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SURREALISM: TOWARD A MAGICAL SOLUTION

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The surrealist group in 1924.  
Above, Left to Right: Morise, Vitrac, Boiffard, Breton,  
Eluard, Naville, Chirico, Soupault.  
Lower Right: Desnos and Baron.  
At the typewriter: Simone Breton-Collinet.

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## INTRODUCTION

Surrealism, rebelling against the false reality of the logical world turned inward in search of an illogical, but more turthful reality. Breton implied that on the other side of the coin called reality lay magic. With Breton at the lead, surrealism became an organised, collective search for the unknown in our midst. Surrealism declared revolution, the turning upside down of old and accepted traditions for a new reality, a reality that had always existed but had been misinterpreted, hidden or ignored - the magic hidden behind a false reality. This collective search was an attempt to suggest a new basis for human life, combining both sides of the coin. The path they trod was into the unconscious, where the combination of opposites is acceptable.\* Waving banners of freedom and truth, the surrealist responsibility was a cosmic one.

The political revolution failed them. They joined the Communist party, seeing it as being concerned with their own radical causes. Although the views of the Party were very dogmatic, their stratagies based on hard economic facts, without any leaning toward the irrational, it could eliminate the bourgeoisie, all middle class morals and social values. The Party would prepare the ground upon which they could build a new "absolute reality", or at



least, produce more fertile ground for surrealist investigations. But the proletariat could not be seen as truly liberated, until it also rid itself of the crippling dogmas of the bourgeoisie. A revolution whose solitary purpose was to raise the proletariat to the economic level of the bourgeoisie could only be seen as replacing one evil with another. They saw themselves as being more communist than the communists. The surrealist revolution was the permanent and true revolution.

The only possible way which surrealism could aspire toward, was what Breton describes as the movements three major goals, namely - "the social liberation of man, man's complete moral liberation and his intellectual rejuvenation", through literature and the plastic arts.

Being too sophisticated in its intellectualism, surrealism did not indulge in the meaningless gibberish, welcomed previously in the Dadaist movement, but turned to Freudian theory. Freudian methods of psychoanalysis were changed to suit their artistic needs, along with Freud's theories of man's inner mechanism, and these became the axis of surrealist philosophy. The movement took on a pseudo - scientific stance. Freud's theories were accepted as proved facts. There was virtually no following of his contemporary Jung, whose more animistic and less, phallocentric path,



which would seem to be more in tune with the magic that they sought. Any reference to Jung is concerned with my own point of view.

In their search for Utopia, a nirvana, a paradise for the here and now, surrealists grasped various spiritual concepts. Their manifestoes and texts are inundated with the word 'magic', they speak of love in the spiritual sublime sense. Contrary to this, I am confronted by discouraging critiques:

"Revolution and Magic are the two values which surrealism used to conceal its unconfessed *raison d'être*, which was to make a religion out of poetic inspiration. These two values constantly succeeded each other, turn and turn about, like day and night in surrealist thought, whose contradictions are a direct result of the impossibility of reconciling them".<sup>1</sup>

"It is commonplace that, to a mystic, absolute liberty goes hand in hand with the destruction of the contingent world. The only way the individual can realize all his desires is to do away with the world as we know it, governed as it is by natural and social laws which invariably stand in the way. (Even the Indian mystic, who progressively eliminates his desires, eventually dissolves reality in Nirvana). The surrealists, however, never ones to be chary of a paradox, claimed to walk in both directions at the same



time. This in itself should have alerted those critics who saw the surrealists as sometime mystics or philosophical primitives that something was wrong".<sup>2</sup>

To begin with I do not agree with Sarane Alexandrian's statement about surrealism's "unconfessed raison d'être". It would seem that the amount of time spent dealing with political parties, producing numerous manifestoes could have been put to better use by being with Gala. Secondly the surrealists were eccentric enough to proclaim "poetic inspiration" as the movements raison d'être without any disguise. Taking into account its situation between two wars "poetic inspiration" would undoubtedly be seen as frivolous but a less adequate concealment would have sufficed.

"In order properly to grasp the notion of Nirvana and to understand the ecstasy of self-annihilation, it is very important to recognize that this oriental 'nothingness' is not absolute negation - not the death of all things - but indifferenciation or in other words, the absence of conflicts and contrasts and hence, the banishment of pain and dynamism".<sup>3</sup>

As well as referring to the hope of Nirvana, Hindu doctrine refers to the lessons to be learnt from Mâyâ - illusion - the world of phenomena where opposites cancel



one another. One opposite is balanced by another through an unending interplay and transmutation of existence - the alternation of creation and destruction. The surrealists delved into the unconscious (which cannot yet be explained in its complexities in scientific terms) hoping that this world where opposites unite acceptably (as opposed to the rational world) would offer an answer for the human condition. Their campaign was world oriented. They saw themselves as an intellectual movement. "Surrealism is, in fact, the only organised intellectual movement which has succeeded in spanning the distance which separates the wars".<sup>4</sup> By disappearing through the looking glass they hoped to return with a bottle of 'drink me', from which the whole world could tipple. Although their investigations took place in dream worlds the magic they sought would eventually be determined by the intellect. In my thesis I follow through the paths taken by the surrealists in order to discover what this 'magic' is and how supposedly it was utilised towards the movement's goals of liberation. It does not tie itself to the formative years the years of a Parisian nucleus 1924 - 1939 but spans surrealism in its broadest international sense. With roots in the women's emancipation movement, la femme played a central role in the surrealist movement, but more important was her role as muse to inspire toward this magical world. Because of the importance of la femme, and the later



associations of the women artists with the movement, in order to get a perspective it must be taken in its broadest sense.<sup>5</sup> Throughout the years surrealism's reformations resulted in a renewal of it's first principals eliminating only the transgressors who sinned against the movement. The surrealist asthetic remained true to itself. Whatever distances are crossed through this broad view of surrealism, it is with this in mind.



FOOTNOTES: INTRODUCTION

\* More acceptable in the unconscious as opposed to the rational world.

<sup>1</sup> Sarane Alexandrian, Surrealist Art, p.220.

<sup>2</sup> Herbert S. Gershman, The Surrealist Revolution in France, p.132.

<sup>3</sup> J.E. Cirlot, A Dictionary of Symbols, p.229

<sup>4</sup> Andre Breton, What is Surrealism?, from Situation of Surrealism Between the Two Wars, p.236.

<sup>5</sup> AGAR, EILEEN: London surrealist group since 1933, met Eluard in Paris 1929.

BRIDGEWATER, EMMY: London surrealist group 1940.

CARRINGTON, LEONORA: Moved to Paris from England in 1937 (with Ernst). Reunited with surrealists in New York.

COLQUHOUN, ITHELL: English surrealist group, 1939 -

ELUARD, NUSCH: Associated with Paris group during the 1930's.

FINI, LENOR: Associations with the Paris group, 1936 -, not a member of the group, participated in exhibitions.

HUGO, VALENTINE: Participated with Paris group, 1930 - 1936.

KAHLO, FRIDA: Met Breton in 1938, exhibited in Paris the following year, considered herself a realist rather than a surrealist. Died 1954.

KERNN, LARSEN: Danish surrealist group 1935 -

LAMBA, (BRETON), JACQUELINE: Paris group 1934.

MARR, DORA: Paris group, 1934 - 1937.

MILLER, LEE: Worked with Man Ray, 1929 - 1932.

OPPENHEIM, MERET: Paris group 1933 - 1937.

PAILTHORPE, GRACE: London surrealist group.



PENROSE, VALENTINE: Late 1920's - early 1930's, Paris group.

RAHON, ALICE: Paris group, late 1930's.

RIMMINGTON, EDITH: London surrealist group 1939 -

SAGE, KAY: Living in Paris 1937. Returned to America during World War II, exhibited regularly until her death. Retrospective exhibition 1954.

TANNING, DOROTHEA: (ERNST). Associations with the surrealists in America 1937 -

TOYEN: Surrealist group in Prague.

VARO, REMIDOS: Paris group, 1937 - 1939.



## DADA AND SURREALISM

"I affirm that Tristan Tzara discovered the word Dada on the 8th of February, 1916, at six o'clock in the evening" - Hans Arp (one of the first members of the group). The word dada meaning hobby-horse, was the first word which met his eye on a randomly opened page of a dictionary.

"I was there with my twelve children when Tzara pronounced for the first time this word, which aroused a legitimate enthusiasm in all of us. This took place at the Terrace Café in Zurich, and I had a roll of bread up my left nostril. I am persuaded that only imbeciles and Spanish professors can be interested in dates. What interests us is the dada spirit and we were all dada before Dada began".<sup>1</sup>

Negativism, revolt and the destruction of all values was the spirit of Dada. It was a violent protest against art, literature, morals and society. Their's was an artistic revolt attempting to free themselves from the shackles of convention and return to living life. "Revolted by the butchery of the 1914 World War, we... devoted ourselves to the arts... we were seeking an art based on fundamentals to cure the madness of the age, and a new order of things that would restore the balance between heaven and hell".<sup>2</sup> They felt that human nature was better left to find its own and believed in uninhibited freedom.



The 'Cabaret Voltaire' was set up in Zurich, 1916, by Hugo Ball. It was the venue for exhibitions, plays and performances. There were many important philosophical and political differences amongst the group members as well as the various Dada groups. The Cabaret Voltaire also served as a venue for discussions that frequently became arguments and occasionally turned into fights.

Paradox was the essence of Dada. If it concerned itself with love, life and laughter, it also encountered black humour, nihilism and suicide. Duchamp had great influence over the movement, believing that art for art's sake was meaningless, that it must serve, must reveal what is hidden in the present or become a futile pastime. His readymades questioned the relevancy of individual craftsmanship.

Dadaists were serious about destroying middle class institutions. Initially it overwhelmed but failed to convince. It was the popular success of Dada that marked its failure.

Breton played an important role in early Dadaist publications and manifestoes in Paris. In 1922 he broke with Tzara (who had moved to Paris in 1919) and the Paris Dadaists feeling the need for a more constructive approach. He felt that Dada's experimental spirit had failed it, with pointless repetition of manifestations no longer with meaning. Believing that the



movement had given up the search and was going nowhere he wrote: "I may never get to the place or find the formula I have in mind, but this can never be said too often - the search for them is what matters and nothing else".<sup>3</sup> The seperation became inevitable when in an article - 'Leave Everything' (2nd issue of 'Litterature') Breton expressed his views that the time had come for the replacement of the destructive programme of Dada for a more positive and creative approach. The final break with Dada was marked by the first Surrealist Manifesto publication in 1929. His manifesto was decisively influenced by Freud's means of treating pathological personalities by probing the unconscious levels of their minds.



FOOTNOTES: CHAPTER I

- <sup>1</sup>David Gascoyne, A Short Survey of Surrealism, p.23.
- <sup>2</sup>Dawn Ades, Dada and Surrealism Reviewed, p.453.
- <sup>3</sup>Gaeton Picon, Surrealism 1919 - 1939, p.43.



#### THE VALUE OF THE FREUDIAN UNCONSCIOUS TOWARD SURREALIST GOALS

Freud was the first to explore experimentally what lay behind consciousness. The Freudian unconscious subdivides into 'primary process thought' and 'secondary process thought'. 'Primary process thought' Freud believed is controlled by the id, the unconscious controlling factor and the fulfilment of wishes and needs. In bringing this about ordinary laws of logic are circumvented. The thought process is much freer but with a logic of its own. 'Secondary process thought' is in control of the ego and deals with all that is conscious, rational and logical. It is linked to experience.

Dreams depend upon 'primary process thought' where the combining of opposites is acceptable, whereas they violate the 'secondary process thought'. Based on the conclusions of eminent neurologists that neurotic symptoms were related to conscious experience, Freud deducted that dreams were not just a matter of chance but were associated with conscious thoughts and problems. But these problems may be forgotten - become unconscious. Physical reactions are only one form in which these problems of the unconscious express themselves. They more frequently find expression in dreams. Dreams for Freud became the starting point from which an unconscious problem could be explored. He placed particular emphasis on dreams as the point of departure for 'free association'.<sup>1</sup>



What Freud called 'archaic remnants' are the images found in dreams that make analogies, or can be associated with myths, primitive ideas and rites. According to Jung, Freud's phraseology "suggests that they are the psychic elements surviving in the human mind from ages ago". He goes on to say that this viewpoint is characteristic of those who regard the unconscious as a mere appendix of consciousness, (or, more picturesquely, as a trash can that collects all the refuse of the conscious mind)."<sup>2</sup> More bluntly than picturesque.

Regardless of the actual functioning of the unconscious the surrealist unconscious presumably functioned in the manner that the unconscious does. Undoubtedly they would be influenced by Freud's theories.

By adopting Freudian methods of treating pathological patients, surrealism saw a way towards liberation. Their search would begin in the unconscious. A wonderland of 'archaic remnants', a place where both sides of the coin were compatible. It was here that they would find their hidden magic. The unconscious could reveal its secrets and suggest a new lifestyle where man, intellectually rejuvenated would exist both socially and morally liberated. Breton, seeing the usefulness in pursuing surrealist goals wrote: "Can dreams not be used to solve the fundamental problems of life?" He believed that "the apparent antagonism between dream and reality" would be "resolved in a kind of absolute reality - in surreality".



## A FOREST OF SIGNS

At the core of the surrealist aesthetic lies what Breton called 'convulsive beauty', and by it's presence a surrealist work could be classified. The traditional aesthetic values of form, colour, draftmanship and insight were of secondary importance. "Beauty shall be convulsive or shall not be at all".

The nature of that convulsion explained by Breton in the first chapter of 'L'Amour Fou' is the process of reality convulsing itself into it's apparent opposite, a sign. Reality itself being an illusion, behind which is hidden the 'magic' which is revealed through reality convulsing itself into a sign.

The nature of 'convulsive beauty' becomes more evident by examining Breton's 'moments' of convulsive beauty, and how he describes the action of these signs. These 'moments' fall into three categories: 'érotique - voilée', 'explosante - fixe' and 'magique - circonstancielle'. 'Érotique voilée' works in realm of representation. It is the echoing of form, as one animal imitates another, or as something inorganic shapes itself to look like statuary.

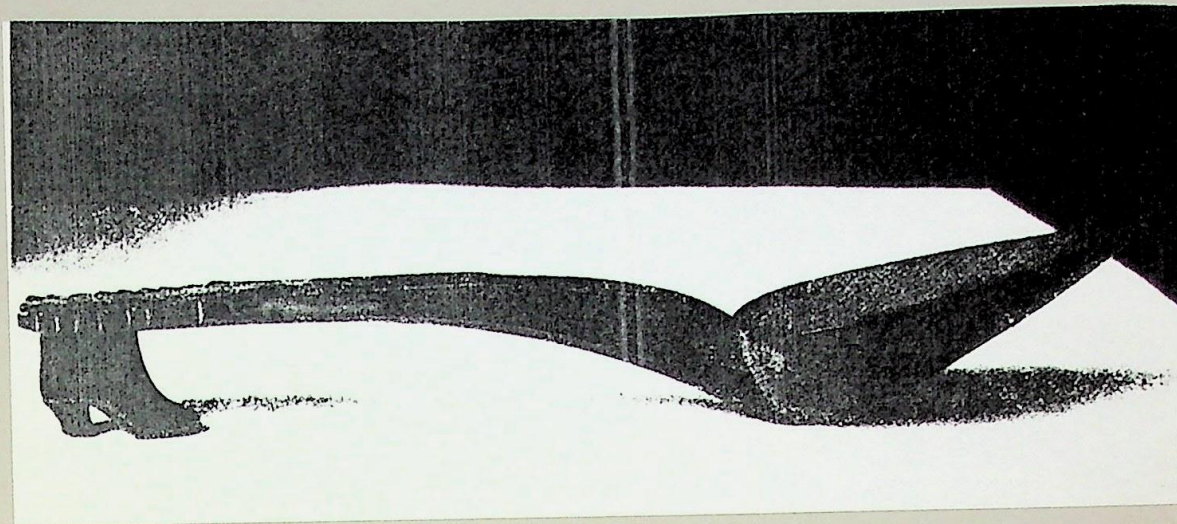
Related to 'explosante - fixe' is the 'expiration of movement', which is the experience of something which was once



in motion and should be, but for some reason has been stopped. Breton's example of 'explosante - fixe' is: "a very handsome locomotive after it had been abandoned for many years to the delirium of a virgin forest".<sup>3</sup> Detached from the continuum of it's natural existence by 'expiration of movement' the locomotive deprived of a part of it's physical self becomes a sign of the reality it no longer possesses.

The found object or found verbal fragment are what constitute 'magique - circonstancielle' both instances of objective chance, emissaries from the external world informing the recipient of his/her own desire, the found object or found verbal fragment being the sign of that desire. An example of this type of convulsive beauty is a slipper spoon found by Breton at a flea market. It became the fulfilment of a wish spoken by the automatic phrase "Cendriller - centrillon" (Cinderella ashtray) which had begun running through his mind months previously. The spoon which had a small shoe attached to the underside of the handle suddenly convulsed itself into a sign for Breton when he began to visualise the object as a shoe reduplicated to infinity. In addition to the small shoe under the handle he perceived the whole object as another shoe, the small shoe being the heel. Then he imagined the small shoe as having yet another shoe for it's heel, a series of mirrored slippers into infinity. To Breton this series of signs signified his desire for love and the beginning of a search whose magical unfolding is





2. Man Ray, "From the height of a little slipper joining  
bodily with it."



plotted throughout L'Amour Fou.

In L'Amour Fou he describes the effect of convulsive beauty: "I acknowledge without the least embarrassment my profound insensibility when I am faced with natural spectacles of works of art that do not immediately produce in me a state of physical disturbance characterised by the sensations of a wind brushing across my forehead and capable of causing me acutally to shiver. I have never been able to help relating this sensation of erotic pleasure and can discover between them only difference of degree".<sup>4</sup>

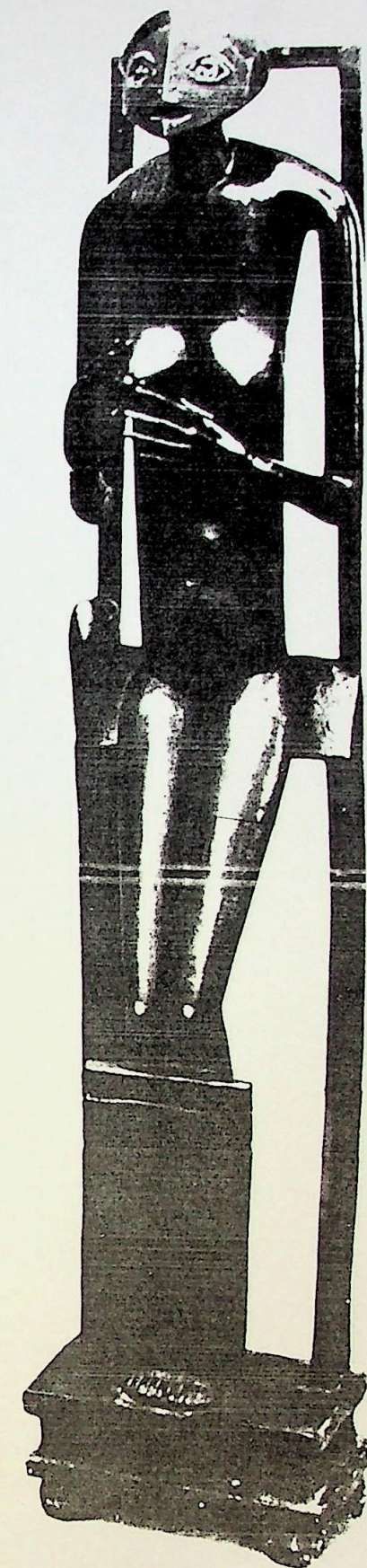


#### THE FUNCTIONING OF CREATIVITY

The French mathematician Poincaré believed that the unconscious conducts the mental act of combining thoughts and judges the potential value of each combination which are valuable. He did not believe, that the unconscious could deal with vast numbers of combinations and concluded that in the initial stage there was a period of conscious work resulting with no possible solutions. The second stage called the "incubation period" (the period when a person is not consciously thinking about a problem but is supposedly working unconsciously on it.) after which a solution will present itself illuminatively.

This outline of Poincaré's thinking on the process of creativity easily ties with surrealist activity. An example of this would be Giacometti, who had been trying in vain to solve a problem concerning an unfinished sculpture. Having found an old fencing mask, at a flea market with Breton, the trouvaille, this gift of chance enabled him to resume work and bring to completion his 'Feminine Personage' or 'Invisible Object'. Presumably the urge to buy the object came from his unconscious. The problem concerning the unfinished sculpture had been going through an 'incubation period', and the solution was provided by "magique - circonstancielle", an emissary of his own desire.





3. Giacometti, Invisible Object, 1934.



With regard to potential solutions and how decisions are made, Poincaré believed that the basis for a person's unconscious evaluation of any given combination of thoughts, was ultimately by one's aesthetic sense. Therefore potentially useful thought combinations appeal to the aesthetic sensibility of the unconscious and it is the 'convulsive beauty' in the case of surrealism that governs the assessment of potentially surrealistic thought combinations.



### THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS

As opposed to Poincaré's theory on the functioning of creativity (consciously pursuing the problem as the first stage) the surrealist's made a direct appeal to the unconscious. Automation<sup>5</sup>, free association and dream imagery were the tools employed to tap the unconscious. Automatism identified as the point of departure for all surrealist activity. Knowing that the unconscious could yield fruits unattainable by pure logic, it became a valuable source and a domain for legitimate investigation.

"The sly protests of the critics... will not prevent me from acknowledging that for many years I have counted on the torrential flow of automatic to purge, definitely the literary stables. In this regard, the will to thrust open the floodgates will doubtless remain the generative idea of surrealism".<sup>6</sup>

Aniela Jaffé on the subject of symbolism in the visual arts refers to Breton and the surrealist movement. She believed that Breton "grasped the point admirably" with regard to dreams and the union of opposites. "But the way he took to reach his goals could only lead him astray".<sup>7</sup> Experimentation with Freudian methods of free association and automatism - what Breton called: "thoughts dictation,



independant of any aesthetic or moral preoccupation" by-passed consciousness. Jung has shown that consciousness is the factor that holds the key to values of the unconscious, that is their value in relation to reality. Jaffé writes: "Consciousness alone is competent to determine the meaning of the images and to recognize their significance for man here and now in the concrete reality of the present". It is the interplay of consciousness and the unconscious (as in normal creativity) and only through this can the unconscious prove its value for the here and now.

The surrealists abandoned themselves to the unconscious assured of its power of revelation, but in doing so risked the destructive side of the unconscious revealing itself, and encountering the void which is evident in early de Chirico's. De Chirico was heavily influenced by Nietzsche and Schopenhaur. He wrote: "Schopenhaur and Nietzsche were the first to teach the deep significance of the senselessness of life, and to show how this senselessness could be transformed into art". De Chirico strove to transform the "dreadful void" into "untroubled beauty". Trying to find artistic expression for the void "he penetrated to the core of the existential dilemma of contemporary man".<sup>8</sup> De Chirico's early works inspired the surrealists and were held in esteem. He had "all the poetic genius, the sarcastic humour, the intollerance and the sense of mystery which they expected

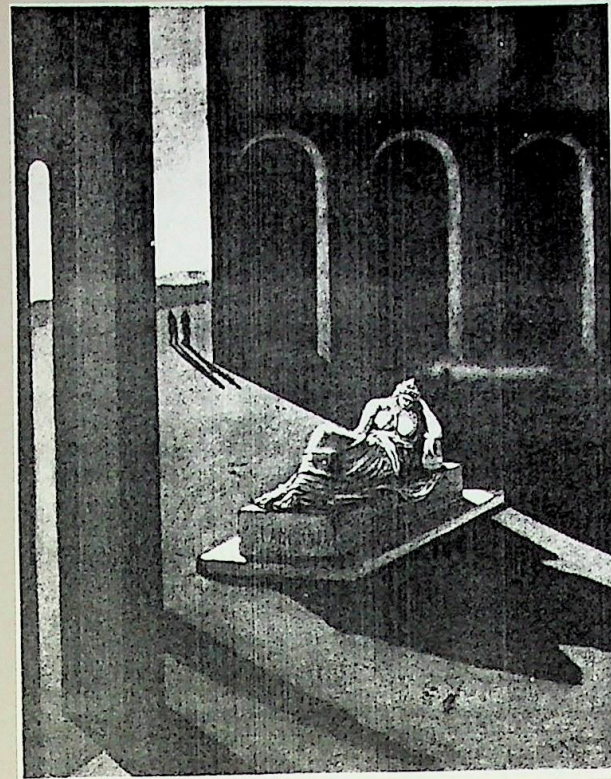


from a master".<sup>9</sup> Later, esteem turned to contempt when Chirico became concerned with traditional aesthetic values and his imagery veered towards classicism. Many of the surrealists borrowed from de Chirico's strange perspectives and illusionistic space, evident in Ernst's Two Children are Threatened by a Nightingale, the work of Tanning, Carrington, even more evident in Kay Sage's work. Sage's abstract paintings automatically produced are imbued with a sense of stillness and impending doom, more evident here than in other surreal works.

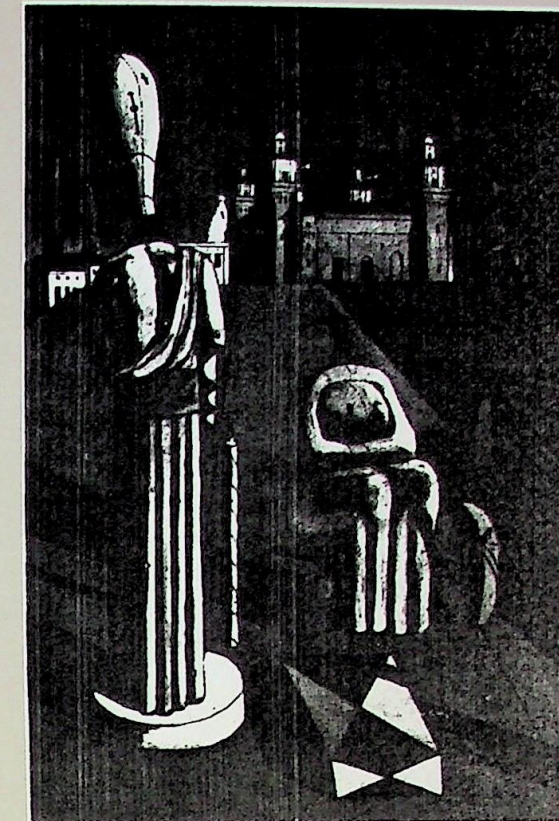
The unconscious being 'pure nature' pours out it's gifts in abundance (like nature), left to itself without response from consciousness can destroy it's own gifts eventually sweeping them into annihilation. "If the unconscious, once in action, is left to itself, there is a risk that its contents will become overpowering or will manifest their negative destructive side".<sup>10</sup> With reference to the destructive side of the unconscious and the eventual annihilation of nature's gifts Jaffe wrote:

"If we look at surrealist pictures (like Salvador Dali's 'The Burning Giraffe') with this in mind, we may feel the wealth of their fantasy and the overwhelming power of their unconscious imagery, but we realize the horror and the symbolism of the end of all things that speaks from many of them".

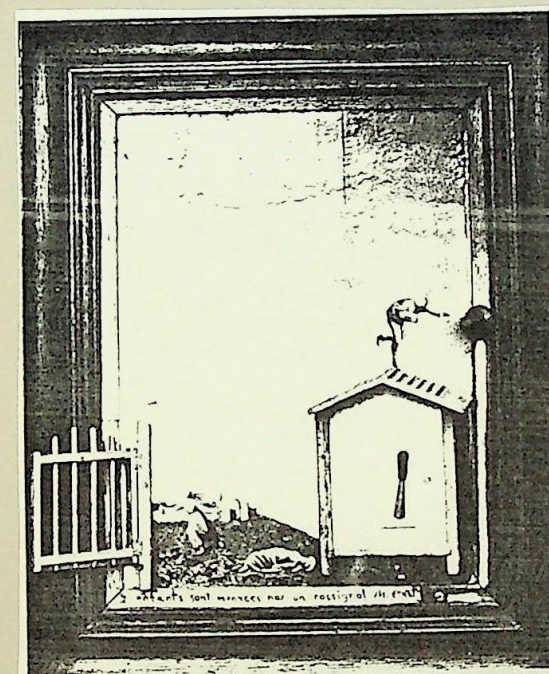




4.



5.



6.

4. Giorgio de Chirico, Melancholy, 1912.
5. Giorgio de Chirico, The Disquieting Muses, 1917.
6. Max Ernst, Two Children are Threatened by a Nightingale, 1924.





7. Dorothea Tanning, Palaestra, 1949.





9. Salvador Dalí, Giraffe on Fire, 1937.



FOOTNOTES: CHAPTER II

<sup>1</sup>Jung concluded that any reference point could reach the centre of a problem.

<sup>2</sup>Carl G Jung, Man and his Symbols, p. 47.

<sup>3</sup>Andre Breton, What is Surrealism? from Mad Love p. 162.

<sup>4</sup>Elizabeth Cowling, Dada and Surrealism Reviewed, p. 458.

<sup>5</sup>Automatism: Based on Théodore Flournoy's research carried out with the medium Catherine Muller, better known by her pseudonym; Hélène Smith. Flournoy discovered a psychological truth, in her irrational utterances while she was in a state of trance. He also discovered that her normal range of creativity was enormously widened while in a fully somnambulistic state.

The surrealists relied on Freud for automatism's theoretical mechanism.

<sup>6</sup>Andre Breton, What is Surrealism?, p. 360.

<sup>7</sup>Carl G Jung, Man and his Symbols, p. 257.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid, p. 255

<sup>9</sup>Sarane Alexandrian, Surrealist Art, p. 55.

<sup>10</sup>Carl G Jung, Man and his Symbols, p. 257.



#### ON MAGIC ART

In his essay On Magic Art, Breton speaks of the controversy unleashed by the word magic and as to what the definition of magic is. Firstly he talks about magic in an esoteric manner, about believers and non-believers and the major rifts that manifest in opposing camps, due to individual perception. He speaks of the intervention of science and the paradoxical results of its progress, how it hoped to "dissipate the illusions of past epochs", but resulted instead in reviving:

"the nostalgia for the first ages of humanity  
and a means of acting on the world whose secrets  
man at that time was fumbling to unravel".<sup>1</sup>

But art itself can never be magic in the narrow sense of the term, the dictionary definition: "supposed art of influencing course of events by occult control of nature or of spirits; witchcraft (black, white, natural), involving invocation of devils, angels, no personal spirit".<sup>2</sup> (Unless the object used in magic rituals, within a certain culture is perceived as an art object from outside or within that culture). Art clearly lacks this operational character.

Breton refers to Novalis' conception of 'magic art'. Novalis believed in the existence of magic in everyday life and its efficacy even when stripped of its ritualistic



apparel. Breton believed, that the modern sensibility was deeply coloured by the same feeling, as "the greatest poets"<sup>3</sup> of the 19th century all shared the same emotion.

Jung believed that artists, like alchemists projected part of their psyche into matter or inanimate objects, unaware perhaps of this "psychological fact".

"They projected their own darkness, their earthly shadow, a psychic content that they and their time had lost and abandoned".<sup>4</sup>

This would link up with both "magique circonstancielle" - the found object, and Novalais' ideas about the existence of magic in everyday life.

According to Breton, there are two main categories into which 'magic' art falls.

1. "Art work which operates as practiced magic, governed by a code varying according to time and place, but exact in each case".
2. An artform: "which exists outside all organised magic and which deliberately or not speculates consciously or not on their power".<sup>5</sup>

It is the latter, in Breton's opinion, which is strongest or more influential. Surrealist activity falls into this



category.

Novalais' writings on magic art were cryptic, but the surrealists retained his idea of what makes magic possible - love - "Love proceeds magically". Breton interpreted this 'love', in "the sense of spiritualised, sublimated desire".

Breton refers to the conception of a work of art as:

"an objectification, on the material plane, of a dynamism of the same nature as that which presided over the creation of the world".<sup>6</sup>

This idea is particularly emphasised among the Gnostics, believing that the cosmos is inferior to the "Eternal". Breton parallels this idea with the living face and the portrait. He then refers to Valentine of Alexandria, who asked: "What is the course of the image?" Valentine concludes that the numerical vibration of the name was the answer. Breton refuses the path taken by Valentine's followers, to make both men and women aware of their magic powers. He gives an example of the 'Marcosians':

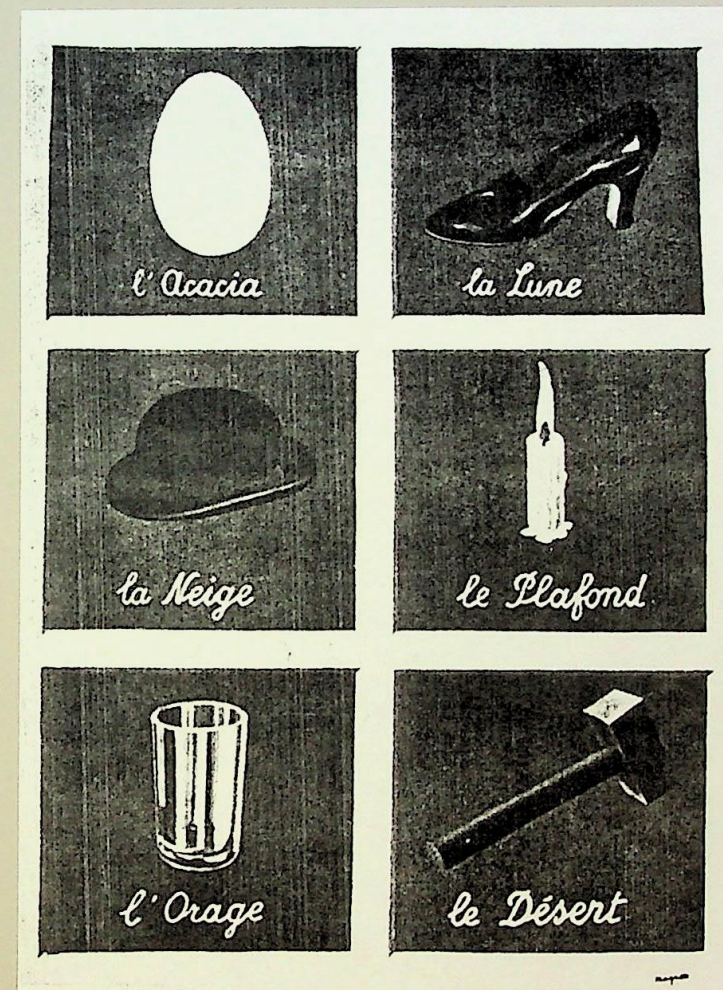
"Who will build for themselves a cosmogony of names and numbers, and devote themselves to phonetic cabala as well as the practice of illusion".<sup>7</sup>

This refusal is evident in Magritte's work which plays on language - "The Wind and the Song", 1928-1929 and his grid paintings.





10. Magritte, The Wind and the Song, 1928 - 1929.



11. Rene Magritte, The Key of Dreams, 1930.



Magritte wished to reveal to the viewer that which had been obscured by familiarity.<sup>8</sup> Nietzsche suggested that the accepted identity of objects was purely conventional, and a hindrance to true creativity. He found that it was more important to know the names of objects, than to know the objects themselves. Magritte, paints what Nietzsche proclaimed: "to call into question the established notion of reality". These works are surreal, both in the sense of revelation and the content of black humour.

The dismissal of numerology and phonetic cabala, shows the peripheral role played by the Tarot in surrealism, which in turn demonstrates the lack of emphasis put on Freud's "archaic remnants".

What he retains of Valentine's thoughts is the emphasis placed "on the sacred terror that seizes hold of the artist facing his work created "in the name of God", or in other words, an unknown superior principle".<sup>9</sup> What he retains complies with the surrealist aesthetic - convulsive beauty, and the power of revelation.

Breton heralds the spirit of adventure and condemns fear when confronted by the unknown. With a quotation by Rimband: "Is it false to say: I think, one ought to say: I am thought". Breton refers to the feeling of "being set



in motion" by forces more powerful than the artist's will. He believes that this feeling will "cease to become more acute or overwhelming". He concludes his essay, by dismissing a need for further inquiry into the question: "What we create - is it ours?", as having been given "ample room".

What can be gleaned from this, is that the magic of the surrealists was their own aesthetic - 'convulsive beauty'. Their outlook was that every 'known' included an unknown aspect. Every unknown was potentially magic. The unknown is revealed magically, and is magic in its revelation.



FOOTNOTES: CHAPTER III

<sup>1</sup>Andre Breton, What is Surrealism, p.293.

<sup>2</sup>Oxford Dictionary

<sup>3</sup>Hugo, Nerval, Baudelaire, Lautrémont, Rimband, Mallarmé.

<sup>4</sup>Carl G Jung, Man and his Symbols, p.254.

<sup>5</sup>Andre Breton, What is Surrealism, p.293.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid, p.295.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid, p.295.

<sup>8</sup>Magritte collaborated with the Paris surrealists from 1927 - 1930. He returned to Brussels for good in 1930, and became the leading Belgian surrealist.

<sup>9</sup>Andre Breton, What is Surrealism, p.295.



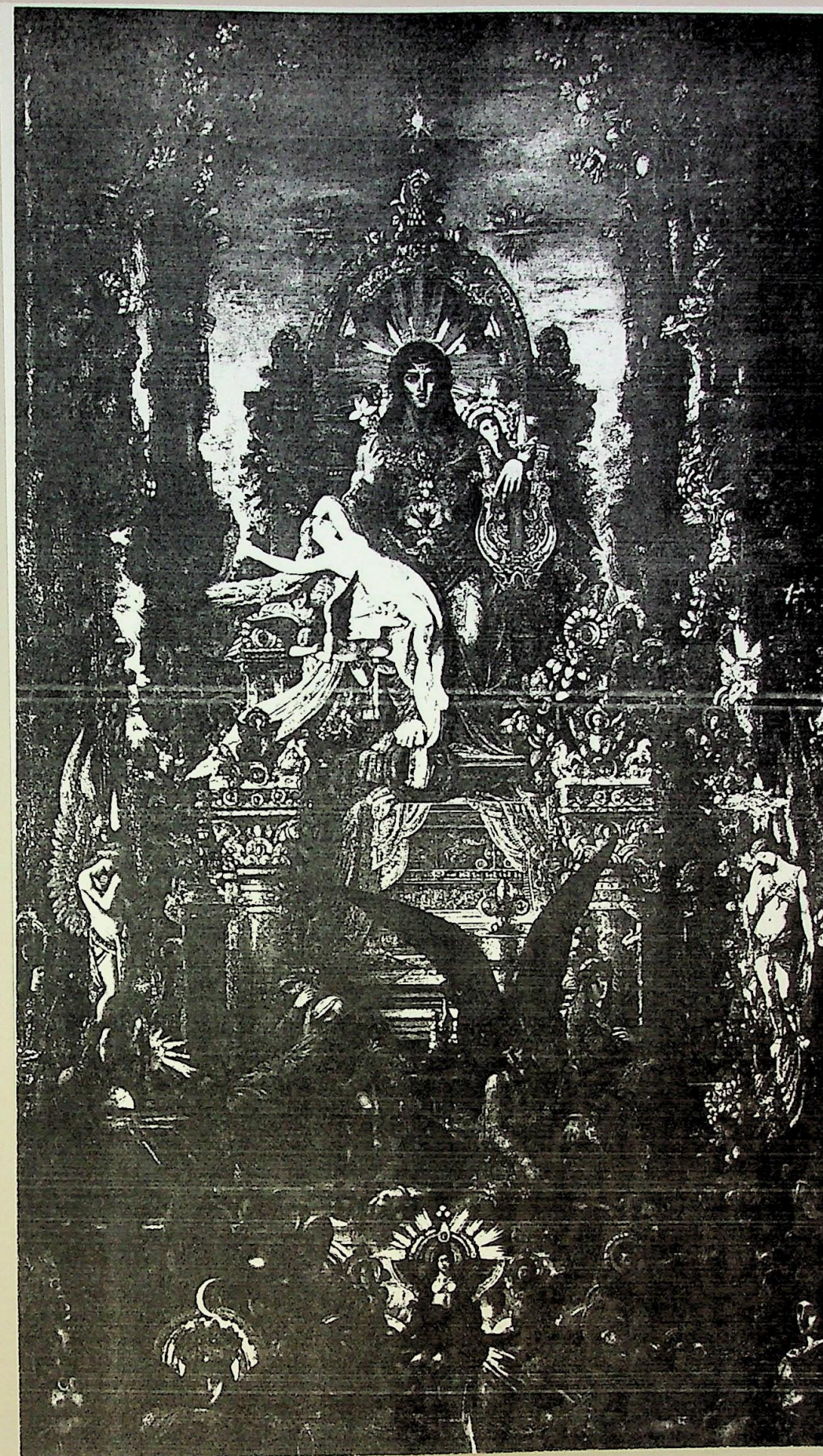
L'AMOUR, LA FEMME ET LA REVOLUTION

Breton saw a close parallel between the period after the First World War, (when surrealism first began), a time of political unrest, and the period of the Franco Prussian War (1870 - 1871) the revolutionary outbreak of the Commune and the establishment of Republican government. The reason for this may be the affects of the Gustave Moreau, Jupiter and Semele, 1894 - 1895, (its relationships in time to the Franco Prussian War), which "conditioned forever his way of loving", and the surrealist attitude toward love. In 1960, he wrote: "It was there that beauty and love were revealed to me, through a few feminine faces and poses. The type these women belonged to has probably hidden all other types for me: I was completely spellbound. Myth kindled into life again here as nowhere else, must have come into it. The woman who, almost without changing was in turn Salome, Helen, Delilah, the Chimera, or Semele, became the incarnation of them all. From them she drew her power, and fixed her features in eternity".<sup>1</sup>

By 1924, Breton had defined love as a means of creation and a source of revelation. He believed that love could succeed where the political revolution had failed.

La femme played a central role in the surrealist





12. Gustave Moreau, Jupiter and Semele, 1870 -- 1871.



movement. On one level in terms of the political revolution she wanted to free herself from her conventional role in society. After 1929, women were active participants in surrealist exhibitions. On a more spiritual level la femme was seen as being more in tune with the forces of nature. Through union with the female principle, la femme within, it might be possible for man and society to get closer to the spirit of nature, to come in contact with past ages and so overcome the scandal of the human condition.

Seeking to unite la femme within and the external male, the surrealists expressed this union in the form of the androgyne. The female element of the male unconscious is what Jung termed the 'anima'. (The 'animus' - the male element of the female unconscious). In the past this inner duality has been represented in the form of a hermaphrodite.

"The anima is a personification of all feminine psychological tendencies in a man's psyche, such as vague feelings and moods. prophetic hunches, receptiveness to the irrational, capacity for personal love, feeling for nature, and - last but not least - his relation to the unconscious".<sup>2</sup> The anima has both positive and negative manifestations. The negative personification of the anima is the femme fatale or the witch. It is the negative manifestation of the anima that dominates surrealist expression. "Witches they are by nature."





13. Crowned hermaphrodite from a 17th century alchemical manuscript.



It is a gift peculiar to woman and her temperament", wrote Jules Michelet in 'La Sorcière' - an imposing study of the witch in medieval society. This work profoundly influenced Breton's thinking on the subject of woman.

The anima, recognised as an inner power, used positively by bringing into play consciously can serve as a guide or mediator to the unconscious, and the self - (the inner most nucleus of the psyche). The negative anima can become a death demon, who bewitches and allures as in the Slavonic myth: the Rusalka. These water nymphs were believed to be the spirits of drowned girls, who bewitch and drown men passing by. In Breton's novel 'Nadia', (published 1928), he is lured by her, but only as far as the asylum doors. This would indicate his sense of self and perhaps demonstrate a romantic vision and its impossibility, not so much an impossibility but the reality of the situation would not be as appealing as the vision.

"The problem of woman", wrote Breton in 1929, "is the most marvellous and disturbing problem in all the world". These real women artists associated with the movement proved problematic, and could not be theorised into non existence. There was a lot of confrontation between surrealist theorising on woman and the views these women had themselves.

The exploration of the dynamics of erotic and spiritual



desire were seen as a means to the goals of the political revolution. Surrealism fought to unite l'amour and l'érotique. In L'Amour Fou, Breton wrote that the difference between poetic emotion and erotic pleasure was only one of degree. But the surrealist erotic was responsive to male desire, formulated in the absence of woman, and based on Freudian concepts. While proclaiming her liberty, her image was defined in terms of man's desire. Locating desire in the forbidden, de Sade being a model, and their need for transgression led to images of perverse sexuality. Bellmer's 'Dolls' are the most concrete and literal expressions of violent attacks on the integrity of the female body.<sup>3</sup> Masson's automatic drawings also lend themselves to Sadian expression.<sup>4</sup>

"The most frequent manifestation of the anima takes the form of erotic fantasy... This is a crude, primitive aspect of the anima"<sup>5</sup> which is connected to an uncultivated feeling attitude toward life.

There is no equivalent in the work of the women artists of the eroticising of la femme. Their treatment of the erotic tends to be more oblique and masked in personal symbolism. There is a parodying of the surrealist obsession with the image of the erotic female in both Ithell Colquhoun's, 'Gouffres Amers', 1939, and Fini's 'Chthonian Divinity, Watching over the Sleep of a Young Man', 1947. Women artists found little support



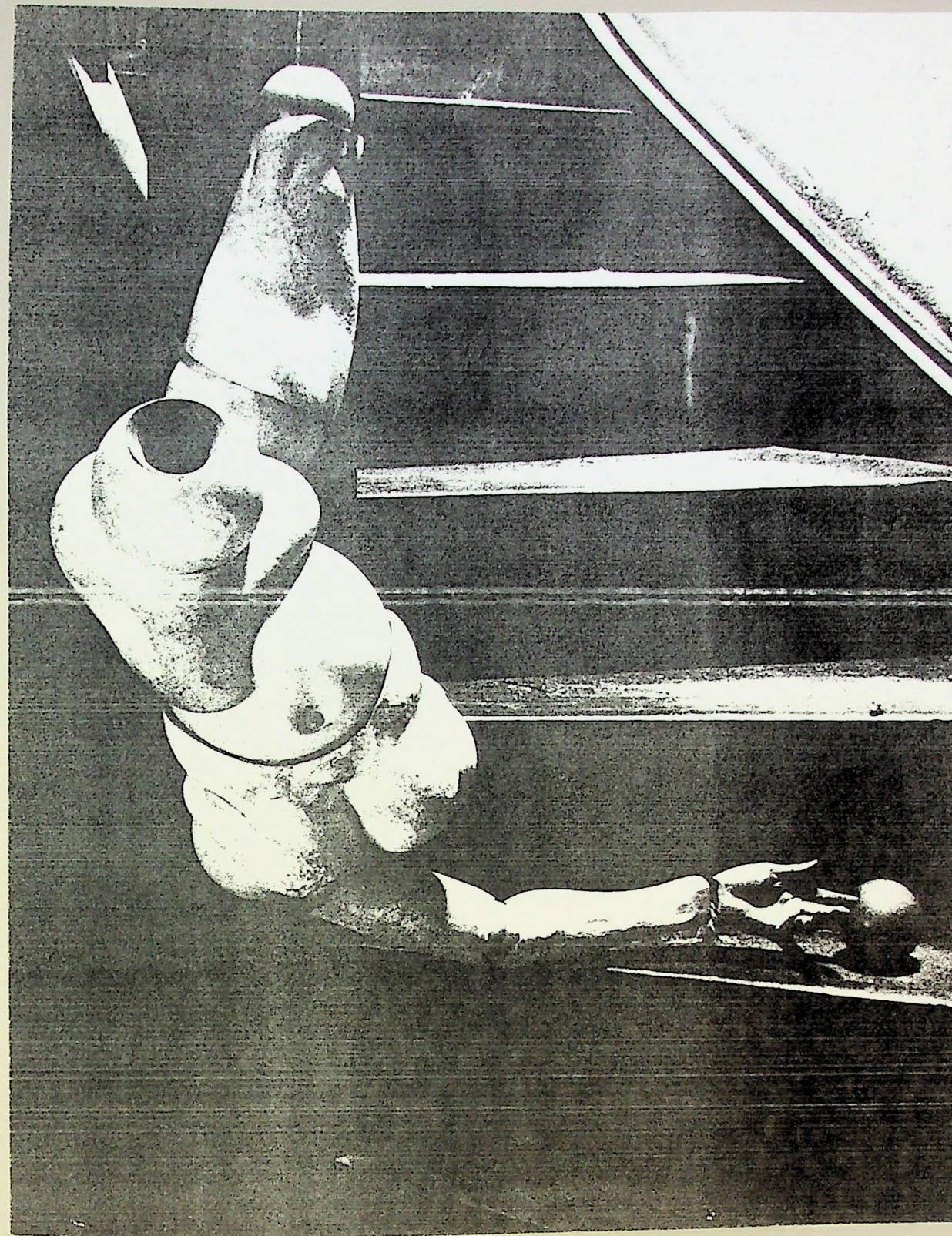


14. Hans Bellmer, Doll, 1934.



15. Hans Bellmer, Doll, 1934.





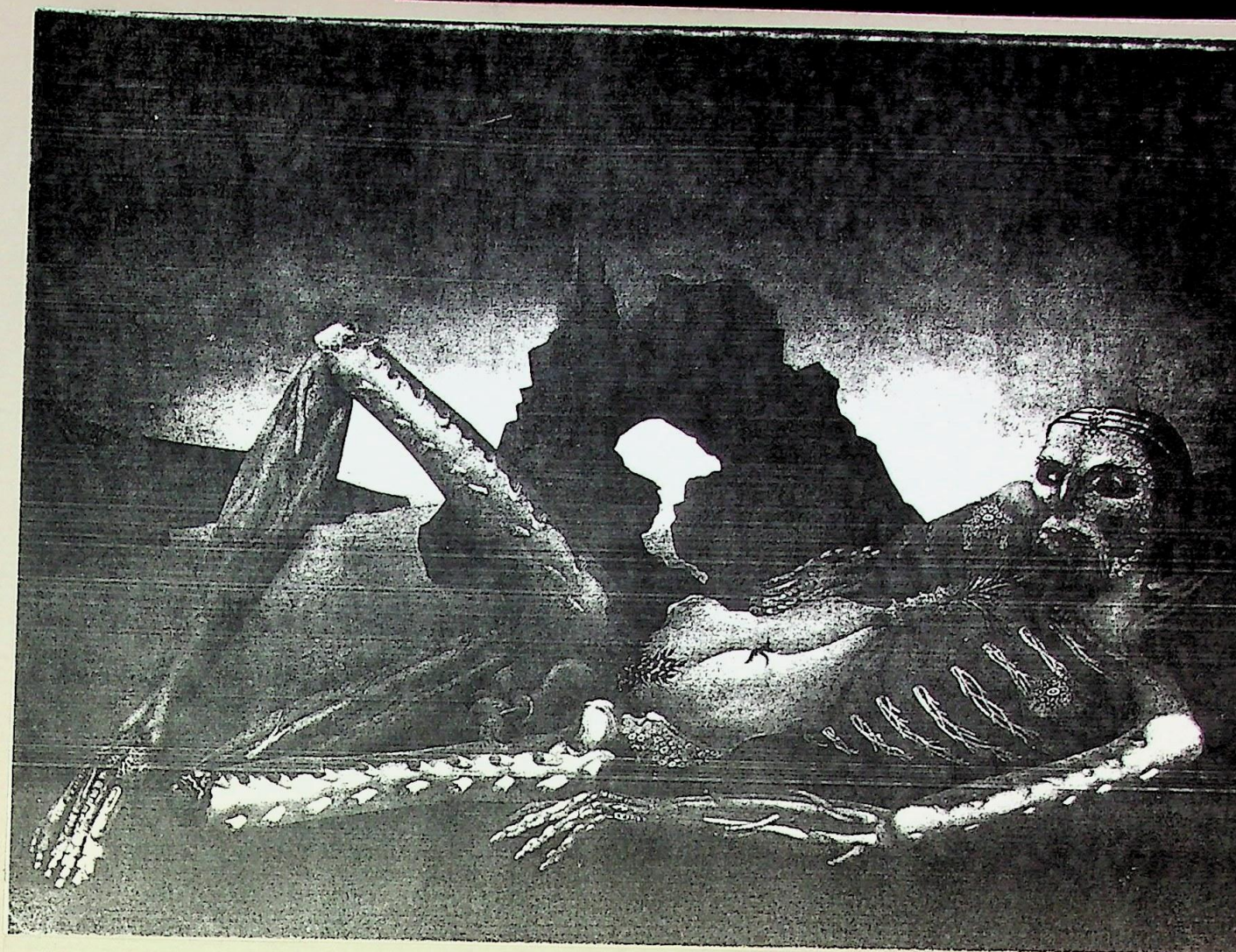
16. Hans Bellmer, Doll, 1935.



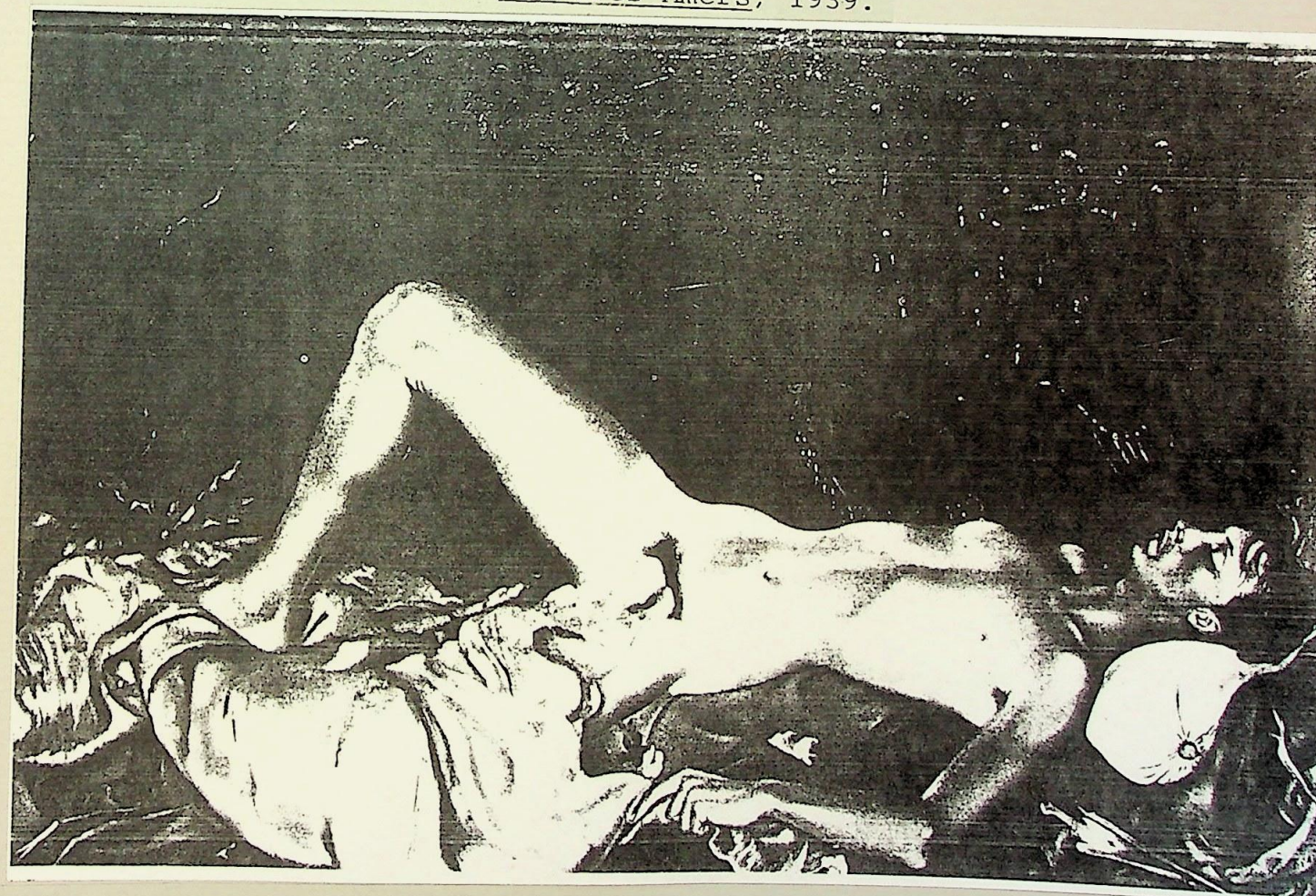


17. André Masson, Massacre, 1933.





18. Ithel Colquhoun, Gouffres Amers, 1939.



19. Leonor Fini, Chthonian Divinity Watching over the Sleep of a Young Man,



for a more liberated understanding of female sexuality in either surrealist theorising an erotic desire or Freud's writings on female sexuality.

La femme internalised played the role of the muse, externalised she became the love object and a means to the magical - "love proceeds magically".

"A charming girl is a more real magician than we think... Any spiritual contact resembles that of a magic wand".<sup>6</sup> The surrealist language of love touched both ends of the scale, reaching the sublime in the more romantic visions of Breton and Eluard and found its antithesis in the more perverse images of Dali and Bellmer.

All aspects of the anima have the same tendency as the shadow principle of the psyche. (Discussed previously in connection with 'magique circonstancielle'). They can be projected into another person and so appear as that person's qualities.

Frida Kahlo, was considered to fit completely, the surrealist ideal of woman. Kahlo was known as the dramatic wife of the famous mural painter Diego Rivera. She was considered to have that 'magical quality' and was seen as some kind of mythical creature, not of this world. Breton



met Kahlo in Mexico in 1938, where he was to deliver some lectures and to meet Trotsky. Kahlo anticipated his arrival with excitement but on their meeting: "She found his theorizing pretentious and boring; his vanity and arrogance offended her".<sup>7</sup> Breton on the other hand was captivated and wrote: "I have long admired the self-portrait by Frida Kahlo de Rivera that hangs on a wall of Trotsky's study. She had painted herself dressed in a robe of wings gilded with butterflies, and it is exactly in this guise that she draws aside the mental curtain. We are privileged to be present, as in the most glorious days of German Romanticism, at the entry of a young woman endowed with all the gifts of seduction, one accustomed to the company of men of genius".<sup>8</sup> This last phrase speaks for itself:

Kahlo considered herself a realist, and claimed to having never seen any of the work of the surrealists before she began painting. Her work is based on autobiographical detail. She defined painting as something she did for herself. "Since I came back from New York", she wrote in 1935, "I have painted about twelve paintings, all small and unimportant, with the same personal subjects that only appeal to myself and nobody else".<sup>9</sup> It was Diego she considered to be the real artist, as can be seen in her painting from 1931, Frida and Diego Rivera.

During their separation she painted The Two Frida's, 1939. Here she portrays the Frida, Diego once loved, dressed in Tehuana





20. Frida Kahlo, Frida and Diego Rivera, 1931.





21. Frida Kahlo, The Two Fridas, 1939.





22. Frida Kahlo, Tree of Hope, 1946.



skirt and blouse, and the Frida no longer loved, dressed in European Victorian dress. The present Frida, tries to stay the blood flowing from a ruptured artery, with a forceps. The other Friday holds a miniature photograph of Friday as a child. Accompanied by her vibrant past, the more fragile Friday stares tentatively outward, but still with the same sense of presence.

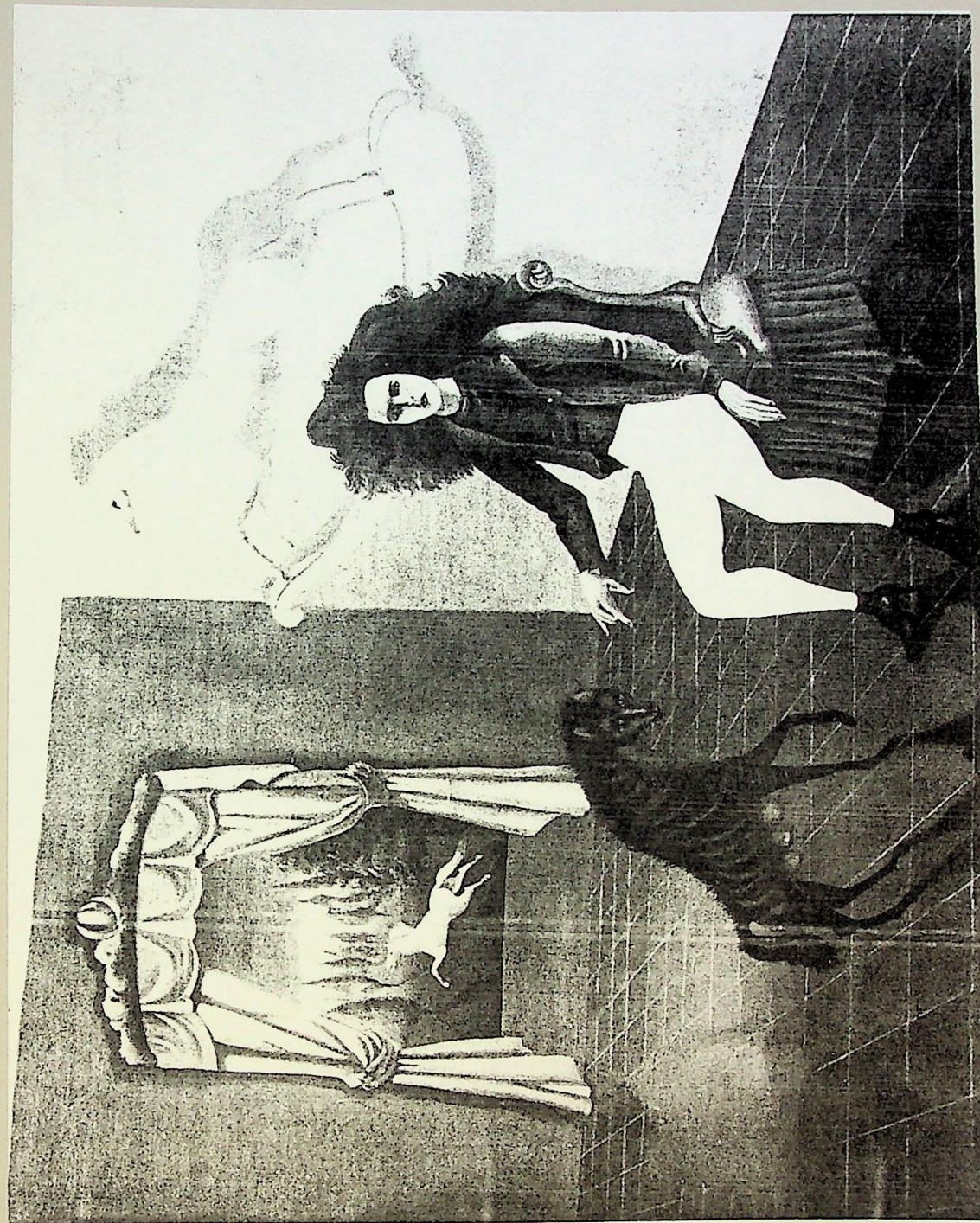
Looking at Kahlo's Tree of Hope, 1946, with regard to the combination of opposites, both day and night are separated, but affected by one another. The images from each opposite overlap. Kahlo portrays herself as both observer and observed. The wounds on her back are echoed in the ravines of the landscape.

Kahlo's first paintings were on tin which is traditional in Mexican art. Her work displays a strong sense of culture and heritage, an aspect of her work Breton failed to consider.

The image of cyclic metamorphosis is a frequent theme in the work of the women artists. There seems to be more of an acceptance of the duality of nature. The image of death is seen as being necessary to rebirth and change.

Carrington,<sup>10</sup> was interested in the alchemical transformation of matter and spirit, having read her first books on alchemy as an art student. Evidence of this interest can be found in her Self Portrait, c1938, and Portrait of Max Ernst, c 1939.





23. Leonora Carrington, Self Portrait, c1938.





24. Leonora Carrington, Portrait of Max Ernst, c1939.



The Self, often symbolised by animals represents a person's instinctive nature, and its relationship with his/her surroundings. Carrington's work contains an abundant vocabulary of magical animals, at the centre, the image of the white horse. She characterised her sensibility as caught between Catholic and Celtic. Her mythical animals come from legends based on Celtic mythology and the fairy tales and bible stories of her childhood. Her paintings rely on a magical realism, based on autobiographical detail and personal symbolism.

The majority of women artists associated with surrealism, saw themselves as functioning outside the inner circle of Breton's doctrine. Rebelling against conventional rules surrealism could at least lend support in this respect, being concerned with the emancipation of woman.

The reinstatement of the femme enfant, the femme fatale and the idealised role of the muse were of little value when seeking an artistic identity within the movement. Alienated from surrealist theorising on the subject of la femme, they turned to their own realities. Their goals were more personal. Contact with the movement seemed to have a consolidating affect on their vocabularies of personal symbolism, and heightened the psychological content of their work.

On an individual level, the work of the male surrealists



was personal, but in general the work of the women artists seems to have a stronger sense of self. Equally they were open to becoming victims of the negative side of the unconscious, which is most evident in Kay Sage's work.



FOOTNOTES: CHAPTER IV

<sup>1</sup>Robert L. Delevoy, Symbolists and Symbolism, p.14.

<sup>2</sup>Carl G. Jung, Man and his Symbols, p.177.

<sup>3</sup>BELLMER, HANS: While working as an advertising designer in Berlin, Bellmer created his Doll and sent photographs of it with a text to the review Minotaure, where they were published, (Paris, 1935). From then on he was adopted by the Surrealists. He moved to Paris in 1939.

<sup>4</sup>MASSON, ANDRE: Took part in the first surrealist exhibition (Paris, Galerie Pierre, 1925). Broke with the surrealists in 1929, but contributed to Minotaure in the 1930's. His work featured in the International Surrealist Exhibitions. In the U.S.A., during the war years he collaborated with the surrealists in exile. Moved back to France in 1945.

<sup>5</sup>Whitney Chadwick, Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement, p.87

<sup>6</sup>Ibid, p.87.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid, p.90.



## CONCLUSION

To all the scribes and artists and practitioners of magic through whom these spirits have been manifested...

NOTHING IS TRUE. EVERYTHING IS PERMITTED. William S. Burroughs.<sup>1</sup>

The surrealists seen as the "Quixotes of the modern world", were purely children of their age. Breton in an address to the students of Yale University, 1942 - Situation of Surrealism Between the Two Wars, emphasised that surrealism could only be understood historically in relation to the two wars which it bridged. This political situation, the appalling state of the arts and the progress of science into the dream world, were all contributing factors to the birth of surrealism. They wanted to do away with this false reality, and replace it with an illogical, but more truthful one. Their revolutionary aims were of the same origin as Dada, but surrealism was a more serious "call to chaos", in its organisation and leadership under Breton. They saw the advantages of the unconscious toward this new irrational existence, but along with the Freudian unconscious they became disciples of the Freudian gospel.

The fortunes of the surrealist group, depended from the beginning to the end, on the fruitful meetings of individuals, freely sharing their experiences that originated in the solitude of dreams or somnambulance. Surrealism's aims were identical to



those of Dada. It's search was more poetic, but like Dada it never realized its numerous proclamations on the importance of liberty and a new basis for life. In the cocoon of the unconscious, it bound man to dreams.

A Utopia of the nature they proposed can only exist in dreams. Without the duality of opposites, these conflicts, there would be no existence.

In the political arena the surrealists had no real voice. Although the artist is expected to further the revolution, it is the politician who eventually determines his/her success or failure.

Although la femme was placed at the centre of surrealist inquiry, surrealism merely replaced the dichotomous victorian view of woman - virgin/whore, with an equally reactionary view - la femme enfant/femme fatale, which is analogous with Freud's writings on woman in relation to man's desires. Paradoxically it was the Second World War, that did more in terms of liberating woman, offering her (through necessity) a way out of her conventional role.

The surrealists proposed to transform the world through magic. Their idea of magic was their aesthetic - 'convulsive beauty' - beauty which transforms and expands knowledge, not the knowledge of the intellect, but more in keeping with the physical



and spiritual side of nature, a beauty which would promote desire. ... "Convulsive beauty will be erotic-veiled, explosive-fixed, magic-circumstantial or will not be at all".<sup>2</sup> Such beauty will provoke contradictory reactions simultaneously, offering no resolution, will leave one in a state of suspense and excitement. Thus the surrealists transformed the world into a forest of signs, and promoted desire.

Their interest in the occult was no more than a restatement in esoteric terms of the value of automatism and the benefits of this mental magic.

... "Everything leads us to believe that there exists a certain point of the mind from which life and death, the real and the imaginary, past and future, the communicable and the incommunicable, high and low, cease to be perceived as contradictory. This is not only a view inherited from occultists; it translates an aspiration so profound that it doubtless is essentially from it that surrealism will be considered as having taken its substance".<sup>3</sup>

This demonstrates surrealism's lack of interest in the magic of the occult. With further reference to the occult, and the values of its ideology toward surrealist goals, underlines an indifferent if not negative attitude.



"For surrealism - and I think this will be its glory someday - anything will have been considered good that could reduce these oppositions which have been presented as insurmountable".<sup>4</sup>

Whether servants of the unconscious or not, the surrealists succeeded in opening the doors, and accomplished to some extent at least one of their goals - the intellectual rejuvenation of man. It has left its mark on literature, theatre, the plastic arts and has made a major contribution to cinema.

"The worst that can be said against the surrealists is that they were often naive, more naive than mischevious".<sup>5</sup>



# FOOTNOTES

- <sup>1</sup>William S. Burroughs, Cities of the Red Night, p.13.
- <sup>2</sup>Maurice Nadeau, The History of Surrealism, p.313. from Andre Breton's, L'Amour Fou, (1937).
- <sup>3</sup>Andre Breton, What is Surrealism, p.245.
- <sup>4</sup>Ibid, p.245
- <sup>5</sup>Herbert S. Gershman, The Surrealist Revolution in France, p.135.



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