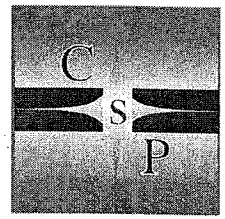
Marcel Duchamp and Eroticism

Edited by

Marc Décimo



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FOR MY PARENTS

CECI N'EST PAS UN CON: DUCHAMP, LACAN, AND *L'ORIGINE DU MONDE*

DEREK SAYER

> We are such stuff
> As dreams are made on ...
> —William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*

"He unlocked a painting whose external panel showed a village church in the snow, and whose hidden panel was the picture Courbet painted for Khalil-Bey, a woman's abdomen down to a black and prominent mount of Venus, above the slit of a pink cunt [*con rose*]," recorded Édouard de Goncourt in his diary on 29 June 1889.[1] The scandalous object was *L'Origine du monde* [The Origin of the World]—a clever title, and probably the artist's own—which Gustave Courbet executed for the Ottoman diplomat in 1866.[2] A century later to the year, Marcel Duchamp completed his last major work *Étant donnés* [*Given*] in the secrecy of his studio on 80 East 11th Street, New York. He prepared detailed instructions for its dismantling and reassembly after his demise.[3] *Étant donnés* opened to the public in July 1969 in the Philadelphia Museum of Art. The installation, which can neither be moved nor properly photographed, is accessed through an empty, windowless gallery, at the end of which is an old wooden barn door that is nailed shut, apparently a "dead end ... But if the visitor ventures nearer," relates Octavio Paz, "he finds two small holes at eye level. If he goes even closer and

[1] Édouard de Goncourt, diary entry, 29 June 1889, quoted in Bernard Marcadé, "Le devenir-femme de l'art," in *féminimasculin: Le sexe de l'art,* exh. cat., (Paris: Centre Pompidou, 1995), 23. The French word "*con*" has nowadays lost its specifically sexual associations, being innocuously defined in current French/English dictionaries as "idiot, clot"—an equivalent shift as has occurred with the (British) English word "twat." Alex Lykiard was nevertheless quite correct to translate Louis Aragon's pornographic novel *Le Con d'Irène* (1928) as *Irene's Cunt* (in G. Apollinaire and L. Aragon, *Flesh Unlimited: Surrealist Erotica,* (New York: Creation Books, 2000).

[2] The fullest study of the history of the painting is Thierry Savatier, *L'Origine du monde: Histoire d'un tableau de Gustave Courbet,* (Paris: Bartillat, 2006).

[3] These instructions are reproduced in facsimile as Marcel Duchamp, *Étant donnés,* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1987).

dares to peep, he will see a scene he is not likely to forget." Since Duchamp had probably never seen Courbet's painting, the reminiscences of *L'Origine du monde* are likely the work of *hasard objectif*—:

> First of all, a brick wall with a slit in it, and through the slit, a wide open space, luminous and seemingly bewitched. Very near the beholder—but also very far away, on the 'other side'—a naked girl, stretched on a kind of bed or pyre of branches or leaves, her face almost completely covered by the blond mass of her hair, her legs open and slightly bent, the pubes strangely smooth in contrast to the splendid abundance of her hair, her right arm out of the line of vision, her left slightly raised, the hand grasping a small gas lamp made of metal and glass... All is real and verges on banality; all is unreal and verges—on what?[4]

Well might we ask.

For illumination, we could do worse than revisit one of the most flagrantly erotic of twentieth-century artistic spectacles, for which Duchamp, who (in his own words) was "borrowed from the ordinary world"[5] for the occasion, played the role of "*Générateur-Arbitre.*"[6] Man Ray later recalled:

> In 1937, nineteen young women were abducted from the display windows of the department stores and handed over to the whims of the Surrealists, who immediately began to ravish them, each in his own and unmistakable way and without in the slightest heeding the feelings of the victims, who, however, suffered, with the most charming goodwill, the offensive displaying of their honor that was forced upon them there and this in such a pure way that it increased the stimulation still further, which one of the most active of the partners, a certain Man Ray, realized, who, unbuttoning himself, fetched his apparatus and recorded the orgy, less out of historic interest than in order to succumb to the burning desire.[7]

The "young women" were in fact mannequins, who had been rented rather than kidnapped from the department store Maison PLEM, the "orgy" was the

[4] Octavio Paz, *Marcel Duchamp,* (New York: Viking, 1978), 95-96.

[5] Duchamp in Pierre Cabanne, *Dialogues...,* (op. cit., 1977), 81.

[6] The catalogue listed André Breton and Paul Éluard as "Organisateurs," Marcel Duchamp as "Générateur-Arbitre," Salvador Dalí and Max Ernst as "Conseillers spéciaux," Man Ray as "Maître des lumières," and Wolfgang Paalen as responsible for "Eaux et broussailles." Reproduced in *La Révolution surréaliste,* exh. cat., (ed. Werner Spies, Paris: Centre Pompidou, 2002), 85.

[7] Man Ray, *Les Mannequins—La Résurrection des mannequins,* (Paris: 1966), quoted in Katherina Sykora, "Merchant Temptress: The Surrealistic Enticements of the Display Window Dummy," in Christoph Grunenberg and Max Hollein (eds), *Shopping: A Century of Art and Consumer Culture,* exh. cat., (Frankfurt: Hatje Cantz, 2002), 133.

Exposition internationale du surréalisme that opened at the Galerie Beaux-Arts in Paris in January 1938, and Man Ray "unbuttoned" not his penis—as his language might suggest—but his camera. His "burning desire," we may surmise, was real enough.

Standing around two meters apart, the mannequins lined the "rue Surréaliste" through which spectators entered the exhibition—a metaphorical vagina, suggests Alyce Mahon, which led into the "uterine" central exhibition chamber, "a dark, warm, moist space that reeked of feminine abjectivity" that was also designed by Duchamp.[8] Since there was no other way in, face-to-face, eye-to-eye contact with these sirens, positioned like so many streetwalkers parading their wares, could not be avoided. It was an effective queering of the gaze, turning the tables of spectator and spectacle—a sensation of the sort that may be met with in any Red Light district. The entire space of the exhibition, Mahon argues, was "emphatically feminine."[9] On the wall behind each mannequin was a blue metal street-sign, situating her in a Parisian landscape that was at once familiar and awry. Blurring the boundaries of the imaginary and the real, the Street of Lips, Blood Transfusion Street, and the Passage des Panoramas neighbored the rue Vivienne—amid whose twilight shop-window displays the Comte de Lautréamont's Maldoror met the English boy Melvyn, "fair as the chance encounter on a dissecting table of a sewing machine and an umbrella"[10]—the rue de la Vieille Lanterne, where Gérard de Nerval committed suicide, and the Porte de Lilas.

Like all readymades, the surrealists' dolls bore traces of the everyday world from which they had been borrowed, but these were no mere tailors' dummies on which to display clothes. Indeed, most were strategically unclothed, sporting a galaxy of bodily adornments that served only to emphasize their essential nudity. Though Max Ernst's haughty young "Widow" was cloaked, hooded, and veiled, she was naked from the waist down—apart, that is, from shoes, stockings, and garters. Ernst had originally placed an electric light bulb where her genitals should be, but André Breton insisted on its being removed—as he did the live goldfish swimming in a bowl "*en guise de sexe*" with which Léo Malet had intended to adorn his mannequin.[11] The irony, of course, is that Breton was censoring what was *not there:* the mannequins had no *sexe* for

[8] Alyce Mahon, *Surrealism and the Politics of Eros 1938-1968,* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2005), 19.
[9] Ibidem., 55.
[10] Comte de Lautréamont [Isidore Ducasse], *Maldoror,* in *Maldoror and the Complete Works of the Comte de Lautréamont,* (Cambridge: Exact Change, 1994), 193.
[11] See Lewis Kachur, *Displaying the Marvelous...,* op. cit., 43, 53. Kachur's book, which gives the most detailed account of the 1938 exhibition to date, describes all the mannequins at length and provides many contemporary photographs.

which to substitute anything.[12] Marcel Duchamp also left his mannequin *nu dessous*—except for a pair of man's shoes, an effect somehow more shocking than Ernst's lascivious stocking-tops. Her outfit was completed by a man's jacket, waistcoat, collar-and-tie, and hat, which suggests there was rather more forethought involved in this gender-bending than Man Ray, who is responsible for the myth that Duchamp simply hung his own jacket and hat on the model and left for London, recollects.[13] Confounding the sexuality of his mannequin still further, Duchamp ascribed authorship to his feminine *alter ego* Rrose Sélavy, whose signature is scrawled above the doll's mount of Venus. Raoul Ubac went down on his knees to shoot her, pointing his camera straight up at her (*sexe*-less) crotch.[14]

The mannequin Breton considered to be "the most brilliant" was André Masson's *Le bâillon vert à bouche de pensée* [The Green Gag for a Mouth of Thought], who was loitering on Lautréamont's rue Vivienne.[15] Her body, too, is wholly naked, except for a *cache-sexe* and a red ribbon around her waist.[16] She has small stuffed birds under her arms, and wears a wicker birdcage over her head, through whose opened door she gazes directly out at the viewer. Goldfish are swimming through the bars of the cage. Her hand extends forward, as if in invitation, but she is gagged by a green velvet band. Where her mouth should be is a pansy, which is both a verbal pun on *pensée*, and—Masson's sketchbooks leave no room for any doubt[17]—a visual pun on the vulva. Where her vulva should be, had it not been translated to the face and transmuted into thought, is the *cache-sexe* that obscures *l'origine du monde.* Though it gestures to the skimpy attire worn by dancing girls in Montmartre's dives, this G-string is no ordinary stripper's cover-up. It is an oval mirror, surrounded by tiger-eyes, above which two peacock feathers curl upward like fallopian tubes. Thus, should desire draw the viewer's gaze to that place from which he—or she—came into being, he will see only multiple other eyes gazing back, eyes that frame his own *imago*, reflected in the mirror.

[12] A convention, Luce Irigaray points out, that has characterized western statuary since the ancient Greeks. See her *This Sex Which Is Not One,* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 26. See also Hal Foster, "Violation and Veiling in Surrealist Photography: Woman as Fetish, as Shattered Object, as Phallus," in *Surrealism: Desire Unbound,* exh. cat., ed. Jennifer Mundy, London: Tate Gallery, 2001, esp. 218-222.
[13] Man Ray, *Self-Portrait,* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1998), 191.
[14] The photograph is reproduced in Kachur, *Displaying the Marvelous,* op. cit., 46.
[15] André Breton, "Prestige d'André Masson," in André Dimanche (ed.), *André Masson,* (Marseilles: André Dimanche, 1993), 113.
[16] Which Alyce Mahon interprets as suggesting "a gash, or the separation of lower body and upper mind." *Surrealism and the Politics of Eros,* op. cit., 47.
[17] See Kachur, *Displaying the Marvelous,* op. cit., 48, as well as Masson's 1938 drawing entitled "La pensée," in Dimanche, *André Masson,*, op. cit., 39.

"*Wo es war, soll Ich werden*"—where it was, I must become—so wrote Freud, in a passage often returned to by the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, whose seminal paper "The Mirror-Phase," written two years before the 1938 *Exposition*—and popularized in the surrealist glossy *Minotaure*—described how "the jubilant assumption of his specular image by the child ... exhibit[s] in an exemplary situation the symbolic matrix in which the I is precipitated in a primordial form."[18] Transpositions of body parts are a staple of surrealist art: think, for instance, of René Magritte's *Le Viol* [The Rape], in which a woman's torso is superimposed on her face in such a way that her nipples become her eyes, her navel her nose, and her vagina her mouth. The intention of such *double entendres* (and, some might sniff, of the entire rue Surréaliste) may sometimes be no more than *épater les bourgeois,* though Magritte's own art amounts to a sustained interrogation of the treachery of images—to invoke the title of another of his paintings, better known as *Ceci n'est pas une pipe.*[19] But Masson's play here with displacements and condensations, both visual and linguistic, is more than just another of surrealism's (alleged) "jokes at the expense of woman"[20]—at least to any reader of Lacan. Could we ask for a more poignant expression of the enigma of the human subject, as it has been explicated since Freud, than this fetching mannequin, who is gagged indeed, yet so very, very eloquent?

The absence behind Masson's tiger-eyed mirror is brought to infamous presence—or so, at least, it seems—in Courbet's *L'Origine du monde.* Though the painting is one of the most notorious works in the history of art, for much of its history it has remained one of the most invisible. Maxime Du Camp was one of a select few who actually got to view the scandalous object:

> In the bathroom of a foreign personage ... I saw a small painting hidden under a green veil. When the veil was moved aside, I was stupefied to make out a life-size woman, seen from the front, extraordinarily moved and contorted, remarkably painted, reproduced *con amore*, as the Italians say, and providing the last word in realism. But, through an incredible omission, the artisan, who had copied his model from life, had neglected to represent the feet, the legs, the thighs, the belly, the hips, the chest, the arms, the shoulders, the neck and the head.[21]

In an omission scarcely less incredible, Du Camp never tells us, in fact, what *is* represented in the picture, but signifies its presence only by a vacancy in his description. That "*entrebâillement d'un con rose*" is no more *there* than it was on the rue Surréaliste.

Later, the painting changed hands, and the green veil that hid the unmentionable was replaced by the village church in the snow. Having found its way to Budapest, *L'Origine du monde* vanished during World War II, when it was feared destroyed. It was long believed that the painting was confiscated by the Nazis, from whom it was liberated by the Soviets, who then sold it on the western art market after the war. Thierry Savatier's researches, however, have established that *L'Origine* remained safe in a Budapest bank vault until it was looted by the city's "liberators." The Russians then ransomed it back to its owner Baron Ferenc Hatvany, who emigrated to Paris in 1949 or 1950.[22] Jacques Lacan acquired Courbet's painting in 1954 or 1955. His wife Sylvia specially commissioned a new sliding panel to cover what lay underneath. The neighbors and the cleaning lady, she explained, "would not understand."[23] The artist she asked to paint this update on the village church in the snow was none other than—André Masson. This was not one of those uncanny surrealist coincidences. Lacan moved in surrealist circles in the nineteen-thirties, publishing some of his earliest papers in *Minotaure,*[24] and Masson was married to Sylvia's sister Rose. The two men had been good friends since 1939 (when Lacan bought Masson's painting *Ariane's Thread*). Sylvia herself was previously briefly married to Georges Bataille, the leading figure among the so-called "dissident" surrealists grouped around the journal *Documents*, of which Masson was a mainstay. Masson was the first illustrator of Bataille's pornographic classic *Histoire de l'œil* [Story of the Eye], which was published in the same year as Aragon's *Le Con d'Irène* (1928). Hans Bellmer (to whom I shall return) would also later illustrate Bataille's novel, whose opening scene

[18] Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror-Stage as Formative of the Function of the *I* as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," in his *Écrits,* London: Routledge, 2001, 2.
[19] René Magritte, *The Treachery of Images*, 1952-3, reproduced in Robert Hughes, *The Portable Magritte*, New York: Universe, 314. See also René Magritte, "Les mots et les images," (1929), in his *Écrits complets,* (Paris: Flammarion, 2001), 60-61.
[20] As Mignon Nixon describes it in her *Fantastic Reality: Louise Bourgeois and a Story of Modern Art,* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2005), 58, asserting that "these figures appeared as the most vacuous variations on the theme of the female body as symbol of desire and dread." The supposed misogyny of surrealism is classically argued in Mary Ann Caws et al., *Surrealism and Women,* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1993).

[21] Maxime du Camp, *Les Convulsions de Paris,* 1878, quoted in Marcadé, "Devenir-femme," op. cit., 23.
[22] See Savatier, *L'Origine du monde*, op. cit., ch. 8.
[23] Elisabeth Roudinesco, *Jacques Lacan: esquisse d'une vie, histoire d'un système de pensée*, (Paris: Fayard, 1993), 249.
[24] Lacan wrote on paranoiac forms of experience in *Minotaure* 1, 1933, 68-9, glossing Dalí's "paranoiac-critical" interpretation of Millet's *Angélus,* and on the Papin sisters in *Minotaure* 3-4, 1933, 24-8; see also Pierre Mabille, "Miroirs," in *Minotaure* 11, 1938, 14-18, 66. For further discussion see Alain Grosrichard, "Dr. Lacan, 'Minotaure,' Surrealists Encounters," in Charles Goerg et al, *Focus on Minotaure: The Animal-headed Review,* exh. cat., (Geneva: Musée d'Art et d'Histoire, 1987), 159-174.

inspired one of the German artist's most infamous photographs—a vagina dripping with milk, poised above a plate. "Milk is for the pussy, isn't it?" coyly asks Bataille's fifteen-year-old heroine Simone. "Do you dare me to sit in the saucer?" "Then I lay down at her feet without her stirring," the equally young narrator relates, "and for the first time, I saw her 'pink and dark flesh,' cooling in the white milk. We remained motionless, on and on, both of us equally overwhelmed ..."[25]

Whether Sylvia commissioned Masson's peek-a-boo panel merely to spare the neighbors' blushes is open to doubt. Jacques delighted in showing off his wife's *trompe-l'œil* to visitors, staging an elaborate striptease of his own before revealing the "pink and dark flesh" beneath for what it was (not). The painting hung in the loggia of his study at La Prévôte, his country house at Guitrancourt, where it played the same *Fort/Da* game as it had in Khalil-Bey's bathroom. "After lunch," recalls James Lord, "we [Lord and Dora Maar] were escorted to a separate, small building, Lacan's studio":

> In a heavy gilt frame to the right of the door hung a sketchy abstraction, on a brown background, by Masson. And indeed Lacan, addressing himself virtually for the first time to me, said, 'Now I'm going to show you something extraordinary.' The Masson was painted on a thin panel which slid to the left out of the frame, revealing behind it a detailed and very beautifully painted close-up study of the genitalia of a fleshy, almost corpulent female...[26]

L'Origine du monde eventually passed into the hands of the French state in lieu of death duties, where it joined Ingres' *The Turkish Bath,* Fragonard's *Women Bathing,* and Delacroix' improbably bare-breasted *Liberty Guiding the People* as part of the national patrimony.[27] Minus Masson's panel (which was actually an abstract reprise of Courbet's hidden subject, and thus yet another

[25] Georges Bataille, *Story of the Eye,* San Francisco: City Lights, 1987, 3-4. While not literal—Simone puns "Les assiettes, c'est fait pour s'asseoir ... Je m'assois dans l'assiette"—this translation's play on the double meaning of "pussy" in English captures the spirit of Bataille's text perfectly (as well as being nicely Duchampian). "*Chat*" [cat] incidentally has the same sexual connotation in French as "pussy" in English. For the original French text see Georges Bataille, *Histoire de l'œil,* in Bataille, *Romans et récits,* (Paris: Gallimard, 2004), 3. Both Masson's and Bellmer's illustrations are reproduced in this edition. Bellmer's photograph (which was not used in Bataille's book) is reproduced in Pierre Dourthe, *Bellmer: le principe de perversion,* (Paris: Jean-Pierre Faur, 1999), 187.

[26] James Lord, *Picasso and Dora: A Personal Memoir,* (New York: Fromm International, 1993), 203-204.

[27] All of these paintings hang in the Louvre.

tease),[28] the Lacans' *quelque chose extraordinaire* has been on very public display since July 1995 in the Musée d'Orsay in Paris, its mysteries all stripped bare. Countless grinning men must by now have had their picture taken in front of it. "Go see it there," recommends John Updike:

> Beneath the pubic bush—
> A matted Rorschach blot—beneath blanched thighs
> Of a fat and bridal docility
> A curved and rosy closure says, '*Ici!*'"[29]

Yes, but *here* is *what,* exactly? The last word in realism, without a doubt: though Du Camp was quite right to draw attention to the omissions that alone made possible such clarity of representation of that which he could not bring himself to name. The angle of vision in Duchamp's *Étant donnés* achieves the same concentration of focus. But we would do well to remember—in the words of Bernard Marcadé, who is alluding to Magritte's *La Trahison des images,* which makes the same distinction of signifier and signified more graphically—that "*this here* [*ceci*], that we have before our eyes, to hold in our hands, *is not* [*n'est pas*] a woman's sex [*un sexe de femme*]. *This here* is a picture, a painting, a work of art realized by a man. We could never penetrate this sex ..."[30] Which may well, of course, have been Lacan's point too. It is the same point that Magritte makes in *La Condition humaine,* a painting of a canvas on an easel standing in a window, on which is painted a picture of what we *might* be able to see through the window *if only the canvas itself were not blocking the view.*[31] The ultimate tease in the strip is that what is uncovered is not the *sexe,* but the signifier. We come face to face not with *un con nu* but its absence—*l'inconnu,* the obscure object of desire that is always already *not there,* unattainable as the bride in Duchamp's *Large Glass.*

Let us return to the rue Surréaliste. The first mannequin to greet spectators at the Galerie Beaux-Arts was Jean Arp's. Unlike most of her sisters, she did not flaunt her (absent) charms. The only part of her body visible was her hands, and she wore a black bag over her head and chest on which was written the word "PAPAPILLON," a portmanteau word on *Papa* and *papillon* [butterfly]. On the

[28] Masson's covering for *L'Origine du monde* can be viewed on-line, and dragged to reveal the Courbet underneath, at www.lacan.com/courbet.htm. It is reproduced (rather better) in *André Masson 1896-1987,* exh. cat., (Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reine Sofía, 2004), 247.

[29] John Updike, "Two Cunts in Paris," *Paris Review,* 144, Fall 1997.

[30] Marcadé, "*Devenir-femme,*" op. cit., 25. It is perhaps apposite to note here that the word *sexe* in French refers both to gender and genitals, a double meaning it does not generally have in English (outside, that is, of pornography).

[31] The painting is reproduced in Hughes, *The Portable Magritte,* op. cit., 139.

wall behind her, as if inviting the imagination to unwrap the butterfly from the cocoon—and liberate her, maybe, from the law of the father?—hung six "Variations on the Montage of an Articulated Minor," as Hans Bellmer's photographs of his own adolescent doll were entitled when they were published in *Minotaure* in 1934.[32] Six more of Bellmer's photographs hung at the end of the parade, reminding us of the *trompe* behind what the mannequins presented to the desiring *œil*. It is ironic that Bellmer, of all artists, should have been criticised for representing "female bodies reified, mutated, sodomized, bound, eviscerated," as he has been by (some) feminist critics.[33] For as Rosalind Krauss has emphasized, "Bellmer's signifiers are—among other things—doll parts. They are not real bodies, and they are not even whole bodies."[34] In contrast to Courbet's realism, Bellmer exposes the signifier *as* a signifier, laying bare "the illusion," in Lacan's words, "that the signifier answers to the function of *representing* the signified, or better, that the signifier has to answer for its existence in the name of any signification whatsoever."[35] "I tried to rearrange the sexual elements of a girl's body like a sort of plastic anagram," Bellmer said later. "I remember describing it thus: the body is like a sentence that invites us to rearrange it, so that *its real meaning becomes clear through a series of endless anagrams.*"[36]

Thus, the first photograph in *Die Puppe* (1934) shows just the doll's armature, the second adds a breast and part of the stomach, the third the head, a still unfinished torso, and one leg—together with the image of the artist, joining his creation in a spectral double exposure. Disrupting any incipient biographical narrative, the fourth photograph shows the doll parts once again completely

[32] Hans Bellmer, "Poupée: variations sur le montage d'une mineure articulée," *Minotaure,* 6, winter 1934-5, 30-31.

[33] I quote Sue Taylor, *Hans Bellmer: the Anatomy of Anxiety,* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2000), 2. She is summarizing the criticisms of others. Her own position is more nuanced.

[34] Rosalind Krauss, *Bachelors,* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1999), 156. See also her essay "Corpus Delicti," in Rosalind Krauss and Jane Livingstone, *L'Amour fou: Photography and Surrealism,* exh. cat., (Washington D.C.: Corcoran Gallery/New York: Abbeville Press, 1982), 57-114, and *The Optical Unconscious,* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1993), 170-76. Other more sympathetic accounts of Bellmer include Taylor, *Hans Bellmer*; Dourthe, *Bellmer*; Therese Lichtenstein, *Behind Closed Doors: The Art of Hans Bellmer,* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty,* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1995), ch. 4, and "Violation and Veiling in Surrealist Photography."

[35] Lacan, *Écrits,* 106, emphasis added.

[36] Hans Bellmer, interview with Peter Webb, Paris, 15 Jan. 1972, quoted in Martin Parr and Gerry Badger, *The Photobook: a History,* Vol. 1, (New York: Phaidon, 2006), 106, emphasis added.

disassembled and pinned against a wall. The fifth is one of the most commonly reproduced of all Bellmer's images. The doll leans against a wall, looking back over her shoulder at the viewer, her chemise lifted to expose her naked buttocks. She "appears to be a violated vamp," says Therese Lichtenstein, "passive and vulnerable yet flirtatious and active."[37] *Really?* It takes an act of considerable imagination thus to animate her, for this "vamp" lacks arms, and has armatures in place of legs. Bellmer added "a second pair of legs, a pair of arms, an upper torso, two pelvises, an extra torso with four breasts, and an additional pelvis with folds of material at its waist" [38] to the head, hands, and legs of his first doll to make a second doll in 1935, whose "games" he recorded in *Jeux de la poupée* (1938/49).[39] He articulated these components, photographing them clothed and unclothed, indoors and out, among an assortment of props—a hoop, a bamboo carpet beater, a child's spinning top—contorting and twisting them so that the doll at one moment consists (only) of opposed pairs of legs pivoting around the central ball-joint, and at another substitutes buttocks for breasts.

This latter interchange, like André Masson's displacement of mouth and *sexe*, was an "axis of reversibility" between "the real and the virtual" which Bellmer found especially alluring, as he explains in his *Petite anatomie de l'inconscient physique, ou l'anatomie de l'image* (1957).[40] The ensemble of his feminine bits and pieces is sometimes disconcertingly phallic, a not uncommon surrealist device which is taken to poetic heights in the photographs of Brassaï and Man Ray—not to mention Lee Miller and Dora Maar—in which the curves of female backs, necks, and buttocks are staged, lit, and shot to suggest the image of an erect penis.[41] But Bellmer goes further in his confounding of sexual distinctions than most. One drawing in *Petite anatomie,* for example, conflates a penis with the naked body of a girl in such a way that her breasts double as testicles and its head moulds itself into the contours of her behind.[42] More outrageously yet, his second doll frequently wears nothing but white knee-

[37] Lichtenstein, *Behind Closed Doors,* 29.

[38] Ibidem., 50.

[39] Paul Éluard chose fourteen photographs of the second doll in 1938 to accompany poems he had written to illustrate Bellmer's pictures (rather than the other way around). The war intervened, Éluard joined the Résistance, and the book did not appear until 1949. The poems may be found in Paul Éluard, *Œuvres complètes,* 1, (Paris: Gallimard, 1968), 1005-10. Photographs of the second doll also appeared in *Minotaure,* 8 (1936) and 10 (1937), and in *Cahiers d'Art,* 11, 1936, a special number devoted to the surrealist object.

[40] Hans Bellmer, *Petite anatomie de l'inconscient physique ou l'anatomie de l'image,* (Paris: Allia, 2002), 18.

[41] For examples see Foster, "Violation and Veiling in Surrealist Photography," and Krauss, *Bachelors,* ch. 1.

[42] Bellmer, *Petite anatomie...,* 32.

length socks, which have usually fallen down around her ankles, and Mary Jane shoes, conjuring up the specter of Nabokov's lollipop-sucking Lolita—or Bataille's unruly Simone.

This doll teases in exactly the way Roland Barthes has shown Bataille's *Histoire de l'œil* does: by yanking our signifying chains.[43] She does not look like Lolita. She does not *look like* a girl at all. Her power derives not from her resemblance, but from what Jacques Derrida would call her *différance*.[44] She does not lead us back to a singular signified—least of all a real female body—but beckons us ever onward into André Breton's "forest of symbols"[45] where signifiers frolic only with one another, setting up any number of *glissades* to tempt and trap the wandering mind. That carpet beater, for instance, which is juxtaposed with not one but two pairs of buttocks in a photograph tinted a lurid bordello red, "anticipat[es] a whipping"—says Lichtenstein, again.[46] And once again, she is importing into the photograph what is *not there*. Each element in Bellmer's construction comes (always, already) laden with traces of the everyday, conjuring up familiar memories and desires. But their combinations bear no resemblance to any reality we know. The dolls thus create the same ontological vertigo Octavio Paz experienced when faced by *Étant donnés*: all is real and verges on banality, all is unreal and verges—on what? Such wanton plays with the signifier, Krauss maintains, disrupt *all* narratives of identity, in the spirit of Bataille's *informe*—"a term that serves to bring things down in the world [*déclasser*]," so that "the universe *resembles* nothing and is only formless... something like a spider or spit."[47] Bellmer disassembles, deranges, disfigures and de(-)forms not the body, but the *imago* in which it is given coherence and meaning—an *imago* that is *classé*, first and foremost, by *différance* of *sexe*. This striptease, too, takes us back not to *L'Origine du monde*, but the tiger-eyed mirror we put in its place the moment we stepped out as subjects, in all senses of the term, of language.

[43] Roland Barthes, "The Metaphor of the Eye," in his *Critical Essays*, (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1972).

[44] The pertinent point being that the signifier (word, image) not only *differs* from the signified (idea, concept) but also "*defers*" to other signifiers, so that meaning is never singular or unequivocal. See my "Incognito Ergo Sum: Language, Memory and the Subject," *Theory, Culture and Society*, vol. 21, no. 6, December 2004, 67-89.

[45] André Breton, translated by Mary Ann Caws: *Mad Love*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987), 87.

[46] Lichtenstein, *Behind Closed Doors*, 87.

[47] Georges Bataille, "Formless," in Yves-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss, *Formless: a User's Guide*, (New York: Zone, 1997), 5, emphasis added. The original French text, which was first published in *Documents*, is given here also.

Before we leave the rue Surréaliste, one final observation may be in order. It is not, perhaps, surprising that (as he complained in a letter to André Breton) Bellmer found himself taken for "a libertine, an alcoholic, a drug addict, a neurotic, a surrealist, unbalanced, a pederast, a seducer of little girls."[48] His dolls are distinctly *unheimlich*.[49] But Bellmer lived in a time and place where the vocabularies of the body had a different political significance than in ours. Ironically, the tuberculosis that was ravaging his wife Margarethe's body was the only reason he remained in Germany after Hitler's triumph in 1933. He fled to France in 1938, only to find himself soon interred in a camp for enemy aliens in Aix-en-Provence, where he shared a room with Max Ernst.[50] Lichtenstein and Hal Foster both read Bellmer's work as challenging the Nazis' mobilization of images of wholesome bodies, especially of hard, neoclassical, male bodies, to construct an "Aryan" normativity[51]—"the type of the new age" of which Hitler boasted opening the *Great German Art Exhibition* in the summer of 1937 in Munich, the day before the notorious *Degenerate Art* circus opened across the street, pillorying the "misshapen cripples and cretins, women who can arouse only revulsion [and] men closer to beasts than to human beings" depicted by modern art before an audience that eventually exceeded three million.[52] Whatever else they might be, Bellmer's dolls are the antithesis of the kitsch so beloved of the National Socialist regime, whether in Clement Greenberg's sense of the term: "the debased and academicized simulacra of genuine culture [...] vicarious experience and faked sensations"[53] or Milan Kundera's: "the need to gaze into the mirror of the beautifying lie and be moved to tears of gratification

[48] Letter from Hans Bellmer to André Breton, 1947. This was auctioned among Breton's personal effects in 2003. See *André Breton: 42 rue Fontaine*, auction catalog, (Paris: Calmels-Cohen, 2003), vol. 3, *Manuscrits*, 201.

[49] Freud's term, usually translated as "uncanny." For further discussion see Foster, *Convulsive Beauty*.

[50] See *Des peintres au camp des Milles :* septembre 1939-été 1941 : Hans Bellmer, Max Ernst, Robert Liebknecht, Leo Marschütz, Ferdinand Springer, Wols (Galerie d'art, Espace 13, Aix-en-Provence, exh. cat., Arles: Actes-Sud, 1997).

[51] See Lichtenstein, *Behind Closed Doors*; Foster, *Convulsive Beauty*.

[52] Adolf Hitler, speech at opening of Great German Art Exhibition, 17 July 1937, from "Facsimile of the '*Entartete Kunst*' Exhibition Brochure," in Stephanie Barron, ed., *"Degenerate Art": The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany*, exh. cat., (Los Angeles: LACMA, 1991), 384-6.

[53] Clement Greenberg, "The Avant-Garde and Kitsch," in *Collected Essays and Criticism*, ed. John O'Brian, vol. 1, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 12.

at one's own reflection."[54] Or should we prefer the Olympians of Leni Riefenstahl?[55]

Notoriously veiling what was *not there,* the Victorians wrapped table legs in frilly ruffles lest their naked curves inflame burning desires. We may laugh at the extravagance of their prudery.[56] But they understood the subversions of the erotic imagination far better than those who identify Bellmer's dolls with female bodies—or see in Courbet's "small painting" a "life-size woman." The place where we might long to find *l'origine du monde* has always, already been occupied by the signifier, which differs from the real, and endlessly defers elsewhere—leading us on, we might say. And on, and on, without end. This *différance* is *la condition humaine.* It is also the condition of any art at all. As I am sure Marcel Duchamp very well knew when he set up his last joke at the expense of "retinal art" like a slot machine in a penny arcade, a dirty little what-the-butler-saw to be sneakily peeked at one viewer at a time, only to uncover, on "the other side," not the "naked girl" of Octavio Paz's imagination, but a reclining mannequin. It is not as if he had not warned us. A fragment in the *Green Box* entitled "Preface" begins with the words that were to become famous, decades later, as the full title of *Étant donnés*:

> Given 1st the waterfall
> 2nd the illuminating gas

There follow several paragraphs on what could follow from these enigmatic premises. But Duchamp ends with the laconic remark—"nothing perhaps."[57]

[54] Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel,* (New York: Grove Press, 1988), 135. Why am I reminded here of George Bush's America?).

[55] I refer to Leni Riefenstahl's two-part film of the 1936 Berlin Olympics, *Olympia: Teil I, Fest der Völker* [Festival of the People], *Teil II, Fest der Schönheit* [Festival of Beauty] (1938).

[56] See Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality, Volume One: An Introduction,* (New York: Vintage, 1980). If Foucault's critique of the repressive hypothesis is correct, the joke is emphatically on us. "What is peculiar to modern societies," he writes, "is not that they confined sex to a shadow existence, but that they dedicated themselves to speaking of it *ad infinitum,* while exploiting it as *the* secret" (35). Eros was everywhere.

[57] *The Writings*..., 27-8.

ÉTANT DONNÉ PICASSO: NOTES ON A BLIND CONVERGENCE

PHILIPPE DAGEN

There are few reasons to compare Duchamp and Picasso.

Anecdotes of dubious veracity suggest antipathy, some even say resentment. If we are to believe a specialist of Picasso, Duchamp's attitudes and inventions are no more than devices and posing:

> Picasso saw them as illusions, a kind of trickery that he rejected as being very similar to that practiced by Academicians, and, to his mind, no more meaningful. But he believed in letting a man earn his living as he saw fit, so he never criticized them publicly. He did, however, appreciate Duchamp's eye when it came to playing the intermediary with American collectors.[1]

He appreciated it all the more when that eye was capable of discerning the remarkable qualities in Picasso's own work. Duchamp bought two of Picasso's drawings when Quinn died and his collection, assembled by his friend Roché, was put on sale. We can assume that he did not keep them for his personal admiration, but put them on the market in New York or Paris. We may also assume that this purchase was not unknown to Picasso, who had every reason follow the results of a sale that included several of his major paintings.

So even if it is possible that Picasso had little sympathy or esteem for Duchamp, it would be hasty to conclude that the feeling was mutual, for several reasons. The first is related to cubism, which, historically speaking, prompted exhibitions in the fifties and sixties that assembled Picasso's and Duchamp's art. Duchamp's were always fewer in number of course, especially in Paris, where the curators of the Musée National d'Art Moderne considered him to be the least interesting of the three brothers, displaying Duchamp-Villon's sculpture or defending Villon's paintings with greater enthusiasm.

Yet whenever Duchamp writes or talks about cubism, Picasso is his reference, and vice-versa: the artist and the movement seem inseparable in his

[1] Pierre Daix, *Dictionnaire Picasso* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1995), 286. Trans. C. McMillan.