Surrealism and Misogyny
Rudolf E. Kuenzli

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-
Séance (Fig. 2). The woman (here, actually Simone Breton) comes the medium, the hands, through which the dreams of the Surrealists are preserved on paper. She is, so to speak, a recording machine. Of course, has no dreams of her own, but faithfully encodes male dreams. Women are to the male Surrealists, as in the longstanding tradition of triarchy, servants, helpers in the forms of child muse, virgin, 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.\(^1\) Breton relationship with the enfant Nadja is illustrative: Nadja's mis distress is used by Breton as a way to the unconscious. She is a vision that he can answer for him his questions, tell him who he is. Women, according to Freud's and Lacan's own misogynist stories, are closer to the unconscious than men, because they have not entirely entered the sympt order. Lacan, who published his first texts in the surrealist magazine N. taure, indicates in his Seminaire livre XX that the female subject nei succumbs to as complete an alienation from the real, the organic who noon enjoys as full an association with the symbolic as does the male ject.\(^2\)

The Surrealists saw the actual demands of French women for sex emancipation in 1924 as merely bourgeois. They preferred to celebrate male hysteria as attitudes passioelles, as l'amour fou, in the last issue of Revolution surrealiste. When their attempted marriage with the Fre Communist Party failed, they turned in the Second Surrealist Manifesto of 1929 to erotic desire as their means of transforming human consciousness. Dali became for Breton the incorporation of this desire through his pnoiac-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 Masturbator of 1929 (Fig. 3) depicts Gala Eluard, soon to be Gala Dali, as his 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 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 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 surreal circle could women br out of the role of serving muse to become artists in their own right.
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." They were allowed to participate with the male Surrealists in making exquisite corpses, the surrealists 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-ce lent misogyny? These images of Ubac, Kertész, and Bellmer have recently been interpreted by Rosalind Krauss as being protofeminist in her edition 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, which is generally seen as a formally regressive movement in art history, via surrealist photograph. In order to redeem Surrealism one also has to deal with misogynist charges. How does she do that? In her first essay, entitled "Photography in the Service of Surrealism," she analyzes the technics through which the Surrealists modified, changed, and defamiliarized the straight image. These techniques include solarization, rayography, negative printing, multiple exposures, photomontage, collage, and doubt. The straight image is thus metamorphosed. The distortions that thereby created serve to point out that even straight photography does not represent reality or nature, but social constructions. Fetishism is such a construction, and the defamiliarizing techniques of the surrealists tophographers reveal this. Krauss states, with regard to Kertész's Distortion Within surrealism photography, doubling also functions as the signification. It is this semiological, rather than stylistic, condition unites the vast array of the movement's photographic production. In this way the photographic medium is exploited to produce a paradox in which 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 surrealism photography collapses, undoes conventional propositions. "Corpus delicti," a juridical term meaning transgression, already alludes to Bataille. Again, through manipulations of strange photography, Surrealists transgress the familiar social constructions produce a kind of formlessness, Bataille's informe, which Krauss connects with Freud's notion of the uncanny. This defamiliarization can be broached not only by darkroom manipulation, but also by contrivance, as in Brassai's Nude of 1933 [Fig. 4]. In this image sexual identity is cloaked: "The female body and the male organ have each become the other" [95].

Bellmer, Ubac, Kertész, and Brassai, according to Krauss, foreground the social fetishization of reality: "It must be seen that in much of surrealist practice, woman, in being a fetish, is nowhere in nature. Having dissolved the natural in which 'normalcy' can be grounded, Surrealism was at least potentially open to the dissolving of distinctions that Bataille insisted was the job of the informe. Gender, at the heart of the surrealists project, one of these categories." Krauss continues: "If within surrealism the general 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. 5 Raoul Ubac, The Battle of the Amazons, 1939. Galerie Adrien Maeght

Krauss is completely silent about the violent, sadistic dismemberment of 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 of misogyny, 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. The sometimes funny, but they are never mean. . . . Kertész’s transform of the female anatomy are at once erotic and aesthetic — the love son photographer.”

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 prothe mark of the sign” [31]. She mentions that Bellmer made his first 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 representing the fear of castration. In emphasizing Bellmer’s construction of the desirable informe, Krauss is again silent about violations of the female fi
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 *informe*, Cailliois's mimicry, Lacan's 'picture'" (78). Again, the uniformed subjectivity produced in surrealist photography is the female subject only. In her attempt to develop a new approach to the visual in art criticism on the basis of these surrealist texts and photographs, Krauss contentedly 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. Rather than exposing and deconstructing the patriarchal fetishization of women as Krauss would have it, Surrealism seems to me to represent an intensification of that social fetishism, an intensification of patriarchy's misogyny. Krauss's belief in Freud's misogynistic stories, her basing her own theses on surrealist texts, her adoption of a male gaze blinds her. Her theory also indicates how much of our modern theory is caught in these surrealist male fantasies. In relying on these theories, Krauss buys into male misogyny and, in accord with Freud's story, into female misogyny as well. His essay "Some Psychical Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction between the Sexes," Freud writes: "When she has passed beyond her first temptation at explaining her lack of a penis as being a punishment personifying herself and has realized that the sexual character is a universal one, she begins to share the contempt felt by men for a sex which is the lesser in so important a respect."

Bataille's notions of the *informe*, of *bassesse*, serve the Surrealists. Krauss as means to dominate, colonize, dissolve, obliterate female subjectivity. 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? Whose disfigured by whose power? These power relations are not natural but social constructs, and the male Surrealists' blatant reinforcement of patriarchal power relations should not be theorized away in order to redeem Surrealism. They should be resisted, they should be rejected. Rather than yielding our minds up with our modeled and remodeled bodies," M. Ann Caws writes, "we must give our readings of our representations; our opinions as to which deserve anger, and which, celebration."

The first resistance to the Surrealists' manhandling of the female figure arose in the works of certain marginalized female artists and writers associated with this movement. The essays in this collection explore the complex strategies women Surrealists employed in order to construct and assert their own subjectivity in light of the male Surrealists' phantasms.