Surrealism and the Exquisite Corpse: 1924 to 1939

John Stezaker, Shadow Series, 2006-07, collage on paper

Man Ray, Joan Miró, Max Morise, Yves Tanguy, Nude (Cadavre Exquis), 1926-27

John Stezaker, Shadow Series, 2006, collage on paper; 55 x 40 x 5 cm each, Saatchi Collection
Surrealism was an art and literary movement in Paris between 1924 to 1939, (and in New York City after the German occupation of Paris in 1940). The term “Surrealism” was coined c.1917 by the French writer Guillaume Apollinaire meaning “beyond realism.”

The movement is led by the writer André Breton.

Breton defined “Surrealism” in his *Surrealist Manifesto* (October 1924):

“[Surrealism is] pure psychic automatism through which it is intended to express, either verbally or in writing, the true functioning of thought. Thought dictated in the absence of all control exerted by reason, and outside any aesthetic or moral pre-occupation… Surrealism rests on the belief in the superior reality of certain forms of association neglected until now, in the omnipotence of the dream, and in the disinterested play of thought. It aims at the definitive ruin of all other psychic mechanisms and at its substitution for them in the resolution of the principal problems of life.”

Surrealism is not irrational, rather it is anti-rational. It celebrates products of the mind in the absence of rational control.
Man Ray, photograph of Surrealist trance session with Robert Desnos, c.1923

Man Ray, André Breton, 1931
The Lyric Tap
They murder a hollow saucer taking flight like a vulture which puts its arms around a quail.
Thus I shall never have lead in my head.
The window's open and the thermometer sings its size.

Le Lyrique robinet
On assassine un assiette creuse en vol de gypaète qui passe le bras autour d’une caille
Je n’aurai donc jamais de plomb dans la tête
La fenêtre est ouvert et le thermomètre chante sa taille

From Robert Desnos, Les Pénalités de l’enfer, 1925
Surrealist strategies in the visual arts in order to free the mind of control exerted by reason:

1. **Automatism**—Andre Masson, Joan Miro, Max Ernst, et al
   - Automatic drawing and painting
     1. Sometimes combined with a second, more calculated creative phase
   - Decalcomania (squishing wet paint between two supports) invented by Oscar Dominguez,
   - Frottage (rubbings of non-representational surfaces to reveal images)
   - Brulage (melting) and solarisation (exposure to light during development) of photographic negatives.

2. **"Convulsive Beauty"**—Man Ray, Andre Breton, et al
   - Found objects that correspond to dream images and desires, what Freud described as the “unheimlich.”

3. Appropriation of **dream imagery created by “naïve” artists**—Henri “Le Douanier” Rousseau (Sunday painter discovered by Picasso in 1910), Eugène Atget (commercial photographer discovered by Man Ray in 1921)

4. **Juxtaposition** of incongruous images—Max Ernst, Merit Oppenheim, Man Ray, Rene Magritte, et al
   - Collage (pasting)
   - Exquisite Corpse
   - Illustrations of irrational knowledge inspired by Giorgio de Chirico’s *Pittura Metafisica*, a movement which took place in Italy and France before the first World War,
   - Salvador Dali’s Paranoiac-Critical Method (intended to undermine the rational view of the world)

5. **Sadism**—Hans Belmer, Alberto Giacometti, and Pablo Picasso
André Masson, *Battle of the Fishes*, 1927, automatic drawing

André Masson, *Automatic Drawing*, 1924

Automatic Drawing
Miro described his method:

“I begin painting and, as I paint, a picture begins to assert itself or suggest itself under my brush. The form becomes a sign for a woman or a bird as I work. The first stage is free, unconscious. The second stage is carefully calculated.”

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Automatic Drawing followed by analysis
Man Ray, *Man*, 1918

Man Ray, *Woman*, 1918

Man Ray, *Untitled*, 1933

Convulsive Beauty

(found objects that correspond to dreams)
We played with **Surrealist collage** at the start of last semester. What was Max Ernst's explanation about how Surrealist collaged worked on the imagination?

Max Ernst, “What is the mechanism of [Surrealist] Collage?” 1936:

“A ready-made reality, whose naïve destination has the air of having been fixed, once and for all (a canoe), finding itself in the presence of another and hardly less absurd reality (a vacuum cleaner), in a place where both of them must feel displaced (a forest), will by this very fact, escape to its naïve destination and to its identity. It will pass from its false absolute, through a series of relative values, into a new absolute value, true and poetic: canoe and vacuum cleaner will make love. The mechanism of collage, it seems to me, is revealed by this very simple example. The complete transmutation, followed by a pure act, as that of love, will make itself known naturally every time the conditions are rendered favorable by the given facts: the coupling of two realities, irreconcilable in appearance, upon a plane which apparently does not suit them” (Chipp, 427).
Man Ray’s Enigma of Isidore Ducase contains a reference to a famous line in an 1869 book by Isidore Ducase, Les Chants de Maldoror, in which author describes a young boy as “beautiful... as the chance meeting on a dissecting-table of a sewing-machine and an umbrella!“

« beau...comme la rencontre fortuite sur une table de dissection d'une machine à coudre et d'un parapluie! »

Max Ernst, “Quietude,” from La Femme 100 Tête, 1929, book of collaged engravings
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Man Ray, Joan Miró, Max Morise, Yves Tanguy, Nude (Cadavre Exquis), 1926-27

Exquisite Corpse
For the Surrealists, Exquisite Corpse was the ideal parlor game, involving elements of unpredictability, chance, unseen elements, and group collaboration—all in service of disrupting the waking mind’s penchant for order.

Exquisite Corpse was a literary form before evolving into a visual art form. For the literary form, a series of words were assembled in sequence, collaboratively. Each participant adds a word following a rule, blind to the contributions of the other collaborators. For example, the first writer sets down an adjective and then folds the paper to cover the word. The next writer adds a noun and covers his work; the third, a verb; the fourth, an adjective; and the final author adds a noun. Then the usually absurd and sometimes humorous sentence is revealed.

The name, Exquisite Corpse, derives from a phrase that resulted when the Surrealists first played the game: "Le cadavre exquis boira le vin nouveau." ("The exquisite corpse will drink the new wine.")

The artists among the Surrealists adopted the technique for the visual arts, drawing in sequence the human body: head to neck, neck to navel, waist to just below the knees, and everything below the knees.
Man Ray, Joan Miró, Max Morise, Yves Tanguy, Nude (Cadavre Exquis), 1926-27

An Exquisite Corpse...

In the visual arts is about the **body** created collaboratively through **time**.
An Exquisite Corpse...

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Exquisite Corpse: Joan Miro, Man Ray, Yves Tanguy, and Max Morise, 1927
Man Ray, Joan Miró, Max Morise, Yves Tanguy, Nude (Cadavre Exquis), 1926-27

Exquisite Corpse

André Breton, Yves Tanguy, Max Morise, Man Ray. Cadavres exquis
Man Ray, Joan Miró, Max Morise, Yves Tanguy, Nude (Cadavre Exquis), 1926-27

Exquisite Corpse

André Breton, Jacques Hérold, Yves Tanguy, Victor Brauner, 1934
John Stezaker’s Photo-collages
Man Ray, Joan Miró, Max Morise, Yves Tanguy, Nude (Cadavre Exquis), 1926-27

Complementary colors appear opposite each other on the color wheel.

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