as an erotic object for the male gaze, and thus to a break with Man Ray in 1932. She became a successful photographer herself. Jacqueline Lamba, whom Breton married in 1934 and who was an artist in her own right, had little time to involve herself in her own work while married to Breton. Chadwick writes: "The women closest to the Surrealists–among them Gala Dali, Nusch Eluard, Dora Maar, and Jacqueline Lamba–were beloved for the quality of their imaginations rather than for their artistic goals."[5] They *were* allowed to participate with the male Surrealists in making exquisite corpses, the surrealist parlor game.

The male Surrealists celebrated the Marquis de Sade, and none was more sadistic than Hans Bellmer, whose photographs of violated puppets and dolls were published in surrealist magazines. André Kertész's *Deformations* are another instance of the male Surrealists' disfiguring of the female figure, and Raoul Ubac's series entitled *The Battle of the Amazons* viciously hacks apart the arms, legs, and heads of female figures in his fear of castration.

Why belabor the obvious point that Surrealism, in celebrating the culine unconscious, brings forth representations of the least-cens misogyny? These images of Ubac, Kertész, and Bellmer have rec been interpreted by Rosalind Krauss as being protofeminist in her ex tion catalogue entitled *L'Amour fou: Photography and Surrealism* of 1 Let me summarize her argument:

Her agenda in the two catalogue essays is to redeem Surrealism, w is generally seen as a formally regressive movement in art history, vi surrealist photograph. In order to redeem Surrealism one also has to it of misogynist charges. How does she do that? In her first essay, ent "Photography in the Service of Surrealism," she analyzes the techni through which the Surrealists modified, changed, and defamiliarize straight image. These techniques include solarization, rayography, r tive printing, multiple exposures, photomontage, collage, and doub The straight image is thus metamorphosed. The distortions that thereby created serve to point out that even straight photography doe represent reality or nature, but social constructions. Fetishism is such cial construction, and the defamiliarizing techniques of the surrealist tographers reveal this. Krauss states, with regard to Kertész's *Distort* "Within surrealist photography, doubling also functions as the signifi signification. It is this semiological, rather than stylistic, condition unites the vast array of the movement's photographic production. . . this way the photographic medium is exploited to produce a paradox paradox of reality constituted as a sign–or presence transformed absence, into representation, into spacing, into writing" (31).

In her second essay, "Corpus delicti," Krauss uses Bataille's notion of *informe* to argue that surrealist photography collapses, undoes con tional propositions. "Corpus delicti, " a juristic term meaning transg sion, already alludes to Bataille. Again, through manipulations of stra photography, Surrealists transgress the familiar social constructions produce a kind of formlessness, Bataille's *informe,* which Krauss conn with Freud's notion of the uncanny. This defamiliarization can be brou about not only by darkroom manipulation, but also by contrivance, s as in Brassaï's *Nude* of 1933 (Fig. 4). In this image sexual identity is lapsed: "The female body and the male organ have each become the s for the other" (95).

Bellmer, Ubac, Kertész, and Brassaï, according to Krauss, foregrou the social fetishization of reality: "It must be seen that in much of surrea practice, woman, in being a fetish, is nowhere in nature. Having dissol the natural in which 'normalcy' can be grounded, Surrealism was at le potentially open to the dissolving of distinctions that Bataille insisted w the job of the *informe.* Gender, at the heart of the surrealist project, w one of these catagories." Krauss continues: "If within surrealist poe *woman* was constantly in construction, then at certain moments that pr

ect could at least prefigure a next step, in which a reading is opened onto deconstruction. It is for this reason," she states, "that the frequent characterizations of Surrealism as antifeminist seem to me to be mistaken" (95).

For Krauss it is precisely surrealist photography, rather than surrealist painting or writing, that presents this moment of deconstruction, the *informe* of gender categories: "Within surrealist photographic practice, too, *woman* was in construction, for she is the obsessional subject there as well. And since the vehicle through which she is figured is itself manifestly constructed (through darkroom manipulations and contrivances), *woman* and *photograph* become figures for each other's condition: ambivalent, blurred, indistinct, and lacking in, to use Edward Weston's word, 'authority'" (95).

Raoul Ubac's photomontages entitled *Battle of the Amazons* (Fig. 5) are seen by Krauss as producing the *informe* through the process of solarization: "These images are the result of successive attacks of solarization. In a first stage a montage would be produced, grouping together various shots of the same nude. This image would then be rephotographed and solarized, the resultant positive becoming a new element to be recombined, through montage, with other fragments and then to be rephotographed and resolarized. . . . A mode of producing a simultaneous positive/negative, solarization most frequently reads as the optical reorganization of the contours of the objects. Reversing and exaggerating the light/dark relationships at this precise registration of the envelope of form, solarization is a process that can obviously be put to the service of the *informe*" (70). This analysis describes Ubac as assaulting straight photography. However

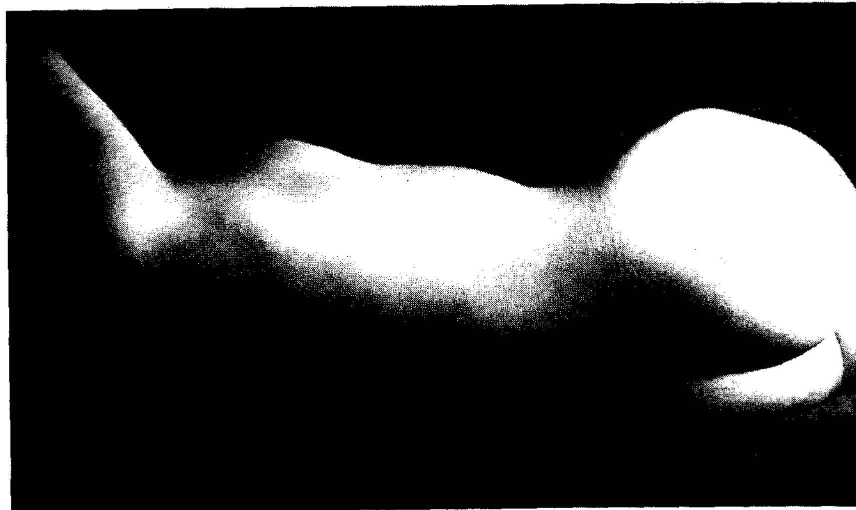

Fig. 4 Brassaï, Untitled, 1933. Collection Rosabianca Skira, Geneva.

Fig. 5 Raoul Ubac, *The Battle of the Amazons,* 1939. Galerie Adrien Maeght

Krauss is completely silent about the violent, sadistic dismemberm
the female image.

In his introduction to André Kertész's *Distortions* (Fig. 6), Hilton K
at least senses that he has to forestall the viewer's perceptions o
ogyny, and therefore explains these works in a "good old boy" way
humor and fun: "They do not victimize but celebrate their subject
There is humor in these pictures, but it is the humor of love. Th
sometimes funny, but they are never mean. . . . Kertész's transform
of the female anatomy are at once erotic and aesthetic – the love son
photographer.[7]

Krauss, however, does not sense the slightest hint of misogyny in
distortions. For her they are simply an instance of the surrealist tech
of defamiliarization called doubling, here via the distorting mirrors.
Bellmer's dolls are for her another example of doubling "which pro
the mark of the sign" (31). She mentions that Bellmer made his firs
upon having seen Jacques Offenbach's opera *The Tales of Hoffman*
first act of which focuses on the Olympia story derived from Hoffm
"The Sandman." She links Bellmer's dolls to Freud's own analysis of
man's story in his essay on the uncanny and sees these dolls as repre
ing the fear of castration. In emphasizing Bellmer's construction of th
sirable *informe,* Krauss is again silent about violations of the female fi

Fig. 6 André Kertész, *Distortion no. 79,* 1933. Collection Beady Davis, New York.

She seems to look at these dolls from the male point of view.

It is precisely Krauss's collusion with the male gaze that makes her unable to recognize the obvious misogyny in these works. The male Surrealists produced Bataille's *informe* only in regard to the female figure. Faced with the female figure, the male Surrealist fears castration, fears the dissolution of his ego. In order to overcome his fears, he fetishizes the female figure, he deforms, disfigures, manipulates her; he literally manhandles her in order to reestablish his own ego, and not his own *informe.* By consistently refusing to see these mangled bodies as female bodies, Krauss is unable to see the aggressive sexual-visual politics acted out in these photographs. In her description of the darkroom manipulations, she writes: "The variety of photographic methods has been exploited to produce . . . bodies dizzily yielding to the force of gravity [Bataille's *bassesse*]; of bodies in the grip of a distorting perspective; of bodies decapitated by the project of shadow; of bodies eaten away either by heat or light" (70). These are not just "bodies"; these are always female figures. Or she argues that surrealist photography explores a subjectivity "dispossessed of its [traditional Cartesian or humanist] privilege," "trapped in a cat's cradle of representation, caught in a hall of mirrors, lost in a labyrinth," a subjectivity linked to "concepts that at this moment combine and redefine the visual: Bataille's *in-*

forme, Caillois's mimicry, Lacan's 'picture'" (78). Again, the unformed s
jectivity produced in surrealist photography is the female subjecti
only. In her attempt to develop a new approach to the visual in art c
cism on the basis of these surrealist texts and photographs, Krauss coı
tently overlooks the gender-specific, sexist politics of these works.

The trapped, lost subjectivity constructed by the Surrealists is the *fer*
subjectivity – disfigured, reduced to an animal, to Bataille's *bassesse,*
result of the male's fear of castration and his fetishistic disavowals. Ra
than exposing and deconstructing the patriarchal fetishization of won
as Krauss would have it, Surrealism seems to me to represent an inten
cation of that social fetishism, an intensification of patriarchy's misog
Krauss's belief in Freud's misogynistic stories, her basing her own theo
on surrealist texts, her adoption of a male gaze blinds her. Her theori
also indicates how much of our modern theory is caught in these surre
male fantasies. In relying on these theories, Krauss buys into male ı
ogyny and, in accord with Freud's story, into female misogyny as wel
his essay "Some Psychical Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction
tween the Sexes," Freud writes: "When she has passed beyond her firs
tempt at explaining her lack of a penis as being a punishment persona
herself and has realized that the sexual character is a universal one, she
gins to share the contempt felt by men for a sex which is the lesser in so
portant a respect."[8]

Bataille's notions of the *informe,* of *bassesse,* serve the Surrealists
Krauss as means to dominate, colonize, dissolve, obliterate female sub
tivity. Brassaï's female nude in the shape of a penis is straightforward
onization, occupation, a refusal to recognize difference. The question
visual-sexual politics are: Who has the power? Who dominates? Wh
disfigured by whose power? These power relations are not natural bu
cial constructs, and the male Surrealists' blatant reinforcement of pa
archal power relations should not be theorized away in order to rede
Surrealism. They should be resisted, they should be rejected. "Rather tl
yielding our minds up with our modeled and remodeled bodies," M
Ann Caws writes, "we must give our readings of our representations, a
our opinions as to which deserve anger, and which, celebration."[9]

The first resistance to the Surrealists' manhandling of the female fig
arose in the works of certain marginalized female artists and writers as
ciated with this movement. The essays in this collection explore the cc
plex strategies women Surrealists employed in order to construct and
sert their own subjectivity in light of the male Surrealists' phantasms
women.