The Message of Surrealist Art:
Automatism, Juxtaposition and Dreams

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“SURREALISM, noun, masc. Pure psychic automatism by which it is intended to express, either verbally or in writing, the true function of thought. Thought dictated in the absence of all control exerted by reason, and outside all aesthetic or moral preoccupations.”¹

- The Surrealist Manifesto, André Breton

"Up to now I have been inclined to consider Surrealists, who seem to have chosen me as their patron saint, as incurable nut cases. This young Spaniard [Salvador Dalí], however, with his candid, fanatical eyes and unquestionable technical skills has made me reconsider my opinion."²

-Sigmund Freud

Surrealism was a literary and philosophical movement pioneered by André Breton which would spiral into an art movement as well. Whereas the preceding Dadaist movement rejected society’s rationality and sought to create entirely irrational art, Surrealism reacted to the shortcomings of previous artwork and psychological thought by combining the unconscious and conscious mind to achieve hitherto impossible artistic creation and mental self-comprehension. The visual art of Surrealism was revolutionary in its aesthetics, but it was not a Dadaist mockery of society or art. Charles Millard of The Hudson Review wrote, regarding the movement, “Surrealism constantly sought to make art of life and to make of life an art.”³ Indeed, Surrealists intended profound meaning for their works, but demystifying the meaning of a given work can be an overwhelming
task. To fully appreciate the message of Surrealism, one must examine the influences, history, thought and artistic process behind it.

The Surrealist movement came about as the product of a clear group of influences. Its roots can be found in German Romanticism of the 18th and 19th centuries, Dadaism as well as the works of Giorgio de Chirico, Pablo Picasso and Sigmund Freud. Surrealism was like German Romanticism in that both were anti-rationalist, but Romanticism was anti-rationalist in its emotional nature, while Surrealism intended to express the unconscious and subconscious. Surrealists appreciated the Dadaists’ adventures in absurdity. Specifically, Dadaist Marcel Duchamp was admired for his combination of raw emotion, chance and self-reflection—a concept of large significance to Surrealists. The Dadaists had a “distaste for the inertia of the bourgeoisie,” who were, to them, not affected enough by the horrors of World War I. Dadaists were disturbed by the failures of a rational society which could allow such a war and created reactionary art via the lens of irrationality and absurdity. Surrealism did not share the Dadaist urge to destroy but instead sought to reinvent and correct the failings of artistic thought which, in the past, was solely conscious.

Giorgio De Chirico was considered to be the proto-surrealist, in that his work was highly characteristic of the movement, before the movement began. Surrealists admired his placement of unrelated objects, a method which would later be called incongruous combination, as well as his often conflicted visual perspective and realistic depictions of unreal images. De Chirico had been influenced by Arnold Böcklin and Friedrich Nietzsche and would influence the works of Max Ernst, Salvador Dalí and Yves Tanguy.

André Breton, who would be the leader of the Surrealist movement, admired Picasso and felt he was one of the first Surrealist artists (distinguishing between Surrealists and Surrealist artists would later become a point of significance). Breton saw Picasso’s paintings as conceptually
dreamlike and felt that Picasso, like the Surrealists, aimed to combine tangible reality with the dream-world. In this sense, Picasso was also a proto-surrealist.

Freud’s influence on the Surrealists cannot be understated. Before Freudian psychiatry, the world of dreams was dismissed as insignificant and the unconscious was unimportant and inexistent. Freud discovered the importance of the unconscious and dreams and the Surrealists knew that this must be combined with reality in order to create a truer surreality. Surrealists had to find a way to allow their unconscious and subconscious to manifest themselves in their work, and so a number of techniques were created with that goal. Putting the unconscious on paper would become the main principle of Surrealism, and even throughout the movement’s many changes, it would remain the underlying goal.

Surrealism’s humble beginnings were in automatic writing. Automatic writing was meant to be the extraction of free association psychoanalysis from oneself, wherein whatever comes to mind is what is written, with no conscious editing. André Breton and Philippe Soupault together wrote The Magnetic Fields in 1922 using the automatic writing technique. The words were written thoughtlessly without any conscious interference that could destroy the unconscious intent. Breton considered this to be the truest form of poetry, as it came not from the mind but from the soul. Breton described it as “A monologue uttered as rapidly as possible on which no judgments are passed by the subject’s critical faculties.” Simply reflecting on one’s dreams shows the creativity present in the unconscious and subconscious. Rationalism only suppresses this imagination. Automatic writing aims to restore the unconscious mind’s imagination and create art more meaningful and more human than ever before produced. Surrealism is an attempt to turn raw thought into art without doing anything that might spoil it.

In 1924, Breton and a group of similar thinkers began working together on the Surrealist review Littérature. In the same year, Breton wrote The Surrealist Manifesto in order to state the
collective aspirations and intentions of the newly formed group.\textsuperscript{13} Their goal was “To express pure thought, freed of all controls imposed by reason and by moral and social prejudices.”\textsuperscript{14} Breton famously referred to Surrealism in the manifesto as “pure psychic automatism,” to express the “true function of thought.”\textsuperscript{15} Unconscious art had never been made before, but Surrealists hoped it would replace all other artistic creation due to its truer intent.

But a problem was presented to surrealists: how does one achieve automatism in the visual arts? Breton felt, at least at the time of the first manifesto, that it could not be done. An art such as painting was too deliberate and time-consuming to possibly be made automatic; there would be no way to paint fast enough to allow the unconscious onto the canvas.\textsuperscript{16} But artists were eager to attempt to bypass such restrictions as imposed by Breton. Joan Miró was one of the first Surrealist visual artists; his work was appreciated by Breton due to both its complex imagery and the words featured within it, which seemed like non sequiturs.\textsuperscript{17} Surely such a display could only be automatic.

Max Ernst’s collages were also of great interest to Breton. A former Dadaist, Ernst began using techniques such as automatic drawing, frottage, photo-collages as well as others that blur the line between Dadaism and the slowly forming notion of Surrealism. Automatic drawing is the idea of drawing an image without any conscious interference of the process, simply letting whatever is thought to be drawn, thus allowing the unconscious to be exposed on paper; it is the analog to automatic writing. Frottage, Ernst felt, was another form of automatic art wherein the artist is separated from consciously interfering with the art work; the artist uses textured objects to scrape paint onto the canvas. It was at this point that Ernst came upon one of the most important aspects of Surrealism, one he had found in De Chirico’s work: incongruous combination. Ernst explained it as the “systematic exploitation of an accidental or deliberate meeting of two unrelated entities on a plane that is related to neither—and the spark of poetry that is kindled by the coming together of
those realities.” The concept of juxtaposing unrelated imagery became the chief way of achieving Surrealist visual art, where many had felt that true automatism was not possible.

While automatism and incongruous combination were both large concepts behind literary and visual Surrealism, the one remaining concept was that of dreams. Before the first manifesto, Breton had been working at a psychiatric center. He used the Freudian technique of free association, where the patients are meant to say whatever it is that comes to their mind, without any conscious censorship. This technique had been the inspiration for automatic writing, but the other aspect of psychoanalysis that fascinated Breton was dream analysis. He drew the patients’ dreams in order to analyze them. This would lead to those Surrealist visual artists who painted dreams and dreamlike events. Surrealists believed that only in dreams is the mental barrier between conscious and unconscious removed, and, as a result, illustration of these dreams is a reflection of the entire psyche, not just one part or the other.

With this concept in place, the distinction between the two branches of Surrealist visual art became apparent. One side was that of automatism, which had branched out of literary Surrealism. The automatic artists included André Masson, Joan Miró and the early works of Yves Tanguy and Max Ernst. The dream painters came a little later to the movement, but compromised the larger part of the Surrealist visual arts. René Magritte, Salvador Dalí and the later work of Yves Tanguy and Max Ernst were examples of Surrealist art based in dreams and their meanings. De Chirico was also an inspiration to the dream-based painters, as they saw the lifelike depictions of the unreal in his works as creative and new, and to depict the unreal world of dreams, such technique was necessary. Surrealists were aware that the concept of Surrealist painting seemed paradoxical due to painting being, to some, too actively conscious, and while some rejected it at first, it grew nonetheless.

As the group’s ideas began to shift, Breton saw the need to refocus its ideas. He was willing to adapt to some changes the group had made but also wanted to maintain the movement’s purity.
In 1929 he wrote *The Second Surrealist Manifesto*. In it, he stated “Regardless of the varied activities of all those who claim allegiance to Surrealism, it must be admitted that the movement’s main ambition is to produce a general serious *crisis of consciousness*, both in the intellectual and moral realm.” This “*crisis of consciousness*” he mentions is the paradox in which any art consciously produced suffers from the mind’s rationality crippling its unconscious creativity.

Breton began to reject automatic writing, which he had once seen as the archetype of Surrealist expression, for he now felt that one needed to consciously manipulate the product of unconscious, automatic invention. Surrealism had become an art movement, not just a theoretical synthesis of art and life. The often political nature of the Surrealist literature had caused it to only affect its native country and Surrealist political associations fluctuated rapidly as few parties were interested in their aid; Surrealist painting was much more digestible for the masses, and so it was fully integrated into the movement. It is at this point that Surrealism snowballed into a method of artistic expression and it becomes clearer to us what the true meaning of Surrealism was.

With Freud having, to an extent, demystified the world of dreams and shown their significance, they are now a part of life. Once dreams are as understandable as reality, the two will merge into Surreality. This higher level of human spiritual understanding was the goal of the Surrealists. Such a goal is difficult to achieve. The Surrealists attempted to reach this understanding through their art; all Surrealist work is meant to display the unconscious and subconscious in a way that will strengthen human understanding of them both. As that understanding is strengthened, Surreality approaches fruition.

Even with the understanding of the Surrealists’ intention, it can be difficult to see how their artwork was a reflection of this mindset. Analysis of Surrealist painting is difficult. The art is meant to shock, utilizing incongruous combination and disquieting imagery. The seemingly nonsensical arrangement is meant to express the hidden meaning of the subconscious thought underneath and
the inability of all but the initiated to see this meaning parallels the inability of all but a psychoanalyst to interpret one’s dreams.\footnote{27}

In preparing to analyze Surrealist art, one must keep in mind that the artist is reproducing their mind, not creating something new. The interest was in the method of reflecting one’s unconscious, not in what those reflections actually appeared as. As a result, simply visual inspection of Surrealist art is futile; one must consider how it reflects the mind of the artist.\footnote{28}

The common themes of eroticism and death in Surrealist art must not be seen as transgressive. Freud believed in the subconscious drives of Eros and Thanatos, the former being a sexual drive of life, the latter being the drive of death. If these are the subconscious drives within us, then surely it is only logical that they would be common themes in Surrealist art.\footnote{29} Even with all of the above understood, Surrealist art can be difficult to understand without reference to specific examples.

Max Ernst’s \textit{The Elephant Celebes} (above), is meant to show the fear and irrationality in one’s mind during war, and the irrationality of the war itself (these themes make even more sense considering Ernst’s Dadaist past). Ernst had served in World War I and had been deeply affected by
it, giving him even more insight as to the mind of one at war. While the elephant has been interpreted to represent the fear-inducing British tanks being seen for the first time, the headless woman likely represents Ernst’s sister, whose death traumatized him. In reality, a tank and Ernst’s dead sister would never appear side by side in his life, but inside Ernst’s mind during the war, these thoughts were mixed together, without the rationality of reality separating them. There is no inherent organization of the unconscious, and so all that was causing him discomfort at the time was simultaneous, thus *The Elephant Celebes* is an excellent depiction of the unconscious mind of one disturbed. Also notable is the use of incongruous combination; the headless woman and the elephant are individually recognizable, but together they confuse the viewer, depicting the feelings expressed above. Ernst’s painting *Man Shall Know Nothing of This* also combined familiar imagery in a similar way.

![Image of René Magritte’s *Pleasure*](image)

René Magritte’s *Pleasure* (above) contains both morbid and erotic aspects that are signature elements of Surrealism for reasons mentioned earlier pertaining to Freud’s theory of the Eros and Thanatos drives. One interpretation of the image is a reimagining of the story of Adam and Eve where Eve is a young girl eating a live bird rather than the forbidden fruit. The image explores the sexuality of the young girl (a topic of great interest to some Surrealist artists) and the corruption of innocence and loss of virginity. These topics are also explored in Ernst’s *The Robing of the Bride*. The
image is not as straightforward, even after interpretation, as *The Elephant Celebes*, but it could be seen as a representation of the mind’s simultaneous Eros and Thanatos drives, combined in ways that seem perverse and frightening, but inside the subconscious are commonplace.

Paul Delvaux’s *Venus Asleep* (above) is a dream painting which portrays a number of Freudian concepts, particularly that of Eros and Thanatos. Venus sleeps on a bed in the center of the image, and the rest of the painting is meant to be her dream. She dreams of death, but death approaches her as if to embrace her. Delvaux wanted to paint the anguish caused by the German bombings of Brussels, and this dream painting does so in showing the Thanatos instinct in one’s mind, accompanied inappropriately, but always by Eros. The contrast between life and death, nude women and their bleak surroundings, is one that Delvaux uses often in his paintings to create a sense of disquiet and anxiety, emotions induced in the reader but also reflected from the bombings. *Les Belles de Nuit* is another example of this concept at work. Life and death together—Eros and Thanatos—are just another manifestation of the incongruous combination that makes Surrealism so distinctive.
Two of Dalí’s most striking works are *The Persistence of Memory* (above, left) and *Autumn Cannibalism* (above, right). In *The Persistence of Memory*, nothing is clear in the sleeping man’s dream; a barren landscape is decorated with fluid clocks and other strange objects. It is the mystery of the image that Dalí utilizes to create an image of the unconscious. *Autumn Cannibalism*, on the other hand, is a more political piece. Along with the similar painting, *Soft Construction with Boiled Beans* (*Premonition of Civil War*), it depicts the gruesome horror of the Spanish Civil War. The word “cannibalism” alone being used to describe civil war is striking yet accurate. Spain has been transformed into some horrible organic mess that is devouring itself. The painting can be seen as the view from the collective unconscious of all of Spain as it witnesses its own self-destruction in war.
Joan Miró’s *The Birth of the World* (above) attempts to display, as the title suggests, the creation of Earth as well as human fertilization (a sperm-shaped figure can be seen in the center of the canvas). Miró was more of an automatic painter than a dream painter, and he allowed paint to drip down the canvas in order to, automatically, create the background. The central imagery was painted in a style like automatic drawing and the entire painting is meant to draw parallels in the viewer’s mind between the creation of the world and the creation of a human life. It makes sense that the Surrealists would value a soul as much as the entire world; both were filled with unexplored complexity, which the Surrealists hoped to reveal.40

Ernst’s experimental painting techniques, Delvaux’s disquieting contrast, Dalí’s dream paintings and Miró’s automatism are just some of the ways that the Surrealists brought their mentality into the visual art. In addition, André Masson glued sand to paper and painted over it as his own form of automatic painting.41 The Surrealists felt that form and color are not the main concern in creating artwork; it is what is behind the painting that is of true importance. The art should be interesting on a conceptual level first and a visual level only as an afterthought.42 Regardless, such creative minds could not help but decorate their artwork with beautiful and horrifying aesthetic technique. The aesthetics could easily be utilized to reinforce the concept; there was no need to fully throw away the visual artistic value of the painting if it could supplement the underlying concept.43

Strikingly parallel to the death of Dada at the end of World War I, Surrealism began to weaken at the end of World War II. That is not to say the movement died, but that many of the members of the previously close group of artists would now move on to personal projects, no longer closely associated with the movement, though the influence would remain. Some of the original members, such as founder Breton, remained true to the decelerating movement.44 The post-war Surrealist movement would continue to produce art up until the death of Breton in 1966.
When De Chirico removed objects from rationality and thus restored their meaning, he unknowingly began one of the most important art movements in history. Breton, Miró, Dalí and countless others saw the beauty in combining the unrelated to create something new with the characteristics of neither, and yet so much more significant; two realities were juxtaposed to create a surreal image. The concepts of automatism, which Breton stated was “A limit toward which the poet or artist should tend…toward the limit of automatism and away from the limit of rational control,” as well as dream painting and incongruous combination all made up a philosophy that was the driving force of the Surrealist movement. This goes to show the potential of a movement which started out as nearly incomprehensible automatic writing and poetry. Surrealism could not have existed without the inspiration of Freud, De Chirico, Picasso, Dadaism, the minds of Breton, Miró and Ernst and the amazing display of collective creativity and mentality between them. Though the movement could not survive forever, its impact was great and can be seen in the art of today, but also in modern psychoanalysis, philosophy and in our understanding of art in the first half of the 20th century.

The message of Surrealist art is as follows: there is a world in the mind that evades ordinary examination; we must embrace this world, our unconscious, and allow it to flourish until it becomes as understandable and ordinary as our reality, in order to create a Surreality. The Surrealists succeeded in this goal and displayed Surreality in every piece of literature, poem, drawing, painting and any other work of art that they created.

Patrick Waldberg wrote in his book Surrealism, “It [Surrealism] is not much a school, but a sate (sic) of mind. Nobody belongs to the movement, but everybody is part of it. Is Surrealism disappearing? No, because it is neither here nor there: it is everywhere. It is a phantom, a brilliant obsession which, by a wonderful transformation, has become surreal.” In this sense, the Surrealist movement succeeded. The Surrealists have died. Their art will never truly be made again, because
without the collective understanding and the connection that the original Surrealists had, all new Surrealist art would be similar only in aesthetic, but not in true meaning. But regardless of this, the world was shown a surreal existence and understanding where reality and dreams were combined.
This revelation cannot be undone and thus, Surrealism is immortal.
Notes

1 Arthur C. Danto, “Seeking ‘Convulsive Beauty,’” Nation 274, no. 9, (2002): 32. I found Breton’s definition in this article, but the quote itself comes from Breton’s 1924 Le Manifeste du Surréalisme.


6 Ibid., 13.


9 Waldberg, 28.

10 Ibid., 13-14.


12 Schneede, 21.

13 Waldberg, 16.

14 Ibid., 12.

15 Ibid., 11.

16 Simon, 4.

17 Danto, 34.

18 Schneede, 19.

19 Ibid., 20-21.

20 Isaacs, 47.

21 Schneede, 32.

22 Ibid., 33-34.

23 Ibid., 29.

24 Ibid., 29-30.


26 Ibid., 16.
27 Isaacs, 48.

28 Sweeney, 435.

29 Simon, 5.

30 Max Ernst, *The Elephant Celebes*, 1921.

31 Wilson, 7.


33 Wilson, 8. The Adam and Eve theory was thought of by Werner Schmalenbach, director of the Nordrhein-Westfalen Collection.

34 Paul Delvaux, *Venus Asleep*, 1944.

35 Wilson, 10-11.


37 Ibid., *Autumn Cannibalism*, 1936.

38 Wilson, 12-13.


40 Wilson, 15.

41 Ibid., 6.

42 Isaacs, 47.

43 Ibid., 48.

44 Waldberg, 42-44.


47 Sweeney, 433.

48 Waldberg, 45.
Bibliography

This book aimed to address nearly every aspect of Surrealism and was one of the most useful of all of my sources. The thesis of the book was that Surrealism was a psychological-based movement which aimed to combine dreams and reality. This book should be the first to look at for anyone interested in the topic.

This source saw Surrealism as more of a protest-based movement, not unlike Dada, which was something I came to disagree with throughout my research. The main thesis was that Surrealism protested against logic and rationale. This source could be useful for one looking for an opposing point of view on Surrealism, but is not useful when trying to create a unified understanding of the movement.

This source was moderately useful, but only in discussing Surrealism as it pertains to Dada and the overarching mentality of both, which can be at times a vague connection. The thesis is likely that both Dada and Surrealism stem from the same rejection of previous notions of the ordinary, and this is correct in some ways, but not specific enough to Surrealism in order to be truly useful for the research of this project.

This book was extremely helpful in my research. The primary essay was quite useful in understanding the connection between Surrealist mentality and Surrealist visual art. The thesis was that Freudian psychology could be seen as the inspiration for incongruous combination which was the unifying concept of all Surrealist visual art. This in addition to the large number of color reproductions of Surrealist paintings and notes on each make this an important resource to anyone trying to understand the Surrealist visual arts.

This source was rather useful in drawing connections between the Surrealists and their view of dreams and society. The thesis is that, even when political, Surrealist art is timeless due to its focus on the human psyche, which is unchanging throughout time. It was moderately useful in my research.

This source was incredibly useful due to its to-the-point information and high readability. The main thesis was that all the Surrealists were working together to encompass Freudian dream analysis into artwork. This was a very useful source for my research.
G. Danzio, Arthur C. "Seeking 'Convulsive Beauty.'" Nation 274, no. 9 (March 11, 2002): 32-36. http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=ulh&AN=6325717&site=src-live (accessed May 13, 2009). This article was interesting and had a good amount of info on the activities of the Surrealists. The thesis was like that of Fred Stern’s article, all the Surrealists were highly interconnected and all saw the importance of the dream world merging with reality. It was a relatively useful source, but gave a lot of information that I already had found.


This source, while technically a review of two books on Surrealism, reviews the movement’s history in a wordy but intelligent way. There was much discussion of Surrealism’s connection with Socialism, which was a connection I felt insignificant in the discussion of Surrealist art. The thesis was that Surrealism sought to rebuild art where others had failed. The article was not that useful compared to other sources, but did contain some useful information.


This source was very useful in understanding Surrealism’s evolution from Dadaism and the differences between them. It also reflects the changes of the products of Surrealism, from the literature, to the automatic visual art and then the dream art. The thesis is that Surrealist art is created from the fusion of unrelated entities, incongruous combination. This was a very useful source.


This book was useful in some ways and difficult in others. The information was high in quality and quantity but much of it was wordy and difficult to read. Also, much of the book focuses on the politics of Surrealism, which was not a topic I was interested in. The source was useful, but only as a supplement to the other sources.

The remaining entries in this bibliography are for online reproductions of Surrealist paintings.


http://wahooart.com/A55A04/w.nsf/OPRA/BRUE-5ZKCUS/$File/Joan%20Mir%C3%A0%20The%20Birth%20of%20the%20World.JPG (accessed May 14, 2009).