

L'Amour fou

photography & surrealism

Rosalind Krauss

Jane Livingston

with an essay by
Dawn Ades

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Photography in the Service of Surrealism

Rosalind Krauss

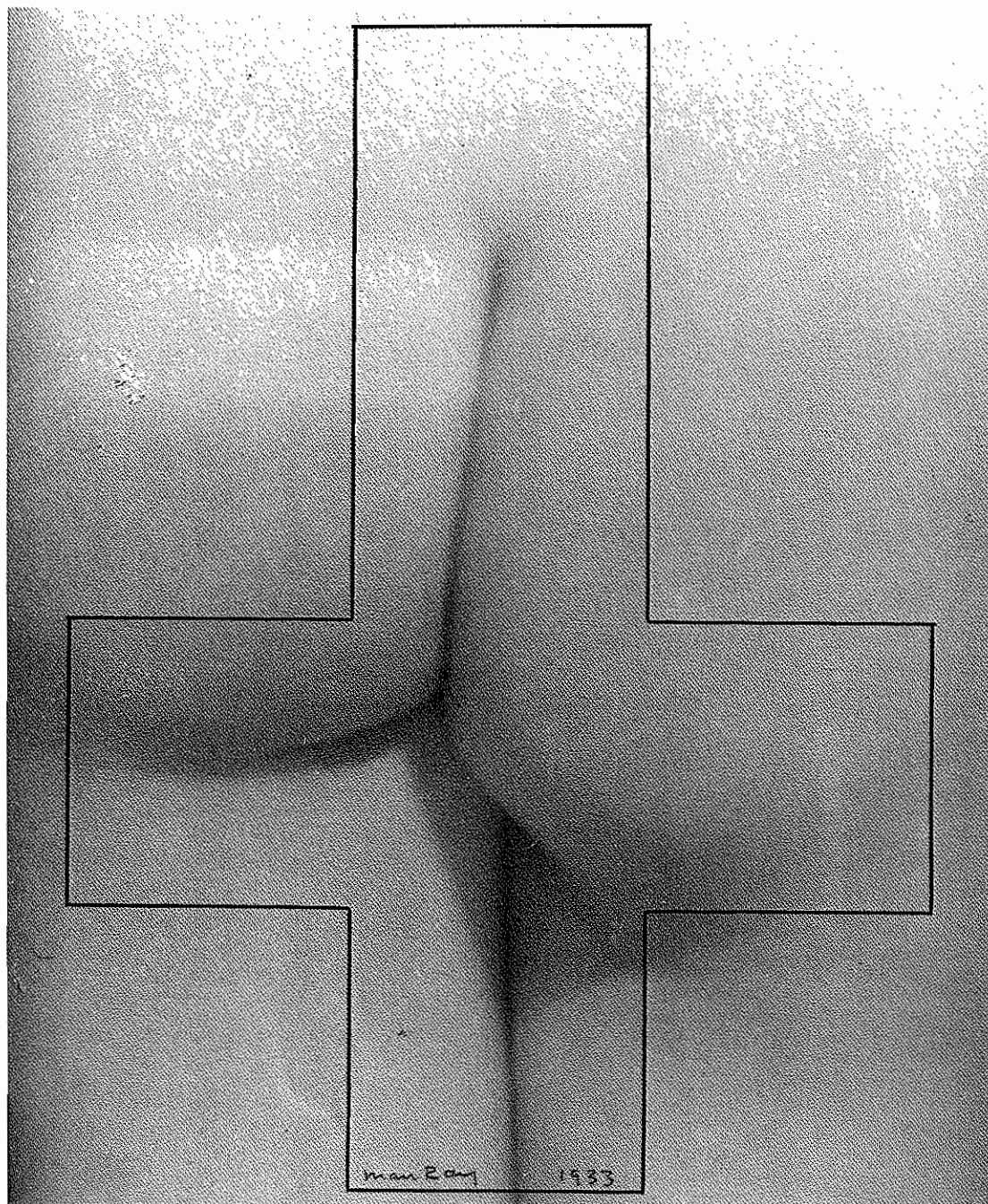


Fig. 6. Man Ray, *Monument à D. A. F. de Sade*, 1933. Vera and Arturo Schwarz Collection, Milan.

*When will we have sleeping logicians, sleeping philosophers?
I would like to sleep, in order to surrender myself to the dreamers . . .*

—*Manifesto of Surrealism*¹

Here is a paradox. It would seem that there cannot be surrealism *and* photography, but only surrealism *or* photography. For surrealism was defined from the start as a revolution in values, a reorganization of the very way the real was conceived. Therefore, as its leader and founder, the poet André Breton, declared, “for a total revision of real values, the plastic work of art will either refer to a *purely* internal model or will cease to exist.”² These internal models were assembled when consciousness lapses. In dream, in free association, in hypnotic states, in automatism, in ecstasy or delirium, the “pure creations of the mind” were able to erupt.

Now, if painting might hope to chart these depths, photography would seem most unlikely as a medium. And indeed, in the *First Manifesto of Surrealism* (1924), Breton’s aversion to “the real form of real objects” expresses itself in, for example, a dislike of the literary realism of the nineteenth-century novel disparaged, precisely, as photographic. “And the descriptions!” he deplores. “Nothing compares to their nonentity; they are simply superimposed pictures taken out of a catalogue, the author . . . takes every opportunity to slip me these postcards, he tries to make me see eye to eye with him about the obvious.”³ Breton’s own “novel” *Nadja* (1928), which was copiously illustrated with photographs exactly to obviate the need for such written descriptions, disappointed its author as he looked at its “illustrated part.” For the photographs seemed to him to leave the magical places he had passed through stripped of their aura, turned “dead and disillusioning.”⁴

But that did not stop Breton from continuing to act on the call he had issued in 1925 when he demanded, “and when will all the books that are worth anything stop being illustrated with drawings and appear only with photographs?”⁵ The photographs by Man Ray and Brassai that had ornamented the sections from the novel *L’Amour fou* (1937) that had first appeared in the surrealist periodical *Minotaure* survived in the final version, faithfully keyed to the text with those “word-for-word quotations . . . as in old chambermaid’s books” that had so fascinated the critic Walter Benjamin when he thought about their anomalous presence. Thus in one of the most central articulations of the surrealist experience of the 1930s, photography continued, as Benjamin said, to “intervene.”⁶

Indeed, it had intervened all during the 1920s in the journals published by the movement, journals that continually served to exemplify, to define, to manifest, what it was that was surreal. Man Ray begins in *La Révolution surréaliste*, contributing six photographs to the first issue alone, to be joined by those surrealist artists like Magritte who were experimenting in photomontage and later, in *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution*, by Breton as well. In *Documents* it was Jacques-André Boiffard who manifested the sensibility photographically. And by the time of *Minotaure*’s operation, Man Ray was working along with Raoul Ubac and Brassai. But the issue is not just that these books and journals contained photographs—or tolerated them, as it were. The more important fact is that in a few of these photographs surrealism



Fig. 8. Jacques-André Boiffard, *Untitled (for Nadja)*, 1928.
Collection Lucien Treillard, Paris.



Fig. 9. Jacques-André Boiffard, *Untitled (for Nadja)*, 1938.
Collection Lucien Treillard, Paris.

pages 16-17: Fig. 7. Man Ray, *Untitled*, 1933. Private collection, Paris.

achieved some of its supreme images—images of far greater power than most of what was done in the remorselessly labored paintings and drawings that came increasingly to establish the identity of Breton's concept of "surrealism and painting."

If we look at certain of these photographs, we see with a shock of recognition the simultaneous effect of displacement and condensation, the very operations of symbol formation, hard at work on the flesh of the real. In Man Ray's *Monument à D. A. F. de Sade* (fig. 6), for example, our perception of nude buttocks is guided by an act of rotation, as the cruciform inner "frame" for this image is transformed into the figure of the phallus. The sense of capture that is simultaneously implied by this fall is then heightened by the structural reciprocity between frame and image, container and contained. For it is the frame that counteracts the effects of the lighting on the flesh, a luminous intensity that causes the nude body to dissolve as it moves with increasing insubstantiality toward the edges of the sheet, seeming as it goes to become as thin as paper. Only the cruciform edges of the frame, rhyming with the clefts and folds of the photographed anatomy, serve to reinject this field with a sense of the corporeal presence of the body, guarantying its density by the act of drawing limits. But to call this body into being is to eroticize it forever, to freeze it as the symbol of pleasure. In a variation on this theme of limits, Man Ray's untitled *Minotaure* image (fig. 7) displaces the visually decapitated head of a body downward to transform the recorded torso into the face of an animal. And the cropping of the image by the photographic frame, a cropping that defines the bull's physiognomy by the act of locating it, as it were—this cutting mimes the beheading by shadow that is at work inside the image's field. So that in both these photographs a transformation of the real occurs through the action of the frame. And in both, each in its own way, the frame is experienced as figurative, as redrawing the elements inside it. These two images by Man Ray, the work of a photographer who participated directly in the movement, are stunning instances of surrealist visual practice.⁷ But others, qualifying equally for this position as the "greatest" of surrealist images, are not really by "surrealists." Brassai's *Involuntary Sculptures* (*Sculptures involontaires*; figs. 10, 28, 29, 30, 31) or his nudes for the journal *Minotaure* are examples. And this fact would seem to raise a problem. For how, with this blurring of boundaries, can we come to understand surrealist photography? How can we think of it as an aesthetic category? Do the photographs that form a historical cluster, either as objects made by surrealists or chosen by them, do they

in fact constitute some kind of unified visual field? And can we conceive this field as an aesthetic category?

What Breton himself put together, however, in the first *Surrealist Manifesto* was not so much an aesthetic category as it was a focus on certain states of mind—dreams—certain criteria—the marvelous—and certain processes—automatism. The exempla of these conditions could be picked up, as though they were *trouvailles* at a flea market, almost anywhere in history. And so Breton finds the "marvelous" in "the romantic ruins, the modern mannequin . . . Villon's gibbets, Baudelaire's couches."⁸ And his famous incantatory list of history's surrealists is precisely the demonstration of a "found" aesthetic, rather than one that thinks itself through the formal coherence of, say, a period style:

Swift is Surrealist in malice,
Sade is Surrealist in sadism.
Chateaubriand is Surrealist in exoticism.
Constant is Surrealist in politics.
Hugo is Surrealist when he isn't stupid . . .⁹

In the beginning the surrealist movement may have had its members, its paid-up subscribers, we could say, but there were many more *complimentary* subscriptions being sent by Breton to far-off places and into the distant past.¹⁰

This attitude, which annexed to surrealism such disparate artists as Uccello, Gustave Moreau, Seurat, and Klee, seemed bent on dismantling the very notion of style. One is therefore not surprised at the position the poet and revolutionary Pierre Naville took up against the "Beaux-Arts" when he limited the visual aesthetic of the movement to memory and the pleasure of the eyes and produced a list of those things that would produce this pleasure: streets, kiosks, automobiles, cinema, photographs.¹¹ In modeling what he intended as the movement's authoritative journal, *La Révolution surréaliste*, after the French scientific review *La Nature*, Naville wanted to clarify that this was not an *art* magazine, and his decision, as its editor, to include a great deal of photography was predicated precisely, he has said, on the availability of photography's images—one could find them anywhere.¹² For Naville, artistic style was anathema. "I have no tastes," he wrote, "except distaste. Masters, master-crooks, smear your canvases. Everyone knows there is no *surrealist painting*. Neither the marks of a pencil abandoned to the accidents of gesture, nor the image retracing the forms of the dream . . ."¹³

To place in this way a ban on accident and dream as the basis of a visual style, thereby proscribing the very

resources on which Breton depended, was to make of himself a kind of roadblock in the direction along which surrealism was moving. Naville's struggle with Breton is acted out in the masthead of *La Révolution surréaliste*, which is issued at its beginning from its rue de Grenelle headquarters, dubbed the "Centrale," its editors listed as Naville and Péret, then is wrested from them in the third issue by Breton and moved to the rue Fontaine, only to return for one number to the Centrale, until it is definitively taken back home by Breton to the rue Fontaine. Many things were at issue in this struggle, but one of them was painting. For by the middle of 1925 Breton had allowed the possibility of "Surrealism and Painting," in the text he produced by that name. At first he thought of it in terms of "found" surrealists, like de Chirico or Picasso. But by March 1926 his second installment of this essay was bent on constructing precisely what "everyone knows" there is none of: a pictorial movement, a stylistic phenomenon, a surrealist painting to go into the newly organized Galerie Surréaliste.

In going about formulating this thing, this style, Breton resorted to his very own privileging of visuality, when in the first *Manifesto* he had located his own invention of psychic automatism within the experience of hypnogogic images—that is, of half-waking, half-dreaming visual experience. For it was out of the priority that he wanted to give to this sensory mode—the very medium of dream experience—that he thought he could institute a pictorial style.

"Surrealism and Painting" thus begins with a declaration of the absolute value of vision above the other senses.¹⁴ Rejecting symbolism's notion that art should aspire to the condition of music, Breton rejoins that "visual images attain what music never can," and he adds, no doubt for the benefit of twentieth-century proponents of abstraction, "so may night continue to descend upon the orchestra." Breton had opened by extolling vision in terms of its absolute immediacy, its resistance to the alienating powers of thought. "The eye exists in its savage state," he had begun. "The marvels of the earth . . . have as their sole witness the wild eye that traces all its colors back to the rainbow." Vision, defined as primitive or natural, is good; it is reason, calculating, premeditated, controlling, that is bad.

No sooner, however, is the immediacy of vision established as the grounds for an aesthetic, than it is overthrown by something else, something normally thought to be its opposite: writing. Psychic automatism is itself a written form, a "scribbling on paper," a textual

production. Describing the automatic drawings of André Masson—the painter whose "chemistry of the intellect" Breton was most drawn to—Breton presents them, too, as a kind of writing, as essentially cursive, scriptorial, the result of "this hand, enamoured of its own movement and of that alone." "Indeed," he adds, "the essential discovery of surrealism is that, without preconceived intention, the pen that flows in order to write and the pencil that runs in order to draw *spin* an infinitely precious substance." So preferable is this substance, in Breton's eyes, to the fundamentally visual product of the dream, that Breton ends by giving way to a distaste for the "other road available to Surrealism," namely, "the stabilizing of dream images in the kind of still-life deception known as *trompe l'oeil* (and the very word 'deception' betrays the weakness of the process)."

Now this distinction between writing and vision is one of the many antinomies that Breton speaks of wanting surrealism to dissolve in the higher synthesis of a surreality that will, in this case, "resolve the dualism of perception and representation."¹⁵ It is an old opposition within Western culture and one that does not simply hold these two modalities to be contrasting forms of experience, but places one higher than the other.¹⁶ Perception is better—truer—because it is immediate to experience, while representation must always remain suspect because it is never anything but a copy, a re-creation in another form, a set of signs for experience. Because of its distance from the real, representation can thus be suspected of fraud.

In preferring the products of a cursive automatism to those of dream imagery, Breton appears to be reversing the classical preference of vision to writing. For in Breton's definition, it is the pictorial image that is suspect, a "deception," while the cursive one is true.¹⁷

Yet this reversal only *appears* to overthrow the traditional Platonic dislike of representation. In fact, because the visual imagery Breton suspects is a picture, and thus the representation of a dream rather than the dream itself, Breton here continues Western culture's fear of representation as an invitation to deceit. And the truth of the cursive flow of automatist writing or drawing derives precisely from the fact that this activity is less a representation of something than it is a manifestation or recording: like the lines traced on paper by machines that monitor heartbeats. What this cursive web makes present by making visible is a direct connection to buried mines of experience. "Automatism," Breton declares, "leads us in a straight line to this region," and the region he had in mind is obviously the unconscious.¹⁸ With this

directness, automatism makes the unconscious present. Automatism may be writing, but it is not representation. It is immediate to experience, untainted by the distance and exteriority of signs.

But this commitment to automatism and writing as a special modality of presence, and a consequent dislike of representation as a cheat, is not consistent in Breton. As we will see, Breton expressed a great enthusiasm for signs—and thus for representation—since representation is the very core of his definition of Convulsive Beauty, and Convulsive Beauty is another term for the Marvelous: the great talismanic concept at the heart of surrealism itself.

On the level of theory, these contradictions about the priorities of vision and representation, presence and sign, perform what the contradiction between the two poles of surrealist art manifests on the level of form. For the problem of how to forge some kind of stylistically coherent entity out of the apparent opposition between the abstract liquefaction of Miró's art, on the one hand, and the dry realism of Magritte or Dalí, on the other, has continued to plague every writer—beginning with Breton himself—who has set out to define surrealist art.¹⁹ Automatism and dream may seem coherent as parallel functions of unconscious activity, but give rise to image types that seem irreconcilably diverse.

It is within this confusion over the nature of surrealist art that the present investigation of surrealist photography should be placed. For to begin that investigation with the claim that surrealist photography is the great unknown, undervalued aspect of surrealist practice, but that nonetheless, it is the *great* production of the movement, is undoubtedly to write a kind of promissory note. Might not this work be the very key to the dilemma of surrealist style, the catalyst for the solution, the magnet that attracts and thereby organizes the particles in the field?

On the surface of things, this would seem a promise

impossible to keep. The very same diversity, so troubling to the art historian or critic who tries to think coherence into the contradictory condition of surrealist pictorial production, repeats itself within the corpus of the photographs. The range of stylistic options taken by the photographers is enormous. There are "straight" images, sharply focused and in close-up, which vary from the contemporaneous production of *Neue Sachlichkeit* or Bauhaus photography only in the peculiarity of their subjects—like Boiffard's untitled photographs of big toes

(figs. 143, 144), or Dora Maar's *Ubu* (1936), or Man Ray's hands (fig. 11), or Mesens' *As We Understand It (Comme nous l'entendons. . .)* (fig. 15)—but sometimes, as in the images Brassai made for *L'Amour fou*, not even in that (fig. 163). There are photographs that are not "straight" but are the result of combination printing, a darkroom maneuver that produces the irrational space of what could be taken to be the image of dreams. Some of these retain the crispness and definition of any contemporary Magritte or Dalí; others, particularly those by Ubac (fig. 66), begin to slide into the fluid, melting condition that we associate more with the pictorial terms elaborated by Masson and Miró. And there were of course techniques associated directly with automatist procedures and the

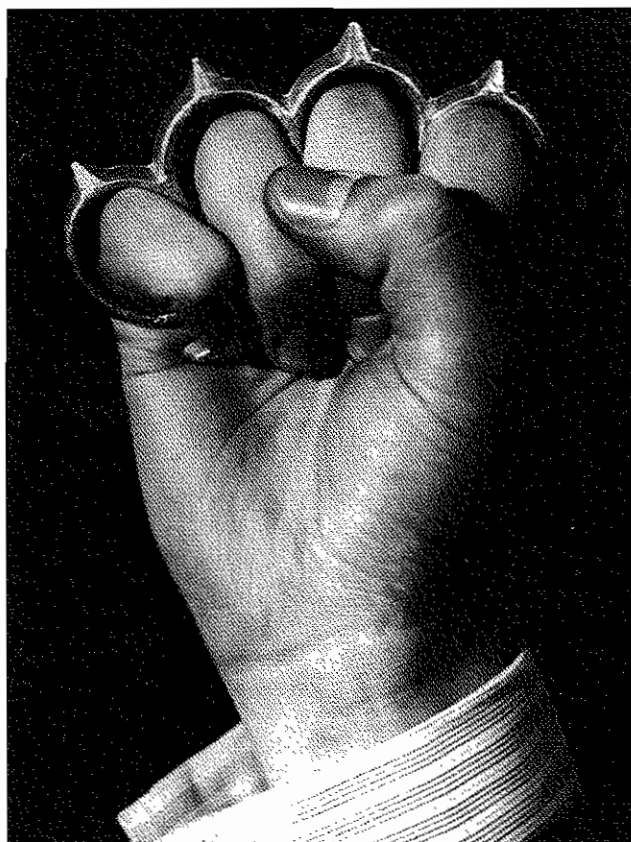


Fig. 15. E. L. T. Mesens, *As We Understand It (Comme ils l'entendons)*, 1926. Private collection.

courting of chance. Thus Ubac speaks of releasing photography from the "rationalist arrogance" that powered its discovery and identifying it with "the poetic movement of liberation" through "a process identical with that of automatism."²⁰ Ubac's *brûlages* (fig. 62), photographs in which the image is modified by melting the negative emulsion before printing, are thought to be one example of this;²¹ Man Ray's rayographs—cameraless "photograms" produced by placing objects directly on photographic paper, which is then exposed to light—can be seen as another (fig. 41). As Man Ray himself said, by "recalling the event more or less clearly, like the undisturbed ashes of an object consumed by flames," the

rayographs seemed like those precipitates from the unconscious on which automatist poetic practice was founded.²² The technical diversity of photographic surrealism does not end here. We must add solarization, negative printing, *cliché verre*, multiple exposure, photomontage, and photo collage, noting that within each of these technical categories there is the possibility of the same stylistic bifurcation (linear/painterly or representational/abstract) that surrealist painting exhibits.

Nowhere does this internal contradiction seem more immediately available than in the photo collage that André Breton made as a self-portrait, a work called *L'Écriture automatique* (fig. 3). For here in a single work is enshrined the very split for which these stylistic terms are the surrogates: vision/writing. Breton portrays himself with a microscope, an optical instrument invented to expand normal eyesight, to extend its powers in ways not unlike those associated with the camera itself. He is shown, that is to say, as the surrealist seer, armed with vision. But this condition of vision produces images, and these images are understood as a textual product, hence the title *Automatic Writing*.

There is, however, one important factor that must be added to any consideration of Breton's *Automatic Writing* before concluding that its contradictions are irreconcilable. It is a factor that allows one to think, as Breton seems to have been doing here, about the relationship between photography and writing. Normally we consider writing as absolutely banned from the photographic field, exiled by the very nature of the image—the “message without a code”—to an external location where language functions as the necessary interpreter of the muteness of the photographic sign.²³ This place is the caption, the very necessity of which produced the despair that Brecht, for example, felt about photography. Walter Benjamin cites this hostility to the “straight” photograph when he quotes Brecht's objection to the camera image: “A

photograph of the Krupp works or GEC yields almost nothing about these institutions Therefore something has actively to be *constructed*, something artificial, something set-up.”²⁴ Throughout the avant-garde of the 1920s and 1930s that something, that *constructed* photograph, was the photomontage, about which it could be claimed that it “expresses not simply the fact which it shows, but also the social tendency expressed by the fact.”²⁵ And this notion of the montage's insistence upon meaning, on a sense of reality bearing its own interpretation,

was articulated by Aragon's reception of the work of the revolutionary artist John Heartfield: “As he was playing with the fire of appearance, reality took fire around him. . . . The scraps of photographs that he formerly manoeuvred for the pleasure of stupefaction, under his fingers begin to *signify*.” The possibility of signification that Aragon saw in Heartfield seems to have been understood as a function of the agglomerative, constructed medium of photo collage. Referring in another context to the separate collage elements of Ernst's montages, Aragon compared them to “words.”²⁶

In what sense, we might ask, could the very act of collage/montage be thought of as textual—as it seems to have been so thought by these writers? And is this a logic

that can resolve what is contradictory in *L'Écriture automatique*?

Objects metamorphosed before my very eyes; they did not assume an allegorical stance or the personality of symbols; they seemed less the outgrowths of an idea than the idea itself.

—Louis Aragon²⁷

If these works were able to “signify,” to articulate reality through a kind of language, this was a function of the cellular structure that montage exploits, with its emphatic gaps between one shard of reality and another, gaps that

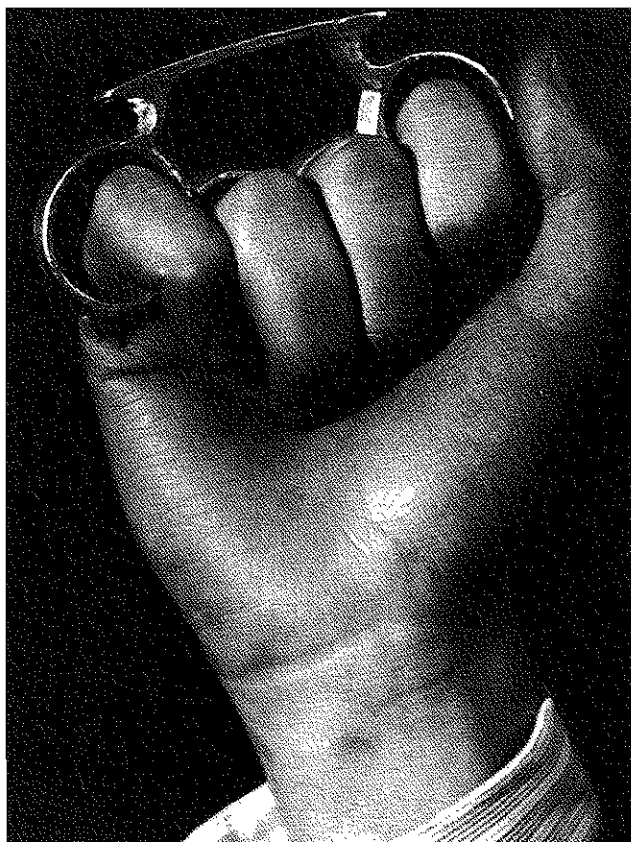


Fig. 16. E. L. T. Mesens. *As They Understand It (Comme nous l'entendons)*, 1926. Private collection.

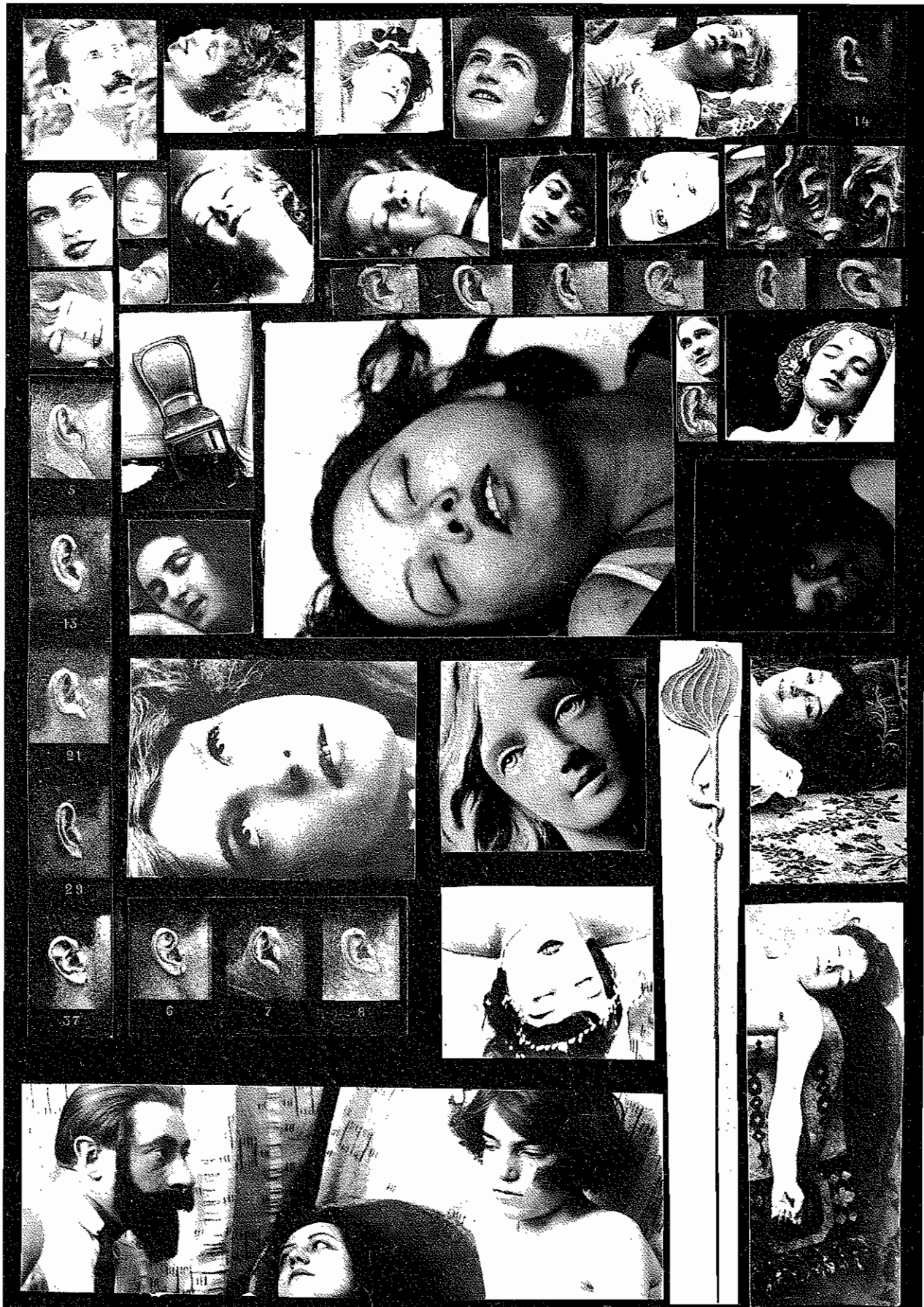


Fig. 17. Salvador Dalí, *The Phenomenon of Ecstasy (Le Phénomène de l'extase)*, 1933. Manoukian Collection, Paris.



Fig. 18. Georges Hngnet, *Untitled*: c. 1947. Manonkian Collection. Paris.

in the montages from the early 1920s by the dadaists Hannah Höch or Raoul Hausmann left rivers of white paper to flow around the individual photographic units. For this cell construction mimics not the look of words but the formal preconditions of signs: the fact that they require a fundamental exteriority between one another. In language this exteriority manifests itself as syntax, and syntax in turn is both a system of connection between the elements of a language, and a system of separation, of maintaining the difference between one sign and the next, of creating meaning through the syntactical condition of spacing.

By leaving the blanks or gaps or spaces of the page to show, dada montage traded in the powerful resource of photographic realism for the quality that we could call the "language effect." Normally, photography is as far as possible from creating such an effect. For photography, with its technical basis in an instantaneous recording of an event, captures what we could call the simultaneity of real space, the fact that space does not present itself to us as successive in nature, like time, but as pure presence, present-all-at-once. By carrying on its continuous surface the trace or imprint of all that vision captures in one glance, photography normally functions as a kind of declaration of the seamlessness of reality itself. It is this seamlessness that dada photo collage disrupts in an attempt to infiltrate reality with interpretation, with signification, with the very writing to which Breton refers in his own collage: *écriture automatique*. It is this seamlessness of the photographic field that is fractured and segmented in Dali's extraordinary collage *The Phenomenon of Ecstasy* (*Le Phénomène de l'extase*; fig. 17) as well, and with the similar production of the language effect. For, within the grid that organizes the ecstatic images of women, we find the inclusion of strips of different ears, taken from the catalogue of anatomical parts assembled by master police chief Alphonse Bertillon that stands as the nineteenth-century criminological attempt to use photography to construct the "*portrait parlant*," or speaking likeness, witness to the last century's expectation that, like other "mediums," photography could wrest a message from the muteness of material reality.

If photo collage set up a relationship between photography and "language," it did so at the sacrifice of photography's privileged connection to the world. This is why the surrealist photographers, for the most part, shunned the collage technique, seeming to have found in it a too-willing surrender of photography's hold on the real. Darkroom processes like combination printing and double exposure were preferred to scissors and paste.

For these techniques could preserve the seamless surface of the final print and thus reinforce the sense that this image, being a photograph, documents the reality from which it is a transfer. But, at the same time, this image, internally riven by the effects of syntax—of spacing—would imply nonetheless that it is reality that has composed itself as a sign.

To convulse reality from within, to demonstrate it as fractured by spacing, became the collective result of all that vast range of techniques to which surrealist photographers resorted and which they understood as producing the characteristics of the sign. For example, solarization—in which photographic paper is briefly exposed to light during the printing process, thereby altering in varying degrees the relationship of dark and light tones, introducing elements of the photographic negative into the positive print—creates a strange effect of *cloisonné*, which visually walls off parts of a single space or a whole body from one another, establishing in this way a kind of testimony to a cloven reality. Negative printing, which produces an entirely negative print, with the momentarily unintelligible gaps that it creates within objects, promotes the same effect. But nothing creates this sense of the linguistic hold on the real more than the photographic strategy of doubling. For it is doubling that produces the formal rhythm of spacing—the two-step that banishes simultaneity. And it is doubling that elicits the notion that to an original has been added its copy. The double is the simulacrum, the second, the representative of the original. It comes after the first, and in this following it can only exist as figure, or image. But in being seen in conjunction with the original, the double destroys the pure singularity of the first. Through duplication, it opens the original to the effect of difference, of deferral, of one-thing-after-another.

This sense of opening reality to deferral is one form of spacing. But doubling does something else besides transmute presence into succession. It also marks the first in the chain as a signifying element—which is to say, doubling transforms raw matter into the conventional shape of the signifier. Linguistics describes this effect of doubling in terms of an infant's progress from babbling to speech. For babbling produces phonemic elements as mere noise as opposed to what happens when one phoneme is doubled by another. *Papa* is a word rather than only a random repetition of the sound *pa* because "The reduplication indicates intent on the part of the speaker; it endows the second syllable with a function different from that which would have been performed by the first separately, or in the form of a potentially limitless series of identical sounds /papapapa/ produced



Fig. 19. Maurice Tabard, *Untitled*, c. 1930. Collection Roger Therond, Paris.

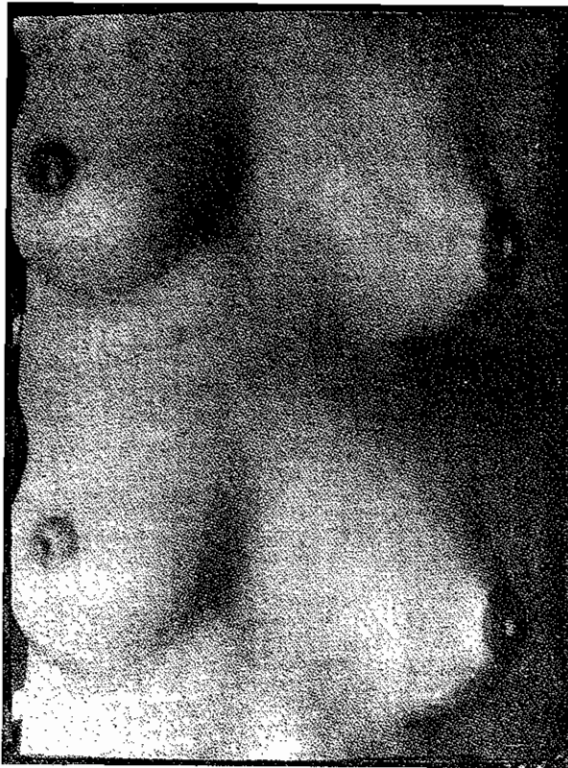


Fig. 20. Man Ray, *Untitled*, 1924. Published in *La Revolution surréaliste*.

by mere babbling. Therefore the second /pa/ is not a repetition of the first, nor has it the same signification. It is a sign that, like itself, the first /pa/ too was a sign, and that as a pair they fall into the category of signifiers, not of things signified."²⁸

Repetition is thus the indicator that the wild sounds of babbling have been rendered deliberate, intentional, and that what they intend is meaning. Doubling is in this sense the "signifier of signification."

Within surrealist photography, doubling also functions as the signifier of signification. It is this semiological, rather than stylistic, condition that unites the vast array of the movement's photographic production. As we observe the various technical options explored by surrealist photography, moving from unmanipulated straight photography, to negative printing, to solarization, to montage, to rayography, there is the constant preoccupation with doubling. We come to realize that this is not only a thematic concern, it is a structural one. For the structure of the double produces the mark of the sign.

We find this within Hans Bellmer's *Dolls* (*Poupées*, 1936), where the mechanically duplicated parts of a doll's anatomy allow for a doubling of these doubles and the doll herself can be composed of identical pairs of legs mirroring each other (figs. 23, 24). This can happen within the very construction of the doll, or from the doll's momentary arrangement for a given photo session, or through paired prints of near-twin images (figs. 21, 22). All of these are rendered through techniques of documentary photography in which manipulation is studiously avoided. But at other points in Bellmer's production, the doubling can manifest itself technically within the image, as in the double exposures that multiply the multiples. Double exposure functions in Man Ray's work to produce, for example, the famous doubling of the eyes of the *Marquise Cassati* (figs. 121, 122). That photographs, multiple by nature, can themselves be doubled makes further doubling available, as in the stacking of images. Man Ray's collage of doubled breasts (fig. 20) in the opening number of *La Révolution surréaliste* (1924) serves as one example, or, again, Frederick Sommer's similarly doubled landscapes reproduced in the American surrealist journal *VVV* (1944), or Man Ray's doubles in rayographic form, as the mass-produced, multiple object of the phonograph record (manufactured of translucent plastic in the days when this work was made) is paired and thereby twinned (fig. 42). The *Distortions*, which André Kertész made in 1933, exploit the doubling of the mirror to create a series dedicated to this effect.

As we noted before, surrealist photography exploits the very special connection to reality with which all

photography is endowed. Photography is an imprint or transfer of the real; it is a photochemically processed trace causally connected to that thing in the world to which it refers in a way parallel to that of fingerprints or footprints or the rings of water that cold glasses leave on tables. The photograph is thus genetically distinct from painting or sculpture or drawing. On the family tree of images it is closer to palm prints, death masks, cast shadows, the Shroud of Turin, or the tracks of gulls on beaches. Technically and semiologically speaking, drawing and paintings are icons, while photographs are indexes.²⁹

Given photography's special status with regard to the real—that is, being a kind of deposit of the real itself—the manipulations wrought by the surrealist photographers, the spacings and doublings, are intended to register the spacings and doublings of *that* very reality of which *this* photograph is merely the faithful trace. In this way the photographic medium is exploited to produce a paradox: the paradox of reality constituted as a sign—or presence transformed into absence, into representation, into spacing, into writing. In this semiological move surrealist photography parallels a similar move of Breton's. For Breton, though he promoted as surrealist a vast heterogeneity of pictorial styles, devised a definition of beauty that is rather more unified and that is itself translatable into semiological terms. Beauty, he said, should be convulsive.

In explaining the nature of that convulsion in the text that serves as prologue to *L'Amour fou*, Breton spells out the process of reality contorting or convulsing itself into its apparent opposite, namely, a sign.³⁰ Reality, which is present, becomes a sign for what is absent, so that the world itself, rendered beautiful, is understood as a "forest of signs." In defining what he means by this "*indice*," this sign, Breton begins to sketch a theory not of painting, but of photography.

Each of Breton's aspects or moments of convulsive beauty are ways of describing the action of signs. The first—"érotique-voilée"—invokes the occurrence in nature of representation, as one animal imitates another or as inorganic matter shapes itself to look like statuary. The second, termed "*explosante-fixe*," is related to the "expiration of movement," which is to say the experience of something that should be in motion but has been, for some reason, stopped, derailed, or as Duchamp would have said, "delayed." In this regard Breton writes, "I am sorry not to be able to reproduce, among the illustrations to this text, a photograph of a very handsome locomotive after it had been abandoned for many years to the delirium of a virgin forest."³¹ The convulsiveness, then,

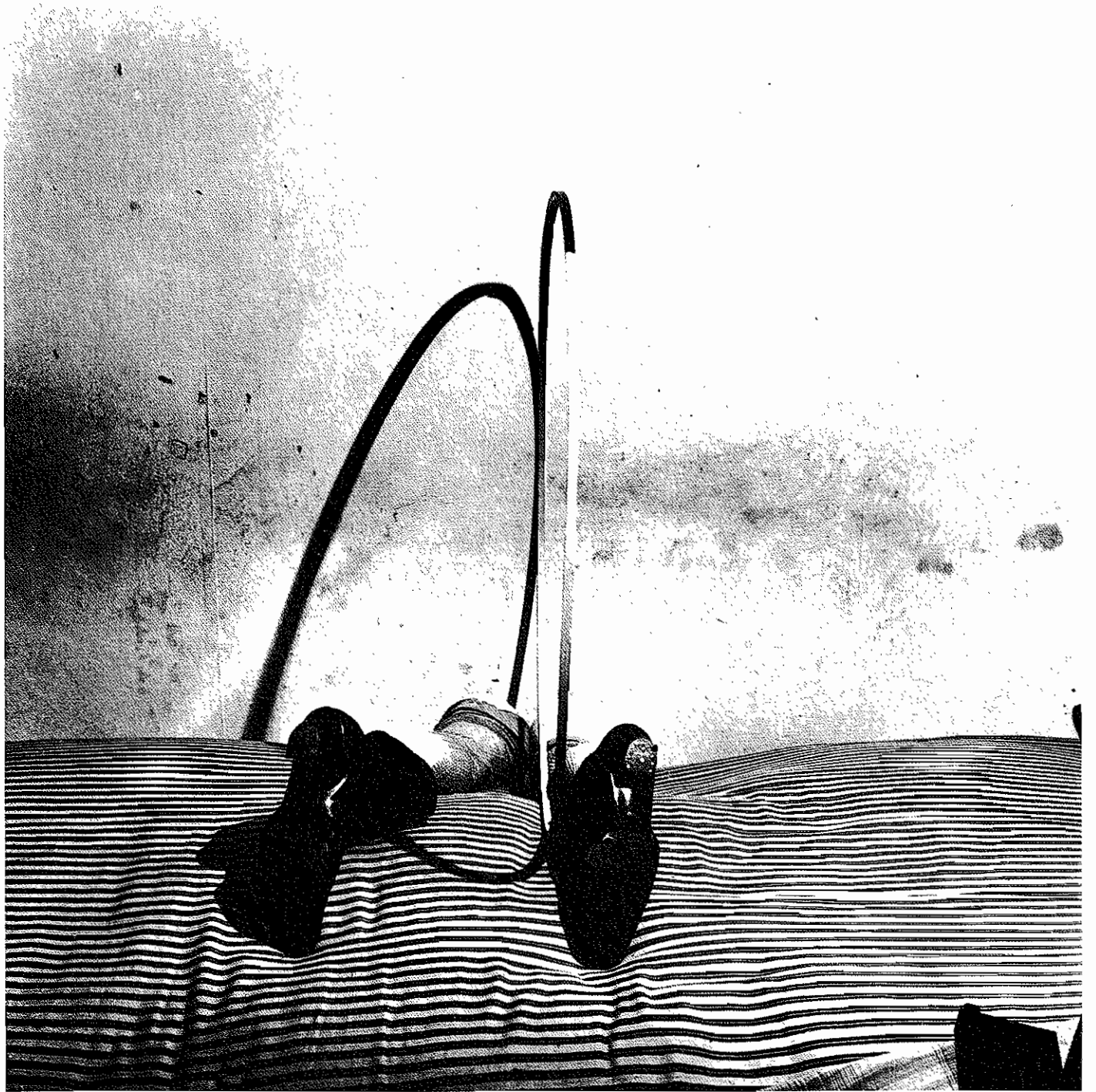


Fig. 21. Hans Bellmer, *Doll (La Poupée)*. 1935. Collection François Petit, Paris.

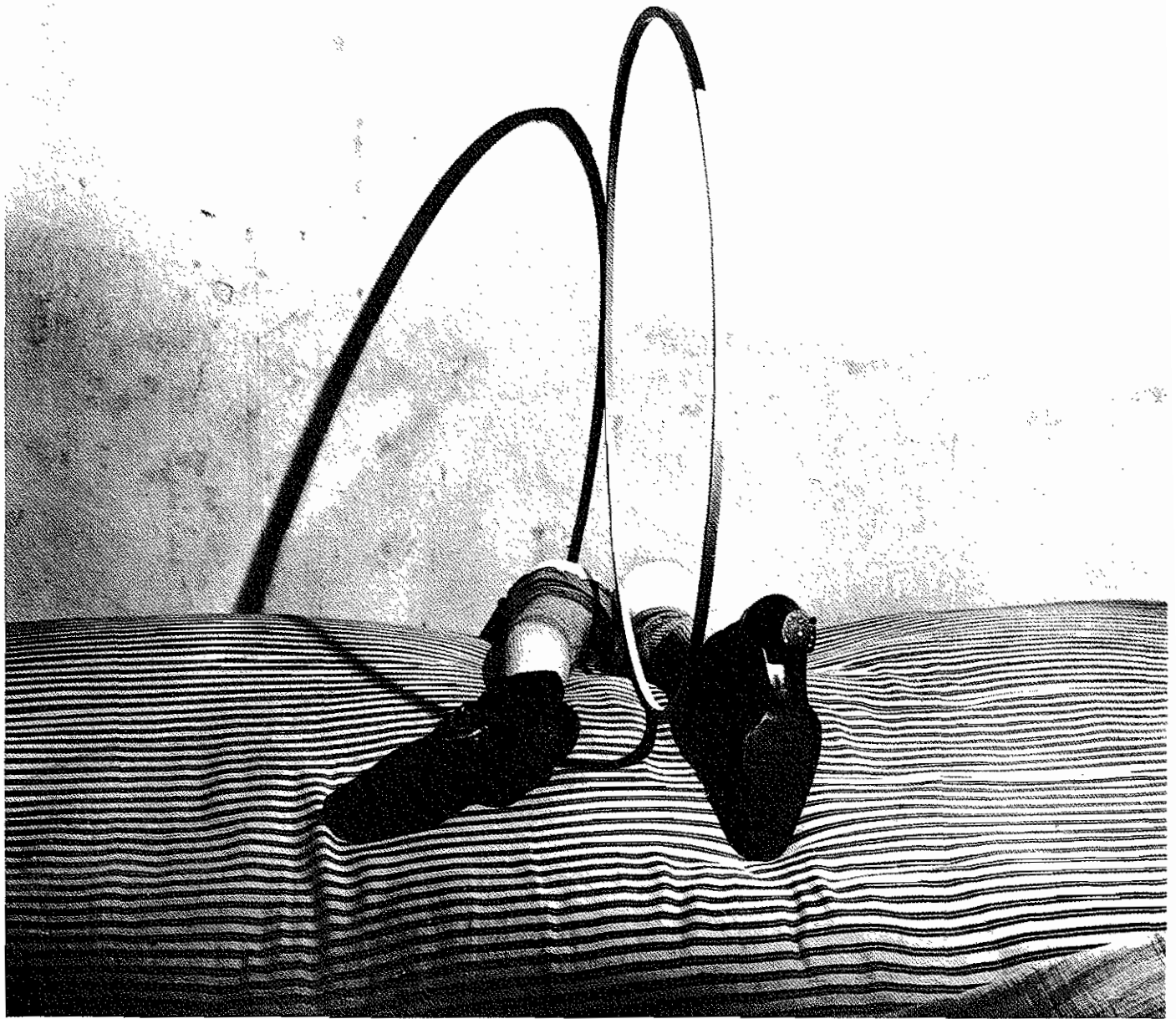


Fig. 22. Hans Bellmer, *Doll (La Poupée)*, 1935. Collection Francois Petit, Paris.



Fig. 23. Hans Bellmer, *Doll (La Poupée)*, 1935.
Collection François Petit, Paris.

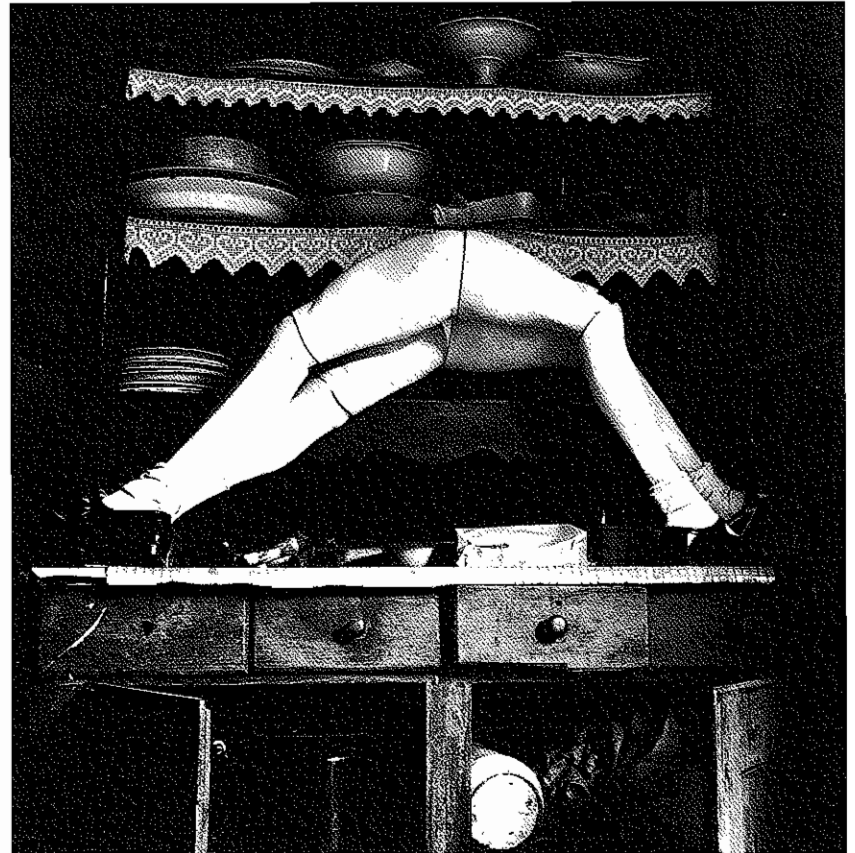


Fig. 24. Hans Bellmer, *Doll (La Poupée)*, 1935.
Collection François Petit, Paris.

the arousal in front of the object is not to it perceived within the continuum of its natural existence, but detached from that flow by means of an expiration of motion, a detachment that deprives the locomotive of some part of its physical self and turns it into a sign of the reality it no longer possesses.

Breton's third example of convulsive beauty—"magique-circonstancielle"—consists of the found object or found verbal fragment, both instances of objective chance, where (specifically in the case of the found object) an emissary from the external world carries a message informing the recipient of his own desire. The found object is a *sign* of that desire. Breton recognized this kind of convulsive beauty in a slipper spoon he had found in a flea market, an object he recognized as the fulfillment of a wish spoken by the automatic phrase that had begun running through his mind some months before. The phrase, *ceendriller-Cendrillon*, translates as "Cinderella ashtray." The flea-market object—a spoon with a little shoe affixed to the underside of its handle—suddenly convulsed itself into a sign when Breton began to see it as a chain of representations in which the "shoe" was reduplicated to infinity, as though caught in a hall of mirrors (fig. 1). In addition to the little shoe under the handle, he suddenly saw the bowl and handle of the spoon as the front and last of

another shoe, of which the little carved slipper was only the heel. Then he imagined *that* slipper as having for its heel yet another slipper and so on to infinity. This chain of reduplicated and mirrored slippers Breton read as a kind of natural writing, a set of "indices" that signified his own desire for love and the beginning of a quest whose magical unfolding is plotted throughout *L'Amour fou*.

If we are to generalize the aesthetic of surrealism, the concept of convulsive beauty is at the core of its aesthetic, a concept that reduces to an experience of reality transformed into representation. Surreality *is*, we could say, nature convulsed into a kind of writing. The special access that photography, as a medium, has to this experience is photography's privileged connection to the real. The manipulations then available to photography—

what we have been calling doubling and spacing as well as a technique of representational reduplication, or structure *en abyme*—appear to document these convulsions. The photographs are not *interpretations* of reality, decoding it as in the photomontage practice of Heartfield or Hausmann. Instead, they are presentations of that very reality as configured or coded or written.

The experience of nature as sign or representation comes naturally, then, to photography. This experience extends as well to the domain that is most inherently photographic: the framing edge of the image experienced as cut or cropped. This is possible even when the image

does not seem folded from within by means of the reduplicative strategy of doubling, when the image is entirely unmanipulated, like the Boiffard big toes (figs. 143, 144), or the *Involuntary Sculptures* (fig. 10) by Brassai, or the image of a hatted figure by Man Ray published in *Minotaure* (fig. 26).³² For, at the very boundary of the image, the camera frame, which essentially crops or cuts the represented element out of reality at large, can be seen as another example of spacing.

Spacing, like the doubled phonemes of *papa*, is the signifier of signification, the indication of a break in the simultaneous experience of the real, a rupture that issues into sequence. Photographic cropping is always experienced as a rupture in the con-

tinuous fabric of reality. But surrealist photography puts enormous pressure on that frame to make it itself read as a sign—an empty sign, it is true, but an integer in the calculus of meaning nonetheless, a signifier of signification. The frame announces that, between the part of reality cut away and this part, there is a difference; and that this segment, which the frame frames, is an example of nature-as-representation or nature-as-sign. Even as it announces this experience of reality, the camera frame, of course, controls it, configures it.³³ This it does by point of view, as in the Man Ray, or focal length, as in the extreme close-ups of Brassai. But in both these instances what the camera frames, and thereby makes visible, is the automatic writing of the world: the constant, uninterrupted production of signs. Brassai's images are of those nasty pieces of paper, like bus tickets

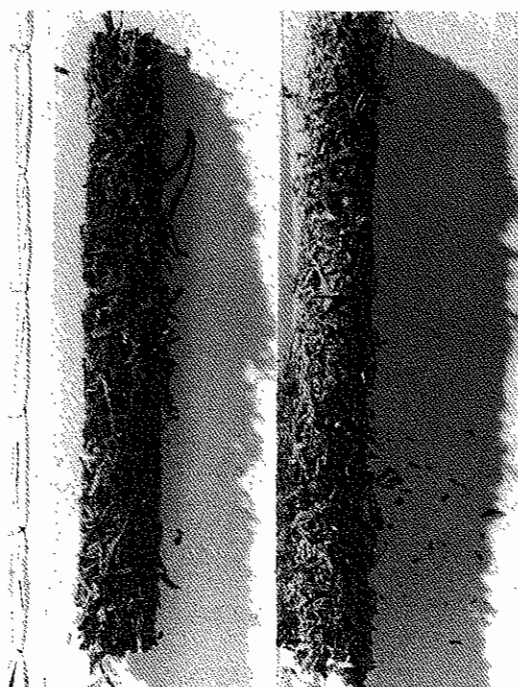


Fig. 25. Marcel Duchamp, *Untitled* (for cover of *7^{ème} Face du dé*), 1936. Collection Robert Shapazian, Fresno, California.

and theater-ticket stubs that we roll into little columns in our pockets or those pieces of eraser that we unconsciously knead—these are what his camera produces through the enlargements that he published as involuntary sculptures. Man Ray's photograph is one of several made to accompany an essay by dada's founding spirit, Tristan Tzara, about the constant unconscious production of sexual imagery throughout culture—here, in the design of hats.

The frame announces the camera's ability to find and isolate what we could call the world's constant production of erotic symbols, its ceaseless automatic writing. In this capacity the frame can itself be glorified, noticed, represented, as in the Man Ray monument to the Marquis

de Sade. Or it can be there silently, operating as spacing, as in Brassai's seizure of automatic production through his images of sculptural onanism or his captured graffiti:

In cutting into the body of the world, stopping it, framing it, spacing it, photography reveals that world as written. Surrealist vision and photographic vision cohere around these principles. For in the *explosante-fixe* we discover the stop-motion of the still photograph; in the *erotique-voilé* we see its framing; and in the *magique-circumstancielle* we find the message of its spacing. Breton has thus provided us all the aesthetic theory we will ever need to understand that, for surrealist photography, too, "beauty will be convulsive or it will not be."

1. André Breton, *Manifestos of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1969), p. 12.

2. André Breton, "Le Surréalisme et la peinture," *La Révolution surréaliste*, no. 4 (July 1925), p. 28. The complete series of essays was collected in Breton, *Surrealism and Painting*, trans. Simon Watson Taylor (New York: Harper & Row, 1972). Further references are to this translation.

3. Breton, *Manifestos*, p. 7.

4. André Breton, *Nadja*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Grove Press, 1960), p. 152. In the preface to the 1963 French edition (Gallimard), Breton speaks of the photographs in relation to one of the "antiliterary" principles that guided the creation of the book. "The abundant photographic illustration," he writes, "had as its objective the elimination of all description—what had been chided as inane in the *Surrealist Manifesto*—and the tone that the narrative adopted was modeled on that of medical observation . . ." See Michel Beanjour, "Qu'est-ce que 'Nadja'?" *La Nouvelle Revue Française*, no. 172 (April 1, 1967), pp. 780–99, for an analysis of *Nadja's* condition as a "text" that is open to additions from what would normally be viewed as *hors-texte* and the role the photographs play in this regard.

5. This question had begun, "The photographic print . . . is permeated with an emotive value that makes it a supremely precious article of exchange" (*Surrealism and Painting*, p. 32).

6. André Breton, "La Beauté sera convulsive . . ." *Minotaur*, no. 5 (1934), pp. 9–16. Walter Benjamin, "Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia," in *Reflections*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), p. 183. See Rosalind Kranss, "Nightwalkers," *Art Journal* 45 (Spring 1981): 33–38.

7. In the stress that both this introduction to the subject of surrealist photography and my subsequent essay in this volume, "Corps Delicti," place on Man Ray's centrality to the surrealist photographic aesthetic, I am in a certain condition of disagreement with the position taken by Jane Livingston, who, in her essay on Man Ray, argues that his photography is highly significant for surrealism without, however, being typically surrealist.

8. Breton, *Manifestos*, p. 16.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 27.

10. Besides the famous "dictionary" definition of surrealism ("n. Psychic automatism in its pure state . . ."), Breton's first *Surrealist Manifesto* includes an "encyclopedia" entry in which the performers of acts of "absolute surrealism" are listed: Aragon, Baron, Boiffard, Breton, Carrive, Crevet, Delteil, Desnos, Eluard, Gérard, Limbour, Malkine, Morise, Naville, Noll, Péret, Picon, Soupault, Vitrac.

11. Pierre Naville, "Beaux-Arts," *La Révolution surréaliste*, no. 3 (April 1925), p. 27.

12. As told to the author in conversation, May 20, 1983. Naville also said that it was he who devised the three-pronged photo collage of the members at the Centrale for the cover of the first issue of *La Révolution surréaliste*. See his account in Pierre Naville, *Le Temps du surréal* (Paris: Galilée, 1977), pp. 99–110.

13. Naville, "Beaux-Arts," p. 27.

14. The quotations in this and the next paragraph are from Breton, *Surrealism and Painting*, pp. 68, 70.

15. André Breton, "Océanie," (1948), reprinted in Breton, *La Clé des champs* (Paris: Sagittaire, 1953; 1973 edition), p. 278.

16. Breton here reenacts the polarization between speech and writing, presence and representation, that Derrida analyzes as the

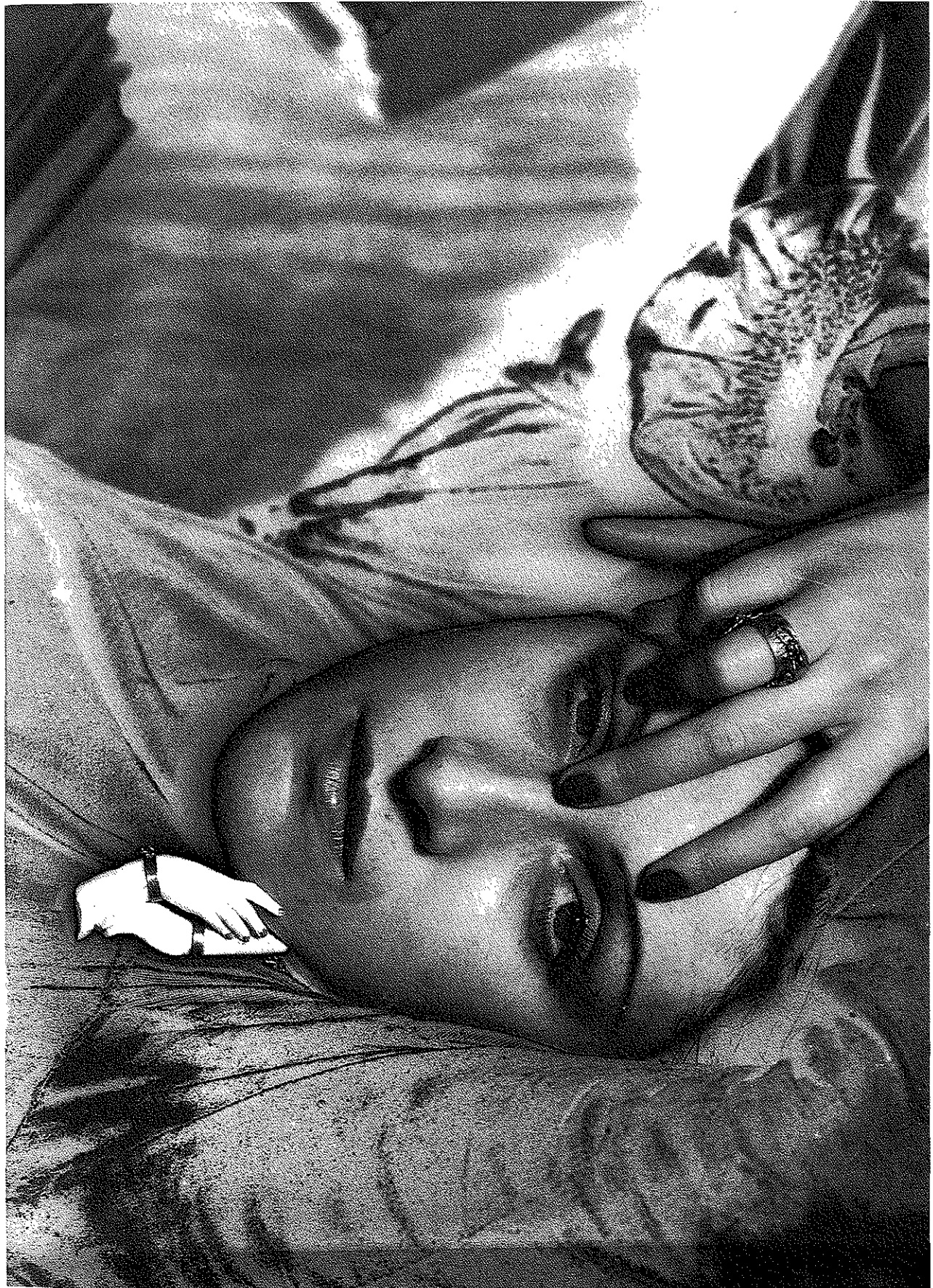


Fig. 32. Man Ray, *Dora Maar*, 1936. Collection Lucien Treillard, Paris.

oppositions that structure Western metaphysics. See Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. G. C. Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976). The concept of spacing developed there (pp. 65–73) and in "Freud and the Scene of Writing" (in Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978]) is important for the discussion that follows.

17. Thus Breton insists that "any form of expression in which automatism does not at least advance undercover runs a grave risk of moving out of the surrealist orbit" (*Surrealism and Painting*, p. 68).

18. *Ibid.*, p. 70.

19. William Rubin attempts to construct an "intrinsic definition of Surrealist painting" in his essay "Toward a Critical Framework," *Artforum* 5 (September 1966): 35. But because he reproduces the same bipolar or bivalent conceptual structure that Breton had established in 1925, his definition mirrors the problems of Breton's as well.

20. See Camille Bryen and Raoul Michelet, *Actuation poétique* (1935; reprinted in Marcel Marien, *L'Activité surréaliste en Belgique* [Brussels: Lebeer-Hossmann, 1979], pp. 269–70).

21. Ubac describes the procedure of *brûlage*, also called *soufflage*, as a system of placing the glass plate of an exposed negative over a heated pan of water in order to melt the emulsion: "It was thus an automatism of destruction, a complete dissolution of the image towards an absolute formlessness. I treated a large number of my negatives in this manner—the result being for the most part disappointing, except in one case where a woman in a bathing suit was transformed into a thunderstruck Goddess—a photo titled 'La Nébuleuse.'" (In an unpublished letter to Yves Gevaert from Raoul Ubac, dated Dieudonné, 21 March, 1981.) The analysis of *La Nébuleuse* in "Corpus Delicti" places the emphasis on the concept of formlessness, and thus on the destructive character of this process rather than the usual idea of automatism as productive.

22. Man Ray, *Exhibition Rayographs 1921–1928* (Stuttgart: L. G. A., 1963).

23. "Message without a code" is Barthes's term in his essays "The Photographic Message" and "Rhetoric of the Image." See Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977).

24. In Walter Benjamin, "A Short History of Photography," trans. Stanley Mitchell, *Screen 13* (Spring 1972): 24.

25. John Heartfield, *Photomontages of the Nazi Period* (New York: Universe Books, 1977), p. 26.

26. Lonis Aragon, "John Heartfield et la beauté révolutionnaire" (1935), reprinted in Aragon, *Les Collages* (Paris: Hermauu, 1965), pp. 78–79.

27. *Nightwalker (Le Paysan de Paris)*, trans. Frederick Brown (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1970), p. 94.

28. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked*, trans. J. and D. Weightman (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), pp. 339–40.

29. Photography's position as an index was first established by C. S. Peirce within the taxonomy of signs that he developed in "Logic as Semiotic: The Theory of Signs," C. S. Peirce, *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, ed. Justus Buchler (New York: Dover, 1955).

30. The text "La beauté sera convulsive" (*op. cit.*) became the first chapter of *L'Amour fou*. See André Breton, *L'Amour fou* (Paris: Gallimard, 1937), pp. 7–19.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

32. Boiffard's big toes accompanied the text by Georges Bataille, "Le Gros Orteil," *Documents*, no. 6 (1929); Brassai's *Sculptures 1 Involontaires* appeared in *Minotaure*, nos. 3–4 (1933), p. 68; Man Ray's photographs of hats illustrated Tristan Tzara's "D'un Certain Automatismes du gont," *Minotaure*, nos. 3–4 (1933), pp. 81–84.

33. Derrida analyzes the frame as "an outside which is called inside the inside to constitute it as inside." See Jacques Derrida, "The Parergon," trans. Craig Owens, *October*, no. 9 (Summer 1979).