

The canonisation of Surrealism in the United States

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In a pointed assessment of the first show of Surrealism in New York, in 1932, the *New York Times* art critic asked, 'How much of the material now on view shall we esteem "art," and how much should be enjoyed as laboratory roughage'?¹ The question encompassed the problem Surrealism posed for art history because it essentially went unanswered. Even after the 1936 endorsement by the Museum of Modern Art in a show organized by its founding director Alfred Barr (1902-1981), Surrealism continued to have a vexed relationship with the canon of modern art. Above all, the enterprise of canonisation is ironic for Surrealism – the Surrealists were self-consciously aiming to overthrow the category of art, but simultaneously participating in a tradition of avant-gardism defined by such revolution.² Framing his exhibition, Barr presented Surrealism as both the most recent avant-garde export, and also as a purposeful departure from the avant-garde's experimentation in form. Instead, Barr stressed that Surrealism focused on an anti-rationalist approach to representation. Though Barr made a strong case to integrate Surrealism into the broader understanding of modernism in the 1930s, and Surrealism was generally accepted by American audiences as the next European avant-garde, by the 1950s formalist critics in the U.S. positioned Surrealism as a disorderly aberration in modernism's quest for abstraction. Surrealism's political goals and commercial manifestations (which Barr's exhibition had implicitly sanctioned by including cartoons and advertisements) became more and more untenable for the movement's acceptance into a modern art canon that was increasingly being formulated around an idea of the autonomous self-reflexive work of art.

However, by the 1960s Surrealism's exclusion from the modernist canon advocated by Clement Greenberg (1909-1994) and younger scholars such as Michael Fried (b.1939) clashed with the increased relevancy of Surrealism's fantastical and everyday vision of modern life. As Surrealism's hybrid quality became a point of interest for artists in the 1960s thanks in part to Pop Art, MoMA's new curator, William Rubin (1927-2006), presented Surrealism as a crucial forerunner for contemporary art. Rubin's exhibition *Dada, Surrealism, and Their Heritage* (1968) was an attempt to incorporate Dada

¹ Edward Alden Jewell, 'From Fatin-Latour to Surrealisme', *New York Times* (January 17, 1932). Jewell was writing in response to in response to the *Surréalisme* exhibition at the Julien Levy Gallery in January 1932. Levy's exhibition included painting, sculpture, photography, collage, books and film.

² For more on Surrealism's contradictions and relationship to art in France in the 1920s and 1930s, see Kim Grant's excellent study *Surrealism and the Visual Arts: Theory and Reception*, Cambridge University Press, 2005.

and Surrealism into the modernist canon, but Rubin did not realize that the parameters of the canon itself were being actively re-evaluated in light of the expanded field of artistic production. Critics disdained Rubin's didactic approach for draining the lifeblood from movements that were inherently unruly and subversive, yet Rubin's exhibition allowed Surrealism to gain a foothold in the modern art canon. Then, in 1985, Jane Livingston's (b.1944) and Rosalind Krauss's (b.1941) exhibition *L'Amour Fou: Surrealism and Photography* challenged Rubin's stylistic positioning of Surrealism by tackling Surrealism's theoretical underpinnings. Though the exhibition's scope was limited to Surrealist photography, by explicitly dispensing with the formalist understanding of modern art, it nonetheless opened up discourse on Surrealism in the USA; both from those scholars who sought to examine Surrealism beyond its formal qualities and perhaps particularly by those who challenged Krauss's narrow focus. This article sketches a brief survey of a half-century of Surrealism's reinterpretation in the United States by American curators to give a richer picture of the complications and contradictions that Surrealism presented to the formation of a canon for modern art.

Surrealism in the 1930s

The first time Surrealism received institutional recognition in the United States was in 1931, when the Wadsworth Athenaeum, an established museum in Hartford Connecticut, hosted an exhibition of the then seven-year-old movement. The exhibition had been orchestrated in large part by Julien Levy (1906-1981), who had opened an art gallery that year.³ Instead of hosting the first U.S. exhibition of the new movement in his newly established space in New York, Levy recognized the value of having Surrealism's initial presentation in a more official institution – a strategic way of lending the movement the endorsement of a recognized art museum before he presented it in his commercial gallery.⁴

Despite these earlier exhibitions of Surrealism in the USA, the movement was still largely uncharted territory. Modern art in general was relatively new on U.S. shores. There were only a few major institutions where Americans could see the twentieth century avant-garde work that had emerged in Europe. One notorious example was the

³ For more on Julien Levy, see Ingrid Schaffer and Lisa Jacobs, *Julien Levy: Portrait of an Art Gallery*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1998.

⁴ *Newer Super-realism* was held at the Wadsworth Athenaeum in Hartford, Connecticut in 1931. It was organized by A. Everett 'Chick' Austin, the director of the museum, and James Thrall Soby, with the cooperation of Julien Levy, whose gallery then hosted a version of the show. In an interview, Levy discussed how he had been the one to import all the works that had been in the show, and for commercial reasons had let Austin host the first Surrealism show, hoping that a museum exhibition would bring prestige to the movement which he could then capitalize on when he displayed the works in his gallery; Julien Levy, interview with Paul Cummings, Archives of American Art, May 30, 1975. For more on this exhibition, see Deborah Zlotsky, "'Pleasant Madness' in Hartford: The First Surrealist Exhibition in America," *Arts Magazine*, 60: 6 (February 1986): 55-61.

Armory Show of 1913, generally credited for waking American audiences from their parochial aesthetic habits. The exhibition of the *Société Anonyme* at the Brooklyn Museum in 1926, and the establishment of the Philips Collection in Washington DC in 1921 and the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1929 helped to bring increased attention to modern art in all its diversity, but nonetheless, the experimentation that educated audiences accepted in advanced art still tended toward abstraction.⁵

When Alfred Barr, founding director of the Museum of Modern Art, began planning the exhibition *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* set to open in 1936, he conceived it in tandem with his now more famous exhibition of that year, *Cubism and Abstract Art*.⁶ Barr understood Cubism and Surrealism as representing interrelated though divergent aesthetic foundations for modern art. In the introduction to *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism*, Barr described *Cubism and Abstract Art* as 'diametrically opposed in both spirit and esthetic principles to the present [Dada and Surrealism] exhibition'.⁷ And yet, he included several of the same artists – at least twenty-two – in both shows.⁸ Barr even pulled a Picasso painting (*The Bather*, 1929) from the traveling version of *Cubism and Abstract Art* so that he could include it in *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism*.⁹ Eventually, *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* was billed both in press releases and in the exhibition catalogue's preface as the second in what was to be a series of five exhibitions designed to highlight important movements in modern art to the American public. The subsequent three

⁵ Barr wrote to a lender, 'Although your loan was one of the most exasperating to many of our art loving friends, I hope you don't mind. I feel sure that in a few years from now, when the Surrealist conception of beauty is more generally accepted, the *Object with a Parrot* will be seen as a seriously humorous work of art'. Alfred Barr, letter to Mrs. Kenneth F. Simpson, March 10, 1937, MoMA Archives, NY.

⁶ Sidney Janis, a dealer on the Museum's advisory committee, had suggested presenting the material as one large exhibition but this idea was rejected because of space constraints. Sidney Janis, interview with Paul Cummings, Tape 1, Side 2, March 29, 1972, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

⁷ Barr, 'Introduction', *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1936, 9. In a letter to another lender, he wrote, 'Late in November we shall open an exhibition illustrating the opposite tendency – the interest in fantastic subject matter. This will be entitled Fantastic-Surrealist art'. Alfred Barr, letter to Dan Fellows Platt, October 15, 1936, MoMA Archives NY.

⁸ Among these were Jean Arp, Alexander Calder, Giorgio de Chirico, Alberto Giacometti, Marcel Duchamp, Max Ernst, Vasily Kandinsky, Paul Klee, Francis Picabia, Pablo Picasso, André Masson, Joan Miró, Yves Tanguy, Man Ray, Kasimir Malevich, Laszlo Maholy-Nagy, Wyndham Lewis, Kurt Schwitters, Henri Rousseau, Julio Gonzales, César Domela-Nieuwenhuis, and Herbert Bayer. This overlap means that about 20 percent of the artists exhibited in the *Cubism and Abstract Art* show were re-positioned in *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism*. Of the reaction, the American artists at the time had to these two exhibitions, art historian Robert C. Hobbs writes, '...many of the stylistic distinctions did not make sense to them. Picasso, for example, was both a Cubist and a Surrealist, but some of his most Cubist works seemed more Surrealist to the Americans than his so-called Surrealist works'. Robert C. Hobbs, 'Early Abstract Expressionism and Surrealism,' *Art Journal*, 45: 4, Winter 1985, 299.

⁹ Barr wrote to the owner of the work that '[t]his is one of the few pictures we wish to include in both exhibitions'. Alfred Barr, letter to M. Bignour, October 5, 1936, MoMA Archives NY.

exhibitions – which focussed on untrained American artists, realism and Magic Realism, and Romantic Art – demonstrate that under Barr's leadership, MoMA's presentation of modern art tended toward representation rather than abstraction. For Barr, abstraction was already an accepted tradition of the avant-garde and he openly acknowledged in the preface to *Cubism and Abstract Art* that '[e]xcept in a few of its aspects this exhibition is in no sense a pioneer effort.'¹⁰ Instead, Barr considered his Surrealism exhibition experimental in a way that his previous exhibitions had not been. Reflecting on - and defending – his presentation of Surrealism, Barr wrote to the museum's president:

... that the Museum has not in the past, except in architecture and industrial art, played the role of the pioneer in its exhibitions. It has rather shown things which have been generally accepted or which in any case are already fairly familiar to the interested public. The present exhibition is in most of its aspects an exception to this rule....¹¹

Barr believed that the Surrealism exhibition was unique in charting new territory of a still unfolding movement. He was also conscious that the aesthetics of Surrealism ran counter to what had been accepted as modern art, and that was why he was being called upon to defend some of his choices to the trustees of the museum:

I think that the heart of the misunderstanding lies in the fact that the exhibition has been assembled upon a Fantastic-Surrealist aesthetic rather than the more usually accepted aesthetic of form and technique expressed through the conventional media of painting and sculpture. A good many people will always object to any new aesthetic The aesthetic of form and color and of distorted or disintegrated objects which so exasperated people in the Armory Show is now generally accepted but the aesthetic of Surrealist fantasy, incongruity, spontaneity and humor, though it is already a dozen or twenty years old, is still exasperating to some of our friends, who are likely to call it silly or absurd (the adjectives I think have not changed since 1913).¹²

Barr stresses that while the aesthetic of form had once been ridiculed, twenty years onward, art audiences were now more comfortable with formal experimentation. Yet Barr did not shy away from the elements of Surrealism that were 'exasperating' and

¹⁰ Alfred Barr, 'Preface', *Cubism and Abstract Art*, New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1936, 9.

¹¹ Alfred Barr, letter to A. Conger Goodyear, January 1937, A. Conger Goodyear Scrapbook, MoMA Archives NY.

¹² Alfred Barr, letter to A. Conger Goodyear, January 1937, A. Conger Goodyear Scrapbook, MoMA Archives NY.

exhibited them alongside more abstract artists practicing in Surrealism. Barr recognized that '[s]uch an exhibition takes us off the beaten path'.¹³

Barr's exhibition also differed dramatically from earlier iterations of Surrealism in that it placed Surrealism firmly within an art historical context.¹⁴ Barr accomplished this in two ways – first, he refused to let the Surrealists dictate the planning of the exhibition, instead creating an installation that was as straightforward and didactic as possible. Not only was the exhibition 'not an official Surrealist manifestation' (much to the disapproval of the movement's leader André Breton), but secondly, Barr situated Surrealism in a 500-year-lineage of fantastic art.¹⁵ Thus the context for the exhibition was not exclusively modern art, following Barr's understanding of modernism as both a revolt from and continuity of tradition. In letters, Barr bristled at the arrogance of Breton to think he could dictate what was included in the exhibition, asserting the integrity of the institution to frame Surrealism as the curator saw fit.¹⁶

By the conclusion of the exhibition, Barr (thanks to Margaret Scolari Barr, and Duchamp)¹⁷ had resolved the disagreements with both the trustees and the artists involved in the show and was gratified that the exhibition had served to expose the public to Surrealism. Barr wrote to the Director of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston: 'The exhibition was one of the most controversial ever held by the Museum, and we hope served its purpose in making a report to the public upon one of the most original and conspicuous of contemporary movements'.¹⁸ Even as he placed Surrealism within a long art historical tradition, Barr reveals that his primary hope for the show was merely reportage, rather than canonisation. Barr's objective was successfully met not only by the

¹³ Alfred Barr, letter to Dan Fellows Platt, October 15, 1936, MoMA Archives NY. In a 1955 internal report, the exhibition was described less generously, perhaps reflective of mid-century attitudes toward Surrealism: '*Fantastic Art, Dada and Surrealism* was the name of this show put on by Barr over the protests of the trustees. It was a historical survey of the strange, the outré, and the ridiculous in art....' Rudi Blesh, 'Fifty Years of Modern Art in America,' 1955, Museum Collection Files, MoMA Archives NY.

¹⁴ As Tessel Bauduin notes, the Surrealists themselves had already sought to build an art history for themselves but 'it was Barr who placed artists such as Bosch and Brueghel in such a prominent relation to surrealism'. Tessel M. Bauduin, 'Fantastic Art, Barr, Surrealism', *Journal of Art Historiography* 17, December 2017, 1. While Barr was clearly familiar with Surrealist texts and concepts, he opted for the broader literary category of the 'fantastic' within which to place Surrealism when it came to the visual arts.

¹⁵ Alfred Barr, letter to Roland Penrose, August 11, 1936, MoMA Archives NY. Barr also mentions the disagreement with Breton and Éluard in letters to Salvador Dali, Jean Arp, Marcel Duchamp and Max Ernst. In a letter of July 13, 1936, Paul Éluard listed the Surrealists' demands for Barr's exhibition, to which Barr refused to conform.

¹⁶ Alfred Barr, letter to Jean Arp, August 7, 1936, MoMA Archives NY.

¹⁷ Anne Umland, 'Surrealism and The Museum of Modern Art: "A Serious Affair"', lecture 27 November 2017, *Networks, Museums and Collections: Surrealism in the United States* conference, organized by the German Center for Art History, Paris, 27-29 November 2017.

¹⁸ Alfred Barr, letter to George Harold Edgell, Esq., of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, March 10 1937, MoMA Archives NY.

50,000 people who visited the exhibition, but by the scores of reviews of the show, which for the most part avoided the question of artistic merit, and instead commented on the variety and novelty of the works on display.

Barr had given Surrealism the Museum's institutional endorsement, but a double-edged one. He had underscored the uncertain legacy of Surrealism in his foreword to the exhibition catalogue when he, rather cavalierly, stated: Once Surrealism is 'no longer a cockpit of controversy, it will doubtless be seen as having produced a mass of mediocre pictures ..., a fair number of excellent and enduring works of art, and even a few masterpieces'.¹⁹ Perhaps the true sign of whether Barr considered Surrealist works to be valuable was if he urged the museum to purchase them for the collection. By 1936, he had already acquired Salvador Dali's *Persistence of Memory* (1931), and from the exhibition he also was able to obtain Rene Magritte's *False Mirror* (1929).²⁰ Years later in 1946, after much lobbying, Meret Oppenheim's *Object* (1936) also entered the collection.

In addition to providing Surrealism with an art historical lineage, Barr also recognised its commercial and vernacular associations. MoMA's initial endorsement of Surrealism did not initially secure the place of Surrealism within the fine art canon, but opened the movement up to further pilfering in the realm of mass culture. These commercial manifestations were often facilitated by Surrealists themselves - or those artists associated with Surrealism in the minds of the public, even if, like Salvador Dali in 1939, they had been officially expelled from the movement by Breton. Thus, the immediate aftermath of Barr's exhibition was public exposure to Surrealism not only in the museum, but also in the marketplace as Surrealist-inspired window displays, advertisements, and movie sequences circulated in American mass culture. As a writer for *Scribner's* noted, while Surrealism was currently being used to promote luxury goods, 'come a few more years, and we may be examining Surrealism in Macy's bargain basement'.²¹ The writer warns that Surrealism's power in advertising signalled an increasing danger of being further diluted, or perhaps more precisely, discounted. What Barr had termed Surrealism's 'conspicuous' presence, one amplified by MoMA's exhibition, meant that its fine art and commercial pursuits were increasingly intertwined in the public imagination.

Surrealism and formalism

In large part because of Surrealism's dynamic relation to popular culture, the movement's significance within art history was not easily defined. When American critic Clement Greenberg sought to establish parameters for the avant-garde in his now notorious 1939 essay 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch' and its 1940 follow up 'Towards a Newer Laocoon', Surrealism's multi-faceted presence in American culture rendered it impossible to

¹⁹ Alfred H. Barr, Jr., 'Preface', *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism*, 8.

²⁰ In 1937, MoMA reported that it had acquired 23 works from *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* in comparison with 3 works acquired from *Cubism and Abstract Art*. *The Museum of Modern Art Bulletin*, 4: 5, April 27, 1937, 6-8.

²¹ Frank Caspers, 'Surrealism in Overalls,' *Scribner's*, 104: 2, August 1938, 20.

categorise by emerging art critical standards. With regards to culture, Surrealism operated between the avant-garde and mass culture. And with regards to style, Surrealism evaded criteria upon which art historical evaluation had conventionally depended: it was both abstract and figurative, automatic and academic. While MoMA continued to support the figurative side of Surrealism in the early 1940s, and collectors such as Peggy Guggenheim and Sidney Janis advocated for both abstract and illusionistic tendencies in modern art, Greenberg argued that abstraction was the best direction for avant-garde painting. In 1944, Greenberg took steps to specifically denounce Surrealism in a two-part essay on Surrealist painting, in which he privileged Surrealism's effects on literature, while disparaging the movement's aesthetics.²² However, following French critical opinion wholesale, he exempted from his critique Miró, Arp, Masson, and Picasso, whom he agreed were exploring untapped possibilities in the medium of painting, while the more figurative Surrealist painters merely rehabilitated 'academic art under a new literary disguise'.²³ Greenberg respected Surrealism's literary origins, but could not reconcile the multi-disciplinarity of the movement.

Modern art's relationship to Surrealism, and its predecessor Dada, was contested especially because more contemporary artists dispensed with the formalist values that had defined the criticism of the previous generation of New York School painters. Surrealism had not been the subject of serious study for over a generation, and thus was ripe for re-assessment by the 1960s.²⁴ The understanding of Surrealism deepened as seminal texts began to be widely available in translation, especially Maurice Nadeau's definitive *The History of Surrealism* (1965), originally published in French in 1945, along with André Breton's *Manifestoes of Surrealism* (1969) and *Nadja* (1960). Reviewing Nadeau's account in the *New York Times*, critic Harold Rosenberg, Greenberg's chief rival, quoted Nadeau's claim that "'the problems that the surrealists attempted to solve are those that still face the younger generation today.'" ... As such, regardless of the value assigned to the poems and paintings, it has a vital place in the modern intellectual tradition.²⁵ Rosenberg, who considered modern art in dialogue with politics, popular culture, and poetry, challenged Greenberg's formalist accounting of modern art. His compendium of essays *Tradition of the New* was published in 1959, and Greenberg's own

²² Clement Greenberg, 'Surrealist Painting (1944),' in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986, 226.

²³ Greenberg, 'Surrealist Painting', 230. Greenberg further acknowledged the achievements of Joan Miró in his monograph on the painter, the only book Greenberg published: Clement Greenberg, *Joan Miro*, Quadrangle Press, 1949.

²⁴ Indeed from 1951 until 1960 there appear to have been no significant scholarly studies of the movement published in English. The bibliography of *Dada, Surrealism and Their Heritage* includes secondary sources that overwhelmingly date from either the 1930s and 1940s or the 1960s, when English-language scholarship on Surrealism resumed and Surrealist writings were translated.

²⁵ Harold Rosenberg, 'A State of Mind,' *The New York Times Book Review*, December 26, 1965. The *History of Surrealism* was published again in English in 1968.

anthology, *Art and Culture*, issued in 1961, may have been a way for Greenberg to re-assert himself in the contemporary critical landscape.²⁶

In the immediate post-war period of the late 1940s and 1950s, Surrealism had essentially been considered a dirty word in American art criticism. However, contemporary artist Ed Ruscha's image on the cover of the September 1966 issue of *Artforum* encapsulates a shift away from the prevailing attitude. The collage, entitled *Surrealism Soaped and Scrubbed*, refers to the way Surrealism was redeemed by artists in the 1960s who recognised that its participation in common culture and commitments to figuration, rather than polluting the avant-garde, were actually a strength. Yet the special issue on Surrealism was received with ambivalence by American critics. While Ruscha's work was meant to express that Surrealism, now cleansed, could be a potent source for contemporary artists, Philip Leider, the editor at *Artforum* disavowed the issue: 'I regarded the Surrealist issue as terrible. I didn't see anything new in it. ... The idea was mine, and everybody I respected laughed at it. Michael [Fried] didn't want any part of it Frank [Stella] hated it. Because nobody had any use for Surrealism'.²⁷ The special issue on Surrealism was counter-intuitive for a magazine that 'bore the heavy imprint of Clement Greenberg',²⁸ and yet it was also a way of re-claiming territory that had been ceded to more expansive socio-historical methodologies for understanding art.

Historicizing Dada and Surrealism

As Barr contemplated his retirement as Director of Collections at MoMA, he chose a young art historian, William Rubin, who was then working on a major study of Dada and Surrealism, to be his successor. In 1966, Rubin was hired as a guest curator for the exhibition *Dada, Surrealism and Their Heritage*, which would eventually open at MoMA in

²⁶ As Daniel Siedell has noted, Greenberg's *Art and Culture* amounted to a direct attack on the influence of his rival Harold Rosenberg, whose poetic and expressionistic art criticism had marginalized Greenberg's by the late fifties, particularly after Rosenberg published his collection of essays, *The Tradition of the New* (1959), which included his profound and influential essay, "The American Action Painters" (1952). Daniel Siedell, 'Review: Rosalind Krauss, David Carrier, and Philosophical Art Criticism,' *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 38: 2, Summer 2004, 102. For more on Rosenberg's and Greenberg's differing views of modern art, see the catalogue *Action/Abstraction: Pollock, De Kooning, and American Art, 1940-1976*, edited by Norman Greenblatt, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008.

²⁷ Philip Leider, quoted in Amy Newman, *Challenging Art: Artforum 1962-1974* New York: Soho Press, 2000, 191.

²⁸ Editor Robert Pincus-Witten recalls that the issue 'pointed to Surrealism as a significant alternative tradition. You mustn't minimize that *Artforum's* writers all bore the heavy imprint of Clement Greenberg. And Surrealism had no existence for Clem except as something to be overcome, to be shed. The issue was an extraordinary thing, a ratification or a codification of this alternative tradition. ... A bit later, there was Bill Rubin's Surrealism show at the Museum of Modern Art. So Surrealism became very important again.' Robert Pincus-Witten, quoted in Amy Newman, *Challenging Art*, 192.

March 1968.²⁹ Rubin recognised Dada and Surrealism's vibrant legacy for contemporary American artists like Jasper Johns and Andy Warhol and included work by Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, and such Pop artists as Claes Oldenburg in the exhibition. As a collector of contemporary art, Rubin was heavily influenced by formalist criticism, but he also believed the MoMA had a unique position in its ability to make historical arguments. Thus, one of his main goals for the exhibition was to establish Dada and Surrealism's place in a linear narrative of modern art.

In planning the exhibition, Rubin had Barr's show of three decades earlier very much in mind, writing that his exhibition would 'be the first comprehensive survey of these movements since Alfred Barr's *Fantastic Art, Dada and Surrealism* in 1936'.³⁰ He and Barr were in regular communication about the exhibition. But unlike Barr in 1936, one of Rubin's goals for the exhibition was to secure a place for Surrealism in the canon of modern art. However, the canon he was thinking of was very much based on a formalist understanding of modern art, as espoused by Greenberg, and despite extensive knowledge of the expanded field of contemporary artistic production, Rubin's exhibition still favoured painting and sculpture. Furthermore, *Dada, Surrealism, and Their Heritage* was intended to shape the recent history of American art by subsuming Dada and Surrealism into a history of Abstract Expressionism, while also affirming Dada and Surrealism as precedents for Pop art.³¹ Rubin and Barr agreed that Dada and Surrealism were essentially, in Rubin's words, 'life movements, or philosophical movements, movements that were really more interested in poetry, psychology, politics, action on various levels, than specifically in works of art.' But with the added vantage point of thirty-two years, Rubin's exhibition could confront the 'irony... that what remains of these movements and what best characterizes for us the historical [import] of these two movements, is the work of art itself.'³² Dada and Surrealism's cultural relevancy was of secondary importance to Rubin, who felt that the time had come to inscribe the movements in the history of modern art, writing: 'I have proceeded from the assumption, therefore, that the works can be described in terms that make sense for art history in general and for the discussion of modernist painting and sculpture in particular'.³³ Dada and Surrealism were accepted as art movements, but they had not been institutionalised as such.

²⁹ Rubin assumed the position of Curator of Painting and Sculpture in 1967, the same year as Barr's retirement.

³⁰ William Rubin, letter to Buckley, May 16, 1967, MoMA Archives NY.

³¹ First published in 1951, Robert Motherwell's book *The Dada Painters and Poets* was a major reference for contemporary artists. For more on this see Catherine Craft, *An Audience of Artists: Dada, Neo-Dada, and the Emergence of Abstract Expressionism*, Chicago: University of Chicago, 2012. The term Neo-Dada, used to describe much figurative contemporary art, was also indicative of Dada's influence.

³² William Rubin, interview with Ruth Bowman, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

³³ William Rubin, *Dada and Surrealist Art*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1969, 8.

Thus, it was important for Rubin to convincingly present the Abstract Expressionists' debt to Surrealism despite the Abstract Expressionists' desire to obscure Surrealism's influence in their early works. One example of this was Rubin's inclusion of Mark Rothko's 1944 painting *Slow Swirl by the Edge of the Sea*, which Rothko had censored from his 1961 retrospective at MoMA. Writing to *New York Times* critic John Canaday, Rubin explained his inclusion of these works, while also revealing his bias against them:

As the Surrealist-influenced but quite fine early work of such painters as Rothko, Newman, and Still is little known except to people who were assiduous gallery goers in the 40's, I felt that a substantial amount of this material should be included.³⁴

Rubin's phrasing – 'Surrealist-influenced but quite fine' – implies that despite the Surrealist influence in the early work of Rothko, Barnett Newman, and Clyfford Still, the paintings are still worthy of exhibition. Thus, he subtly undercuts the very body of work he seeks to account for, understanding the historical interest in Surrealism while implicitly acknowledging it as something to be overcome. Even then, such important critics as Irving Sandler and Sidney Tillim still refused to fully credit Surrealism's influence on the New York School.³⁵

Rubin's exhibition re-inscribed the views of French modernist critics who understood Miró as a key painter in the history of modern art, also reinforcing Greenberg's views. Miró is often singled out in formalist accounts because there is no need in approaching his work to reconcile elements of representation, academicism, or populism found in other manifestations of Surrealism.³⁶ In order to make this case, Rubin

³⁴ William Rubin, letter to John Canaday, September 8, 1967, MoMA Archives NY.

³⁵ In his 1968 article on the Surrealists in the 1940s, Sandler wrote that 'it was...particularly from the Cubists, that the New Yorkers derived their conception of a modern picture'. Irving Sandler, 'Dada, Surrealism, and Their Heritage: The Surrealist Émigrés in New York,' *Artforum*, v. 6, n. 9 (May 1968), 29. In a 1966 article, Tillim wrote, 'The only Surrealist whose paintings had any impact was Miró, and he affected Gorky principally, and through him de Kooning. Pollock and Motherwell were doubtlessly affected by Breton's theory of automatism. But in every case the ultimate benefit of Surrealism was not ideological; rather it made possible, in a wholly unexpected way, certain liberties in the handling of paint. Pollock could drip, Motherwell could splash and Gorky could stain, the idea in every instance being the 'opening' of their own hand-me-down versions of Cubism. ... Consequently, I believe the greater part of Surrealism's impact on Abstract Expressionism to have been more indirect than hitherto thought'. Sidney Tillim, 'Surrealism as Art', *Artforum*, 5: 1, September 1966, 71.

³⁶ In H.W. Janson's 1968 edition of the textbook *A History of Art and Music*, the author illustrates only Max Ernst and Joan Miró as part of his half page on Surrealism, not mentioning André Breton, Dalí, or Magritte. Janson writes, 'Surrealist theory is heavily larded with concepts borrowed from psychoanalysis, and its overwrought rhetoric is not always to be taken seriously'. H.W. Janson, *A History of Art and Music*, New Jersey and New York: Prentice-Hall Inc., and Harry N. Abrams Inc., 1968, 201. Miró's work, which closes the section on Surrealism, is immediately followed by Jackson Pollock and Abstract Expressionism. For a detailed account of this period, see

highlighted Miró's large-scale painting *Birth of the World* (1925) as a crucial forerunner for mid-century Abstract Expressionism. He wrote to the owner of the painting:

Since this painting [*La Naissance du Monde*] has never been seen in this country and since it is so important historically – I consider it as *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* for the *Informelle* – I should just like you to know that to be able to have this picture for the New York showing of the exhibition would give me the greatest single satisfaction of any loan I will be getting; but even more, it would be a revelation for our tremendously attentive audience of painters and amateurs whose image of Miro has never been in balance due to the absence in America of such works as *La Naissance du Monde* and many smaller pictures painted in that direction. ... [Y]ou will especially appreciate the recognition of *La Naissance du Monde* to help confirm Miro as the real foundation of post-Cubist abstraction.³⁷

Rubin's conviction – that Miro was the real foundation of post-Cubist abstraction – is underscored by his comparison with Picasso's *Demoiselles d'Avignon* and further reinforced through his selection of twenty-four Mirós for the exhibition.³⁸ *Birth of the World's* large dimensions – over 8 by 6 feet – and Miro's use of automatism and free play of drips made the painting a convincing predecessor to Pollock's work, though the painting had not been shown the U.S. and thus was almost certainly unknown to Pollock. Nonetheless, the Surrealists' automatism was a widely-recognised influence on Pollock. Rubin unequivocally stated his admiration of Miró in an interview about *Dada, Surrealism, and Their Heritage* for the television show *Camera III* in 1968:

I think that Miró is by far the best artist in that exhibition. And he is the best artist of the generation between the two wars. In other words, between the generation of Picasso, Matisse and Bonnard, and the generation of Pollock let's say, the greatest painter in the modern tradition is Miró. And he is the only great painter, in my estimation, in this exhibition.³⁹

Martica Sawin, *Surrealism in Exile and the Beginning of the New York School*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1995.

³⁷ William Rubin, letter to Rene Gafe, October 10, 1967, MoMA Archives NY. The painting entered MoMA's collection in 1972.

³⁸ Miró was often identified by critics as surpassing his fellow Surrealists. For instance: 'Miró, whom I would exclude from most of the reservations I have voiced about Surrealism, is not readily thought of as a Surrealist... since his work has always acknowledged a level of taste beyond that of his polemical contemporaries, just as his raw talent exceeded theirs as well'. Sidney Tillim, 'Surrealism as Art,' *Artforum*, 5: 1, September 1966, 69. Miro was the second-most represented artist in the exhibition, after Max Ernst. Ernst, though figurative, also enjoyed a healthy reputation at MoMA where his work was extensively collected. He received a solo exhibition of his work in 1961.

³⁹ William Rubin, *Camera III* 68.12 sound recording, 1968, MoMA Archives NY.

Rubin's candid assessment of Miró – and the explicit way he places him between an established European avant-garde and 'the generation of Pollock' demonstrates how Rubin sought to establish Miró as an aesthetic lynchpin between the European avant-garde and the New York School.

Rubin's motive for the exhibition was not lost on contemporary reviewers, who recognised that instead of showcasing Dada and Surrealism, the exhibition marked an attempt to rein in these unruly moments of modernism, forcing them into an aesthetic lineage and thereby reducing their revolutionary impact. In May 1968, Rosenberg wrote in *The New Yorker* that the sole purpose of Rubin's show could only be 'to knock out the philosophical underpinnings of modern art. The show is a remarkable, if not epoch-making, instance of a museum's openly intruding on current art history as an active partisan force by posing its own conception of value and its own will regarding the future against the will and ideas of the artists it is displaying.'⁴⁰ Rosenberg saw the museum, with Rubin as its agent, as trying to fix a place for Dada and Surrealism by firmly placing them in the category of art, and in relation to a certain set of standards for contemporary art practice.

In light of the social upheaval of the 1960s, MoMA's presentation of Dada and Surrealism seemed untenably conservative to contemporary critics. The most scathing reviews came from those critics who realised that a history of art based exclusively on form excluded the social dimension of art, draining the lifeblood from images that were meant to convey revolutionary ideas. Describing the rift that had ignited the partisan reaction to the show, critic Max Kozloff wrote in the left-leaning journal *The Nation*:

Formulated once again in terms of history, the debate pivots on whether you take seriously the idea that art issues primarily from art, or accept literally the Surrealist assumption that art can transcend itself (i.e., its historical moment and hermetic instincts) and permanently affect life in the same way as could an "action."⁴¹

Kozloff goes on to react with thick sarcasm to the position of such formalist critics as Michael Fried, who believed that 'the extent to which a painting is contaminated by the Surrealist *sensibility* is the extent of its failure'.⁴² Even the notion of a Surrealist sensibility points demonstrates that Surrealism exceeded stylistic categorisation, and instead could be classified as a way of perceiving and responding to the world. Unlike critics who

⁴⁰ Harold Rosenberg, 'MOMA Dada', *The New Yorker*, XLIV: 13, May 18, 1968, 151.

⁴¹ Max Kozloff, 'The Sixties Look at Dada and Surrealism,' originally published in *The Nation* (1968), reprinted in *Cultivated Impasses: Essays on the Waning of the Avant-Garde 1964-1975*, New York: Marsilio Publishers, 2000, 343. Kozloff's use of the word 'action' refers to Harold Rosenberg's characterization of the New York School as action painting.

⁴² Fried, quoted in Kozloff, 'The Sixties Look', 343, original emphasis. Fried's comment is also repeated in Philip Leider's article on the exhibition. Philip Leider, 'Dada, Surrealism, and Their Heritage: A Beautiful Exhibition,' *Artforum*, 6: 9, May 1968, 22.

dismissed Surrealism unilaterally, Rubin was keenly aware of the problem that Surrealism posed to art history and alluded to Surrealism's difficulty in the exhibition catalogue. There Rubin acknowledged, '[o]bviously a definition of style that, for Dada, must comprehend the work of Duchamp and Arp and, for Surrealism, that of Miró and Dalí, will be problematic. Yet the alternative is not simply to accept confusion'.⁴³ For Rubin, the key difficulty was that Dada and Surrealism 'fostered activities in the plastic arts so variegated as almost to preclude the use of the terms as definitions of style'.⁴⁴

The glaring issue that remained after Rubin's show was not about Surrealism's place in the canon, but what the canon of modern art meant to designate. Critic James R. Mellow alluded to this when he noted of Rubin's exhibition that 'there is an ironic significance in the fact that the boisterous, anti-esthetic, prodigal sons have now come home to rest on the great mothering breast of the Museum of Modern Art'.⁴⁵ Mellow's assessment, typical of much of the criticism of Rubin's show, underscores MoMA's power at this point in its own history to define the canon through the artwork it displayed, regardless of the original intentions of the artists.

Rubin's exhibition, reinforced by his installation of the permanent collection at MoMA, legitimised Dada and Surrealism as part of the canon, but inadvertently exposed a larger problem – that in the expanded production of avant-garde artistic practice a canon based on form alone was not sustainable. Protesters at the opening of *Dada, Surrealism and Their Heritage* drew attention to the de-politicization of modern art in what they considered the museum's sterilised displays. MoMA's hegemony began to be more consistently challenged in the 1970s by the next generation of artists, critics and art historians. In a sweeping critique of MoMA published in 1978, art historians Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach argued that the MoMA's installation of its permanent collection presented Surrealism as having 'unseated the last vestiges of reason and history and ... you end up in the Abstract Expressionist realm of myth ... in which abstract form signified the Absolute. This is the climax...'.⁴⁶ For Wallach and Duncan, MoMA's installation positioned Surrealism as a gateway through which one passed, and ultimately dispensed with, on the way to the triumph of abstraction.

⁴³ William Rubin, *Dada, Surrealism, and Their Heritage*, 11-12. Nonetheless, Rubin was determined to find the common denominators in Surrealist production, continuing, 'We can distinguish in Dada and Surrealist art some common properties of style and many common denominators of character, iconography and intent' Rubin, *Dada, Surrealism and Their Heritage*, 11-12.

⁴⁴ William Rubin, *Dada, Surrealism, and Their Heritage*, New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1968, 11.

⁴⁵ James R. Mellow, 'The Exquisite Corpses,' *New Leader* (April 8, 1968).

⁴⁶ Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach, 'MoMA: Ordeal and Triumph on 53rd Street,' *Studio International*, 148: 988, 1978, 54. A longer version of the article was also published with the title 'The Museum of Modern Art as Late Capitalist Ritual: An Iconographic Analysis,' in *Marxist Perspectives*, 1: 4, Winter 1978. Reflecting on that article in a 1992 essay, Wallach states that the *Marxist Perspectives* essay was 'the first to attempt a critical analysis of MoMA and it intervened in what had been up to that point pretty much a celebratory discourse'. Alan Wallach, 'The Museum of Modern Art: The Past's Future,' *Journal of Design History*, 5: 3, 1992, 214.

Challenging the Modern

For critics and scholars alike, it was increasingly clear that the narrow formalist parameters that MoMA espoused in the 1970s, demanded reappraisal. One such critic was Rosalind Krauss, a prolific writer at *Artforum* from 1966-1974. In 1976, Krauss co-founded the influential journal *October* which for her coincided with 'a transitional period in which the modernist canon, the forms and categories that had defined and elucidated it, were everywhere in question. This situation, which we have subsequently come to call postmodernist, required in our estimation an intensive effort of reassessment and analysis'.⁴⁷ Krauss recognised the inadequacy of formalist tools to account for the range of modern artistic production and became particularly convinced that she could challenge the prevailing stylistic understanding of modern art by considering Surrealism's photography.⁴⁸ Inspired by art historian Dawn Ades' 1978 exhibition *Dada and Surrealism Reviewed* at the Hayward Gallery, London, Krauss wanted to focus on Surrealist photography because as an indexical, reproducible medium operating at the centre of an avowedly anti-aesthetic movement, it offered a concise way to interrogate the underpinnings of modernism.⁴⁹

L'Amour Fou: Surrealism and Photography, curated by Krauss and Jane Livingston, represented Krauss's intervention into the debates about the historicization of Surrealist work, though the venue this time was not MoMA, but the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.⁵⁰ The seeds of the exhibition had been planted in the 1970s, when Krauss had seen the catalogue published by the Art Institute of Chicago in conjunction with curator David Travis's exhibition *The Julien Levy Collection Starting with Atget* (on view from December 11, 1976 to February 20, 1977).⁵¹ In a later interview, Levy described

⁴⁷ 'Introduction,' *October: The First Decade, 1976-1986*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1987, ix.

⁴⁸ In 1981, Krauss wrote that a major impetus for writing on Surrealism was to redress the 1968 MoMA exhibition and Rubin's need to determine a cohesive style of Surrealism, or, as Rubin put it, 'an intrinsic definition of Surrealist painting'. Rosalind Krauss, 'Photographic Conditions of Surrealism,' *The Originality of the Avant-garde and other Modernist Myths*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1985, 91.

⁴⁹ In a 1990 interview, Krauss stated that 'within standard art-historical accounts of twentieth-century production Surrealism is totally marginalized, as is photography. And therefore, photography's undeniably major role within Surrealism – in books, journals, etc. – has simply been ignored in the histories of the movement that have been produced over the past forty years. I thought it was important to ask about this marginalization, because it has the quality of repression.' Rosalind Krauss, quoted in Gregory Gilbert and Richard Paley, 'An Interview with Rosalind Krauss,' *Rutgers Art Review*, 11, 1990, 65-66.

⁵⁰ The exhibition ran from September 14 until November 17, 1985, before traveling to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, and the Hayward Gallery in London.

⁵¹ David Travis, *The Julien Levy Collection Starting with Atget*, Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 1976. The exhibition was later shown at the International Center for Photography in New York. In

the American art world's attitude toward Surrealism: 'There was always a remaining prejudice against surrealism, because it's not serious even about politics, or it's decadent, or it's European or purportedly dead, or I don't know just what'.⁵² In the 1930s, Levy had originally wanted his gallery to specialise in photography, but there had not been a sustainable market for the medium in the 1930s and he had pivoted toward Surrealism as a result. The purchase of a major part of his photography collection by the Art Institute in the 1970s marked a belated coup, indicative of the burgeoning institutional interest in photography by major museums.

While Krauss's decision to curate a major exhibition that would focus on Surrealist photography was inspired in part by photography's increasing institutionalisation, she also sought to recuperate a kind of photography that would disrupt the modernist canon. Instead of the formal attributes of photography promoted by John Szarkowski, curator of photography at MoMA from 1962-1991, Krauss wanted to foreground the Surrealists' experimental photographic practices, in which they undercut 'straight' photography and imbued it not only with the subjective presence of the photographer, but also explored themes of sex, desire, and violence through darkroom manipulation. At the same time, even straight photography was being re-theorized as surreal at its core. As cultural critic Susan Sontag argued: 'The mainstream of photographic activity has shown that a Surrealist manipulation or theatricalization of the real is unnecessary, if not actually redundant. Surrealism lies at the heart of the photographic enterprise: in the very creation of a duplicate world, of a reality in the second degree, narrower but more dramatic than the one perceived by natural vision'.⁵³ As photography received increased attention in the 1970s, critics also recognized the medium's inherent Surrealist qualities, while simultaneously discounting Surrealist 'manipulation or theatricalization.'

Surrealist photography thwarted the accepted stylistic categories of Surrealist artistic practice – it was neither automatist/abstract nor academic/illusionist. Instead Krauss wanted to dispense with the issue of style altogether, asserting that 'issues of Surrealist heterogeneity will be resolved around the semiological functions of photography rather than the formal properties operating the traditional art-historical classifications of style'.⁵⁴ Krauss advocated for a new understanding of Surrealism via the

1977, Levy also published a personal record of his experience as a dealer and collector, *Memoir of an Art Gallery*, New York: C.G. Putnam's Sons, 1977.

⁵² Julien Levy, quoted in 'Surrealist Photography at the New Gallery: A Conversation with Julien Levy', *Dialogue*, 2, September-October 1979, 25.

⁵³ Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, New York: Farrar: Straus and Giroux, 1977 (originally 1973), 49.

⁵⁴ Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde*, 101. In his review of the book, Yve-Alain Bois concurs, writing of the Surrealist essays, 'more useful for students of the field, considering the quantity of failed attempts at a stylistic analysis of this phenomenon, is the redefinition of Surrealist art that is offered by Krauss in this book.' Yve-Alain Bois, 'Review: Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde*', *Art Journal*, 45: 4, 1985, 371.

theories of George Bataille and formlessness.⁵⁵ Reviewers of the *L'Amour Fou* exhibition recognized that rather than place value on this body of art works in the traditional sense, Krauss's objective was instead, as art historian Hal Foster put it, 'to displace the formalist model of modernism by means of its "cursed part", Surrealism'.⁵⁶ Krauss marshalled critical theory to expose the fissures in the construction of the modern art canon in the U.S. and articulate a postmodern condition.

If today the stranglehold that formalist criticism once held on art historical discourse in the U.S. in the post-war period seems irreconcilable with our increasingly globalised and pluralist contemporary art world, it is in part because Dada and Surrealism consciously challenged reigning understandings of modern art, pushing on the category of art itself, and thereby rejecting the very premise of canonisation. Barr seems to have anticipated this position as early as 1936, when he declared Surrealism 'a way of life'⁵⁷ and began to associate Surrealism with the idea of the broader notion of the 'fantastic',⁵⁸ which was in some ways conceived as a counterpoint to and expansion from the formal values that were already associated with evolving understandings of modernism. Despite Barr's inclusive view of modern art, Greenberg's persuasive art criticism inscribed formalism as the basis for aesthetic evaluation. Rubin, though he departed from Greenberg's stringent criteria and embraced Pop art, still considered style to be the fundamental through-line in the narrative of modernism he sought to delineate. Reacting against both Greenberg and Rubin, Krauss sought to open up the discourse of modernism by using Surrealist photography to challenge the limits of the modernist canon. Surrealism's aesthetic diversity, alongside its political and philosophical commitments, literary experiments, and absorption into mass culture, have contributed to its fraught relationship with the canon of modern art in the U.S.; yet Barr's multifaceted view of modernism – in which a Dada-Surrealist trajectory could be traced alongside, and especially intermingle with, an Abstract-Cubist one – is accepted today, as the proliferation of scholarship on Surrealism – and its long and variegated legacy – attests. Surrealism may be modern, but the questions it poses about what constitutes the

⁵⁵ Rosalind Krauss, letter to Jane Livingston, October 20 no year, *L'Amour Fou* exhibition files, Corcoran Gallery of Art Archives. In the same letter, Krauss further explained: 'In relation to this [unifying idea] I am really interested in demonstrating the nature of the center, which I believe to be represented by the work of a few photographers, rather than a whole host of them. The important ones are: Parry, Boiffard, Man Ray, Bellmer, Tabard, Ubac, Brassai, Kertesz, Dora Maar and a few others plus some of the people who made photomontages'.

⁵⁶ Hal Foster, 'L'Amour Faux,' *Art in America*, v. 74, n. 1 (January 1986), 117. In the 1990s, Robert Pincus-Witten, editor at *Artforum* as discussed above, recalled that prior to Krauss, important young critics had 'as an *article of faith*, this resistance to Surrealism. Now clearly the worm has turned. Ros [Krauss] is all Georges Bataille, and it's all this visceral, underbelly kind of side to Surrealism which she's largely valorised as the cynosure of graduate studies, displacing Breton. Now we're all grown up so that we don't have the same feeling. But *then* Surrealism was absolutely to be handled with tongs. And back then, no one studied Bataille.' Robert Pincus-Witten, quoted in Amy Newman, *Challenging Art*, 193.

⁵⁷ Barr, 'Preface', *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism*, 8.

⁵⁸ See Bauduin, 'Fantastic Art, Barr, Surrealism', 1-23.

canon, and how to expand the understanding of artistic practice, are decidedly contemporary.

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