



DRAWING SURREALISM DIDACTICS

Drawing Surrealism is the first-ever large-scale exhibition to explore the significance of drawing and works on paper to surrealist innovation. Although launched initially as a literary movement with the publication of André Breton's *Manifesto of Surrealism* in 1924, surrealism quickly became a cultural phenomenon in which the visual arts were central to envisioning the world of dreams and the unconscious. Automatic drawings, exquisite corpses, frottage, decalcomania, and collage are just a few of the drawing-based processes invented or reinvented by surrealists as means to tap into the subconscious realm.

With surrealism, drawing, long recognized as the medium of exploration and innovation for its use in studies and preparatory sketches, was set free from its associations with other media (painting notably) and valued for its intrinsic qualities of immediacy and spontaneity. This exhibition reveals how drawing, often considered a minor medium, became a predominant mode of expression and innovation that has had long-standing repercussions in the history of art. The inclusion of drawing-based projects by contemporary artists Alexandra Grant, Mark Licari, and Stas Orlovski, conceived specifically for *Drawing Surrealism*, aspires to elucidate the diverse and enduring vestiges of surrealist drawing.

Drawing Surrealism is also the first exhibition to examine the impact of surrealist drawing on a global scale. In addition to works from well-known surrealist artists based in France (André Masson, Max Ernst, Joan Miró, Salvador Dalí, among them), drawings by lesser-known artists from Western Europe, as well as from countries in Eastern Europe and the Americas, Great Britain, and Japan, are included. The exhibition presents approximately 250 works representing nearly ninety artists from fifteen countries.

Precursors

In the years immediately preceding 1924, there were a number of artists making radical innovations in drawing. Many of them, like Jean (born Hans) Arp, Francis Picabia, Man Ray, and Max Ernst, were associated with dada—a countercultural movement that began in Zurich, Switzerland, during World War I and spread throughout Europe. Dada attempted to incite cultural as well as political rebellion through performances and a wide array of visual artworks, including collage, printed ephemera, and unconventional approaches to drawing—but little to no painting, which had come to represent the bourgeois status quo. Arp made collage compositions “according to the laws of chance,” while Picabia made mechanical line drawings and ink splats destined for publication in avant-garde journals, not for museum walls. Man Ray made aerographs—airbrush drawings—as a means to literally distance himself from the creative process and introduce chance into his work. And Ernst’s early use of collage to create unlikely juxtapositions of everyday images would become a primary visual strategy for the surrealists.

Automatic Drawing

Automatic drawing was the first graphic process adopted and sanctioned (through publications and André Breton’s writings) by surrealism. It derived from Breton’s notion of “pure *psychic* automatism” as the expression of “the real functioning of thought...in the absence of any control exercised by reason, beyond all aesthetic or moral preoccupation.” Adapting this notion into an art technique generally involved chance and the rapid and aimless meandering of an artist’s hand across a piece of paper; the results were as distinct and varied as the artists themselves. André Masson’s automatic drawings came to characterize the process, yet the viability of a pure unmediated automatism was an issue from the very beginning. Joan Miró, Yves Tanguy, and Salvador Dalí all adapted the technique for their own ends and often employed, as Henri Michaux had proposed, “a fusion of automatism and volition.” Michaux as well as César Moro and Georges Bataille were writers by vocation; automatic drawing allowed them a visual means of expression using the familiar tools of pen and ink.

Frottage

Another drawing technique that had a profound impact on surrealism as a visual art was frottage, which materialized in 1925. Frottage involved rubbing graphite (or other drawing media) on paper that was placed on a textured surface, such as a wood floor, string, leaves, or other flora, in order to reproduce that texture on paper. Its discovery is attributed to Max Ernst, who considered frottage a "real equivalent of that which is already known by the term automatic writing" because of the mechanical and unconscious way in which the imagery surfaces. While certain frottage works seem more plotted out than others, the technique did allow for a distancing between the artist and the creative process. With frottage, artists were able to "lift" textures and forms from the physical world without drawing them, at least in the conventional sense.

Exquisite Corpse

If automatic drawing encapsulated the surrealist notion of tapping into the unconscious, then the game of exquisite corpse, beginning in 1925, embodied the surrealist notions of collaboration and chance. In André Breton and Paul Eluard's *Abridged Dictionary of Surrealism*, the exquisite corpse is defined as a "game of folded paper" that consists of having several people compose a phrase or drawing collectively, none of the participants having any idea of the nature of the preceding contribution or contributions." The earliest examples were drawn with graphite or ink or colored pencil on common everyday writing paper. Around 1929, collaborators began using pastel or tempera on black paper, and beginning in the mid-1930s, collage was used. According to Breton, a frequent "player": "What really excited us about these productions was the certainty that, no matter what, they could not possibly have been conjured up by a single brain, and that they possessed to a much greater degree the capacity for 'deviation.'"

Early Surrealist Collage

Disorientation achieved through the unlikely juxtaposition of everyday images became a primary visual strategy for the surrealists, and its origin stems from collage and the myriad inherent possibilities of its process. Collage and related photomontage are particularly visible in the last issue of *La Révolution surréaliste*, published in 1929. Included were reproductions of Max Ernst's collages made from illustrative wood

engravings found in scientific and geographic periodicals, illustrated novels, magazines, medical textbooks, and zoological guides. The distinct imagery shared a quality of line characteristic of wood engravings that allowed Ernst to seamlessly fuse disparate elements and create altogether surreal scenarios. "It is not the glue that makes the collage," remarked Ernst, expressing his desire to conceal his method of production. E.L.T. Mesens in Belgium and Adriano del Valle in Spain also were drawn to collage early on. By the mid-1930s, collage had become one of the predominant forms of expression among the surrealists internationally.

International Surrealist Collage

In 1930 in his preface to an exhibition of collages at the Galerie Goemans, in Paris, "*Challenge to Painting*" (La Peinture au défi), Louis Aragon voiced the political significance of an artist's choice of medium. He wrote that while painting was "luxurious" and therefore subject to "being tamed by money," collages were "poor" and lacked prestige. Distinct from bourgeois painting and because of its "poverty" as a common, everyday medium, collage embodied the populist and countercultural sentiments of surrealism, and had infinite potential. "Why use pigments? A pair of scissors and some paper—that's the only palette that doesn't lead back to the school bench."

The show, and Aragon's preface in particular, sounded a clarion call for pictorial revolution by means of collage heard near and far. Artists in the United States, Czechoslovakia, Spain, Great Britain, Mexico, Serbia, and Japan embraced the technique for its surrealist potential.

Drawing with Light

The illusory potential of photography was exploited by many surrealist artists to distort pictures from "reality" into uncanny visions. In terms of drawing practices, this is evident in photomontages in which collage elements are seamlessly fused by the equalizing effect of the camera lens. For many artists, however, the camera played no role whatsoever in the creation of their "light drawings." Man Ray made his first rayographs (a.k.a. photograms or contact prints) around 1921. The process involved placing objects on unexposed photographic paper that, once exposed and developed, resulted in a collage or montage of silhouetted forms. Japanese artist Ei-kyu actually described the process in terms of drawing,

referring to his own photograms as "photodrawings." Czech artist Jindřich Heisler drew on glass plates in his darkroom using viscous substances such as petroleum jelly and rubber cement, and then exposed the plates to light. The results are haunting images of figures seemingly bound to desolate landscapes.

Automatism Returns: Decalcomania and Fumage

In the mid-1930s, artists developed new automatic drawing techniques in attempts to bypass the rational mind in the creative process.

Decalcomania, for example, involved applying gouache to a sheet of paper and/or stencil and then pressing it against another sheet, creating a transfer image that is revealed when the sheets are pulled apart.

Originally a decorative technique popular in the nineteenth century, it was repurposed for therapeutic usages and designated the Rorschach test in the 1920s. Decalcomania was reinvented with surrealist aims in 1935 by Spanish surrealist Oscar Dominguez and employed by artists and writers Yves Tanguy, Georges Hugnet, Marcel Jean, Shūzō Takiguchi, and others.

Another new technique created around this time, by Wolfgang Paalen, was fumage—a process that used smoke (fumée in French) from a candle flame to "draw" (with soot) on paper or on canvas held above it. The artist could exert a certain amount of control but, ultimately, was susceptible to the whims of the flame.

Automatism Returns: Psychological Explorations

In the mid- to late-1930s, Dr. Grace Pailthorpe and Reuben Mednikoc in London, and Roberto Matta, Gordon Onslow-Ford, and Esteban Francés in Paris and New York, revived automatic drawing as a means to expand consciousness of physical and nonphysical realms. For Pailthorpe, a practicing psychoanalyst, and her artist partner Mednikoc, automatic drawing offered direct access to the unconscious as a method to recover their earliest childhood experiences—including the trauma of birth and uncontrollable infantile bodily functions. The imagery was then submitted to analysis and interpretation.

Matta, Onslow-Ford, and Francés employed the spontaneous principle of automatic drawing as a tool to envision a time/space continuum inspired by non-Euclidean geometry. Seeking to move beyond the more structured,

logical parameters of Euclidean principles, they made drawings that, with diagrammatic lines, dots, dashes, spirals, and helixes, appeared vaguely scientific yet ultimately defied conventional perspective and were further destabilized by the inclusion of irrational, polymorphous shapes.

Surrealist Illustration

Because of surrealism's literary roots, writing and writers provided ongoing sources of inspiration and exchange for surrealist artists. This is evident in the numerous artist-writer surrealist collaborations, which included Wifredo Lam's drawings for André Breton's *Fata Morgana*, Paul Eluard's texts after Man Ray's drawings in *Les Mains libres* (The Free Hands), and the exquisite corpse-like composition of drawing-text-drawing by Esteban Francés, Benjamin Péret, and Remedios Varo, respectively.

The protosurrealist text *Les Chants de Maldoror* by the Comte de Lautréamont was a seemingly limitless source of graphic inspiration. The distinct approaches to depicting *Maldoror* suggest that artists absorbed the hallucinatory, nonlinear, and subversive qualities of the text and adapted them to their own expressive ends. The notion of illustration as a depiction of narrative (and somehow secondary to the written word) is thus undermined, as surrealist artists use text as stimulus, not source.

Surrealist Drawing in Conventional Modes

In contrast to utilizing the automatic and collage-based practices that dominated much of surrealist discourse, many artists (most notably Salvador Dalí) denounced the "passivity" of automatism and chose to work in a conventional style, albeit to depict unconventional subject matter. Dalí sought to materialize his "delirious phenomena" and dream imagery with the utmost detail and in the tradition of the old masters, such as Hieronymus Bosch, Leonardo da Vinci, Albrecht Dürer, and Johannes Vermeer. "My whole ambition in the pictorial domain is to materialize the images of concrete irrationality with the most imperialist fury of precision," he proclaimed.

Bizarre scenes rendered in detail with almost emphatic skill came to characterize surrealist drawings of wartime (from the period 1936 to 1945 and including the Spanish Civil War and World War II). Surrealism's more illusionistic modes allowed artists to address the nightmarish and morbid

climate of war, and to create imagery as disorienting and destabilizing as the atrocities of war they represented.

Drawing the Grotesque

Beginning with the exquisite corpse in 1925, surrealists embraced grotesque bodily distortion as a means to disturb rational and idealized notions of the human form. Simone Kahn, André Breton's first wife and frequent exquisite corpse collaborator, stated that it was also "a method of research, a way for exaltation and stimulation, a mine of numberless inventions." Bizarre creatures, such as those generated via the exquisite corpse, reappear in artists' individual works, most notably in Victor Brauner's mechanomorphic figures and in the quasitotemic configurations of Wifredo Lam.

Georges Bataille's notion of "base materialism," which embraced desublimation (or the exposure of repressed desires) as a challenge to what he perceived as Breton's idealization of the unconscious, also encouraged abject representations. In his 1929 article "Le Gros Orteil" (The Big Toe), Bataille explains that, despite human conditioning to idealize beauty, humans possess a perverse attraction for the "base," the lowly and repulsive. Such abhorrent features appear in drawings by Joan Miró, Roberto Matta, Artür Harfaux, Hans Bellmer, and other surrealists.

Drawing after Surrealism

Artistic innovations resulting from the expansive inventiveness of surrealist drawing are evident in the work of later artists who adapted surrealist techniques and approaches to their own ends, often with very different results. Automatic drawing evolved from a technique engaging pen, ink, and the artist's alleged subconscious into an approach incorporating chance, instinct, and materials ranging from sand to smoke to photographic paper to paint. This open-ended approach brought about innovations in work by artists as distinct as Jackson Pollock, Ellsworth Kelly, and Wols. The exquisite corpse "game" involved an element of chance but, more importantly, invited collaboration, play, and naïveté into the artistic process, and certainly contributed to the notion of the desanctified artist so exalted by postmodernism. Surrealist collage allowed for the resignification of preexisting imagery that, while

creating disorienting scenarios in the context of surrealism, eventually contributed to the collage-based practices critical of mass culture. Even conventional modes of drawing—decried as too academic or illustrational by some—experienced desublimation in surrealist hands, which paved the way for the psychological revelations of John Graham, Louise Bourgeois, Pavel Tchelitchew, and others.

Drawing today is in many ways indebted to the expansive and innovative approach to artistic creation and the primacy of the art form encouraged by surrealism. For contemporary artists, drawing is a process more than a medium; it functions as a metaphor for experimentation and innovation that defies any strict material definition.