THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS JOURNALS

The Avant-Garde Object: Form and Fetish between World War I and World War II

Author(s): Jack J. Spector

Source: *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, Autumn, 1986, No. 12 (Autumn, 1986), pp. 125-143

Published by: The University of Chicago Press on behalf of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/20166757

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at https://about.jstor.org/terms

Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology and *The University of Chicago Press* are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*

This content downloaded from 167.99.163.123 on Wed, 29 May 2024 14:04:00 +00:00
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

The avant-garde object

Form and fetish between World War I and World War II

JACK J. SPECTOR

Of the numerous types of art invented in the twentieth century, none has had a more significant and odd career than the "object." Although clearly dependent on the existence and nature of modern art, the object served a particular group of modernist writers and artists as a weapon. With it they fought not only the traditional art acceptable to bourgeois society but modern art itself, which they perceived as a part of the value system of that society. As we shall see, the avant-garde producers of such objects directed them against both the formal values of modernism and the commercialism that frequently accompanied the success of the gifted modernist, usually after a period of neglect.

Standard definitions of *object* can help situate our discussion with regard to art. The Oxford English Dictionary offers two definitions relevant to us: "3. Something placed before the eyes, or presented to the sight or other sense . . . 6. *Metaph.* A thing or being of which one thinks or has cognition, as correlative to the thinking or knowing *subject*; something external, or regarded as external, to the mind; the non-ego as related to, or distinguished from, the ego."[1]

Two crucial aspects of these definitions will enter our discussion: the neutral sense of something present to the eyes, and the privative sense of externality, of *not* being ego or subject. As distinct from an ordinary object, the "objet d'art," the valued product of human hand, acquires a value, as in the definition of the *Larousse du XX° Siècle*: "work of man, to whose value artistic merit contributes the most." Yet, as is well known, such products became, for the antiaesthetic mentality of some artists, not valued commodities, but weapons, as in Duchamp's "objet dard" that suggests a primitive projectile. A catalogue of antiaesthetic objects made by Futurists, Dadaists, Russian Constructivists, and Surrealists would easily demonstrate aggression against the tradition of fine art and its place in bourgeois society. Thus Konstantin Umansky, in his book *Neue Kunst in Russland 1914–1919* (Munich, 1920), praised the constructions of Tatlin in these terms: "A triumph of the intellectual and the material, the negation of the right of the spirit to isolated autonomy, a quintessence of contemporary reality, of sovereign technique, of victorious materialism—it is thus that we must define the counter-reliefs which have relegated within quotation marks all such sacrosanct words as Art, Painting, Picture."[2]

Despite their three-dimensionality and the canny adoption sometimes of modernist techniques by their makers, most avant-garde objects intentionally fail to conform to the canons of aesthetic quality that have continued in modern French sculpture. Consequently they pose embarrassing problems for museums of modern art—the poor relations of the attractive and skillful works displayed. These problems manifest themselves also in the incongruousness of these objects within histories of modern sculpture, which invariably falter when the authors try to include the politically charged movements between post-Cubism and the end of the 1930s.

To make this point clearer, I shall present the pertinent material from several typical histories of modern sculpture. The field of formalist history was evidently dominated by the writings of the Swiss architect-painter Le Corbusier, who collaborated with the academic Cubist Amédée Ozenfant to write *Après le Cubisme*,[3] which derived basic ideas from

I wish to thank Francesco Pellizzi for his careful and constructive reading of an early draft of this paper, which I wrote under the ideal conditions provided by the Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts (National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.), as an offshoot of my project on "Hegel, Trotsky and Freud as Sources for the Early Surrealism of Breton (1924/32)." At the center I profited above all from discussions with other members, especially George Kubler.

1. French definitions correspond to the English; e.g., see the standard Littré, *Dictionnaire de la Langue Française* III, Paris, 1878, "Object. 3°. Term in philosophy. Everything outside the mind, as opposed to subject, which betokens what is within the mind. . . . 4°. Thing, in an indefinite sense. . . . 5°. Figuratively. Everything that is presented to the mind, that occupies it. . . . The object moves, rouses energy, that is, the presence of the object excites desire."

2. See Herta Wescher, *Collage*, New York, n.d., pp. 100–101.

3. Paris, 1918; Le Corbusier signed the work with his real name, Jeanneret-Gris.

This content downloaded from
167.99.163.123 on Wed, 29 May 2024 14:04:00 +00:00
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Apollinaire.[4] *Après le Cubisme* emphasized the "necessity for the predominance of plastic art over representational art (*descriptif*)," and proposed a return to the "elements of art . . : pure form, pure color. . . ." The Purists, while admiring the revolutionary importance of the machine, in good beaux-arts style emphasized "un art conscient" and the placing of the human figure at its center. These ideas anticipate and perhaps affected the formal emphasis of the highly influential periodical *Cahiers d'Art*, which, while reporting on and even including sympathetic articles on Surrealism, essentially resisted whatever failed to measure up to the canons of plastic art in the line of Cézanne and Cubism.[5] In one of his articles for the *Cahiers* on recent painting, E. Tériade deplored the literary emphasis of the Surrealists, whose anti-Cubist attitude annoyed him. He found in them "not a trace of that sculptural ability" (*faculté sculpturale*) or of "réalisation plastique."[6] And the editor Christian Zervos, devoted both to Cézanne and Picasso (above all his Cubism), called for young artists to maintain "objectivity in the interpretation of nature":

> Our generation owes to Cézanne the knowledge that, contrary to the assertion of all the academics, there are no fixed forms in nature, there are only adaptable (*malléables*) elements that the artist's sensibility continually transposes. . . . By rejecting the anecdote, the so-called poetic and expressive or psychological effect, Cézanne has led us to the healthier (*plus saine*) notion of the true dignity of the object. For it is in and through the object that the artist comes to know himself and his art."[7]

Most histories of modern sculpture retain this framework in which the objects of the avant-garde exist on the margin of the modernist beauties of form and color; but the polemical tone of rejection frankly expressed by the *Cahiers d'Art* editors is usually replaced by benign platitudes, in an effort to write a smooth, comfortable narrative. One of the *doyennes* of such histories, Carola Giedion-Welcker, published the first edition of her *Contemporary Sculpture* in Zurich in 1937.[8] Her views, and her choices of modern sculptors, belong among those typical of modernists in the interwar period of the thirties. She notes that "to Cubism we owe the introduction of the 'object.'. . . F. Léger says: 'C'est le Cubisme qui a imposé l'objet au monde. La grande formule, c'est l'objet'—that is to say, the complete elimination of any specifically human content." She complements her superficial observations —Dada represents the metaphysics of banality; Surrealism dissolved the wall between inner and outer life; "modern plastic art" and physics (space, time, and motion) are parallel; "modern and primitive art" have a "remarkable similarity"—with luscious photographs of the sculptures that recall contemporary fashion magazine illustrations.

In 1954, the protean critic and philosopher of modernism Herbert Read published his 1951 lectures as *The Art of Sculpture*. Having lost what poetry he possessed when he passed his earlier Surrealist phase through an Existentialist filter of anxious meditation, and having relinquished the political engagement of his youth in his successful maturity, the old critic here demonstrated a conservative indifference to the avant-garde challenge to art. His most important example of twentieth-century sculpture—Moore's work—served comfortably to bridge the gap between Surrealist antiart and modernist sculpture assimilable to the tradition of the masterpieces or "touchstones" with which he concludes his book. He epitomizes his view of sculpture by quoting the words of Simone Weil: "The beautiful is that which we can contemplate. A statue, a picture which we can gaze at for hours."[9] Alternatives

4. See G. Apollinaire, "The Cubist Painters," 1913, in H. Chipp, *Theories of Modern Art*, Berkeley, 1968, pp. 221–222, for the assertions that "the subject has little or no importance any more" and that the aim of the new painters is "to produce pure painting": "theirs is an entirely new plastic art."

5. André Breton, in *Les Pas perdus* (1924), expressed himself clearly with regard to Cézanne: "dont . . . je me moque absolument, etc." *Cahiers d'Art* had an immense importance for the New York critics and historians of modernism; Barr's exhibitions at the NYMOMA in 1936, and the "International Style" formalism he concocted with his Harvard friends H. R. Hitchcock and Philip Johnson, seem especially indebted to the periodical. We may suppose the well-known formalist writings of Clive Bell and Roger Fry also contributed to their ideas. Apparently formalist ideas significantly affected the postradical phases of New York critics like Greenberg, Rosenberg, and Schapiro. For other aspects see Helen Searing, "International Style: The Crimson Connection," *Progressive Architecture*, February 1982, pp. 85–91, and in the same issue, pp. 92–104, R. G. Wilson, "International Style: the MOMA exhibition," Barr's exhibitions impressed sympathetic and adverse critics alike, and determined the essential intellectual content of many later exhibitions at the MOMA.

6. See *Cahiers d'Art* 5, 1930, no. 2, for E. Tériade, "Documentaire sur la jeune peinture. IV. La réaction littéraire," especially p. 74.

7. Christian Zervos, "Les Problèmes de la jeune peinture. II. Le retour au sujet est-il probable?," *Cahiers d'Art* 6, 1931, no. 4, p. 208.

8. I refer here to the English edition published in New York, 1960.

9. Herbert Read, *The Art of Sculpture*, 1954, p. 100.

This content downloaded from
167.99.163.123 on Wed, 29 May 2024 14:04:00 +00:00
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

to plasticity such as the admired Gabo's light structures Read considered at best a poetry of light that was inevitably dehumanized (in Ortega y Gasset's sense).

Albert E. Elsen's book *Origins of Modern Sculpture: Pioneers and Premises* reduces the subject to convenient art-historical categories like "the nude," "la vie moderne," and "the portrait," although he does include a section "Objects as Subjects."[10] Instead of genuine interest in the avant-garde and the politics of sculpture, he writes of the "sculptural revolution" and expresses the notion that "often masterpieces are not perfect" (p. x). This reputable Rodin specialist looks at changes of medium and conception and makes formal comparisons with little concern for political significance; thus he ignores the ideological motivation for Tatlin's shift from painting to object-making, attributing it to "the desire to convey reality" (p. 58); and when he finally discusses "revolution," he means "the revolution in form" (p. 67).[11]

Jack Burnham, in his *Beyond Modern Sculpture: The Effects of Science and Technology on the Sculpture of This Century*, attempted to advance the criticism of modern sculpture from a formal and psychological emphasis to a concern for materials and for the relation of sculpture to evolving technology. This concern led him to divide his book into two sections, one concerned with the "older" tradition of "Sculpture as Object"—issues of the base, biomorphism, formalism, and phenomenology; and the other with "Sculpture as System"—automata, kineticism, light (sound sculpture had not yet evolved and was not mentioned)—grounded in field structuring relationships rather than detached elements.[12] Burnham dwells on the importance of time and movement as evolving from a long tradition that sought "to break down the psychic and physical barriers between art and living reality."[13]

Burnham finds that sculpture as plastic object probably must remain tied to its anthropomorphism; but he sees a future for "sculpture" beyond this anthropomorphic plasticity, in a superior "biotechnology": "Sculpture seeks its own obliteration by moving toward integration with the intelligent life forms it has always imitated" (*Beyond Modern Sculpture*, pp. 332, 333). In his conclusion, Burnham predicts that "the vogue for inert imagery may continue as an expression of individualism or as therapeutic release. Nevertheless, little meaningful art can be created without a plenum of social need, and few artists work in complete isolation" (p. 376). As a potential analysis of this vogue, Burnham had introduced earlier in the book the seminally important Marxian theme of reification; but he failed to develop it, perhaps because he didn't fully understand it:

> For Marx "thingification" was a term which described how certain societies transformed all ideas into objects. By this means, man himself became an exchangeable object, a commodity. This process typified for Marx the way in which man accomplished his own alienation from self. . . . Thus the process of "thingification" which has given birth to modern sculpture is the constant resynchronization of artistic sensibility with a disclosed form-world of scientific theory.[14]
>
> *(P. 6)*

Rosalind E. Krauss's *Passages in Modern Sculpture* offers a valuable riposte to Burnham's presentation of, as she calls it, "sculpture made in the service of a mechanistic view of the world. But that view . . . is precisely what much of contemporary sculpture (and art in general) wishes to overturn" (p. 212).[15] Taking up the question of time, which Burnham had limited to technological vehicles, she confronts Michael Fried's opposition of art and a theatrical, temporal "objecthood." She observes that "it was the very

10. See Albert E. Elsen, *Origins of Modern Sculpture: Pioneers and Promises*, New York, 1974. On pp. 52–58 he discusses the objects of Picasso and Duchamp.

11. Elsen's later book, *Modern European Sculpture, 1918/45*, New York, 1979, although still including Constructivism in the context of an apolitical view of the avant-garde, shows greater awareness in its exclusion of "Surrealist objects." Here he stands in agreement with Rubin—and of course Sidney Geist, to whom he dedicates the book—that the Surrealists were "not engaged in an 'essentially sculptural activity' " (p. 12).

12. Cf. Burnham, *Beyond Modern Sculpture: The Effects of Science and Technology on the Sculpture of This Century*, New York, 1968, p. 262. For an application of this division, see Ruth Butler's chapter on twentieth-century sculpture, "Object and Kinetic Configuration," in her *Western Sculpture: Definitions of Man*, New York, 1975.

13. Important for him in this context are Gabo's Realist Manifesto and George Rickey's essay "The Morphology of Movement" in G. Kepes, ed., *Structure in Art and Science*, 1965. See Burnham, p. 267. Burnham does not evidence awareness of the avant-garde's intentions likewise to dissolve such barriers for different reasons from those still tied to Western hedonism and the consumer needs created within the bourgeois market economy.

14. Unfortunately, in his discussion of *Verdinglichung*, Burnham proves unaware of the place of the commodity fetish in the economic system of capitalist society as understood by Marx.

15. Rosalind E. Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, New York, 1977.

This content downloaded from
167.99.163.123 on Wed, 29 May 2024 14:04:00 +00:00
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

dependency of theater on a variable situation that was able to put pressure on and disrupt the conventions of classicism lodged so deeply within their twentieth century variants, in futurism, constructivism, and their technological extensions" (p. 240). Theater for Krauss is devoid of political cogency—she cites Artaud, but not Brecht! She admires Rodin—justifiably or not—for eliminating narrative time and Duchamp for his production of a depersonalized art impervious to psychological penetration. Her whole argument leads to a justification of Minimalism, which "began with a procedure for declaring the externality of meaning" (p. 66). She finds a parallel between the art of Rodin and Husserl's phenomenological view of the self as private and inaccessible (apolitical), and insists on the significance of the surface in Picasso's reliefs.[16] Her reliance on the phenomenology of surface while excluding political analysis has, in my opinion, harmed her argument; nowhere is its polemical vulnerability more evident than in her discussion of Eisenstein's film *October* (the name, incidentally, chosen for the periodical she edits). Although Krauss seems to agree with Eisenstein's assertion of the "ideological role of all art" (p. 211), she uncritically notes (p. 9): "for Eisenstein [rationalism] was identified with a political philosophy opposed to change and intent on using 'things as they are' to legitimize oppression. When Kerensky enters the throne room, he does so to restore capital punishment to the laws of Russia." This appreciative quotation misses the fact that Lenin supported Kerensky on the death penalty and persuaded the Bolsheviks to go along with it. Trotsky related this fact in his *Lenin* of 1925, a book that was refused publication in the Soviet Union.[17]

Evidently one cannot understand Eisenstein's intentions strictly from a formalist / structuralist / poststructuralist perspective: one must take into account the compromises, defiances, and gestures of dependence or independence made in a regime that, by 1927, was ever more tightly in the grip of a Stalinist bureaucracy dedicated to promulgating its ideology in film even more than in the other arts.

The avant-garde object makes far more sense considered in the light of ideology and radical politics rather than as an artwork evaluated in terms of the aesthetic criteria of modernism. Before developing this side of the argument, we should look briefly at the origin and development of the object. Originally the work of art as an autonomous object, rather than as an imitation or decoration, appeared in the *tableaux-objets* made by Picasso and Braque around 1911, essentially using their new technique of collage. Braque usually stayed fairly close to the flat relief surface, as in the *papiers collés*, whereas Picasso, ever the restless explorer, put together materials often of a rather incongruous nature and worked in three dimensions. While Braque and a host of other major and minor artists turned out ingenious Cubist inventions that perplexed but eventually charmed the educated middle classes, the Futurists and, after the Revolution of 1917, the Russian Constructivists collaged objects not only as an affront to the taste for the "masters," but against modernist formalism. Evidently the object had emerged from the alembic of Picasso's unique inventiveness into the universe of political gesture and discourse.

With Dadaism the sociopolitical usefulness of the object reached its climax during and after 1916, while a repugnant war lay waste to Europe in the name of patriotism and civilization. Disgust and terror induced a desire to get rid of hypocritical and bankrupt bourgeois society engaged in the destruction of itself on an international scale.[18] The Zurich Dadaist Marcel Janco, perhaps also inspired by the Futurist passion for purging the passé, succinctly stated that desire: "In order to make a new beginning, first everything had to be destroyed, most of all the picture in its gold frame, the 'black sheep' always ready for any prostitution, object of retail trade."[19] Like the other Dada artists, Francis Picabia relied on Cubist collage for his technique; but the witty and literate artist went much further and, like the subtly ironic Duchamp, insinuated verbal associations, as in puzzles, or even like Chinese

16. See ibid., p. 28. Ortega y Gasset in 1924, Guy Habasque in 1949, and Edward Fry in 1966 applied Husserl's phenomenology to the criticism of Cubism. None of these works is mentioned by Krauss.

17. For the ideological tamperings with *October*, see Jay Leyda, ed., *Battleship Potemkin, October . . .* , London, 1974, p. 85; and Norman Swallow, *Eisenstein, A Documentary Portrait*, London, 1976, pp. 56–57: ". . . the complete film (*October*) was released to the general public in March 1928—though the word 'complete' is inaccurate, as numerous changes had to be made for political reasons, and Grigori Alexandrov has stated that Stalin himself visited the cutting-room on at least one occasion to order the removal of sequences that he felt were sympathetic to Trotsky, and another which showed Lenin in 'an unsatisfactory light.' "

18. For a recent discussion with references to psychoanalysis of the disgusting and ugly as "anti-aesthetic," see Anna Homberg, "Fenomenologia dello schifo," *Rivista di Psicologia dell'Arte* I, no. 1, December 1979, pp. 33–43.

19. See Herta Wescher, *Collage*, New York, 1971, p. 126.

This content downloaded from
167.99.163.123 on Wed, 29 May 2024 14:04:00 +00:00
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

ideographs.[20] The intention of adding something beyond its material presence to the object occurred independently of the Cubist *tableaux-objets* both in the occult infusions of Kandinsky and in the post-Cubist paintings of Mondrian, with their own theosophical presuppositions.[21]

In its full flowering in Zurich and Paris, Dadaism devised innumerable varieties of "object," ranging from collages and assemblages to masked or costumed performers simulating objects. Invariably, one senses in these objects an aggressive polemical intention allied to the stream of manifestos issued by the group (who in this respect are the good students of the Futurists); but the noisy invectives contradicted one another, except for their consistently "scandalous" content, aimed against complacent bourgeois institutions.

The Surrealists, whose viewpoint matured during the years in which Dadaism prevailed, and in a productive symbiosis with the Dadaist movement, adopted from the first (1920–1924) the Dada (and, of course, Futurist) habit of issuing manifestos; but as they progressively evinced a more coherent and positive purpose than the Dadaists, they first rivaled, then helped to destroy Dadaism. A serious problem for Surrealism was the unresolved question of whether there could be a Surrealist visual art to correspond to its verbal (not to say literary) one. Breton (along with Aragon and Soupault, who with him inaugurated Surrealism), a writer, naturally looked for an art that could be "read," that would have a content beyond its visual form. Certainly the examples of Futurism and Dadaism were at hand — and claims would soon be made by artists in both groups that Surrealist ideas in general were patterned on theirs — but the centrality of the dream and its psychoanalytic interpretation, as well as the allied technique of automatism (first applied by the poets Breton and Soupault in *Les Champs magnétiques* in 1921), distinguished the Surrealists. Moreover, as has been well pointed out, the Surrealist attitude to the manufactured object differed significantly from the characteristically Dadaist position of Duchamp: "Duchamp's Readymade does not provoke a Crisis of the Object but a Crisis of Art."[22]

Certain works of Picasso, De Chirico, Masson, Tanguy, Miro, and others seemed to correspond to one or the other criterion of dream or automatism. Nevertheless, the political content of Surrealist painting fell far short of the clearly stated tracts and manifestos issued by the writers at different junctures and from the very beginning. Surrealist art should, according to Breton, amount to a "window" (what we see through it is more important than the windowpane or the frame), and "the work of art will refer to a *purely interior model* or will not be."[23] The crucial issue of what a Surrealist "sculpture" would look like seemed on the way to solution in the wake of Duchamp's readymades of the previous decade, first through the aggressively sexual "symbolically functioning" objects of Giacometti admired by Breton, who praised his "astonishing constructions starting in 1930 with the 'suspended ball' impossibly balanced over an inclined crescent,"[24] through Arp's "disagreeable objects" of 1930, and then through a variety of "dream objects" produced by all the Surrealists, and informed at once by Breton's use of the concept of "l'hasard objectif" and of Dalí's paranoia-criticism. All these works proffer more than surface significations, formal satisfactions, or emotional charge and discharge; indeed, one detects a more or less explicit political intention in them.

The political phase of the avant-garde from World War I to the late 1920s has been well characterized by Bürger:

> In summary, we note that the historical avant-garde movements negate those determinations that are essential in autonomous art: the disjunction of art and the praxis of life, individual production, and individual reception as distinct from the former. The avant-garde intends the abolition of autonomous art by which it means that art is to be integrated into the praxis of life.[25]

20. See Rose-Carol Washton Long, *Kandinsky: The Development of an Abstract Style*, Oxford, 1980, pp. 145–146. For Picabia, whose protean relation to Breton and Surrealism still needs much work, see William A. Camfield, *Francis Picabia: His Art, Life and Times*, Princeton, N.J., 1979.

21. See the article by Sixten Ringbom, "Art in the 'Epoch of the Great Spiritual'. Occult Elements in the Early Theory of Abstract Painting," in *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* XXIX, 1966, pp. 386–418.

22. Haim Finkelstein, *Surrealism and the Crisis of the Object*, Ann Arbor, Mich., 1979, pp. 60–61. We must observe that the individualistic and isolated behavior of the Dadaists — the aloof Duchamp, the aesthetically concentrated Schwitters, the quasi-fascist Picabia — sets them apart from the Surrealists, essentially collectivist and cooperative despite their political schisms.

23. Breton, *Le Surréalisme et la Peinture*, Paris, 1945, p. 21.

24. Breton, *Entretiens*, Gallimard edition, 1969, p. 163.

25. See Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Minneapolis, 1984, pp. 53–54. Cf. Spector, review of *Theory in Art Criticism*, vol. 2, no. 1, pp. 70ff. As will appear presently, Bürger's view of the avant-garde's aim of destroying the autonomy of art applies to the first phase of Surrealism, but not to the 1930s, when a reversion to older

This content downloaded from
167.99.163.123 on Wed, 29 May 2024 14:04:00 +00:00
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

A crucial text for understanding the place of the object in the Surrealist avant-garde is Breton's "Introduction au discours sur le peu de réalité":[26]

> Human fetishism, which has a need to try on the white helmet, to caress the fur bonnet, listens with a quite different attitude to the account of our adventures. It is absolutely necessary to it to believe that *it has arrived*. In response to this desire for eternal verification, I recently proposed the production, to the extent possible, of certain of those objects which one approaches only in dream, and which appear as lacking in utility as in agreeableness. Thus, at night not so long ago, while sleeping, in an open air market which was held near Saint-Malo, I got hold of a rather curious book. The back of this book consisted of a gnome made of wood with a white beard cut in the Assyrian fashion that came down to my feet. . . . I would like to put into circulation such objects, whose fate seems to me highly problematic and disturbing. . . . / Who knows whether I might possibly contribute thereby to ruin those concrete trophies (*trophées concrets*) that are so detestable, and to put into the greatest discredit "reasonable" things?

And a bit later he demands: "Are poetic creations already called on to assume a tangible character, to displace so curiously the limits of so-called reality?"

Breton's proposal to make and circulate "dream objects" in order to undermine the complacent security of the bourgeois mind does not yet present a specific political program much beyond the irritations of the Dadaists; but it anticipates the Surrealists' assault on the stability of the middle class from the point of view of radicals sympathetic to the Russian Revolution, and it clearly displays their intention to undermine the stable distinction between object and subject that—as we saw at the beginning—belongs to the standard definition of the object, by placing it somewhere between reality and imagination.[27] *La Révolution Surréaliste* in its early issues contains articles bearing on Breton's ideas: Aragon attacked the utility and commercialization of decorative art and of all "commodités quotidiennes"; Breton asserted the aim of Surrealism to be liberty, which he found incompatible with bourgeois or proletarian work and its products; Leiris created a *Glossaire* in which he freed words from their usual contexts, rather like the objects proposed by Breton.[28] It is worthwhile contrasting here the Surrealist attitude to the object with that of Léger, who precisely at this time was expanding his Cubism in the direction of a new form of realism. In his essay of 1924 on "The Aesthetic of the Machine," Léger reverses the aim of the Surrealists in his wish to discover plastic and geometric values in all things, however trivial, natural or machine-made.[29] Inspired, like the Surrealists, by the cinema, Léger found in the close-up and in the enlargement of details not the Surrealist potential for fetishistic and sadistic literary and visual content, but pure plasticity. In an essay of 1926 he wrote:

> The technique emphasized is to isolate the object or the fragment of an object and to present it on the screen in close-ups of the largest possible scale. Enormous enlargement of an object or a fragment gives it a personality it never had before and in this way it can become a vehicle of an entirely new lyric and plastic power. / I maintain that before the invention of the moving-picture no one knew the possibilities latent in a foot—a hand—a hat.[30]

From 1925 on, a series of political events and the evolution of the Russian Revolution contributed to a deepening and broadening of the political awareness and intent of Breton and the Surrealists. The Algerian crisis of 1925, Breton's appreciative review of Trotsky's *Lenin* in 1925 in *La Révolution Surréaliste*, and the intensifying relations with the French Communists associated with *l'Humanité*, *Clarté*, and *Philosophies*

---

modernist ideas occurs. The 1930s phase is better summed up by Renato Poggioli's book of the same title, 1968, which uncritically adopts Breton's later formulations. Bürger does not note this limitation of Poggioli.

26. 1924. In *Point du jour*, Paris, 1970, p. 24.

27. This effort at ambiguous location of the object is referred to by Breton in 1933, in his article on von Arnim. See *Point du jour*, Paris, 1970, pp. 128–129.

28. See the following in *La Révolution Surréaliste*: Aragon, "Au bout du quai, les Arts Décoratifs," December 1, 1924; Breton, "La dernière Grève," January 15, 1925; Leiris, "Glossaire: J'y serre mes gloses," April 15, 1928.

29. See H. Chipp, *Theories of Modern Art*, Berkeley, 1968, p. 277.

30. Ibid., p. 279. Léger illustrates these ideas in his film *Ballet Mécanique* of 1923–1924, passages of which actually come close to Dada/Surrealist cinema. And note that Léger said of this film: "Fragments of objects were also useful; by isolating a thing you give it personality. . . . A herd of sheep walking, filmed from above, shown straight on the screen, is like an unknown sea that disorients the spectator. / That is objectivity." Peter de Francia, *Fernand Léger*, New Haven, 1983, p. 114, denies Léger's relation to Surrealism in 1930, despite his taking common objects out of conventional contexts and the emphasis on illogicality: "But the use Léger made of this device differs completely from that adopted by Surrealist painters like Dalí or Tanguy. This is due primarily to the fact that incongruity or illogicality in Léger's work is never intended as a *violation* of the subconscious. There is no assault on the memory of the spectator."

This content downloaded from 167.99.163.123 on Wed, 29 May 2024 14:04:00 +00:00
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

transformed the Surrealist attitude toward the object. Concurrently with their increasingly political expression of disaffection with bourgeois society and its aesthetic values, Breton and his colleagues debated the possibility of expanding the domain of Surrealist productions to include painting as a visual art based on the dream of automatism. In a series of essays written after 1925 (1928), Breton made somewhat confusing efforts to balance the various criteria of Surrealism, revolution, and art: "The revolutionary significance of a work, or quite simply its significance, should never be subordinated to the choice of elements that the work brings into play. Whence the difficulty in setting up a rigorous and objective scale of plastic values at a time when a radical overhaul of all values is about to be undertaken."[31] Breton's thought, moving in different directions as he seeks to define a collectivity where art and imagination could move freely, turns to prehistory (cave painting) and to universal memory. He criticizes the commercialization of art, deploring that the person who "first enclosed a landscape or a human figure within the boundaries of a canvas, had the idea of saying 'This is mine' (meaning also 'I did this')" (p. 20).[32] Breton's talk of caves and shadows and recognition—"To see, hear means nothing. To recognize . . . means everything" (p. 43), and of the nonreality of painting (p. 28), point beyond his references to neo-Kantianism, toward Plato. But some statements go directly toward fetishism; he speaks of plunging "into that strange adventure in bewitchment and exorcism which still commands the allegiance of most of us" (p. 22).

The Surrealists constantly defended the libertarian function of their unsettling productions; but the tension between free and daring thought inspired by the Russian Revolution and the prosaic realities generated by the Soviet Union's need to survive gradually transformed the political overtones of Surrealist productions. Caught between the repellent alternatives of the bombastic propaganda of bureaucratic collectivism (with its varied expressions in Russia, Germany, and Italy), a prelude to Socialist Realism, and the bourgeois appetite for novelty and titillation, the Surrealists invested their efforts in the invention of useless, confusing, and scandalous objects. The position of the *Discours* toward the object is reaffirmed in the *Second Manifesto* of 1929, at least with reference to words: "Nothing, in fact, can any longer prevent this country from being largely conquered. The hordes of words which, whatever one may say, Dada and Surrealism set about to let loose as though opening a Pandora's box, are not of a kind to withdraw again for no good purpose."[33] Breton also felt compelled to defend Surrealism against the specious value of an "authentic" proletarian art: "I do not believe in the present possibility of an art or literature which expresses the aspirations of the working class" (p. 155).

Breton, who propounded the idea of a coherent Surrealism in collaboration with Communism, reined in the centrifugal impulses of eccentric individualists and repelled those who like Naville advocated complete submergence in the Party (albeit the Trotskyist Opposition). To ensure the unclouded clarity of his aims, in 1929 Breton proclaimed the purge of dissidents in his *Second Manifesto*—in vituperation at least parallel to the early purges of Stalin, sinister portent of the bloody trials to come. Perhaps as a result of these tensions—to which must be added heightened antagonism to the Stalinist regime derived from sympathy with the exiled Trotsky (especially on Breton's part), the Surrealist object became more and more centered on an upward evasion, an ideal of love or erotic passion valued as both attractive in itself and inaccessible to the despised, prosaic bourgeois.

A different concept of the object emerged among some of the purged Surrealists who gathered about Georges Bataille. A powerful figure, Bataille maintained his independence from the beginning, while sharing many of Breton's ideas and interests. To Breton's hysterical yet chivalric love, Bataille opposed an earthy materialism that featured a sadistic and bestial sexuality, and an exploration of psychoanalysis that made free use of the unconscious with little concern for the sublimations that still preoccupied the Surrealist poets.[34] Bataille seems to have viewed Breton's

31. *Surrealism and Painting*, New York, 1972, p. 8.

32. Duchamp anticipated Breton's feelings about the possessive aspect of bourgeois creativity.

33. See Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, Ann Arbor, Mich., 1969, p. 163, n.: ". . . the strange symbolic life which objects, the most commonplace as well as the most clearly defined, have only in dreams. . . ." For a concise history of the Surrealist object—Duchamp's readymade of 1916, Breton's *objet insolite* of the *Discours* of 1923, Giacometti's constructions of 1930, Dalí's symbolically functioning objects, and his own *poèmes-objets*—see Breton's *Entretiens, 1913–52*, Paris, 1969, pp. 163–164.

34. See M. Perniola, *Studi sul Surrealismo*, Rome, 1977, p. 33, who observes that Breton, in criticizing Bataille, considers "purity and integrity as essential conditions of Surrealist experience." Perniola correctly characterizes Bataille's view of Breton's position as

This content downloaded from
167.99.163.123 on Wed, 29 May 2024 14:04:00 +00:00
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

materialism as an inverted Platonism—to use the phrase of Rickert, cited by Lukacs.[35]

An excellent exposition of the Surrealist object from the point of view of Bataille's friend Michel Leiris is offered by William Pietz: "In modernist art, the surrealistic object was often constructed to be a material thing that resonated throughout all the registers (ethnographic, Marxist, psychoanalytic, and modernist) of fetish discourse by appearing as a perversely anthropomorphized or sexualized thing."[36] Pietz finds that Leiris's article on the sculpture of Giacometti (published in Bataille's periodical *Documents* I, no. 4, 1929) defines the "true fetishism" relevant to modernism. Pietz continues:

> The "true fetishism which remains at the base of our human existence" is here called "a love—truly *amoureux* (infatuated)—of ourselves, projected from inside to outside and clothed in a solid carapace which imprisons it within the limits of a precise thing and situates it, like a piece of furniture (*meuble*, a movable property) which we can use in that strange, vast room called space." The fetish is, then, first of all, something intensely personal, whose truth is experienced as a substantial movement from "inside" the self . . . into the self-limited morphology of a material object situated in space "outside". Works of art are true fetishes only if they are material objects at least as intensely personal as the water of tears.
>
> *(Pp. 11–12)*

Leiris's fetish object constitutes a psychic excretion that suggests to me either the pathetic metaphysics of Kafka's story about the metamorphosis of skin into cuticula or the defensive category of armoring in Wilhelm Reich's psychoanalysis of neurotic character, but without Reich's interest in sexual-political implications. Leiris speaks of "crises" at the origin of the fetish (tears), but one senses the truncated nature of the experience, which appears to Leiris himself both gratuitous and futile, one which in fact muffles any public communication or private integrating insight; indeed Leiris's "crisis" seems more like a melancholy Joycean epiphany than an illuminating moment of Proustian memory or the revelation of a psychoanalytically interpreted trauma of infancy. Leiris's fetishes and crises of 1929 resemble his earlier *Glossaire* words created under Breton's aegis, those troubling orphans without etymological parentage; but they are no longer meant to descend upon the marketplace in order to disturb the routine of society.

With Breton, things stand at this time differently. Aragon and he are intent, after 1925, on aligning their activities with the Revolution, and finding alternatives to humdrum work in a capitalist society that prevented the proletariat of mind as well as arm from sharing with the whole society an enjoyment in producing something of value to all. Nothing seems closer to their attitude on the power of words to affect society than the *Cratylus*, the dialogue in which Plato articulated his conception of work and tools.[37] Socrates asserts that "to speak is an act"; in fact, words might be considered universal tools, naming and designating things by gesture. Socrates' indexical creation bears on Duchamp's "finding" of objects and Magritte's naming/misnaming/unnaming of them ("Ceci est / n'est pas un . . .") and on the "first encounter theory of the fetish."[38] The Surrealist procedure of naming objects, of realizing dream images, of assembling incongruous symbolically functioning objects, all seem to me to correspond to the intention to undermine the status of the bourgeois commodity object. This results in a disturbance of the commodity-fetish character of the artwork, which loses its autonomy as a polished, attractive, and useful end product.

It has been well observed that the distance between the object and its contemplation that Kant made the basis of the idea of the beautiful became with Benjamin the "aura," in its turn linked to Marx's idea of the fetish:

> The fetish is merchandise—a product to which one only assigns exchange function and value starting with the obliteration of that which has made it possible: production. Merchandise: "reified thing". The *aura* of the object is nothing but the "disemployment" (*désemploi*) that affects the object and by which the latter can *drift*, become autonomous: we grasp the object in this autonomization, which is made possible by the detachment (*désancrage*) that reifies the object with respect to its origin.[39]

"Icarian, that is, directed toward granting a privilege to the high compared to the low, to the ideal compared to the real. . . ."

35. George Lukacs, *History and Class Consciousness*, Cambridge, Mass., 1968, p. 202.

36. William Pietz, "The Problem of the Fetish, I," *Res* 9, 1985, p. 10.

37. I have relied on Danièle van de Velde's reading of this dialogue in "Examples d'instruments," *Res* 4, 1982, pp. 47–61.

38. Pietz, "The Problem of the Fetish, I," *Res* 9, 1985, p. 8. The fetish adopted by the tribal member about to undertake a great task is the first thing encountered on going out of doors.

39. See Remo Guidieri, "L'imaginaire du Musée," *Res* 9, 1985, p. 27: "Le fétiche est la marchandise—un produit auquel on prête seulement la fonction et la valeur d'echange à partir de l'oblitération

This content downloaded from
167.99.163.123 on Wed, 29 May 2024 14:04:00 +00:00
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

The phenomenon of reification understood in Marxian terms as alienation appears in George Lukacs's major work of the early 1920s, *History and Class Consciousness*:[40] "The essence of commodity-structure has often been pointed out. Its basis is that a relation between people takes on the character of a thing and thus acquires a 'phantom objectivity,' an autonomy that seems so strictly rational and all-embracing as to conceal every trace of its fundamental nature: the relation between people." Lukacs sees two sides to reification: "*Objectively*, a world of objects and relationships between things springs into being (the world of commodities and their movements on the market). *Subjectively*—where the market economy has been fully developed—a man's activity becomes estranged from himself, it turns into a commodity which, subject to the non-human objectivity of the natural laws of society, must go its own way independently of man just like any consumer article" (p. 87).

For Lukacs the central problem is to prove both that freedom has objective reality and that seemingly objective relations actually are produced by human beings. Here Lukacs (like Breton) attacks the same problem as German Idealism—to overcome dualism and demonstrate that in a world of fact and objective necessity an important role still remained for human freedom.[41] Both Fichte's concept of creative projection and Schiller's of the humanity of play offer solutions to the problem of the union of subject and object.[42]

The chief problem, in Lukacs's view, is that undialectic dualism avoids questions of history, resulting in unreflective immediacy of perception. Fichte, he finds, best formulated the problem, when he described "the absolute projection of an object *of the origin of which no account can be given* with the result that *the space between projection and thing projected is dark and void*.[43] To explain the "dark and empty" chasm of Fichte that opens up between subject and object of knowledge for unmediated contemplation, Lukacs cites this "fine illustration borrowed from Ernst Bloch":

> When nature becomes landscape—e.g., in contrast to the peasant's unconscious living within nature—the artist's unmediated experience of the landscape (which has of course only achieved this immediacy after undergoing a whole series of mediations) presupposes a distance (spatial in this case) between the observer and the landscape. The observer stands outside the landscape, for were this not the case it would not be possible for nature to become a landscape at all. If he were to attempt to integrate himself and the nature immediately surrounding him in space within "nature-seen-as-landscape", without modifying his aesthetic contemplative immediacy, it would then at once become apparent that landscape only *starts* to become landscape at a definite (though of course variable) distance from the observer and that only as an observer set apart in space can he relate to nature in terms of landscape at all . . . even in art we find the same unbridgeable gap opening up between subject and object that we find confronting us everywhere in modern life.[44]

The distance between artist/contemplator and landscape that Lukacs notes introduces an element of separation that provides the basis for science and realistic art; only when the contemplator becomes

de ce qui l'a rendu possible: la production. Marchandise: 'chose réifiée.' L'*aura* de l'objet n'est autre que ce 'desemploi' qui affecte l'objet et par quoi celui-ci peut *flotter*: devient autonome, est appréhendé dans cette autonomisation elle-même rendue possible par le désancrage qui le réifie par rapport à son origine."

40. Ed. of 1968, p. 83, "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat."

41. Breton throughout his career expressed concern about "cette effroyable dualité" (*Les Pas perdus*, 1924, p. 136) that took such varied forms as life and death, reality and dream; and he devoted major works, such as the *Vases communicants* (1932), to overcoming it.

42. See Lukacs, *History and Class Consciousness*, Cambridge, Mass., 1968, pp. 119, 138–139. Breton found in Fichte ideas important for his own thought.

43. Ibid., p. 119.

44. Ibid., pp. 157–158. Lukacs does not cite Hegel, but the same idea appears in the *Aesthetics* I, pp. 315–316, Oxford, 1975, translated by T. M. Knox: "Whereas wonder only occurs when man, torn free from his most immediate first connection with nature and from his most elementary, purely practical, relation to it, that of desire, stands back spiritually from nature and his own singularity and now seeks and sees in things a universal, implicit, and permanent element. In that case for the first time natural objects strike him; they are an 'other' which yet is meant to be for his apprehension and in which he strives to find himself over again as well as thoughts and reason. . . . Now the first product of this situation consists in the fact that man sets nature and objectivity in general over against himself on the one hand as cause, and he reverences it as power; but even so on the other hand he satisfies his need to make external to himself the subjective feeling of something higher, essential, and universal, and to contemplate it as objective. In this unification . . . the single natural objects . . . are not accepted just as they are in their separation, but, lifted into the realm of our ideas, acquire for our ideas the form of universal and absolute existence." The "beginning of art" occurs through contemplation. "The immediate reverence for natural objects—nature worship and fetish worship—is therefore not yet art. On its *objective* side the beginning of art stands in the closest connection with religion." Note the role of desire in Hegel, which recurs throughout Breton's thought, especially in *l'Amour fou* of 1937, and that its source is not uniquely in Freudian psychoanalysis.

This content downloaded from
167.99.163.123 on Wed, 29 May 2024 14:04:00 +00:00
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

aware of the history, development, and underlying causes of the "landscape" does it become possible to initiate a program to overcome the alienation that characterizes bourgeois culture. Jordan has observed that Marx designated his notion of *Entfremdung* also as fetishism, dehumanization, and exploitation. He also observes that Hegel's notion of "alienation through productive labor is . . . an inevitable result of integration of individual activities into an organized whole in a commodity-producing society in which mechanization makes the individual more and more powerless and subjugated to his labor."[45]

Two important and interrelated issues result from these ideas for the Surrealists of the late 1920s: the need to overcome subjective/objective duality, such as the alienation of the individual (the artist) from political activity and the evaluation of work. Duality inheres precisely in the commodity fetish of which Marx spoke, the object produced by human hands or mind endowed with a transcendent quality capable of influencing human behavior. By turning art into objects whose bizarre symbolism and mode of making are visible rather than hidden (thus negating Horace's old maxim *ars celare artem*), and visibly directed "against" modern art, Surrealists transmogrified style traits into stigmata, and remade thereby the commodity character of the artwork into a "mock fetish." They assaulted, too, the persistence within modernism of a craft tradition linked to form and utility and above all *order*; for example, Jeanneret-Gris and Ozenfant asserted in 1918 under the heading of "L'esprit moderne" that "L'évolution actuelle du travail conduit par l'utile à la synthèse et l'ordre."[46] It has been observed that between 1924 (Breton's *First Manifesto*) and 1929, the *Révolution Surréaliste* waged war on work: ". . . car ils sont parfaitement conscients du role central du travail dans l'organisation de la société (industrielle, bourgeoise, capitaliste) et dans l'agencement de l'idéologie."[47] Moreover, the Surrealists concentrated "leur agressivité sur deux points précis: l'apologie du travail, considérée comme 'une vieille idée des classes dirigeantes' et le manque de combativité des travailleurs, de ceux qui sont effectivement soumis à cette nécessité."[48] Evidently the Surrealists advocated a new species of work affiliated to psychoanalytic dream work. We can cite here the story of Saint-Pol-Roux, told by Breton in the *First Manifesto*, that "he used to have a notice posted on the door of his manor house . . . every evening before he went to sleep, which read: THE POET IS WORKING."[49]

The dismantled object of Surrealist collage that does not work communicates something beyond its informal presence, something savage and outlandishly regressive, with perversely sexual overtones. This quality has from the beginning invited the Surrealists to think of their productions in terms not only of Marx but of Freud. The stimulating catalogue for the exhibition

45. See Z. A. Jordan, *The Evolution of Dialectic Materialism*, New York, 1967, p. 410, n. 19.

46. See Charles E. Jeanneret-Gris and Amédée Ozenfant, *Après le Cubisme*, Paris, 1918, p. 26. It is worth noting that the periodical founded in 1922 by Lissitzky and Ehrenburg, *Veshch.Objet. Gegenstand*, and which advocated the equation of "technical object, economy and Suprematist Object," received high praise from Jeanneret and Ozenfant's periodical *L'Esprit nouveau*.

47. Jean-Michel Pianca, "Et Guerre au travail," in *Mélusine* 5, 1983, p. 37.

48. Ibid., p. 38.

49. Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, Ann Arbor, Mich., 1969, p. 14. Breton already expressed an amused contempt for mundane work in his section of *Les Champs magnétiques*, which he wrote with Soupault in 1919, "Usine" (Factory); e.g., "The grand legend of the railways and the reservoirs, the exhaustion of draught animals, touch the hearts (*trouvent bien le coeur*) of certain men." See the Gallimard edition, 1971, p. 82. Evidently the Surrealists departed radically from the production aesthetics of Brecht and other communist thinkers like Benjamin. In his important essay, "Rapports du travail intellectuel et du capital," published in *Le Surr. au Serv. de la Rév.*, October 1930, Breton distinguished between "deux principaux modes de production 'intellectuelle,' " one that satisfied the natural "appétit de l'esprit," the other aiming for "argent, honneurs, gloire, etc." He cites Marx, in favor of the first: "L'homme qui, par son produit, satisfait son besoin personnel, crée bien une valeur d'usage, mais non pas une marchandise.' " Simone Weil found a common ground between intellectual and manual labor—"la contemplation": in 1934–1935, as she ruminated over Marxism and proletarian revolution, she worked in a factory. While she perceived the demeaning nature of the labor, she identified deeply with and respected her fellow workers. See E. Piccard, *Simone Weil*, Paris, 1960, especially ch. IV, "Le Travail manuel et la condition ouvrière," p. 127 ff.

Their attitude to work freed the Surrealists from the insidiously exploitive mentality that climaxed in the mid-1930s in Stakhanovism, a counterpart to capitalist incentive labor; but it diluted their commitment to the proletarian cause, despite Breton's intentions, and ultimately drew them away from serious political engagement. One can make an instructive comparison between the opinions of two noted anthropologists on the nature and products of work in bourgeois society: Margaret Mead, a liberal with modernist taste expanded through sensitivity to Oceanic art, in her essay "Work, Leisure, and Creativity," *Daedalus* (winter 1960), pp. 13–23, worries about the loss of freshness and novelty in artist and spectator alike. As an antidote (curiously akin to the emerging ideas of pop art), she prescribes that one should "stress the value of participant production of ephemeral things, a mural for a night, an individual greeting card that will go quickly to an honorable grave, a sketch on the edge of a letter to a distant friend; emphasize the importance of painting *for*

This content downloaded from
167.99.163.123 on Wed, 29 May 2024 14:04:00 +00:00
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

"Fetisch-Formen" held in 1967 makes the point that the fetish forms in modern art have a double character, at once binding and liberating:

> We ought not be captivated by Fetish-Forms, but we must be struck by them, pay attention to them. That is, there must be built-in limitations, that prevent the passive submission of the observer. Then they can represent a fetish; the person begins to understand the sign without actually grasping it fully. The phenomenon Form-Fetish is ambivalent. Regression and the will to comprehend occur together in him simultaneously: submission through fascination and liberation through comprehension. Such ambivalence characterizes the ideological situation of a turning point. Some states of consciousness receive thereby a janus-face.[50]

The Surrealists came closest in their earlier practice to the "janus-faced" aspect of the fetish.

A duality pervades the primitive fetish whose unassimilable streak of barbaric sorcery could, up to the twentieth century, still be contained within ethnographic classifications. With appreciation of their formal qualities by twentieth-century artists and critics, they became prized objects for museums; but their admission—a little like the fox in the chicken coop—to collections of Western fine arts, caused uneasiness to observers forced to rethink the limits of art. With familiarization and expanded canons of beauty, the threatening magical potency of the fetish once more verged on domestication.[51] In the 1920s the Surrealists recuperated from modernist circles the power of the fetish by detaching it from its new, aestheticized "containers," and linking fetishlike objects and activities to blatant sexuality and aggression: like some Freudian dream-objects metamorphosed under the processes of condensation and displacement, they often suggested occult meanings and an unsettling rearrangement of the everyday. Moreover, the Surrealist fetish-object contributed to the political and economic subversion of modernism by attacking its characteristics of invention and quality. One level of the fetishistic character of the Surrealist object consisted of its brazen display of useless and disagreeable things that had no place in galleries beside "good art." The illustration of

---

reproduction, rather than making exact reproductions in which the single masterpiece is still intended." On the other hand Lévi-Strauss, schooled in part on the ideas of Surrealism, developed the notion of *bricolage*, in his "The Science of the Concrete" in *The Savage Mind*, Chicago, 1966. This has little to do with the modernist taste for novelty, and much to do with myth and the Surrealist preoccupation with chance, games, and collage: "In its old sense the verb 'bricoler' applied to ball games and billiards, to hunting, shooting, and riding. It was, however, always used with reference to some extraneous movement. . . . And in our own time the 'bricoleur' is still someone who works with his hands and uses devious means compared to those of a craftsman. The characteristic feature of mythical thought is that it expresses itself by means of a heterogeneous repertoire which, even if extensive, is nevertheless limited. It has to use this repertoire, however, whatever the task at hand, because it has nothing else at its disposal. Mythical thought is therefore a kind of intellectual 'bricolage.' "

50. See Hans Heinz Holz, "Ideologiekritische Bemerkungen zur Fetisch-Form" in *Fetisch-Formen*, exhibition of the Berliner Kunstverein, May/July 1967, no pagination. An interesting later collection of essays largely by French Structuralists like Jean Pouillon and Jean Baudrillard, together with some well-known French Freudians that likewise tries to tie psychoanalytic and Marxian concepts of fetishism together, is *Objets du fétichisme*, introduced by J.-B. Portalis, *Nouvelle Revue de psychanalyse* no. 2, autumn 1970. Guy Rosolato, "Le Fétichisme dont se *dérobe* l'objet," makes interesting use of Freud's discussion in his article of 1927, "Fetishism," in which Freud presents his famous case involving the "Glanz auf der Nase." The nose for Freud's patient became a fetish, which in psychoanalytic terms constitutes a substitute for the (absent) phallus of the woman (the mother). It seems to me that Rosalind Krauss, in her interesting essay "Corpus Delicti," *L'Amour fou*, Washington, D.C., 1985, p. 95, although not citing Rosolato, covers the same ground concerning the "Glanz." In her attempt to prove that the (male) Surrealists' focus on the woman as love object was not antifeminist, she makes a claim with which I disagree: "Surrealism's having taken the love act and its object—woman—as its central, obsessional subject, it must be seen that in much of surrealist practice, woman, in being a 'shine on the nose,' is nowhere in nature." In reversing Lacan's idea that the child is the *mother's* phallus, she seems to neglect the point that in becoming a "phallus" (in the suggestively trimmed Surrealist photos of nude females she displays), the woman,while apparently achieving a superior power, actually loses her very *differentia*: in becoming the fetish-phallus of male fantasy, woman would have nothing left but a nebulously androgynous and inert condition, whereas the male would retain his own desires and active voyeurism toward the female object.

Freud earlier used the term "janus-faced" in his book *Jokes*, having borrowed it from a French author. The psychoanalyst Albert Rothenberg in 1979 introduced the term "janusian thinking" to describe antithetical images in which artists refer simultaneously to the primary and the secondary process.

51. An important formal analysis of African art and its fetishes appeared in Paul Guillaume and Thomas Munro, *Primitive Negro Sculpture*, New York, 1926. Guillaume had already collaborated with Apollinaire in *Sculptures nègres*, Paris, 1917. The authors dedicated their 1926 book to A. C. Barnes, whose foundation supported and patronized abstract art and advocated formal analysis. Breton expressed his opinion of Barnes very clearly in a note to *le Surréalisme et la Peinture*, Paris, 1928, p. 37, on De Chirico's "génie perdu": "Cf. la préface que, pour sa dernière exposition (du 4 au 12 juin 1926, chez Paul Guillaume), il a laissé écrire par l'ignoble crétin Albert-C. Barnes. Elle suffirait, je pense, à le déshonorer." These offensive lines were expunged from later editions.

This content downloaded from
167.99.163.123 on Wed, 29 May 2024 14:04:00 +00:00
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

objects in photographs also served a polemical function; for example, in *Le Surréalisme au Service de la Révolution*, no. 4, December 1931, the last illustration, a photograph of several objects displayed in the room organized by Aragon, Eluard, and Tanguy for the exhibition "La Vérité sur les colonies," shows a cogently ironic group of figurines—a bare-breasted native woman, a young beggar with a tablet on his chest that reads "Merci," and a Madonna and Child—before which lies a plaque inscribed "Fétiches Européens."

Breton's great rival in the domain of sociosexual politics was Georges Bataille. Combining a Marxian revolutionary intention (but with as little interest in proletarian labor as Breton) with Freudian notions about orality and anality—greatly intensified by reference to the excesses of de Sade—Bataille explored a dialectic between the appropriation and excretion of objects. He envisaged human emancipation to result from the passage from an orgiastic and destructive phase of political and social revolution to a postrevolutionary one involving separation between sociopolitical organizations and an "antireligious and asocial organization." In the "Notion of Expenditure" (1933), Bataille expounds a dialectic of class struggle based on a fundamental human need to destroy—the negativity of a destructive orgiastic drive—that leads the workers to the final revolution. Now the "lower" classes surge with a Nietzschean force, but with that of an *Untermensch* (if I may so dub Bataille's revolutionary masses, a political counterpart to Groddeck's *Es* or Freud's id). While the earlier Surrealists played scandalous parlor games, Bataille dreamed that his revolutionaries would engage in excretionary orgies (modeled on the potlatch described by Mauss), which he presumably thought to be salubrious in the sense of Bakhtin's carnivals. Bataille's vision of the object differs essentially from that of the Surrealists—it both extends far below the threshold of bad taste admitted and even admired by the Surrealists, never raises the issue of mediation (at least implicit in some Surrealist works), and ranges further in its openness to objects excluded by the Surrealists as smacking of religiosity or bourgeois luxury. In Bataille's words:

> Sexual activity, whether perverted or not; the behavior of one sex before the other; defecation; urination; death and the cult of cadavers (above all, insofar as it involves the stinking decomposition of bodies); the different taboos; ritual cannibalism; the sacrifice of animal-gods; omophagia; the laughter of exclusion; sobbing (which in general has death as its object); religious ecstasy; the identical attitude toward shit, gods, and cadavers; the terror that so often accompanies involuntary defecation; the custom of exchanging brilliant, lubricious, painted and jeweled women; gambling; heedless expenditure and certain fanciful uses of money, etc. . . . together present a common character in that the object of the activity (excrement, shameful parts, cadavers, etc. . . .) is found each time treated as a foreign body (*das ganz Andere*); in other words, it can just as well be expelled following a brutal rupture as reabsorbed through the desire to put one's body and mind entirely in a more or less violent state of expulsion (or projection). The notion of the (heterogeneous) *foreign body* permits one to note the elementary *subjective* identity between types of excrement (sperm, menstrual blood, urine, fecal matter) and everything that can be seen as sacred, divine, or marvelous: a half-decomposed cadaver fleeing through the night in a luminous shroud can be seen as characteristic of this unity.[52]

The nude body became the theme of a ritualized dismemberment and assemblage for the three or four Surrealists playing the drawing/poem game of *cadavres exquis* and for Breton in such poems as *Union libre* (1931), describing his girlfriend's body parts metaphorically as though they had undergone a sea change. The effort to unite the aims of art, love, and revolutionary politics attained what we may consider its "summa" in Breton's *Les Vases Communicants* of 1932; but the delicate equilibrium of elements in that volume could not be sustained in the political climate of the 1930s, when the specter of bureaucracy rose from the gray fog spreading throughout Europe. Despite differences in the styles of their leaders, the governing classes of the Soviet Union, Germany, Italy, France, and even the Anglo-Saxon democracies came closer and closer to one another physically and spiritually, like the beasts of George Orwell's *Animal Farm*. Increasingly disillusioned with the reality of Soviet communism as a model for their libertarian ideals, the Surrealists began to emphasize the fantastic, even occult aspect of their productions and to reinterpret their fetish objects as works of bizarre but fashionably *épatant* modernism: they began to sell well and to influence taste in many fields. The scandalous commercialism and the plunge into revolutionary politics and religion by the provocative renegade Dalí merely intensified and brought to extremity what the politically conscientious Breton and his group were

52. Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927–1939*, Minneapolis, 1985, p. 94.

This content downloaded from
167.99.163.123 on Wed, 29 May 2024 14:04:00 +00:00
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

themselves being forced toward, albeit in a different manner.

With the disintegration of the ideal of collective liberation through social revolution (in 1919 Breton had linked *rêve* and *révolution*, a link repeated later in Leiris's definition of revolution as *"l'évolution d'un rêve"*), there reemerged the early predilection for anarchic individualism among the young poets.[53] Collectivist ideals now survived among certain groups of abstractionists like *Abstraction-Création*. There is, however, something pathetic about the abstract humanism, the forced optimism, the belief in an independent, pure creation, and an "art social et collectif universel"[54] in this period of rationalized opportunism, of hypocritical but convenient "united fronts" between incongruous partners, and of a shapeless liberalism trapped between the rigid systems of communism and fascism.

The attitudes of Bataille and Breton in the darkening years leading to World War II show surprising parallels despite their almost constant dissension: both opposed the production of works intended to have beauty or utility; both maintained antipathy toward productive work, placing the pleasure principle far above the reality principle; and each had only a remote sense of what the working masses were like (although both professed sympathy—inspired by a theoretical communism—for the proletariat). The two men collaborated for a brief moment in 1935–1936 in the group *Contre-Attaque*, until Breton and his group withdrew from what they perceived as a strong sympathy toward fascistlike violence and cult of force.

The Surrealists continued to produce objects, often with purposes of furthering confusion, unmarketability, and antimodernism similar to the earlier ones of the 1920s; but the political reverberations of their latent content grew ever dimmer. In the last issue of *Surréalisme au Service de la Révolution*, no. 6, May 15, 1933, two significant articles appeared bearing on the issue of the object: Thirion's "En lisant Hegel" presents from his notebooks Lenin's excerpts of passages from Hegel, including, for example, "#108: 'En réalité les buts humains sont créés par le monde objectif et le supposent; ils le trouvent à l'avance comme quelque chose de donné, de présent. Mais il *semble* à l'homme que ses buts naissent hors *du monde*, sont indépendants du monde ("Liberté").' "[55] The other article contains "Recherches expérimentales. A. Sur la connaissance irrationnelle de l'objet." The objects include a piece of rose velvet, a crystal ball, and a painting by De Chirico, and questions concerned issues like the sexual perversion suggested by the item —all the male respondents associated the velvet to the woman (Breton and Caillois both answered *"Fétichisme"*). The point is that both articles indicate a crisis in the Surrealist attitude to political reality: the Hegel of Lenin resonates with the misguided pseudoscientific views of Engels, and in the "research" the emphasis on cliquish objects confounds any revolutionary intention by preserving the old elitist predilections of the Surrealist group.[56]

With the last issue of *Surréalisme au Service de la Révolution* in May 1933, the Surrealists lost their last major periodical; and when the luxurious *Minotaure* appeared in May 1933, theirs became one voice among several, without any clear-cut political focus. Part of the difficulty in sustaining a Surrealist revolutionary politics derived from the decline of radical vision internationally; but the success of Surrealism in the fashionable world of European and American

53. The loss of an optimistic vision in the 1930s is well summed up by Steven A. Mansbach, *Visions of Totality*, Ann Arbor, Mich., 1980, p. 123: "Thus, the vision of totality which Moholy-Nagy, Van Doesburg, and Lissitzky articulated during the twenties as a response to the tragedy they perceived in the pre-War order was an early victim of the tragic New Order of the totalitarian thirties." The optimism was of course not universal, and Peter Gay, *Weimar Culture: The Outsider as Insider*, New York, 1968, p. 96, points to the condition that tragically isolated the Bauhaus during the 1920s: "The complex of feelings and responses I have called 'the hunger for wholeness' turns out on examination to be a great regression born from a great fear: the fear of modernity." This "regression" differs from the vital primitivism of the Expressionists, for it turns with reactionary nostalgia exclusively to German peasants, seeking in their seeming purity and naïveté a remedy for *Angst*. Cf. Joseph Masheck, " 'Primitive' authenticity and German Expressionism," *Res* 4, 1982, especially p. 115 for the 1920s.

54. See Gorrin, *"Vers un Art Social et Collectif Universel," Abstraction-Création*, #4, 1935, p. 11.

55. "#108; 'In reality human objectives are formed by and presuppose the objective world; they come across that world in advance as a given, as a present thing. But it *seems* to man that his objectives are born *outside the world*, independently of the world ("Liberty").' "

56. To his credit, Bataille adopted the acute analysis of Nicolai Hartmann of the crucial flaw in Engels, who had interpreted his ideas of dialectical materialism dogmatically; thus Engels believed that the theory had the value of a scientific law applicable to the study of natural phenomena, and that it could even make a significant contribution to the understanding of the mathematical sciences. Hartmann's articulation of these absurdities anticipates the fundamental critique of Z. A. Jordan in *The Evolution of Dialectical Materialism*, New York, 1967.

This content downloaded from
167.99.163.123 on Wed, 29 May 2024 14:04:00 +00:00
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

modernism also undermined its earlier communist libertarianism. In a lecture at Prague in March 1935, "Surrealist Situation of the Object. Situation of the Surrealist Object," Breton with grim humor addressed the latter difficulty:

> Perhaps the greatest danger threatening Surrealism today is the fact that because of its spread throughout the world, which was very sudden and rapid, the word found favor much faster than the idea and all sorts of more or less questionable creations tend to pin the Surrealist label on themselves. . . . To avoid such misunderstandings or render such vulgar abuses impossible in the future, it would be desirable for us to establish a very precise line of demarcation between what is Surrealist in its essence and what seeks to pass itself off as such for publicity or other reasons. The ideal, obviously, would be for every authentic Surrealist object to have some distinctive outer sign so that it would be immediately recognizable; Man Ray thought that it should be a sort of hallmark or seal.

Thus, to help the amateur, objects would bear the mark "A Surrealist Object."[57]

The new place Breton would assign to the object may be better understood by considering a lecture he gave to the group "Leftist Front" in Prague on April 1, 1935, on the "Political Position of Today's Art," in which—like Trotsky—he still expresses confidence that "our Russian comrades . . . [are] building . . . a new world . . . whose evolution opens an unlimited field to human hope . . . ," whereas in the West (especially France and Czechoslovakia) "the contamination of money has covered everything over." While declaiming against official Soviet cultural policy ("socialist realism"), he cites copiously from the complicated apologetics of his book *Les Vases Communicants* of 1932, concluding that one can only transform society "by agreeing to rehabilitate the study of the ego so as to be able to integrate it with that of collective being" (*Manifestoes*, pp. 216, 225; see note 33). If Breton's real political "hope" comes from his reliance on Trotsky's opposition to Stalin and Hitler, his method of attaining it through art depends on the old automatism grounded in Freudian psychoanalysis:

> Personally, I believe that I have sufficiently insisted on the fact that the automatic text and the Surrealist poem are no less interpretable than the dream narrative. . . . The artist, in turn, is beginning to give up the personality that he was so jealous of before. He is suddenly in possession of the key to a treasure, but this treasure does not belong to him; it becomes impossible for him to arrogate it to himself, even by surprise: *this treasure is none other than the collective treasure.* / In these conditions, thus, art is no longer a question of the creation of a personal myth, but rather, with Surrealism, *of the creation of a collective myth.*[58]

Breton, caught in the morass of communist politics of the 1930s (even the Trotskyites violently debated whether Stalin's Russia was still a progressive force), tried in these addresses to "comrades" to finesse his way toward a collective myth that would signify political collectivism and thus agreement with the "revolutionary aims" of the U.S.S.R. The rhetoric of collectivism that he shared with Bataille, members of *Abstraction-Création*, and a gamut of political parties of the left and right did not save him from a painful dilemma: to choose between trying to maintain a coherent Surrealist position as an obscure, elitist coterie and reaching a wide public with clear revolutionary messages devoid of the special qualities of their work. The solution offered in the March lecture consists of the not entirely unexpected claim (Lautréamont had already made it) that poetic language "must be universal": not only must poetry "*be created by everyone,*" but it "*must be understood by everyone.*"[59] The source for these ideas is not standard Marxist aesthetics, but Hegel, whose philosophy provides a ground for the notion of the collective mind and for one of the major new approaches to the production of Surrealist work that Breton takes during the mid-1930s—*l'humour*

57. See Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, Ann Arbor, Mich., 1969, pp. 257–258. Gérard Legrand, André *Breton en son temps*, Paris, 1976, p. 119, n. 1, writes that "Vers 1960, Breton regrettait que ce voeu n'eût pas finalement pris corps," so perhaps Breton, assuming that he did not later change his mind, had meant the label idea to be taken seriously. See also Marcel Jean, *The History of Surrealist Painting*, New York, 1960, pp. 230–231, on the vulgarization of Surrealist images in the 1930s through success. Already in the October 1927 issue of *La Révolution Surréaliste*, Naville, in his article "Mieux et moins bien," had warned against the vulgarization of the name "Surrealist," to which Breton apparently responded in the *Second Manifesto* with a demand for the "occultation of Surrealism."

58. See Breton, *Manifestoes*, p. 232, and also "Limites non-frontières du surréalisme," in *La clé des champs*, Paris, 1967, pp. 23–24. Bataille engaged the issue of a modern myth with equal fervor. The universal fascination with myth—often folkloric and racial—in the 1930s bears directly on the prewar resurgence of nationalism; and the corresponding disintegration of the international communist ideals under Stalin rendered the well-meant but befuddled mythmaking of fellow travelers about fraternity and equality impotent.

59. See Breton, *Manifestoes*, p. 262. For similar claims by abstract artists in the 1920s, see Steven A. Mansbach, *Visions of Totality*, ch. 6, "The Universal Language," Ann Arbor, 1980.

This content downloaded from 167.99.163.123 on Wed, 29 May 2024 14:04:00 +00:00
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

objectif.[60] In the March lecture Breton defined it as the "dialectical resolution" of two interpenetrating tendencies, "the force that made the accidents of the outer world a matter of interest on the one hand, and on the other hand the force that made the caprices of personality a matter of interest" (*Manifestoes*, p. 266; see note 33). To objective humour, which involves the "contemplation of nature in its accidental forms," he contrasts subjective humour, "which is itself a consequence of the need of the personality to attain the highest possible degree of independence" (p. 267). Breton apparently adapts Hegel's analysis of subjective humor to his quest for artistic freedom, but he inverts Hegel's evaluation of it:

> Now humour is not set the task of developing and shaping a topic objectively and in a way appropriate to the essential nature of the topic, and, in this development, using its own means to articulate the topic and round it off artistically; on the contrary, it is the artist himself who enters the material, with the result that his chief activity, by the power of subjective notions, flashes of thought, striking modes of interpretation, consists in destroying and dissolving everything that proposes to make itself objective and win a firm shape for itself in reality, or that seems to have such a shape already in the external world. Therefore every independence of an objective *content* along with the inherently fixed connection of the *form* (given as that is by the subject matter) is annihilated in itself, and the presentation is only a sporting with the topics, a derangement and perversion of the material, and a rambling to and fro, a criss-cross movement of subjective expressions, views, and attitudes whereby the author sacrifices himself and his topics alike.[61]

Hegel's discussion of objective humour allowed Breton to come to grips with the recurrent problem of duality. Hegel noted that

> [if] what matters to humour is the object and its configuration within its subjective reflex, then we acquire thereby a growing intimacy with the object, a sort of *objective* humour. Yet such an intimacy can only be partial and can perhaps be expressed only within the compass of a song or only as part of a greater whole. For if it were extended and carried through within objectivity, it would necessarily become action and event and an objective presentation of these. But what we may regard as necessary here is rather a sensitive abandonment of the heart in the object, which is indeed unfolded but remains a *subjective* spirited movement of imagination and the heart—a fugitive notion, but one which is not purely accidental and capricious but an inner movement of the spirit devoted entirely to its object and retaining it as its content and interest.[62]

Breton interprets the realm of objective necessity in the terms of modern materialists to whom "*le hasard serait la forme de manifestation de la nécessité extérieure qui se fraie un chemin dans l'inconscient humain* (pour tenter hardiment d'interpréter et de concilier sur ce point Engels et Freud)."[63] He thought to avoid the confining necessities and banalities of external reality by discovering in "*pure mental representation*" a new field in which desire and imagination could romp: "The important thing is that recourse to mental representation (outside of the physical presence of the object) furnishes, as Freud has said, 'sensations related to processes unfolding in the most diverse, and even the deepest layers of the psychic mechanism.' "[64]

Breton proposed the means of reaching those deepest layers where internal and external meet in "Le Message

60. With regard to the Surrealist approach to questions of universality, one should consider Hegel's critique of Kant's categorical imperative, which bears also on the fundamental issue of dualism. As formulated by Charles Karelis, "An Interpretive Essay," *Hegel's Introduction to Aesthetics*, Oxford, 1979, p. xix: "The upshot, then, is that given the equation of morality and autonomy, *if* one accepts the common sense conception of reason, one is led to an ethical analogue of the sceptical position that knowledge is impossible: the position that nothing counts as a good rather than evil will. Hegel's way out, as in epistemology, is to abandon the dualistic assumption. Rational will, like knowing mind, is held to be at once subjective and objective—objective, namely, in the laws of a state that is rational. . . . But the conception of [the subjective factor and the objective factor] as distinct contains contradictions—so Hegel tries to show—and leads on to the conception of them as being at a deeper level identical. What exists absolutely, then, is a unity of the two elements of the dualistic picture."

61. G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics* I, translated by T. M. Knox, Oxford, 1975, pp. 600–601.

62. Ibid., p. 609.

63. Breton, *L'Amour fou*, Paris, 1937, p. 31: " . . . *chance is the formal manifestation of the external necessity that opens up a pathway through the human unconscious* (to try boldly to interpret and to reconcile Engels and Freud on this point)." Cf. Breton, *L'Amour fou*, p. 28, for the definition of "le hasard" taken from Engels: "la rencontre d'une causalité externe et d'une finalité interne." Lévi-Strauss, in "The Science of the Concrete," a chapter of *The Savage Mind*, 1966, places Surrealist objective chance at the center of his notion of "*bricolage*." See also n. 9.

64. Breton, *Manifestoes*, p. 273, "Surrealist Situation." For Hegel's view of "The Subjective Artistic Imitation of the Existent Present," see his *Aesthetics* I, pp. 595–596, where he complains about art that "reverts to the imitation of nature, i.e., to an intentional approach to the contingency of immediate existence which, taken by itself, is unbeautiful and prosaic."

This content downloaded from
167.99.163.123 on Wed, 29 May 2024 14:04:00 +00:00
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

automatique" of 1933. Here he showed that automatic writing or drawing resembles the utterances of mediums and hypnotized persons, the gestures of hysterics, or the tracings of the eidetically gifted in producing tangible, concrete images grounded in a mental reality; he insisted also on the converse phenomenon of Leonardo's old cracked wall, which could inspire the imagination to "see" a reality not actually there. Especially important for this enterprise were the contributions of Dalí from 1929 to the mid-1930s, above all his notion of "paranoia-criticism," and Max Ernst's *frottages*. Breton says in the last paragraph of his 1935 essay on the object, after referring to both these artists:

> We say that the art of imitation (of places, of scenes, of external objects) has had its day and that the artistic problem today consists of making mental representation more and more objectively precise through the voluntary exercise of imagination and memory (it being understood that only the perception of the outside world has permitted the involuntary acquisition of the materials which mental representation is called upon to use). The greatest benefit that Surrealism has gotten out of this sort of operation is the fact that we have succeeded in *dialectically* reconciling these two terms—perception and representation—that are so violently contradictory for the adult man, and the fact that we have thrown a bridge over the abyss that separated them.[65]

The growing importance of psychological and parapsychological concerns of the Surrealists in the mid-1930s corresponded to the dwindling possibilities for a meaningful revolutionary politics. This condition is manifest in the bewildering hodgepodge of objects the Surrealists now put before the public. Two Surrealist exhibitions were held in Paris in 1936—one at the Galerie Pierre Colle, the other at the Galerie Ratton. The latter included an astonishing number and range of things—"natural objects," "interpreted natural objects," "interpreted objets trouvés," mathematical objects, and so on. The real emphasis in the exhibitions was on consumption and sexuality: the edible works of Dalí, and the hit of the Ratton show, Meret Oppenheim's celebrated *Luncheon in Fur* or *Fur-lined Teacup*, which blazoned to the world an image of fashionably fetishistic obsession. At this time propaganda and fashion publicity appear to converge. Surrealism was now the rage of the *haut monde*: Dalí designed clothing for Schiaparelli in 1935–1936; at the World Exhibition in Paris in 1937, the Pavilion of Fashion Designing showed the strong influence of Surrealism; Meret Oppenheim composed a page of Surrealist jewelry for the 1938 Surrealist Exhibition in Paris; and at this same exhibition many Surrealists created their own mannequins, distorted versions of fashion models.

The shifting tides of politics and taste were such that Breton could publish his commentaries on the exhibitions of 1936, "Crisis of the Object," in *Cahiers d'Art* of May 1936.[66] The "crisis" to which Breton refers has to do not with a political issue, but with the threat of the conventional, systematic and rational to inhibit artistic and scientific thought:

> The urgency of the need to break down the concrete form of the various geometries in order to give research an unlimited field of operation and permit the ultimate coordination of the results obtained is subordinate only to the overriding need to break down the barriers in art which divide familiar sights from possible visions, common experience from conceivable initiation, and so on.

Political disillusion underlies his view of "an age like ours, where human brotherhood is at a premium, while the best organized systems—including social systems—seem to have become petrified in the hands of their advocates." His reference now to reification has nothing to do with Marx, but with the stultifying effect of conventional thought that he hoped to overcome by harnessing a new way of thought that "is dominated by an unprecedented *desire to objectify*." He calls for "dream-engendered objects representing pure desire in concrete form" and for "unleashing the *powers of invention*": here he lists the Surrealist discoveries that aim at "bringing about *a total revolution of the object*." Three major Surrealist exhibitions of the year 1936—in

65. Breton, *Manifestoes*, pp. 277–278.

66. See, for the English version, *Surrealism and Painting*, New York, 1965, pp. 275–280. The editors of *Cahiers d'Art*, wishing to show all contemporary styles, tolerated Surrealism as far back as the 1920s, although they viewed it as at best a literary tendency and at worst an academic parody of Picasso (see vol. 3, 1928, no. 2, p. 69). The editors shared with the Surrealists a taste for African and Oceanian art, and articles of primitive art were occasionally illustrated with objects from the collections of Surrealists such as Breton (see vol. 4, 1929, nos. 2–3, p. 108). From the mid-1930s on, this periodical carried several important Surrealist articles; but this has gone unnoticed, presumably because it is so unexpected: in Dawn Ades's extensive survey of the periodical literature, *Dada and Surrealism Reviewed*, London, 1978, no mention is made of *Cahiers d'Art*!

This content downloaded from
167.99.163.123 on Wed, 29 May 2024 14:04:00 +00:00
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Paris, London, and New York—all devoted much attention to the object.[67]

Evidently, this revolutionary storm in a fur-lined teacup occurs within a tragically restricted horizon of political possibilities (apart from some tracts and poetry, the Spanish Civil War did little more than elicit sympathetic understanding among the Surrealists in the face of Stalinist collusion with the fascists to undermine the loyalists); and Breton concludes his list with the remark: "In all these cases, perturbation and distortion are sought for their own sake. . . ."[68]

The failure of these exhibitions to reach their mark disaffected Jean Arp, who commented:

> La bouteille à nombril objet utilitaire, monstrueux, réunissant bicyclette, baleine, soutien-gorge et cuiller à absinthe, le gant que l'on peut porter à la place de la tête vétuste, tout cela devait suggérer au bourgeois l'irréalité de son univers, la futilité de ses aspirations vaines, de son patriotisme si lucratif. Tout cela était évidemment naif de notre part, puisque le bourgeois normalement constitué dispose d'autant de fantasie qu'un ver de terre, et qu'à la place de son coeur se trouve un immense cor aux pieds qui le pince seulement lorsque le baromètre, c'est-à-dire la bourse, est en baisse.[69]

But even beyond the bourgeois stolidity noted by Arp, the exhibitions themselves no longer resisted the temptation to indulge in piquant stimuli: in their collection of diverse and "*dépaysés*" objects mingled with near-excreta, the exhibitions had achieved notoriety, and at the same time they had become an apotheosis of the *marché aux puces*. In recycling refuse as commercially valuable, Surrealism provided a minor loop in the cycle of capitalist economy and also discharged some ideas into the very modernism it had initially defied (the boxes of Torrès-Garcia, Nevelson, and early Abstract Expressionists; the sculpture of Moore and early David Smith).

Political frustration and the ineffectiveness of a too-familiar shock or scandal during the 1930s had two main consequences for Surrealism—they led to the fashionably titillating exhibitions just described, and they exacerbated a need for taking up an ironic posture toward all authority.[70] Humour—more precisely *l'humour noir*—became the resort of the disappointed Surrealists, erstwhile revolutionists. Breton opens his *Anthologie de l'Humour noir* of 1939 by applying words (from Rimbaud who got them from Baudelaire) to humour: emanation, explosion. Next he quotes again Hegel's ideas about objective humour, to which he adds Freud's analysis of humour as having something at once "libérateur" and "sublime." However, he omits an essential point of Freud's analysis; *viz.*, that the energy of humour arises from the inhibition or repression of an erotic or aggressive aim (the pleasure comes from the economy of expenditure of feeling that finds its way past the resistance, a process not unlike that which gives rise to dream). Significantly, in this

67. See the interesting catalogue for the exhibition "1936. Surrealism. Objects, Photographs, Collages, Documents," held in the Zabriskie Galleries, New York and Paris, February to April 1986. The juxtaposition of Breton's introduction to the Paris show, of Read's to the London show, emphasizing Freud, and of Hugnet's to the New York one, inanely defending the beauty and taste for Surrealist objects, demonstrates with unintended irony the displacement of political by aesthetic "revolution."

68. Breton's remarks favoring perturbation, or in other places disequilibrium, bear the mark of the old revolutionary intention to unsettle the bourgeois mind, in contrast to the calm, catharsis, or equilibrium sought by middle-class art, including modernism. We should, however, observe here that the modernist critic C. Zervos recognized in Oceanic art a disquiet similar to that of his contemporaries, in "Oeuvres d'art océaniennes et inquiétudes d'aujord'hui," preface to a special issue on Oceanic art in *Cahiers d'Art* IV, March-April, 1929, pp. 57–58.

69. Cited by Claude Abastado, *Introduction au surréalisme*, Paris, 1971, p. 110. "The bottle with navel, an object useful and monstrous, combining bicycle, whalebone, brassiere, and absinthe spoon, the glove that one can wear in place of a decrepit head, all that ought to suggest to the bourgeois the unreality of the universe, the futility of his vain aspirations, (and) of his very profitable patriotism. All that was very naive on our part, since the bourgeois as normally constituted has as much fantasy as an earthworm, and since in place of his heart (*coeur*) one finds an immense foot corn (*cor*) that pinches only when the barometer, that is to say the stockmarket, is in decline."

70. Failure to perceive the evolution of Surrealism from the 1920s to the 1930s has led to confusing generalizations about the movement; e.g., Eugene Lunn, in his important study *Marxism and Modernism*, states: "In the late 1930s, Benjamin and Adorno disputed whether surrealists merely mirror the experience of a reified world out of control (to which they surrender in its domination of the data of the 'unconscious') or seriously and effectively counter that world (through shocks to habitual logic and mental associations)." See Lunn, *Marxism and Modernism: An Historical Study of Lukacs, Brecht, Benjamin and Adorno*, Berkeley, 1982, pp. 57–58. The anxiously democratic world of postwar reconstruction in the 1920s mingled desperate pessimism and chimerical optimism. In such a world "shock" had a different ring to it as compared to the paranoid 1930s; and it is significant that Benjamin appears to have formed his idea of the Surrealist "shock" during the late 1920s, rather than the mid-1930s. For the international situation from the viewpoint of Germany, see John Willett, *Art and Politics in the Weimar Period: The New Sobriety, 1917–1933*, New York, 1978.

This content downloaded from
167.99.163.123 on Wed, 29 May 2024 14:04:00 +00:00
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

omission Breton betrays unawareness that his emphasis on humour may well have originated in response to his compressed political environment: the "explosion" has become purely rhetorical, *objectless* (the antithesis of the maxim *res non verba*). The disturbing object, now only a matter of words, disappears in a joke; for example, in the *Anthologie* (1966 ed., p. 56) he cites Lichtenberg's "chef-d'oeuvre dialectique de l'objet: 'un couteau sans lame, auquel manque le manche' " (a knife without a blade, and missing the handle).[71]

The disintegration of the politically intended object meant the end of the attack on the fetish-character of art in a bourgeois society: the object now became a valuable commodity, absorbed into the marketplace of appreciated modern art. Ignoring the radical heterogeneity of the fetish, the leaders—Breton, Eluard, Aragon, Tzara—who had been collectors, if not connoisseurs of non-Western fetishes, became critics and exhibitors of the fetishlike object.[72]

This failure of their implicit ambition to undermine the commodity fetish, using the primitive fetish (as well as dream imagery) as a guide, was partly determined, as already indicated, by the course of revolutionary politics; for the Surrealists did not rise to the new realities of the 1930s to develop either a sense of their historical place in the radical movement or a coherent political self-criticism. Consequently that faculty of mediation, which would have permitted them self-consciousness, eluded them, and they interpreted "mediation" in the somewhat anachronistic terms of their old fascination with *mediums*: it seemed that the best thing to do in a hatefully overpowering world was either to get out of it through study of parapsychology (the occult, black magic) or to challenge it with black humour.[73] Thus Breton and the Surrealists did not overcome their alienation, as they might have wished. When one of them stopped to analyze their "*flâneur*"-like saunterings through Paris, their dandyish habits, their eye-catching public displays, or their cultish games and productions, he soon made a break, as the politically conscious Naville did, when he criticized his fellow Surrealists in 1926 and then became a loyal Trotskyist. And later in the 1930s, the group activities proved even less conducive to the "mediation" of self-criticism, and to the politically conscious perception of their position as bourgeois liberal poets; for then the group turned increasingly to rarefied games of occultistic, mediumistic, arcane, and alchemical flavor, all the time holding to vows of materialism by placing these activities within the perimeter of "experimental" parapsychology. The goal of liberation moved upward into ever more remote regions, governed by romantic love rather than political design.

The bourgeois artist contemplating a landscape in the Lukacs/Bloch example cited earlier fails to attain the mediating awareness that could conquer alienation. Unlike Bloch's peasant he remained outside, an observer. The Surrealists dreamed of arriving at a dialectical synthesis, of crossing the dark chasm of unmediated space between themselves and the real world: as revolutionists they would act with the workers and peasants *within* the "landscape" to change it, and as independent artists, creators of a collective myth, they would also remain somehow free of complete immersion, taking Hegelian liberties. Unfortunately, as we know, they failed; and this failure marked the position of the advanced artist in Soviet communist society as well. Under Stalinist party leadership (the self-styled "dictatorship of the proletariat"), the need for class struggle was denied, and with it the dialectics of historical materialism as proposed by Marx. From the mid-1920s on, Lukacs gave up his dialectical analysis of subject/object relations and instead found in Hegel the ground for a new "realism," essentially a

71. For the merging of the Dada/Surrealist object into the happening and ultimately into Conceptual art, with its consequent disappearance, see Domenico Nardone, "La scomparsa dell' ogetto d'arte," *Rivista di Psicologia dell' Arte* II, no. 2, June 1980, pp. 9–14.

72. A distinct, yet parallel, failure to become conscious of the fetish aspect of art has its counterpart in the U.S.S.R. Inattention to the bourgeois commodity value of the Surrealist object corresponds to inattention to the bureaucratic value (a species of market value) invested in Socialist Realist propaganda painting. In criticizing the concept of réalisme socialiste, Breton states that "nous contestons formellement qu'on puisse faire oeuvre d'art, ni même, en dernière analyse, oeuvre utile en s'attachant à n'exprimer que le *contenu manifeste* d'une époque. Ce que, par contre, le surréalisme se propose est l'expression de son *contenu latent*." See Breton, "Limites non-frontières du surréalisme," in *La clé des champs*, Paris, 1967, p. 21. Unfortunately, Breton was less perceptive about his own position within the politics of Surrealism, the weaknesses in Engel's version of dialectic materialism, or the autocratic implications of the Bolshevist conception of the party's right to power, a conception held equally by Lenin, Trotsky, and Stalin.

73. See *Les Vases communicants*, p. 170, where Breton, speaking of the future poet's overcoming of the split between action and dream, tries to avoid the implication of a "transcendental mediation": "Ce rapport [between action and dream] peut passer pour magique en ce sens qu'il consiste dans l'action inconsciente, immédiate, de l'interne sur l'externe et que se glisse aisément dans l'analyse sommaire d'une telle notion l'idée d'une médiation transcendante qui serait, du reste, plutôt celle d'un démon que d'un dieu. Le poète se dressera contre cette interprétation simpliste."

This content downloaded from
167.99.163.123 on Wed, 29 May 2024 14:04:00 +00:00
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

resignation to the failure of the proletarian class consciousness during the Stalinist era.[74] The Party and its purpose replaced the mediation of class consciousness, on the model of Leninist Bolshevism and the faith that the Party's—Stalin's—will could be successfully imposed on nature (the "voluntarism" of Stalin that encouraged him to speculate with agricultural experiments that relied on Lysenko's "dialectical materialist" biology, which of course failed to produce the crop yield predicted).

The Surrealist failure to be "in nature" while changing it fatally limited the vision of Breton's major work, *L'Amour fou* of 1937. In it he seemingly found a place for Lukacs's artist within a landscape governed by desire:

> Le désir, seul ressort du monde, le désir, seule rigueur que l'homme ait à connaître, où puis-je être mieux pour l'adorer qu'à l'intérieur du nuage? Les formes que, de la terre, aux yeux de l'homme prennent les nuages ne sont aucunement fortuites, elles sont augurales. Si toute une partie de la psychologie moderne tend à mettre ce fait en évidence, je m'assure que Baudelaire l'a pressenti dans cette strophe du *Voyage* où le dernier vers, tout en les chargeant de sens, fait écho d'une manière si troublante aux trois premiers: "Les plus riches cités, les plus grands paysages / Jamais ne contenaient l'attrait mystérieux / De ceux que le hasard fait avec les nuages / Et toujours le désir nous rendait soucieux!" / Me voici dans le nuage, me voici dans la pièce intensément opaque où j'ai toujours rêvé de pénétrer. J'erre dans la superbe salle de bains de buée.[75]

He continues, describing his search for the desired woman, as free from the confines of the contemplated landscape as a dreamer associating, a poet shaping wonders, a "possessed" (to use the term of his automatic text simulating madness) straying everywhere mentally. But the vision falters, and Breton has replaced all traces of the dialectics of historical materialism he once held dear with the principles of free association. The landscape here changes only in the mind's eye. The unmediated object now functions solely as a poetic projection: unsupported by the class consciousness of radical politics, the Surrealist falls back into the "landscape," a "*Paysan de Paris*" (the title of Aragon's book of 1924), prey to his unanalyzed desire. In this the fate of the Surrealist resembles that of the object that falls back (however awkwardly) into the modern art marketplace.

Finally, together with that great and tragic figure Trotsky, Breton devised an aesthetics that verges on the surrender of all prospects for a collective political role for art, and in which no place is left for the avant-garde object. Indeed, in their "Manifesto: Towards a Free Revolutionary Art" of 1938 (an unintended epitaph to a Surrealist revolutionary art), the aim is the minimal one, in a world whose communist ideals had been compromised by Stalinism, of "complete freedom for art." They actually expound an "anarchist regime of individual liberty" to promote intellectual creation. And the oscillations between interior and exterior of the Surrealist objects are to achieve a new equilibrium grounded in "psychoanalysis":

> The communist revolution is not afraid of art. It realizes that the role of the artist in a decadent capitalist society is determined by the conflict between the individual and various social forms which are hostile to him. This fact alone, insofar as he is conscious of it, makes the artist the natural ally of revolution. The process of *sublimation*, which here comes into play, and which psychoanalysis has analyzed, tries to restore the broken equilibrium between the integral "ego" and the outside elements it rejects. This restoration works to the advantage of the "ideal of self," which marshals against the unbearable present reality all those powers of the interior world, of the "self," which are *common to all men* and which are constantly flowering and developing.[76]

In little more than a year Trotsky will die, and Breton will already have found that grim variant of objective humour, *l'humour noir*, Freud's *Galgenhumor*. This wry "gallows humour," desperate and pessimistic, matches in terror and absurdity the lethal "communications" of the belligerents in the world of 1939–1945.

74. See Michael Löwy, "Lukacs and Stalinism," *New Left Review*, 91, May/June 1975, pp. 25–27.

75. "Desire, the only incentive in the world, desire, the only obligation man must recognize, where can I be better (placed) to adore it than at the interior of a cloud? The forms that clouds take in the eyes of man on earth are in no sense fortuitous, (rather) they are augurs. While a good part of modern psychology tends to bring this fact to (our) attention, I firmly believe that Baudelaire adumbrated it in this stanza from *The Voyage*, in which the last verse, even as it loads meaning onto the first three verses, echoes them in a very troubling way: 'The richest cities, the greatest landscapes / Never contained the mysterious attraction / Of (their counterparts) that chance makes with clouds / And desire always makes us anxious!' Here I am in the cloud(s), here I am in the intensely opaque room into which I've always dreamed of entering. I stroll in the superb bathroom of steam."

76. H. Chipp, *Theories of Modern Art*, Berkeley, 1968, pp. 483–486.

This content downloaded from
167.99.163.123 on Wed, 29 May 2024 14:04:00 +00:00
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms