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Author

McShane, Megan C.

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Exquisite Corpses: Representations of Violence in the Collective Surrealist Unconscious

Megan C. McShane is a doctoral candidate in Art History at Emory University.

This paper will address the collective method for producing drawings and collages employed by the Surrealists, known as the *cadavre exquis* or exquisite corpse. In 1925 the Surrealists began playing the exquisite corpse game using words to produce fantastic sentences. The game was quickly adapted to produce strange and unexpected figural images. Playing the game entailed passing a sheet of paper among participants while folding the paper in order to conceal the previous person's response. Each person would contribute a part of the sentence or, if drawing, a partial image of a body. In the linguistic method, the players followed the approximate syntactical sequence of subject, verb, and predicate. In the visual method, the image of a body was substituted for the sentence. André Breton cites the elemental segments to be supplied by each person: "subject, verb, or predicate adjective--head, belly, or legs" (*Manifestos* 179). The first sentence produced provided the unusual name for the game: "The exquisite / corpse / will drink / the young / wine" [Le-cadavre-exquis-boira-le-vin-nouveau] (*Dictionnaire* 6).

As a collective endeavor, the Surrealist games were important ways for the group to explore ideas collaboratively. The exquisite corpse drawings that survive are examples of these explorations. These drawings reveal the Surrealists' fascination with death and trauma. Through these collective exercises artists questioned the concepts of individual authorship and rational subjectivity. The exquisite corpse drawings are an important part of Surrealist artistic production. Their original display in the same locations as other Surrealist art works in the publications and exhibitions of the group indicates the value the Surrealists placed on the drawings.¹ They were displayed prominently in historical Surrealist publications. Four major Surrealist journals published examples of exquisite corpse drawings: *La Révolution*

surréaliste (vol. 9-10, 1924-29), *Variétés* (vol. 38-39, 1929), *Le Surréalisme au service de la Révolution* (vol. 20-23, 1930-33), and *Documents 34* (vol. 54-57, 1934). The *Dictionnaire abrégé du surréalisme* (1938) also reproduced an exquisite corpse drawing alongside the definition of the game (*Dictionnaire* 6). The many instances in which the drawings were reproduced provide a series of case studies where exquisite corpse drawings can be linked to Surrealist ideas, both conceptually and chronologically.

Participating in exquisite corpse games was, for the Surrealists, a method of research into subjects of primary interest: psychoanalysis, collective creation, and ludic activity. The exquisite corpse embodied Surrealist principles such as automatism, chance operations, black humor, and thought transmission (6). The technique worked towards effacement of individual will in favor of a collective authorship.² Additionally, the fragmented logic of the game was viewed as an illogical or anti-rational method of exploration.³ The Surrealists employed many techniques in their critique of rationality that was inspired in part by the events of the First World War.⁴ The game of the exquisite corpse exploited chance operations to produce anti-rational, imaginary figures. As a collective activity practiced by over fifty participants from 1925-1940, the exquisite corpse method is an important contribution to the Surrealist project. Nearly two hundred exquisite corpse drawings and collages exist from this period.

Swarming with lice, surrounded by mutilated bodies, and standing in pools of feces, they were faced with “groaning wounded who couldn’t be helped, and distended bodies that your foot sank into” (Binding 21, 83). They often had to resort to using corpses to shore up the walls of the trenches from collapse. The Surrealists’ continual diatribes against war, conscription, patriotism, religion, rationality, and institutions concerned with regulating social behavior were all explicit reactions to the war in which most of them had fought. And yet the impact of the war, perhaps because it is so self-evident, has been largely ignored by Surrealist scholars.⁵

Nearly all of the founding members of the Surrealist movement served in the Great War, or in postwar operations against rebellious colonies. The leader of the Surrealists, André Breton, served as a military medic.⁶ He was stationed at a medical center until September 1919 where he worked with shell-shocked and crazed soldiers. It was here that he applied the procedures of Charcot, Freud, and Janet to analyze patients.⁷ Louis Aragon was mobilized as an infantry medic in 1917.⁸ Later, in 1919, he inspected brothels during the occupation of the Saar and Rhineland. Max Ernst was an artilleryman on the front for two years, and was wounded severely twice (Ernst vii). Antonin Artaud and Benjamin Péret also served (Péret 217). Artaud was drafted into the infantry in 1916, but released nine months later for mental instability. The Poet Paul Eluard was gassed in the war. Eluard's letters to Gala, who later married Salvador Dali, describe repeated hospitalizations, misery, and anguish (Eluard 153). André Masson, too, was profoundly affected as evidenced not only in his art, but also in his graphic accounts of his service:

I shall sing of the stupendous fatigue of the soldiers, of the unwanted consequences of action, of the scared human wrecks abandoned on the battlefield. Above all the physical misery of human beings become hideous: covered with mud from head to foot for a week and often longer, of "sojourn" on the front line ...Many of us unable to wash off that carapace of earth and excrement, lacking water to drink...Like accompaniments, the pounding of artillery and the increasing fear, the one of "gas alert" being not the least distressing. (55-56)

Masson fought in the battles of the Somme where 75 percent of the men in his company were killed in a matter of hours each time they were called to battle. He referred to the war as "the suicide of Europe" (Clébert 20). After being wounded, he lay all night in a shell hole using the cadaver of a German soldier for

cover. Then he escaped from the hospital, was recaptured by military police, and was further transferred to a psychiatric hospital until the end of 1918. Similarly, poor Yves Tanguy, although serving in the period after the war, also suffered psychologically. He resorted to eating his socks and spider sandwiches while living in the hellish barracks (Jean, M. 160). One can see from a cursory list of Surrealists, that most were either patients or medics in the psychiatric hospitals of the war.

Almost immediately following the war, Aragon, Breton, and Soupault worked together to edit the proto-Surrealist Journal *Littérature*. It ran from 1919 to 1924 exposing nascent surrealist principles such as chance operations, subconscious suggestion, automatism, hypnosis, anti-aesthetics, and above all, an irreverent attitude towards death. The journal was also decidedly against family-oriented sexual mores, or sex that resulted in procreation in the service of the patrimony. It was in the pages of *Littérature* that the final break with Dada occurred under the proclamation, "Lachez tout."⁹ The second series of *Littérature* also saw the Period of Sleep explained by the tract "Entrée des mediums." The Period of Sleep was a prolonged investigation into the subconscious operations of the Surrealist mind based on principles of hypnosis and trance induced automatism. Later, Breton would write in the *Manifesto of Surrealism* (1924)

Obsessed as I still was with Freud at this period, and familiar with his methods of analysis, which I had some occasion to practice upon patients during the war, I determined to obtain from myself what one attempts to obtain from them—a monologue spoken as rapidly as possible, on which the subject's critical spirit brings no judgment to bear...and which is, as exactly as possible, *spoken thought*. (*Manifestos* 22-23)

This period was characterized by séances and nights of hypnotizing which quickly eroded into uncontrolled violence, as members of the group attacked each other while under hypnosis.

Aside from providing a unique view into automatic procedures and new access to the unconscious, these evenings were undoubtedly quite amusing. They were characteristic of many surrealist activities at the time because they were collective endeavors. Other such endeavors included wandering the streets of Paris in search of chance encounters with uncanny people or things. They also went as a group on general fieldtrips to such places as the slaughterhouses of Paris. Breton's experiment in automatic writing, *Nadja*, (1924), traces a chance, uncanny encounter, while Aragon's *Paysan de Paris* (1924), describes various events and places which were the favorite haunts of the Surrealists for seeking out the marvelous through chance operations. It is in 1924 that a key concept is elucidated linking the advent of Surrealist games with the horrible and traumatic effects of World War I. After the failure of the trances to access the subconscious without resulting in the acting out of violent fantasies, the Surrealists turned to another collective endeavor: the game of the exquisite corpse.

The games are promoted as a way to circumvent ennui. In *Paysan de Paris* Aragon warns us about that Delicate Monster: *ennui*.¹⁰ After Aragon describes the games he states that they have a serious function: exposing ruptures, jealousies, and suspicions. Furthermore, he notes, "des petits jeux qui sont gros des drames et qui aident à rendre aux pensées dévenues inopérantes dans la vie de société...Un goût du désastre était en l'air" (164). Sometimes translated as boredom, *ennui* also encompasses a quality of anxiety. *Ennui* can affect one in a range of ways from mania to lethargy. The "monster" of *ennui* was, for the Surrealists, a very real and terrifying thing. Having maladjusted after the war to the tedium and quotidian life of bourgeois Paris, *ennui* seems to have plagued them. There are many instances where the Surrealists actually describe ennui in terms of a lack of interest in anything, *including living*. Breton writes: "C'est que, de plus en plus, nous sommes en proie à l'ennui et que, si l'on n'y prends garde, <<ce monstre délicat>> nous aura bientôt fait perdre tout intérêt à quoi ce soit, autrement dit nous aura privé de toutes raisons de vivre" (qtd. in Bürger

203).¹¹ There is, then, an element of fear for one's will to live that exists in the terror inspired by excessive ennui.

Early stages of Surrealism were marred by the suicides of members of the group, most notably Jacques Vaché. Noted Avant-garde theorist Peter Bürger describes the *Gruppenspiele*, or collective games, as a solution to evade the terror and trauma associated with ennui. This terror, and association of death with *ennui*, can partially be explained by the phenomenon of waiting in the war. Soldiers were always waiting; they were waiting to be bombed, waiting to receive orders to attack, waiting to be picked up if wounded, all seemingly interminably. They describe heightened perceptions and acute anxiety in these terrible periods of stagnant waiting. *Ennui*, if let go too far, could result in one losing one's will to live. Therefore, the games functioned to allay thoughts of suicide, while probing the Surrealists' collective experiences for thoughts that were no longer operable in postwar society.

In addition to evading the terror associated with ennui, the proliferation of ludic activity among the Surrealists can be traced to early texts on psychiatry. Not only were the Surrealists exposed to psychiatry in the wartime medical psychiatric wards, but they had also been exposed to certain psychiatric sources through their prewar educational experiences (Spector *Surrealist Art* 22-42). Early texts on psychiatry significantly influenced Surrealist thought. These psychoanalytic sources provide an historical explanation for the game and its relation to Surrealist theories about collective psychology. Believing that thoughts were contagious, or that mental states were transferable, the Surrealists used the drawings to experiment with the transference of thought. The failure of the séances and trances to access the subconscious without inducing acts of violence created an ideal environment in which the relatively non-violent game of the exquisite corpse could be adopted following the Period of Sleep. Situated within a larger context of Surrealist goals, the exquisite corpse can be seen as a method of Surrealist research into the collective unconscious.¹²

The collective procedure associated with the making of an exquisite corpse poem or drawing was favored as a means of

“pooling” the consciousness of individual artists and writers. Most forms of automatism lacked the element of collectivity so important to the group. The notion of collective pooling, indicating the almost telepathic nature of the game, was also extolled by the Prague Surrealists, one of whom wrote, “At the end we had discovered that we had all drawn on the same paper the same object, only differently organized. We had obviously reached a state of perfect telepathy” (qtd. in Schwartz 42). Breton would write that the drawings were a product of “tacit communication—merely by waves—among the players” (*Surréalisme* 290). While it is clearly debatable whether a state of perfect telepathy was achieved, we can point to their belief in collective psychology as an important aspect of the exquisite corpse practice.

The works of Pierre Janet, Gustav Le Bon, J.-M. Charcot, and Sigmund Freud provided psychiatric and psychoanalytic sources for the Surrealists. Pierre Janet contributed to their knowledge of oneric experiments and automatism during the Period of Sleep. Le Bon significantly influenced their ideas about automatism in the group environment, and advocated manipulation of groups or crowds by appealing to their subconscious desires. Charcot was a veritable hero of the Surrealists, whom they celebrated on the 50 year anniversary of the invention of hysteria with a special spread in their journal *La Révolution surréaliste*. Furthermore, Freud had studied under Charcot at the Salpêtrière. Freud was always an influence on the Surrealists, even after Breton went to visit him 10 October 1921 in Vienna, and found him to be “un petit vieillard sans allure” (qtd. in Alexandrian 55).

Surrealist scholars such as Sarane Alexandrian and Jack Spector enlist the psychoanalytic sources read by the Surrealists to explain the historical role of psychology in Surrealism.¹³ Alexandrian uses Janet to illuminate Breton’s 1919 automatic text written in collaboration with Phillippe Soupault, *Les Champs magnétiques*, by reconstructing the historical interaction of Breton with the writings of Janet (Alexandrian 50-51).¹⁴ Alexandrian’s model is based on the influence of Janet’s formulation of electromagnetic operations and leads us to the

source for Breton's notion of collective thought. Telepathy, as outlined in Janet's *L'Automatisme psychologique* (1889), is a striking parallel for Breton's notion of "pooling" in the exquisite corpse drawings. Further, Janet studied under and wrote extensively about Charcot. Janet felt that Charcot provoked his observations of hysterics noting Charcot, "tenait à la théorie, à l'interprétation des faits, au moins que autant qu'à leur description" (J.M. Charot 573). Breton was interested in a systematic method for accessing the unconscious and revealing the marvelous. Janet's fascination with descriptions of how to *access* communal thoughts, which were analogous to electromagnetism between two objects, were more useful in the exquisite corpse experiments than Charcot's predilection for *interpretation*. Furthermore, Janet would use Charcot in 1925 to say that the cause of neurosis is a "traumatic memory." Janet claimed that, "symptoms were induced by a far simpler mechanism, which I have described under the name *psychological automatism*. The actual memory of the happening was constituted by a system of psychological and physiological phenomena" (*Psychological Healing* 597).¹⁵

Another source for ideas about communal terror and automatic thought operations in the group environment, was Gustav Le Bon. Le Bon is historically located by Spector and others as an influence on both Freud and the Surrealists. Jack Spector carefully reconstructs the French educational curriculum in the Surrealists' early formation, revealing their prewar exposure to influential psychiatric texts. The 1895 text by Le Bon, *Psychologie des foules*, is one of the sources for the theories of collective psychology at work in the exquisite corpse.¹⁶ Within this text of Le Bon, mob psychology prevails as an incredible subversive source for Surrealist ideas. Lawless, criminal, heroic and acting on automatic impulses ungoverned by reason were virtues extolled by the Surrealists. Mob psychology had a significant impact on the goals of the collective and can be allied to their intense distrust of institutions, for Le Bon's text pragmatically outlined ways in which the public crowd was increasingly governed by the state through progressive restriction. Recall that many war-wounded,

including Surrealists, were not discharged from the war's psychiatric hospitals for fear of widespread riots. The famous call for a "Revolution of the mind" is thought to be a couched reference to Le Bon's work, *The French Revolution and the Psychology of Revolution*, a text that was widely read at the time in French secondary schools. Le Bon is also the most significant source for Freud's study of group psychology, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, which appeared in French translation in 1924.

The writings of Freud intersect at many levels with the exquisite corpse drawings. His writings and exquisite corpse drawings were placed side by side in Surrealist publications. This serves as an historicized instance of intersecting evidence where the Surrealists related Freud's writings to the exquisite corpse. Indeed, the drawings can be explained and analyzed in terms of the Freudian texts with which they are associated. For example, in 1925, when the drawings were first invented, Freud's ideas about group psychology were available to Surrealists.¹⁷ In 1927, when the first major publication of the exquisite corpse drawings appeared in *La Révolution surréaliste*, some of the drawings were placed within a reprinted extract from Freud's *La Question de l'analyse par les non-médecins*. The extract ends with a reference to the games of children.

These exquisite corpse drawings represent a ludic experiment, the goal of which was to access the unconscious. Traumatic and violent experiences marked the Surrealist project from its inception. Psychiatric hospitals and texts played a formative role in the experience of the artists and writers who engaged in this collective activity. Apart from such correlations as the publication of Freud's texts along side the drawings, there is evidence for the exquisite corpse drawings' relation to psychoanalytic concepts and group psychology. The game of the exquisite corpse should be viewed as an escape from *ennui*, in the sense that *ennui* was perceived as a *death by not dying*.¹⁸ When we view the events, the sources, and the texts that accompany the exquisite corpse drawings, it becomes evident that, in the words of André Masson, the exquisite

corpse was indeed “one of the Surrealists’ serious games.”¹⁹



NOTES

¹ An exquisite corpse collage was used for the invitation to the inauguration of the *Galérie Surréaliste* in Paris, October 1927.

² Many examples of collaborative works appear in the literary genre. There are also examples of collaboration between writers and artists, particularly in the production of Surrealist books. Yet the exquisite corpse was the dominant mode of visual collaboration. For a discussion of Surrealist collaboration between text and image see Renée Riese Hubert, *Surrealism and the Book*, 54-84.

³ Scholars who favor a semiotic approach view the fragments as a destabilizing force in relation to mimesis. The function of the fragment in this sense relies heavily on collage principles where a photograph is the material of collage. The seam, or *spacing*, in photographic collage is viewed by Krauss and Adamowicz as destabilizing the role of the photograph as an index of reality. This is perhaps the reason why Adamowicz does not include any of the exquisite corpses that were drawn by hand in her study, as the argument works best for collaged examples. See Elza Adamowicz, *Surrealist Collage*.

⁴ For commentary on the effects of the First World War on artists and the artistic milieu, see Kenneth Silver, *Esprit de Corps*. See also Sidra Stich, *Anxious Visions*.

⁵ See Ferdinand Alquié, *Entretiens sur le Surréalisme* 8, 504. Alquié's call for further research was answered by Sidra Stich who organized a traveling exhibiton that addresses some of these issues. See

Sidra Stich. *Anxious Visions*, 1990. Unfortunately, the *cadavre exquis* were only briefly mentioned.

⁶ Biographical data unless otherwise noted is from Anna Balakian, *André Breton: Magus of Surrealism*.

⁷ This was a precautionary delay by officials as they were convinced there would be violent riots if all the angry and insane soldiers were discharged at the same time.

⁸ Biographical data unless otherwise noted is from Roger Garaudy, *L'Intinéraire d'Aragon: du Surréalisme au monde réel* and Lucille Becker, *Louis Aragon*.

⁹ Breton later speaks of Dada as a necessary Terror. See André Breton, *Les Pas perdus*, 207.

¹⁰ "Delicate Monster" is Breton's term derived from Baudelaire.

¹¹ Bürger also makes a distinction between nineteenth century *ennui*, where one thinks first of a lack of work, or *arbeit*, while he points out that the Surrealists emphatically state, "Nous sommes guère des travailleurs."

¹² The term collective unconscious, as used here, is not a Jungian term. The Jungian term was developed much later. I use the term, as the Surrealists did, to describe the unconscious operations when one is in a group, as opposed to when one is alone. They believed that certain mental states were contagious. The Surrealists developed their notion of the collective workings of the unconscious based on nineteenth century studies of crowd psychology. Many nineteenth century texts discussed theories of collective psychology based on the violence of the French Revolution. Breton, himself, alludes to this in the Manifesto of Surrealism when he calls for a "revolution of the mind." See Spector, 44, 61. For a discussion of the lack of influence Jung had on Surrealism, with the noted exception of Tzara's interest after 1931, see Alexandrian, 69-70.

¹³ See Alexandrian, *Le surréalisme et le rêve*. See also Spector, *The Aesthetics of Freud*, and *Surrealist Art and Writing*. See also Elizabeth Roudinesco, *La Bataille de cent ans: Histoire de la*

psychoanalyse en France; for a critique of Roudinesco's history as a teleological prelude leading to Lacan, see Paul Bercherie, "The Quadrifocal Oculary," 23-70.

¹⁴ Janet's influence on Breton has been noted by other scholars. See also Anna Balakian, *André Breton: Magus of Surrealism*, 28-34. See also Jennifer Gibson, "Surrealism before Freud: Dynamic Psychiatry's Simple Recording Instrument" 56-60.

¹⁵ Janet cites Charcot, *Névroses et l'idées fixes* and *Les Obsessions et la psychasthénie* for the notion of traumatic memory.

¹⁶ See also Didier Anzieu, *Le Groupe et l'inconscient*. Significantly, Didier Anzieu uses *Le Bon* to discuss the group as a female gendered phenomenon. Although this position fails accurately to describe or explain the engagement of women in the collective drawings, it will be introduced as a dominant epistemology of the category of the group as "Other."

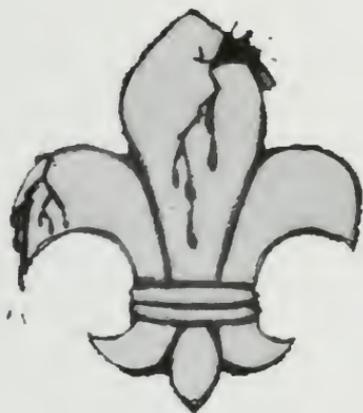
¹⁷ It was at this time that the publisher of the French translation of Freud's *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* placed prominent advertisements for the text in the journal *La Révolution Surréaliste*.

¹⁸ This is Paul Eluard's term, and the title of his 1924 book of poetry.

¹⁹ Masson, "Where do you Come From Exquisite Corpse? One of the Surrealists' (Serious) Games," qtd. in Schwartz, *Le Cadavre exquis, son exaltation*.

Murder, Massacre, Mayhem:

The Poetics of Violence in French Literature and Society



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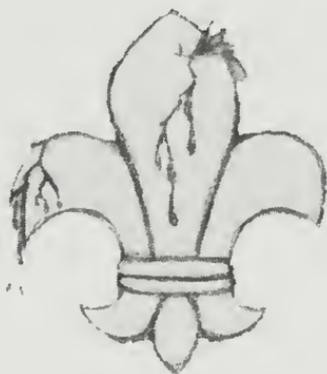
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*Ce serait le moment de philosopher et de
rechercher si, par hasard, se trouvait ici
l'endroit où de telles paroles dégèlent.*

Rabelais,
Le Quart Livre

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