

*Review of Roger Rothman, Tiny Surrealism: Salvador Dalí and the  
Aesthetics of the Small  
University of Nebraska Press, 2012, 262 pp.*

Jonathan Wallis  
Moore College of Art & Design

Roger Rothman's book, *Tiny Surrealism: Salvador Dalí and the Aesthetics of the Small* (2012), reminds us not to overlook the importance of little things in the art and writing of Salvador Dalí. The artist's paintings from the 1920s-1930s, as Rothman reminds us, teem with tiny subjects depicted on a small scale: ants, breadcrumbs, buttons, flies, fish, seashells, etc. (not to mention that a portion of the visual work from the 1930s itself is physically small). The small, Rothman claims, is also a growing obsession as a literary device in the artist's writings during this period. Focusing his attention on these little things, Rothman turns away from the influence of iconography and psychoanalysis and posits an understanding of the artist's "larger" motivations within surrealism, the avant-garde, and modernism as influenced by the potential objectivity of the camera and motivated by the probity of Vermeer's eye.<sup>1</sup> On a continuing quest to exploit the tiny to transform objects into things, Dalí, Rothman claims, created a "surrealism of the tiny to rival not only Breton's surrealism of the marvellous but also Georges Bataille's surrealism of the formless and Antonin Artaud's surrealism of suffering."<sup>2</sup>

The central thesis of *Tiny Surrealism*, that the tiny was of cardinal importance to Dalí's artistic development in the late twenties and influenced his later artistic participation in the surrealist group, is based on four separate yet related pieces of evidence: the artist's writings, object theory, the importance of photographic vision, and the art of Vermeer. Together these four "cornerstones" offer a synthesized discourse of the tiny demonstrating the artist's desire to liberate objects and affect their ontology. The author makes considerable use of Dalí's critical essays on art and his letters and poetry to his close friend Federico García Lorca, citing passages that emphasize a discourse of the tiny and analysing various literary devices that evoke an awareness of small things. For Rothman, Dalí's search for a pictorial language to depict his small things leads to his exploratory and stylistically variable visual

Jonathan Wallis: [jwallis@MOORE.EDU](mailto:jwallis@MOORE.EDU)

production prior to his entrance into surrealism—a provocative and compelling suggestion. Theoretically, Rothman’s examination of Dalí’s work flips us outward and away from the “subjective turn” to the object depicted. Relying heavily on Bill Brown’s 2004 essay, “Thing Theory,” Rothman approaches Dalí’s fascination with the tiny through a theoretical lens influenced by the recent resurgence of interest in object studies.

The first chapter of *Tiny Surrealism* introduces the range of subject matter that qualifies as little things and takes us more deeply into Brown’s object theory and the “Dalínian” experience of the tiny. This initial discussion provides the critical backbone for the entire book, and it raises a number of provocative ideas and repositions scholarly viewpoints on Dalí’s development in the late twenties and his interests in surrealism. Rothman’s use of Brown’s ideas regarding the distinction of “objects” and “things” as a means to illustrate Dalí’s use of literary devices and their potential transference to a pictorial language is fascinating. The further support given to the discussion through the transcription of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s concept of “deterritorialization” in the writing of Kafka to the context of Dalí’s work, to potentially transform a “meaningful object” into an asignifying “thing,” is one of the book’s most interesting contributions. Rothman’s examples are useful in clarifying the concept of “thingness,” but the visual nature of Dalí’s practice raises questions regarding the transference of a linguistic theory to a visual practice and its relationship to earlier theories (i.e. Kantian aesthetics of “disinterest”) and also the durational limits of the life of “things” as depictions. The section left me curious about the extent to which an object undergoes a “transference” of meaning versus a loss of meaning, and more rigorous explication of how object theory counters positions that posit our habitation with linguistic discourse would have furthered Rothman’s effective use of this theory in the context of Dalí’s written and visual work.

Rothman locates convincing specific evidence by Dalí to support his claims in the first chapter, and it is curious that many of his observations and interpretations are presented largely outside the parameters of art historical and literary studies, leaving the book’s thesis in a precarious scholarly position. Mention is made of existing scholarship by art historians and scholars of Dalí’s writing and biography at the outset regarding the artist’s relationship to psychoanalysis during the 1920s and 1930s, but beyond this brief acknowledgement much of Rothman’s insights become “homeless,” and it is difficult to grasp the extent to which he has benefitted from, and progressed beyond, what has already been accomplished on Dalí regarding this subject.<sup>3</sup> Early in the introduction Rothman states that, “By approaching Dalí’s work through the lens of the small, this book diverges from the prevailing scholarship.”<sup>4</sup> How *Tiny Surrealism* diverges from the existing scholarship beyond its unorthodox “turn” is not clarified with enough detail to allow for the full appreciation of the Rothman’s ideas to shine through in the text. This limits

the polemical potential of *Tiny Surrealism* within Dalinian studies, and the degree to which Rothman's readings are personal and subjective in nature, rather than based on prior scholarship, is not always clear. While citations are present where the author builds on existing work, the line between a scholarly-informed determination and a theoretically justified subjectivity on the part of the author is never made explicit.

In a sense, Rothman "deterritorializes" his book much like Dalí's objects, and this could be a provocative methodological tactic if the book were purposefully positioned in liminal territory between fields and disciplines. But without the overt acknowledgement of this tactic, and a rigorous critical discussion of the intention within the text, the effect is limiting rather than liberating.

Our access to the object is Rothman's second scholarly "turn" in the first chapter - from the subjects Dalí paints, to how he paints them. Technique is paramount to an understanding of this new, and admittedly fascinating interpretative position. Rothman challenges the idea that the clarity of Dalí's painted subjects is driven by their desired readability as iconography for artistic interpretation and/or an experience of surrealism. Instead, he claims these elements are the "lure, the device through which the viewer is drawn near to the painting so as to attend to it technique." To accomplish this task, Rothman introduces the last two elements of his four-part thesis in *Tiny Surrealism*: the camera and the art of Johannes Vermeer. Rothman looks to a particular source, Dalí's essay, "Photography: Pure Creation of the Spirit," to emphasize the influence of the camera on his perception of objects. Referring to the camera's ability to create an "anesthetized look," Dalí, Rothman argues, values the device as a means to "see the world properly."<sup>5</sup> To give this vision material form, one need look no further than Vermeer, whose probity and attention to the mundane was a proto-type to the enhanced version of the reality of objects offered through the photographic. As Rothman states, "Dalí likened Vermeer to a human camera," and Rothman cogently describes this aesthetic marriage as one where "the (photographic) instrument and the (human) hand have merged to become a hybrid machine-organism that is also a hybrid subject-object... It is not so much an attempt to mimic the appearance of a photograph as an attempt to mimic its epistemology, its manner of knowing the world."<sup>6</sup> Thus, both the camera and Vermeer offered Dalí "tools of deterritorialization" that allowed him to accomplish in a pictorial language what Kafka, according to Deleuze and Guattari, did in literature - with the goal of evoking the "thingness" of his depicted objects. This latter discussion in the first chapter is quite convincing, although it leaves the reader questioning whether any photographic evidence exists that demonstrates this particular use of/interest in the camera by Dalí at this time. And if not, if any secondary sources can be located that provide evidence of a rigorous photographic activity by Dalí at this time as studies or visual fodder for his paintings? Although in this book it serves as a starting point for more detailed examinations of thematic elements in Dalí's work in subsequent chapters, this is nevertheless an interesting

reconsideration of the artist's motivations in the late twenties that reinforces the advantages of the close assessment of Dalí's written work to his visual output for the understanding of his artistic evolution and interests.

Rothman applies his thesis to the specialized topics established by the thematic layout of the remaining chapters of the book: paranoia, parasitism, superficiality, submission and anachronism. The second chapter contains what could be his most provocative claim, that the artist's interest in paranoia was not born from surrealist origins based on psychoanalysis. Rothman claims that Dalí viewed the condition of paranoia as "a form of cognition born of a heightened sensitivity to little things."<sup>7</sup> Tracking Dalí's entry into surrealism alongside several of his writings, Rothman suggests that the artist had a personal view of surrealism quite different from Breton—one that was based on an "epistemological project" that contained shared parallels between material (photographic) and mental (surrealist) realities laid bare.<sup>8</sup> Considering paranoia as akin to the objectivity of a camera casts a new light on the process by which Dalí arrives at his surrealist aesthetic. There are provocative ideas running throughout this chapter, and much of the attention to Dalí's writings from 1929 demonstrate that at this early date the artist was driven in part by an independent application of the purpose and goal of surrealism more so than generally understood in most scholarship. It is unfortunate that the extent to which the visual work justifies the written statements is not more thorough, as Rothman does not attempt to explain how this position counters existing art historical scholarship addressing Freudian influence and iconography, as well as the artist's own statements about these early surrealist works.

The third and fourth chapters, parasitism and superficiality, are without question the standouts of the entire book. Rothman covers impressive ground regarding the nature of parasitism and its relevance to the little things, with nods to the important role of Ernest Meissonier in Dalí's conceptions of the small. If anywhere in the book the term "tiny surrealism" is most fitting it is in the passages covering the topics of amphoras, ants, blackheads and boogers. The ability of these little things to question scale, their potential as metaphorical content related to the visible and invisible, and their ability to disrupt (via figure-ground gestalt switches) and unravel the security of the artist's imagery is all described with convincing detail and well articulated visual examples. Most compelling perhaps is the notion that Meissonier was attractive to Dalí partly for his "minor" status—his "littleness." As Rothman states, "Meissonier's status within the art historical canon might well have been likened to a bread crumb or an insect on a picnic blanket..."<sup>9</sup> Rothman almost teases us to make a parallel with Dalí, considering his anti-modern "self-othering," and he follows through with further success in the next chapter with a fascinating analysis of the disruptive potential of the superficial and Dalí's relationship to five concepts of types of simulacra. Countering the strong current of avant-garde work pursuing the real (especially Bergsonian ideas), Rothman tracks Dalí's work with

an eye to his interest in simulations and their potency as a subject/medium that is often more effective and evocative than their real counterparts. A close reading of the abstruse essay, “The Sanitary Goat” reveals Dalí’s use of a fascinating literary device as well as the importance of his concept of “the gratuitous point” to an understanding of the relationship of “fakes” to the world of reality.

The discussions in the last two chapters are more tenuously related to the overall thesis of the book and Rothman’s concepts of the small. Chapter five is heavily indebted to additional critical and theoretical explanations that consume large portions of the text. Its focus on submission as a means of “self-restraint” never quite evinces the effects of the earlier chapters, and the sections on sadism and anti-masculinism, while interesting, meander. The chapter’s reliance on such extensive additional theoretical content is perhaps an indication of its limited relation to the thesis under which the book’s larger program functions. Dalí’s views on the potential of art nouveau and his attraction to it as an anachronistic “interruption of the past into the present” in the last chapter, while interesting and new, are not presented clearly enough for their significance to things “little” to be fully grasped, nor are the interesting (and thoughtful) passages on de Chirico, Böcklin, Meissonier and Uccello that demonstrate Dalí’s interest in constructing a vocabulary that expresses anachronism as a challenge to the modern avant-garde.

*Tiny Surrealism* makes some big claims, and in doing so it illustrates the potential advantages and problems that exist at present for scholars who want to challenge the existing parameters of scholarly discourse on Dalí. Rothman moves into uncharted territory, and there are number of “large” ideas radiating from the tiny objects and themes examined in this book. The book opens a new portal through which scholars can examine and scrutinize Dalí, and that is always refreshing. For this he is to be commended; the book is a breath of fresh air in Dalinian studies. *Tiny Surrealism* contributes to the ongoing revisionist examination of Dalí, questioning the limits of his relationship to the surrealists and Freud, and the extent to which his motivations for joining the surrealist cause were more self-serving than previously suggested. It also reveals his early fascination with vision in a manner consistent, and at times different from, his later more overt incorporation of mechanical forms of reproduction and projection. At the end of his introduction, Rothman cites Louis Aragon’s remarks in his essay accompanying the group exhibition of collage-based work at the Galerie Goussier in 1930, entitled “In Defiance of Painting,” where he raises a question about Dalí’s work. “What,” he asks, “are we to make of Dalí’s meticulousness [*minutie*]?”<sup>10</sup> *Tiny Surrealism* provides a sizeable response.

1 Roger Rothman, *Tiny Surrealism: Salvador Dalí and the Aesthetics of the Small* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012), 49.

2 *Ibid.*, 33 and 2.

3 For example, Ades, Foster, Lubar, Lomas, Fanes, and Finkelstein.

4 *Ibid.*, 4.

5 *Ibid.*, 40-41.

6 *Ibid.*, 49 and 42.

7 *Ibid.*, 10.

8 *Ibid.*, 61.

9 *Ibid.*, 117.

10 *Ibid.*, 16.