

*Notes for a Historiography of Surrealism in America,
or the Reinterpretation of the Repressed*

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In 1995 Martica Sawin and Dickran Tashjian published seminal works on Surrealism in America: *Surrealism in Exile and the Beginning of the New York School* and *A Boatload of Madmen, Surrealism and the American Avant-Garde 1920-1950*, respectively. Inspired by these groundbreaking works, the *Journal of Surrealism and the Americas* continues the investigation into this rich history and its current impact. While previous issues of JSA have explored the intersections of Surrealism and ethnography, photography, Latin America and women, this issue assembles various essays that look at the reception of Surrealism in the U.S. and its continued presence in criticism, art, collecting and anthropology.

The critical fate of surrealist visual art in America fluctuates based on the value ascribed to it by critics of contemporary art. Specifically, its mid-century dismissal by Clement Greenberg as retrograde, academic kitsch, condemned it to several decades of irrelevancy; and, in a direct challenge to Greenberg, the critics and scholars of the 1980s and 90s, in particular October group members Rosalind Krauss and Hal Foster, rehabilitated Surrealism and returned it to contemporary relevance. This critical fall and rise provokes some interesting questions. Did the modernist rejection and post-modernist resurrection of Surrealism emerge from the inherent postmodernism of the movement itself, or from the agendas of the respective critics? For example, by privileging Georges Bataille and the dissonant Surrealists over André Breton, and a Lacanian theoretical framework over a Freudian one, did Krauss reveal the repressed within Surrealism, or did she reconfigure it in light of contemporary interest in transgression, abjection and the de-centered subject? Can this vision of Surrealism be reconciled with Breton's romantic idealism

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and belief in an absolute?

The rapport between Surrealism and postmodernism hinges on the uneasy relationship between Surrealism and modernism. In 1924, the same year as the official founding of Surrealism and the publication of André Breton's First Manifesto, the modernist critic Roger Fry wrote an essay titled "The Artist and Psycho-Analysis." Fry considered Freudian ideas on artistic sublimation, dream analysis and symbolism inimical to modernist art. He relegated all such "fantasy" to popular culture and "impure" art forms while situating "pure" art (the contemplation of formal relations), close to science and as far as possible from libido, wish fulfillment and neurosis. According to Fry, art should be objective, disinterested and divorced from personal desires. Fry's dichotomy between pure and impure became firmly entrenched within formalist criticism, its longevity demonstrated in the mid-century writings of Clement Greenberg. Greenberg called the Surrealists "revivers of the literal past and advance agents of a new conformist, and best-selling art," and labeled their work as academic kitsch. His bias led to the repression of the impact of Surrealism on the New York School and Abstract Expressionism in dominant art historical narratives, and exacerbated the divide between automatism and dream imagery in the critical understanding of the movement.

As a result, any postmodern tendencies of artists who emphasize automatic technique, and modernist aspects of those who focus on dream imagery, are often repressed. For example, Joan Miró was one of the few Surrealists that Greenberg accepted on account of his biomorphic abstraction. Visually, especially in images such as *Painting from 1933*, Miró entered the trajectory of modernism's obsession with its own formal elements. However, this reading of Miró represses the printed advertisements that serve as the basis for the abstractions, a repression instigated by the painting itself. A 2008 exhibition titled "Joan Miró, *Painting and Anti-Painting, 1927-1937*" at the Museum of Modern Art presented Miró as an artist intent on destroying or assassinating painting rather than celebrating its purity, and brought to light the inventiveness and heterogeneity of his materials and techniques during these years. Regarding Max Ernst, who lived and worked in the U.S. from 1941 to 1956 first in New York, then in Sedona, Arizona, Greenberg had very little to say. The critical neglect Ernst suffered in America succeeded in repressing his dialogue with the emerging New York School. For example, while in America, Ernst experimented with drip paintings by puncturing a hole in a can of paint and swinging it by a string over a canvas. A work such as *Head of a Man Intrigued by the Flight of a Non-Euclidian Fly* hung prominently in the window of Betty Parsons Gallery in 1942 and caught the attention of a young American painter named Jackson Pollock. When a later French interviewer asks Ernst: Do you feel, from this fact, responsible for the

whole American painting movement? Ernst humbly admits that, “It would be pretty ridiculous to feel singly responsible for a movement.” But he doesn’t doubt that after he explained the technique to Pollock, he perhaps “influenced—without being accountable—the course of painting.” Actually, while in America, Ernst created some of his most modernist works: landscapes which at times become color fields, indexical results of spontaneous mark making, or arrangements of minimalist forms. The only comment Greenberg ever seems to have made on Ernst’s work was to compare his images of volcanoes to postcards. In the 1980s, Krauss corrected this neglect by privileging Ernst in her challenge to Greenbergian modernism. Although for different reasons, she also emphasized Ernst’s early collages and more figurative works than his more abstract and automatist output.

A closer reading of some of Krauss’s texts on Surrealism allows one to pinpoint the moves she makes to bring Surrealism firmly into line with postmodern theory. In her seminal 1986 anthology *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, she argues that the modernist ideals of originality, autonomy, and transparency function as myths to repress the underlying presence of the copy, of contingency, and convention in modern art. This anthology includes an essay on the work of surrealist sculptor Alberto Giacometti, a reprint of an essay she contributed to the catalogue of the Museum of Modern Art’s 1984 exhibition, “‘Primitivism’ in Twentieth Century Art, Affinity Between the Tribal and the Modern.” Curated by William Rubin, the show conformed to modernist values, emphasizing formal “affinities” between tribal works from Africa, Oceania, and Native America and canonical modernist works by artists from Picasso to Pollock.

Krauss’s essay pretty much set her at odds with the whole establishment. She accuses those who understood these vague “affinities” as original, essential and universal forms of celebrating a type of “soft” primitivism. In contrast, her essay explores the “hard” primitivism of Giacometti’s work during the 1930s during his association with Georges Bataille, as well as the group of writers and ethnologists connected with the journal *Documents*. This is a primitivism of anti-humanist violence. Rather than celebrating a primary instinct towards form, Bataille defines primitive art as inherently destructive, and suggestive of a will to violence and transgression. Krauss’s essay succeeds in transforming Surrealism from outmoded to edgy, but in doing so, moves Bataille to the center and pushes Andre Breton to the periphery.

This shift happens within the structure of her essay as well as in its content. She opens by contrasting two different interpretations of Giacometti’s 1934 sculpture, *Invisible Object*. Breton’s earlier interpretation appears in *L’Amour fou*, in which he offers an account of strolling through the Parisian flea markets

with Giacometti and observing the action of what he termed “objective chance.” Giacometti found a strange, alien-looking mask which came as an answer to a previous sculptural problem. The problem was the integration of the face of Invisible Object with the body; supposedly Giacometti’s compulsion to purchase a strange mask solved the problem and motivated the final look of the sculpture. However for Krauss this narrative no longer functions as an adequate explanation for Giacometti’s work. She then supplements it with a second, later interpretation by Michel Leiris, who claims that the work was inspired by a memory of a little Swiss girl at prayer. Following Leiris and in opposition to the automatic revelations of objective chance championed by Breton, Krauss frames the work within a complex web of references and ideas generated in a large part by Bataille.

Krauss’s preference for Bataille and his group stems from the contradictions she encounters in Breton’s writings. In her 1981 essay “The Photographic Conditions of Surrealism,” reprinted in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, she finds Breton to be inconsistent, and claims that if one wants to offer a coherent concept of surrealist visual practice, Breton “is an obstacle one must surmount.”(93) In this essay and its later version, “Photography in the Service of Surrealism,” published in the exhibition catalogue *L’Amour Fou* in 1985 she offers her first and most problematic argument for a postmodern Surrealism. She begins her essay by outlining some of the inherent difficulties in defining surrealist visual art. Fueled by Pierre Naville’s early assertion that there could be no such thing, Breton penned his extended essay, “Surrealism and Painting,” to establish a theoretical and practical foundation for surrealist visual art. Krauss acknowledges that within this text, Breton celebrates a modernist ideal of vision. His opening line states, “the eye exists in its savage state”; he then suggests that artists replace their traditional external visual model with an internal one. Krauss cites Breton’s differentiation between visual automatism and descriptive dream imagery. She wants to claim that Breton’s privileging of automatic drawing connects surrealist art making to surrealist writing, and that as writing art can no longer be about modernist visual immediacy. But Breton’s conception of automatism, whether visual or written, is rather stubbornly modernist. He views it as an immediate trace or index of the unconscious, which dissolves the distinction between perception and representation. Krauss admits that for Breton, “automatism makes the unconscious present. Automatism may be writing, but it is not representation. It is immediate to experience, untainted by the distance and the exteriority of signs.” (24)

However, she finds Breton’s emphasis on the immediacy of automatism discounted by his ideal of convulsive beauty. For if automatism is a denial of representation, convulsive beauty reconfigures the world as a machine for

producing signs. In this essay she seeks to replace Breton not with Bataille, but with photography, as the medium that collapses the dichotomy between automatism and representation, and that offers a general aesthetic applicable to all surrealist art. Basically one could say that photography functions as an index of the real, as automatism functions as an index of the unconscious. But, she writes, “In this way the photographic medium is exploited to produce a paradox: the paradox of reality constituted as a sign—or presence transformed into absence, into representation, into spacing, into writing.” (30) And based on Breton’s concept of convulsive beauty, she continues, “Surreality is, we could say, nature convulsed into a kind of writing.” (32) The camera then makes visible “the automatic writing of the world: the constant, uninterrupted production of signs.” (32) Krauss thus elegantly circumvents Breton’s modernist conception of automatism, and introduces a postmodern aesthetic of a world transformed into signs.

From a postmodern vantage point, this world of signs is generated from without, an exteriority that impinges on and informs the individual. But to rephrase Krauss’s text, I would add that within the surrealist frame, the camera makes visible “the automatic writing of the world: the constant, uninterrupted production of signs” for the author/dreamer. The surrealist world of signs exists not as something exterior, but as a projection of the unconscious onto the world. The internal informs the external, not the opposite. To be Surrealist, the image must be understood as a trace, an index, of the author/dreamer’s unconscious. Assuredly aware of this problem, Krauss turns to the theories of Lacan.

Krauss’s postmodern version of Surrealism actively represses Surrealism’s inconvenient modernism, while at the same time redresses some of modernism’s more egregious repressions of surrealist history. When, in opposition to Greenberg, Krauss looks for a surrealist example of anti-modernist vision, she turns to Ernst in both her 1989 article “The Master’s Bedroom,” and subsequent book, *The Optical Unconscious*, published in 1993. In the later work, Krauss clearly articulates her endeavor to write an alternate art history, one that goes, as she says, “against the grain of modernist opticality.”

In “The Master’s Bedroom” she adduces one of Ernst’s early collages, or rather overpaintings, as exemplifying the surrealist critique of modernist vision. In so doing she first compares the formal structure of Ernst’s overpainting to the structure of the Freudian unconscious, where the readymade character of Ernst’s ground—he painted over top of a printed page from a catalogue—relates to the readymade condition of the unconscious and of memory. Consequently, the given ground of the unconscious soils the “purity” and “immediacy” of modernist vision, and effectively dismantles the modernist edifice built by Fry and propped up by

Greenberg. This is a brilliant article, and it rather seamlessly fulfills her larger task while also offering what was, at the time, a fresh and significant understanding of Ernst's innovative use of readymade imagery and Freudian theoretical models. Yet, the larger framework of her interpretation stems from Lacan, not Freud. While her use of Klein groups and L schemas has become notorious, she basically argues that not only is the ground of the image already written, but so is the unconscious that Ernst's technique attempts to access. Ernst claims that the odd juxtapositions of objects on the readymade page trigger unconscious hallucinations which the artist has only to make visible. The readymade world functions as a screen for unconscious projections. So if the Freudian unconscious writes on the pad, the Lacanian unconscious is already written.

As articulated by Krauss, the surrealist challenge to traditional modes of authorship clearly emerges as postmodern. Yet it strikes me that the one thing that the postmodern reading neglects is the effective aspect of the marvelous, of discovery, of surprise, in the workings of "objective chance." The surrealist unconscious may already be written, but for the artist, for the conscious ego, the realm of the unconscious still functions as a mysterious unknown. And while it may be structured from without, it is still experienced as a force within. It seems that there is an experiential aspect to Surrealism that resists full conformity to postmodernist readings. In addition to the almost religious concept of "the marvelous," the Surrealists held on to modernist conceptions of "aura," of myth, and of multivalent, yet authentic forms of identity. Regarding the term "aura," the surrealists invested material objects, even the mass produced, mechanically made, soulless objects of the industrial world, with the patina of personal memory, specific history, and profound symbolism (see Katharine Conley's essay in this issue). When Breton and Giacometti visited the flea markets they, or at least Breton, imbued their finds with the aura of objective chance. Regarding myth, the Surrealists understood the structure and power of mythic language, but used this knowledge to mythologize as well as to demythologize. Ernst created an imaginary friend, his avian alter ego, Loplop; and when he came to America during the Second World War, he used Loplop to construct a new mythic identity for himself as a Native American Shaman.

Ernst's creation of this mythic identity is really neither modernist nor postmodern. In America Ernst literally plays Indian in an effort to create a new American identity, to naturalize his foreignness. The Surrealists embraced the myth of a universal primitive that transcended historical time and geographic location, the very "soft" primitivism that Krauss wants to deny. Ernst's belief that he could create a new identity emerges from an acceptance of identity as something fractured, unstable, and always partially unknown. While this has parallels in the postmodern

concept of identity as socially constructed, there is a crucial difference. For example, we can compare Ernst's role playing to Cindy Sherman's. Sherman mimics culturally and socially coded roles—locating identity within visual styles and stereotypes, challenging the ability of art to represent anything beyond conventionalized identity. Ernst takes on a conventionalized identity, yet claims it as his own. When writing about this as a sort of mimetic performance in “Max Ernst in Arizona: Myth, Mimesis and the Hysterical Landscape,” I turned to a 1993 work, *Mimesis and Alterity* by Michael Taussig. Taussig argues that while we live in a constructed world, we still live in at as if is real and in the world of the really made-up, mimetic performance becomes natural. He defines the mimetic faculty as “the nature that culture uses to create second nature, the faculty to copy, imitate, make models, explore difference, yield into the become Other. The wonder of mimesis lies in the copy drawing on the character and power of the original, to the point whereby the representation may even assume that character and that power.” (xiii) He equates this with the older term, “sympathetic magic,” a term prevalent in the psychoanalytic and ethnographic scholarship absorbed by the Surrealists. Through the mimetic faculty, the Surrealist defined lived identity not as a social fiction, but rather sought to transform social fictions into lived identities. In her contribution to this issue, Claudia Mesch continues the investigation into the intersections of anthropology, collecting and mimetic performance in the work of Joseph Beuys and Steven Yazzie, artists more obviously conscious of the political aspects of their practice than Ernst.

It seems to me then, that Surrealism, rather than being inherently postmodern, was and remains inherently oxymoronic. For Surrealism proposes such apparent contradictions as the authentic copy and the unconscious author which close down the binary oppositions of western thought still active in late twentieth century scholarship. What Surrealism may offer in the present is a model for ways in which to transcend the modernist/postmodernist divide, and, to paraphrase Breton, to find a means towards the future resolution of oppositions.

Evidence that this has and is happening appears in the more recent work of Hal Foster. In 1996, he published *The Return of the Real* in which he argued for a reframing of both modernism and postmodernism. The real that he sees returning in contemporary art is that of the subject, or at least the violated body and /or traumatic subject—based on his earlier writings, this is also the origin of Surrealism. Conceived in response to the psychic and physical traumas of World War I, the Surrealists turned to the fractured subject as both the producer and subject matter of art. Foster's work on Surrealism resonates throughout his later text, informing his view of contemporary art. This is a reversal of his earlier writings in which, like Greenberg and Krauss, his contemporary criticism infused his perspective on

Surrealism, reinforcing a sort of reciprocal mirroring of subject and object. As an historiographic enterprise itself, Foster's *Return of the Real*, resists easy inclusion into my brief notes for a historiography of Surrealism in American criticism. Yet the prevalence of Surrealism as a touchstone in this text positions it uniquely at the junction between modernist and postmodernist perspectives. This is clear in Foster's mapping of the structures of identity in twentieth century aesthetic theory. Surrealism partakes of the modernist search for identity in the otherness of the unconscious or the "primitive," without accepting these identities as fixed. In its critic of authorship, it presaged the postmodern dissolution of identity, but as an internal process rather than as an exterior condition. Finally, the current return of identity as traumatic seems a return of Surrealism itself. Doesn't Ernst's mimetic performance as a shaman articulate a sort of traumatic discourse, in which as Foster writes, "the subject is evacuated and elevated at once"?

This issue of the JSA explores the critical reception and enduring legacy of Surrealism in America. The common themes that emerge from these various essays are the lingering ability of Surrealism to collapse oppositions and confuse categories, as well as elements of repression and resurgence, both in the external reaction to the movement and in the internal substance of surrealist theory. Sandra Zalman focuses on the critical response to specific exhibitions of surrealist art, in 1947 and 1965 respectively, illuminating many of the complexities and confusions surrounding the American reception. Conley and Leif Jonsson discover and analyze the enduring legacy of Surrealism within collecting, curatorial and anthropological practices, while Mesch connects past surrealist practices to that of more contemporary artists.

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