1924

André Breton publishes the first issue of *La Révolution surréaliste*, establishing the terms of Surrealist aesthetics.

1920–1929

Developing as a young poet under the inauspicious conditions of World War I France, André Breton (1896–1966) was profoundly marked by two, mutually reinforcing phenomena. The first was his service as a medical orderly on a ward of shell-shock patients at the Val de Grâce Hospital in Paris; the second was his encounter with the sensibility of Dada in the person of Jacques Vaché, a permanent *révolté* and subscriber to the utter absurdity of life.

Breton's ardent acceptance of the ideas of psychoanalysis—the unconscious, the pleasure principle, the expressive power of the symptom and of dreams, castration anxiety, even the death drive—derived from his experience with profoundly disturbed trauma victims. And the very nature of their trauma—that something could happen for which there was no way to prepare ahead of time—fits, furthermore, into Vaché's absurdist views. The idea of life as a series of unpredictable and uncontrollable shocks was enacted by Breton and Vaché in a type of movie-going in which they entered and exited from screenings in rapid succession and without any regard for the program, thereby producing a random collage of visual and narrative experiences wholly out of their control. A few years later Breton would put this attitude of openness to whatever might happen—or *disponibilité*—to work poetically in *Les Champs magnétiques* (*Magnetic Fields*; 1920), which he wrote with Philippe Soupault as an exercise in stream-of-consciousness, and which he composed, in this sense, "automatically."

When it was time for Breton to separate himself from the Dada activities that had been mounted in Paris by the Romanian poet ▲Tristan Tzara after the ending of the war and the Cabaret Voltaire Dadaists had been able to move from Zurich to France, he used the avant-garde form of the manifesto to set out the terms of what he was announcing as a new movement. "SURREALISM, *n.*," his definition ran, "Psychic automism in its pure state … Dictated by thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern." And the two avenues the manifesto laid out for capturing the products of psychic automatism were (1) the kind of automatic writing *Magnetic Fields* had already explored and (2) the irrational narratives provided by dreams. Indeed, the new movement's very first act was to set up a central office in which to collect such narratives (offered by its young members) and to establish a magazine, *La Révolution surréaliste*, in which to publish them.

The interpretation of dreams

None of this was very promising, one might say, from the point of view of the visual arts, and indeed the magazine's first editor, Pierre Naville (who left the movement in 1927 to become Leon Trotsky's secretary), opened fire on the idea of any traffic with the fine arts or the refinements of style: "We have no taste," he wrote in the magazine's third issue (1925), "but distaste.… No one can still be in the dark about the fact that there isn't any *surrealist painting*. Neither pencil marks deposited by aleatory gestures, nor the image retracing dream figures.… But there are *spectacles*.… The street, the kiosques, cars, streetlamps bursting against the sky." And in accordance with his call for mass-cultural phenomena in place of "art," Naville illustrated the magazine mainly with photographs, many of them anonymous.

But Breton, who was an aesthete through and through—it was ▲he who had brokered the sale of Pablo Picasso's *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* to the fashion designer Jacques Doucet; it was he who had purchased heavily from Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler's wartime sequestered stock of Cubist paintings at government auctions in 1921 and 1922; it was he who was amassing an extraordinary collection of tribal art—struck back, taking the magazine away from Naville in late 1925. Thereupon he began publishing the serialized treatise "Surrealism and Painting," in which he laid claim to a variety of older artists as Surrealists-without-knowing-it (Picasso • and Giorgio de Chirico [1]), a group of Dada figures as threshold ■ Surrealists (Max Ernst and Man Ray [1870–1976]), and a group of younger artists as burgeoning Surrealists (André Masson ◆ [1896–1987] and Joan Miró [1893–1983]).

Insisting that psychic automatism could indeed issue from brush or pencil, Breton welcomed the uncontrolled production of Masson's automatic drawings and dribbled sand paintings, Miró's dripped and spattered "dream pictures," Ernst's trancelike rubbings (or *frottages*). The transfer of collectively written "poems" that would "automatically" generate surprising imagery (called *exquisite corpse* after the first result: "the exquisite corpse drinks

▲1916a ▲1907 •1909 ■1922, 1930b, 1931 ◆1930c, 1940a, 1940c

the new wine") to games of collective drawing seemed to him an obvious move. But at the same time Breton also insisted on the importance of the idea of the symptom or trace or index as giving unimpeachable evidence of what lies behind reality by registering a disturbance on its surface. In practice this meant that he continued Naville's reliance on photography, not only in subsequent issues of the magazine but in the pages of his three autobiographical "novels," the first of which, *Nadja*, was published in 1928.

From the automatic text to the photograph seems a great leap indeed. The first is irrational and chaotic, while the second is mechanical and organized according to the very world the unconscious strives to disrupt. Yet in Breton's survey in "Surrealism and Painting" both of these poles are represented: automatism by the liquid spills and mists of Miró's open color paintings or the meanders of Masson's automatic drawings; the photographic by Man Ray's silver prints, often reproduced in *La Révolution surréaliste*, or the veristic dream paintings by Ernst, such as *Two Children Menaced by a Nightingale* [**2**].

It is this stylistic schizophrenia that has made Surrealism so elusive for many art historians. On the one hand, an iconographic bias has exploited the movement's formal heterogeneity to push for a thematic reading of its output, gathering works under various categories. Some of these reflect psychoanalytic concerns, such as castration anxiety (which produces a fear of female genitalia and imagery cycling around the idea of the *vagina dentata*) and fetishism; others relate to the searing experience of World War I, such as the disorienting wasteland of the trenches or the grotesque physiognomies of the wounded or a desire to regress toward a primitive state of humanity. On the other hand, a certain type of modernism wants to claim those parts of Surrealism's visual production that seem acceptably abstract—Miró and the half of Ernst that confines itself to *frottage*—while disencumbering itself of everything that seems retrograde and antimodernist because too suavely realistic—other parts of Ernst, late (and repetitious) de Chirico and René Magritte, and, after 1930, Salvador Dalí's photographically rendered dream pictures [**3**].

2 • Max Ernst, *Two Children Menaced by a Nightingale*, 1924
Oil on wood in original frame, 69.9 x 57.2 x 11.4 (27½ x 22½ x 4½)

1 • Giorgio de Chirico, *The Child's Brain*, 1914
Oil on canvas, 80 x 65 (31⅞ x 25⅝)

That Miró lends himself to this modernist tendency is easy enough to see. Having begun in the late teens in Barcelona as a Fauve-derived painter, and having subsequently absorbed the lessons of Cubism, he arrived in Paris in the early twenties and by 1923 was assimilated to the circle of poets and artists around Breton. The "dream paintings" he was making by 1925 were erotic recodings of Matisse's work from around 1911, in that fields of intense color were allowed to spread uninterruptedly over the surface, so disembodied was the drawing within them. If in Matisse's case drawing had been carried out by means of negative lines or "reserves" (as in *The Red Studio* [1911]), in Miró's it was now performed as a kind of calligraphy that converted all bodies to the transparency and weightlessness of the written sign. These waves of blue, in which space is devoid of limits and objects float like wisps of smoke, and in which bodies turn into question marks

▲ 1927a

3 • Salvador Dalí, *The Persistence of Memory*, 1931
Oil on canvas, 24.1 x 33 (9½ x 13)

or signs for infinity—only the little red bar at the nexus of the figure eight indicating that the content of this graphic mark is the joining of two cells in erotic contact [**4**]—fit nicely with a modernist narrative of formal "progress."

But if the iconographic treatment of Surrealism seems insufficient, remaining blind as it does to something like the formal brilliance of Miró's art, the modernist account seems equally impoverished. It can neither produce a reading that would relate ▲ Miró to his colleagues in the movement—from Masson to Dalí to Surrealist photographers like Raoul Ubac (1910–85) and Hans Bellmer (1902–75)—nor can it address the structural issue of whether, on the level of the signifier (the form of expression), there is anything coherent in all the rich diversity of Surrealist activity.

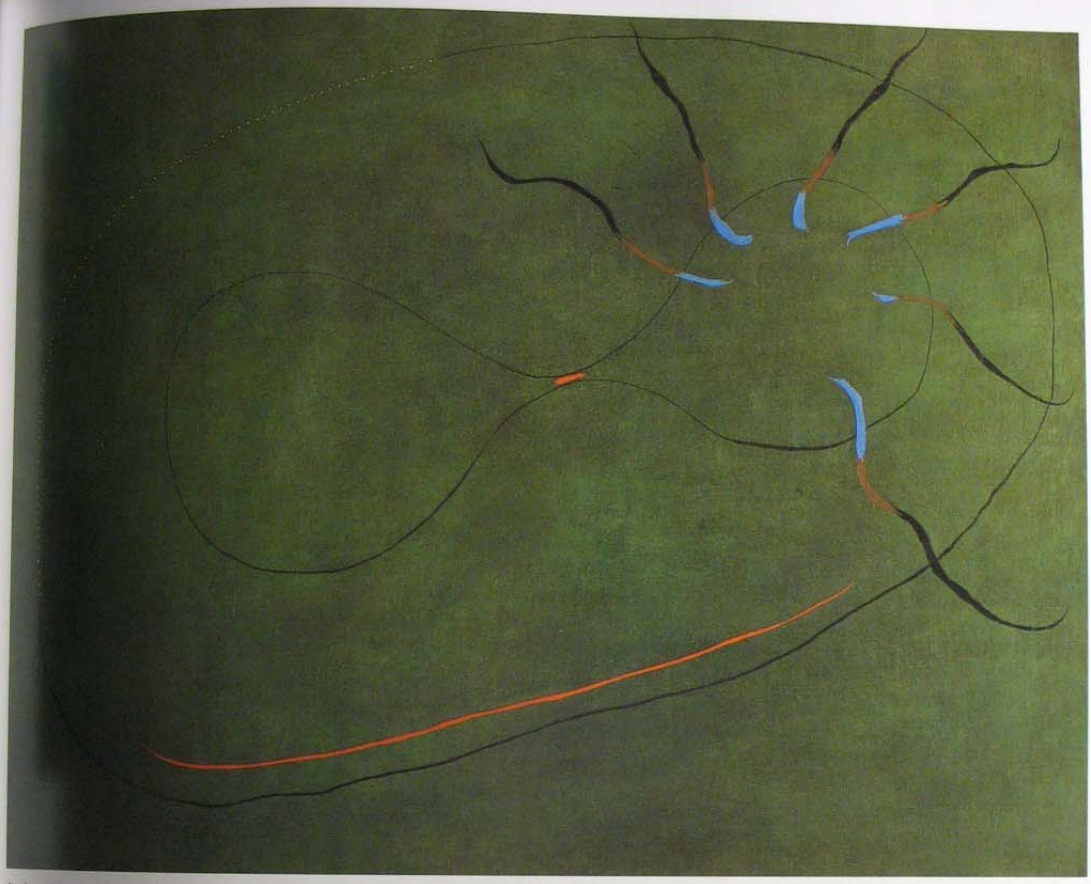
The third alternative is to use the actual categories that Breton developed to theorize Surrealism and to mine them for their *structure*, thereby generating on the one hand a set of formal principles (the technique of *doubling* would be one of them) that can be permuted through a whole range of visual styles and, on the other, an understanding of the way such categories recode psychoanalytic or sociohistorical problems. As just one example we could take "objective chance," a variant on "psychic automatism" and a vehicle of the end result that Breton aspired to as a Surrealist, namely, "the marvelous."

Breton describes objective chance as the crossing-point of two causal chains, the first subjective, interior to the human psyche, and the second objective, a function of real world events. In this conjunction, so seemingly unprepared for, it is discovered that on each side there was a kind of determinism at work. On the side of the real, the subject seems to have been expected, since what the world proffers at this moment is a "sign" specifically addressed to him or her. While on the side of the subject, there is an unconscious desire driving him or her unwittingly toward this sign, even constituting it as such, and allowing the sign to be deciphered after the fact.

The semiosis of Surrealism

While *Nadja* is constructed as a tissue of objective chance, the clearest illustration of how it works is presented at the beginning of another autobiographical novel, *L'Amour fou* (Mad Love; 1937). There Breton tells of going to the Marché aux Puces flea market in Paris and bringing home a wooden spoon with a little carved shoe projecting from the underside of its handle [**5**]. Not even liking this

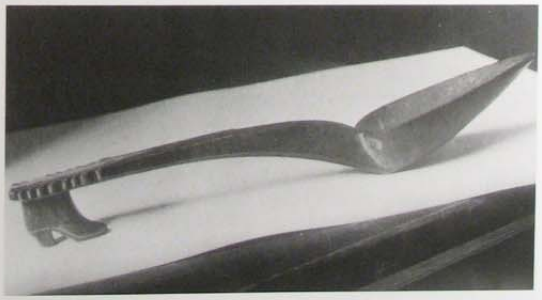
▲ 1930b, 1942a



4 • Joan Miró, *The Kiss*, 1924
Oil on canvas, 73 x 92 (28¾ x 36¼)

object, he nonetheless sets it on his desk whereupon it reminds him of another object he had fruitlessly asked Alberto Giacometti to sculpt for him some time earlier. This object, an ashtray in the shape of a glass slipper, had been meant to exorcise the nonsense phrase that had been running through Breton's head like a persistent tune: "*cendrier-Cendrillon*," or "Cinderella ashtray." Now suddenly, he says, he begins to see the newly purchased spoon as a series of nested slippers, each the representational double of the preceding one (the bowl of the spoon as the front of the slipper, the handle as the middle section, and the shoe beneath as the heel; then the shoe itself as the front, the middle section, and the heel; and then—imaginatively—*its* heel as containing another such slipper; and so on). This structure in which an object is mirrored by another, the double functioning as the representation of the first, Breton understands semiotically—he sees it as constituting a sign.

In this, Breton is completely orthodox, since signs are always pictured as ghostly doubles of the things they represent. More



5 • Man Ray, André Breton's slipper-spoon, 1934
Reproduced in Breton's *L'Amour fou* (1937)

Surrealist journals

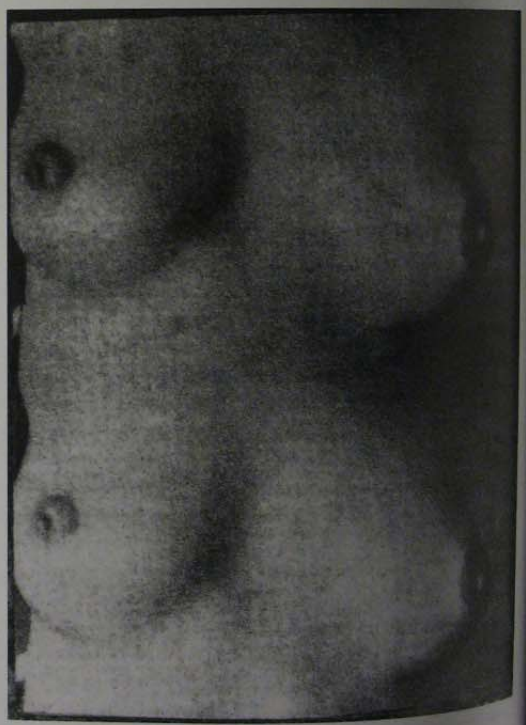
La Révolution surréaliste, the journal that formed the backbone of the Surrealist movement, lasted ten years, from 1924 until, after issue no. 12, in 1929 it yielded to *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution*, which in turn was outshone by the more lavish and aesthetically more ambitious *Minotaure*. The initial journal was riven by an internal debate between André Breton and the journal's first editor, Pierre Naville. Naville proudly modeled the cover of *LRS* on the nineteenth-century magazine of popular science *La Nature*, since the "positivist nature" of the latter stood for the status of the documentary material the Surrealist journal would publish—accounts of dreams, and answers to questionnaires around such problems as "Is suicide a solution?" In addition, Naville called the offices of the review the Surrealist "*centrale*," imitating the headquarters of Communist Party cells. A collage of three photographs of the members of the movement gathered in the *centrale* ornamented the first issue of *LRS* (December 1924). The place of photography was secured both inside the journal's covers and on its outside, since Naville was interested in anonymous, popular imagery and was programmatically hostile to art. But when Breton took over the editorship of the journal he began to publish his four-part text "Surrealism and Painting," in which the genesis of Surrealist visual production (in the work of Picasso) is shown to have yielded such contemporary practitioners as Miró, Arp, Ernst, and Masson.

The documentary focus of the journal was not abandoned altogether, however. Breton celebrated the "50th Anniversary of the Discovery of Hysteria" with the publication of photographs taken of Charcot's patients in the Salpetrière Asylum. The threshold between *LRS* and its successor *LSASDLR* was constructed by Breton's second manifesto of Surrealism, in which he exiled many of the original members of the movement, particularly those who had left the *centrale* to join with Georges Bataille and his radical journal *Documents*. Announcing on its cover that the areas of its concern would be ethnography, archaeology, and popular culture in addition to fine arts, *Documents* celebrated Bataille's own version of Naville's "distaste," in his exploration of the *informe* or formlessness.

importantly this condition of doubling is itself at the very beginning of language, as when a baby, repeating a sound—"ma-ma" or "pa-pa" or "ca-ca"—suddenly understands that the second sound in redoubling the first, both reaches back to mark the initial one as a signifier (which is to say, not just a random sound but a meaningful utterance) and sets it up as a carrier of intentional meaning.

The slipper-spoon is, then, the world convulsed into a sign. But crucially this sign was not only addressed *to* Breton; it was willed by him through the power of his own unconscious desire. For he associated this sign-material with his unconscious thoughts, which, unknown to him, were driving him to assume the role of a prince setting out to seek his mate. What immediately follows is the story of Breton's encounter with the subject of this "mad love," in encounter all of the details of which he discovers, to his amazement, were "predicted" by an automatic poem he had written a decade earlier and which he is now unconsciously repeating in the present. Thus if the world's "sign" is structured through the condition of the double, the unconscious operates on the same principle. Freud had described this as the compulsion to repeat; in the sixties, French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan would recode this semiotically by saying that the unconscious is structured like a language. Redoubling, then, is the formal condition of the unconscious drives.

That photography is a function of doubling—not only does it "mirror" its object but, technically, its prints exist as multiples—



6 • Man Ray, *Untitled*, 1924
Published in *La Révolution surréaliste*

7 • Hans Bellmer, *La Poupée* (Doll), 1938
Published in *La Révolution surréaliste*

made it a perfect vehicle for Surrealism, which exploited this aspect in its use of double exposures, sandwich printing, juxtapositions of negative and positive prints of the same image, and montaged doubles to produce this sense of the world redoubled as sign. The first issue of *La Révolution surréaliste* carried several photographs by Man Ray in which doubling was at work [**6**].

But doubling, as was pointed out, has a certain psychoanalytic content, one aspect of which Freud discusses in his essay "The Uncanny" (1919). Ghosts, the very stuff of uncanniness, are doubles of the living; and it is when live bodies are redoubled by lifeless ones—as in the case of automata or robots, or sometimes with dolls, or with people in states of seizure—that they take on the uncanniness of ghosts. That doubles should produce this condition is due, Freud explains, to the return of early states of dread. One of these derives from infantile feelings of omnipotence, in which the child believes itself able to project its control into the surrounding world only to find, however, these doubles of itself turning round to threaten and attack it. Another is castration anxiety, in which, similarly, the threat takes the form of one's phallic double. More generally, Freud says, anything that reminds us of our inner compulsion to repeat will strike us as uncanny.

That Hans Bellmer would build his early artistic practice entirely around a specially constructed doll, which he would arrange in various situations and then photograph, engages with this operation of the uncanny. Not only is the doll itself connected to this experience but Bellmer's treatment both exploits the sense of the way the doll's appearance to the viewer is dependent on either the operations of dream or on those of objective chance, and, by means of photomechanical doubling, projects the doll as the emblem of castration anxiety: tumescent female redoubled as male organ [**7**].

Uncanny doubling, although unrelated to the figure of the doll, ▲ was also exploited by the Belgian Surrealist René Magritte. Interestingly, Freud's description of the experience of the uncanny maps directly onto Breton's recipe for objective chance. "Involuntary repetition," Freud wrote, "surrounds with an uncanny atmosphere what would otherwise be innocent enough, and forces upon us the idea of something fateful and unescapable where otherwise we should have spoken of 'chance' only." And in relation to objective chance in *Nadja*, where Breton's attraction to Nadja herself is partly due to her being able to predict when these chance occurrences would take place, Freud recalls the tendency of his neurotic patients to have "presentiments" that "usually come true," a phenomenon he links to the recurrence of primitive omnipotence of thoughts. To the common example of objective chance occurring in most people's lives through "uncanny" repetitions of the same number (our birthday, our street address, and, say, our new friend's telephone number), Freud responds: "Unless a man is utterly hardened and proof against the lure of superstition he will be tempted to ascribe a secret meaning to this obstinate recurrence of a number, taking it, perhaps, as an indication of the span of life allotted to him."

Objective chance indeed provides a common ground between Surrealist photographic practice and Miró's "dream paintings," since, like the former, the latter are focused on the waves of color yielding up a sign of the dreamer's desire. Miró himself acknowledged as much in an extraordinary painting of this period in which, on a white ground, he deposited a splotch of intense cerulean blue. Over it, he wrote "this is the color of my dreams"; but in the upper left corner of the work, in much larger letters, he inscribed "Photo." Somewhere on the painting's material surface the chain of the real and the chain of the unconscious will meet.

FURTHER READING

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Rosalind Krauss and Jane Livingston, *L'Amour fou: Surrealism and Photography* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1986)
William Rubin, *Dada and Surrealist Art* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1968)
Sidra Stich (ed.), *Anxious Visions: Surrealist Art* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1990)

▲ 1927a