Visual Surrealism: A History and Analysis of the Surrealist Image

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DESPITE the initial focus on automatic poetry as the central practice of Surrealism, André Breton’s *Manifesto of Surrealism* sparked the influential addition of visual art to the movement. The Manifesto outlined the underlying philosophy of Surrealism: it was to be a revolution opposed to bourgeois logic that resulted in wars and elitism—a movement that would extend beyond art with the goal of freeing the imagination.

Surrealism, as Breton explained it, valued the undervalued—“dreams, coincidences, correspondences, the marvelous, the uncanny; a reciprocal exchange, connecting conscious and unconscious thoughts.” The main medium of the movement was psychic automatism practiced through automatic writing. This technique involved allowing one to relax into a meditative state and write thoughts quickly without interference of the overactive mind. Breton and his collaborators believed that automatic writing enabled the free flow of imaginative thought from the mind to paper, eliminating the logical reflective aspects of thought.

Breton developed psychic automatism when the idea of a man cut in half by a window came suddenly to him—a evocative visual. Although it would be overly simplistic to cite this single point as the birth of Surrealism, this moment testifies to the importance of images in the beginning of Surrealism. Though the focus was on writing, Breton specifically noted the striking quality of visual descriptions in his praise of automatic text. In the *Manifesto*, he notes that his and Soupault’s writings in *The Magnetic Fields* contain “a considerable choice of images of a quality such that we would not have been capable of preparing a single one in longhand, a very special picturesque quality.”

The initial exclusion of visual art could not have been aversion the Surrealist image; his own praise is a testament to the importance of visual elements. Despite this, visual art was not explicitly accepted as a valid Surrealist expression at first. The central concern was how to achieve the aims of automatic writing using images instead. Breton valued automatism in part because it presented thoughts directly, avoiding representation, which was “an invitation to deceit.” He and others wondered how paintings, which took careful planning and execution, or photographs, with their artistic manipulation and instantaneous representation of reality, could capture the quick flow of unfiltered thought. Visuals were present in Surrealist thought from the start, but could visual arts be a way to liberate the imagination in the way Breton believed automatic writing did? Many of these concerns were a result of mistak-
ing automatic writing as the sole and definitive practice of Surrealism. Although a defining characteristic of Surrealism is “psychic automa-
tions,” Breton recognized this was not limited to writing, as long as the artist “proposes to express—verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner—the actual functioning of thought.”

In painting and photography, images replaced words, although words were not necessarily excluded. Although an observer can not read through an image the way they could an automa-
tic text, s/he can still observe the product of direct thought in a way similar to automatic writing.” Surrealist visual art could have as much, if not more, depth as automatic writing and offer multiple levels. On one level, the viewer could observe the objects and their arrangement, or one could focus on the technique, the intellectual meaning, or the interpretation of symbols and their own impressions of the painting. In addition to presenting the artist’s own inner thought, visual automatism could engage the observer as well.

Once Surrealism moved past the initial privilege of text over image, Breton increased the privileging of text over image, Breton increased the visual automatism in visual art. He used photographs in his own paintings, and Breton’s position on visual art was especially clear after he wrote Surrealism and Painting: “In this text, he justified the creation of images as “a means for making the products of the imagination materially visible” and described automatism for Surrealist work, when he took over editing the later editions of it. This stands as a sign that he supported visual work as an expression of Surrealism. Breton’s position on visual art was especially clear after he wrote Surrealism and Painting: “In this text, he justified the creation of images as “a means for making the products of the imagination materially visible” and described automatism for Surrealist work, when he took over editing the later editions of it. 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Breton’s position on visual art was especially clear after he wrote Surrealism and Painting: “In this text, he justified the creation of images as “a means for making the products of the imagination materially visible” and described automatism for Surrealism and its revolutionary force. He echoes Breton’s call to change the way people think by encouraging “investigation of areas which have been deliberately ignored or despised” and the end of a set of distant art to humanity. Surrealism claims for our waking life a freedom similar to that which we have in dreams.” In “La Ligne de vie,” an autobiograph-
ical explanation of his work, Magritte explains the importance of the interpreter step, the way he made instantaneous automatic connections with the painting and thus allowed his imagination to guide him. In addition to automatism and automatism, Ernst also used osculation and decalcomania. Decalco-
mancy is a process that Ernst developed in 1925. It consisted of spreading paint onto what was usually a canvas, then separating the two. Ernst used free to manipulate the paint by adjusting the two surfaces while they were in contact with each other. This allows the artist to create a layer of paint on a canvas and then separating the two. The result is a series of overlapping images—an egg, a shoe, a hat, a candle, a glass, and a hammer—each with a word written out of the jagged, metallic trees that grate across the forest into the foreboding sky. 33 A painting by René Magritte shows six panels with straightfor-
ward images—an egg, a shoe, a hat, a candle, a glass, and a hammer—each with a word written by Ernst. In the first step, Ernst employed grattage. Similar to frottage, this is Ernst’s invented placing a canvas thick with paint on top of a textured surface and scratch-
ing the paint over the canvas. For La Forêt, the result is crooked rows of rough edged metallic strips in dark colors. In the center is a thin orb that appears to rise out of the metallic strips. After this first step, Ernst interpreted the paint-
ing by observing it and embellishing details that he saw. The bird in the bottom center of the painting was added after the grattage stage was executed. Through these steps, frottage seems to provide greater access to the imagination than automatic writing. In the first step, Ernst freed himself from purpose-driven painting; without a plan and without his traditional painterly skills, he was able to engage in the automatism Breton described. With his evolving methods of painting, he made instantane-
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These images Magritte used a particular type of realism in a schematic style similar to that of illustrations, which resulted in flattened images like those found in Giorgio de Chirico's earlier paintings. The objects are clearly recognizable, but not necessarily realistic. This banality has an interesting effect on the viewer. By using a simple style, somewhat evocative of children's books, but not necessarily realistic. This banality has an interesting effect on the viewer. By using a simple style, somewhat evocative of children's books, but not necessarily realistic. This banality has an interesting effect on the viewer. By using a simple style, somewhat evocative of children's books, but not necessarily realistic. This banality has an interesting effect on the viewer. By using a simple style, somewhat evocative of children's books, but not necessarily realistic. This banality has an interesting effect on the viewer. By using a simple style, somewhat evocative of children's books, but not necessarily realistic. This banality has an interesting effect on the viewer.

Magritte's attention to words is also an important aspect of his work. He pointed out, "It sometimes happens that we are presented with something unknown simply by means of the word "sky" under a painting of a suitcase?" This technique of juxtaposing mismatched images and words, "The Key of Dreams" enables observers to make associations between the two, potentially unlocking their imagination. What could it mean to place the word "sky" under a painting of a suitcase? It was a challenge to observers to unlock this mystery, since Magritte refused to explain his paintings.

Magritte's photography provided access to the viewer's unconscious by directing the viewer to make connections between the objects portrayed in his photographs and to reflect inward. The frame cut-out—edited—the world to get at an altered space between reality and dreams. By focusing our attention to a specific area within the frame of the photo, the observer focuses on what s/he cannot normally see. Photography changes our experience of the normal. Man Ray's 1922 photograph, Morisque Coasi, aimed to present the world as symbol for our interpretation, in which turn revealed our unconscious thought. "This photograph is being analyzed in terms of its effect on the viewer, although it can also be analyzed as an expression of Man Ray's unconscious thought. The image is a woman staring straight into the camera. Her image is double-exposed; the result is a blurred, dreamy double-vision of her. Man Ray makes a Surrealist statement in his choice of both subject and method. As Rosalind Krauss suggests, continual return to the female body as a subject supported Breton's desire to join unconscious desire with reality. The subject's penetrating look and active stare is enlarged by the double-exposure of her eyes. By photographing the woman head-on, Man Ray forces us to acknowledge her as well as ourselves and our unconscious desires, whatever they may be. The image also serves as a two-jaw mirror where both subject and viewer reflect one another. Within Man Ray’s frame, we find a double arrow pointing back into ourselves, indicating the real subject. The photograph stands as a sign for ourselves. As a dream, by decoding the image, we decode ourselves. This idea contributes to the Surrealist interest in the desires and thoughts of the unconscious. It takes a photograph—something outside of and produced by us—to exteriorize our thoughts and better understand the interior of our mind.

Man Ray's oeuvre is diverse. Some of his photographic techniques achieved a greater degree of automatism, such as the rayogram. A rayogram is created by laying a transparent negative over objects, directing a ray of light through the image, and exposing them to light to capture an imprint of the objects. Other of Man Ray's photographs were unmanipulated, "straight" images of female figures, often his lovers or assistants. Through his use of these techniques and others, Man Ray's career proves that although Man Ray can find similarity between Surrealist works, there is no style distinct to Surrealism.

Raoel Ubac was most involved in the Surrealist movement from 1936-1939, and worked with photography until he returned to drawing and painting in 1945. His photographs serve as important contributions to Surrealist visual art in that they alter our perception of ordinary objects. Ubac joined the movement as a photographer who focused on "stretching the [object's] poetic significance to the fullest." He used various photographic methods to portray normal objects in a different, stark way in order to detach our ordinary experience from them, much like Magritte’s. Ubac’s photographs, exist as examples of divergent yet successful approaches to achieve formlessness, which opened his photos to diverse interpretation. Like Man Ray, Ubac developed a few automatic photographic methods for his own work: brulage, petrification and solarization. Brulage was a technique that involved exposing the image to heat from a burner, which "ripples and contorts the image". Petrification was a method that involved exposing the image to heat and light, which gives a sense of the violation of personal space. The distorted bodies conflict with our expectations of how photographed bodies should look. The effect is a disturbing, dream-like image that forces the viewer out of her ordinary experience. Visual art was a successful endeavor for the Surrealist project and became the main expression associated with the movement. Ernst’s and Magritte’s paintings, and Man Ray’s and Ubac’s photographs, exist as examples of divergent yet successful approaches to achieve formlessness, which opened his photos to diverse interpretation. These artists’ differing photographic techniques prove that Surrealism is more than a passing style; it is a movement that accommodates diverse and mysterious techniques as long as they are associated with the use of various media. Regardless of its success or failure to achieve true automatism, the strange, beautiful, marvelous juxtapositions found in Surrealist art is a violent, erotic, artistic movement in twentieth-century art.