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Surrealism: a Marxist Enterprise in 1930s London

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Surrealism: a Marxist Enterprise in 1930s London

DISSERTATION

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in Visual Studies

by

Susan King Obarski

Dissertation Committee:
Professor James D. Herbert, Chair
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2014
DEDICATION

To

my parents Joan and Jim King,

and my daughter Katie Obarski,

for their love and unconditional support.
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This dissertation, a presentation of institutional and personal histories, considers how the British surrealists used varied media—from found objects and fashion to film, special exhibitions and events, and commercial advertising—in their attempt to revolutionize British capitalist society in the mid-nineteen thirties. With writers Herbert Read and David Gascoyne as their leading spokespersons, the British surrealists advocated a Marxist-inspired social revolution when they formed as a group in 1936. Yet, throughout the late thirties, the Marxist aims of British surrealism were often lost on patrons, and questioned by communist and conservative critics responding to the artworks. In chapter one, I suggest this was the case because the sensational and playful antics, and the highly varied and sometimes abstract surrealist art associated with the 1936 International Surrealist Exhibition in London did not convey the same direct political message contained in the surrealists’ written statements. To build this argument, I consider artworks produced by the group including: Eileen Agar, Gascoyne, Henry Moore, and Paul Nash. Chapter two focuses on Agar to show how the surrealists’ demands for social change were
based as much on advocating creative freedom and independence from established social norms, as they were on Marx's ideas about social progress. Like many of the English surrealists, Agar's bourgeois background and humanitarian commitment to a Popular Front against fascism defined the content of her art more than any statements advocating a proletarian revolution that she willingly signed. To further explore the political compromises faced by the British surrealists and their diversity of artistic styles and media to promote social change, chapter three considers two promotional films: *The Birth of the Robot* directed by Len Lye for Shell-Mex and B.P. Oil, and *Spare Time* directed by Humphrey Jennings for the government run General Post Office (G.P.O.) Film Unit. To focus on the British surrealists’ greatest success in raising awareness about the Spanish Civil War, chapter four appraises how Roland Penrose, E. L. T. Mesens, Read, and others brought Picasso’s *Guernica* to England in late 1938, promoting it as a prime example of how surrealism could indeed embody political ideals.
INTRODUCTION

In July 1936 a band of influential writers and visual artists convened at art collector and artist Roland Penrose’s home in the London suburb of Hampstead to officially form the British surrealist group and to hammer out the particulars of their artistic and intellectual purpose that would take the form of a signed group statement in International Surrealist Bulletin No. 4. The group had successfully organized the International Surrealist Exhibition in London earlier that summer, and they were eager to define a course for the future of surrealism in England. To show the tight correspondence between the British and French surrealists, the signatories at Penrose’s house included the French surrealists André Breton, Paul Éluard, and Man Ray, and the émigré Belgian art dealer E. L. T. Mesens.¹

Throughout the late thirties, the British group remained closely affiliated with Breton, but its leaders were interested in defining a uniquely British approach to surrealist art and surrealism’s Marxist politics. In 1936, art critic and writer Herbert Read served as the British group’s primary spokesperson. By 1938, Penrose and Mesens, as co-directors of the London Gallery, consolidated the group’s political agenda and sponsored a series of surrealist exhibitions and highly publicized political events.

This dissertation considers how key members of the surrealist group—including Read, Penrose, Mesens, filmmaker Humphrey Jennings, and poets Charles Madge, Hugh Sykes Davies, David Gascoyne, and Roger Roughton—shaped British surrealism’s Marxist politics in response to current events from early 1936 throughout the period of the Spanish Civil War. Primarily as a remedy to fascism, their Marxist desire to make British workers more aware of their own labor and its contribution to the larger notion of Empire inspired
a hybrid form of surrealism in England. Although their political views were well meaning and informed, many members of the surrealist group came from bourgeois backgrounds and were invested in sustaining the humanitarian and egalitarian aspects of Britain’s capitalist culture. For these reasons, and because the surrealists’ often abstract and playful imagery failed to overtly reflect the political views expressed in their writings, the surrealists’ vitriolic declarations for a proletarian social revolution consistently came under fire from critics on the right and left. The political affiliations of individual members of the group also varied considerably; from Read’s anarchist views to Roughton’s staunch support of Stalin as a member of the British Communist Party. Other artists affiliating with the group, including Agar, Paul Nash and Len Lye, never admitted to more than a humanist position against fascism. Agar, Nash, and Lye allied themselves with the surrealists’ Marxist politics only because they wanted to fight fascism and take a stand in support of the Spanish Republicans. As a result, there was dissension within the group, and not all members fully embraced the political statements they were willing to sign.

In my attempt to understand the complexity of the political climate in England and the motivations of the surrealists working there, my dissertation explores in depth the external pressures and internal conflicts faced by the group. The surrealists’ 1936 international exhibition opened in London just before the advent of the Spanish civil war (begun in mid July 1936) and Joseph Stalin’s first purges in August 1936 of Bolshevik-Leninists sympathetic to Leon Trotsky, then in exile. Along with Breton, the British group under Read’s leadership generally supported Trotsky during the purges; however, Trotsky never advocated the surrealist platform, nor was he even aware of it in 1936.
The four related case studies that make up this dissertation build from 1936 to 1939 to analyze the surprising, and somewhat paradoxical, ways that the British surrealists coalesced their expertise in commercial enterprises and artistic ventures to promote a Marxist turn for Britain’s capitalist culture. Earlier scholarship has suggested that members of the international surrealist movement, as Marxists seeking creative freedom in the arts, generally critiqued capitalist commodity culture. Yet there is ample evidence that British surrealists of this period consistently promoted surrealism’s creative labor and Marxist politics by exploiting marketing strategies they had honed in London’s art world, from their work in the government sponsored General Post Office (G.P.O.) Film Unit, and as commercial designers. As they managed successful galleries, worked for the G.P.O., and created promotional materials for multinational corporations, they wholeheartedly advocated surrealism as an example of the totally free, productive, and non-alienated labor they desired for all workers in Britain’s capitalist economy. Judging from their actions, Read, Penrose, and Mesens embraced and wanted to extend the social democratic aspects of Britain’s capitalist system. Yet in their written statements, they purported to seek a proletarian revolution and did not waiver in their commitment to Marxism.

Today their paradoxical use of capitalist strategies to promote their own set of carefully defined Marxist principles might seem odd. This is in part because typically communism and capitalism have been accounted for as independent systems. At the time, some members of the Communist Party viewed any application of Marxist principles in a capitalist state as an unholy union. The British surrealists were indeed criticized by individuals further to the left, and often from an explicitly Marxist position. Conservatives in the art world, allying themselves more closely with the fascists, saw the surrealists’
interest in Marxism as a capitulation to communism. But in the late nineteen thirties, the British surrealists’ ideological melding was efficacious for bringing their revolutionary art, along with their social ideals, to the attention of the British public and to the wider international community.

Transgressing the ideological boundaries normally separating communism and social democracy at the left end of the political spectrum, these predominantly bourgeois artists were some of the first to give women such as Agar a role in shaping the public perception of an international movement. Beyond gender, British surrealists such as Jennings wanted to give a voice to the working classes and bring attention to the individual workers’ relations to the state and to the larger empire. Eschewing stock images that morally defended capitalist overseers or criticized the exploitation of labor, Jennings presented human productivity and industrial progress in a positive light to reflect his support of the working classes. Modern British life as it was presented in his films such as *Spare Time* (1939) successfully shifted perceptions of how individual Brits contributed to building the empire, even if his films failed to critique class differences or the inequalities inherent to them. Given this, the surrealist enterprise is fertile ground for anyone considering gender issues, tensions between national identity and internationalism in British art, the formation of British class consciousness, and the ironies that emerge when bourgeois artists presume to act as agents for social change.

As Walter Benjamin surmised in 1929 as he was writing about surrealism, surrealist activism was based in the experience of modern material culture. This dissertation, consonant with recent studies of surrealism’s engagement with commercial advertising, shows how the British group effectively raided strategies from communist and capitalist
culture—the fine art market, Soviet film, and commercial advertising—to project political messages that were meant to exceed the limits of capitalism and communism. Yet given the lack of cohesion within their ranks and among the audiences they wanted to attract in thirties London, the British surrealists consistently watered down their lofty Marxist rhetoric with exhibitions of vaguely humanistic art and flashy events sponsored in association with government dignitaries. Holding true to their commitment to freedom of expression, the group’s leaders accepted an extremely wide range of abstract and modernist art into their juried exhibitions, reducing the likelihood that their exhibitions would embody a clear political thesis. As with most groups, the varied political allegiances of the group’s individual members also made it difficult to sustain a singular political vision. That said, the British surrealists were enthusiastic about unifying around a dual commitment to freedom of the imagination and freedom from political tyranny.

That dual commitment to freedom intensified from 1936 to 1939, partly in response to a menacing fascist movement at home, mounting casualties in the Spanish Civil War, and Britain’s hesitancy to declare war against fascist Germany until September of 1939. To reflect this progression, each chapter of the dissertation analyzes a pivotal event or artists’ works occurring during this three-year period. In each case study, I interpret key objects, primary texts, and source materials in relation to the British surrealists’ paradoxical use of capitalist methods and humanist art to promote what they saw as a Marxist enterprise.

Chapter one investigates how the surrealists first attempted to convey their theoretical platform—steeped in Hegelian dialectics, Freudian psychoanalysis, and Marxist political theory—to the British public through a large-scale international exhibition and ancillary promotional materials and events at London’s New Burlington Galleries in the
summer of 1936. Their political aims, although forcefully stated in written materials and related lectures, were not directly reflected in the artworks exhibited in 1936. Rather than conveying explicit messages about class differences or advocating proletarian revolution, the artworks shown by members of the British group focused on a range of transformative themes—from the real evolutionary development of plants, animals, humans, and their machines; to abstract forms that morphed into other forms, and the transformation of mythological figures and natural spaces. Critics and the public had a difficult time reconciling the surrealists’ hyperbolic political statements with the abstract and humanistic artworks shown. It was also difficult for Anthony Blunt and other Marxists on the far left to take seriously the surrealists’ Marxist position, given that most of the surrealist leaders came to the movement with established careers as writers, artists, and dealers in the art capitals of London, Paris, and Brussels. This first chapter extends past scholarship around the 1936 *Surrealist Exhibition*, which includes Michel Remy’s comprehensive biographical history of British surrealism, catalogue essays about the planning and implementation of the 1936 exhibition, and a small number of articles about the British surrealists’ role in mounting the exhibition.

The second chapter examines how Agar, as a humanist and a key member of the group, readily signed onto each of the group’s political manifestos, yet she never fully embraced the British surrealists’ Marxist politics. Her art in the thirties and her later dismissive statements about surrealist politics were emblematic of the group’s ambivalent embrace of Marxism as a vehicle for fighting fascism, for promoting democracy in its place, and for protecting creative freedom. She ardently believed in these goals, but never came out on her own to advocate a Marxist social revolution, as the surrealists’ political
statements that she signed seemed to demand. The revolutionary value of Agar’s humanist art lay in its reorientation of surrealism’s male-centered, and sometimes sadist, politics of desire to a woman’s view of world cultures and artistic labor. In her performative and photographic collages, Agar’s body doubles as artist/laborer and model, and functions as both artwork and commodity. Her multi-media works effectively erode distinctions between subjectivity and objectivity and between fashion and the artistic avant-garde. Her paintings vacillate between abstraction and figuration and reflect a range of visual traditions rooted in African and Western cultures. Although the surrealist group’s leaders never acknowledged the African sources for her art, and late in life she downplayed the significance of her largest painting *The Autobiography of an Embryo*, which made reference to Africa, the group’s leaders hailed her art in the thirties for its humanistic qualities, and for its novel blending of materials, media, and visual norms.

The third chapter shows how Lye and Jennings used surrealist and Soviet film techniques to celebrate British labor and advancements in industrial technology in promotional films that they directed for Shell-Mex and B.P. Oil and for John Grierson’s government sponsored G.P.O. Film Unit. Jennings, who was instrumental in framing the surrealists’ Marxist messages to the public, saw the British as pioneering capitalists, whose way of life had been both ensured and threatened by industrial advancement. To remedy society’s ills, Jennings, like his nineteenth century predecessor William Morris, believed in the Marxist principle of non-alienated labor and had an unwavering faith in the ingenuity and resourcefulness of the British worker. Rather than calling for capitalism’s destruction, Lye and Jennings as surrealist filmmakers working under Alberto Cavalcanti in Grierson’s G.P.O. Film Unit sought to celebrate the modern worker and his products, and by extension
the British Empire, at a time when it was most threatened by fascist forces.

Chapter four considers the British group’s role in exhibiting Guernica along with 67 of Pablo Picasso’s preparatory sketches and paintings in London, Oxford, Leeds, and Manchester as the Spanish Civil War was coming to a close. In association with Picasso and local British labor councils, members of the surrealist group marketed Picasso’s enormous oil painting as propaganda for the Spanish Republican cause, and as an example of surrealism and the unbridled creative expression under siege in fascist states. By doing so, they were able to boost their leftist political status in the eyes of their allies and their leading detractor, the communist leaning critic Blunt. Historians writing about Guernica in England have focused on Penrose’s significant role in organizing the exhibitions. However, virtually no attention has been paid to how and why Read and other members of the surrealist group—including E. L. T. Mesens, Jennings, Roger Roughton, and Julian Trevelyan—framed the exhibitions and built support for Picasso’s surrealist art and the Republican cause in England. Even less has been written about the surrealists’ collaboration with Harry Pollitt as General Secretary of the Communist Party of Great Britain, Members of Parliament from the Labour and Liberal Parties, the Artists International Association (A.I.A.), and local labor groups to raise support for Republican Spain.

Unlike past studies that have focused on British surrealism and documentary film as independent forms of visual expression, this dissertation will break new ground to consider the mutuality of the surrealists’ efforts in art and film to promote their cultural revolution. This dissertation contributes to a growing field of surrealist research that recognizes advertising and film as significant vehicles for the surrealists’ Marxist ideals and
Freudian notions. When compared to writing about French surrealism, the secondary literature on the British movement is relatively slim, and primarily documentary in nature, to which this dissertation will provide a corrective. My study furthers research by John Roberts and David Mellor around the cultural, economic, and political context for British art in the thirties. Neither Mellor nor Roberts, however, focused on the British surrealists’ motivations for regularly crossing ideological and artistic boundaries to promote social change and sway public opinion. My approach, while focusing on British surrealists who operated within a capitalist society, is similar to Christina Kiaer’s in relation to Russian constructivism—an art movement she argues was designed to both promote and embody the ideology of the Soviet state through abstract and commercial art. Like the Russian constructivists, the British surrealists refused to distinguish between applied and fine art, and they hoped to combine radical politics with innovative visual means in a heartfelt, but not altogether successful, attempt to revolutionize society.

I will show that in the mid-thirties, the British surrealists were marrying their genuine Marxist beliefs with free-market enterprise to promote a novel artistic platform of cultural revolution in England. In association with an international coalition of poets and artists, they disseminated surrealist theory and poetry in the English language for the first time, and mounted the largest surrealist exhibition to date in the English capital. Of all the media that they explored, the British surrealists focused national attention on the realities of the English working classes most effectively through film. It was also primarily through film, posters, hoardings [advertising billboards], special events, and the exhibition of Pablo Picasso’s Guernica in 1938 that the British group was best able to galvanize public opinion against fascism in the late thirties. This dissertation considers how the volatile political
climate in Europe during the Spanish Civil War and Britain’s long-standing capitalist culture helped to shape surrealism in England, and how the British surrealists hoped to impact the world with their art.

Introduction Endnotes

1 Surrealist Group in England, International Surrealist Bulletin No. 4 (London: Curwen Press, 1936). Key members of the group met on 7 July 1936 to read and approve a statement of their purpose, which was published in the International Surrealist Bulletin No. 4 in September 1936. The signatories were: Eileen Agar, André Breton, Edward Burra, Hugh Sykes Davies, Paul Eluard, Mervyn Evans, David Gascoyne, Charles Howard, Humphrey Jennings, Rupert Lee, Sheila Legge, Len Lye, ELT Mesens, Henry Moore, Paul Nash, Roland Penrose, Man Ray, Herbert Read, George Reavey, Roger Roughton, Ruthven Todd, and Julian Trevelyan.

2 Walter Benjamin, "Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia," in Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Volume 2 1927-1934, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge MA and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 207-10, 16. In 1929, Benjamin argued that surrealism was "reflective of a crisis of the intelligentsia, or, more precisely, with that of the humanistic concept of freedom." (p. 207). From his own direct experience of surrealism’s "highly exposed position between an anarchistic Fronde and revolutionary discipline," Benjamin saw the surrealists as a "closely knit circle of people pushing the ‘poetic life’ to the utmost limits of possibility." (pp. 207-208). He believed the surrealism’s “true, creative overcoming of religious illumination” resided in "profane illumination, a materialistic, anthropological inspiration, to which hashish, opium, or whatever else can give [only] an introductory lesson." (p. 209). For Benjamin, surrealism’s primary goal was “to win the energies of intoxication for the revolution.” (p. 215). To set surrealism’s political art apart from dry or celebratory anarchic art, and from histrionic and mysterious romantic art, he showed his agreement with the surrealists by using the first person plural. He stated, "we penetrate the mystery only to the degree that we recognize it in the everyday world, by virtue of a dialectical optic that perceives the everyday as impenetrable, and the impenetrable as everyday… The reader, the thinker, the loiterer, the flâneur, are types of illuminati just as much as the opium eater, the dreamer, the ecstatic. And more profane." (p. 216). As examples of the surrealist interest in material culture, he names the outmoded industrial sites and fashions in André Breton’s book Nadja. “No one before these visionaries and augurs [the surrealists] perceived how destitution—not only social but architectonic, the poverty of interiors, enslaved and enslaving objects—can be suddenly transformed into revolutionary nihilism.” (p. 210).


Establishing the Revolutionary Aims of British Surrealism

“Surrealism will only be truly successful in the degree to which it leads, not to social entertainment, but to revolutionary action. It was in that belief that we organized the Exhibition; in that belief we sponsored Surrealism in this country, and in that belief I appear before you tonight to explain and defend the aims of the movement.”

Herbert Read

As art critic Herbert Read unequivocally stated during a debate on surrealism organized by the Artists’ International Association at London’s Conway Hall in late June 1936, surrealism in England during the thirties aspired to be foremost a tool for revolutionary action. For the remainder of 1936, the surrealists—especially Read, filmmaker Humphrey Jennings, and poets Charles Madge, David Gascoyne, and Roger Roughton—would press this political aim beyond their circle of Marxist and liberal allies in the Artists’ International Association to a broader audience through trade books; an international exhibition; and related lectures, poetry readings, and performances (Figure 1.1). In each venue, these key figures reiterated time and again an adherence to Marxist ideals for a social and economic revolution. In books, poetry journals, an excerpted manifesto printed in Cahiers d’Art in 1935, and the International Surrealist Bulletin No. 4, which was written by Read and published as a signed group statement in September 1936, they claimed to advocate nothing short of a proletarian revolution within British capitalist society (Figure 1.2). Their visual art was also critically reviewed in the press, potentially bringing added visibility to their cause. However, art critics either ignored or dismissed the political aims of surrealism in part because the artworks did not convey the same direct political message contained in the surrealists’ written statements.
In just less than a month from 11 June to 4 July 1936, close to 25,000 people filed through the fashionable New Burlington Galleries in London to see the exhibition to which Read referred—the *International Surrealist Exhibition*—a large display of nearly 390 examples of surrealist art from around the world (*Figures 1.3 & 1.4*). The English organizers of the exhibition—Read, Jennings, and Gascoyne, along with poet Hugh Sykes Davies; artists Edward McKnight Kauffer, Roland Penrose, Paul Nash, Henry Moore, and Rupert and Diana Lee—readily admitted that they had unified as a group much later than surrealists in other European countries, yet they believed their distinctive position as arbiters of British culture offered a vital contribution to the broader movement. One third of the artists who contributed works were from England, with thirteen other nationalities represented. Each of the participating English artists came to the exhibition with a well-established individual career. However, most had not called themselves surrealists prior to the exhibition, even if some of them had spent considerable time working in Paris and had affiliated with the Parisian surrealists before 1936. The English group was unified less by a shared artistic style and more by an interest in transforming British society with their playful artistic labor and ingenious surrealist products, both of which were inspired by a combination of Marxist ideology and Freudian psychoanalytic theory. Although making most art involves striving to take control of one’s own means of production, the surrealists believed their combined interest in society’s material realities and the inner world of the individual made their art ideally suited as a model of non-alienated labor.

On behalf of the rest of the group, Read, Jennings, Madge, Gascoyne, and Roughton promoted freely creative labor as a means for solving the social problems that had proliferated with industrial growth in London and England’s northern towns from the
nineteenth century onward. While historians have generally considered British surrealism a backwater of the international movement, leaders of the British group were convinced that from their position as visual artists and poets in the largest and most entrenched capitalist system in the world, they stood at the forefront of a larger avant-garde in tackling capitalism’s problems. Not only did they see personally satisfying, thoughtful, and hands-on work as an effective remedy for capitalism’s ills, as had the poet and artist William Morris long before them, they advocated this kind of stimulating labor for all workers, even those in highly technological industries. Their embrace of machines was at odds with the hand labor advocated by Morris, but they specifically named William Blake (1757-1827) and Morris (1834-1896) as surrealist forefathers for their utopian politics and focus on the inner world of the imagination. Fueled by idealistic bravura, English pragmatism, and the belief that a small collective of artists and writers might actually change society, the British group promoted surrealism—its cross-disciplinary theory, intuitive process, openness to transformation, and products that derived from an amalgam of Marxist and Freudian principles—as a set of model attitudes and forms of output. If embraced by workers at large, surrealism might invigorate their dreary lives and finally set British culture on its proper course.

The English surrealists stated in general terms that they wanted a proletarian revolution, however their more detailed explanations of their revolutionary goals and their actions belied that aim. Antithetical to established Marxist doctrine, the group’s art and other creative projects actually did more to fortify, not destroy, Britain’s capitalist society. They looked to Soviet Russian art and film of the twenties for creative inspiration, but nothing in their art, writing, or actions called for transforming the British empire into a
proletarian or communist state. Rather, they believed a populace that was as fully aware and critical of bourgeois culture as the surrealists were might finally demand that the British Commonwealth stand against, rather than appease, the menacing tide of fascism that was gaining strength in Spain, Germany, and Italy, and was being led by Oswald Mosley at home. Resorting to Stalinist communism as a means for resisting fascism was as unacceptable to a core group of the surrealists as fascism itself. At the same time, Stalin or Trotsky, as divided as they stood, would have seen the group’s desire to shape or transform capitalist culture as abetting the very imperialist forces and economic patterns that the communist revolution was meant to overcome. Cognizant of these potential criticisms, the British group argued even more vociferously for fighting fascism by infusing Marxist ideals into their homeland economy and government, and their platform took a noticeably defensive tone.

Despite their strident call for social revolution, the content of their art in 1936, such as Henry Moore’s *Figure* (1933-34) (*Figure 1.5*), did not present the clear social message that Moore, Read, Jennings, and Roughton conveyed in their writings. A close look at a few surrealist objects and paintings from the 1936 exhibition reveals how the artworks, while certainly the attention-grabbing and playful products of creative labor the surrealists desired, did little to underscore the longstanding ills of the industrial revolution or the recent fascist threat. Some critics and the public were dazzled and befuddled by the novelty of the artworks presented, but they failed to grasp them as exemplary products of non-alienated labor or to connect them to daily life in Britain. Marxist critics such as Anthony Blunt were altogether dismissive of the surrealists’ political claims. Perhaps the surrealists’ visual art failed to convey their social aspirations because it emerged from the
less political artist group Unit One—a group of 11 cross-disciplinary artists founded by Paul Nash in 1933—as much as it did from the ambitions of young Marxist poets in Cambridge and surrealist circles in Paris. Perhaps the artworks resisted any one political message because the group’s leaders were fractured into opposing Trotskyist and Stalinist camps. Perhaps the visual art was less overtly political than the surrealists’ speeches and statements in England because many of the visual artists left the group’s political posturing up to their poet brethren. Or perhaps the surrealist visual art and poetry coming out of England in 1936 was not seen as political because at that time the surrealists were adamantly against producing any work that might serve a propagandistic purpose. To gauge how far the art veered, at least in appearance, from the surrealists’ political intent, it is useful to consider the surrealists’ poetry and visual art in relation to the political and aesthetic statements made by members of the group. Likewise, because the group coalesced foremost around a political platform in response to current events, the artwork needs to be assessed in the context of Breton’s Trotskyist leanings as well as broader Marxist trends in thirties Britain.

**Extending Unit One**

The British group’s decision to exhibit a wide range of media in 1936 including paintings, sculptures, as well as ethnographic objects from the Pacific and Africa grew in part from an earlier call by Nash to build alliances across the arts. In 1933, Nash had founded the artist group Unit One along with ten other British artists in an effort to improve design.\(^{13}\) Five of the Unit One artists—Nash, Moore, John Armstrong, John Bigge, and Edward Burra—would later associate themselves either directly or indirectly with the
surrealists. Given Nash’s and Moore’s leadership in founding the British surrealist group and organizing the 1936 exhibition, the British surrealists readily adopted some of the unifying principles of the short-lived Unit One group. In a 1934 magazine article on Unit One, Nash declared his keen awareness of post-war trends in European art “at the Bauhaus in Germany, among the avant-garde artists of Soviet Russia, and the De Stijl artists and architects in Holland,” and stated that he shared their European modernist interest in combining fine art, craft, and architecture. Although Nash’s cross disciplinary interests were later embraced by the surrealists; Read (who critically introduced the Unit One artists in 1934 and went on to become the British surrealists’ key critical spokesperson in 1936) distinguished Unit One’s purely aesthetic goals from the communist revolutionary goals of the Parisian surrealists. In Read’s view that has held sway over time, the Unit One artists shared the aesthetic interests of their European counterparts, but not their political agenda. However, in 1934 Bigge interpreted Unit One in a more political light than Read:

Today is an epoch of revolution, not only of the economic and social environment, but of the spiritual and intellectual life of Man. At the present moment few people 'know where they are,' either socially, morally, mentally, or spiritually. With the decay of established religion the need for art, either as solace or stimulus, is probably greater than at any other time. The speed at which this revolution is proceeding is its special characteristic. Another characteristic is that it is world-wide in its range. ... So, in the art of today the chief characteristic is a revolutionary sentiment; a searching for new content, a new form to contain it and a new technique to devise that form. ...For the artist revolution can only mean “Révolution Créatrice.” It is for him to create the new and for others to destroy the out-worn and useless.

Bigge’s association with the French surrealists in Paris prior to joining Unit One in 1933 most likely influenced his assessment of Unit One art. As an artist, Bigge considered himself part of a timely and international creative revolution. As a member of Unit One and later exhibiting with the British surrealists, he aspired to new content and form, as well as
artistic techniques, to coincide with and represent a wave of social change. However, Nash never emphasized a political agenda in establishing the aims of Unit One. At least for Bigge, the surrealist group offered a continuation of Unit One’s revolutionary values. Those values, however, were so modestly expressed by Bigge and other members of Unit One that Read failed to recognize them. Both as part of Unit One and with the surrealist group, Moore, Nash, and their close associates such as Eileen Agar produced art focused on aesthetic principles and vague humanitarian values, rather than on a proletarian revolution as Read had advocated for the surrealists.

Like Read and Gascoyne in 1936, Bigge considered the sur-realities of surrealism more real than “the conventional realities of the material world.”¹⁸ To express his revolutionary sentiment, Bigge exhibited abstract paintings with Unit One and the surrealist because he felt that biomorphic abstract art was a “stimulus to life” rather than a refuge from it.¹⁹ In Britain as on the continent, the stylistic preferences of the surrealists varied dramatically, and Unit One was the local incubator for aesthetic cross-pollination. Bigge’s subjects ranged from fantastic seascapes to abstract biomorphic forms. Burra painted sinister figures and urban scenes from his imagination. Moore exhibited works with both groups that were based on the human body, but were made up of highly abstracted biomorphic forms. The surrealist group embraced Burra, Moore, and Nash for their Unit One concern with “the greater reality behind the reality,” despite their divergent styles that fluctuated between abstract and more realistic forms of representation.²⁰
Aligning with Breton and Local British Traditions

A sociologist as well as a poet, Charles Madge was one of the first to voice a British surrealist agenda distinct from French surrealism. Madge joined the Cambridge communists in 1932 while it was still a nascent group; and in the following year, he wrote three seminal articles in the poetry anthology *New Verse* on the revolutionary power of poetry in England. Written prior to the formation of the British group in 1935, these articles laid the groundwork for Gascoyne and Read’s later assertions. Madge was the first to state that surrealist poets in England were products of their own environment and needed to rely on their own traditions, language, and literature in developing surrealist works.

At the same time, Madge believed that English artists and poets interested in surrealism needed “to extract the essential purpose from the formal appearance” of Breton’s movement; and like in France, poets and artists should unite for social transformation. Although Madge emphasized surrealism’s dialectical merging of imagination and judgment, he privileged judgment, saw all poetry as didactic, and believed that surrealism was a form of popular science “by virtue of its capacity for development and discovery and by virtue of the anonymity of its researches.” Madge’s views were instrumental in shaping the British surrealists’ pragmatism, which in turn led to both Jennings and Madge’s development of the ethnographic study *Mass Observation* with Charles Harrison, and Jennings’ participation in the documentary film movement. Madge advocated dropping all critical dogma when judging surrealism and stressed both its local and international aspects.

In his *Short Survey of Surrealism*, first published in 1935 and reprinted in 1936 to introduce broader English speaking audiences to surrealism, Gascoyne agreed with his
close associate Breton that mid-1925 marked the surrealists’ final break with society’s conformist elements. As Breton stated it, “…from that point on, our shared revolt focused much more on the political sphere.” Breton referred back to one sentence in particular from the fourth number of *La Révolution Surréaliste* to express the surrealists’ agitation in 1925, “In the current state of European society, we remain faithful to the principles of any revolutionary action, even when it takes class struggle as its point of departure, on condition that it goes far enough.” The fifth number of *La Révolution Surréaliste* in early fall 1925 contained an anti-patriotic and anti-imperialist manifesto protesting the war in Morocco that marked for Gascoyne the complete adherence of the surrealists to communism and their shift to dialectical materialism. The surrealists joined other revolutionary writers (from the journals *Clarté, Correspondance*, and *Philosophies*) to sign the manifesto simply titled, “The Revolution Now and Ever.” As Gascoyne wrote in 1935, “The principles of Marxism have given the movement a unity and a purpose that to a large extent were lacking until then [1925]. Without the philosophy of dialectical materialism behind it, surrealism could hardly have existed until to-day [1936] and be still a living force.” The fifth number of *La Révolution Surréaliste* was also a political turning point because it contained an admiring review by Breton of Trotsky’s book on Vladimir Lenin. Breton maintained years later that his review represented a first and decisive step, even if he was just beginning to grope his way forward with a deeper understanding of the Marxist ideals of the Russian Revolution.

The cultural aims established by French surrealism in 1924-25 and again in the early thirties would later serve as the basis for the aims of English surrealism. In those periods the surrealists promoted poetry, love, and liberty in opposition to social conformity
and the sacred ideals of social convention—namely family, country, religion, work, and honor. As Breton described it, “We felt that an outmoded world rushing to its doom could prolong itself only by reinforcing taboos and multiplying constraints, and we were radically in favor of escaping it.”32 Surrealists in both countries wanted to break open the “closed rationalism” that denied the unconscious world of Freudian analysis. They rejected established moral codes—“the ancien regime of the mind”33—and in their place sought a new order of values to liberate the human spirit through poetry, dreams, coincidence, and the marvelous.34 As Breton noted much later, seeming to imply that personal and national character played a role in realizing political goals, “on these various points, we were in total agreement. But we could not avoid certain differences about the means of realizing these goals, given each one’s psychological makeup.”35 Illustrating his views on national difference in pursuit of a common cause, Breton opened his essay in Read’s Surrealism of 1936 with a bold and unsubstantiated argument that three contemporaneous events—the London surrealist exhibition, French workers’ forcible occupation of factories, and the fall of men and women before Saragossa in the Spanish revolution—were evidence of an upwelling and unstoppable proletarian movement for the liberation of the human spirit from oppression.36

Gascoyne credited surrealism as the one movement from 1920s Paris remaining alive in 1936 because it was a revolution of ideas rather than the artistic forms used to express them.37 Gascoyne’s focus on ideation over plastic aesthetics possibly influenced Read’s statement in 1936 that the British group came together on political grounds above all else. However, in other arenas, Read admitted that surrealism was indeed concerned with aesthetics, and that art and politics went hand in hand.38 While surrealism might have
looked different in 1936, Gascoyne argued that its aims had remained virtually the same, in part because it was not dogmatic and the definition allowed for creative freedom, even if Breton was widely considered to be a tyrannical authoritarian dictator.39

**Part of a Growing British Left**

As a result of Adolf Hitler’s appointment as Chancellor in January 1933, the expanding presence of the British Union of Fascists, Neville Chamberlain’s appeasement policies, and an ongoing depression at home, a steady tide of English intellectuals including the surrealists turned to Marxism and joined the Communist Party from 1933 to 1935. Even though the economy had improved somewhat by 1934, legions of poor and unemployed workers made their way from the industrial north to London in highly visible hunger marches to bring attention to their plight. The irony that so many people were malnourished and suffering in the oldest and most advanced capitalist country was patently clear to liberals and conservatives alike. As Harold Macmillan who later became a conservative Prime Minister wrote in a letter, “It had become evident that the structure of capitalist society in its old form had broken down, not only in Britain but all over Europe and even in the United States. The whole system had to be reassessed. Perhaps it could not survive at all; it certainly could not survive without radical change.”40 In the face of these developments, the surrealists as a group felt obliged to take a strong stand on social issues and focused their art on a range of transformative themes to echo the social transformations they believed were desperately needed in British society.

For a core group of young scholars of Oxbridge, some of whom would go on to found the surrealist movement in England, Marxism provided a means to analyze and respond to the root causes of Great Britain’s mass unemployment.41 It also gave them theoretical
ammunition in the fight against fascist sympathizers whom they associated with ultra-right wing capitalist doctrine. To the dismay of many, Chamberlain’s government had appeased Nazi Germany, not so much in the name of peace, but more to oppose Soviet Russia. In response, the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) and the Artists’ International (founded in London in 1933) independently organized peace rallies and strikes, offering the surrealists and a widening circle of writers and visual artists opportunities to actively oppose Chamberlain’s policies. Together with the Artist’s International Association, the surrealists mounted a series of related large-scale exhibitions.42

The diverse artists who formed the surrealist group in England—some abstract artists, others representational; some communist, others socialist, and most liberal, but all to the left and in favor of Marxist ideology—unified to support Read’s anarchist-leaning agenda that borrowed from the aims of French surrealism and staked claims for English society in particular. As Julian Bell, who was a close friend of art critic Anthony Blunt and an associate of Blunt’s archrival Read, said at the time, “It is not so much that we are all Socialists now as that we are all Marxists now.”43 Along with some of the surrealists, Bell took issue with predictions of society’s collapse and found the Communist Party’s demands repugnant. While Blunt never officially joined the communist party, he probably began to work as a Soviet spy by the mid-thirties and was certainly known among Cambridge intellectuals as a Marxist sympathetic to Stalinist communism. Blunt had previously espoused the tenets of modernism; but soon after the Soviet state’s official adoption of socialist realism in the summer of 1934, he began publishing articles in support of socialist realism over surrealism and abstraction, and soon became one of surrealism’s harshest critics.44 Read, on the other hand, an anarchist in the spirit of Morris, was surrealism’s
staunchest advocate in England. Despite Read’s assertion that surrealist art was directly engaged with life, Blunt saw it cut off from reality. In Blunt’s first article about the relations between Marxist theory and art published in late 1934, he heralded the “serious” art of Gustave Courbet that was “directly connected with material reality.” In contrast to Courbet’s ability to reflect his social milieu, Blunt derided the surrealists for their obsession with escapist dreams. For Blunt, surrealist paintings used material reality as a means to express pure fantasy, and the majority of critics and the public agreed.

As Charles Harrison has explained, the debate hosted by the Artists’ International Association at which Read spoke on the social aspects of surrealism marked the beginning of a three-year period during which the social function of art was hotly contested among the stakeholders in English modern art—almost all Marxist, yet vehemently at odds about how art might best reflect the progressive social values they held. Harrison’s admittedly crude analysis of the three primary positions held in the London art world during the mid thirties fails to account for the nuanced ways that the points of view coalesced as much as they diverged, but his interpretation draws out the surrealists’ position in relation to abstraction and social realism:

(1) the abstract and constructive artists on the whole idealized the artist as the typical designer of the forms of a new and harmonious world of which he was thus an important instigator; (2) the Surrealists saw the artist as the anarchic and unafraid guardian of the values of an ‘uncensored’ humanity and as an informed critic of the bourgeois world; while (3) the Marxists and would-be Social Realists saw the artist as the propagandist for and servant of proletarian revolution.

Harrison emphasizes the harmonious world the abstract and constructive artists hoped to shape, yet the surrealists also believed that they could be important instigators in shaping a new economy around Marxist principles. They chose, however, to change the world
through uncensored activity and emphasized their role as informed critics of the bourgeois world. With Read at the helm, their position was perceived to be more anarchical than communist. However, Gascoyne, Banting, and Davies, all of whom exhibited with the surrealists in 1936, were members of the CPGB along with Roughton who edited *Contemporary Poetry and Prose*. Though they had signed onto Read’s statements in the *International Surrealist Bulletin No. 4* and were committed to surrealist aesthetics, Banting, Davies, and Roughton as individuals sided more closely with the Stalinists than with Read and Breton. All three groups’ aesthetic positions were shaped by their Marxist political beliefs, yet the Social Realists that Blunt hailed were more comfortable asserting that art should be an outright propagandistic servant of the proletarian revolution.

Although the majority of the surrealists disavowed any connection to Stalin, the British surrealists’ broad political base and hazy application of Marxism was indicative of the Soviet Union’s “Popular Front” policy first introduced in 1934 as an avenue for Western communist parties to boost membership and build broad alliances among individuals concerned about fascism, fearing another war, or wanting to alleviate economic misery. For example, Eileen Agar described herself simply as a humanist in support of the Spanish cause; and Bigge embraced a generic creative revolution. Apart from Banting, Davies and Roughton, the surrealists saw Stalin’s increasingly autocratic approach as a betrayal of true Marxist values, and therefore adhered to a more progressive and democratic workers’ revolution that allowed for individual creative expression, in line with the call *Pour Un Art Révolutionnaire Indépendant* that Breton, Trotsky, and Diego Rivera would make in 1938. From Trotsky’s strict view, however, their surrealist position was simply a sellout to liberal bourgeois ideals.
As a result, the surrealists felt a need to defend their position from both Stalinist and Trotskyist detractors. In *A Short Survey of Surrealism*, a book that had little impact on the British public when published in 1935 but was often used by the English surrealists in conjunction with the 1936 exhibition to explain the basis of their art, Gascoyne delineated the surrealists’ Marxist position in relation to the Communist Party and contemporary politics:

It should be clear to Marxists that the surrealist attitude is totally in accord with the Communist philosophy of dialectical materialism, with its insistence on the synonimity of theory and practice, and that only the imminence of proletarian revolution allows surrealism to hope that its aims will ultimately be fulfilled. The surrealist cause is the revolutionary cause—in spite of the surrealists’ bourgeois origin, in spite of the attitude of certain dogmatic Marxists towards such phenomena as Freudian psycho-analysis and the more complicated developments of modern literature and art, and in spite of such apparent compromises on the part of the Communists as the Franco-Soviet pact and the recent rehabilitation in Russia of the bourgeois conception of family.\(^{50}\)

Gascoyne was quick to acknowledge that the surrealists came primarily from bourgeois backgrounds, and he saw this as posing no threat to the movement’s revolutionary validity. Given the personal histories of Marx and Engels, Gascoyne’s position was perhaps justified. After all Marx was the product of a union between a lawyer and the educated daughter of a baron, and Friedrich Engels supported Marx with income generated from his family’s textile business in Manchester. The surrealist desire to form a vanguard of intellectual and creative leadership for a wide range of British workers fit with Lenin’s views in, “What Is To Be Done?” In that 1902 pamphlet, Lenin argued that socialist intellectuals, whose education was superior given their status in the propertied elite, had an obligation to lead common workers, who were incapable of consolidating more than their economic interests through trade unions, to Marxist revolution. The surrealists shared Lenin’s view that to be
political and Marxist, one must address the interactions among all classes, not solely the economic struggles of the proletariat. The surrealists’ primarily middle to upper class backgrounds, their leadership in Oxbridge intellectual circles, and their liberal rather than hard-line approach to Marxist theory represented a typically English position. As Miranda Carter has pointed out, embracing Marxism absolved the guilt felt by middle class students and intellectuals of Oxbridge about being part of the privileged ruling class. Looking back on these times, Bell, Richard Wolheim, and others recalled a pervasive sense of shame that England’s upper classes had betrayed the world with cowardice and greed. For some, joining the Communist Party was “the best hope against fascism and depression, and...for all the harsh rhetoric, Communism was really just a kind of up-to-date Liberalism.” As Carter suggests, this attitude was a characteristically English response to Communism’s extreme ideology.

It is most likely that Gascoyne’s “certain dogmatic Marxists” referred primarily to Stalin and his followers, including surrealism’s Marxist critics in England such as Blunt, but also to more dogmatic Trotskyists who were committed to the masses over individual freedom. As Breton and Éluard did in other texts, Gascoyne distanced the surrealists’ advocacy for individual expression and creative freedom for all workers from the reactionary forces that had paved the way for Stalin’s consolidation of power throughout the 1920s and Stalin’s more recent dictatorial constraints on modernist culture. As dialectical materialists, the surrealists believed that the philosophy, religion, and ideology of an age were inextricably connected to its economy of production. With this view, Read emphasized the surrealists’ total rejection of capitalist ideals and conventions that he associated with realism and naturalism. However, ironically, he was one of the prime
contributors to London’s burgeoning art market. By most standards a bourgeois himself, he called on surrealism to “discredit the whole bourgeois concept of art and artist.”

Likewise, he heaped scorn on “the pitiful banality” and “vulgar ineptitude” of socialist realism, adopted as the official art of Soviet Russia in the summer of 1934 and soon advocated by Blunt. Rather than imitating the art of the past that was irrevocably tied to previous economic conditions, Read called on the surrealists “as artists no less than socialists, [to] work for the transformation of this imperfect world.” In contrast, Francis Klingender, a Marxist art historian who contributed an essay along with Read in 1935 to the Artists’ International Association’s 5 on Revolutionary Art and who was more closely aligned to Blunt’s position in support of social realism, quoted Lenin in proscribing the role of art:

> Art belongs to the people. Its roots should penetrate deeply into the very thick of the masses of the people. It should be comprehensible to these masses and loved by them. It should unite the emotions, the thought and the will of these masses and raise them to a higher level.

For Blunt and Klingender, realism in the tradition of Courbet best filled the role. In opposition, Read argued that surrealism’s more anarchical art based on the free expression of the individual and the surrealists’ critical stance against bourgeois culture offered a better vehicle for the artist’s creative expression, as well as for reaching the masses and elevating them. While it might seem paradoxical, Read, Klingender, and Blunt each positively distinguished the kind of transformative art prescribed by Lenin from outright propaganda.

In his Short Survey, Gascoyne distanced the surrealists from the purported compromises associated with Russia’s recent rehabilitation of the bourgeois conception of family—outlawing abortion, restricting divorce, providing incentives for large families, and
fostering the principle of the nuclear family—to grow the proletarian base for the new society. Detractors of Stalin like Gascoyne saw this as returning to the traditional values long associated with bourgeois culture. Yet as Ian Thatcher and David Hoffman have recently noted, Stalin’s policies toward the family were part of a larger pan-European trend in capitalist as well as communist states, and were not necessarily evidence of Soviet backsliding as Gascoyne implied.58

The other apparent compromise of the communists that Gascoyne mentioned was the May 1935 alliance formed between France and Russia to defend against Hitler’s aggression. Three months later the Comintern’s Seventh Congress officially endorsed the Popular Front strategy as a defense against fascism. Ironically for Stalin but also not surprisingly, the Comintern’s official adoption of the Popular Front strategy in August 1935 significantly mellowed the CPGB’s Stalinist tenor rather than strengthening it. Gascoyne was careful to distance the surrealists from the Soviets in 1935, and by 1936 the surrealists actively supported the *Frente Popular* in Spain. It was not until 1936 that Gascoyne joined the CPGB, which had recently grown in size, drawing in a range of liberals, leftists, and communists supporting vague Marxist goals, just as the surrealists did.

The surrealists’ defensive tone when substantiating their Marxist platform was not only in response to the French communist party’s ridicule of Breton for his Trotskyist leanings, but also to Marxist hardliners in England, who considered surrealism a form of “bourgeois individualism.”59 According to the surrealists, the British Marxists’ criticism of their art stemmed from the failure of communist doctrine to accept the unconscious: “...their whole system is built up on the simple plan of man and the real world. It is therefore quite impossible for them to appreciate our strictly dialectical and materialist
synthesis of inner and outer world as the basis of general theory.” As the surrealists would have anticipated from someone with a materialist viewpoint who viewed them as bourgeois individualists, the critic for the Daily Worker also prosaically stated, “Nor is it accidental that the majority of those who attended the exhibition were the ‘artists’ themselves.” While the true meaning of this comment cannot be known, it could be read as a complaint that workers failed to make up the exhibition’s audience despite the artists’ desire to engage them. In any case, Read speaking for the surrealists dismissed the communists because they refused to take a “coherent attitude to the world of the dream” and thus appeared “to be obsessed and governed by it.” Read added, “In our work they see only the dream, while for the other element of our synthesis they have a blind spot.”

Voicing his extreme frustration with the communist position, he went on to conclude:

Nursing their own dreams in private terror, they are unaware of the plain fact that men are more alike in their dreams than in their thoughts and their actions. Here is, indeed, the common ground, the meeting place of all humanity, an essential part of the basis of that state of equality which we, with them, desire to establish—not a refuge of individualism. As always, we regret their misunderstanding of our attitude.

In Contemporary Poetry and Prose, Roughton as a communist surrealist took specific issue with this statement by Read in an article titled “Surrealism and Communism.” Roughton argued that Read had misrepresented the true surrealist position, and that it was indeed possible to be both a devoted communist and surrealist. Roughton took issue with the Trotskyist position that had been officially presented by the group under Read’s pen and iterated that true surrealists supported the proletarian revolution as it was currently playing out in Russia.

Although Read took every opportunity to present the surrealist platform as a united political front, there were significant differences in the means of social revolution
advocated by members of the group, with Read and Breton siding with Trotsky, and Gascoyne and Roughton more closely associated with Stalinist Russia. Given Read’s key role in organizing the exhibition and publically addressing the movement’s goals, as well as in preparing the *International Surrealist Bulletin* No. 4 and the trade book *Surrealism*, Read’s personal commitment to anarchy and his allegiance to Trotsky dominated both the New Burlington Galleries exhibition and explanations of the movement in 1936. Gascoyne, Read, and Roughton were instrumental in disseminating the political theories associated with English surrealism, and their differences of opinion were tolerated and acknowledged within the group. Yet, in comparison to Read’s prominence as an art critic and Breton’s role as the international leader of the movement, Gascoyne’s youthful inexperience and Roughton’s minimal involvement in the exhibition made it more difficult for their Stalinist communist views to be taken seriously or even heard by the public at large. While Gascoyne and Roughton worked hard to distinguish Read’s anarchist position from what they considered to be true surrealist theory, Read also ironically undercut the veracity of his own positions. To communist and socialist audiences, Read was more than ready to advocate the poet as the leader of proletarian revolution and culture as the driver of social change, but when asked in a questionnaire of writers in *New Verse* if politics were important to his poetry, he flatly responded “no,” end of story. The surrealists saw Read’s ability to craft his arguments to engage varied audiences as a great asset, yet his shifting rhetoric and failure to acknowledge how politics affected his own creative process made it even more difficult to understand just what surrealism stood for.
The International Surrealist Exhibition

In a chance meeting on the streets of Paris in early 1936, Gascoyne and Read, who had been working with the French surrealists, came up with the idea for an international surrealist exhibition in London. At the time, both were in support of the international cohesion and consolidation of socialist, democratic, and liberal points of view promoted with the popular front strategy. Given their commitment to these unifying ideals, the London exhibition included artists from around the world and reflected the vague Marxist politics that had come to define their position as well as the prevailing view of the English left. For Agar and others, the courageous exhibition of revolutionary art in an established gallery provided a poignant contrast to Nazi claims of degeneracy for similar artworks in Germany. While their choice to mount the exhibition in the New Burlington Galleries, flanked by London’s most established arts institution—the Royal Academy—and its most fashionable shopping district—Bond Street—was likely meant to confront power at its very heart, the location could just as easily be seen as belying the surrealists’ Marxist call for revolution. In either case, holding the exhibition in the well-known gallery and including notable European artists (such as Hans Arp, Hans Bellmer, Giorgio de Chirico, Salvador Dali, Marcel Duchamp, Max Ernst, Alberto Giacometti, Paul Klee, René Magritte, André Masson, Joan Miró, Pablo Picasso, and Yves Tanguy) showed the organizers’ serious dedication to the surrealist movement and drew in leading critics and collectors.

During the exceptionally hot summer of 1936, for many of the British surrealists and certainly for the large crowds who made their way up the lift to the sweltering third floor galleries, the London exhibition offered the first real opportunity to view a range of surrealist works from around the world and to gauge just how English artists might
contribute to the wider movement. Although the British group organized the exhibition, Breton took the lead in seamlessly integrating works by English artists such as Agar, Banting, Moore, Nash, Gascoyne, and Trevelyan with works by American-born artists Alexander Calder, Charles Howard, Edward McKnight Kauffer, and Man Ray, and many Europeans with larger international reputations (Figures 1.6 & 1.7). Ethnographic objects from Africa and Oceania were listed separately in the catalogue but were interspersed with Western artists’ works throughout the rooms of the hall.69 It was one of the first, and certainly the largest to date, of a series of international exhibitions mounted by Breton in association with local surrealist groups in Brussels, Copenhagen, Tenerife, Paris, Tokyo, Amsterdam, and Sao Paulo, and by Alfred Barr in New York to bring international attention to the movement.70 Agar recalled that for Breton, the London exhibition was “a stepping-stone for World Surrealism,” though looking back on it, she believed events in London failed to bear out this optimistic view.71

Breton, Man Ray, and Éluard joined the British group to mount the London exhibition and publish trade books and pamphlets advocating a democratic avenue for asserting the free will of artist and worker alike. By 1936, Breton’s affiliation with the official communist party had been severed; and Read, an anarchist at heart, was content to share Breton’s support of Trotsky over Stalin. However, Éluard who still belonged to the communist party took a more active role than Breton in setting the political tone in London in 1936, and the posturing around the exhibition had to incorporate both views and satisfy both Breton and Éluard. Roughton, a communist, invited Éluard to contribute a statement and nine poems to the special Double Surrealist Number of Contemporary Poetry and Prose published during the exhibition (Figure 1.8).72 In Éluard’s statement, he urged readers, “Be
the man who is questioned and who is heard. A single vision, infinitely varied. THE POET IS HE WHO INSPIRES FAR MORE THAN HE WHO IS INSPIRED." Though Éluard was not speaking of the exhibition, his call “A single vision, infinitely varied.” certainly applied to it. The British and French organizers coalesced to put forward a single surrealist vision, but its infinite variation as expressed through the works was so overwhelming as to be no distinct political message at all.

The English group was philosophically and artistically aligned with Breton, Man Ray, Dali, and Éluard, but they were equally interested in establishing a surrealist teleology that included an English tradition beginning with the poetry and graphic art of Blake; continuing with the arts and crafts of Morris and Edward Burne-Jones; and more recently associated with the sculpture, architecture and art of the Unit One group. The surrealists returned to Blake and Morris not just for art forms rooted in fantasy, mythic visions, and native landscapes, but also for the earlier artists’ radical social politics and admixture of art and poetry. Unit One artists such as Bigge and the surrealists saw art as spiritual and intellectual solace for a public long denied a robust spiritual life or true charity by established religion and the ruling classes in Britain. Like Blake and Morris, the surrealist group was intent on developing artistic processes and creating artistic products that might ameliorate the effects of the industrial revolution. While they saw social revolution as an international goal, the English group believed that because they descended from an artistic legacy established by Blake and Morris and because of their place in Britain’s materialist history as the leading capitalist economy, they held exclusive rights within the international surrealist movement for propelling such a cultural revolution.
Given the surrealist interest in social transformation, much of the British art focused on transformative themes, partly through formal means—such as Nash’s collages that converted real materials and recognizable local settings into newly abstracted compositions—and partly through subject matter—such as Agar’s use of ancient horse heads to create what she hoped would be an abstract meditation on war. However, because the surrealists’ demand for a proletarian revolution *per se* was never addressed thematically in their visual art, neither the lay public nor the experts visiting the exhibition could discern the surrealists’ political message simply by looking at the sundry found objects, paintings, sculptures, and ethnographic curios on display. In this setting, the surrealist’s revolutionary call was interpreted in purely aesthetic terms.

The British surrealists, like their French counterparts, considered art as a form of visual poetry and consistently presented visual art and written works together to convey their artistic principles. In addition to publishing poetry and prose in the summer of 1936, the group’s poets (Gascoyne, Jennings, Penrose, Davies, Geoffrey Grigson, Read, and Roughton) exhibited artworks in the London exhibition. However, neither the visual art nor the poetry communicated the political goals of the surrealists to working class audiences for several reasons. For one, the location of the galleries attracted notable members of the upper class, yet the well-heeled patrons felt uncomfortable with the art. As Agar remembered it, many respectable people attended and “acted as people usually act when observed in an ‘immoral place’. They tried to be invisible,” whereas young people flooded the hall to admire and learn from the work. For another, the circulation of the poetry journal *New Verse* and the special Double Surrealist Number of the London journal *Contemporary Poetry and Prose* published in conjunction with the exhibition were limited
to a small cadre of intellectuals in England, the United States, and France. The readership was youthful and had international breadth, but lacked working class representation. Therefore their reach, while perhaps effective in energizing young intellectuals around their cause, was limited to a highly privileged segment of the population.

Although the published poems failed to speak directly to the masses, some included phrases indicative of the surrealists’ revolutionary politics. For example, lines referring to England in a portion of Gascoyne’s poem “The Cubical Domes” in *Contemporary Poetry and Prose* read:

...And then there is the problem of living to be considered
With its vast pink parachutes full of underdone mutton
Its tableaux of the archbishops dressed in their underwear...

For the bounds of my kingdom are truly unknown
And its factories work all night long
Producing the strongest canonical wastepaper-baskets
And ant-eaters’ skiing shoes
Which follow the glistening murders as far as the pond
And then light a magnificent bonfire of old rusty nails
And indeed they are paid by the state for their crimes
There is room for them all in the conjuror’s musical-box
There is still enough room for even the hardest of faces
For faces are needed to stick on the emperor’s walls
To roll down the stairs like a party of seafaring christians [sic]
Whose hearts are on fire in the snow. ...75

These loosely associated images of raw flesh, defrocked priests, factory nightshifts, and portraits of the powerful rolling down stairs like coals in the snow blend in Gascoyne’s poem with nonsensical lines, thus attenuating the political reading of the poetry for anyone inclined toward direct language or social realism. In lines between the portions of the poem quoted here, Gascoyne considers why grass is green, speaks to basking in the tropical sun, and suggests that transparent flowers attract starlight.76 Unless his readers appreciated the political power of disjointed modernist prose and were familiar with the surrealist group’s
condemnation of capitalism’s wasteful generation of products, and the perpetual
reinforcement of capitalist systems by both the state and colluding sectarians, the political
message of his poem was largely lost.

While open-minded and knowledgeable readers might be able to draw political
meaning from Gascoyne’s surrealist poem, viewers of his object-poem and collages in the
exhibition had less content to go on. It is likely that Gascoyne’s small collage, *Perseus and
Andromeda* (1936), was exhibited for its likeness to Ernst’s surrealist collages and for its
homage to Morris’ precedent for combining abstract imagery and myth to convey utopian
and apocalyptic themes (Figure 1.9). In their writings, the surrealists set themselves apart
as highly modern cultural renegades, yet their alignment with Morris whom Julius Meier-
Graefe and Nicolas Pevsner saw as the key forbearer of English modernism added to the
surrealists’ credibility and importance within English art circles. But like the decorative
arts and crafts produced by Morris and Company for upper middle class and wealthy
patrons who were often oblivious or resistant to Morris’ radical politics, the material
products of the surrealists lacked any recognizable markers of their Marxist zeal and
consequently could be interpreted in a range of ways by both friend and foe.

One could make an association between the myth of Perseus, who after slaying the
sea serpent and sacking existing civilizations went on to found Mycenae, and the
surrealists’ desire to remake British capitalist society; however, there is scant evidence that
Morris, his artist colleague Burne Jones, or Gascoyne considered the Perseus myth as a
revolutionary metaphor in this way. Beyond this association, Gascoyne’s collage seems to
carry very little political content. In his modernized version of the myth, Perseus appears
trapped as either a priest or professor at a lectern, or a Jack doll in a toy machine-like box.
Gascoyne’s modern box-like form could be an allusion to the wooden chest of the ancient myth—a box in which King Acrisius placed his daughter Danaë and her son Perseus and then cast them into the sea. Yet Danaë is absent here, and Gascoyne’s image is full of ribald humor. Perseus’ upper torso and head are cartoonish and his legs, collaged from a different source, are covered in a clown suit or perhaps pajamas. Like a vaudeville actor in dramatic flourish, his professorial or priestly arms are outstretched and his hands are pointing up. Perseus appears shocked to find Andromeda’s decapitated head resting on a badminton racket, which in turn rests on a rock, or perhaps the back of a whale.

Apart from a potentially ironical presentation of priests or professors, and a nod to the Perseus theme as interpreted by Morris and Company, Gascoyne’s abstracted caricature of the myth fails to provide a conclusive political message to viewers. Gascoyne appears to have referenced Burne-Jones’ Perseus cycle of paintings and Morris’s related poem, “The Doom of King Acrisius,” in The Earthly Paradise. Burne-Jones’ eighth painting in the cycle, The Doom Fulfilled (1884-85), features a highly abstracted black serpent in the center front of the composition (Figure 1.10). While Burne-Jones’ serpent looks more like an ornamental font in one of Morris’s Kelmscott Press books than a sea creature, Gascoyne has even further abstracted a similar centrally positioned form, so that it cannot be discerned as a sea creature at all. Is it the sea serpent to be slain by Perseus, or is it part of the rock on which Andromeda might rest? We cannot know. Morris’s poem of the Perseus myth also describes a form so abstract as to be unrecognizable:

He [Perseus] beheld the sea,
And saw a huge wave rising mightily
Above the smaller breakers of the shore,
Which in its green breast for a minute bore
A nameless horror, that it cast aland
And left, a huge mass on the oozing sand,
That scarcely seemed a living thing to be,\textsuperscript{80}

Morris ends “The Doom of King Acrisius” with the following three lines:

\begin{quote}
He heard the shallow breakers on the shore,  
And o’er his head the sea-gull’s plaintive cry,  
Careless as gods for who might live or die.\textsuperscript{81}
\end{quote}

In Gascoyne’s collage, sea gulls fill the air above Perseus’ head. Many fly at a distance, and other bird couples fly close. Given the large number of gulls, one could easily imagine the plaintive cries described by Morris. Coupling is the central theme of Gascoyne’s collage—the gulls couple on rocks and fly in pairs; a pair of seals kisses above Andromeda’s head; and Perseus will mate with Andromeda once he has set her free. While Gascoyne might have appreciated a reading of the \textit{Perseus and Andromeda} collage that combined the surrealist interest in sensual love and political revolution, there is little in the collage to suggest that he wanted to allude to the surrealists’ utopian desire for a new worker-friendly state, aside from the fact that birds coupling is the theme of his \textit{Short Survey of Surrealism}.

Moore signed onto each of the political statements made by the surrealist group; however, the three drawings and four sculptures he exhibited at the New Burlington Galleries, including a lead version of \textit{Reclining Figure} (1931), were so highly abstract that they resisted a political interpretation, aside from their humanist sensibility. Given the similarities between the forms in \textit{Reclining Figure} and Moore’s pencil drawings \textit{Ideas for Sculpture: Transformation of Bones}, the transformation of human forms into biomorphic, abstract volumes seems to be the most significant theme for the sculptor. The torso, arms, and upper thigh of Moore’s \textit{Reclining Figure} are attenuated, whereas the lower thigh, upper calf, chest, and neck are unnaturally thick and round (Figure 1.11). Moore abstracted the
chest into a cage like form with three vertical rods only reminiscent of ribs. Just before the exhibition opened, perhaps to force an association between Moore’s abstracted female figure and a more obviously sexualized and anti-fascist image of woman by a well-known German surrealist, Breton demanded that Moore’s Reclining Figure be repositioned in front of one of Bellmer’s La Poupée photographs (Figure 1.11). After the move, Bellmer’s ostensibly misogynist and disturbing photographic collage, produced to defy paternalistic German authority and repudiate the Nazi cult of the perfect human body, provided the closest visual association for Moore’s abstracted reclining nude due simply to its proximity and similar subversion of the female body. According to one witness, Breton repositioned two other works, Dali’s The Dream (1931) and a barren landscape with amoeba and cloud forms titled The Gaze of Amber (1929) by Tanguy, to the right of Moore’s Reclining Figure so that Moore’s sculpture would be associated with their dream imagery. Just to the left of Moore’s sculpture hung Joan Miró’s La Terre Labourée (Ploughed Land), 1923-24 that has been displayed recently to show Miró’s enduring interest in farming and the real soil of his native Catalonia. As shown in a photograph of the 1936 gallery installation, the vertical rods that made up the rib cage of Moore’s sculpture would have visually resonated with the vertical lines representing rows of a plowed field in Miró’s oil painting. Perhaps Breton was interested in the formal connections between the two works as a way to provoke associations between Miró’s indigenous land and Moore’s intimate body. If so, Breton was fabricating associations that normally would not be made between the artworks. That said, the links that can be drawn between Moore’s sculpture and either agrarian labor or dream states are tenuous at best, and in no way should be attributed to Moore’s intentions as a sculptor or to the British group’s thematic interests when first hanging the show.
Like Breton, Agar paid particular attention to how the artworks interacted with each other, and she attributed anthropomorphic characteristics to them—

Across the room, an incredulous smile was staring at a melting watch hanging on to its memory. A fantastic painting of a Paranoic [sic] Head was watching a mask insulting aesthetes, while a painted man was executing a dance of liberty.⁸⁴

Her description of the exhibited paintings emphasizes the surrealists’ interests in the absurd, creative liberty, and overturning prevailing aesthetic values—all of which were associated with their desire to shake up the staid conventions of British society, though not in any direct way related to their call for proletarian revolution.

As with Moore’s sculpture, transformation was a theme of Agar’s oil painting Quadriga (1935), one of three paintings she exhibited in the New Burlington Galleries (Figures 1.13 & 1.14).⁸⁵ The leading historian of British surrealism, Michel Remy, has suggested that the four horse heads of Agar’s painting and Moore’s Reclining Figure represent a deformation of form.⁸⁶ Agar characterized her painting as an anti-war painting with contemporary, ancient, and mythic associations. She interpreted the painting in much the same way that Wassily Kandinsky saw his Improvisation 30 (Cannons) as a premonition of the First World War; however, her imagery grew from sources unrelated to war. She initially derived the four horse heads of Quadriga from a photograph of a horse’s head on the Acropolis that she wanted to modernize.⁸⁷ To create the painting, she combined aspects of the ancient horse of the Acropolis with her childhood memories of horseback riding in a surreal “exalted innocence” and her awareness of two ancient myths—of a sacred fountain in Boetia that evolved when the ground was hit by the feet of Pegasus, and of the moon goddess Selene who drove horses across the sky.⁸⁸ In her words, “One horse’s head became four ghost heads, agitated, beating rhythmic cabbalistic convoluted signs expressing
movement and anxiety, each square a different mood.” Given these qualities, Agar said the painting represented the four horses of the apocalypse, and she believed it embodied her unconscious anticipation of the impending Spanish civil war, which in turn served as a prelude to the Second World War.

Likewise, Read in the introduction of *Surrealism*, a book published following the exhibition to explain the surrealist movement to English audiences, stressed war as a primary concern of the surrealists:

> Those who have not experienced war at first hand may perhaps entertain illusions about its comparative evil; they may entertain the idea, that is to say, that even its modern intensity of horror is sanctioned by some nobler effects of heroism, of national awakening, of personal regeneration. Such a belief is a pestilential idiocy. There is in modern war neither grace nor dignity. It is mad and inconsequential in its inception; beyond the scope of human control in its conduct—a dreary shattering of human flesh in conditions of physical and mental disgust, a long agony which can only be ended in exhaustion.

Given that Remy, who was well-aware of the surrealists’ views about the evils of war, did not see the four horses of the apocalypse in Agar’s painting, it is doubtful the crowds visiting the galleries would have understood Agar’s painting as a mediation on war as she had intended.

Critics and the public were quick to recognize that Nash’s *Harbour and Room* (1932-36) fused the inner life of a bedroom and the outer commercial world of a harbor (*Figure 1.15*). Nash’s superposition of the material trade of the harbor at Toulon, France onto the walls of the hotel bedroom where he slept with his wife is emblematic of the English surrealists’ interest in combining the inner world of the dream with the outer world of work to depict the full complexity of life. The subject of the painting was derived from a reflection of large vessels in the harbor in the mirror across from the couple’s bed. As if in a
dream, the intimate interior of the room melds with the exterior industry of the harbor. Because of the guest room’s classical design that could just as easily be set in England as in France, the painting could be interpreted as an English interior transformed by Nash’s surrealist interest in dream imagery, strange juxtapositions, and chance combinations—characteristics of both continental and British surrealism. However, for those who knew that the harbor in Nash’s painting was Toulon, it was also a reminder of the deep connections between the French surrealists and English artists such as Nash.

Likewise, the English seaside figured prominently in a set of three photographic collages exhibited by Nash to emphasize the artist’s strong connections to his homeland. An extant work that most closely resembles those collages is Swanage (c. 1936) (Figure 1.16). Even though this collage, made up of Nash’s own photographs, is small (just 40 by 58 centimeters) and those exhibited in 1936 were too, Nash wrote extensively about them and the found objects from which they derive in two articles in Architectural Review in April and November 1936. The Victorian seaside town of Swanage in Dorset, England was a key place in Nash’s life. He spent holidays there as a child and made a special return trip just before his death. Nash also lived in the environs of Swanage from fall 1934 to early spring 1936, while working on the Dorset volume of the Shell Guide. Agar and her husband vacationed in Swanage during the summer of 1935 and became close friends with Nash and his wife Margaret. Like Nash, Agar produced a number of surrealist works related to the area. Nash was intrigued by Swanage’s combination of ‘beauty, ugliness and the power to disquiet.’ Swanage “held a ‘strange fascination’ that was a form of ‘natural surrealism’” for him. Nash was especially interested in the incongruous things that seemed to fill the town and create a dreamlike setting—swans floating on the sea, ancient fossils amid modern
architecture, and lampposts transported to the seaside from St. George's of Hanover Square.96

Indicative of the surrealist interest in depicting a super reality, most of the photographic images in Swanage “as well as being extraordinary things of Surrealist appearance...also contain multiple references to actual people, places and events.”97 Nash was interested in grouping found objects or “object personages” so that their unique personalities, evident from the object’s formal qualities, would combine in a new and imaginative ways.98 In this sense, transformation was a key theme for Nash, as it was for Gascoyne, Moore, and Agar. For example, Nash included in the bottom left of the Swanage collage a portion of a photograph of a vitreous mineral object, which he initially photographed outside the Seabreeze Guesthouse, in Worth Matravers, a small town near Swanage in Dorset where he stayed during the summer of 1935 or spring of 1936.99 Once collected, the ten to twelve-inch high vitreous object remained in Nash’s home in Hampstead, and Agar was later able to identify it as a black bituminous rock from Kimmeridge Bay.100 Like Agar, local fishermen and trades people familiar with the Dorset coast would be able to identify the object’s likely origin, even though as a form removed from its context, it appears highly surreal in the collage. The upper left of the Swanage collage also contains an abstract form that appears to be flying. In fact, it is a cut-out portion of a photograph of an object that Nash called Lon-Gom-Pa (a piece of furze driftwood about 18 inches high, found c. 1934-1936). He derived the object’s name from a particular species of llama in Tibet because of its very long legs and the llama’s ability to cover huge distances by leaping in a trancelike state.101 According to Nash, a woman found Lon-Gom-Pa on Egdon Heath, a twenty-mile stretch of coastal wilderness between
Dorchester and Studland, an area that Nash considered to be enchanting for locals and of virtually no interest to foreigners. As designed, these collages appealed to English audiences and offered those familiar with the landscapes a welcome reminder of the English seaside.

Nash also took a number of photographs of the pebbles on Dorset beaches. One is used here, and another was included in a collage for the back of the Dorset Shell Guide produced by Nash for Shell Oil Company during the same period. Just above the pebbles in the left center of the Swanage collage, Nash included a cut-out portion of a photograph of a thin, flat, circular-shaped stone (a 7-inch piece of shale also from Kimmeridge Bay). Nash uses the image of the rock as a dark backdrop or stage for a bleached form commonly known in Dorset as a “crucifix fish,” or the boney structure of a sail catfish. Agar and Nash each collected dried crucifix fishes and competed for the best example. To the right of the crucifix fish, Nash has placed a photograph of his first found object—Marsh Personnage—a piece of driftwood about 30 inches long found along the banks of the River Rother in Romney Marsh, which reminded Nash of a finely wrought Moore sculpture. When he found it, Nash was...

...instantly aware of being in the presence of what he could only describe as a “personage”, and Coleridge would have called a “personeity”. That split and eroded tree-trunk was more than other thus it seemed, and emanated some indeterminable and disquieting magic. Being shapeless, it yet occultly evinced form; though dead, it was patently quick with a mysterious life of its own.

As can be seen in an installation photograph (Figure 1.17), Nash’s found object Marsh Personnage (listed in the catalogue as Found Object interpreted Vegetable Kingdom) was exhibited on a pedestal next to Picasso’s Woman in a Chemise (1913), so that the sail-like portion of Nash’s object is echoed in the curvilinear forms of Picasso’s painting to the right.
Likewise, the object’s rough edges correspond with the jagged edges of an abstracted woman in the painting to its left.

In the *Swanage* collage, the tall totem-like piece of wood to the right of *Marsh Personnage* appears to rise up out of Studland Bay behind Ballard Head.\(^{108}\) Below the unidentified wooden totem, Nash has placed a photograph of a two-foot long anchor chain accreted with shells and stones, which Agar had dug up out of the sand on Lulworth Cove, Dorset in the summer of 1935. Nash referred to the old anchor chain as a *Sea Monster*. Agar called it the *Sea-Snake* and made her own watercolor of it in June 1936.\(^{109}\) Nash’s *Sea Monster* hovers over a distant photograph of a lone swan floating on the calm water of Studland Bay near Swanage. Both Nash and Agar associated the swan with the myth of Leda. Nash went on to describe its surreal qualities in reference to a fictive traveler looking out to the shoreline from a hotel balcony. Expecting to find stampeding horses on the beach, the traveler instead finds a lone swan on “the bay riding uncomfortably against the incoming tide.”\(^{110}\) While swans might seem rare on the ocean, they are relatively common at Swanage, because of a swannery on Chesil Bank at nearby Abbotsbury.\(^{111}\) On the right-hand side of the collage is the cliff of Ballard Head and Ballard Down, which forms a natural dividing line between Swanage and Studland Bays. Nash stayed in two houses and hoped to build a home there. As noted by the Tate, “The white shape just visible at the end of the cliffs is Old Harry Rock which marks the boundary of the Dorset and Hampshire shores.” Above Nash’s collaged shoreline, either a setting sun or rising moon casts a half-light over the local scene, emphasizing the liminality of the landscape boundary and increasing its surrealist power.
Postmortem and Response to the Press

Published in September 1936 as a signed statement of unified artistic and political purpose, the *International Surrealist Bulletin No. 4* provided a postmortem analysis of the exhibition and delineated once more the political stakes of the British group for those who so far remained unfamiliar with or dubious of their position.\textsuperscript{112} Within the *Bulletin*, the group also presented their response to both the broader intellectual climate in England and to press coverage of the exhibition. They took particular pains to address comments from the Marxist and Communist critics of *The (London) Spectator*, then a respected radical magazine, and *The Daily Worker*, London’s only communist daily at the time.

For the English group, Blunt who wrote for *The Spectator* offered the most valid criticism of surrealism. In a June 1936 review of the exhibition, Blunt suggested that the surrealism on display combined Blake’s anti-rationalism with Alphonse de Lamartine’s pacifist and idealist politics of the French Second Republic.\textsuperscript{113} Previously Blunt had elaborated that Blake’s visionary art had done all that surrealism aspired to do, only 150 years earlier, and better.\textsuperscript{114} The *Daily Telegraph* critic held a similar view, calling the surrealists, “Relics of outworn romanticism.”\textsuperscript{115} A noted scholar of Nicolas Poussin, Blunt failed to find the role of reason in surrealist practice and believed that the surrealists’ apparent wholesale embrace of chaos, as well as their unchecked imagination and subconscious material led to mystical art that lacked the significance or quality of Blake’s work.\textsuperscript{116} Even if the surrealists viewed his statement about de Lamartine’s pacifism and idealism as a backhanded jab at their claims for real revolutionary power, Blunt’s characterization fit the surrealist platform fairly well.\textsuperscript{117} The surrealists in part took Blunt so seriously because his opinions of the movement and the artists associated with it were
not always negative. Despite his apparent animosity towards surrealism in the summer of 1936, he had come out in 1933 to support the Tate’s acquisition of a painting by Picasso as “the greatest living painter.”\textsuperscript{118} In the following year, Blunt had characterized Man Ray as “the best achievement of modern photography,”\textsuperscript{119} and in 1935, he hailed Moore as “a sculptor of genius.”\textsuperscript{120}

The avowedly communist critic from the \textit{Daily Worker} was much less convinced of the British surrealists’ political resolve or effectiveness: “The general impression one gets is that here is a group of young people who just haven’t got the guts to tackle anything seriously and attempt to justify themselves by an elaborate rationalization racket.”\textsuperscript{121} The surrealists dismissed this critic’s derisive comment as being voiced “in the fake proletarian manner too often employed by our only Communist daily.”\textsuperscript{122} Yet the critic had a valid point that the surrealists relished in the absurd when it came to the exhibition and related events, and they went to great pains in Gascoyne’s and Read’s books on surrealism and in the \textit{International Surrealist Bulletin No. 4} to rationalize their playful and absurdist actions with relatively sophisticated political rhetoric.

Even though the \textit{Daily Worker} seemed to admonish the surrealists for ignoring the real conditions of the worker, regional papers of the north suggested the exhibition held wide popular appeal: “The Surrealist exhibition is tremendously impressive. There are things in it which will haunt you until you die.”\textsuperscript{123} The reviewers for the \textit{Daily Dispatch} suggested that if you had seen Dadaism and Cubism, you would be prepared for surrealism’s terror.\textsuperscript{124} \textit{The Listener} was ready to write off surrealism as just one more fad that had already seen its day in France before making its way to the backwaters of British culture: “Surrealism has reached London—a little late it is true, a little dowdy and seedy
and down at heel and generally enfeebled...in Paris is decrepit, may yet become fashionable in London.”

Standing with and Against English Culture

To realize a cultural revolution, Breton named three primary obstacles for the movement as a whole to overcome—narrow rationalism, sexual and social taboos, and good taste. While the English group promoted surrealism as the epitome of creativity and non-alienated labor—characteristics usually associated with individual artists—they paradoxically believed that a strong sense of individualism was one of the key difficulties to surmount in developing their interests as a local group. In the International Surrealist Bulletin No. 4, Read explained that artists in England historically resisted cooperative efforts, partly due to the English notion that highly creative art came from cranky loners, not groups such as theirs with an organized agenda. The surrealists resisted this trend because they believed true individual liberty had lost its potency in England after 300 years of philosophical dilution under protestant sectarianism, and it was necessary to unify as a group to restore the power of the individual. As they explained it in 1936,

After three centuries of sectarianism in religion, and a continual confusion of politics by their fusion with the innumerable sects, tolerance and individual liberty have been carried to such a point that they defeat their own ends, by making all social and co-operative life impossible. Individual liberty is not an inevitable and natural state of affairs; it has to be won, and defended when won. This can only be done by co-operative effort, and at present individualism prevents us from uniting in the defence of the individual.

The British surrealists faulted pliant sectarian and purportedly enlightened priests for promoting a false liberal individualism “at every rank of the political scale” to sustain the world’s oldest capitalist system. Despite the fact that communist, pacifist, and left-wing
priests all made their voices heard in the church (and partly because of their plurality), the surrealists claimed the church was complicit with capitalists in withholding real power from the British worker, hiding the human crisis endemic to capitalism behind false charity, and turning a blind eye to the murder and starvation of workers in colonial states in order to lull British workers into complacency with slightly higher wages at the empire’s core. As the surrealists stated to their audience, “In the face of such confusions, such multiplicity of manoeuvres, it is not surprising that individuals fail to appreciate the existence of a crisis, and that they remain blind to the essential unity and strength of the oppressors.”

The surrealist group was convinced that the English, above all other nationalities, were the most adept at obfuscating worker oppression because English capitalism was the most highly organized, oldest, and richest of all, and was also the most deeply rooted in national life. Remarkably for a small band of artists with careers entrenched in the very environment they condemned, they presented themselves and their art as most capable of overcoming these difficulties:

Those of us who have overcome these difficulties in ourselves have done so because we realize that the situation is acute; because we see that religion is once more re-establishing its hold upon the life of the country, and because the movement of our government towards Fascism threatens to put a stop to all creativity. Against this, it is absolutely necessary to combine, to force a dialectical solution of a series of existing conflicts: reality with the dream; society with the individual; the ideology of the artist with his creative activity. This is to be done by attacking the problems of art and of society by means of a coherent activity which will secure the creative transformation of life itself. In this way, reinforced by the achievements of Surrealism in all countries and on every front, we shall put an end to our individualistic anarchy.

As Read suggests here, surrealism was viewed as an indispensable tool for transforming life and solving the problems of art and society expressly because it acknowledged that
waking and dream worlds coexisted in dialectical tension. However, elements of his argument are specious. Apart from a call for coherent activity, Read never explains how this dialectical tension might solve the two key social problems that the group hoped to overcome—namely the English capitalists’ false charity that patronizingly glossed over social ills, and the capitalists’ ability to abuse foreign workers away from local eyes. He simply implies that because surrealism suspends a series of conflicts in dialectical tension, it offers its adherents the ability to see the reality of the economic situation in Britain most clearly. By blending elements of Marxism and Freudian theory, Read believed surrealism bridged the conflicting interests of material society and the inner life of the mind. While he did not state it explicitly, the autocratic rule of Hitler in Germany, Francisco Franco in Spain, and Benito Mussolini in Italy, in concert with the undue local influence of Mosley’s British Union of Fascists presented serious threats to creativity in England. Remedying these realities was one of the group’s primary aims, even if as they asserted, “In all probability English capitalism will not need to make use of official and open Fascism, because it can so easily transform existing forms of government to suit its purposes.”

Although individuals within the group represented a range of leftist positions, the surrealists wanted their activities to be seen as coherent and rooted in defined ideological traditions, and chose to consider the fantastical and irrational aspects of surrealism in unison with rationality and order. To explain the philosophical underpinnings and social aspects of surrealism, the surrealist group reprinted in the *International Surrealist Bulletin* No. 4 a letter read by Read during the debate held on 23 June 1936 in Conway Hall. In his letter presented to the Artists’ International Association, the first deliberate statement of the British group’s left leaning agenda, Read argued that surrealism combined Hegel’s
dialectic with Marx’s historical materialism that both upended and extended the dialectic, and included a heretical infusion of Freud:

In particular [surrealism] takes over from Marx that ‘logic of totality’ which Marx in his turn had taken over from Hegel. Just as for Hegel and Marx the social system constitutes a whole, and none of its separate parts—its political economy, its religion, its art—can be properly understood in isolation, so art itself is not to be regarded as a reflection of one part of our mental experience—that part which we call ‘conscious’—but is to be regarded as a synthesis of all aspects of our existence, even (indeed, especially) the most contradictory.135

Just as Hegel and Marx argued that various elements of the social system were interdependent parts of one larger whole, and thus needed to be considered as operating in unison to fully understand society, surrealism attempted to hold waking and dream states, conscious and unconscious, and fantasy and reality in dialectical solution to represent the full range of human experience. Yet Read’s emphasis on the synthesis of contradictory elements provided easy ammunition for critics such as Blunt who preferred the clarity gained from a strictly rational point of view. To counter such arguments, the British surrealists enlisted Breton’s first manifesto of surrealism in 1924 to argue that surrealism’s synthesis of all aspects of human existence (its interior and social realities) was ideally suited for reflecting the totality of society’s multiple facets. In his letter read at the Artists’ International Association debate, Read quoted Breton as declaring in the First Surrealist Manifesto that, “I believe in the future transmutation of those two seemingly contradictory states, dream and reality, into a sort of absolute reality, a superreality, so to speak.”136 As Read reiterated it, surrealism was superior to previous art movements for its ability to reflect the full range of human experience:

An art of the intellect such as we find in classicism; an art of the eye such as we find in impressionism; an art of the understanding such as we find in naturalism; an art of the feeling such as we find expressionism—all of these
are partial and incomplete forms of art, types of idealistic preference. If reality is to be our aim, then we must include all aspects of human experience, not excluding those elements of subconscious life which are revealed in dreams, day dreams, trances and hallucinations.\textsuperscript{137}

In this regard, the surrealists considered themselves the ultimate or super realists. Getting at the full complexity of the economic reality of the nation and of the perceptual reality of the individual was a central aim of the British group. This was one reason Lye, Jennings, John Banting, and Julian Trevelyan, each to varying degrees, addressed workers’ perceptions of life through documentary films and Mass Observation, an anthropological study of English civilization, while affiliating with the surrealist group.

Because surrealism followed Freudian theory to deal with both unconscious and conscious aspects of human experience, the British group argued that it was a highly logical art, “quite materialistic” (in the Marxist sense that it was rooted in the real world), and as a result, the best equipped of all modern art movements for their emancipatory effort.\textsuperscript{138}

Read made clear in the debate that surrealism’s emphasis on individual experience and Freudian theory in no way impugned the surrealists’ proprietary claim to be true Marxists. With regard to Marxism, the surrealist...

...believes that no satisfactory basis for art can be found within the existing form of society. He is, therefore revolutionary, but not merely a revolutionary in matters of art. He begins with a revolutionary attitude in philosophy, with (to be precise) that revolutionary conception for which Marx was responsible, and which may perhaps be summarised in two propositions: (1) that the validity of theory must be tested in the field of activity; and (2) that the object of philosophy is not to interpret the world, but to transform it. Beginning from such a standpoint, the Surrealist is naturally a Marxian Socialist, and generally claims that he is a more consistent Communist than many who submit to all manner of compromise with the aesthetic culture and moral conventions of capitalism.\textsuperscript{139}

While Read initially made this statement alone, this portion of his speech was included in the \textit{International Surrealist Bulletin No. 4} and approved by many key members of the
British group in addition to Breton, Éluard, and Man Ray. Their readers were to make no mistake; the British group considered itself Marxist for its materialist focus and its members’ desire to liberate humankind through proletarian revolution. Yet apart from isolated proclamations such as this, even the communist members of the group never in any real sense advocated for a Communist revolution in Britain. Instead, Lye and Jennings, both signers to *International Surrealist Bulletin No. 4*, created a wildly successful short promotional film *The Birth of The Robot* for Shell-Mex and BP Oil in 1935-36. Jennings also produced a special number of the *London Bulletin* in July 1938 on the “Impact of Machines” to show how humans had variously responded to the use of machines during the industrial revolution from Blake’s time to the present day. Shortly after the London exhibition, Jennings discussed with Madge and Gascoyne the possibly of founding Mass Observation, an “Anthropology at Home”, modeled after previous studies of savage groups in the South Pacific and other colonial outposts. Madge, Jennings, and Tom Harrisson went on to found Mass Observation in 1937. Given the influence of Jennings and Madge, the study was founded on the surrealist principle that to transform society, one needed to understand the full range of human experience. Mass Observation became a repository of uncensored data on English working-class life for the surrealists, and provided the impetus and source material for Jennings’ film *Spare Time*, a subject of chapter three of the dissertation.

Trevelyan’s part time work for Mass Observation in 1937 impacted the content of his surrealist paintings and collages of workers in Bolton and other industrial towns.

For the British surrealists, art and life were integrally connected. On their behalf, Read argued that whether one liked it or not, art could not be divorced from social development, and therefore art (to be valid, radical, and modern) must service social
transformation. Speaking to the mostly socialist and communist members of the Artists’ International Association, Read proclaimed that surrealism’s liberation of the mind demanded the liberation of man through proletarian revolution. Quoting Breton, Read also conveyed the surrealist desire to deepen the foundations of real sensory experience by having artists’ eyes wide open to the outside consequences of their art and by assuring that the results of their artistic “investigations would be capable of facing the breath of the street.” While this was the case, the works exhibited by Gascoyne, Moore, Agar, and Nash in 1936 only made abstract allusions to the street. Nash’s collages and found objects spoke directly to life along the coast; but rather than facing the breath of the street as Breton did in Nadja, Nash evoked the salt air and isolation of Dorset, promoting British national identity defined around a well-known regional place.

Portions of a speech given by Davies on biology and surrealism during the course of the exhibition were also reprinted in the International Surrealist Bulletin No. 4. As he had explained to a large audience in the galleries on June 26, the surrealists were not offering a new aesthetic theory or a new style of painting, but a new ways of reckoning with the human condition through both Marx and Freud—they leaned on Marxism for understanding social history, and Freudian theory to understand the “misery” born from early parent-child relations in an individual’s personal development and forever resting in a person’s physical and biological nature. For Read and Davies, the surrealist desire to bring unconscious processes out into the open effectively resolved the conflict between the social realm of Marxism and the personal interior world of psychoanalysis. By making public the private miserable nightmares and repressed sexual feelings from childhood, Davies argued that surrealism might “put an end to human loneliness in the face of this
universal human situation.... The hidden world will become part of our common life as human beings, the anti-social will be made social, synthesised with the rest of our existence.”

At about the same time as Davies made his speech, Trotsky put a resolution before the International Communist League, repudiating the “conservative-centrist” politics of the CPGB, which under its popular front umbrella included the Independent Labour Party (ILP). Trotsky was especially vexed by the ILP’s endorsement of both Stalin’s popular front strategy and Beatrice and Sidney Webb’s uncritical book, Soviet Communism: A New Civilization? (1935), written in blind support of Stalin’s regime following a recent trip to Moscow. Like the English surrealists’ criticism of the British capitalists’ false charity, Trotsky believed the Webbs’ Fabian Socialist views were “calculated solely to lead the workers astray as to the real ways and methods of the proletarian revolution.” For Trotsky, Marxist theory and the Russian experience were evidence that a proletarian revolution was impossible within the framework of a bourgeois democracy. Any “synthesis” of bourgeois democracy and socialism represented “the organized betrayal of the historic interests of the proletariat.” Surely had Trotsky been aware of it, he would have taken a similar dim view of the British surrealists’ goals for reforming British society and unifying a polymorphous front in support of the Spanish Republicans. While Read saw the compromises in the Fabian Socialists’ conservative bourgeois views and sincerely wanted to align with Trotsky against Stalin, Read turned a blind eye to the surrealists’ own compromises and paradoxes in promoting a so-called proletarian revolution in England.
Conclusions

Proud of their contributions to the international surrealist movement, the English group advocated stimulating and productive labor for all workers, even those in highly technological industries, as a way to combat three enemies: 1) the historically mind-numbing conformity of industrial capitalism, 2) a menacing tide of fascist oppression at home and on the continent; and 3) Stalin’s increasingly intractable and deadly dictatorial repression. Yet by visiting the 1936 exhibition alone, it was difficult to come to this conclusion, even though the artworks were exemplary products of creative labor just as the surrealists intended. As chapter three of the dissertation will show, the surrealists were better able to shift societal values through documentary film and the social experiment Mass Observation. Despite these limitations, the surrealists formed a multi-disciplinary cultural avant-garde with international reach and local salience, and contemporary critics understood the movement as such, even if they heaped ridicule on the surrealist exhibits in 1936 and saw the surrealists’ bombastic stunts and art as mere provocation.

Given the British government’s apathy when faced with workers marching from the north, Hitler’s persecution of Jews and modern artists, the fall of democracy in Spain, and the continuing presence of the British Union of Fascists at home, the surrealists felt compelled to demand an end to the longstanding capitalist systems they believed fueled unemployment and fascism, in addition to the government’s inaction. Convinced of the necessity to fight against all forms of oppression on an international front, they rallied with their European allies in the name of individual creative freedom and attempted to couple visual art and poetry as Blake and Morris had before them to manifest the deep connections between art and life that they believed existed. The artworks exhibited in 1936
reflected their political ideals in that they combined aspects of the inner and outer worlds and art and poetry, yet the public never associated the exhibits with a proletarian revolution, the social dangers of capitalism, or the surrealists’ anti-fascist cause.

Along with Breton, Éluard, and Mesens, the English group infused their political rhetoric with Freudian theory to acknowledge the inner life of the artist, the one aspect of the art that was most apparent to viewers. In the thirties, Marx was still considered the greatest theorist of capitalism. With the attitude that Britain was the oldest and most entrenched capitalist society in the world and a desire that surrealism to be taken seriously as a modern movement in England, the surrealists had little choice but to adopt Marxist theory to both explain and transcend the living and work conditions that they believed stifled creative production. However, three paradoxes compromised the validity of their Marxist position: they were able to develop surrealism in the very environment they found anathema to creativity, they invigorated London’s art world even as they undermined it, and critics in the press failed to see their sometimes ironical and often abstract art shown in London in 1936 as a sharp critique of English society.

In the New Burlington Galleries, the English group’s homogenous display of surrealist works gathered from economically advanced nations as well as small-scale cultures from around the world reiterated in material terms their belief that anyone with the right attitude could produce surrealist art. This message, however, failed to reach members of the working classes who had no experience of the prestigious galleries and were typically not interested in reading critical art reviews in the papers and art journals. Mounting the exhibition in one of London’s leading galleries near the Royal Academy was good for bringing in important critics and patrons and lending stature to surrealism as a
modernist movement and increasing its viability in England, but it offered the surrealists little opportunity to provoke the proletarian revolution they purported to want.

I do not want to suggest that the British surrealists were failures or sellouts, even if their artworks and the exhibition lacked the clear message of their members’ texts and speeches. Their position that blended Freud and Marx, that applied Marxist doctrine in a capitalist society, and advocated individual freedom along with socialism perhaps fits more closely with our post-communist present than with contemporary political thought in the thirties. In that regard, the British surrealists appear today as remarkably prescient. The surrealists also succeeded in disrupting the status quo of the London art world with quirky artworks, strange ethnographic objects, and bombastic lectures at the New Burlington Galleries, offering critics and patrons vivid examples of the free and creative labor that the surrealists wished for everyone.

Chapter 1 Endnotes

6 Surrealist Group in England, International Surrealist Bulletin No. 4, 8. The bulletin was distributed by Zwemmer’s bookshop.


8 Artists and writers from Great Britain exhibiting were Eileen Agar, John Banting, John Selby Bigge, Diana Brinton Lee, Edward Burra, Cecil Collins, P. Norman Dawson, Hugh Sykes Davies, Mervyn Evans, David Gascoyne, Geoffrey Grigson, S. W. Hayter, Humphrey Jennings, Rupert Lee, Sheila Legge, Len Lye, Robert Medley, Reuben Mednikoff, Henry Moore, Margaret Nash, Paul Nash, Grace W. Pailthorpe, Roland Penrose, Herbert Read, Roger Roughton, Graham Sutherland, Hugh Sykes Davies, and Julian Trevelyan.


10 Ibid., 3.

11 Ibid., 16. The surrealists quoted a number of press reviews of the exhibition. For example, the Daily Dispatch critic stated on June 12, "Having seen examples of ‘Dadaism’ and ‘Cubism’, I was prepared for all the terrors of ‘Surrealism’."
Ibid. Blunt stated in the Spectator on June 19, "Superrealism is simply the last stage of an individualistic and subjective attitude to art."

Other members of Unit One included: Barbara Hepworth, Henry Moore, John Armstrong, John Bigge, Edward Burra, Tristram Hillier, Ben Nicholson, Edward Wadsworth, and architects Wells Coates and Colin Lucas.

Nash, Moore, Bigge, and Burra exhibited with the surrealists in 1936. Bigge exhibited with the surrealists, but never joined the surrealist group. Armstrong remained on the fringes of the surrealist group.

Paul Overy, "Taking a Second Look at Unit 1," The Times, 6 June 1978. Overy characterized the sculpture and paintings shown in the one and only Unit 1 exhibit held at the Mayor Gallery in London in 1934 and traveling on to Liverpool, Manchester, Hanley, Derby, Swansea, and Belfast as "a slightly uneasy mixture of surrealist-influenced figurative work and biomorphic abstraction."

Herbert Read, Unit 1: The Modern Movement in English Architecture Painting and Sculpture (London: Cassell and Company, 1934). However, in 1936, Read expressly connected the British surrealists with the Parisian interest in communist revolutionary politics.


Ibid.

Ibid.


Madge cited the English poet Edward Young, as well as Blake and Coleridge as surrealist precursors. In describing the combination of imagination and rational judgment in surrealism, he quoted from Young, "But then in ode, there is this difference from other kinds of poetry; that, there, the imagination, like a very beautiful mistress, is indulged in the appearance of domineering; though the judgment, like an artful lover in reality carries its point, and the less it is suspected of it, it shows the more masterly conduct and deserves the greater commendation." See: "Surrealism for the English," 15-17.


Ibid., 87.


Ibid.

Breton, Conversations, 92.

Ibid., 71. According to Breton, the political goals of the French surrealists were strongest when they first organized in 1924-25 and in the early thirties.

Ibid.

Ibid., 86.
In a review of Read's *Surrealism*, Jennings agreed with Breton's view that surrealism's new interest in "coincidence" was the contemporary equivalent of romanticism's interest in the "apparition." For Breton's statements, see: *Limits Not Frontiers of Surrealism*, ed. Herbert Read (London: Faber and Faber, 1936), 112-13. For Jennings' review, see: Humphrey Jennings, "'Surrealism'," in *The Humphrey Jennings Film Reader*, ed. Kevin Jackson (Manchester: Carcanet, 2004), 220.

Breton, *Conversations*, 81.

"Limits Not Frontiers of Surrealism," 95-99.


The initial meeting of the Artists' International was held in 1933 and consisted of Clifford Rowe, Pearl Binder, Francis Klingender, Mischa Black, James Boswell, James Lucas, James Fitton, James Holland, and Betty Rea. To appeal to the United Front, they changed their name to the Artists' International Association in 1935. Chamberlain developed his appeasement policies first as Chancellor of the Exchequer under Ramsay MacDonald and Stanley Baldwin, and continued to assert them as Prime Minister from 1937-1940.


Ibid., 125-126.


Gascoyne joined the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB), but not until 1936 at the young age of twenty.


Ibid., 111-112. Carter makes this point from reflections by Richard Wollheim and Julian Bell.

Ibid., 123.


Ibid.

Ibid., 13.


Roughton, "Surrealism and Communism," 74-75.


Penrose, Read, and Nash were primarily responsible for selecting artists and works to include. In her memoirs Agar, who was one of the first English artists chosen to participate, remembered Penrose and Read visiting her studio, “One day I was an artist exploring highly personal combinations of form and content, and the next I was calmly informed I was a Surrealist!” See, Eileen Agar and Andrew Lambirth, A Look at My Life (London: Methuen, 1988), 115.

The Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology of Cambridge lent the Oceanic objects. Penrose lent an African mask and two objects from the Americas. The exhibition also included a number of photographs of objects held by the British Museum in London.

International surrealist exhibitions were held in Brussels (1934): Copenhagen and Tenerife, Canary Islands (1935); Paris (May 1936 and 1938), New York (December 1936); Tokyo (1937); Amsterdam (1938); and Sao Paulo (1938).

Agar and Lambirth, A Look at My Life, 117.

A selection from The Immaculate Conception by André Breton and Paul Éluard was also published in the Double Surrealist Number.


Agar and Lambirth, A Look at My Life, 117.


Ibid. The lines between these quoted passages read, "Have you ever paused to consider why grass is green/Yes greener at least it is said than the man in the moon/Which is why/The linen of flat countries basks in the tropical sun/And the light of the stars is attracted by transparent flowers/And at last is forgotten by both man and beast/By helmet and capstan and mermerised nun."

Gascoyne exhibited four works: Object-Poem: Homage to André Breton, and three collages, Perseus and Andromeda, The Annunciation, and A Critical Visit.


Ibid.
Ibid.


83 Miró’s La Terre Labourée (Ploughed Land), 1923-24, was included in the exhibition “Miró: La Terra” (Miró: The Land), at the Palazzo dei Diamanti, in Ferrara, Italy in Spring 2008.

84 Agar and Lambirth, A Look at My Life, 118.

85 Agar was represented by eight works, three oil paintings and five objects, in the exhibition. Roland Penrose purchased Quadriga from the exhibition and went on to lend it to the Museum of Modern Art.

86 Remy, "Surrealism's Vertiginous Descent on Britain." For Remy’s comments on Agar, see p. 46; and on Moore, see p. 51.

87 Agar and Lambirth, A Look at My Life, 121.

88 Ibid., 122.

89 Ibid.

90 Ibid.

91 Read, Surrealism, 34.

92 Paul Nash contributed four oil paintings, five collages, and three objects (two designed and one found) to the exhibition. The Trustees of the Tate Gallery, London purchased Nash’s oil painting, Harbour and Room (1932-36), in 1981. In 1973, the Tate purchased his collage, Swanage (c. 1936), also exhibited in the International Surrealist Exhibition.

93 Alexander Robertson et al., Angels of Anarchy and Machines for Making Clouds: Surrealism in Britain in the Thirties (Leeds: Leeds City Art Galleries, 1986), exhibition catalogue, 164. Nash’s painting, a four-year study probably finished so that it could be shown in 1936, is based on a watercolor of 1931. The watercolor and painting blend aspects of the harbor at Toulon with elements of Paul and Margaret Nash’s hotel bedroom there in 1930.


95 For the Tate online description of Swanage, see: http://www.tate.org.uk/servlet/ViewWork?cgroupid=999999961&workid=10553&searchid=9820


97 Ibid.

98 Ibid.

99 Notes on the back of a photograph of the object date Nash’s visit to Worth Matravers as the summers of 1935 and 1937. See Paul Nash photographs, Box 8, 746/B Found Object, mineral kingdom, vitreous subject, 1936. However, the Tate Biennial Report of 1972-74 suggests that Nash stayed there for a short time during the spring of 1936 or 1937. Ibid., 206.

100 Agar described the rock in a letter to the Tate compiler (4 March 1974).


104 The piece of shale now resides in one of the few extant collage works made by Nash, Only Egg (c. 1937), made of actual objects.
106 Ibid.
107 Ibid.
108 Ibid., 209.
110 Nash, "Swanage or Seaside Surrealism."
113 Ibid., 16. The review was printed in The Spectator, 19 June 1936.
115 Surrealist Group in England, International Surrealist Bulletin No. 4, 16. For the full review, see Daily Telegraph, 12 June 1936.
117 Lamartine was known for his role in abolishing slavery and the death penalty, and protecting workers’ right to work through a national workshop program during the Second Republic.
118 Anthony Blunt, The Spectator, 14 July 1933.
119 "Man Ray," The Spectator, 7 December 1934.
120 "Henry Moore," The Spectator, 1 February 1935.
121 Surrealist Group in England, International Surrealist Bulletin No. 4, 16. For the full review, see Daily Worker, 12 June 1936.
122 Ibid.
124 Ibid. For the full review, see Daily Dispatch, 12 June 1936.
125 Ibid. For the full review, see The Listener, 17 June 1936.
126 Breton, Conversations, 63.
128 Ibid.
129 Ibid.
130 Ibid., 5.
131 Ibid.
132 Ibid., 6.
133 Ibid., 4.
136 Ibid., 9.
Ibid. 8.

Ibid. 8-9.

Ibid.

Read’s comments on the political position of surrealism were taken from his opening speech at a debate on surrealism sponsored by the Artists’ International in Conway Hall on 23 June 1936.

In the same speech, Read makes the following statement, “There can be no doubt as to the direction which these activities should take. That liberation of the mind which Surrealism requires as the primary condition of its revolutionary activity demands, as Breton has made sufficiently clear, the liberation of man, ‘which implies that we must struggle against our fetters with all the energy of despair; that to-day more than ever before the Surrealists entirely rely for the bringing about of the liberation of man upon the proletarian Revolution.” Surrealist Group in England, International Surrealist Bulletin No. 4, 10.

"Anthropology at Home” was the title of a letter submitted to the New Statesman on 30 January 1937 by Madge, Jennings, and Harrisson.

The original Mass Observation organization continued on in various guises through the early 1950s and was the source of critical information about the English working class for the British public and ethnographers worldwide.


Ibid. Davies’ statement was extracted from a lecture he gave at the exhibition on 26 June 1936.

Ibid., 13.

Ibid., 15.

Trotsky authored a resolution, adopted by the International Communist League in July 1936, taking aim against the centrist politics of the London Bureau including the Independent Labour Party, whom Trotsky called, “the pacifist-parliamentary clique of Maxton and Company.” Trotsky considered their conservative-centrist position “utterly incapable of resisting the pressure of reaction and chauvinism.” The Webbs had been hostile to the October Revolution but came to support Stalin’s regime. As Trotsky noted in The Revolution Betrayed of 1936, Lenin was passionately hostile to conservative bourgeois ideologues, particularly the British Fabians, who considered themselves socialists. (See the online edition of Trotsky, The Revolution Betrayed, Appendix “Socialism in One Country” under the heading, “The ‘Friends’ of the Soviet Union” http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1936/revbet/ch12.htm)

Eileen Agar and the Compromises of Pursuing a Free Revolutionary Art

The British surrealists were eager to help reshape British capitalist society, not as the architects of a new communist state, but as artists contributing to a more egalitarian and creative capitalist empire—one that might finally remedy the psychological trauma, social barriers, and debilitating environmental effects of over 150 years of industrialization and imperialism; and inoculate the British people against the twin threats of Stalinist and fascist totalitarianism. As part of a larger international Popular Front coalescing in the mid thirties to oppose fascism, they represented a wide range of leftist political positions. Despite their various political allegiances, members of the British group all agreed that fascism threatened the liberal democratic values that they believed should, but did not at that time, undergird British culture. Gender inequalities in British society also did not escape the women in the group including Eileen Agar. She lived her life in a way to rectify that, even if fighting for gender equality was never an overt political struggle for her.

The British surrealists claimed in a series of manifestos, including David Gascoyne’s book A Short Survey of Surrealism and the International Surrealist Bulletin No. 4, that Britain’s present class system and the ideologies that went along with it were undemocratic and undermined the power of the working classes in pursuit of capitalist and colonial goals. The men crafting those declarations—Gascoyne, Herbert Read, Roger Roughten, and E. L. T. Mesens—purported to support a Marxist-inspired proletarian revolution in their fight against fascism, and Agar and others appeared eager to sign their names to the call. However, beyond the male leaders’ strident Marxist and anti-fascist posturing in public documents and speeches, her art, along with that of her lover Paul Nash,
addressed transformative themes using abstract symbols, and natural objects. Rather than promoting any real or lasting proletarian uprising in England as they said they wanted to, the British surrealists actively contributed to one of the oldest, largest, and strongest industrial capitalist societies on earth, and they sought to transform British society from within rather than overthrowing it. The bourgeois status of many of the group's members, including Agar and Read, Roland Penrose who purchased the London Gallery in early 1938 to exhibit surrealist art, and Mesens who directed that gallery, only exacerbated this tendency.

Although the group's more vocal members often preferred to deny it, their political position was defined more by capitalist and humanist values and their interest in stimulating and satisfying desire, than it was by a commitment to Marxist ideals. For example, in aligning with the working classes, the Labour Party, Trade Unions, and the Artists International Association (A.I.A.) as a United Front to oppose the British government's non-intervention in Spain in early 1937, Agar and other members of the surrealist group demanded in a broadsheet that:

If only in self-defence we must END ALL FORMS OF NON-INTERVENTION, INTERVENE IN THE FIELD OF POLITICS, INTERVENE IN THE FIELD OF IMAGINATION. THE REVOLUTION which we can bring about must have as its object the DEVELOPMENT OF CONSCIOUSNESS and the WIDER SATISFACTION OF DESIRE. Economic justice is the first object of our intervention, but we demand also the vindication of the psychological rights of man, the liberation of intelligence and imagination. INTERVENE AS POETS, ARTISTS AND INTELLECTUALS BY VIOLENT OR SUBTLE SUBVERSION AND BY STIMULATING DESIRE.”

This quote gives no evidence that the surrealists wanted to use art to create a proletarian revolution. Rather it suggests parallel avenues for pursuing a range of revolutionary values: to intervene in the creative sphere, to intervene economically, and to intervene politically.
There is some indication that they linked their revolution of the imagination to psychological consciousness, but to say that they demand economic justice as well as the liberation of the imagination speaks to a parallel, not causal, relationship. As Lynda Morris and Robert Radford have pointed out, the surrealist broadsheet’s “more radical than thou” tone came across as “politically naïve and aimlessly sensational” in comparison to the plain-speaking communist-style politics of the founders of the A.I.A.\textsuperscript{152} At face value, the surrealists said that they foremost sought “economic justice,” yet that stated goal was overwhelmed by the bolded words IMAGINATION, SUBVERSION, and DESIRE. These were interventions focused on developing human consciousness, not on politics in any traditional sense of the word. Agar’s paintings of the thirties were about developing consciousness and freeing human desire, intelligence, and creativity—the very qualities sought by the surrealists during that period to oppose Britain’s non-intervention. However, because she and other surrealists relied on abstraction and natural objects to convey vague transformative themes around consciousness, desire, intelligence, and creativity; most viewers failed to heed British surrealism or the group’s associated proclamations for psychic, social, and environmental transformation as a call for a new society. As discussed in chapter one, works by Agar, Paul Nash, Henry Moore, and Julian Trevelyan in the 1936 \textit{International Surrealist Exhibition} contained abstracted and ambiguous iconography, such as the four horses of the apocalypse in Agar’s painting \textit{Quadriga}, which she associated with ancient myths, childhood experiences, and contemporary events that might lead to war. Agar and Nash gathered evocative driftwood from coastal marshes and plucked shells, sponges, and rusted anchor chains from the sea, transforming them through the act of assemblage into cultural products such as Agar’s \textit{Ceremonial Hat for Eating Bouillabaisse}, to
draw attention to the creative process, to blur distinctions between the natural
environment and culture, and to evoke the marvelous and irrational over the
professionalism and contrivance that they believed dominated bourgeois art.\textsuperscript{153}

In the summer of 1935, the Soviet Comintern officially endorsed the Popular Front
strategy—opening the door to alliances with groups and parties of various leftist and
liberal persuasions—as a defense against fascism. Ironically, although Stalin was firmly in
control, the Soviet adoption of the Popular Front strategy significantly mellowed the
Stalinist tenor of liberal politics across Europe and America, and the Popular Front was
important in building a broad liberal coalition in support of the Spanish Republicans during
the Spanish Civil War. The surrealists actively supported the \textit{Frente Popular} in Spain. Like
others drawn to the Popular Front, Agar lent her name to the surrealist group’s political
declarations in the late summer of 1936 and in March 1937 as a liberal humanist who
opposed fascism.\textsuperscript{154} She contributed works to two exhibitions co-sponsored by the A.I.A.
and the surrealist group. Both exhibitions were mounted to oppose fascism and gain more
employment and greater respect for the work of British artists and designers. In late 1938,
Agar’s sculptural bust \textit{The Angel of Anarchy} (Figure 2.1) was highlighted in Number Seven
of the \textit{London Bulletin}, which contained the first English translation of the manifesto,
“Towards an INDEPENDENT Revolutionary Art,” drafted by André Breton and Diego Rivera
in association with Leon Trotsky in Mexico earlier in the year.\textsuperscript{155} She also participated in
the \textit{Living Art in England} exhibition mounted in early 1939 by Mesens at the London
Gallery, the leading venue in London for surrealist art. That exhibition was staged
specifically as a show of solidarity with exiled artists from Nazi-controlled countries and to
protest the increasing intolerance of “individual and spontaneous” art in the Soviet Union
under Joseph Stalin’s rule. In 1940, recognizing that the British surrealists as a group had grown soft on their first proposals calling for a proletarian revolution, Mesens laid down an ultimatum for members to either fully commit to the proletarian revolution and promote their art as exclusively surrealist, or disengage altogether. Rather than galvanizing the group, he prompted a mass defection, yet Agar was one of the few artists who remained, and Mesens continued to promote her as a bona fide surrealist.

Agar’s art in the thirties and her later dismissive statements about surrealist politics were emblematic of the group’s muddled embrace of Marxism as a means to fight fascism, promote democracy, and protect creative freedom. Along with others in the British group, Agar seems to have been drawn to Marxism in the 1930s mainly because it was considered the most powerful ideological antidote to fascism. Apart from Marxism, like other British women writers of the early twentieth century from Virginia Woolf to Doris Lessing, Agar also was committed to breaking conventions related to gender and sexuality. While in her memoir Agar did not link her support of women’s rights to her political stand against fascism, she would have been familiar with Woolf’s *Three Guineas* published in 1938 that did. Like Lessing, Agar also might have signed onto the surrealists’ Marxist political agenda because Marxism implied, at least in its end stage of evolutionary social progress, a commitment to women’s rights and racial equality as humanitarian concerns. Members of the fledgling Pan-African movement, which celebrated unifying and strengthening black culture in Africa and across the African diaspora, were certainly attracted to Marxism for its potential for racial equality; and the African elements of Agar’s largest painting, *The Autobiography of an Embryo*, would have suggested their cause to anyone familiar with it. However, despite Agar’s apparent adherence to the surrealists’ strident political
manifestos in the thirties, her paintings did little more than hint at the Pan-African struggle, and her lifelong commitment to Marxism or the Pan-African movement was relatively weak. In the 1980s, decades after the death of Trotsky and the dismantling of the Stalinist state, Agar disavowed having any real interest in Marxism. She also failed to acknowledge any support for the Pan-African movement when looking back over her career. I will argue that her painting *The Autobiography of an Embryo* of 1933-34 belies this erasure later in life.

While the British group was committed to a Popular Front of collective revolutionary action, each artist developed a unique way of expressing social values in their art. Agar devoted her figural and abstract paintings such as *The Autobiography of an Embryo* to the cultural histories of Europe and Africa, the general concepts of social history, human productivity, and natural cycles of decline and rebirth (*Figure 2.2*). As the surrealists called for in their 1937 political broadsheet, her art was subtly subversive and often focused on desire, and her unexpected combinations of source imagery were highly imaginative. Trevelyan represented the surrealists’ interest in the class struggle in Britain more graphically, laying in newsprint from *The Daily Worker* to double as rolling hills in collages of coal towns, and painting black-faced potters as they left work at their kilns billowing sooty smoke (*Figure 2.3*). Trevelyan based these and many of his collages and paintings on his experiences observing and interviewing workers in industrial towns in association with the anthropological study, *Mass Observation*.161 Rather than representing workers’ status in the capitalist system as Trevelyan did, Agar filled her art with an idiosyncratic blend of natural elements, abstract forms, and symbolic figures to convey freedom of expression in a period when just the opposite was embraced by world powers.
As the surrealists made clear in their political writings, Britain was in the business of sustaining its imperial domination, fascist states were solidifying and expanding their control, and Stalin was aggressively persecuting anyone opposed to his party line in the Soviet Union.

Beyond her apparent embrace of racial and cultural equality in *The Autobiography of an Embryo*, Agar engaged the highly gendered politics of sexual love to foster subversive play and creative freedom for women. In each of these ways, she helped promote a social revolution within British society, even if she never addressed class issues head on. Agar refused to be cast as a female muse. Instead, her principal muses were her husband, Jewish poet Joseph Bard, her longtime lover Nash, and Paul Éluard, with whom she had a brief affair and an abiding affinity as an artist. Her collaboration as an independent partner with these men and her awareness of the Pan-African movement shaped the content and form of some of her key works. Perhaps to present the gestation of a contemporary diaspora that might eventually hold the significance of the ancient and classical civilizations of the Western tradition that Bard and she admired, Agar’s art and writing from 1931-34 spoke to the nascent Pan-African movement. That movement demanded three things: recognition of African culture as one of the world’s great cultures independent of the Western tradition, African independence from colonial rule, and expanded civil rights for African Americans in the United States. Agar’s works were often autobiographical, and she presented herself as integrally connected to Europe’s urban culture, aware of the burgeoning Pan-African movement in London, and in touch with the natural landscape, especially along the southern coasts of England and France. In the process, she challenged the social and
institutional constraints placed on British subjects worldwide, and more specifically on women in the British avant-garde and in the surrealist movement.

In her art, human sexuality is related to creative power. Agar’s resulting images of women, her muses, and signs of fertility often appear androgynous, and her figures simultaneously hold elements of male and female identity. Distinctions between African and European, between Christian and Jew, between fashion and the avant-garde, between human-made and natural forms, and between abstraction and figuration are effectively eroded in Agar’s artworks, and the Surrealists celebrated their blurring for its revolutionary power. By transcending these distinctions, Agar’s art effectively emphasized the surrealist interest in Hegelian dialectics handed down through Marx, and her works embodied the surrealists’ democratic call for resisting all forms of hierarchical relationships, even if she produced her art from a privileged position in society due to her family’s wealth.162

**Surrealism Conceived Upmarket**

While the British surrealists avowed to support a proletarian revolution, Agar and other members of the group enjoyed wearing high-end fashions by Elsa Schiaparelli and other designers. Penrose, whose parents left him a substantial inheritance in the early thirties, was one of Picasso’s most prominent collectors in England; and like many of the surrealists, he “‘accumulated’ fine examples of tribal art and the kinds of heteroclite ‘curiosities’ which, in times past, packed the *Wunderkammern* of the aristocracy.”163 The surrealists routinely used their bourgeois status to curry favor with patrons and critics and eagerly bought and sold works in London’s thriving art market. Given their elite social
standing, it would have been unthinkable for Read, Agar, Penrose, or Mesens to consider themselves or their personal interests as proletarian. To bolster the rebel status of artists like Agar who contributed to the *Living Art in England* exhibition, Mesens stretched the truth to boast that Agar may have been born in Buenos Aires in 1901, but she was reborn a surrealist in Paris’s rue Schoelcher.\textsuperscript{164} She did in fact live on that street in early 1929 and studied painting while in Paris.\textsuperscript{165} Yet her teacher in the French capital, the Czech painter Frantisek Foltyn to whom she was introduced by Adolf Loos, flatly dismissed surrealism as a movement.\textsuperscript{166} Like Agar’s teacher in England, Leon Underwood, Foltyn stressed the formal and abstract qualities of cubism’s line, color, and form over surrealism’s figurative tendencies.\textsuperscript{167} Mesens, in his role as director of the London Gallery and editor of the *London Gallery Bulletin* in 1939, enticed patrons with Agar’s combination of a “foreign eye” and an “English finger.”\textsuperscript{168} Emphasizing her rebellion against the English establishment, Mesens also incorrectly identified her as Irish. More accurately, she was born in a fashionable Buenos Aires suburb at the close of the nineteenth century to a wealthy Scot industrialist and an English-American mother (Figure 2.4).\textsuperscript{169} Agar’s memoir is steeped with fond memories of growing up first in Argentina and later in London in a household of immense privilege. In describing her transition to adulthood, she prosaically stated that while she enjoyed some of the demands that her family placed on her as a young woman coming out in society, she was becoming “increasingly rebellious” in her art and her personal relationships.\textsuperscript{170}

Her wealthy upbringing might account, at least in part, for her lukewarm support for communism even though she signed onto the surrealists’ Marxist statements and confirmed her commitment to the proletarian cause with Mesens in 1940. She believed the
surrealists’ more radical politics derived solely from Breton and the French camp of artists, whom she first met in Paris in 1929 and came to know more fully in 1936. Writing in the 1980s, she recalled that:

Under the French definition of surrealism we were supposed to be political activists, adhering to the cause of proletarian revolution, yet in reality Communism and Surrealism did not go together so easily. ...in England, John Banting was almost unique in being able to ride—at least for a time—the two spirited horses of Surrealism and Communism.

I have always described myself as apolitical, but as a humanist there were important issues which I felt the need to endorse. A number of us reacted strongly to the threat of fascism, and there were demonstrations and petitions to sign. The Spanish Civil War was being shamefully ignored in England.171

Agar’s humanist motivations for protesting against fascism and the plight of Republican Spain were coupled with a deep admiration for her father’s capitalist enterprise in Argentina and an equally strong desire to break away from her parents’ social dictates for their three daughters. Given these competing personal stakes, her autobiographical photomontages, paintings, and sculptural assemblages exhibited from 1936 through 1939 resist an explicit message of proletarian revolution, and focus instead on the colonial and gender issues she felt most acutely as an individual.

Neither Agar nor most of the British surrealists believed that Britain should become a communist state. Instead, she and the de facto leaders of the British movement—Mesens, Read, and Penrose—sought to overcome the alienation they believed pervaded the lives of the masses in the British empire by exerting as much direct control over their artistic labor and the products of their labor as they possibly could in the English art market. In line with Marx’s ideas, they associated workers’ alienation—from both the products of their labor and the reasons why they labored—with industrial capitalist production. However, as if to show that alienation did not necessarily have to exist in British society or its colonies, or
perhaps to show that British society might be better served by less alienated subjects like herself, Agar attempted to control all aspects of her production as a professional artist working in London. She was careful to publish the principles on which her art would be produced. Working with plaster casts, brushed oil painting, small-scale collages, and assemblages of objects she found near the sea and in her daily life, she managed her artistic production without the help of studio assistants. She limited the exhibition of her work primarily to public galleries or galleries run by the surrealists, and she liked having a direct hand in the marketing and sale of her art. Likewise, Mesens, Read, and Penrose put great effort into critically positioning surrealism in relation to other British movements, into establishing the London Gallery as an intellectual and marketing hub for surrealist art, and producing a range of cultural products with their own labor.

Like so many other activities and products of the British group, Agar’s art resonates with the general humanist values associated with Marxist theory, not Marxism’s more radical aspects. Apart from their call for a proletarian revolution, Mesens, Read, and Penrose put her art forward to show Britain’s ascendancy as a cultural and artistic powerhouse in relation to France. For example, Mesens expressly organized the Living Art in England exhibition to demonstrate London’s new status as an art center with the influx of exiled modern artists from Nazi controlled states. In addition to showing solidarity with refugee artists, the English group wanted to express their pivotal role in sustaining European modern art in the face of fascist oppression. To this end, Mesens, Read, and Penrose championed Agar’s allegorical abstractions to British patrons, playing up her “English hand” over any Pan-African references in her work. She was one of the first artists recruited by Read and Penrose to form the British movement, and she soon became the
group’s most internationally recognized woman member. She contributed works to all of the major exhibitions of British surrealism of the thirties, and her art has been included in almost all international retrospectives of surrealism. Because artists were often listed alphabetically in catalogues to promote the surrealists’ egalitarian values, her name “Agar” stood out as one of the first examples of British surrealism in print materials.

**Autobiography of an Embryo**

In step with the British surrealists’ call for a creative intervention that stressed developing consciousness, the imagination, and desire, Agar’s paintings such as *The Autobiography of an Embryo* of 1933-34 were allegories for transformation and creative expression. As a close visual analysis will reveal, *The Autobiography of an Embryo* metaphorically links artistic production to the eggs, sperm, and cell division of human reproduction, and sets human pro/creativity with and against nature. In fact, one could posit that rather than economic justice, Agar focused on the elementary division of labor associated with human procreation (man implants sperm and woman carries child to term and nurses) and creative production (the embryo creates a biography of itself).

Agar’s interest in human reproduction can be construed as Marxist only in that it relates thematically to the ideas about human procreation and the early stages of human development expressed by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in “The German Ideology.” That essay established the premises for their new materialist philosophy and empiricist view of human development, world history, and human consciousness. The link between Agar’s art and Marxism pertains only to the subject matter of human production as an elemental form of labor. Agar never espoused Marx’s political views. Whereas Marx and Engels
argued in this early essay that history and philosophy were rooted in the production of material life, Agar as a humanist simply believed that “Whatever you are going to do, you should do it here, on this planet, now.” Moreover, she veered from a strictly materialist view of history or human development in stating, “It is literally fatal to reduce a thing to a fact alone, for the imagination must have room to stretch. ...And dreams reveal more of reality than science ever could.” As a surrealist, she proclaimed, “The surrealists have seen that the universe is at root a magical illusion, a strange mysterious fabulous game and that is how they play it.”

In contrast to Agar, for Marx, human development was conditioned by the needs of material production and evolved from the primal division of labor associated with the reproducing family to the increasing division of labor associated with more complex “forms of ownership.” Material history rested on the fact that to make history at all, humans had to provide for their basic needs of food, shelter, and clothing. Human procreation and maintaining the social relations of the family were necessary for producing the means to meet these basic needs. Once met, those basic needs drove expanded needs and new social relations to which family relations were subordinated. Marx saw the production of these new needs, not the formation of the family, as the first historical act; whereas Agar saw the formation of the family as a metaphor for the development of world cultures. For Marx, human propagation, meeting the basic needs of living, and the production of ever-greater needs are the “three ‘moments’ that have existed simultaneously since the dawn of history.” Thus, Agar’s paintings relate to Marx in that they present procreation and cultural production as primal human activities that occur within the context of nature. Along with plants, animals, and objects from nature, she referenced a range of abstract and
iconic symbols of human expression from a wide range of ancient and modern cultures. In this sense, creativity is presented in Agar’s artworks as a timeless human trait, harnessed by cultural groups both within and beyond the British Empire.

*The Autobiography of an Embryo*, measuring three feet by seven feet, celebrates the symbiotic and sometimes antagonistic engagement of nature and humanity over time and across cultures with an abundance of abstract forms, plant and animal motifs, human figures, and symbols of artistic production, technology, and military affiliation. Reading the painting from left to right, the first of four vertical sections holds a highly decorated African tribesman standing in profile and presenting Agar’s signature, along with another African-like figure facing the viewer before a mountainous landscape. This first section also contains a human hand, an apparently ancient figurative statue with a wide torso, as well as abstract forms that suggest angelfish and possibly dividing cells. The second or center left panel includes a series of busts and standing figures with various African, Jewish, and classical traits, along with a series of circular forms that resemble a small Royal Air Force (R.A.F.) target, a larger color wheel, and a painter’s palette. Indicative of Agar’s interest in fish and sea creatures, this center left panel also holds a starfish, as well as a variety of linear patterns, some geometric and others biomorphic. Flight is suggested as the primary theme of the next or third panel due to a large white bird, a separate set of bird wings, and another R.A.F. emblem. Apart from flight, this panel depicts three grounded sculptures—a profile bust and two standing statues based on ancient Mesopotamian and classical forms. All four panels hold gunmetal gray gear-like forms. The painting’s two right panels are filled with more circular forms than in the left panels, suggesting increasing complexity or some kind of cell division as one reads the painting from left to right. For example, in the
left-most panel, there is only one circular form outlined strongly in black. In the next panel, it appears to have divided into two cells, which are stacked on one another. The third panel contains three sets of circular cells, which seem to be dividing on a vertical axis. The far right or final panel holds gearshifts, a tripartite circular cell that might represent a set of three microscope lenses, and another dark circle with four internal rounded forms. The crisp edges of those rounded forms suggest icons of industry and science; however, the panel also contains two standing figures from antiquity and a roughly drawn profile-view line figure that could be from the Maasai tribe (Figure 2.5). These older and more loosely rendered figures undercut the notion that the painting’s rectangular sections, read from left to right, serve as an allegory for the advancement of science.

Agar’s playful blending of sources fit with Peter Bürger’s theory that avant-garde works of art—surrealist works in particular—eschew notions of work and instead playfully embrace chance as “something like an objective meaning.” Bürger considers chance, disunity, and play as defining characteristics of avant-garde art, all of which were important to Agar as an artist. In Autobiography of an Embryo, Agar flirted with disunity by combining abstract and representational elements and by bringing together disparate iconographic and stylistic elements into a single painting; yet contrary to Bürger’s theory, she remained committed to the visual unity of the painting’s disparate elements. She organized the painting into four sections of roughly equal size and shape. The four sections are united by circular forms that are repeated in all of the panels and by two yellow lines, which undulate across the top and bottom of the picture plane. A photograph of an early state of the painting shows that these abstract geometric shapes formed the basis of the composition, with a range of disparate symbolic elements painted in later (Figure 2.6). The
painting contains no collaged elements; yet Agar has created a pastiche of natural and cultural symbols to suggest her collage practice that for her was “a form of inspired correction, a displacement of the banal by the fertile intervention of chance or coincidence.”

Her unexpected combination of images and signs was also similar to her collection of found objects and bric-a-brac in her home and to Penrose’s collection of tribal art and curiosities that he freely combined with contemporary art “in the archetypal, deliberately provocative Surrealist manner.” She likened her approach to nature to that of Yves Tanguy, whose paintings derived from his imagination along with references to tiny marine creatures, seaweed, and rocks he found as a beachcomber. As she stated:

I adopt a similar approach, though at the same time, abstraction would also be exerting its influence upon me, giving me the benefit of geometry and design to match and balance and strengthen the imaginative elements of a composition. Outer eye and inner eye, backward and forward, inside out and upside down, sideways, as a metaphysical aeroplane might go, no longer classical or romantic, medieval or gothic, but surreal, transcendent, a revelation of what is concealed in the hide-and-seek of life, a mixture of laughter, play and perseverance.

Agar found it “dull to live in a standardized world,” and she embraced Breton’s acceptance of abstraction “as something strange and new.” She distinguished surrealism’s more playful approach to abstraction from Ben Nicholson’s “puritanical” and “tight formula” for modern abstract form. In contrast to Nicholson’s modernist abstractions, she celebrated the ways in which the surrealists “were opening up a new approach to art which would indeed stir sluggish minds.” Her approach to abstraction was in line with Bürger’s argument that avant-garde artists such as the surrealists used play to question the autonomy and the unity of bourgeois works of art (classical art and more mainstream modernism) in their attempt to restore the stale institution of art to the praxis of material life. Agar believed that surrealism’s resistance to established visual traditions
complemented the surrealists’ insistence on rebellion against “the conventions of reality.”\textsuperscript{188} She saw her work and life inextricably woven together—“My home...was a work of art in itself, my paintings at that time [1936] were only part of an immense pattern of fantastic bric-a-brac amongst which I lived and worked.”\textsuperscript{189} By combining ancient and modern symbols in \textit{Autobiography of an Embryo}, sometimes even in a single figure, she hoped to transcend their defining limitations to form a new surrealist lexicon that might break down distinctions between past and present, nature and culture, and in Agar’s words, “outer eye and inner eye.” By this expression, she meant the inner eye of the artist’s imagination and the artist’s outer eye of observation. She was invested in revealing the ruptures and unexpected correspondences between the forms developed by various world cultures, between science and nature, between natural and human-made forms, and between land, sea, and air.

While she and other members of the British group might seem traditional for incorporating longstanding artistic conventions into their work (classical or romantic, medieval or gothic), she thought of herself as avant-garde, and her irreverent disregard for a single unifying style is a distinctly avant-garde approach to art making as Bürger has theorized.\textsuperscript{190} Thin columnar forms divide the sections in the early state of the painting. In the completed version, a blue sperm-like form makes its way up each column to a winged putto, as if to suggest the creative forces of today might someday grow to hold the power of classical antiquity and renaissance art \textbf{(Figure 2.7)}. In addition to putti, Agar painted images of robed statues reminiscent of a \textit{Draped Standing Youth} from Rhodes (c. 550 BCE) in the three right sections of the painting \textbf{(Figure 2.8)}. The British Museum collection held the \textit{Draped Standing Youth} and hundreds of other artifacts readily available to Agar, who
had developed an interest in the subjects and symbols of antiquity from her husband. Bard’s literary and antiquary knowledge opened up the classical world to her and inspired her art. Likewise, in the third section of the painting, Agar included a standing figure similar to votive figures from Ishnunna, Iraq (c. 2750-2600 BCE) and the Temple of Nabu at Nimrud, Iraq (c. 810-800 BCE), both in the British Museum collection (Figure 2.9). More recent references were equally important to Agar. Her friend and collaborator Lambirth has likened a figure in the upper right of the first section of Autobiography of an Embryo to Alfred Jarry’s 1896 illustration of Père Ubu, an infantile male protagonist in a series of scatological and absurdist plays written by Jarry and celebrated by the French surrealists for their harsh critique of societal values and power relations (Figure 2.10). However, as Lambirth has acknowledged, Agar’s Ubu-like figure with a bell-shaped dress bears female breasts (Figure 2.11). In addition to referencing Jarry’s vulgar Ubu, Agar’s figure appears to be modeled after ancient pottery statues. Three types of artifacts in the British Museum collections share the elongated neck, small pinched nose, and pointed breasts of Agar’s Ubu figure, but none closely resembles it. Perhaps derived from artworks seen on her visits to the museum, Agar’s androgynous Ubu is reminiscent of Middle Minoan votive figures, the heads and upper bodies of Base-Ring II Ware from Cyprus (c. 1450-1200 B.C.E.), and a clay Vessel Figure made in the Iron Age in the area that covers north west Iran. While there is no evidence that she was aware of these particular figures at the British Museum, several examples existed in the museum’s collection in the thirties. Referencing Bard’s influence on her choices as an artist, Agar noted, “I found that classical motifs added a new time-dimension to my images, as well as a series of cultural cross-references.” By extending the temporal and cultural dimensions of her work, she was able to stress both
the universality and the variability of creative expression, thus driving home the basic human need for it, and drawing attention to the fact that a wide range of people’s freedom of expression was severely compromised across the world in the thirties—from Britain’s colonies to fascist controlled countries and the Soviet Union under Stalin’s rule.

Agar brought in a contemporary reference to the second section of *Autobiography of an Embryo*—an old dark-skinned person wearing a white turban and dress—to engage the relations between humans and nature (Figure 2.12). Whether Agar intended it or not, in early 1934 when she completed the painting, this figure that appears more male than female, yet remains gender ambiguous, would have suggested a follower of the indigenous *Watu Wa Muungu* (Akorino) religion to anyone knowledgeable of Kenya at that time. There were a series of articles in the London *Times* about the Akorinos’ disputes with the colonial authorities. The Akorino religion was founded as a pacifist movement by a group of Kikuyu people in Kenya to stand against British colonial oppression and the Western missions’ prohibition of ceremonial female circumcision in the mid-nineteen twenties, about the same time as the surrealist movement was founded in Paris. The parallels between the history and interests of the surrealists and the Akorino would have made the Akorino a likely subject for Agar, although she never identified the figure as such. Male and female adherents wore white turbans and robes during religious ceremonies in 1934 as they do now (Figure 2.13). Considered peaceful visionaries by Jomo Kenyatta, who later became the first independent president of Kenya, yet disparaged by colonial administrators as violent and subversive false prophets, the Akorino have been known by outsiders as *aroti* or visionary dreamers from their group’s founding to the present day.194 Any associations to the nascent Akorino religion, made by Agar or by the painting’s viewers, would have
provided an anti-colonialist dimension to Agar's embryonic and surrealist themes. In early
1934, the Akorinos' propensity to roar like lions and leopards from the tops of hillsides, to
tremble with strong emotion, and to hide caches of spears and poisoned war arrows from
the colonial administration were presented by the London Times Kenyan correspondent as
examples of the religious frenzy spreading among the native population.\textsuperscript{195} The Akorino
were described in the Times as integrally connected to nature, as a people deeply
committed to their internal beliefs, and as adversaries to the modern ways of the colonial
government. Around the same time that Agar was completing \textit{Autobiography of an Embryo},
British soldiers shot three Akorino leaders, beginning a long period of intense persecution
of the religious sect by the colonial government.\textsuperscript{196} The brutal murder by the colonial
authorities was reported twice in the London Times. Initially, it was considered a justifiable
use of force by colonial authorities to quell violent native subversives.\textsuperscript{197} A few weeks later,
the Kenyan correspondent corrected his account of the killing as the mistaken murder of a
group of religious tribal leaders who had gone into the forest to pray, not to commit
criminal acts as the authorities had alleged.\textsuperscript{198} Historically, the Akorino have refused to
testify in court, preferring jail time as a means of breaking the cycle of colonial injustice.
They have also advocated abolishing dowries and the private ownership of lands. Their
reputation as dreamers and their history as persecuted non-violent defenders of
indigenous rights in colonial Kenya fit with the transformative social politics of the British
surrealists. Related to her theme of human culture and its relations to nature, anyone
aware of the Akorino's political struggle might read this turbaned African figure as an icon
of the newly formed indigenous group in Africa.
Two adjacent images offer further evidence that Agar carried her interest in African culture from an earlier series of drawings into *Autobiography of an Embryo*. Just below the turbaned man, there is a figure that looks much like the Jewish patriarch of Agar’s *Family Trio* drawings of 1931 to 1934 (*Figure 2.14*). That figure also bears a resemblance to Kenyatta in his ceremonial African dress as the first Kenyan president (*Figure 2.15*), as well as to Père Ubu as Lambirth has suggested. While these references are so multivalent that it is difficult to attribute any definitive meaning to the figure, Agar made clear that she preferred fusing sources for her images, and that she appreciated the opportunities such melding allowed for viewers to bring their own meaning to a work of art.199 To the left of this Jewish-Ubu-Kenyatta patriarch, another male figure stands in a landscape in the first section of the painting. This lone male is painted in black and white and appears to be translucent, thus blending into the grassland scene behind him. He wears something like a fan-shaped Kikuyu headdress (*Figure 2.16*) and seems to be at one with the land given his semi-transparent body that melds with the rolling hills. In the upper left corner of the same section of the painting, there is another figure standing in profile. This figure is so abstracted that it appears androgynous and barely human; however, the head is bald to suggest a male. He is draped in patterned robes that look much like the leopard skins of Kenyatta’s ceremonial dress, and he holds a banner on which Agar has painted her signature. It is as if he is ushering in the subjects of the painting to be read by the viewer from left to right. His gestures and the signature banner draw attention to Agar’s role as the initial arbiter of the painting’s meaning, even though she encouraged viewers to draw their own meaning from the many disparate and ambiguous icons depicted within it.200
Agar put roughly equal emphasis on nature and culture in *Autobiography of an Embryo*. She treated nature, humankind, and myriad forms of cultural production on equal terms, even if they sometimes came into conflict with one another. Speaking in general terms about her aspirations as an artist, she summarized her primary motivations for presenting a plethora of varied themes:

One should be able, ideally, to make paintings which throw off imagery of different kinds at different times to different people, continually unfolding different aspects of themselves, ambiguous and paradoxical paintings with no main ‘theme’, but from which the spectator may, by participation, extract his own images. I used natural elements (the sea and sky, fish, birds, trees and leaves, landscape) to establish the context of nature, and then figures or technological artefacts (a bridge or an aeroplane) to bring out the dialogue. Mankind as a party of nature; the individual who pits himself or herself against our mass-media society; mankind outside nature. Increasingly this was the underlying subject of my work.201

Throughout her career as an artist, she combined classical and ancient motifs with both real carcasses and painted images of sea animals and other life forms that caught her interest. As she explained in her memoir, the natural forms found in *Autobiography of an Embryo*, such as angelfish in the first two sections and the mantle of a squid in the fourth section of the painting, were meant to establish the context of nature. They function as natural subjects, but they also provide a context for humanity. In the third panel, there is a white bird form, reminiscent of the Archaeopteryx exhibit in the Gallery of Paleontology and Comparative Anatomy at the *Jardin des Plantes* in Paris (Figure 2.17). While living in the Rue Schoelcher in Montparnasse from 1928 to 1930, Agar frequented the Gallery. Of all the exhibits there, she was most drawn to Archaeopteryx, the oldest bird from the late Jurassic period.202 She was most fascinated with its bone structure, and as the first known bird, Archaeopteryx fits well with her embryonic theme. The bird had teeth, amphibious scales as well as feathers, claws at the ends of its wings, and a bony tail in addition to its
bird-like hollow bones. Given her desire to play with paradoxical and ambiguous images, she must have also appreciated the ways in which Archaeopteryx, about the size of a large crow, shared characteristics with land-based dinosaurs. Perhaps Archaeopteryx’s affinity for eating starfish and fish also attracted Agar. Given her penchant for mixing sources for a single image, her white abstract bird that might be an Archaeopteryx, with lines circling its neck and radiating down its body, also shares formal characteristics with a painted pottery duck from Cyprus, c. 600-450 BCE (Figure 2.18), which came into the British Museums collections in 1894. These associations to past animals and cultures as well as present experiences remain ambiguous in Agar’s artworks, and she meant for the ambiguity to add to the painting’s surrealist meaning by suggesting transmutation and the flux of dialectical forces. However, despite her hope that spectators would extract their own set of meanings from the mixed symbols she presented, the ambiguity of her images had the potential for confusing many viewers, leaving them clueless as to her subtle subversions of staid convention.

To hold the painting together as a single visual experience, Agar unified the composition of Autobiography of an Embryo and strengthened the connections between her imaginative elements with a series of abstract black circles and rings that reflect the structure of animal and human forms—eyes and eggs in particular. In both the exhibit of Archaeopteryx in Paris and the ancient pottery shard of a duck from Cyprus, the eye of the bird attracts attention as a singular round and vivid form. Likewise, in the Gallery of Paleontology and Comparative Anatomy at the Jardin des Plantes, the eye and nose sockets of the myriad skeletal displays stand out as striking black holes, unifying the exhibits and drawing attention to a common structural element among many species (Figure 2.19).
Perhaps this visual effect was obvious to Agar on her numerous visits to the galleries and affected her choice to unify the composition of *Autobiography of an Embryo* with black circles, sometimes appearing as abstract black forms, and in other places as the black eye of the bird, the black eyes of abstracted white and pink seahorse forms, or the eyes of human figures.

As early as 1927-1928, Agar was influenced by W. B. Yeats’ advice “that a painter should aim for clarity, structure and vital energy.” According to Ann Simpson, during Agar’s stay in Portofino, Italy with Yeats during that winter, Agar made notes on her theories as an artist, remarking that “the painter must be a philosopher of the eye, with aspirations to create epic works of universal rather than local interest.” Rather than taking any strong political position—Marxist or otherwise—Agar quoted Johann Wolfgang von Goethe on the need to find matter into which to breathe your spirit, and she emphasized the importance of symbols in her work.

Agar remarked on the muted colors and beauty of the fossils that she saw at the *Jardin des Plantes*. Echoing the embryonic theme of her painting, she felt they “reach us as signals in time, isolated objects which take on the importance of a problem resolved at some moment far back beyond the mists of human memory.” She attributed her knowledge of animal structure to her study of the fossils in Paris; and from that experience, she turned her attention to the structure of the human body. At this time she sought out Foltyn as a teacher because of his shared interest in developing abstract compositions to symbolize the underlying structure of living forms.

Agar combined landscapes, living figures, and machine forms in paintings such as *Autobiography of an Embryo* to iterate the three types of relations between humanity and
nature that interested her: humanity at one with nature; the expressive individual pitted against mass-media society; and human experience removed from nature. In each of the painting’s four sections, human and animal forms combine in compositions structured around a series of black rings, circles, and rectangles, in addition to blue-gray gears that read like the cogs and wheels of Charlie Chaplin’s film, *Modern Times*, of 1936. While Agar foregoes Chaplin’s humor, like Chaplin she seems to have included the gears to set the creative impulses of the individual against the alienation that comes with uniform mass production. Apart from the gears that unify the four sections, what appear to be a factory with a smoke stack in the upper right of the second section, and two R.A.F. insignia, there are no other historically grounded symbols of mass-media society or mass culture in *Autobiography of an Embryo*. Instead, Agar focuses on the expressive individual pitted against mass culture. In her painting, meant to be read from left to right, a single upraised hand appears in the lower right corner of the first section, perhaps to either signify Agar’s artistic hand, to announce a generic human hand of any individual, or to present an iteration of the assembly *Hand of Fate* that she posed with circa 1936 (*Figure 2.20*). Regardless, the hand represents a human tool of fine motor skill and is animal-like, in contrast to the mechanization of mass-production. As Lambirth has observed, the hand in this painting prefigures a hand motif found in a smaller portrait titled *Head by Agar* in 1939. Four hands also appear in Agar’s multi-media and partly automatic painting of 1938, *The Battle Cry (Bullet-proof Painting)* (*Figure 2.21*) that seems to be related to Picasso’s *Guernica*, exhibited in London in late 1938 and early 1939. As a mark of individual human expression, Agar included another more direct reference to her studio practice in *Autobiography of an Embryo*. In the upper central black circle of the second section of the
painting, she painted a palette with circular blotches representing the hues of the spectrum. Around 1936, to reference her profession as a painter and her political interest in artistic expression, she collaged a similar palette motif onto the interior of an artist portfolio (Figure 2.22). That palette is accompanied by a cutout image of a blue bird and an abstract drawing in the style of Foltyn from one of Agar’s sketchbooks, and the exterior of the portfolio is collaged with the logo design from the leftist magazine, *Left Review*.

Some viewers might read the blue, white, and red British R.A.F. emblems that Agar included in the second and third sections of *Autobiography of an Embryo* as removed from nature. The circular targets were painted on R.A.F. fighter planes, including de Havilland DH82 Tiger Moth Biplanes (Figure 2.23) produced from 1931 to 1944 and first in service in 1932. Contemporary viewers would have readily associated the emblems in Agar’s painting with the new aircraft and Britain’s military power in general—used to maintain control over British colonial territories and so far held at bay in the fight against fascism. The same bulls-eye emblems appear with dismembered hands in Agar’s *The Battle Cry (Bullet-proof Painting)* of 1938. That automatic painting of melted lead and disjointed images was meant to evoke the atmosphere surrounding the Spanish Civil War.211

Counter to military emblems that have long been associated with masculinity, as Lambirth and Simpson have pointed out, Agar developed a symbolic language based on female intuition in her efforts to subvert rationality.212 In *Autobiography of an Embryo* and other works, Agar wanted to hold reason and unreason in dialectal “counterplay,” “freeing the human mind from overdoses of common sense” and “opening hilarious new avenues to free thought.”213 The male surrealists were just as interested in the dialectical synthesis of irrationality and rationality, and in freeing the mind from common sense with humor, yet
she maintained that imagination, irrationality, creativity, and intuition were feminine concerns. Her colleague John Banting saw the beachcombing habits adopted by Agar, Nash, and Ernst as a novel way to surmount rationality with irrationality:

The sense of the marvelous—and wonder of everything and found objects were collected such as wood, gloves or bones washed up and transformed by the sea’s constant movement. Beachcombing became inspired. The finding took the place of man made ornaments and one had to go half way to meet their different qualities which were not always at all ornamental but frantically and sanely irrational. It was a gesture against over professionalism and things contrived.214

Agar somewhat jokingly compared the symbolism she was able to conjure with natural objects with religious experience, and she associated both surrealism and her pull as a woman toward celestial bodies—the earth, sun and moon—with the sway of “womb-magic” in the fourth and final issue of The Island, a magazine she founded in 1931 in association with Bard and her painting instructor Underwood. She contributed an essay, “Religion and the Artistic Imagination,” to The Island in which she elaborated on her belief that the imagination and unconscious celebrated by surrealism were dominated by feminine energy, whereas militarism and rationality were male:

As an artist, the Earth, the Sun and the Moon have a greater significance for me than the highly rarefied idea of the Holy Trinity. For natural symbolism has a greater emotional appeal to a woman than has religious mysticism. ...In Europe, the importance of the unconscious in all forms of Literature and Art establishes the dominance of a feminine type of imagination over the classical and more masculine order. Apart from rampant and hysterical militarism, there is no male element left in Europe, for the intellectual and rational conception of life has given way to a more miraculous creative interpretation, and artistic and imaginative life is under the sway of womb-magic.215

From this playful and evocative quote, Agar appears to support the view that women were the rightful muses of surrealism, the primary force in establishing the dominance of the unconscious in European art and literature. Yet ironically, her primary muses were Bard,
from whom she gained an appreciation for classical literature and art, and Nash, with whom she combed beaches, took photographs, and assembled found objects from nature. In the manuscript prepared for an undated lecture presentation with Agar, Lambirth even went so far as to say that when she wrote the quote above in 1931, “Agar invented her own brand of Surrealism, this ‘miraculous creative interpretation’ she called ‘womb-magic’.”216 For Lambirth, *Autobiography of an Embryo* was a masterpiece of Agar’s “womb-magic” surrealism—even though it was completed two years before she was enlisted into the surrealist group—because of its focus on “the eternal cycle of renewal, apparently following the conception of a child, but opening up the subject to embrace and celebrate the whole of life. From amoeba to birds, from fish to plants to figures, from earth mother to Greek sculpture to Egyptian deity—the allusions are generalized but all-embracing.”217

The meager exhibition history and lackluster reception of *Autobiography of an Embryo* were perhaps due to its combination of disparate abstract and figurative forms, its avant-garde composition that flirted with disunity, and its racial complexion. There is little evidence to explain why it was only exhibited once—at the Royal Institute Galleries in the *Ninth Exhibition of the National Society of Painters, Sculptors, Engravers, and Potters*, 11 February to 4 March, 1938—an inconsequential group exhibition that received virtually no attention in the press. Nor is there any evidence why afterward Agar would have tucked it away in her attic for over forty years. Lambirth characterized the painting as “Agar’s undisputed early masterpiece,” and he was dismayed that she had dismissed its importance.218 He too was at a loss for why it was not exhibited in 1936. As he surmised, either she chose not to present the painting to Read and Penrose when they visited her studio to select works for the 1936 International Surrealist Exhibition, or it was judged by
them to be too large or not surrealist enough for that blockbuster exhibition.\textsuperscript{219} Lambirth did not substantiate why the painting might fail to meet surrealist criteria. Another explanation might be that viewers in the mid-thirties could easily spot the womb magic, Pan-African references, and nods to British militarism that were evident in the painting. Agar may have relegated the painting to her attic because it never received much attention in the thirties and she came to doubt its importance.\textsuperscript{220} In 1987, without Lambirth’s encouragement to bring it out, he believes Agar would have kept it hidden, and she even considered cutting it in half so that it would fit into her new flat. It was only at Lambirth’s insistence that Agar showed it to her dealers who gave it center stage at her retrospective at Birch and Conran Fine Art, in Deane Street, Soho. From that 1987 retrospective exhibition, the Tate Gallery purchased the painting. After the Tate’s affirmation, she came to acknowledge it as her best artwork in the national collection.\textsuperscript{221}

\textit{Angel of Anarchy}

For the British surrealists such as Agar, cultural expression was to be set free, and not manipulated or controlled as part of a larger program of Stalinist or fascist oppression. Freedom of expression was at the root of Breton and Rivera’s manifesto, “Towards an INDEPENDENT Revolutionary Art,” arguably one of the most important documents associated with twentieth century art. That now famous \textit{cri de coeur} called for founding an international association—the International Federation of Independent Revolutionary Art or I.F.I.R.A.—to be composed of like-minded intellectuals and artists to protect creative freedom in the face of totalitarianism. The manifesto was drafted on 25 July 1938 in diatribe against Stalin as the enemy of true communists and against “Hitlerian Fascism.”\textsuperscript{222}
In opposition to Stalin and Hitler, Breton and Rivera proclaimed that individual artistic statements were needed to produce objective improvements in collective society: “An artists’ [sic] opposition is one of the forces today that can usefully contribute to discredit and ruin regimes which disfigure, at the same time, the right of an exploited class to aspire to a better world, every sentiment of greatness, and human dignity itself.”

Mesens, eager to promote these ideals for artistic action and to form a British section of the I.F.I.R.A., printed the original French manifesto in the London Bulletin in November 1938 and published the first English translation of the manifesto in the following December/January issue (Figure 2.24). A full page spread, pairing a photograph of Agar’s Angel of Anarchy of 1934-36 with a photographic portrait of Read and his young son, appeared just a few pages before that English translation (Figure 2.1).

The manifesto emphasized, as much as Agar asserted in her own writings in the early 1930s and in her memoir of 1988, that many forms of intellectual discovery that grew from the work of individuals relied on rare chance and developed out of spontaneous necessity. As Breton and Rivera stated it:

In so far as it preserves an individual character at the time of its birth, in so far as it displays subjective qualities in order to produce a certain result leading to an objective enrichment, a philosophical, sociological, scientific or artistic discovery appears as the fruit of a rare chance, that is, as a more or less spontaneous manifestation of necessity. ...True art—that which is not satisfied with variations of ready-made models but which endeavours to give expression to the inner needs of present-day man and humanity—cannot help but be revolutionary, that is, it cannot help but aspire to a complete and radical reconstruction of society if only to free intellectual creativeness from its shackles and to allow the whole of humanity to rise to heights which only geniuses have scaled in the past.

They demanded that these tenets of creative freedom be respected the world over. Agar certainly read their manifesto, and Mesens presented her Angel of Anarchy of 1934-36 to
readers of the *London Bulletin* to promote the British group’s shared principles for an independent revolutionary art. However, when looking back on her career as an artist, Agar did not link her reliance on chance—when combining symbols in her work or finding objects when she beachcombed—to a political position *per se*, even though she considered it a positive force and believed it was fed by the open attitude promoted by Breton and Rivera:

> You see the shape of a tree, the way a pebble falls or is formed, and you are astounded to discover that dumb nature makes an effort to speak to you, to give you a sign, to warn you, to symbolise your innermost thoughts. Chance is not a neutral but a distinctly positive force; the Surrealists believe that you can get on good terms with chance by adopting a lyrical mode of behaviour and an open attitude.\(^{227}\)

As this quote from her memoir shows, Agar associated chance more acutely with her perception of nature and its influence on her art, than with any political demand for creative freedom.

She in part chose the title *Angel of Anarchy* for its playful and positive associations with political anarchy, yet she developed the material sculpture around formal considerations, not its symbolic message.\(^{228}\) Agar’s initial version of *Angel of Anarchy* that was reproduced in the *London Bulletin* was covered in black Astrakhan fur, white doilies, and some green feathers over the forehead to enliven the dead white plaster.\(^{229}\) On first glance these disparate materials seem to have been assembled by mere chance, and the unlikeliness of their assembly increases the affective power of the object. As Breton and Rivera encouraged, Agar’s “artistic discovery appears as the fruit of a rare chance,” and therefore the bust seems to be a “spontaneous manifestation of necessity.” It is the appearance that chance is operating that might give viewers the impression that the *Angel of Anarchy* was percolating up from the public consciousness through Agar’s hands. Her
bust appears to be rising from the inner needs of humanity, and Agar humbly contributes to the “radical reconstruction of society” only in so much as she frees “intellectual creativeness from its shackles.” In reality, however, Agar chose the fur for Angel of Anarchy as a way to accentuate the contours of the bust with black shadows, and she attached the doilies to add texture to the smooth white surface. As Lambirth has pointed out, Agar’s title for the bust was nothing more than a nod to Herbert Read’s anarchist position as the leader of the British surrealists. Her title most likely contributed to Mesens’ decision to position Angel of Anarchy next to the photograph of Read and his son in the London Bulletin. Even though the British group could not settle on a strictly communist course for their reform, Read’s anarchic leanings fit with Breton and Rivera’s proposal that in the new Socialist State, even a centralized one, the sphere of intellectual creation should be set up and maintained as an “anarchist regime of individual freedom.” In other words, they were arguing that even in a centralized communist state such as Russia, it might be possible to maintain a creative realm that was completely free from interference by the state. As Agar noted in her autobiography, anarchy was in the air in 1937 due to the Spanish Civil War, and she referred to the republicans as revolutionary angels. That larger-than-life-size cast was last exhibited in Amsterdam earlier in 1938 before it mysteriously disappeared. It was the second of four busts produced by Agar from 1934 to 1940—the first two cast from a portrait made by Agar of her husband Bard (Figure 2.25).

Apart from the political veneer that she attributed to the bust in association with Read and the Spanish republicans, Agar questioned the Western tradition of presenting portrait busts as either male or female. The gender of Agar’s Angel of Anarchy I is indecipherable—just as it is in her earlier bust Angel of Mercy begun in 1934, her more
raucous Rococo Cocotte of c. 1937, and the second smaller version of Angel of Anarchy (II) completed in the late thirties. She never intended for the bust shown in the London Bulletin to be a portrait of Read. Likewise, with the fabric adorning its surface, the humanity of the bust is emphasized over any racial characteristics. Although it was conceived from a portrait of Bard, and Nash mistakenly thought it might be a portrait of himself, some have assumed it to be a female bust, possibly of Agar, due to the pensive half shut eyes, soft rounded lips, and the feminine doilies, fur, and feathers adorning its surface.\(^{234}\) By keeping the race and the gender of the bust ambiguous, Agar was able to universalize the subtle cultural politics of Angel of Anarchy to all people.

**Agar as Producer**

Taking a different tack from the Russian constructivists whose mannequins and fashion designs contributed to mass production in the nineteen twenties, Agar playfully manipulated paint and canvas, photographs, and a host of natural and manufactured materials to create one-off objects that had nothing to do with assembly line production (Figure 2.26).\(^ {235} \) Doing so made apparent the non-alienated labor, creative exuberance, and connection to nature that she and the surrealists advocated for everyone. She joined other visual artists and poets to rally around the idea that anyone could be a poet with words, music, or images.\(^ {236} \) As she stated it, the surrealist “aim was to make a religion out of poetic inspiration.”\(^ {237} \) In their minds, anyone could make a poetic statement, regardless of their vocation or medium.\(^ {238} \)

In a lecture at the New Burlington Galleries in the summer of 1936 in association with the international surrealist exhibition in London, her close personal friend Éluard offered the exhibits, including Agar’s sculptural Object (that Agar reconfigured in 1936
from an old-fashioned carpet beater into two personages) and her oil painting *Quadriga* (1935), as proof that “Surrealism is a state of mind.” In the lecture, he elaborated on the characteristics of surrealist paintings such as Agar’s and on what set the surrealists apart from their critics:

... For a long time degraded to the status of scribes, painters used to copy apples and become virtuosos. ... But surrealist painters, who are poets, always think of something else. The unprecedented is familiar to them, premeditation unknown. ... They know that no description is adequate, that nothing can be reproduced literally. They are all animated by the same striving to liberate the vision, to unite imagination and nature, to consider all possibilities a reality, to prove to us that no dualism exists between the imagination and reality, that everything the human spirit can conceive and create springs from the same vein, is made of the same matter as his flesh and blood, and the world around him. ...

Those who come here to laugh or give vent to their indignation, those who, when confronted with surrealist poesy, either written or painted, talk of snobbism to hide their lack of understanding, their fear or their hatred, are like those who tortured Galileo, burned Rousseau’s books, defamed William Blake, condemned Baudelaire, Swinburne and Flaubert, declared that Goya or Courbet did not know how to paint, whistled down Wagner and Stravinsky, imprisoned Sade. They claim to be on the side of good sense, wisdom and order, the better to satisfy their ignoble appetites, exploit men, prevent them from liberating themselves—that they may the better degrade and destroy men by means of ignorance, poverty and war.

As Agar made clear throughout her writings about surrealism, and like her lover Éluard whom she characterized as a “living Eros,” she eschewed the tameness, pragmatism, and order demanded on all levels of British society. Even late in life, she affirmed that, “I agree wholeheartedly with the Surrealist belief that we must somehow avoid the constricting influence of too much accumulated civilization: we must indeed learn to breathe in a different way—too many have choked on the musty air of established culture.” As Éluard spelled out, and as was stated in the British group’s political statements, tameness, pragmatism, and order had perpetuated ignorance and misery, and led to workers’ exploitation and ultimately to war.
The surrealists offered up their poetic state of mind to encourage freedom and exuberance as a way out of the quagmire of staid convention. Agar saw her surrealist poetic objects and collages opening up the possibility to unlock “existing patterns of thought... through mistakes accidents or humour.” In photographs of Agar proudly wearing her playful Ceremonial Hat for Eating Bouillabaisse—fashioned in 1936 from a cork basket purchased in St. Tropez, painted pale blue and covered in fishnet along with seashells, a lobster tail, and starfishes—her body doubles as an artist-laborer and model, and she presents herself to the viewer as both the producer and subject of the artwork. Agar likened the hat to “a sort of Arcimboldo headgear for the fashion-conscious.” Lobsters had begun appearing in Salvador Dali’s work over the pudenda of nude female models and the mouthpieces of phones from 1934 onward, and Agar probably recognized the sexual connotations of the lobster tail sticking straight up on her hat like a male phallus. The photograph speaks as much about her prankster antics in creating and wearing the hat as it shows the material object itself. The silly absurdity of wearing a hat fashioned from a cork basket, smelly seaweed, and a real lobster tail at once ties her to nature, liberates her from convention, and unsettles her viewers’ expectations. In this way, Agar and her playful hat effectively “liberate the vision” of both artist and viewer, join the imagination to nature and reality, and open up “the gates of wonder” as Éluard demanded of surrealist art. As she summed it up herself, “To play is to yield oneself to a kind of magic, and to give the lie to the inconvenient world of fact, and the hideous edifice of unrelieved utility. In play the mind is prepared to accept the unimagined and incredible, to enter a world where different laws apply, to be free, unfettered, and divine.”
Following on the ground broken by designers such as Paul Poiret and artists such as Lyubov Popova, leaders in the fashion industry as well as fine artists in the nineteen thirties were eager to transgress the boundaries that separated their professions. As Nancy Troy has argued, Poiret profitably combined fashion and art in the teens to appeal to the rarified tastes of wealthy clients and to increase the prestige of his designs so that middle class buyers might also covet them. As Christina Kiaer has shown, Popova was successful in the twenties in designing inexpensive yet high quality fabrics and dresses “to democratize fashion and disseminate the creative technological forms of modernist art throughout everyday life” in the Soviet Union. Accepting Kiaer’s argument that Popova’s egalitarian approach to fashion held “utopian promise as a force of social change,” Popova’s designs offered a more viable example of how fashion might embody the surrealists’ Marxist aims. However, Poiret’s profitability would have been no less compelling to the British group whose leaders, despite their claims for social revolution, were heavily invested in selling surrealist artworks to wealthy patrons and London’s cultural elite, as well as stirring interest in the surrealist movement among the middle and working classes throughout England. More conventional leaders in both fields such as Coco Chanel saw art that masqueraded as fashion and fashion that verged on art as irksome and adventurous, yet not dangerous, forms of mutiny. Chanel derided her leading competitor Elsa Schiaparelli as “that Italian artist who makes clothes,” while Agar—a fashionista who made art—transgressed the same professional boundaries off the runway. Emphasizing the renegade status of merging art and fashion, Mesens selected a design by Ernst featuring two blinded fashion models—one female in a modernist pantsuit and wearing a flamboyant fan-shaped hat, and the other male in a primitive loincloth and ceremonial headdress—to
illustrate the title page of the English translation of *Towards an INDEPENDENT Revolutionary Art* (Figure 2.24). The fusion of fashion and art was a primary surrealist concern, and Mesens chose to capitalize on it more than once. In the very first number of the *London Gallery Bulletin*, printed in April 1938, women’s fashions embroidered with surrealist motifs by the Belgian designer “Norine” took center stage between mannequins designed by Dali and Ernst (Figure 2.27). Magritte and Ernst designed numerous graphics and appliqués for the couture house of “Norine.”

The frisky fur of *Angel of Anarchy*, the tongue-in-cheek humor of her *Ceremonial Hat*, and its renegade status as both art and fashion suggest contemporary hats conceived and worn by Schiaparelli (Figure 2.28). Like Agar, Schiaparelli liked to associate fashion with politics on a superficial level. In June of 1936, *Vogue* magazine published an “impossible interview” between Schiaparelli and Joseph Stalin, in which she taunted “the dictator about the increasing influence of fashion on Soviet women.” Over the span of her career, Schiaparelli was affiliated with the dadaists first in New York and the surrealists in Paris, especially Dali. She opened her millinery department in 1934, the year following her London Salon. Her 1937-38 Paris collection featured a *Shoe Hat* made of wool felt and silk velvet. The *Shoe Hat* was derived from a drawing by Dali, which he in turn fabricated from a 1933 photograph taken by his wife Gala of her husband wearing a women’s shoe on his head. Schiaparelli also designed an altogether new genre of garment—the dinner suit—that in one version featured red-lipped pockets very similar to Man Ray’s lips from *Observatory Time—The Lovers*, exhibited at the 1936 International Surrealist Exhibition in London.

Agar took pride in the elegance that she and the surrealist women cultivated in both their clothing and their surroundings. For example, Sheila Legge dressed in a white
evening gown, long black gloves, and a head of red roses, as the Surrealist Phantom in
Trafalgar Square, as part of a performance staged to open the International Surrealist
Exhibition in summer 1936 (Figure 2.29). In some cases the men were involved too.
During the opening ceremonies, Dali sported his Aphrodisiac Jacket, a dinner coat covered
in stemmed glasses filled with crème de menthe. In addition to her Hat for Eating
Bouillabaisse, Agar made a Glove Hat from straw and a pair of white leather gloves painted
with red fingernails from Schiaparelli’s August 1936 collection (Figure 2.30). Agar later
wore the gloves to the opening of the Surrealist Objects exhibit at the London Gallery at the
end of 1937. While she and her associates never considered that their interest in high
fashion might appear to be a capitulation to bourgeois interests or sexist values, some
critics interpreted their fashion consciousness that way—J. B. Priestley referred to the
surrealists as “greedy and slobbering sensation-seekers.”258 Agar surmised the surrealist
women’s focus on physical appearances was not pandering to male tastes, but directly
reflected the surrealist lifestyle. She much preferred dressing with panache to wearing
clothes spotted with paint like other women artists. That was wearing your art on your
sleeve, whereas Agar felt wearing “a Schiaparelli dress with outrageous behaviour or
conversation was simply carrying the beliefs of Surrealism into public existence.”259
Schiaparelli’s motto after all was “dare to be different.”260

Agar’s works yield an assertive image of woman as a cultural producer—not a
woman controlled with fetishistic delight or determination by a male artist, such as in the
images produced by her contemporaries Conroy Maddox, René Magritte, Hans Bellmer,
Dali, and Max Ernst. Agar’s female figures, including images of the artist herself, appear to
be in charge of their sexual energy. As can be seen in a photograph of Agar taken by her
husband while they were on holiday in Mougins, France in 1937 with Paul and Nusch Éluard, Lee Miller and Roland Penrose, Pablo Picasso and Dora Maar, and Man Ray and his girlfriend Ady Fidelin; Agar yields a playful and sexually assertive image of woman (Figure 2.31). After a hectic night in a hotel room that was infested with bats, Bard captured the image of Agar semi-nude on a rooftop, with her curved breasts and pubic hair visible under a diaphanous ankle-length dress.261 According to Agar, during the previous night Bard had stood nude in the hotel room swatting away the bats with a newspaper, while she cowered under the covers. She characterized her rooftop dance as a dance of freedom. For a woman who came across to one critic as “an extremely well bred English lady,” her position with arms raised as if she is dancing barefoot on the inn’s rooftop is alone transgressive, and our ability to see her body under the translucent dress only adds to the subversive playfulness of the photograph.262 Her apparent joy emphasizes her freedom from the bats’ tyranny, her desire to skirt the cool reserve of English ladies of her social standing, and her collusion with Bard in producing a semi-pornographic image. Agar looks to the right and away from Bard, as if she is uninterested in his gaze on her body, yet her body presents itself fully for Bard’s and the viewer’s delectation. For Agar, the picture was as much about spreading her own wings after a somewhat terrifying night with the bats, and spreading her wings as a surrealist woman, as it was an erotic memento of a trip in the company of her husband and her new-found lover Éluard. Within the picture, Agar appears to be fully sexual, free and independent, and a cultural producer on her own terms. She is there for her male lovers’ adoration, but she is not their pawn. In contrast, the male surrealists, like Dali holding his own nude and decapitated female mannequin in front of other mannequins designed by Maurice Henry to the left and Man Ray to the right, gravitated to inanimate, controllable,
and sometimes misogynist female forms (Figure 2.32). Even in association with Schiaparelli, Dali wanted to appear as if he controlled the sexuality of the women he chose to depict (Figure 2.33). In this drawing over a photo by Horst P. Horst of a model wearing a necklace of casein plastic stars for Schiaparelli’s summer 1929 collection, Dali has enclosed the erotically charged, curvaceous body of the model in a skin-tight black devilfish suit of his own ink. It is as if he has encased her living flesh with his drawing. By comparison, Agar’s equally camp and irreverent bust, *Rococo Cocotte* (produced sometime around 1937 from an ordinary fashion display, and now destroyed), appears less controlled by Agar and bears signs of both male and female gender, with its sweeping black ostrich feather hair, black mustache, smooth white skin, and diamanté eyes (Figure 2.34). *Rococo Cocotte* is playful, and Agar does not pin down the sexuality of the bust or trap the figure in the way that Dali does.

Throughout her career, Agar presented herself as someone fully in control of both her artistic production and her sexual persona. For example, in 1936 Agar painted over a nude photograph of herself—a silver gelatin print taken by Bard—to create *Ladybird* (Figure 2.35). In the photograph, she holds up a clear plastic or cellophane sheet as if it is the two-dimensional surface of her art, literally stretched and manipulated by the artist. Her signature starfish and ladybird forms overshadow and enliven the sexualized image shot by Bard. She has also painted in a black hand. Pressing over her mouth and chin, it echoes her white living hands holding the translucent sheet. On the palm of the black hand, Agar has left unpainted an upturned arc to reveal her face underneath, creating a wry smile. Although her added elements have not obscured the fact that she is the subject of Bard’s photograph, her over painting emphasizes her role as the producer of the resulting
collage. She overwrites Bard's photograph, re-conceiving his portrait of her as a self-portrait of a woman artist. Her active transformation of Bard’s image can be contrasted to Magritte’s role as a male artist standing before his self-portrait in Tentative de l'impossible (Attempt at the Impossible) of 1928 (Figure 2.36). In this photograph, Magritte poses, palette in hand, in front of an earlier painting of himself painting a standing female nude. His position holding the palette in the photograph simulates and reinforces the creative act represented in his self-portrait. Though the title would suggest otherwise, the image implies that through his creative act, he might bring the woman to life for his own pleasure. However, while he is fully formed and animate as the artist in the painting, the female figure remains lifeless and incomplete. Magritte’s presentation in the foreground of the photograph brings life to the painter Magritte in the background. However, the photograph’s posed quality makes the repetition appear somewhat unnatural and forced. Like Agar, Magritte focuses the viewer’s attention on the creative act. Yet the ironic title of his painting draws out the impossibility of any male artist to bring to life the true essence of a woman or to fully control her as a sexual object. The photograph’s lack of candidness only reinforces this impossibility. In contrast, Agar is the artistic producer of Ladybird in association with Bard. At the same time, she is the sexual subject of her artwork, and she can know and speak of her sexuality in a way that her male counterparts cannot.

In making works such as Autobiography of an Embryo, Angel of Anarchy, Ceremonial Hat for Eating Bouillabaisse, and Ladybird, Agar held a tight reign on her artistic process by working alone or in intimate association with Bard or Nash. She also allowed intuitive associations to form in her art by chance. Her collages, nude photographs, and wearable art make evident the labor of the female artist (and her tools and products).
Cultural Production as a Political Cause

Agar was aware of the work of the Pan-African movement’s key proponents in London in the early thirties and included imagery that could be seen to reflect their cause in prints, drawings, and her largest painting, *The Autobiography of an Embryo*, completed in early 1934. For three reasons in the early thirties—mounting violence against blacks in Germany, disillusionment with the Soviet Communist Party as a vehicle for African independence from imperial rule, and racial discrimination in the United States—London and Paris became hubs for Pan-African intellectuals pressing a case for the independence of African nations from colonial rule and for the recognition of African culture independent of Western traditions. George Padmore, a leader of the Pan-Africanists in London, had been deported from Germany after fascist gangs raided the offices of the communist paper, *The Negro Worker*, in 1933. By February of 1934, Padmore had also severed his ties with the Soviet Comintern over their lack of support of African independence. He chose to settle in London in February 1934, about the same time that Agar was finishing *The Autobiography of an Embryo*. With connections made on his behalf by heiress Nancy Cunard, a good friend of Agar’s from finishing school and an activist against racism and fascism, Padmore was able to publish his book *How Britain Rules Africa* in 1936 with Wishart Limited, a liberal family owned press in London.263 Kenyatta, the first independent president of Kenya, also spent time in England from 1929 to 1931 writing letters to *The Times* and *Manchester Guardian* under the name of Johnstone Kenyatta in support of the Kikuyu people’s land claims against the British colonial administration in Kenya. In 1931, Kenyatta began associating with British communists, including Agar’s surrealist friends Banting and

Likewise, Paul Robeson, the legendary Harlem Renaissance singer, actor, and activist for anti-imperialism and civil rights, became a central figure in the London Pan-African circle. He performed as stevedore Joe in the London production of the musical *Show Boat* in 1928 and his rendition of “Ol’ Man River” came to define the song for British audiences. In 1933, Robeson had the leading role in the London performance of Eugene O’Neill’s play about miscegenation, *All God’s Chillun Got Wings*. Robeson and his wife settled in Hampstead in 1934 near Penrose and several other members of the surrealist group.

As the Pan-Africanists built their case in the early 1930s, Agar and Bard co-founded a small non-commercial magazine, *The Island*, devoted to the imagination, poetry, and the visual arts including art produced by the tribes of Africa.²⁶⁴ Ann Simpson has noted that one reviewer complained in 1931 that the illustrations in *The Island* “moved ‘in a negroid circle with an embryonic complex.’”²⁶⁵ As Simpson explains, this aptly described the primitive style of Underwood, the art director for the magazine and Agar’s teacher. The reviewer’s remarks could also have been a response to the primitive style and symbolic content of a line block print, *The Family Trio*, contributed by Agar to the September 1931 issue of *The Island* (*Figure 2.14*).²⁶⁶ According to Agar’s essay, “Religion and the Artistic Imagination,” written for the December issue of the magazine, the father, mother, and child of the trio form an allegory for three world cultures, rather than simply a family gathering of a post-natal mother, her child, and partner. As Agar explained, the stoic and sturdy male
adult figure in the engraving represented the older religion of Judaism that she linked to her husband Bard and the Russian temperament more generally; the central mother figure symbolized European Christianity; and the child was “the culture of the tribes of Africa as transposed to the New World.” Simpson and Lambirth have emphasized how the theme of “womb magic,” another topic of Agar’s essay on art and religion, permeates this work and Agar’s largest painting, *The Autobiography of an Embryo*. However, to focus exclusively on Agar’s interest in feminine womb magic, which was more glib than Simpson and Lambirth suggest, is to miss that Agar’s illustration is a part of a series of *Family Trio* works from the early thirties that focuses on the interrelationships between these three world cultures. Another example is a watercolor on paper from 1931, also titled *Family Trio* (Figure 2.37). In it, the abstract form of the mother’s breast appears to double as an infant’s head, signifying that she is breastfeeding her child in a tender and enveloping embrace. Although it might have been an unconscious decision, her depiction of a European mother suckling the African child only reinforces colonial stereotypes, as does her drawing of African culture as a child in other *Family Trio* pictures. The androgynous childlike figure to her right is modeled in charcoal black and appears to look up to his mother. His body is made of undulating lines and the bars of a musical score, emphasizing music as a key aspect of African culture. Her linkage of African art and music is also apparent in *The Wandering Minstrel*, oil on board painting, circa 1932 (Figure 2.38). Agar’s minstrel, though highly abstract, is an African male with a dark face and body, and nappy head of hair. His frontal body fills the space of the painting and his outstretched arms reach to the edges of the board. His body speaks as much of performance and dance as it does of song. In these works, she celebrates Jewish and African American culture at a time when fascist
movements across Europe were asserting the dominance of white Christian values. The quiet and nurturing power of the Christian European mother in Agar’s *Family Trio* series and Agar’s willful and commanding black minstrel stand serene in a period of fascist violence.

However, Agar’s maternal instincts and white privilege appear to have precluded an accurate understanding of the Pan-African cause. What Agar seems to have missed in relation to the Pan-African cause is that Robeson and others expressly wanted to disavow any notion that black culture emanated from European culture.\(^{260}\) As early as 1925, Robeson had stated that, “One of the great measures of a people is its culture. Above all things, we boast that the only true artistic contributions of America are Negro in origin. We boast of the culture of ancient Africa.”\(^{270}\) In 1933, Robeson spoke to London reporters about “Black Greatness,” declaring that rather than performing in Italian, French, or German, he would seek Russian or Asian roles, because according to current thought the history of his slave-ancestors was more related to the ancient cultures of the Orient than it was to European culture.\(^{271}\) To realize his claim, Robeson visited the U.S.S.R. in December 1934 on invitation from Sergei Eisenstein and with the encouragement of his British socialist and anti-imperialist friends.

In her writings, Agar also neglected to reference Carl Einstein’s ideas or examples of African art in *Negerplastik* of 1915, though she may have been familiar with Einstein given his personal connections to Picasso, and given Bard’s knowledge of German, interest in world cultures, and close associations within Berlin’s literary circles.\(^{272}\) Einstein, the first European critic to question Western prejudices and misunderstandings about the development of African art and to evaluate the formal linkages between cubism and African
sculpture, thoughtfully addressed the pure form and communicative self-sufficiency of African sculpture. Despite her apparent disregard or ignorance of Einstein’s work, Agar formed her own opinions about the strengths of African sculpture. In a section of an early draft of her autobiography that was later removed, she claimed African sculpture’s key strength was its dynamism:

The most fundamental quality in African sculpture is dynamism or force: the forces of the spirit, human, animal etc. not matter. Forces are always associated with a sense of vastness and infinity, of fear and astonishment. A sort of divine horror, the quality in works of art to which Burke gives the name sublime.\textsuperscript{273}

In light of this statement, it is likely that Agar included African figures in \textit{Autobiography of an Embryo} as part of a larger effort to elicit the spiritual forces of humans and animals that she associated with the sublime.

By 1936, much like Agar and Padmore, Robeson distanced himself from Soviet communism, choosing to express his desire for social change through his artistic craft rather than political means. Along with Agar, Penrose, Einstein, and many others, he became a committed activist in the struggle against fascism in the Spanish Civil War in 1937.\textsuperscript{274} In fact, Robeson was the lead attraction for a rally and auction “Spain and Culture” that Penrose organized for the A.I.A. and the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief on 24 June 1937 in London’s Royal Albert Hall to support refugee Basque children. Many artists, most likely including Agar, attended the event in hopes of seeing Picasso and hearing a special radio transmission from Robeson in Moscow.\textsuperscript{275} However, Picasso remained in Paris to complete \textit{Guernica}, and Robeson flew back to England to personally appear “to a tumultuous reception.”\textsuperscript{276}
From 1937 to 1939, artistic labor grew increasingly important as an issue for the British surrealists, as well as members of the Pan-African circle, due to the continuing economic crisis at home and the British government’s refusal to intervene against Hitler or to support the Spanish Republicans. Hitler’s cultural program severely limited the capacity of modern artists to produce, own, and sell their art in Nazi occupied states. Padmore had been expelled from Germany in this purge. Agar and her surrealist friends feted Walter Gropius, Marcel Breuer, and Moholy-Nagy as they passed through London from Germany on the way to the United States.\textsuperscript{277} The surrealists and other groups and individuals organized a number of exhibitions from 1934 to 1938 in London to honor and support the artistic production of modern artists in Germany and to aid Spain.\textsuperscript{278} In early 1939, Mesens organized the \textit{Living Art in England} exhibition at the London Gallery, and Penrose organized exhibitions of Picasso’s \textit{Guernica} at several venues in England to raise money in support of Spanish refugees. In another show of solidarity with the anti-fascist cause, Agar signed the surrealist broadsheet and contributed works to a “surrealist room” in the A.I.A. exhibition titled \textit{Unity of Artists for Peace, Democracy, and Cultural Development}, held in Grosvenor Square in spring 1937.\textsuperscript{279} The A.I.A. organized the exhibition in association with the Surrealist Group, the International Faculty of Arts, and the Society of Industrial Artists to support the conditions needed for the free expression of artistic vision (namely, a vital and democratic society valuing the pursuit of individual tasks in peace).\textsuperscript{280} As the surrealists had done in 1936 with their \textit{International Surrealist Exhibition}, this consortium of arts organizations put forward a somewhat paradoxical call for individual freedom and group action under the auspices of the A.I.A. To protect the freedom of any artist to produce whatever form of art he or she so chose, the A.I.A. vociferously defended the right
of artists to organize into groups to influence society and to deal with problems related to the “State, Industry, and the Public.”

While the ostensible reason for holding the *Unity of Artists for Peace, Democracy, and Cultural Development* exhibition was to advocate for the free expression of artists and designers, a second less obviously stated, but no less important goal of the A.I.A. was to encourage more interest in British art and thus improve the amount and quality of commissions for member artists. This ulterior motive reflected capitalist ideologies of market control more than it did a communist fervor for protecting the artisanal worker or humanist ideals in the name of freedom, even though the A.I.A. had been founded by a small group of dedicated communists in 1933. In response to the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in August 1936, their political agenda broadened to appeal to a Popular Front against fascism and war, and membership swelled to over 600 members, including Agar and the entire surrealist group. The A.I.A. began as a Soviet-style artist group and English modern artists almost universally admired the politically engaged art of early Soviet artists and filmmakers like Eisenstein; but by the late thirties, the A.I.A. had grown to advocate a rich and varied vanguard of modern art over the more recent demand for uniform expression in Stalinist art. In addition to helping their artistic allies regain some semblance of free expression in Nazi-controlled countries and Stalinist Russia, the A.I.A. selfishly wanted to further the prestige of British design, in hopes of widening the competitive edge of British commodities on world markets and boosting the employment of British commercial designers and fine artists. John Grierson had founded the Government Post Office Film Unit to realize the same goals. As the back of the A.I.A. catalogue stated and Grierson believed, the days of the English artist as a “romantic individualist” were over; both artists and
designers were "vital assets to industrial and social life;" and any separation between art, life, and industrial production was artificial.283

Conclusions

Given the significance of the Pan-African movement in thirties London and the organized efforts of the A.I.A. to promote artistic production at home and to defend creative freedom across Europe, Agar’s focus on human expression was not a hermetic retreat to the interior world of the feminine unconscious, as Whitney Chadwick and others have argued, but an engagement with some of the central political issues of the late thirties, in London’s artistic circles and worldwide.284 Hand-in-hand with her colleagues, Agar engaged, not as a communist, but as an artist willing to work within a capitalist system for the sake of advancing a worldwide campaign for freedom of expression in the face of fascism. Her humanitarian interest in free expression and her worldly affluence fit the liberal mold of the predominately male British group of surrealists, and they treated her as much like an equal as was possible for a woman in the 1930s.

Agar’s well-to-do upbringing afforded her enough money to live comfortably and travel freely throughout Europe prior to the war, without the need of a full-time job to supplement her income as an artist. Although her privileged background may have made it difficult for her to fully support Breton’s Trotskyist agenda for the surrealists, the enduring personal connections she, Mesens, and Penrose were able to forge with poets and artists across Europe sensitized the British group to the mounting threats to individual and creative freedom on the continent. At home, as the A.I.A. catalogue for Unity of Artists for Peace, Democracy, and Cultural Development exhibition made clear, many artists in
England, including some of the surrealists, needed supplemental work as industrial designers, filmmakers, and anthropologists to make ends meet. To draw attention to the economic depression in England, the Spanish Civil War, and the plight of modern artists under Hitler and Stalin, Agar was more than eager to engage with avowed Marxists such as Read, Éluard, Banting, Trevelyan, and surrealist filmmaker Humphrey Jennings as part of the Popular Front.

She joined the surrealists to call for an overhaul of British capitalist society from 1936 to 1939 for all of those reasons, yet as she later stated, the communist agenda was necessarily doomed in Britain. She even closed her chapter on surrealism in her autobiography with an epitaph:

There is no doubt that Surrealism is a cultural and artistic success. But the Surrealists’ aim was not to establish a glorious place for themselves in the annals of art and literature, but to change the world. To transform life itself, this was the essential purpose of the group, but alas the form of the flower is unknown to the seed, and the goal has not been reached, for the great transformation has not occurred.\(^{285}\)

Marx and Engels were masters in describing the problems associated with Britain as the oldest industrialist economy, but precisely because Britain had the longest history of industrialization, the British surrealists typically believed there was no chance of overturning the ideology of capitalism at the empire’s core. It was more difficult for them to promote an outright communist agenda in London than it was for artists in Paris. Even if their politics were less radical than the French Surrealists, in cultural terms, Agar’s art embodied almost every characteristic heralded as revolutionary by Éluard in Poetic Evidence. Her objects and paintings of the thirties subverted the tameness, staid conformity, and good sense often celebrated in British society with a playful embrace of chance, sexual energy, and mordant humor. She typically focused her art on the products
and tools of her artistic labor, on natural growth, and on a timeless need for cultural transformation among people. Her art of the mid to late thirties stood out from the art produced by the men of the group because she was effectively able to reorient surrealism’s male-centered and sadistic politics of desire to a woman’s view of her own body, her production as an artist, and to the natural world around her.

Despite the fact that her visual images held the revolutionary qualities sought by the surrealists, her images, like those of her male counterparts, provided little impetus to British workers to mount a social revolution or to rally behind the African struggle for independence. Nor did they in any way encourage British industrialists to enact fairer labor practices. Her humor was meant in part to undo the staid dependability and “keep calm and carry on” attitude promoted in British culture. However, evoking amusement made it more difficult for the public to take seriously the surrealist call for a new society. Her largest and arguably most important painting, *The Autobiography of an Embryo*, which subtly engaged Pan-African and feminist themes, was dismissed by Agar and overlooked by the surrealists, perhaps because in her quest to cede control to the viewer, she presented an overwhelming display of abstracted symbols from a hodge-podge of cultures and animal forms. In her paintings of the early thirties, her humanist message was artfully hedged in familial groupings and folded into ovular compositions, so much so that Lambirth and Simpson mistook her celebration of African American culture for an abiding interest in womb magic. Lambirth even surmised that *The Autobiography of an Embryo* might have been an expression of her desire to have a baby by Bard, even though she never had children and stated that she did not want them.286
Agar drew the revolutionary power of her surrealist objects and paintings from the beaches of southern England and the savannahs of Africa, rather than the merchandise of Paris’s passages. While she sometimes combined old commodities to construct structural assemblages, she more often used objects from the sea—shells, the carapaces of sea stars, driftwood—to build up her collages and installations. In this respect she differed from most of the male surrealists working in Paris. Joanna Malt has shown how the economic history of past commodities incorporated into surrealist installations, such as a retired mannequin or an old car, is apparent to viewers, and thus contributes to the meaning of surrealist objects. For example, viewers recognize the articulated mannequin held by Dali in 1938 for its original purpose as an artist’s studio aid and for its close relation to department store mannequins, such as those appropriated into the installations of other male surrealists. Dali adopts a female figure over which he has complete control. In contrast, Agar appears fully animated as if she is a live mannequin controlling her own environment in her photographic collage Ladybird. This is a key difference between her artworks and the paintings of Dali or Magritte who relished manipulating women as objects. The natural elements she gathered from the seashore and the human figures she incorporated into her art do not hold the same kind of commodity status as a store mannequin. As Banting, one of the group’s committed communists, pointed out—the beachcombing practiced by Agar, as well as Nash, Ernst, and Tanguy, suspended rationality, avoided contrivance, and undid notions of professionalism. Rather than harnessing the economic past of dead commodity goods, Agar sought to capture the vital—she would even say sublime and mysterious—forces unleashed by humans and animals in nature.
Chapter 2 Endnotes

150 For David Gascoyne’s view about the surrealist’s aspirations for a proletarian revolution, see: Gascoyne, A Short Survey of Surrealism, 24-25. For a statement of the surrealists’ frustrations with the capitalist and colonialist focus of British society, see: Surrealist Group in England, International Surrealist Bulletin No. 4, 4-5.


153 John Banting asserted these goals for surrealist beachcombing in a handwritten account of his affiliation with the British surrealists, now in the Tate Gallery Archives. See: TGA 779/5/52.


156 Herbert Read reiterated these goals in his catalogue essay in the London Bulletin, which introduced the Living Art in England exhibition. See: Herbert Read, “In What Sense ‘Living’?,” ibid., no. 8-9 (1939): 5-7. Silvano Levy, The Scandalous Eye: The Surrealism of Conroy Maddox (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2003), 52. According to Levy, Mesens reiterated in 1967 that the Living Art in England exhibition was staged to present a united front of modernists in opposition to “the growing decay in Europe under the pressure of the Nazi art politics and intolerant attitude of the tenets of Socialist Realism.”

157 Agar and Lambirth, A Look at My Life, 204-05, 32. Agar devoted her life to fighting all forms of convention, including those related to sex and gender. She prided herself on being a woman artist who made her living from selling her artwork, and she confirmed that she “never had the slightest desire to have children,” nor did she ascribe to the convention of marriage, although she finally married Bard after living with him for 12 years. She proposed to Bard, and they married on Leap Year Day in 1940, and they sustained an open marriage.

158 Agar lived in a flat in a Georgian house that Virginia Woolf had lived in for two or three years and admired Woolf’s writing. See: ibid., 69.

159 As Doris Lessing described the connections between her feminist perspective as a writer with Marxism, “…Marxism looks at things as a whole and in relation to each other—or tries to, but its limitations are not the point for the moment. A person who has been influenced by Marxism takes it for granted that an event in Siberia will affect one in Botswana. I think it is possible that Marxism was the first attempt, for our time, outside the formal religions, at the world-mind, a world ethic.” Doris Lessing, The Golden Notebook (London: Flamingo, 2002), 14.

160 For an analysis of the connections between the Pan-African movement and the communist party, see: Mark Salomon, The Cry Was Freedom: Communists and African-Americans, 1917-36 (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1998). George Padmore joined the communist party in 1927, lived in Moscow in 1930 where he was elected to the Moscow City Soviet, and was instrumental in drawing blacks to the communist party until 1933, when he became disillusioned by the Soviet Union’s alliances with colonial powers over support for the liberation of colonial people. Paul Robeson was affiliated with the British socialists and visited the Soviet Union in December 1934 by invitation of Sergei Eisenstein.

161 Surrealist Humphrey Jennings, poet and journalist Charles Madge, and anthropologist Tom Harrisson founded the social research organization Mass Observation in 1937 to systematically assess the public’s response to the abdication crisis. That first study quickly grew to include workers’ views of their daily life, work, and surroundings in several industrial towns including Bolton, situated 10 miles northwest of
Manchester. Mass Observation remained in existence through the early nineteen fifties and was rekindled in new form in 1981. Jennings’ involvement was limited to 1937, and Trevelyan was a paid volunteer during that time to observe and record workers at work and at play in Bolton.

**162** To open a lecture presented with Eileen Agar, Andrew Lambirth quoted the aims laid out by David Gascoyne in his introduction to A Short History of Surrealism published in 1936, “It is the avowed aim of the Surrealist movement to reduce and finally dispose altogether of the flagrant contradictions that exist between dream and waking life, the ‘unreal’ and the ‘real’, the unconscious and the conscious, and thus to make of what has hitherto been regarded as the special domain of poets, the acknowledged common property of all.” This quote is taken from: Tate Gallery Archives 881.12 Surrealism in England in the 1930s, lecture by E. Agar and A. Lambirth, 1.


**164** E. L. T. Mesens, “Living Art in England,” London Gallery Bulletin 1, no. 8-9 (1939). Mesens incorrectly states that Agar was born in 1901. She was born in December 1899. Agar often misrepresented her birth year as 1901 perhaps to emphasize her affiliation with the twentieth century, so Mesens probably quoted the date from her.

**165** For an account of her visit to Paris, see Agar and Lambirth, A Look at My Life, 84-86.

**166** Ibid., 85.

**167** Agar attended a private art school run by painter and sculptor Leon Underwood in Hammersmith, and went on to study under the figurative painter Henry Tonks and the impressionist landscape painter Philip Wilson Steer at the Slade School of Fine Art.

**168** Mesens, “Living Art.” Mesens exhibited his work in the 1936 exhibition as one of the surrealist representatives from Belgium and was close friends with Rene Magritte. While living in Brussels, he managed the Palais des Beaux Arts and organized exhibitions in London, Paris, etc. He moved to London during the winter of 1937 and became the managing director of the London Gallery in 1938. Roland Penrose funded the gallery and served as the executive director. The Dean Gallery Archives contain correspondence from C.P. Medley to Roland Penrose regarding the formation of the gallery and Mesens’ role. See: GMA A35/1/1/RPA 277/2/1/1a, GMA A35/1/1/RPA 277/2/1/3a, GMA A35/1/1/RPA 277/2/1/6b, GMA A35/1/1/RPA 277/2/1/8a.

**169** Agar and Lambirth, A Look at My Life, 3-5.

**170** Ibid., 37.

**171** Ibid., 123.

**172** Agar first established her aesthetic principles in her essay, “Religion and the Artistic Imagination,” published in the December 1931 issue of The Island, edited by Joseph Bard. She reiterated many of her views on artistic practice in her memoir, A Look at My Life.


**174** Agar and Lambirth, A Look at My Life, 228.

**175** Ibid., 224.

**176** Tate Gallery Archives #117 (uncatalogued Agar, Eileen collections, 75b).

**177** Marx and Engels, “The German Ideology: Part I,” 151-52. According to Marx and Engels, ownership evolved from (1) the tribal, to (2) ancient communal societies that involved state ownership and conquest, to (3) feudal and estate property that was associated with private ownership.
As far as I am aware, Agar made no reference to Jarry in her autobiography or in discussing this painting.


Tate Gallery Archives, Thoughts on Surrealism by Eileen Agar (from inside Notebook #64, Box 6, Eileen Agar collections). In her handwritten “Thoughts on Surrealism” now held in the Tate Gallery Archives, Agar stated, “…the people the surrealists looked back to, had all been rebels. They rebelled against a hyper-logical view of the world and against the classical idea that art’s task is to imitate the world of exterior reality. We are, they said what goes on inside our heads, we shall change the world to notice this fact, in spite of interruptions.”

Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 55-82. In chapter four, “The Avant-Gardiste Work of Art,” Bürger outlines chance, disunity, and play as defining characteristics of avant-garde art, all of which were important to Agar as an artist.

Agar and Lambirth, *A Look at My Life*, 165.

Andrew Lambirth, *Eileen Agar: An Eye for Collage* (Chichester: Pallant House Gallery in association with AVA Publishing SA, 2008), 26. As far as I am aware, Agar made no reference to Jarry in her autobiography or in discussing this painting.

Agar and Lambirth, *A Look at My Life*, 165.

Timothy Gachanga, “The Pacifist Presence in Kenya,” The Open University, http://www.open.ac.uk/Arts/ferguson-centre/memorialisation/events/addis-workshop/tim-gachanga-paper.shtml. According to Gachanga, the Akorino “preached a non-violent opposition of unjust colonial policies that discriminated against and exploited Africans. They refused to carry *kipande*, to be counted during censuses, to pay taxes, to take their children to missionary schools or hospitals, and to be employed in settlers’ farms. They also abstained from buying colonial industrial goods from the shops, to eat or drink from plates and cups, or to travel by vehicles.”


Timothy Gachanga places the date of the execution as 2 February 1934. It was reported twice in the *Times* (London) as 29 January 1934.


Agar and Lambirth, *A Look at My Life*, 147.

Cowling, *Visiting Picasso: The Notebooks and Letters of Roland Penrose*, 28. An abundance of Penrose’s collected artifacts remain in the farmhouse at Farley Farm in combination with modern art by Picasso and the surrealists. According to his son Anthony, Penrose took great pleasure in the archetypal associations that his collected objects connoted.

Agar and Lambirth, *A Look at My Life*, 123.

Ibid.

Ibid., 129.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 55.

Tate Gallery Archives, Thoughts on Surrealism by Eileen Agar (from inside Notebook #64, Box 6, Eileen Agar collections). In her handwritten “Thoughts on Surrealism” now held in the Tate Gallery Archives, Agar stated, “...the people the surrealists looked back to, had all been rebels. They rebelled against a hyper-logical view of the world and against the classical idea that art’s task is to imitate the world of exterior reality. We are, they said what goes on inside our heads, we shall change the world to notice this fact, in spite of interruptions.”

Tate Gallery Archives #117 (uncatalogued Eileen Agar collections, 74a).

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Agar and Lambirth, *A Look at My Life*, 165.

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the London
now in the Tate Gallery Archives. See: TGA 779/5/52.
Modern Art, 1999), 40.
and is currently held in the Tate Gallery Archives.
Tate Gallery Archives 8881.12 Surrealism in England in the 1930’s, lecture by E. Agar and A. Lambirth, 12.
Ibid.
Tate Gallery Archives, “Thoughts on Surrealism” by Eileen Agar (from inside Notebook #64, Box 6)., II-III.
Agar and Lambirth, Eileen Agar: An Eye for Collage, 26.
Agar and Lambirth, A Look at My Life, 126.
Tate Gallery Archives 881.12 Surrealism in England in the 1930s, lecture by E. Agar and A. Lambirth, 11.
Ibid.
Ibid., 84.
Ibid., 229. In summing up her humanist position and her approach to art, Agar stated, "Art invokes the unconscious world to counterbalance the conscious results of materialism, and in the ideally perceptive sensibility there is contained the image of the whole world, infinitely susceptible to new shapes, because (like my wax Aladdin’s Lamp which changes with the heat) no shape can be regarded as final. According to Hegel, when art becomes pure, it ceases to be serious. The work of art is a work of limitation, of concentration. On the other hand, it poses the questions of informality, infinity, the conscious need to give to the feelings 'a species of escape' from finite objects; the necessity of expressing internal perception visually. There is a continual conflict between the love of space and simplicity, or producing a feast for the eyes; between a desire to make holes in the walls of reality, and a desire for impact and intensity."
Ibid.
Agar’s Portofino notebook is titled, "A Painter’s Journal, thoughts and notes on the philosophy of painting," and is currently held in the Tate Gallery Archives.
Agar and Lambirth, A Look at My Life, 84.
Ibid., 85.
Ibid., 165-166.
Agar and Lambirth, A Look at My Life, 126.
I have been unable to locate a copy of The Island, No. 4, published in December 1931. Agar is quoted by Simpson, "Eileen Agar: The Spirit of Play," 19.
Ibid.
Ibid.
The Ninth Exhibition of the National Society of Painters, Sculptors, Engravers, and Potters was advertised in the London Times, however, neither the Times nor The Spectator reviewed the exhibition.
Agar and Lambirth, A Look at My Life, 235.
Breton and Rivera, "Towards an Independent Revolutionary Art," 30.

Ibid.


As Ann Simpson has detailed, Agar, her husband Bard, and her teacher Underwood co-founded a magazine, The Island, in 1931 to stand united as visual artists and writers against commercial art. Agar for the most part funded the venture, Bard was editor, and Underwood served as art director. Four monthly issues were published beginning 15 June 1931. Agar contributed an essay on "Religion and the Artistic Imagination" to the last issue, which was devoted to religion and art. Agar explained in her essay that the sun, moon, and earth held more religious power for her than the Holy Trinity because "natural symbolism has a greater emotional appeal to a woman than has religious mysticism." (Quoted from Simpson, "Eileen Agar: The Spirit of Play," 19.)

Breton and Rivera, "Towards an Independent Revolutionary Art," 30.

Agar and Lambirth, A Look at My Life, 121.

Ibid., 128.

Lambirth, "A Question of Dates," 42. Also see: Agar and Lambirth, A Look at My Life, 127.

A Look at My Life, 127.


Breton and Rivera, "Towards an Independent Revolutionary Art," 31.

Agar and Lambirth, A Look at My Life, 128. She referred to the Republicans as revolutionary angels.

Ibid., 127. Agar quickly disabused Nash of this notion.


Tate Gallery Archives, "Thoughts on Surrealism" by Eileen Agar (from inside Notebook #64, Box 6), II-III. In her handwritten notes, Agar stated, "Without language we would have no realization of the world and its objects, hence Wittgenstein and his belief in the importance of objects. The poetic object is one of the major discoveries of the surrealists, collage is also something they have made their own, through Max Ernst, the founding father of surrealist art."

Tate Gallery Archives #117 (uncatalogued Agar, Eileen collections, 75a).

As Paul Éluard stated in a lecture at the New Burlington Galleries on 24 June 1936 on behalf of Agar and the other surrealists exhibiting, "The time has come for poets to proclaim their right and duty to maintain that they are deeply involved in the life of other men, in communal life. ... And what of pure poetry? Poetry's absolute power will purify men, all men. 'Poetry must be made by all. Not by one.' So said Lautréomont. All the ivory towers will be demolished, all speech will be holy, and, having at last come into the reality which is his, man will need only to shut his eyes to see the gates of wonder opening up." George Reavey translated into English Éluard's French lecture. For this quote, see Reavey's translation: Paul Éluard, "Poetic Evidence," in Surrealism, ed. Herbert Read (London: Faber and Faber, 1936), 171-72.

Ibid., 174. Agar also referred to surrealism as a state of mind in her writing: "...surrealism also opened up new possibilities in subject matter, it was more than an art movement, it was and is a state of mind...." Agar's quote is from: Tate Gallery Archives, "Thoughts on Surrealism" by Eileen Agar (from inside Notebook #64, Box 6), II.
Agar and Lambirth, *A Look at My Life*, 132-33. Agar characterized her relationship with Éluard as “a lasting companionship of like minds, similar to Goethe’s *Elective Affinities.*” In the first draft of her memoir, she stated, “Surrealism opened up new possibilities in subject matter for me. It was a constructive Art Movement, bend on freeing the human mind from overdoses of common sense and opening hilarious new avenues to free thought.” See: Tate Gallery Archives, “A Look at My Life” by Eileen Agar, first typed copy of her autobiography, 122.

Ibid., 125.


Agar and Lambirth, *A Look at My Life*, 232. As Agar stated it, “I have spent my life in revolt against convention, trying to bring colour and light and a sense of the mysterious to daily existence.”

Tate Gallery Archives, “Thoughts on Surrealism” by Eileen Agar (from inside Notebook #64, Box 6), II.


Éluard, “Poetic Evidence,” 172, 75.

Tate Gallery Archives, “A Look at My Life” by Eileen Agar, first typed copy of her autobiography, 126.


Ibid., 135. Len Lye in particular was deeply affected by Popova’s theater set designs and costumes. While he was less interested in her clothing designs, he wanted to emulate the kinetic quality of her sets and appreciated their capacity to convey social ideas through abstract form.

Both established art dealers, Penrose and Mesens founded the London Gallery in 1938 as a means to market and show surrealists’ works, and they maintained a brisk business through the London Gallery. In a democratic appeal to a wide range of viewers, Penrose also organized a series of exhibitions of Picasso’s *Guernica* and the preparatory sketches associated with it at the New Burlington Galleries in London’s fashionable West End, in Oxford and Leeds, in a car salesroom in the industrial town of Manchester, and finally at the Whitechapel Galleries in the working class East End of London. In 1940-45, David Gascoyne put together a scrapbook of memorabilia collected from 1935 forward that was related to the surrealist movement in England. The scrapbook contained an illustration and extract from a magazine article, “Surrealism in window displays: Manchester Firm’s Experiment,” *Drapers Record*, London 18 July 1936. The illustration showed shop windows created by a display designer for a cloth retailer in Manchester. The designer had read about surrealism and attended the 1936 exhibition in London and wanted to recreate his own surrealist window dressings to sell gingham, fancy linen, and piqué. See: GMA A42/1/GKA005, 83.


In 1938, to express his political solidarity with the cause, Robeson sang to an audience of thousands at the Welsh International Brigades Memorial in tribute to Welsh countrymen who had died fighting in Spain. In solidarity with the Welsh miners who had marched to London in 1928 to draw attention to the hardships of
thousands of unemployed miners and their families, Robeson also regularly sang to working class audiences in music halls in Welsh cities throughout the thirties.

275 No evidence remains that Agar attended the event, although it is highly likely that she did. She was a member of the A.I.A. at this point and was an intimate friend of Penrose and Picasso, vacationing with them twice in the summer of 1937.


278 For example, the exhibition *Drawings and Paintings by Max Liebermann* was held at the Leicester Galleries in 1934, and the *Twentieth Century German Art* exhibit was mounted at the New Burlington Galleries in 1938.

279 The exhibition was held from 14 April to 5 May 1937 in conjunction with the First British Artists Congress held 23-25 April 1937 to deal with problems related to “State, Industry, and the Public.” In concert with both A.I.A. events, the surrealist group published their vitriolic broadsheet against Britain’s non-intervention, “On the Occasion of the Artists’ International Congress and Exhibition We Ask Your Attention.” The exhibition and congress were supported by notable figures in English society, fine artists, designers, and surrealists including among others: John Banting, Vanessa Bell, W.G. Constable, Jacob Epstein, James Fitton, Eric Gill, Duncan Grant, Barbara Hepworth, Edward McKnight Kauffer, J. Maynard Keynes, David Low, Henry Moore, Paul Nash, Lazlo Moholy Nagy, Ben Nicholson, Eric Ravilious, Herbert Read, Frank Rutter, Sir Michael Sadler, and Edward Wadsworth.


281 Ibid. These claims were made in the “Forward” and on the back cover under the title, “The Congress.”

282 In 1933, Soviet sympathizers Cliff Rowe, Misha Black, James Boswell, James Lucas, James Fitton and Pearl Binder founded the Artists International to seek “the international unity of artists against Imperialist War on the Soviet Union, Fascism, and Colonial oppression.” (See: Morris and Radford, *Story of the A.I.A.*, 2. for a brief history of the Artists International Association.)

283 Artists International Association, "Catalogue for A.I.A. Exhibition, 41 Grosvenor Square, 14 April to 5 May 1937, "Unity of Artists for Peace, Democracy, and Cultural Development".” The economic motives for the exhibition and congress were explicitly stated on the back of the catalogue under the title, “The Congress.”


286 Lambirth, "A Question of Dates," 40-41. To support his view that she might have been expressing a latent desire to have children in *The Autobiography of an Embryo*, Lambirth quotes a passage from Agar’s 1929 notebook: "What song should woman sing if not a love-song? Every child she bears should be a paean in praise of him who fructifies her. There is no other story than that of Love, Creation and Birth. It is woman who should answer Solomon’s love cry—for it was written that thro’ Love should the world be born anew—".

Speaking to the Masses with Surrealist Film

To show the inherent compromises in how the British surrealists realized their political agenda and to explore the diversity of artistic styles and media adopted by members of the group to express their political beliefs, this chapter will consider two short films directed by Len Lye and Humphrey Jennings. I will focus my analysis on the social interests and surrealist tendencies of a seven-minute promotional film, *The Birth of the Robot* (1935-36), produced and directed by Len Lye in association with Humphrey Jennings for Shell-Mex and BP Oil, and a fifteen-minute General Post Office (G.P.O.) documentary, *Spare Time* about workers' leisure pursuits in British industrial towns, directed by Jennings in 1939. Since their inception, these promotional films have been considered groundbreaking masterworks of the British documentary tradition. However, Lye and Jennings, both British surrealists, produced them during a period in the G.P.O. Film Unit’s history defined much more by Brazilian-born Alberto Cavalcanti’s experimental surrealist vision than by the Unit’s founder John Grierson’s Scots documentary pragmatism.288

Lye and Jennings were active participants in the British surrealist group at the time and certainly wanted to imbue their promotional films for public and corporate sponsors with surrealist qualities.289 Likewise, they contributed images reflective of their films to surrealist publications such as the *London Bulletin* (Figure 3.1). For example, the left-hand side of a two-page spread in the June 1938 issue of the *London Bulletin* devoted to “English Landscapes” presents an abstract landscape painting by Nash next to a photograph taken by Jennings of a wall-size billboard advertising Persil detergent in a highly industrial city. Opposite it, the right-hand page features a still from Harry Watt’s G.P.O. film *Night-Mail*
(1936) along with a photograph taken by Lee Miller of Eileen Agar’s shadow projected on a column in Brighton, and a relief sculpture by Sophie Taeuber-Arp. The heading for the right-hand page, “Shadows and Reliefs,” emphasizes Watt’s use of shadow as a formal element in the film, but it also draws attention to the locomotive’s role in building the modern British economy—in this context and in other surrealist publications, the locomotive stands out as a key symbol of the industrial age. The locomotive was also one of the most important emblems of industrialization for Jennings. He included locomotives in paintings, films, poetry, articles, and books. In numerous situations, the British surrealists focused on “English Landscapes” as a way to establish their indigenous interests apart from the French surrealists and to draw British viewers to their movement. Given the industrial setting of Jennings’ photograph in the London Bulletin and its focus on commercialism in a site of labor, his photograph might easily be mistaken for a still from Spare Time. The juxtaposition of two female apparitions, scrubbed so white that they appear like ghosts haunting the dank factory setting, draws attention to the absurdity of sparkling cleanliness in such a grimy place and to the difficult truths at the core of the commodity culture that pervaded industrial Britain.

However, as products of large oil conglomerates and the government sponsored G.P.O. Film Unit, the films The Birth of the Robot and Spare Time functioned as coded messages in support of Britain’s reigning capitalist ideology. Their sponsors readily adopted Lye and Jennings’ signature surrealist styles to promote products and services, even if neither Lye nor Jennings was personally committed to speaking to the public from the top down as some aspects of the films suggest. Jennings encouraged the people he encountered when filming to help mold the film’s content. In writings, he also stated that
he wanted to show the British people (us) to ourselves.\footnote{291} Lye’s hand painted films that were made without the use of a camera and his animated color films were extraordinarily experimental for their time and usually carried no political message. Notable examples included: Lye’s first animated film \textit{Tusalava}, which set a roll of hand painted film to live music in December 1929;\footnote{292} a novel puppet animation \textit{Peanut Vendor} (1934, three minutes), synced to a recorded adaptation of the immensely popular Cuban song \textit{El Manisero};\footnote{293} and Lye’s first G.P.O. film \textit{A Colour Box} (1935, four minutes), a hand-painted film based on tribal art that was set to Cuban music and produced using the new Dufaycolor process.\footnote{294} Because of their vivid colors and surreal animation set to Latin and jazz music, and because of Lye’s affiliation with the British surrealist group, Lye’s films have been considered surrealist precursors for many of the psychedelic light shows of the 1960s and music videos of the 1980s.\footnote{295} Although Lye’s films strengthened the G.P.O. Film Unit’s experimental reputation, only recently have critics acknowledged the significance of his contributions to the documentary film movement in England. This was because his abstract and hand-painted color films were considered too far afield of Grierson’s tenets of documentary realism—“the creative treatment of actuality” in Grierson’s words.\footnote{296}

As Geoffrey Nowell-Smith has argued, Jennings’ \textit{Spare Time}, a black and white film more emblematic of Grierson’s documentary style, also holds numerous surrealist attributes, due to its lack of plotlines and use of collage to create startling combinations of images and music.\footnote{297} Scenes of \textit{Spare Time} include a montage of storefronts and passersby, a theme rooted in commodification and associated with much surrealist art, British or otherwise. In social terms Jennings believed that because of photography’s realism and accessibility to the masses, photographic media were the primary means by which the
people could picture the people for the people, rather than being dictated to by a government or corporation. At the same time, he felt the intellectual importance of the camera rested “with the problems of choice—choice and avoidance of choice,” and he likened his filmic choices to the Freudian concept of Déjà Vu. As a surrealist filmmaker, he believed the power of the camera was related to the memory of unconscious fantasies and that effective scenes were reminders of his own and viewers’ past experiences. For Jennings, the camera was an instrument for recording the objects or images that evoked unconscious memories.

Only with a 1982 exhibition of Jennings’ paintings and films did critics and historians begin to celebrate the surrealist qualities of Jennings’ films as much as their documentary status. In an interview leading up to the exhibition, Roland Penrose explained that the Parisian surrealists considered Jennings important for his poetic interest, his awareness of poetry’s place in development of society, and his fixation on the intrusion of the machine during the industrial revolution—all defining forces in his films of the thirties and especially these two films. As Penrose said, the machine was important to dada and surrealism, but Jennings took a different approach from Ernst’s collages, in which the machine is a powerful absurdity. Instead, Jennings thought the machine replaced natural forces and became the leading influencer in industrialized society. For Jennings, William Blake’s ‘satanic mills’ were a direct result of the machine, and the modern coal, steel, and cotton industries featured in his film Spare Time were dependent on the machine as part of that legacy. Likewise, Jennings played a key role in developing the animated effects for The Birth of the Robot that opens with an antiquated machine hand cranked by father time and closes with a modern piston-driven machine overseen by the robot.
Framing the discourse around the 1982 exhibition, Lindsay Anderson of the British New Wave acknowledged that Jennings’ emotional ideas about British tradition corresponded to the social reality of the late thirties, and that Jennings formed his sequences with conscious precision. However, Anderson saw Jennings’ imaginative impulse, instinctive sense of composition, and ability to convey strong emotion as the surrealist qualities and the real strengths of his films.\textsuperscript{303} Paul Joyce, in *The British Journal of Photography* in 1982, joined Anderson to emphasize Jennings’ surrealist tendencies, arguing that Jennings’ films are filled with: “potent images, mythic symbols, surreal juxtapositions, intellectual connections, [and] once stifled emotions running freely like a deep, open vein.”\textsuperscript{304} Michael McCluskey more recently emphasized the experimental use of sound, fragmentation, and surrealist collage (or the unusual juxtaposition of common objects) as key aspects of Jennings’ surrealist style. Using these techniques, Jennings combined scenes to “reveal the multiple systems and different layers of meaning operating in society.”\textsuperscript{305} McCluskey and Kevin Jackson have argued that Jennings’ documentary films carry a surrealist sensibility due to Jennings’ interest in chance encounters, common rituals, unexpected edits, and “finding the marvelous in the everyday.”\textsuperscript{306}

Of all the works produced the British surrealists in the late thirties, Jennings’ films were the most effective in focusing national attention on the realities of the English working classes. It was primarily through films such as *The Birth of the Robot* and *Spare Time* and the exhibition of Pablo Picasso’s *Guernica* in 1938 (dealt with in Chapter 4) that the British group was also best able to galvanize public opinion against fascism in the late thirties. These two films that celebrate the benefits of modern labor can be seen as democratic appeals in support of the proletariat as the surrealists’ political manifestos
seemed to demand. However, the films were equally a form of nationalistic propaganda meant to simultaneously rally and pleasure the masses through a striking array of sensual sights and sounds—a maneuver that might be said to preclude the very autonomy and spontaneity that the surrealists so admired. Ironically the persuasive techniques used by Lye and Jennings for engaging the British public, even if viewed as democratic social appeals, were similar to the methods used by fascist leaders to sway the masses away from critical thought to a more regressive form of viewing as Theodor Adorno first theorized at about the same time these films were made.307 This ambiguity of aim—both an attempt to influence the masses and to open up a vehicle for their expression—had precedent in the mass demonstrations of the futurist movement in the twenties.

As I will show in this chapter, despite the fact that Jennings’ films were used to reinforce capitalist ideology, Jennings believed that his patriotism and nationalism brought a level of authenticity to his surrealist works and solidified his commitment to the surrealist agenda for social transformation. Given that the majority of the British surrealist group purportedly espoused “proletarian revolution” and opposed capitalism in their writings such as the International Surrealist Bulletin no. 4, and bearing in mind that Jennings’ parents founded the Walberswick Peasant Pottery Company, a workshop steeped in the type of guild socialism promoted by William Morris and John Ruskin, it might seem counter-intuitive that films by Jennings and his friend Lye would valorize petroleum products and laborers’ contributions to capitalist industry, and document how the British people spent their leisure time—the time they purportedly called their own apart from work. In essence, the films that Jennings and Lye produced while members of the surrealist group held these qualities. However, as McCloskey has argued, Spare Time also
“acknowledges the constraints placed on leisure time through the demanding work schedules and the limited public space available to these residents.”

British documentary filmmakers of the thirties—including Grierson who first headed up the G.P.O. Film Unit, Cavalcanti who moved from Paris in 1934 to work with Grierson and soon took over the G.P.O. Film Unit, and surrealists such as Jennings and Lye who worked under them—explicitly looked back to German and Soviet filmmakers of the late twenties for creative inspiration. Emulating the penchant of Hans Richter, Walter Ruttmann, Sergei Eisenstein, and the dramatist Vsevolod Meyerhold for effectively communicating social messages with experimental film and theater, Lye and Jennings created short promotional films such as *The Birth of the Robot* and *Spare Time*, sometimes using new color processes as in *The Birth of the Robot* and recorded popular music, to celebrate modern industrial advances and to draw workers’ attention to themselves as a means, not for communist revolution, but for strengthening British capitalist society at a time when Britain’s global empire was shrinking and fascism was on the rise across Europe.

Jennings and Lye’s use of Soviet constructivist and surrealist film practices to support the British state was in large part a response to both their local capitalist environment and the long history of industrialization in Britain. As Jennings made clear in *Spare Time* and as Adorno iterated in his 1977 essay *Free Time*, twentieth-century laborers’ spare time was reified into a compulsory form of organized freedom, which could not be separated from industry and business. In this way, it was modern and markedly different from the leisure pursuits of the pre-industrial gentry. Jennings realized that contemporary workers’ experiences, even in their spare time, were inextricably tied to
capitalist enterprise, and he stopped short of advocating a communist revolution in Britain. Even communist sympathizers among the British surrealists, including Jennings, E.L.T. Mesens, and John Banting, accepted the futility of calling for a communist revolution in Britain, the oldest industrial society, unapologetically founded on capitalism and expanded through colonialism.

In London where a fledgling commercial film industry was vying to compete with Hollywood, Lye and Jennings as experimental filmmakers had little choice if they wanted to exercise their craft but to secure employment with Grierson in the G.P.O. Film Unit, an arm of the British civil service, and to seek corporate sponsors such as Shell-Mex and BP Oil. As Grierson’s employees from 1934-37, Lye and Jennings out of necessity produced films that fit rhetorically within Grierson’s political strictures, at least until Grierson left the G.P.O. Film Unit in 1937. Jeffrey Richards, a leading expert on Grierson, summed up Grierson’s political position as a filmmaker:

Grierson contrived to merge the liberal idealism of his father and the radical socialism of his mother, to emerge as a reformist social democrat, coming to believe in social reconstruction by the agency of the state rather than full-blown socialist transformation. ... As applied to film, these ideas led him to vigorously advocate a socially purposive cinema which would bestow recognition and dignity on the working man, neglected by mainstream cinema, and would at the same time inform and educate the newly enfranchised mass electorate to function in a participatory democracy which would achieve the organic inter-relatedness which was his ideal.311

Jennings’ strong affinity for the working class fit with Grierson’s demands that cinema dignify workers and promote a more fully participatory democracy, however Grierson found Jennings more of an aesthete than a true socialist. Remembering Jennings, late in life Grierson summed up his younger protégée as a “stilted” and “minor” poet with
“considerable talent,” and Grierson questioned Jennings’ true commitment to the proletariat:

He [Jennings] was fearfully sorry for the working class, which is a kind of limited position to be in, you know. Yes, he was safely, safely sorry for the working class, which did credit not just to his liberal spirit but to his lack of relationship with the living thing, sometimes. I think the word is that he didn’t have a sense of smell. There’s no doubt that he had good taste, visual good taste.312

As this quote suggests, there was no love lost between the two men. From Jennings’ point of view, Grierson was “a course-minded dogmatist, a bully and a fraud.”313 While Jennings worked for Grierson at the G.P.O., their relationship was somewhat strained. However, Grierson and Jennings’ mutual lack of respect for each other did not play a role in Jennings’ direction of *Spare Time* under Cavalcanti’s supervision two years after Grierson’s departure from the G.P.O.. Recently scholars have stressed the unorthodoxy of Jennings’ G.P.O. films in relation to Grierson’s tenets for documentary film.314 As they have suggested, Jennings’ filmic techniques were more aligned with Cavalcanti’s avant-garde practice. Cavalcanti encouraged G.P.O. filmmakers to meld fact with fiction, as he had done in *Rien que les heures*, and to experiment with new color processes as well as complex fusions of images and sounds (voices, music, and noises) to promote a myriad of products and services in the British Empire and to document daily life in the British dominions. Grierson’s bull-headed approach to social reform engineered by the state also had virtually no effect on the content or form of the promotional films such as *The Birth of the Robot* that Jennings or Lye produced for corporate sponsors, because they were projects beyond Grierson’s immediate control.

Pooling their creative talent, love of machine imagery, and a desire for the British government to take a stronger stand against fascism as early as 1935, Lye and Jennings
formed a team to produce *The Birth of the Robot* for Jack Beddington at Shell-Mex and BP Oil. Grierson was not involved in the project, but he was instrumental in encouraging Beddington to sponsor films in addition to the series of travel posters that Shell had commissioned from surrealist artists such as Nash and McKnight Kauffer. According to Horrocks, Grierson was also the one to initially conceive of a robot film as a way to engage Shell’s robot mascot. Because of their work together at the G.P.O. Film Unit and his admiration for *Peanut Vendor*, Jennings introduced Lye to Beddington. Lye went on to direct and produce the film, and Jennings oversaw the new Gaspar color production. Lye’s best friend Ellitt served as the film’s sound technician. The film’s seven-minute sound track was condensed from Gustav Holst’s *The Planets* as performed by the London Symphony Orchestra. Ellitt played a contra-bassoon that was specially imported for the Australian premier of *The Planets* in 1926, and he most likely either chose or recommended the music for the sound track. Banting handled the art direction along with Allen Fanner, and together they built puppets for the film’s main characters: the robot, Venus and her pantheon of gods, the laboring Father Time, and an arrogant British tourist who rides roughshod over the pyramids of Giza. As this photograph of Lye arranging the set shows, the puppets were miniature in size (*Figure 3.2*). Jennings assembled and animated a rotating globe of the earth to illustrate the reach of the British Empire in the film (*Figure 3.3*). Alex Strasser, who had recently emigrated from Germany due to Nazi oppression, served as Lye’s cameraman.

Until recently, promotional films such as *The Birth of the Robot* or *Spare Time* that was produced by the G.P.O. Film Unit, an offshoot of the Film Unit founded in 1929 by Grierson for the Empire Marketing Board (EMB), have not been categorized as surrealist
cinema because Grierson, Paul Rotha and others closely associated with the documentary film movement retrospectively stressed the verism and documentary nature of G.P.O. films. However, in taking this dogmatic position, Grierson failed to convey the full complexity of his own vision. While he was known for his black and white documentaries, he was also a collector of modern art and an avid fan of Eisenstein's experimental Soviet films, which relied on montage and surrealist-like effects for their modern look. For example, as Bruce Elder has suggested, Dali and Buñuel's famous scene of a knife slicing through an eye in Un Chien Andalou (1929) was influenced in part by Eisenstein's portrayal of a woman's eye being slashed by a saber in Battleship Potemkin (1925). Even in Grierson's own Drifters (1931), he focused in on the fishing boats bobbing in the rough seas and the gulls circling frenetically over the fishermen's work to convey the disorienting perceptual effects of being on the high seas in rough weather. While Drifters was realistic and focused on the fishermen's labor, it seemed to be surrealistic due to these disorienting and nightmarish qualities.

In the spirit of Eisenstein's Battleship Potemkin; Cavalcanti's quotidian film of Parisian life, Rien que les heures (1926); Ruttmann's Berlin: Symphony of a Great City (1927) on which Cavalcanti worked; and Dziga Vertov's Man with a Movie Camera (1929), Grierson demanded that G.P.O. filmmakers be socially aware and exhibit artistic creativity, both tendencies advocated by the surrealists and appreciated by Jennings. Cavalcanti extended this tendency to promote social messages through experimental techniques when he came on board to direct the G.P.O. Film Unit in 1934, just before Lye and Jennings joined the team. Grierson and Cavalcanti brought on Lye due to his highly experimental animated color films, and The Birth of the Robot was on the cutting edge of film production when it
opened. As Nowell-Smith has emphasized, Jennings’ *Spare Time* fit into the continental avant-garde tradition of realizing modern urban environments through experimental means, far more than it reinforced the realist dogma of the British documentary film movement.

**Contributions to the British Surrealist Group**

From about the time that *The Birth of the Robot* was made, Jennings and Lye actively contributed to the British surrealist group. As early as June 1930 while he was a Cambridge undergraduate, Jennings had signed a manifesto to overthrow Britain’s literary and critical traditions with French experimentation as a member of the Experiment Group, along with Hugh Sykes Davies, Julian Trevelyan, and George Reavey, all of whom would go on to join the British surrealists. At the 1936 International Surrealist Exhibition in London, which occurred just months after the release of *The Birth of the Robot*, Lye exhibited one oil painting, *The Jam Session* (1936), in addition to two photograms produced in 1930, including *Self-planting at Night*. Jennings served on the exhibition’s organizing committee and showed six of his own works: an oil painting, *In a Country Churchyard* (1933); two collages produced in 1934, *Life and Death* and *The Minotaure*; and three image-objects, *Stereo* (1933), *Life and Death* (1934), and *Death at Work* (1934). As these titles suggest, during the Spanish Civil War and in the lead up to World War II, life, death, and work were themes that permeated Jennings’ surrealist objects, collages, and films including *Spare Time*.

In November 1936, Jennings signed a “Declaration on Spain,” drafted by the Surrealist Group in England and distributed with *Contemporary Poetry and Prose*, no. 7 to
oppose the British ban on exporting arms to Spain. The signers of the declaration considered fascism an international rather than a nationalistic phenomenon rooted in capitalist ideology. Attempting to undo the view that all proletarian revolutions were totalitarian and all capitalists were peaceful and democratic in nature, they referred to the constitutionally elected Spanish government as the “People’s Government” in opposition to “Capitalism,” their metonym for fascism. While Jennings and the British surrealists viewed fascism as an extreme form of capitalism that should be vanquished at all costs, Jennings acquiesced to sustaining capitalist ideals if they were wholly democratic, as his role in producing *The Birth of the Robot* and *Spare Time* exemplified.\textsuperscript{326} Although Lye did not sign the surrealists’ declaration on Spain, he supported its major points. Lye’s most significant political statement came just after the war began, when he co-wrote an essay, “A Definition of Common Purpose,” with Robert Graves on the tenets of democracy that should be defended against fascist oppression.\textsuperscript{327} In it, Lye and Graves resisted “all forms of regimentation and officialdom,” and Lye argued that democracy should be grounded in the ability of individuals to achieve happiness in their daily lives.\textsuperscript{328}

The industrial themes established in *The Birth of the Robot* and *Spare Time* were related to Jennings’ most significant contribution to the surrealist cause in England—the July 1938 issue of the *London Bulletin* on “The Impact of Machines” (Figure 3.4). Jennings was primarily responsible for that publication which served as the catalogue for two exhibitions: one titled “The Impact of Machines” and organized by Jennings and E. L. T. Mesens at the London Gallery, and an Yves Tanguy exhibition at the Guggenheim Jeune Gallery.\textsuperscript{329} “The Impact of Machines” exhibition opened on July 5 and focused on the human response to the machine in the industrial age—a crucial topic for Jennings, who sought to
document the effects of the industrial revolution on the people and land of Britain as the writer and politician William Cobbett had before him.\textsuperscript{330} The human response to industrialization was a driving force in his life’s work, including the films \textit{The Birth of the Robot} and \textit{Spare Time}, the ethnographic experiment \textit{Mass Observation}, and his posthumously published book \textit{Pandaemonium}.\textsuperscript{331} Jennings presented a sampling of texts by Blake, Friedrich Engels, Samuel Smiles, and John Ruskin in the special double issue of the \textit{London Bulletin} that he would also later include in \textit{Pandaemonium}. Although the bulk of the “The Impact of Machines” exhibits consisted of historical photographs and engravings of machines, locomotives, and cast iron bridges in Britain from the 1790s to the present day, Penrose who served as the executive director of the London Gallery and who spearheaded the British group with Mesens and Herbert Read hailed Jennings’ catalogue and related exhibition as a high point for British surrealism.\textsuperscript{332} This was probably because Jennings organized the catalogue and exhibits to illustrate the British group’s national interest in social transformation as it related to the industrial revolution, as much as he selected artworks to show the alliance between the British group and the French surrealists. As Penrose expressed it when looking back in 1981, the English group took a more moderate view towards social revolution than the French surrealists who “spat out all patriotism” and “spat out the idea of the State”:\textsuperscript{333}

We appreciated that. But we felt, I think, less revolutionary in that particular way….\textsuperscript{[Humphrey’s] work in films particularly was a work which was of great use in changing the ideas of society but also sustaining them to some degree, not breaking them down completely. …} So there was this curious nationalist, patriotic side in Humphrey, which from the purely surrealist point of view was rather shocking. But from Humphrey’s point of view it added certainly a genuine feeling of activity and a sort of solidarity between England, which he loved, and the whole revolutionary attitude, which Surrealism stood for. ‘Change Life’ was certainly one of the war cries of all Surrealists, and Humphrey took notice of that very much. But his way of changing life was
more tactful, was more constructive in a way than just an iconoclasm, which would break up everything. I don’t mean to suggest that Humphrey was a patriot in the conventional way at all. His patriotism was far deeper than that. He was certainly anti-military. And anti-society when it became organized in an absurd way...\textsuperscript{334}

Penrose’s account of British surrealism as a “more temperate” version of the revolutionary fervor of the French surrealists fits with an accepted belief that the British people are less inclined to revolution than the French, and it sheds light on how a documentary film like \textit{Spare Time} could hold revolutionary qualities for the British surrealists.\textsuperscript{335} Penrose’s recollections show evidence of this on several counts. First, he clearly states that as a leader of the surrealists he harbored Jennings’ view that a more moderate social revolution was demanded in British society—both men believed that it was important to constructively change society, not remake it altogether. In their estimation, the most radical social change to be inflicted on man had occurred in Britain during the past one hundred and fifty years, and sitting on English soil in the aftermath, they were in an ideal position to critique capitalism. By equal measure they were mired down by it. Second, he admits that Jennings’ films were instrumental in sustaining the reigning ideology as much as they affected social change as the surrealists demanded. Given that Penrose considered the “Impact of Machines” to be one of the finest hours for British surrealism, one could infer that the British group found it less important to affect radical social change than to state the goal in their manifestos. As Agar suggested in her memoire, the British group advocated proletarian revolution in loyalty to Breton and the French surrealists; however, in her view, they never fully embraced the principle.\textsuperscript{336} Third, Penrose acknowledges how Jennings’ patriotic and nationalist tendencies were shocking in light of surrealist doctrine, yet Jennings believed these very qualities spurred his genuine devotion to the British surrealist
movement. For Jennings, England’s lifeblood was rooted in the industrial revolution. Industrialization had transformed British society, and any present or future social revolution must necessarily be connected to that past.

The surrealists relied on documentary filmmakers to mount the “The Impact of Machines” exhibition. Arthur Elton, a former scientist and one of the first filmmakers to work under Grierson, contributed the lead article in the catalogue, and most of the works shown in the exhibit were from his extensive personal collection, which included woodcuts and engravings of machines invented before the nineteenth century; engineers’ drawings of various engines from 1790 to 1932; photographs by Henry Fox-Talbot and etchings by George Cruikshank of the Great Exhibition of 1851; and a litany of lithographs and engravings of mines, cast iron bridges, locomotives, and the early London Underground. Elton’s lead article and one entire section of the exhibition were dedicated to the “Romance of Machines,” while two others focused on “The Anatomy of Machines” and “Naïve Views of Machines.” Elton framed industrial advances in terms of the gods moving house from nature in the eighteenth century to the machine in the nineteenth century. As he put it, “In the 19th century Romance left Arcady for a railway station.” Just as the British tourist’s roadster in The Birth of the Robot had human eyes for headlamps and a mouth over its radiator, Elton described how early writers saw locomotives’ headlamps as eyes and the puffing of the engine like the breath of a wild animal harnessed for man.

Although Jennings’ Spare Time focuses on the hours workers spend away from their jobs, Spare Time is in essence a surrealist film about the pervasive and defining influence of modern industry on the British labor force, even in their spare time. The film was produced by Cavalcanti at the G.P.O. for screening at the 1939 World’s Fair in New York. Its initial
purpose as a promotional film about British society during the World’s Fair was consonant with Elton’s and Jennings’ interest in the Great Exhibition of 1851 in London. The Great Exhibition stood as a culminating symbol of Britain’s railway age in the early decades of the nineteenth century and was an emblem of “British capitalism in the hour of its greatest triumph.” It served as the initial prototype for all subsequent World’s Fairs. For this reason, Jennings and Elton would have most likely viewed the 1939 World’s Fair as the modern equivalent of the London Exhibition. Like their forefathers provided examples of contemporary industry in 1851, they wanted to provide a snapshot of industrial workers’ lives in the present. Their conception of the film in 1939 was not unlike the comparisons they made between antiquated and modern machines in “The Impact of Machines” exhibition the previous summer at the London Gallery.

The last section of that London Gallery exhibition, “Impact on Modern Painting,” included European surrealist works containing machine-like elements and served to associate Britain’s industrial past with the contemporary international surrealist movement. This culminating section included a mobile by Alexander Calder; preparatory drawings and documents related to Marcel Duchamp’s *The Bride Stripped Naked by her Bachelors Even*; as well as collages, photographs, and paintings by Giorgio de Chirico, Max Ernst, Arthur Lett-Haines, Jennings, Fernand Leger, René Magritte, Francis Picabia, Man Ray, and E. Stewart-Jones. Breton contributed a lengthy analysis of *The Bride Stripped Naked by her Bachelors Even* to the catalogue, with a quote from Duchamp describing the bride alternatively as the embodiment of “timid-power,” a “steam-engine,” and the “apotheosis of virginity;” and the “fat and lewd” bachelor machine at the base of the work as a “desire-motor” in operation with her. Breton stressed the “newness of such a
conception” and the wholly avant-garde quality of Duchamp’s work. Elements of the catalogue and the exhibition, however, undermined this avant-garde conception. The arrangement of the exhibition encouraged viewers to associate illustrations of Duchamp’s bride and her desirous bachelor-machine with images of antiquated mid-nineteenth century locomotives; and Breton’s essay followed Elton’s article that stressed the romance of machines in the early part of the industrial revolution.

As a whole the July double issue of the London Bulletin was intended to emphasize the close connections between the French and English surrealists. After all, the double issue served as the catalogue for the “Impact of Machines” and Tanguy’s London exhibition. For anyone who missed the connection, the correspondence between Britain’s old machines and the new interests of the French surrealists was illustrated by a set of two images on page 15 of the London Bulletin (Figure 3.5). A photograph taken by Fox Talbot of a vacuum sugar apparatus displayed at the Great Exhibition of 1851 was paired with Ernst’s La Femme Chancellante, (1923). Pairing double images in this way was part of a visual tradition dating back to the nineteenth century with the publication of Augustus Pugin’s polemic book on Gothic architecture, Contrasts (1836). Earlier issues of the London Bulletin had used paired images to elicit playful contrasts, and the French surrealists had paired images in the special issue of Variétés titled “Surrealism in 1929.” In this case, the visual congruence between the mid-nineteenth century sugar apparatus and Ernst’s surrealist Femme is established through several common elements: both include machine forms in angular settings where floors meet walls; the rounded and symmetrical curves of the vacuum sugar apparatus are echoed by the soft curves of the tunic and legs of Ernst’s
female performer; and rounded pipe-like contraptions support both the 1851 sugar apparatus and Ernst’s staggering woman.

It is not surprising this pairing was made, given that sugar production in the colonies was a subject for both the surrealists and the British documentary film movement. Elton had collected the photograph of the vacuum sugar apparatus by Fox Talbot; Lye was particularly interested in Cuba, where sugar production dominated the economy; and Basil Wright, Grierson’s first recruit, traveled to the British colony of Barbados in 1933 to produce a sound-recorded film for the Empire Marketing Board, *Windmill in Barbados.* Wright’s film is narrated by a West Indian who explains that the youth of Barbados welcome replacing the West Indian tradition of handpicking and grinding the cane under benevolent English overseers, with “new machines and ways of working” imported from England. Like *The Birth of the Robot* and *Spare Time,* which simultaneously promote and attempt to transform societal values, *Windmill in Barbados* reinforces the ideology of empire with its message that British ingenuity will continue to improve the lives of happy, backward “natives;” as much as it advocates any sort of progressive social change with the use of a West Indian narrator. *343 Windmill in Barbados* was a significant precursor for *The Birth of the Robot* and *Spare Time* in that its themes addressed the colonial island culture that intrigued Lye, as well as the transformation of labor practices and machinery that captivated both men, especially Jennings. In their affiliation with the G.P.O., Jennings and Lye would have been familiar with *Windmill in Barbados* and considered its message and Wright’s techniques in relation to their own.
Presenting the Social by Experimental Means

In different ways, Lye and Jennings embraced the G.P.O. demand that experimental film serve as a vehicle for realizing social goals. Under Lye’s direction for Shell-Mex and BP Oil in *The Birth of the Robot*, Lye and Jennings used collage and animation to present a mythical modern world made whole by Shell-Mex oil—a technological transformation that was coupled with a transformation in the labor force from handwork to automation that supposedly rendered the British Empire impervious to defeat. While fascism was never directly addressed in the film, fighter planes fly in formation in one scene and are vanquished by the robot, implying the defeat of enemy fighters. As most viewers of the film in the thirties would have recognized, the fascist countries posed the most serious threat to British and world peace. On the other hand, Jennings used surrealist collage techniques to present poetic moments among British steel, cotton, and coal workers during their leisure hours in *Spare Time*. As Jennings stated in a BBC broadcast in late April 1938, he was after the grim realistic poetry of workers rather than the highly abstract and romantic poetry of Edith Sitwell.344 To explain what he and artists of the thirties were attempting to address, he quoted a railway worker’s purportedly authentic description of his daily surroundings:

Live in a street [worker says] practically closed in, the backs of one row of houses face our back, and the fronts of another row of houses face our front, across the bottom there is a Methodist Sunday School and at the top an open meadow, across the meadow is the public maternity hospital. Where I work is in the railway coal yard, very dreary and dull, it is situated in the lowest part of the town, as I look out of my office window to my left I see coal wagons, beyond them on the hillside a row of rather dirty-looking houses, and beyond them a hillside of green fields very drab and steep, with a pylon for electric top and bottom. In front more wagons, the fruit shed, and two mill chimneys to the right, the yard gates at the bottom of the main street which I can see about half, with a hotel at the bottom, shops, a garage and a cinema as it goes up to a left turn. At my back there is some spare ground on which travelling fairs stay—a few dirty shops with the passenger station which I cannot see to the back.345
The worker’s description fits so closely with the scenery depicted in the coal town
Pontypridd, Wales of Jennings’ *Spare Time* that one might question whether Jennings
invented the quote to explain his aim as a filmmaker for a poetic message in touch with the
life of the people, rather than highbrow poetry. Jennings specifically stated that he wanted
to give the public information about itself through a poetic message that was both moving
and thrilling.\(^\text{346}\) He sought a visual poetry “to show ourselves off to ourselves.”\(^\text{347}\)

Jennings’ private correspondence and public comments about his film *The Silent
Village* suggest that he believed the people’s self-awareness was paramount to standing
firm against fascist oppression.\(^\text{348}\) In 1934, as his anti-fascist ideals were forming, he
directed four documentary films for the G.P.O. about British class differences and the use of
industrial technology for the betterment of society. Yet over the next four years prior to
making *Spare Time*, he turned his attention away from film, putting far more energy into
establishing his reputation as a surrealist painter and poet, and into cofounding the social
experiment *Mass Observation*. As discussed in chapter one of the dissertation, the British
group saw surrealism as an avenue for exploring the full extent of reality through a
dialectical engagement of interior and exterior experience. Related to that aim, as well as
the British surrealists’ interests in labor and the deep interconnections between art and
life, and his own work on documentary films, Jennings envisioned *Mass Observation* as a
new form of written social documentary, founded to study crowd behavior through the
collection of individual observers’ subjective experiences.\(^\text{349}\) Not only did the project
further his filmic concerns through written means, it spoke to the working classes in ways
that most surrealist art did not. As Jennings and his co-founder journalist and fellow
surrealist writer Charles Madge stated it, *Mass Observation* was conceived as an
anthropological study of the British people, “giving working-class and middle-class people a chance to speak for themselves, about themselves.” Jackson claims the “problems” that the Mass Observation cofounders sought to study held surrealist tendencies, which included “behavior of people at war memorials; shouts and gestures of motorists; the aspidistra cult; anthropology of football pools; bathroom behavior; beards, armpits, eyebrows; anti-Semitism; distribution, diffusion and significance of the dirty joke; funerals and undertakers; female taboos about eating; the private lives of midwives.” As mystical and Freudian as these topics sound, they were identified out of a desire to understand the dynamics of British class culture. For example, the aspidistra cult was simply the fad for decorating homes with the relatively common houseplant aspidistra, which had come to represent middle class values and respectability.

Nowell-Smith has argued that Jennings worked in diverse media—film, painting, photographic collage, poetry, and anthropology—in the mid-thirties from a conviction that expression of the full complexity of modern life (his first priority on all fronts) required an avant-garde and original art, not one that relied on a rehashing of romanticism. Yet, as much as Jennings believed in contributing to a new modern art, and as much as he ascribed to the notion that English commoners valuable contributed to society, a careful scrutiny of his films and writings indicates that he remained far more committed to surrealism’s romanticist tendencies in his art than he preferred to admit. As early as 1936, Jennings took umbrage at the notion that surrealism might be used to reinforce society’s status quo. However, his advocacy of surrealism as a modern tool of revolution is hard to reconcile with the promotional films that he made for large corporations including *The Birth of the*
Robot, and with the patriotic tenor of his films such as Spare Time that were made for the British government in the thirties and forties.

To understand how Jennings might have balanced his genuine commitment to surrealism’s revolutionary politics with his promotional films, it is helpful to return to a review he wrote in December 1936 of Read’s book Surrealism. In that review Jennings lambasted Read’s portrayal of British romanticism as a surrealist precursor, and he disagreed with Read’s assessment that surrealism’s neo-romantic tendencies made it particularly useful as an antidote to classicism and staid convention. While Jennings readily admitted that societies since antiquity had harnessed classicism to promote Western culture’s reigning ideology, he argued that romanticism could just as effectively reinforce the power held by the institutions of civil society. He stated in particular, “We all agree with Mr. Read that the eternally fabricated ‘eternal truths of classicism’ constantly appear as the symbols and tools of a classical-military-capitalist-ecclesiastical racket.”

Speaking specifically about the power of film as a persuasive medium, Jennings went on to explain—with snide derision for Read’s view of surrealism as a form of neo-romanticism and perhaps even some foresight about how his own films would benefit industrial patrons and engage the public—that surrealism might in fact replace classicism as the new modality for reinforcing society’s dominant ideology:

But then we remember a recent query in a film-paper: ‘Is it possible that the business of national education is passing, by default, from the offices of Whitehall to the public relations departments of the great corporations?’ Is it possible that in place of a classical-military-capitalist-ecclesiastical racket there has come into being a romantic-cultural-soi-disant co-operative-new uplift racket ready and delighted to use the ‘universal truths of romanticism—co-eval with the evolving consciousness of mankind’ as symbols and tools for its own ends? Our ‘advanced’ poster designers and ‘emancipated’ business men—what a gift Surrealism is to them when it is
In fact, at the time Jennings wrote this, Whitehall (i.e., Grierson’s EMB) was at the forefront of the new field of public relations. Grierson’s approach to filmmaking was more romanticist than classicist, and the films produced by the EMB helped the British public understand how as individuals they contributed to the larger empire. Industry was by far the most significant patron of the independent film companies that were spawned from the EMB in the nineteen thirties, in large part because businesses wanted to capitalize on film’s ability to shape public perception in the way that the EMB did. Jennings’ assessment of surrealism, which was based in part on the success of The Birth of the Robot, was astonishingly prescient given the London design community’s admiration for surrealist and neo-romantic art designed by Edward McKnight-Kauffer and Nash well into the forties, and given Jennings’ continuing presence in the documentary movement. Years later, in a discussion with Ian Dalrymple and J. B. Holmes of the Crown Film Unit, Jennings explained how documentary films such as Night Mail (1936) varied from newsreel films. While newsreel films focused on the most astonishing moments of an event, in a documentary like Night Mail, he argued that it was important to “get into the romance of it, to get under the skin of the people who are responsible for it, to suggest further ramifications: where those letters came from, what they might contain, the emotions suggested by the various types of letters.”

Lye was less vocal in expressing his political views than Jennings, yet as a New Zealander who was deeply affected by tribal culture throughout his life, Lye was attuned to the social impact of colonialism, and began to speak out about the need to oppose fascism in the late thirties. Especially drawn to Cuban music and the indigenous art of the South...
Pacific, Lye had a keen interest in how abstract forms, such as those found on tapa cloth, could be made to move through time using film, and he had a growing reputation in London’s artistic circles as a stylistic and technical innovator for his direct films.\textsuperscript{358}

Unconcerned with money or the practicalities of life, Lye was drawn to socialism during his teen years, but unlike Jennings, he maintained even during the depression era that art should not be realistic or focus overtly on “social problems of the living.”\textsuperscript{359}

As early as the nineteen twenties, however, Lye was fascinated by the ability of Soviet theatre and silent film to convey strong social messages with an economy of words and a profusion of machines or moving machine-like constructions. He was so impressed with the kinetic aspects of Lyubov Popova’s stage set for the 1922 Meyerhold Theatre production of \textit{The Magnanimous Cuckold} that he considered moving to Moscow in 1925 to join the theater group (Figure 3.6).\textsuperscript{360} He was mesmerized by how the doors and windows of her set opened and shut and the wheels turned in relation to the action and emotional climaxes of the play. Lye used gears and crankshafts to similar effect in the opening and closing scenes of \textit{The Birth of the Robot}. That the film was developed for a capitalist corporation rather than to convey communist ideals was a relative non-issue for Lye. Like so many of the other British surrealists he had little interest in communism or dismantling capitalism, although he lived communally in Samoa, had friends in Sydney who enthusiastically supported the Russian revolution, and closely collaborated with Banting, probably the most outspoken communist in the surrealist group in London.\textsuperscript{361} From reading \textit{Time} magazine and Huntley Carter’s \textit{The New Theatre and Cinema of Soviet Russia}, Lye was more enthralled with the formal and abstract tactics used by Meyerhold to convey social messages, than he was with the political tenets of the Soviet proletarian
revolution. As Carter explained to British readers, Meyerhold founded a constructivist theater that combined costumes, sets, and choreography to create what were in essence, constructivist paintings in motion. Much like the robotic puppets in *The Birth of the Robot*, Meyerhold’s actors held biomechanical properties—“a rather wonderful engine composed of many engines” set into quirky motion in the playful tradition of *Commedia dell’arte*. Lye’s robotic puppets were modeled in the spirit of Oskar Schlemmer’s Bauhaus costumes for the Triadic ballet and Meyerhold’s actors. In all three cases the figures signified a utopian future. For Meyerhold, they were talismans of the industrial future of the communist state. Schlemmer devised his robotic costumes for a utopian world in which art and industry were symbiotically fused. Contrary to Meyerhold’s communist ideals and the socialist tenor of Bauhaus art, the robots in *The Birth of the Robot* were constructed to show how modern oil production might secure a productive and peaceful future for the capitalist British Empire.

Events in late 1929, a formative and fertile period in Lye’s filmmaking career, illustrate how he paradoxically coupled an admiration for Eisenstein and Richter’s experimental techniques with a disregard for socialist politics. Though he never made it to Moscow to work with Popova, in December 1929 Lye attended a now famous series of London Film Society lectures by Eisenstein and a related film production workshop run by Richter. Under Richter’s direction, the group created a short documentary film, *Every Day* (17 minutes), which included montage sequences, repetition, and stop action photography to show how the dull monotonous existence of typical white-collar city workers in 1929 was punctuated with rare moments of surrealist playfulness. Through stop-motion photography with a close-up view of a lunchtime meal, food dances around the plate. As
Jamie Sexton describes it, “inanimate objects assume lifelike properties and revolt against daily routine, thus expressing the sublimated desires of the workers.” Though Jennings did not attend the workshop, the film’s theme was closely aligned with the labor issues in his *Spare Time* and the British surrealists’ future view that the playfulness of surrealism might offer a respite from the drudgery of alienated labor. In a photograph that emphasizes the participants’ high-spirited experimentation and international cohesion in making the film, Eisenstein takes center stage in his appointed role as a policeman (*Figure 3.7*). Lye, smoking and wearing a hat from his costume as a white-collar worker, straddles a chair on the far right, and Richter wearing an *auteur’s* scarf sits to the lower left. Lye participated as an extra in *Every Day*, and he initiated a lifelong friendship with Richter during the workshop; however, he was bothered by the influence of Eisenstein’s leftist politics on the subject of *Every Day*. This is not surprising given that even in 1936 when Lye signed onto the British surrealists’ demand for proletarian revolution, he made it known elsewhere that art should not depict social issues in any realistic way. Up until his work on *Every Day*, Lye had made cubist-style sculptural constructions that were consistent with the abstract forms of Popova’s mechanized sets. Emphasizing the English public’s enthusiastic embrace of Lye’s abstract constructions and his presence in London’s commodity-driven art market, the *Auckland Sun* reported in 1928 that Lye, a “Futurist New Zealander,” “created a sensation” at London’s annual Seven and Five exhibition with his “mechanized art.” If social issues were to be presented in a work, Lye preferred that they be grounded in abstraction in the vein of the Russian Constructivists, not socialist documentary.

Although Lye was against making straightforward documentaries, his abstract artworks and films often manifested colonial and psychoanalytic themes. His first hand-
painted film *Tusalava*, which premiered at the London Film Society in the same month as the Eisenstein lectures and the completion of *Every Day*, was made from Lye’s drawings of Aboriginal witchetty grubs. In the movie the insect grubs wiggled in sync with avant-garde piano music, written and performed live by his friend Jack Ellitt. As Lye described his state of mind in making *Tusalava*, “To get in the spirit of the imagery I...imagined that I was myself an Australian Aboriginal who was making this animated tribal dance film.” His title for the film combines two Samoan words *tusa* and *lava* to mean that in the end, everything is the same. Like Agar’s paintings about African culture, his interest in indigenous art appealed to a small and loyal following in London, while a preponderance of viewers was “baffled and disconcerted” by his primitive influences. The Lord Chamberlain’s office even placed a temporary ban on screenings of *Tusalava* because of its purportedly sexual nature. For this reason, and perhaps due to Lye’s position outside mainstream society as an avant-garde filmmaker, the British public remained for the most part unaware of Lye’s films until *A Colour Box* appeared in theaters in 1935. According to David Curtis, *A Colour Box* attracted “a larger public that any experimental film before it, and most since.”

In 1936, Sidney Bernstein introduced Lye’s films to Walt Disney, who shared them with his staff, and various of Lye’s effects began to appear in Disney’s animated productions, including *Fantasia* (1940). Despite this commercial appropriation of his experimental techniques, Lye’s approach of hand painting directly onto 35mm film is the one type of filmmaking that literally embodies the *auteur* theory that film is the production of a single artist. Lye in fact worked alone for long hours painting films in his studio, and evidence of his hand is present in all of his painted films. For Lye, painting and filmmaking
were complimentary sides of his surrealist art. His direct approach to film blurred the distinctions between the two media, and his organic and evolutionary themes that were indicative of the British surrealists were expressed in both forms of art.

In an apparent retreat from his previous interest in mechanical forces, Lye’s batiks and paintings of the early thirties, similar to Agar’s surrealist art, focused heavily on transformations of natural forms, the origins of organic life, and the evolution of mankind and culture. Despite the British group’s call for proletarian revolution, its leaders were more than willing to hail both artists for their abstract forms when projecting the British group’s collective identity, and their drawings contained remarkably similar organic and linear forms as can be seen in their self portraits from the thirties (Figures 3.8 and 3.9). The painting *The King of Plants Meets the First Man* (1936) is illustrative of Lye’s focus on the origins and evolution of organic life and on primitive cultures (Figure 3.10). In the painting, the right leg of the world’s first man doubles as the eyebrow of a native mask and the king of plants is made up of a series of abstracted vegetal forms in the shape of a ceremonial headpiece. Lye’s painting matured during this period into a personal style that combined modernist and South Pacific influences including Samoan, Maori, and aboriginal art.

In the early thirties, Lye was more comfortable combining his interest in tribal art and kinetic theatre with an idiosyncratic curiosity in Freudian psychoanalysis, than he was in producing social documentaries, even if they were deemed experimental. He sought out illustrated books, which included psychoanalytic case studies, as a stimulus to his paintings and sculptures. Two books were particularly influential: *Expressionism in Art* by Dr. Oskar Pfister, which focused on an anonymous French modern painter who was drawn to African
art; and *Psychopathology* by Dr. Edward J. Kempf, which contained 87 illustrations related to disturbed patients. One photograph in Kempf's book—a mechanical contraption captioned “Copulation fetish by impotent negro paranoiac” instructed by God to build the “first church of perpetual motion”—inspired Lye to begin making similar kinds of kinetic sculpture (Figure 3.11). Lye claimed to be oblivious to Kempf’s opinion that the contraption was formed in a phallic shape to compensate for the man’s impotence and that it carried religious overtones as a way of concealing the sexual nature of the man’s disorder. Lye was primarily drawn to the kinetic aspects of the outsider folk sculpture, and he incorporated both the vertical form of the gears and pulleys and the paranoiac’s idea of “worshipping God as the primal force that made the world move” into the kinetic mechanisms designed for the opening and closing sequences in *The Birth of the Robot*. Because Jennings was instrumental in developing those opening and closing scenes, there is a possibility that Lye shared the image or his ideas about it with Jennings. The paranoiac contraption is also remarkably similar to the shape and the look of an “Iron Horse” illustration, which accompanied an article by Jennings in the June 1938 issue of the *London Bulletin* to promote Jennings’ upcoming special issue of the *London Bulletin* on machines (Figure 3.12).

**Evolving Labor and Technology in *The Birth of the Robot***

Through a series of abstract and surrealist elements, *The Birth of the Robot* paints a colorful story of the power of modern labor and evolving technologies to reinforce British power and thwart the fascist threat. Jennings, perhaps more than Lye, was responsible for establishing a central theme of the film—the development of labor from handwork to
mechanized robotics. While Lye had made his distaste for addressing social issues in film abundantly clear, Jennings had directed three instructional films for the G.P.O. in 1934 that dealt with the technological developments and changes in labor associated with the industrial revolution in Britain.\textsuperscript{375} Although \textit{The Birth of the Robot} is animated and takes a far more playful approach to both subject matter and color than Jennings’ earlier films, it still speaks to England’s social development during the industrial period. Perhaps the film’s childlike humor made the social theme palatable enough for Lye to consider pursuing it. To signify pre-industrial labor, the film begins with Father Time, as a long-bearded antiquated laborer with a scythe and hourglass beside him, hand-cranking a series of gears, which in turn rotate a solar carrousel holding Zeus, Venus, and two other gods (\textbf{Figure 3.13}). Below and to the side of the carrousel, Jennings’ globe of the earth rotates at a tilted angle. The creative team possibly devised these moving and rotating elements due to Lye’s interest in Popova’s sets produced for the Meyerhold ballet in Russia as well as the kinetics of the copulation fetish. However, the miniature gears and pistons illustrating the inner workings of collieries and factories in Jennings’ 1934 film \textit{Locomotives} served as more contemporary and local models for the cranks, pistons, and shafts in the opening and closing sequences of \textit{The Birth of the Robot} (\textbf{Figure 3.14}).\textsuperscript{376}

Lacking a narrator or spoken script, the film opens with the typography, “When the world was turned by hand and Venus made her lonely music amid the stars.” Less a libidinal goddess of love in the film, Venus is associated more directly with Eros as the Freudian life force, set against Father Time as the death instinct or Thanatos. As Venus, a slim yet curvaceous robot with long blond tresses, plays a shell harp, multicolored notes flow down musical bars from her celestial perch to earth. The film then cuts from a wide
view of her divine position on the rotating solar carrousel to the revolving globe where the great cities and roads of Europe thin to a stretch of barren sand and scattered palm trees that make up the Middle East. In the desert, as if spurred into action by Venus, an apparently privileged British colonialist, dressed in a clean white suit, hat, and sunglasses, drives a green roadster up and over the great pyramids of Giza as if he owned them. His expression is altogether giddy and enthusiastic (Figure 3.15). Exercising a surrealist disregard for consistent scale among the elements within a composition, Lye’s creative team made the size of the colonialist’s green roadster so that it would dwarf the pyramids. The colonialist puppet’s white suit and hat are reminiscent of the real outfits worn by the British colonialists overseeing the black sugar cane workers on horseback in Windmills in Barbados.

The animation then takes an abstract turn with a fierce sandstorm, evoked by a series of color fields and dot patterns, which in turn disturb the gleeful tourist’s state of bliss (Figure 3.16). The car’s anthropomorphic headlights squint against the ferocity of the wind. Shrii music and animal skeletons amplify the storm’s terrifying and disorienting effect, along with an abstracted (perhaps wooden?) form on the horizon, reminiscent of one of Nash’s surrealist found objects, the piece of driftwood titled Marsh Personnage, exhibited during the 1936 International Surrealist exhibition (See Figure 1.17). Viewers and critics were especially impressed with the color effects derived in the surreal storm sequence, and Disney animators matched Lye’s effects to produce the sandstorm in Fantasia’s “The Rite of Spring.”

In the wake of the sandstorm in the Egyptian desert, the word “OIL” appears in golden viscous letters on a black ground, and the music from the Planets turns to lighter
somnolent rhythms. After the word OIL, a “Garage” mirage magically appears before the sore eyes of the British car and driver like a camp vision of the *Taj Mahal*, surrounded by cellophane palm trees and brightly colored gas pumps (Figure 3.17). However, as the mirage fluctuates in and out of vision, all is not rosy for the Brit and his roadster. The music darkens and his green car is overwhelmed first by a giant hourglass, and then by the ancient laborer Thanatos swinging his scythe as an instrument of death. A jaw-dropping skull flies into the viewers’ face, and the sequence ends with an aerial shot of the car and driver, now only bones, marooned by a dead tree on the desert floor. Awakened from her slumber, Venus sends down musical notes once more, and the notes magically become oil drops that transform the driver’s skeleton into a robot (Figure 3.18).

The last sequence of the film focuses on the robot who rises to make animated semaphore-like hand signals in unison with a streetlight flashing from red to green. The robot’s shadow is then cast on the barren desert floor, which transforms into the ground of the empire’s core, implying that Egypt and Britain are part of one expansive British territory (Figure 3.19). As roads and the classical monuments of European culture appear one by one over the desert terrain, in syncopation with music from *The Planets*, the robot’s bright orange shadow figures in the landscape like the Long Man of Wilmington, a chalk figure cut into an East Sussex hillside nearby Penrose’s home, Farley Farm, in Chiddingly (Figure 3.20). Penrose and the surrealists were fascinated with the Long Man, a mysterious and haunting emblem of British culture and England’s long tradition of agrarian labor. Yet in the film, the robot’s shadow is a highly modern evocation of the ancient Long Man, just as the mechanized pistons that appear alongside the robot at the end of the film replace Father Time’s old-fashioned crankshafts in the opening scene.
With a shrill crescendo in the music, the scene cuts to a darker shadow of the robot, now more of a threatening harbinger who looms over the rotating globe (Figure 3.21). He points overhead to the sky, and the view expands above the earth to the shadow of three warplanes flying in formation from east to west. On the same abstracted blue ground, a shadow of the robot in his roadster flies in triumphal return from the west. The film concludes with Venus waving down to the robot who, in his mechanical splendor, returns her greeting from the base of the carrousel (Figure 3.22). Standing in front of a flourish of rapidly turning pistons and levers that have replaced Father Time’s dated crankshafts, the robot performs a semaphore dance of exultation in unison with a victorious passage from The Planets, and the film closes with two sets of typography: “Modern Worlds need Modern Lubrication.” and “Lubrication by Shell Oil.” The first emphasizes the modern and transformative theme of the film, while the final sentence drives home the corporate authority to realize those goals.

Various surrealists from Man Ray, to Agar in England, and Karel Teige in Czechoslovakia visited the theme of a robot from the mid-nineteen twenties through the forties.380 For the opening on 17 January 1938 of the surrealist International Exhibition held in the Galerie des Beaux-Arts in Paris, plans were even made for a robot—“an authentic descendent of Frankenstein”—to appear.381 While Banting and Lye most likely modeled their robotic figures from a range of sources for The Birth of the Robot including Meyerhold’s actors, Schlemmer’s dancers, and the general concept of a mannequin, other surrealist artists such as Man Ray and Agar used small wooden artist mannequins with bendable joints to stand in as robotic puppets in their artworks (Figures 3.23 & 3.24). However, their found objects focus attention on the artist’s non-alienated and creative
labor within the studio, rather than the autonomy of mechanized labor that Lye references. In their case, the viewer is reminded that the artist has brought the robot to life. The posed positions of their robotic puppets manifest the artist’s manipulation of the figure more than any semblance of life. There is no pretense that their robots are actually alive. By contrast, through a sequence of stop-action photography in Lye’s film, the robot rises from the carcass of the dead tourist, in a supposed act of generation with the aid of Venus.

Lye was not the first to attribute human qualities to an inanimate figure through stop action photography. His approach to the robot as an animate being is similar to the robotic wire protagonist of *Les Tribulations de M. WZZZ...*, a photographic novel produced by Max Morise, Marcel Duhamel, and Man Ray in 1929, though there is no evidence that Lye was aware of that earlier photographic novel or the wire figure associated with it.382 Beyond the surrealists, Vertov had used stop action photography in 1929 in *Man with a Movie Camera*. *The Birth of the Robot* was only one of several elaborate experimental films that relied on puppet animation over cartoon animation in the mid thirties.383 According to accounts in *The English Weekly* in early July 1936, viewers of *The Birth of the Robot* found Banting’s robots “more grotesque” and “more expressive” than earlier film puppets.384 The two most important robot films that came before *The Birth of the Robot* were Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* (1929) and Harry Piel’s *Der Herr der Welt (The Master of the World)* (1934). Both of those films, like *The Birth of the Robot*, focused on the replacement of human labor with mechanized labor. However, those two earlier films emphasized the human costs associated with mechanized assembly lines, rather than the benefits of moving from hand labor to mechanized labor as Lye did. The earlier films portrayed machines as mortal threats to human laborers, even if Maria, the savior of the workers in *Metropolis*, ultimately
transforms into a robot, and *The Master of the World* ends with the warrior death-ray robots taking over assembly lines so that humans might be free to pursue more humane work. By all accounts, labor was a potent topic for films during the period.

Shell’s publicity officer Beddington who produced *The Birth of the Robot* and other forward-thinking public relations specialists sought out avant-garde artists such as Lye and Jennings to bring prestige to the sponsoring businesses, because the artists had won artistic awards and had garnered positive reviews and the embrace of the London Film Society and trade groups for their experimental films. Lye’s most recent commission by Imperial Tobacco Company—a four-minute film *Kaleidoscope* released in late October 1935 at the London Film Society—had “moved the audience to a state of sheer glee” according to a critic writing for *To-day’s Cinema.* It and *The Birth of the Robot* broke new territory for public relations and were critically acclaimed for their experimental qualities. Due in part to their success, Beddington’s enthusiasm for capitalizing on the public fascination with surrealist art remained palpable even in 1947. As Beddington put it, “The higher levels of education of today and tomorrow will make it more and more difficult for the bold, bad business-man of the past to exist. We are going to have the bold, good merchant in the future and both my adjectives will apply to his use of the arts in general to further his enterprise in a way that is both lawful and beneficial.” As early as 1935 when he commissioned *The Birth of the Robot,* Beddington considered himself to be one of these new merchants and believed publicity would only become more progressive given the growing awareness of the benefits of soft sell public relations over hard-hitting product promotion.
Modern Workers in *Spare Time*

Humphrey Jennings’ *Spare Time* emphasizes the contributions of local British citizens as actors throughout the film. The opening credits, which roll over patriotic march music, recognize the people in Sheffield, Manchester, and Bolton, England and Pontypridd, Wales, as well as the three local bands and orchestras who performed for the film. Factory smokestacks and adjacent worker housing figure prominently in the film’s initial sequence of images, stressing the omnipresent corporation in each modern industrial town (Figure 3.25). Although Jennings said that he preferred not to see surrealism as a neo-romantic movement in opposition to classicism, the opening and closing images of *Spare Time* that combine smokestacks and row houses in claustrophobic proximity are reminiscent of Bill Brandt’s neo-romantic photographs of coal miners’ houses taken in East Durham in 1937 (Figure 3.26). Jennings’ choice to convey day-to-day existence in northern English and Welsh industrial cities with visually cold and oppressive images, even if they have a poetic beauty to them, belies *Spare Time*’s purportedly upbeat theme of leisure time. The houses of the opening scenes stand in uniform conformity and the damp streets are bare and lifeless. His paintings of the period exhibit the same often lonely and always bleak outlook. For example, the lurid color and crystalline planes of the oil on canvas *The House in the Woods* (1939-44) portray an apparently idyllic British suburb or rural area in harsh and disorienting terms (Figure 3.27). In *Spare Time*, Jennings presents viewers with purportedly objective images of everyday life in Britain’s industrial cities; and in this way, the film feels both rational and traditional. The patriotic march music that underlies the opening credits and many of the scenes also serve to ennoble Jennings’ primarily lower and middle class subjects. For all these reasons, *Spare Time* reads as a neo-
romantic film, and it functions on the political grounds that Read laid out in his book *Surrealism* that Jennings critiqued. By focusing on the working classes rather than showing scions or overseers who framed the dominant ideology of capitalism, Jennings attempted to subvert the typical operation of classical art that reinforced societal values, and he did it through neo-romantic means.

Rather than the playful magic of *The Birth of the Robot*, Jennings’ film is emblematic of the surrealists’ stated aim to focus on working class issues. As in Julian Trevelyan’s surrealist painting, *The Potteries* (1938), and Magritte’s cover drawing for the first issue of the *London Gallery Bulletin*, an early scene in Jennings’ film focuses on male workers wearing flat caps leaving the steel furnaces (Figure 3.28). Smoke figures prominently in all three of these examples. In Trevelyan’s painting, the workers’ faces are covered in black soot and smoke overwhelms the landscape (Figure 2.3); and in Magritte’s drawing, the worker puffs on a meerschaum pipe in the shape of a head, which in turn puffs on another anthropomorphic pipe, and so on (Figure 3.29). In Jennings’ film, smokestacks fill the background from which the men depart in cap and coat with newspapers in hand. Despite the apparent candidness of their movements, Jennings precisely orchestrated the scene and consciously portrayed smokestacks on the horizon to mark the landscape as a site of industry. Throughout the film, Jennings attempts to render workers’ authentic experience through associative and carefully constructed montages. As a result, the social fabric in these urban communities appears to be centered around either the steel, cotton, or coal industry, and it is constructed through scenes of individuals’ activities. This method of showing the whole from the sum of the parts is similar to how Jennings and the Mass Observation team combined people’s individual accounts of their lives to document the
social response to the coronation of King George VI and Queen Elizabeth in 1937. Yet in *Spare Time*, the King and Queen are omitted. In fact, while capitalist industry is ever present in the film, Jennings never focuses on anyone in a position of power. As patriotic marches fill the film’s sound track to draw attention to his subjects’ contributions to the British Commonwealth, Jennings focuses on real workers and local musicians going about their daily activities, apparently oblivious to the world beyond their immediate surroundings of factory and home.

The meaning of Jennings’ film is underscored by its structure. Laurie Lee, an English writer deeply committed to the Spanish Republican cause, narrated the film. Perhaps to appeal to the international audience at the world’s fair, his voiceover accent sounds as American as it does British. Moreover, rather than showing impartiality or his remove from the subjects of the film, Lee speaks in the first person plural when introducing the film’s theme: “between work and sleep, comes the time we call our own. What do we do with it?” Aside from this introduction, however, Lee provides minimal commentary as the film depicts mundane daily life in the few hours after rising and before entering the workplace, after work and before bedtime, and on the weekends using avant-garde modalities. Beyond explaining the aim of the film, Lee’s voiceover narration occurs just four more times in the film—to introduce the steel, cotton, and coal sequences; and to conclude the film. As if to illustrate explicitly the dialectical union of leisure and work in modern society, Lee’s terse voiceover statements explain the work hours of each industry, which in turn determine the parameters of workers’ leisure time. Lee explains that the shift system in the steel industry means that spare time can come at any time of the day, whereas the cotton mills “open at eight, close at five, Saturday afternoons and Sundays off.” To introduce coal, he states only
two words, “Finally coal.” The narrator’s emphasis on labor over repose reinforces Adorno’s notion that the capitalist employer dictates the amount of the modern worker’s leisure and the time period during which it must occur, even if there is some freedom in how that time is spent. Given the situation, Lee’s concluding statement—“As things are, spare time is a time when we have a chance to do what we like. A chance to be most ourselves.”—carries an understated irony.

Before turning to the steel industry, viewers are presented with a series of scenes of people of various classes and ages—business men in suits descend from a bus or trolley, younger male office workers make their way to work on bicycles, a middle-class working mother collects her child from an elderly caregiver, and a factory worker walks his daughter home after work. During this class sequence that is not defined by any one industry, patriotic march music blares, making the bleak settings feel more positive and emphasizing civic and familial duty. Throughout the film, class designations are vividly portrayed—a small boy in tattered shorts draws in chalk on the sidewalk and couples of varying socio-economic status dance together to the music of the local orchestra (Figure 3.30). Beyond class, the predominance of heterosexual couples on the dance floor is upset by two young women in short less-formal dresses who sashay into the scene. It is not clear whether the young women are single friends or sisters enjoying the dance together after work, or they are a lesbian couple. Most likely Jennings was representing the custom of that time for women who had no sexual interest in each other to dance together as partners on an occasional basis. While the film focuses primarily on class and age distinctions, the women’s entry into the scene suggests Jennings' awareness of the subtler gender issues at play in society as well.
Although the film typically addresses individual or small group activities, in three scenes of *Spare Time* the camera focuses on mass crowds of spectators, as if to make a point about the mass consumption of entertainment in much the same way that Walter Benjamin did three years earlier in an essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” It is doubtful that Jennings would have been familiar with the content of Benjamin’s essay as it was written in French in Paris where Benjamin had sought refuge from Nazi Germany in 1933, even though Jennings had close ties to Paris, was sympathetic to anti-fascist émigrés, and spoke fluent French. However, it is significant that Jennings and Benjamin were independently and contemporaneously considering the impact of mechanical developments, and of film in particular, on the power of art to convey authentic experience. Both men felt that technology had opened up the potential for film to serve as a revolutionary force in society, even if society had not yet been mature enough to harness technology for lasting social improvements.\(^{392}\) In one scene of *Spare Time*, as if to draw the film audience’s attention to itself, Jennings turns his camera on a large crowd amassed in the bleachers at a soccer match, and for the first time during the film, band music is absent. Instead, the natural sounds of the crowd responding to the soccer match are recorded to emphasize the personality and energy of the people amassed to watch the game. The swell of applause mounts as the goalie averts an attempted goal. In another sequence a few minutes later in the film, Jennings presents viewers with a smaller crowd, this time focusing on the mannerisms of individuals enthralled in watching a wrestling match. In ironic counterpoint, viewers of *Spare Time* hear the Manchester Victorian Carnival Band play “Rule Britannia” on kazoo, as they watch the responses of the crowd of men and women watching the fight. The last audience scene in *Spare Time* focuses on individuals
immersed in watching a puppet play on a large stage (Figure 3.31). The audience’s attention is drawn to two puppets—a Welsh flax spinner and a harpist—as the Handel Male Voice Choir sings Handel’s “Largo” over the scene. The camera turns from the stage to the audience to register the emotional responses of spectators to the puppet’s actions. This close attention to individual facial expressions and mannerisms is indicative of Jennings’ desire to treat people as “human beings” rather than “looking for types.” For both Benjamin and Jennings, film put a distracted modern audience in the role of the critic. In Benjamin’s words, “The public is an examiner, but an absent-minded one.” Jennings’ film seems to imply that audiences in various settings took on the role of critic as well. Each real crowd scene in Spare Time drew the contemporary British public’s attention to itself. Each crowd scene also makes two things apparent to film audiences in any era: that because the mass was distracted from its usual routine, it was in a position to be absorbed by the activity at hand (soccer, wrestling, or the puppet play), and in such an absorbed and removed state, members of the crowd responded critically to what they saw—they cheered with each winning move on the field, they pulled for their wrestler over his foe, and they assessed the puppets’ actions.

Like Benjamin, Jennings believed that art had the greatest potential to mobilize the masses through film, although both men recognized that film’s cult value could undermine its political power. In comparing documentary film to dramatic shorts, Jennings stressed that documentarians presented real people rather than famous actors to the audience, so that the audience would be able to more closely identify with the actions in the film. Yet Jennings stated that documentary for him was not simply presenting the thing itself for an audience’s consumption, as was the case in newsreel footage:
Newsreels show the thing itself. We [documentarians] restage and reconstruct things to show what it looks like when you’ve thought about it. We emphasize certain points to the exclusion of others, taking the background and ideas that have produced the scene into consideration. We have a choice over the setting that will best describe the situation we’re after. ... it is surreptitious in that we take a real individual, place him in a situation he might actually find himself in, and allow life to unfold around him. ... Sometimes we notify police and have an assistant tell the public not to notice or interfere with filmmakers. In this way, we can situate an individual in society so that he becomes part of that living reality.396

Jennings readily admitted that his manipulation of actors and scenes was surreptitious. For him, documentary offered a middle ground between star-studded productions that lacked a connection to reality and newsreels that lacked any sort of reflection. In this middle ground, he believed documentary films that engaged local people in controlled scenes were capable of breaking down the prejudices and class partitions in society. Likewise, Benjamin applauded the breakdown in the distinctions between author and public in Russian films where people portrayed “themselves—and primarily in their own work process.”397

Jennings in fact was emulating Soviet filmmakers’ engagement of proletarian actors to achieve similar goals when he used British industrial laborers in Spare Time. However, Jennings as the author wanted to control the scenes comprised of capitalist workers. Like Benjamin, Jennings was committed to presenting an alternative to the “illusion-promoting spectacles” of the major film studios. Jennings believed, as Benjamin stated it, that such “capitalistic exploitation of the film denies consideration to the modern man’s legitimate claim to being produced,” and it was Jennings’ mission to rectify the situation by producing Britain’s workers on the screen.398

As opposed to the redemptive rebirth of the British colonialist in The Birth of the Robot, Jennings emphasizes the steel, cotton, and coal workers’ confinement within the capitalist industrialist complex as much as he portrays their spare time activities. At the
conclusion of the steel sequence in *Spare Time*, the camera turns to men buying postal orders behind a heavy chain-link partition (Figure 3.32). While it is simply a grate at a post office station, the image emphasizes the separation of worker and state, and the need to protect the government and postal cash boxes from potentially unruly patrons. To compare this form of mild subjugation within British class society with the more restrictive confinement of animals in a zoo, early in the cotton sequence in Manchester, viewers are presented with a close up of tigers and lions, pacing in front of the heavy bars of their cages in the *Belle Vue* amusement park. To return to the containment of man’s atavistic tendencies, the lion is followed by the wrestling match—a masculine group activity that involves controlled physical violence in a ring. The camera cuts between the crowd gathered to watch the match, and the two men in combat overseen by a referee. During the concluding coal sequence, the darkest and most surreal sequence in the film, Jennings’ careful selection of camera angles creates a visual congruence between the site of the Danter’s circus and the coal pits just beyond its perimeter. The pulleys and harnesses of the coal pits appear like a dark Ferris wheel against the muted and opaque sky, and it is difficult to tell where the pit ends and the circus begins. In this surreal and disoriented space, the visual congruence between the mines and the circus drives home that the circus, a frivolous and exciting pastime set within the company town, is a temporary diversion to draw the colliers and their families’ attention away from their austere company housing where they appear to enjoy their spare time, and the dark and dangerous conditions in the mine.

Unlike *The Birth of the Robot* that foregrounds Venus as a symbol for Eros, Jennings presents a number of images in *Spare Time* to subtly show the presence of the death
instinct or Thanatos along with the life force (Figure 3.33). For example, as a brass band rehearses in their spare time from working in the steel furnaces, viewers are presented with a wide shot of the steel mills, smoke rising from their stacks, and a dank river flowing over a dam in the foreground. A large object, perhaps simply a log, is jammed in the dam. Yet the dark object appears almost like a dead body hung in the spillage. When the camera cuts back to the band, the men play their instruments with resigned expressions even though the sound of the song is upbeat and patriotic. Later in the steel sequence, Jennings includes intercut shots of a group of young men and women on a cycle-club outing in the countryside—an ebullient activity, made more happy by the band music that plays under the scene. Yet the riders pass a grouping of dilapidated barns, outbuildings, and old farm equipment, drawing the film audience’s attention to the shifting character of the British countryside—in the past seen a pastoral site of agrarian labor and becoming in modern times the superfluous outskirts of an industrial center. During the cotton sequence, a man stands wrapping a package shaped like a small coffin. Later in Manchester, to close out a series of shots of ballroom dancers pirouetting to “The Bells of Saint Mary’s,” Jennings focuses not on the lively dancers, but their shadows and the gaps left between them on the parquet dance floor. The strict geometric pattern of the dance floor draws the viewers’ attention away from the playful and imaginative forces stimulated by the dancers’ movements, and instead underscores the conformities of the culture industry—the admission fees required for admittance, the uniform nature of the dance steps, the predetermined notes of the band music, the expectations for dress and behavior, and the innocuous setting of the dancehall.
Spare Time depicts mundane scenes in British industrial towns to draw attention to the wide variety of opportunities for leisure apart from workers’ regimented work day through the use of dissolves, intercut shots, as well as fast movement, strange juxtapositions, and dark shadows to give the film a surrealist look. The dancehall scene is preceded by the dress rehearsal of a restoration comedy. To transition between the dress rehearsal and the dancehall, Jennings dissolves an image of the play’s producer, a middle-aged woman with dark hair, into a wide shot of the band stage (Figure 3.34). A similar dissolve transitions between a sequence of shots of a man out walking his dogs in a semi-industrial area and a scene of another man tending his pigeons in the same general location. These men practicing their hobbies express in visual terms Adorno’s notion that a hobby speaks to a paradox:

If we suppose with Marx that in bourgeois society labour power has become a commodity in which labour is consequently reified, then the expression ‘hobby’ amounts to a paradox: that human condition which sees itself as the opposite of reification, the oasis of unmediated life within a completely mediated total system, has itself been reified just like the rigid distinction between labour and free time. The latter is a continuation of the forms of profit-oriented social life.399

In each case, the hobby represents the unmediated opposite of the worker’s reified work, and as well the hobby serves as an oasis within a completely mediated and reified system, which is dictated and controlled by the factories in the background. Adorno, Lye, and Jennings each focus on the word oasis. Whereas the garage oasis offers a fictitious refuge or salvation to the dying colonialist in The Birth of the Robot, the men’s hobbies in Spare Time offer an apparent “oasis of unmediated life” in an industrial city dominated by steel mills—a place that Jennings painstakingly portrayed as a wholly mediated social system with an industrial center, around which rows of worker housing are congregated, and between...
which the workers come and go. The narrator’s spare words emphasize that within this environment, there are only a few hours a day or on the weekend when workers can freely choose what they do. Many of the spare time activities—wrestling, penny bets, a dance, a play, and the circus—are businesses with admission fees, rules, and expectations for the comportment of participants. Thus as Adorno suggested, the hobbies in Spare Time are only slightly less reified than the workers’ labor when on duty in the mills or mines.

The coal sequence opens with loud sirens coming from the pits and a pan of the colliers’ row houses amassed against the hillside, as if to iterate Arthur Schopenhauer’s notion (picked up by Adorno) that “mankind is the factory product of nature.”400 (Figure 3.35). As Adorno suggested in his unrelated essay, Jennings’ scene “captures something of what the totality of the commodity character actually makes man into.”401 The bleak expanse of collier housing set against the landscape quickly dissolves to the bright lights and signs of “Danter’s” circus where mechanized rides swirl at vertiginous angles (Figure 3.36). By blending images of the row houses set against the hillside and the temporary amusement park, Jennings reiterates how leisure in the town is inextricably tied to the mining industry. Once inside the circus park, the speed of the amusement rides emphasizes that the circus is merely a fleeting and makeshift distraction from the monotony of the daily work schedule in the mining town, rather than any real panacea for the colliers’ alienating labor. The coal sequence draws to a close with a series of intercut shots of the interiors and exteriors of storefronts (Figure 3.37)—a trope popular with surrealist artists because it was defined by commerce, hinted at libidinal desire, offered unexpected juxtapositions of objects, blurred the distinctions between real and synthetic bodies, and functioned as a sign of the capitalist economy. Shot from a camera mounted on a car, in much the same way
that Vertov filmed many of the street scenes in *Man with a Movie Camera*, a long tracking shot picks up on lighted storefronts to give viewers a sense that they are moving along the street of shops as a collier or his family might.  

Jennings’ use of surrealist techniques is similar to the methods used by Lye in the short film *N. or N.W. (North or Northwest)* produced in 1937 following *The Birth of the Robot*. In *N. or N.W.*, Lye took the opportunity to expand his repertoire beyond hand drawn animations and puppets. Instead, he used non-professional actors to tell a story of a young couple’s miscommunication after the young man sends a letter of apology to the wrong London postal code. Although Lye conceded to convention by using live actors to portray real scenes in *N. or N.W.*, he managed to break away from the orthodox camerawork and editing established by D. W. Griffith for Hollywood film dramas. Lye’s cameraman, Jonah Jones, was more than happy to follow Lye’s “strange ideas about focus-pulling.” As a result, the film is replete with unconventional edits, subjective close-ups from odd angles, dissolves between scenes, superimpositions of maps and letters, and other special effects (Figure 3.38). According to Horrocks, Cavalcanti removed Lye’s favorite sequence from the film because it broke too many of the conventions of narrative cinema. In the removed sequence, after the female protagonist put on her shoes in her room, the bedroom floor dissolved into a city street where her walk appeared as a series of abbreviated signs of walking. Through that series of shots, Lye had hoped to break down motion into its elemental parts and recombine it in filmic terms, much like Marcel Duchamp had done in painterly terms in *Nude Descending a Staircase*. The sequence that Cavalcanti deleted from *N. or N.W.*, however, appears no more experimental than the dissolves between scenes and the extreme close-ups of fast moving carnival rides that Cavalcanti allowed to
remain in *Spare Time* as Jennings’ producer. The surrealist tone of *Spare Time* is even reinforced by a scene near the end of the film in which a young man smokes a cigarette and reads a newspaper with the headline “Her Scent Was Bats’ Delight” (*Figure 3.39*). The newspaper also has a smaller headline, “Loneliest Job’s Salary is £0,” which effectively buttresses the film’s labor theme at the same time. It may be that Cavalcanti was willing for G.P.O. films to move in a more experimental direction by 1939, but another more likely explanation for his allowing so many surrealist tendencies to stand in *Spare Time* is that the film addresses the prosaic theme of labor in Britain’s three primary industries. *Spare Time* reinforces the protestant work ethic and patriotism on multiple levels and in ways that the government and capitalist industry would have wholeheartedly supported in 1939. The featured bands and choirs play patriotic marches, protestant hymns, and “Rule Britannia.” These songs become the unspoken narrative of the film, holding perhaps more significance for the film’s meaning than Lee’s voiceover. Because local musicians performed the music, the music purports to speak to the spare time of a creative, and altogether complacent and genial, workforce. The communal spirit of the pub scene is sanitized with Handel’s “Largo” played under it, and the colliers who make their way to work along the dark streets at night can also share in a ball game at the local YMCA. The ideological message of the film makes its surrealist palette acceptable, and the surrealist elements of *Spare Time* give its cut and dry motifs more levity and psychological power than they would have otherwise. A prime example of this cross-fertilization between surrealist method and the film’s motifs that reinforce conventions of the British social order is the bizarre and unconventional scene in which a local Morris Troupe band plays “Rule Britannia” on kazooes in an open field in Manchester (*Figure 3.40*). The bleak repetition of the row houses behind the band and the
troupe’s earnest seriousness are leavened and made almost funny by the kazoo music, the ungainly majorettes’ tight fitting dresses, and Britannia’s makeshift warrior-princess garb.

Conclusions

Both films reached an exceptionally large audience with their social message. More widely distributed than most advertising films of the period, *The Birth of the Robot* was shown in over 300 cinemas to as many as three million viewers.\textsuperscript{407} Though they were often shown before a feature, advertising films were novel enough at the time that people purchased tickets at the London Film Society and other venues expressly to see popular ones.\textsuperscript{408} The G.P.O. Film Unit was also remarkably successful in attracting big audiences despite its small stable of filmmakers and its non-commercial status. According to G.P.O. estimates, over four and a half million people had seen its films by the fall of 1939.\textsuperscript{409} By reaching so many British viewers, Lye and Jennings were able to draw the public’s attention to itself. While individuals had varied responses to the films, both films were produced to reach the general public with a celebratory message about the ingenuity of British workers and their refinement of natural resources, as the surrealists, documentarians, and their corporate patrons alike demanded, albeit for different reasons. Companies such as Shell-Mex and BP Oil sought out Lye and Jennings in an effort to appear modern. However, unlike the surrealists, they were also firmly entrenched in sustaining the British capitalist empire. Beddington was more than pleased to capitalize on Lye’s prodigious ability to create innovative and captivating films; and Lye welcomed the opportunity to ply his craft.
On the one hand the fighter planes that are vanquished by the robot suggest that *The Birth of the Robot* carried an underlying anti-fascist message—perhaps the strongest and most deeply felt aspect of the British surrealist’s political platform in the late thirties, but that theme was subtly expressed in this film. On the other hand, *The Birth of the Robot*’s playful irony and innovative animation that fascinated Lye as a surrealist made the film more successful and allowed it to reach a wider audience than any previous promotional film for a major British corporation.

By all accounts, *Spare Time* spoke to the effects of technology on modern society, and to the status of workers’ free time from three industries—steel, cotton, and coal—that often dictated the amenities and opportunities for people living in the company towns surrounding the mills and mines. Without doubt, Jennings infused what critics have come to see as surrealist qualities in *Spare Time* to maximize its democratic appeal in support of laborers. Yet counter to all written accounts of surrealism’s political aims, including Jennings’ own critique of Read’s position, Jennings unmistakably and unapologetically directed *Spare Time* as a vehicle for nationalistic propaganda in the year before Britain entered the Second World War. Enamored with the success of Soviet film in rallying the masses around revolutionary values, Jennings solicited local people as actors so that the British public might see themselves in the film and come to understand their individual contributions to the greater empire in a time of crisis.

*Spare Time* also pleased and mollified the masses through a striking array of images and music that reinforced the protestant work ethic. This maneuver was at odds with the surrealists’ revolutionary stand against exploitative capitalism and Jennings’ own writing. Looking at the film from that point of view, just as Adorno argued late in life,
Jennings’ use of popular and patriotic music swayed the masses away from the critical thought demanded by the surrealists to a more regressive form of listening. Yet Jennings and Penrose seemed blinded to this operation. They only saw the film’s potential for reaching the masses and somehow believed its patriotic tenor increased its surrealist power. This belief, held by two key leaders of the British Group, did as much to undermine their stated surrealist politics as it did to support the British government in a time of unparalleled crisis. Even later in life, Penrose remained proud of Jennings’ films as surrealist works. Jennings’ films embodied a vital understanding of Britain’s long industrial history and its present state, yet in coming to terms with the impact of the machine on Britain’s land and people, Jennings was not able to resist the euphoria that had made possible industrialization’s splendid and horrible inventions. From the writings of Jennings and Elton, it is impossible to decipher whether they celebrated or hated that “Romance left Arcady for a railway station.” Elton more than Jennings professed to feel both emotions in sublime terms.

Whether he was aware of it or not, Benjamin’s theory about the controlled mass reception of film was borne out by the reception of British surrealist art and film in London. For Benjamin, large movie theaters provided a setting in which the audience’s receptive and critical attitudes could coincide. He contrasted this with how the public generally responded to art—as a collection of independent individuals in a gallery situation. According to his theory, in that more personal experience of looking at art, if an individual happened to take a reactionary stand against the new, it was not so easily mitigated by the larger audience’s positive attitudes or excitement, as was the case in viewing film. To substantiate his view, Benjamin compared audience responses to a grotesque film and
surrealist art as an example of the phenomenon: “Thus the same public which responds in a progressive manner toward a grotesque film is bound to respond in a reactionary manner to surrealism.” In the same year, as if to provide more evidence to support Benjamin’s argument, a majority of critics heaped opprobrium on the artworks exhibited in the London international surrealist exhibition, and older and more conventional members of the viewing public mocked the exhibits. At the same time, large audiences turned out to see the films of Lye and Jennings, and there was almost universal praise for The Birth of the Robot and Spare Time.

Chapter 3 Endnotes

288 Grierson formed the G.P.O. Film Unit in 1933 and was its first producer. Grierson hired Cavalcanti as his second in command in 1934. A fellow student of Jennings at Cambridge, Stuart Legg, introduced Jennings to Grierson in the same year. Jennings was affiliated with G.P.O. Film Unit as an editor, designer, and director from 1934-35 and from 1938 through the first few months of World War II, when in late 1940 it became the Crown Film Unit under the Films Division of the Ministry of Information. Jennings continued to work for the Crown Film Unit. In 1934, Cavalcanti urged Lye to speak with Grierson about employment at the G.P.O. Grierson was eager to take on an experimental modernist working in color to vitalize the Unit’s circulating packages of black and white documentaries. Lye remained with the G.P.O. Film Unit through 1938. John Grierson left the G.P.O. Film Unit in June 1937. Cavalcanti left in spring 1940.

289 From 1927 through the early thirties, Lye lived in St. Peter’s Square in Hammersmith near his sound editor Jack Ellitt, painter John Piper, and surrealist painters Ceri Richards and Julian Trevelyan. He also socialized with surrealists Henry Moore and Stanley William Hayter at the Black Lion pub, a popular bohemian hangout, just down the street from his studio. Whenever his own work ebbed, he visited friends' studios for a new “propulsion.” Lye was invited by Ben Nicholson to exhibit as a guest artist with the Seven and Five Society in 1927, and Nicholson backed him for full membership in 1929. Roger Horrocks, Len Lye: A Biography (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2001), 99-101.


292 For more on the production of Tusalava, see: Horrocks, Len Lye: A Biography, 90-95. The London Film Society was founded in late 1925 to present experimental and foreign films not distributed in England, either because commercial circuits would not purchase the rights to show them or because the censor refused their wider release in England. Due to censorship, The London Film Society was the first to show Eisenstein’s Battleship Potemkin and Ten Days Which Shook the World in England. Lye joined the society in 1926. Members of the society—including filmmakers and critics Ivor Montagu and Thorold Dickinson, the CEO of Granada theatres and television Sidney Bernstein, poets Robert Graves and Norman Cameron, and abstract artist Ben
Nicholson—provided modest funds for Lye to complete *Tusalava*. The film was influenced by Aboriginal and Maori art and modernism.

291 Lye's film *Peanut Vendor* has also been titled *Experimental Animation*. Moises Simons' song *El Manisero* took the form of a *son pregón*, based on a Cuban street vendor's cry, and is often considered a rumba. *El Manisero* set off a rumba craze that lasted into the forties.

292 For more on the production of *A Colour Box*, see: Horrocks, *Len Lye: A Biography*, 133-41. In *A Colour Box*, Lye's hand painted film was set to the song "La Belle Creole" by Don Barreto and his Cuban Orchestra.


294 For Grierson's quote, see: Jeffrey Richards, "John Grierson and the Lost World of the G.P.O. Film Unit," in *The Projection of Britain: A History of the G.P.O. Film Unit*, ed. Scott Anthony and James G. Mansell (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan on behalf of the British Film Institute, 2011), 1. The G.P.O. Film Unit directly sponsored only four of Lye’s films: *A Colour Box* (1935, four minutes); *Rainbow Dance* (1936, five minutes); *Trade Tattoo* (1937, five minutes); and *N or NW* (1937, seven minutes). For a discussion of the surrealist forms and structures of Lye's G.P.O. films, see: Desmond O'Rawe, "(Pro)Motion Pictures: Len Lye in the Thirties," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 29, no. 1 (2012). For a more general gloss on Lye's contributions to the G.P.O. Film Unit, see: Kevin Jackson, "The Joy of Drooling in Praise of Len Lye," in *The Projection of Britain: A History of the G.P.O. Film Unit*, ed. Scott Anthony and James G. Mansell (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan on behalf of the British Film Institute, 2011).

295 Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, "Humphrey Jennings: Surrealist Observer," in *All Our Yesterdays: 90 Years of British Cinema*, ed. Charles Barr (London: British Film Institute and the Museum of Modern Art, 1986), 321-26. Jennings was involved in producing 13 black and white G.P.O. promotional and documentary films: *Pett and Pott* (1934, 29 minutes); *Post Haste* (1934, eight minutes); *Locomotives* (1934, 10 minutes); *The Story of the Wheel* (1934, 12 minutes); *Speaking from America* (1938, 10 minutes); *Penny Journey* (1938, six minutes); *Spare Time* (1939, 15 minutes); *The First Days* (1939, 23 minutes); *SS Ionian* (1939, 20 minutes); *Spring Offensive* (1940, 20 minutes); *Welfare of the Workers* (1940, 10 minutes); *London Can Take It!* (1940, nine minutes) and *Britain Can Take It!* (1940, eight minutes). Jennings directed all of these films except *Pett and Pott*.

296 Jennings, "Who Does That Remind You Of?," 22.

297 Ibid.

298 Readings of Jennings’ films shifted from emphasizing their verism to their surrealist qualities in 1982 when a retrospective of Jennings’ work was held at the Riverside Studios in Hammersmith.


300 Ibid.

301 Ibid.

302 Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art Archives, Edinburgh, GMA A 62/1/1 RPA 246 Jennings, Humphrey, Copy of “Close your eyes and dream: The life and work of Humphrey Jennings” by Paul Joyce (*The British Journal of Photography* 4 June 1982, 82:23, 584-587). This quote is taken from p. 584. Joyce's article was related to an exhibition at Riverside Studios, Hammersmith.


304 Ibid. For Kevin Jackson's discussion of the attributes of Jennings' surrealist sensibility, see: Kevin Jackson, ed. *The Humphrey Jennings Film Reader* (Manchester: Carcanet Press Limited, 1993), xii-xiii.
paintings, Lye related the rhythm of visual forms to the rhythm of jazz music.

323 Some G.P.O. directors were paid as little as two pounds per week, and the G.P.O. struggled to provide adequate equipment and space, however, G.P.O. filmmakers were pleased to be working in solidarity to push technical and creative limits around social issues.

319 The Hungarian chemist Bela Gaspar invented Gasparcolor in consultation with Oskar Fischinger. A beam-splitter camera divided black and white images into three separate images that focused on different ranges of the color spectrum. The three images were then recombined into a single color film stock. Adrian Klein opened an English company in 1934 to promote the new color process and used The Birth of the Robot to showcase their new product. Lye's crew was unable to acquire the beam-splitter camera in time for filming, and they adapted the process by using an ordinary camera with three color filters. As a result, according to Horrocks, each animated scene had to be shot three times in alignment. Given this, no two prints of the film had exactly the same color. See: Horrocks, Len Lye: A Biography, 147.


318 The EMB Film Unit was founded in 1929 to promote the improvement of trade between Britain and her colonies during the depression, and EMB was disbanded in 1933. Stephen Tallents was the Secretary of EMB and was deeply committed to hiring the finest artistic talent in various media to foster a general awareness of the Empire and its products, rather than advertising specific products. To show the value of film to the project, Grierson presented at least three censored Soviet films as examples of what might be done to Tallents and other in Whitehall: Storm Over Asia by Vsevolod Pudovkin; Earth by Alexander Dovzhenko; and Turksib by Victor Turin. (Jackson, Humphrey Jennings, 136.)

319 For example, see: Nowell-Smith, "Humphrey Jennings: Surrealist Observer," 325-26.


321 The Jam Session was an abstract painting that reflected Lye's interest in American jazz. In his films and paintings, Lye related the rhythm of visual forms to the rhythm of jazz music.
For a copy of the text of the “Declaration on Spain,” see: Robertson et al., *Angels of Anarchy and Machines for Making Clouds*, 76. The “Declaration on Spain” iterated that five important lessons for humanity had already been learned from the first months of the Spanish Civil War: 1) despite the constitutionality of the Spanish election, the fascists would oppose democracy by illegal means; 2) capitalist fascists in Spain, Italy, and Germany were just as violent as the proletariat had been in establishing the USSR; 3) fascist countries had aligned to form the “International of Capital,” and German and Italian arms were killing the people of Spain; 4) fascism lacked respect for humanist ideals, given the assassination of García Lorca; and 5) the British government had no right to speak in the name of democracy given its criminal non-intervention, its refusal to send arms to Spain, and its lack of spine in stopping Portuguese support of the rebels given its domination over Portugal as a “British financial colony.”

Wystan Curnow and Roger Horrocks, eds., *Figures in Motion: Len Lye / Selected Writings* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1984), xvii. “A Definition of Common Purpose” was written in response to an article by J. B. Priestley. Priestley thought the allied leaders should clearly state the tenets of democracy for which the troops were fighting.

The *London Bulletin* sections devoted to Yves Tanguy included reproductions of three works by Tanguy, a surrealist article on Tanguy written in French by Breton, a series of playful drawings on several pages of a French dictionary by Tanguy and titled “In the Margin of Cross-Words,” a surrealist poem about Tanguy by Paul Éluard that was translated into English by George Reavey, a listing of Tanguy’s exhibited works at the Guggenheim Jeune gallery, and his artist biography.

Jennings was keenly interested in the machine age that came with the industrial revolution and its effect on the British people; so much so that from 1937 to his death in 1950, he collected texts written as early as 1660 by John Milton and as late as 1886 by Morris “to illustrate the coming of the Machine‘ through the words of a long list of contemporary observers.” See: Charles Madge, “Editorial Tasks and Methods,” in *Pandaemonium*, ed. Mary-Lou Jennings and Charles Madge (London: Andre Deutsch Limited, 1985), xvi. Madge and Jennings’ daughter Mary-Lou posthumously published the compilation of texts as the book, *Pandaemonium*.


Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art Archives, GMA A35/1/1/RPA 246/6/15. Penrose funded and served as Executive Director of the London Gallery. Penrose praised Jennings’ exhibition and catalogue in an eleven-page interview, “Roland Penrose talks about Humphrey Jennings,” related to a 1982 exhibition in Bolton on Jennings. Kevin Daly recorded the interview on 7 Oct 1981, and Charlotte Jennings produced the transcript on 17-18 Oct 1981. This copy of the transcript was sent to Penrose by Director of Arts, Le Mans Crescent, Bolton BL1 1SA. Penrose discusses Jennings’ issue on the machine on p. 5.

Ibid., 3.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Agar and Lambirth, *A Look at My Life*, 123.


In addition to directing the film, Jennings wrote the script. H. Fowle was responsible for photography, and Y. Scarlett handled the sound.
particularly proud. After seeing the debut of Lye’s Tusalava (1929), Fry perceptively wrote, “I thought that
you had seen the essential thing as no-one had hitherto—I mean you really thought not of forms in themselves but of them as movements in time. I suspect it will need a new kind of imagination to seize this idea fully but you are the first as far as I know to make a start.” (Letter from Roger Fry to Len Lye, 3 December 1929, Lye Foundation Collection).

359 Curnow and Horrocks, Figures in Motion: Len Lye / Selected Writings, xvii.

360 Horrocks, Len Lye: A Biography, 66. Lye read about the Meyerhold theatre and saw the picture of Popova’s stage set in Life magazine (“Theater,” Life, 17 March 1923) while he was living in Samoa in late 1924 to early 1925.

361 Ibid.


364 Sexton, Jamie. “BFI Screenonline: Every Day (1929).” BFI Screenonline. http://www.screenonline.org.uk/film/id/442332/ (accessed September 25, 2013). The film was initially titled The Daily Round. Richter was not satisfied with the quality of the film and held it from release. It was not reworked and released under the new title until after Richter’s death.

365 Ibid.

366 Horrocks, Len Lye: A Biography, 128. In describing Lye’s discomfort with the political focus of the film, Horrocks states that the film was a satire of new money and ostentation in the nineteen twenties that foretold the stock market crash of 1929.

367 Ibid., 103. Horrocks conveys this information from a review in Auckland Sun, 19 May 1928. Horrocks also suggests that another unnamed New Zealand paper singled out Lye’s mechanized paintings and sculptures for praise.


369 Ibid.


371 Horrocks, Len Lye: A Biography, 164. After meeting Walt Disney, Sidney Bernstein delivered several of Lye’s films to Disney Studios. Disney was impressed enough with the films to share them with his staff. Disney never contacted Lye directly, and Lye never visited the Disney Studios. However, Lye and British critics including Dilys Powell recognized effects in Disney films such as Fantasia that were similar to Lye’s effects in A Colour Box.

372 Ibid., 134.

373 Ibid., 103.

374 Ibid., 52.

375 Jennings’ Post Haste charts postal history from the 18th century through the 1930s. Jennings’ Locomotives focuses on the initial development of the steam engine for work previously done by horses in mills and mining in England’s industrial north. Jennings’ third film about industrial transformation, The Story of the Wheel, tracks developments in wheels, vehicles, and roads. For The Story of the Wheel and Locomotives, Jennings used working models and paintings in the South Kensington Science Museum to illustrate his points.

376 The gears and pistons in Locomotives are actually working models shot from close up in the South Kensington Science museum.

377 Marsh Personnage was also included in Nash’s photographic collage Swanage (c. 1936).
A similar land art monument, the Uffington White Horse, was probably first constructed sometime in the last millennium BCE. The Long Man of Wilmington, while long thought to be prehistoric, was probably constructed sometime in the 16th to 17th century based on chemical analysis of the chalks used. Both figures require constant reworking to maintain their clear definition in the landscape.

The word "robot" was first used by Karel Capek in 1920 in his science fiction play *RUR (Rossum's Universal Robots).* When the play premiered in 1921, the word "robot" and the concept it represented spread quickly and widely beyond the play's Czech origins.


Lee traveled to Spain in 1935-36 and again in 1937-39 to join the Republican International Brigades and wrote about his experiences in a three-part memoir.

As Anthony Hodgkinson and Rodney Sheratsky have noted, Benjamin also collected hundreds of quotations as a way to build his arguments about German tragedy, just as Jennings gathered quotations from Milton to Morris to illustrate the artistic, social, scientific, and historical impact of machines. See: Anthony W. Hodgkinson and Rodney E. Sheratsky, *Humphrey Jennings--More Than a Maker of Films* (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1982), 89-90.
For credits and a summary of the film, see: Hodgkinson and Sheratsky, *Humphrey Jennings--More Than a Maker of Films*, 118-19. Hodgkinson and Sheratsky identify the songs played by the various bands and indicate that the long tracking shot of storefronts was taken from a car.

Evelyn Corbett who played the female lead was a 15-year-old G.P.O. assistant. Lye chose her in part for her natural sounding London voice.

Hodgkinson and Sheratsky, *Humphrey Jennings--More Than a Maker of Films*, 118-19. Hodgkinson and Sheratsky identify the songs played by the various bands and indicate that the long tracking shot of storefronts was taken from a car.

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Ibid.

Ibid., 166.


Ibid., 166.

Ibid., 166.


Len Lye: A Biography, 142.


Exhibiting Picasso’s *Guernica*: Melding Marxist ideology and Capitalist Enterprise to Oppose Fascism

In late 1938 and early 1939 when the British surrealists were most ardently aligned with the leftist Popular Front against fascism, they mounted an ambitious traveling exhibition of *Guernica*, an 11 ft. 6 in. by 25 ft. 8 in. oil painting on canvas conceived and painted by Pablo Picasso in protest of the market-day bombing of the Basque town of Guernica on 26 April 1937 (*Figure 4.1*). In association with Picasso, a Spanish Republican official Juan Larrea, and local British labor councils, they unapologetically presented the portable mural along with 67 preparatory sketches and paintings as outright propaganda for the Spanish Republican cause, an example of surrealism, and the unbridled creative expression under siege in fascist states.

*Guernica* was mounted with the preparatory sketches and paintings in two exhibitions in London and one in Manchester. Two smaller exhibitions of only the preparatory works were also held in Oxford and Leeds. The set of traveling exhibits were part of a much larger, sustained effort by British artists to seek relief aid for the Spanish Republicans, the International Brigades, and countless civilians caught in the battle. Although Penrose negotiated with Picasso to bring the picture to England and contracted with venues and sponsors, the press and public consistently associated the *Guernica* exhibition with the British surrealists’ political and aesthetic agenda.

The surrealists worked with Harry Pollitt, General Secretary of the Communist Party of Great Britain, Members of Parliament from the Labour and Liberal Parties, and local labor groups to raise support for Republican Spain. For example, the Stepney Trades
Council, a local council formed under the aegis of the Trades Union Congress, officially sponsored the exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery in London’s East End. Likewise, worker and student-led Peace Councils in Oxford and Manchester sponsored the exhibitions in those locations. Given the British group’s Marxist language in the *International Surrealist Bulletin No. 4*, it is no surprise they would have associated closely with these leftist, democratic, and worker-centered councils to bring *Guernica* to England. Their labor engagements also stemmed from their support of Trotsky’s communist agenda as it was expressed in “Towards an Independent Revolutionary Art,” a manifesto that they published in the *London Bulletin* in French and English during the *Guernica* run in England.

By taking an active role in exhibiting *Guernica*, the British group was able to manifest its political commitments to two primary allies: the London-based Artists International Association (A.I.A.), an organization the surrealists had joined en masse in August 1936 just after the Spanish Civil War broke out; and André Breton’s international surrealist movement centered in Paris. The ostensible reason for exhibiting the painting in England was to raise the stakes in the surrealists’ and the A.I.A.’s ongoing campaign as part of a Popular or People’s Front to support the Spanish cause and to counter Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain’s appeasement of the fascists. However, during the time that *Guernica* was on British soil, the Spanish Republican front lines collapsed and the International Brigades were pulled from combat zones. By late January 1939, Barcelona had fallen to Franco, prompting a mass exodus of over 500,000 people from Catalonia. Along with the human traffic, hundreds of artworks from the Prado’s collections were making their way north to safety in Geneva, on the advice of the League of Nations. I will
argue that, in what would become the final months of the war, an ulterior motive for exhibiting *Guernica* and the preparatory sketches in England was to confirm and elevate the British surrealists’ leftist political status in the eyes of their allies and their leading detractor, the communist leaning critic Anthony Blunt. Around the time of the exhibitions, the founders of the A.I.A., Breton, and Blunt each posed serious questions about the surrealists’ leftist commitment and ability to express powerful political messages in their art. The British surrealists were unequivocal in putting forward *Guernica* as their affirmative answer to both questions.

Yet contrary to their rhetoric, the surrealists’ success in raising public awareness about the misery and horror related to the Spanish Civil War necessitated calling in favors from wealthy art patrons, business owners, and sympathetic officials in a government that the surrealists claimed to oppose. It also required their professional skills in advertising, events planning, and promoting Picasso’s art—all honed in London’s capitalist art market. As a result, even in their most visible hour of political protest, their emancipatory social goals were realized through the very capitalist systems and ideologies that they purportedly sought to overcome in British society. However, there is no evidence that they saw this as a contradiction. Rather they sought to work within the capitalist system as best they could to pursue their Marxist goals. Viewed in this light, they brought capitalism and Marxism together in a dialectic that complemented the other dialectical forces in their art, namely the synthesis of rationality and irrationality, consciousness and the subconscious, male and female, and nature and culture.

Although the British group took consistent steps with the A.I.A. to support the Spanish Republicans and protest against Chamberlain’s non-intervention policy, Blunt at
home and Breton on the continent doubted their commitment to a Marxist social revolution. That skepticism was strong enough to propel the surrealist group to defend their art and actions with Picasso’s immense star appeal and his most celebrated painting. It also impelled them to engage directly with working class groups in the fight against fascism. However, Blunt as the leading proponent for realist art and the surrealists’ harshest critic in London remained unmoved. Instead, he questioned Picasso’s true understanding of the political stakes against fascism. Although Blunt would later frame *Guernica* as Picasso’s great *Massacre of the Innocents*, his most acerbic criticism in the late thirties was reserved for the surrealists’ overly imaginative and individualistic art.\(^{416}\) In no uncertain terms, he attributed those surrealist characteristics to *Guernica*. In counterattack, Read and Penrose vociferously defended the politics and art of surrealism and Picasso in particular. That longstanding controversy played out in a series of heated public debates, ten *Left Review* articles published from June 1936 through April 1938, and several other articles and letters in the *Spectator* in 1937.\(^{417}\)

Antithetical to Blunt’s Stalinist position, the surrealists were also feeling pressure from across the channel to more firmly commit to the Trotskyist cause. In October 1938, Breton and the French surrealists sent the British group a private letter asking if they would officially join the Trotskyist *Fédération Internationale des Artistes Révolutionnaires Indépendants* (F.I.A.R.I.).\(^{418}\) In the first issue of *Clé: bulletin mensuel de la F.I.A.R.I.*, Breton’s “Letter to our England Friends” was printed almost in its entirety, bringing the French entreaty into the public arena.\(^{419}\) Breton’s appeal was made in January 1939 at the same time that *Guernica* was shown at the Whitechapel Gallery. Read responded to the French F.I.A.R.I. with an open letter of support for Trotsky in the second (and final) issue of *Clé*.  

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Read’s reply was published the following month as *Guernica* was being shown in the working-class industrial town of Manchester and the surrealists painted a series of billboards (advertising hoardings) in London to seek aid for Spanish refugees. Read could be proud and point to those actions as he stood up to Blunt in London and provided a decisive answer to Breton in Paris. At the same time, the British surrealists, who were affluent and well positioned in British society, were quick to rely on capitalist means to rouse the middle and working classes in the fight against fascism.

**Spain as a Defining Surrealist Issue**

Because the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War occurred on the heels of the British surrealist’s inaugural international exhibition in the New Burlington Galleries and just before they published their first unified statement in the *International Surrealist Bulletin No. 4*, the Spanish resistance to fascism was a defining issue for the group.\(^{420}\) It was as critical to their *modus operandi* as the Freudian theories of the unconscious and Hegelian dialectics that informed their aesthetics. To validate their anti-fascist rhetoric, the British group staged an increasingly visible campaign of exhibitions and political events from the late summer of 1936 to the advent of the Second World War in 1939.

Roger Roughton produced a special double issue of the *Contemporary Poetry and Prose* journal in August and September 1936 that was dedicated to Picasso’s poems. Roughton contributed an article, “Surrealism and Communism,” to the Picasso double issue.\(^{421}\) In that article, he made clear his own Stalinist position in opposition to Read, and he entreated the British surrealists not to isolate themselves in their Trotskyist camp and to accept the A.I.A.’s invitation to join their ranks as part of the United Front. The back
cover of the Picasso issue also had a full-page ad soliciting support for the Spanish people against fascism (Figure 4.2). Contributions were to be sent to National Council of Labour of Great Britain (previously the National Joint Council), which was comprised of representatives from the Trade Unions Council, Labour Party, and Co-operative Movement. However, contrary to Roughton’s communist position, the British Labour Movement officially supported Britain’s non-intervention policy through November 1936 and provided only humanitarian aid to Spain. Perhaps recognizing this and to reflect the surrealists’ shift from a pacifist stance to actively protesting the Anglo-French arms embargo in late 1936, Contemporary Poetry and Prose revised the back-page ad in November and December 1936 to seek contributions for the Special Fund managed by Pollitt (Figure 4.3). Although Roughton clearly specified that contributions would go towards arms, Pollitt himself was careful to qualify elsewhere that his fund provided humanitarian aid, not arms, to the International Brigade. In an open letter soliciting contributions to the International Brigade Fund from all labor, trade union, and democratic organizations, Pollitt claimed in 1936 to be supporting the dependents of 500 men in the British section of the Brigade.422 His special fund had raised enough money to send six ambulances and medical equipment, a special food kitchen, two tons of pressed beef, and clothing for the brigade.423 Pollitt’s Special Fund was not the only connection between the surrealists and the communists.

At the beginning and end of the Spanish Civil War, the surrealists made two key interventions against fascism in London’s predominately working class and Jewish East End, then a hotbed of anti-fascist communist activity. On 4 October 1936, along with other members of the A.I.A., the surrealists took part in the Battle of Cable Street, a violent clash
between a crowd of 100,000 to 250,000 anti-fascists and 6000 police officers who were on duty to clear a path for a planned march of Oswald Mosley and roughly 2000 men from the British Union of Fascists. The surrealists returned to the East End during the first two weeks of January 1939 to help organize and run the Whitechapel Art Gallery’s exhibition of Guernica. Penrose designed the exhibition specifically to appeal to the East End’s working class citizens. Guernica opened at Whitechapel just before Franco’s victorious march through the streets of Barcelona, an all-time low for the Republicans’ moral.

From late 1936 to early 1939, the British surrealists showed their support for the Spanish cause in other direct ways. In November 1936 following the Battle of Cable Street, the surrealist group published their vitriolic “ARMS for the people of Spain” as a supplement to Contemporary Poetry and Prose. Around the same time, Penrose, his wife Valentine, and the surrealist poet David Gascoyne traveled to Spain with Christian and Yvonne Zervos, publishers of Cahiers d’Art. With the Zervoses, they attempted to safeguard Spain’s artistic heritage during the fighting, assess the validity of reports that the Republicans and Anarchists had vandalized cultural monuments, and gather material for a study and related exhibition on Romanesque and medieval Catalan art. The Independent Labour Party (I.L.P.) sponsored the Penroses’ trip to Barcelona to assist Señor Castagnet in making “a news reel to win support for the workers’ struggle” and to gather material “to arouse further support” in Britain for the Republican cause. A similar documentary film, Dawn in Spain, was filmed in Barcelona and produced by the International Anti-Fascist Solidarity (Solidaridad Internacional Antifascista or S.I.A.)—an organization sponsored by Read, W. H. Auden, Nancy Cunard, and George Orwell, among others. Dawn in Spain was shown at at least one private viewing to members of parliament, various labor
According to the Director of the S.I.A, *Dawn in Spain* was also to be shown to the entire House of Commons during the summer of 1938. Like Castagnet’s I.L.P. newsreel, the S.I.A. documentary was to convey the tragedies and consequences of the war, and to build support among British government officials and labor groups for the anti-fascist work of ordinary Spanish citizens.

To help open the door to facilities and assistance, the I.L.P.’s Secretary Chair vouched for the Penroses and Gascoyne as “trustworthy Socialists” in a letter of introduction that they carried with them. While in Barcelona, they spoke on the radio as well as contributed to the British newsreel. Shortly after their return, the I.L.P. published John McNair’s first-hand account of the front and the socialist organizing of Spanish workers (*Figure 4.4*). It is likely that Penrose knew McNair, because McNair was the I.L.P. organizing secretary and international representative in Spain in 1936, and Penrose kept a copy of McNair’s pamphlet in his archives. As Elizabeth Cowling has noted, Penrose’s stay in Barcelona was also an “important building-block” in establishing his close relationship with Picasso. On Picasso’s request, the Penroses visited Picasso’s mother and sister. According to Cowling, the trip impressed Picasso because it showed “Penrose was prepared to stand up against the British Government’s policy and act decisively on behalf of the Spanish Republican cause,” and it provided evidence that Penrose “was genuinely interested in the Catalan ‘primitives’ Picasso admired so much.” In the fall of 1937, John Banting and Cunard also traveled to Spain, showing sustained surrealist support for the Republican cause. In January 1938, the Spanish government invited another delegation of distinguished artists and writers including Moore and Paul Robeson to come to Spain for the same purpose. As an American, Robeson was able to secure a visa to enter
Spain and remained there from December 1937 through early 1938; however, Moore and the British members of the delegation were denied permission to travel to Spain by the Foreign Office.\textsuperscript{435} This provided the surrealists with more tangible evidence that Chamberlain’s government was colluding with the fascists, but it also limited their own involvement on behalf of the Republicans.

The surrealists were politically active on the home front as well. From late 1936 to early 1939, artists associated with the surrealists including Banting, Ceri Richards, and Thomas Samuel Haile worked with members of the A.I.A. to paint advertising hoardings to raise money for medical supplies, clothing, and food for the British Battalion of the International Brigade, as well as for Spanish refugees and civilians caught in the conflict (Figure 4.5).\textsuperscript{436} By keeping the messages focused on women and children, the surrealists were able to appear to limit their involvement to humanitarian aid and stay within the bounds of British law that prohibited providing arms to Spain. With a humanitarian message, they could also garner sympathy from pacifists as well as supporters of the Republicans. The surrealists’ hoarding that solicited food for Spanish children in 1939 is very similar to the style of the advertisement for British Petroleum to its right, possibly designed by fellow surrealist Edward McKnight Kauffer, which includes heavy fonts, diagonals to lead the viewer in, and abstracted geometric shapes. Kauffer was a leader in shaping British commercial design of the thirties. Other A.I.A. artists who were not connected with the surrealists painted similar hoardings in Kauffer’s signature style (Figure 4.6). Richards relied on his experience as a designer and illustrator for the Orient Line to support the Spanish Republican cause. He was not an official member of the surrealist group, but he lived in Hammersmith and regularly exhibited with the surrealists
and the A.I.A. from 1936-1939. According to Mel Gooding, Richards’ lifelong commitment to surrealist politics and art began in 1935.\textsuperscript{437} He was most committed to surrealism’s liberation of the human mind and spirit, along with “its associated ideals of social justice, internationalism and political freedom.”\textsuperscript{438} After reading the surrealists’ “ARMS for the People of Spain” he became especially committed to the cause.\textsuperscript{439} Haile came to the project with no commercial experience as a designer; however, he taught art in the East End of London and in Hammersmith and joined the surrealist group and A.I.A. in 1938.\textsuperscript{440}

In opposition to fascism—billed as a militant and extreme form of capitalism in the surrealists’ written statements—the group demanded an end to Britain’s non-interventionist policies.\textsuperscript{441} At the same time, they promoted surrealist art and \textit{Guernica} through a number of high-profile exhibitions and events from 1937 to 1939, with support from government opposition leaders and British celebrities.\textsuperscript{442} One of the largest events was a rally and art auction, “Spain & Culture,” on 24 June 1937 in London’s Royal Albert Hall. Penrose organized the event to support refugee Basque children just as Picasso was putting the finishing touches on \textit{Guernica}.\textsuperscript{443} The German Luftwaffe’s bombing of Guernica had propelled the Basque government to seek temporary asylum for Basque children in foreign countries. The British government initially refused to allow the children entry because of its policy of non-intervention, but finally succumbed to public pressure to grant them refuge, on the condition that their relocation would be funded through private donations. In late May, close to 4000 children from the area around Guernica were packed onto the steamship S.S. Habana in the Spanish port of Santurce near Bilbao and were sailed to Southampton.\textsuperscript{444} Over the next several months specially built group homes and
individual families across Britain volunteered to take in the children, and the “Spain & Culture” rally was held to garner more funds for the effort.

In lieu of speaking as promised, Picasso donated a preparatory drawing of a mother and dead child dedicated to the “mothers and children of Spain” to illustrate the promotional notice (Figure 4.7). Picasso also donated a drawing, *Weeping Woman 1937*, for the auction (Figure 4.8). Billed as a “Grand International Meeting,” the Spain & Culture rally and auction was sponsored by the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief and supported by a long list of British dignitaries and celebrities. The Duchess of Atholl, a Member of Parliament who broke rank with the Conservative Party to oppose Chamberlain's non-intervention policies, chaired the committee, and Penrose served as honorary treasurer. Penrose, Moore, Auden, Virginia Woolf, E. M. Forester, and Robeson, among others, sat on the platform. Woolf recalled in her diary that before the event, a trail of Spanish refugee children wrapped around the buildings of Bloomsbury, “like a caravan in the desert...Spaniards flying from Bilbao, which has fallen.” The Albert Hall was filled with people hoping to see Picasso and hear a special radio transmission from Robeson in Moscow, and the Basque children that had been lining the streets sang folk songs. At the eleventh hour, perhaps because Picasso chose to stay in Paris, Robeson flew back to England for a personal appearance. Robeson hailed the crowd largely filled with writers and artists, “the battle front is everywhere...and every artist must take his stand on one side or the other,” and they responded with thunderous applause.

**Unity and Conflict in the A.I.A.**

After the Spanish Civil War broke out mid-July 1936, the A.I.A. expanded their strict communist agenda and focus on realist art to draw in a larger Popular Front of artists.
against fascism and for peace.\textsuperscript{453} A majority of the founders of the A.I.A. were graphic artists and realist painters working in the socialist realist tradition. As members of the communist party, some remained committed to socialist realism as the most viable style for conveying social messages, even if they were willing to welcome abstract and surrealist artists into their ranks. By August, membership swelled to over 600 artists. As the war in Spain escalated that fall, the A.I.A. and the surrealists grew less tolerant of a pacifist stance, as the surrealists’ pamphlet “ARMS for the people of Spain” made clear.\textsuperscript{454} Over the next three years the surrealists worked hand in hand with the A.I.A. to stage large-scale art exhibitions, political rallies, and public meetings. At the same time, they agreed to disagree in public debates about the relative merits of realism and surrealism for expressing social values.

With the surrealists securely if not comfortably in their ranks, the A.I.A. kept its focus on the Spanish cause throughout the late thirties.\textsuperscript{455} For example, in December 1936, the A.I.A. mounted an exhibition \textit{Artists Help Spain} to raise money for a field kitchen for the International Brigade defending Madrid.\textsuperscript{456} The A.I.A. also donated a hand-made banner for the British battalion of the International Brigade to carry into battle.\textsuperscript{457} Because the British Union of Fascists consistently stirred up trouble in the heavily communist and working class neighborhoods of London including Hammersmith and the East End, A.I.A. actions were often centered in those areas (Figure 4.9). In Hammersmith, they raised enough funds to purchase a field ambulance within the first six months of fighting in Spain.\textsuperscript{458} Richards attended demonstrations and designed and painted banners for the Hammersmith Group in support of the International Brigades.\textsuperscript{459} Along with Haile who taught in Hammersmith, Richards became intensely active in the Hammersmith branch of
the A.I.A. to raise awareness about Republican Spain in 1936-1937. The banners they produced in Hammersmith, like the ads posted on the back cover of Contemporary Poetry and Prose, emphasized solidarity in providing arms and justice for Spain (Figure 4.10).

While arms were emphasized in the banner’s title, it was stated below only that “Hammersmith sends milk,” thereby staying within the limits of the arms embargo imposed by the British government.

Despite the surrealists’ wholesale membership in the A.I.A. and their shared interest in fighting fascism and countering Chamberlain’s policies, as Lynda Morris and Robert Radford have shown, tensions remained high between some members of the A.I.A. and the surrealists. The A.I.A. leadership was committed to a Popular Front strategy. Given that political reality, the surrealists became highly visible in A.I.A. exhibitions and political events, and the A.I.A. leaders willingly trumped their own objections to abstraction and surrealism in support of the Spanish cause. Although they took that pragmatic position and welcomed the surrealists into their ranks, the A.I.A.’s political theorists never fully altered their dim view of surrealism, nor were they willing to broaden their own approach beyond social realism. For example, A.I.A. members including James Holland, Nan Youngman, Elizabeth Watson, and Betty Rea contributed to a mural display in the unofficial Peace Pavilion, erected by the French Popular Front Peace organizations just outside the Trocadero entrance at the 1937 Paris Exhibition (Figure 4.11). As contrasted with the surrealist statement made by Picasso for the Spanish pavilion, those mural designs were much more in line with the didactic hoardings around London, which were painted by the A.I.A. and British surrealists in support of the Spanish cause. The murals for the Peace Pavilion reflected the large bold graphics popular in illustration designs of the thirties and
held no hint of a surrealist sensibility. The murals for the Peace Pavilion included relatively static text and diagrammatic symbols, rather than abstracted and exuberant human forms.

The differences between the proponents of surrealism and social realism reached a boiling point in February 1938 when the surrealists threatened to leave the A.I.A. over remarks made by Jack Chen in the A.I.A. Artists News Sheet about a New York exhibition in defense of the people of Spain and China and “World Democracy.” Chen appreciated some of the exhibits; but in his mind, others suffered from surrealism’s “bad influence.” He went on to say, “This applies also even to the new etchings by Picasso presented to the show, ‘The Dreams and Lies of General Franco’, that are as fantastic and far less comprehensible than Goya’s work in denunciation of war.” The surrealist group responded with an angry letter to the editor of the Artists News Sheet:

Your correspondent deplores “The bad influences of expressionism, surrealism, futurism and abstractionism”, and draws a parallel between Picasso’s recent work and the work of Goya, finding both fantastic and incomprehensible. These remarks may enable us to gage the ability of your correspondent to appreciate the modern movement in painting. But if they are significant of the official attitude of the A.I.A., as expressed in its News Sheet and judging from the Editorial this is the case, then we, as Surrealists, feel that we have no place within its ranks.

The surrealists demanded an explanation from the A.I.A. and that their letter be printed in the next Artists News Sheet, or they would tender their resignations. James Holland sent a reply on behalf of the A.I.A. to Penrose as the surrealists’ representative. Holland was sorry that A.I.A. official support was implied. It was certainly not unintended, and he pledged to acquiesce to the surrealists’ demands.

On 1 May 1938, the surrealists, including Haile, participated as part of a larger A.I.A. alliance in a May Day demonstration organized by the Communist Party of Great Britain in Hyde Park to protest Chamberlain’s non-interventionist policies (Figure 4.12). Penrose,
Trevelyan, James Cant, and Geoffrey Graham dressed in top hats and Chamberlain masks made by F.E. McWilliam and wore sandwich boards which read, “CHAMBERLAIN MUST GO.” They processed in front of a van, which was outfitted by the surrealists as a parade float with loudspeakers (Figure 4.13). A large gilded birdcage housing a white skeleton was mounted on top of the van, with a banner that read, “A Present from the Dictators.” In comparison to the A.I.A. contingent that carried a large banner and placards with straightforward designs like those used for the advertising hoardings (Figure 4.14), the surrealists conveyed their interventionist message through lyrical, dada-like props. As their different choices of props within the same march made clear, the two contingents were allied in making an anti-fascist statement, though through different means. Sticking closer to the long tradition of May Day celebrations, the A.I.A.’s largest banner focused squarely on the unity of labor groups—fine artists, illustrators, engravers, and sculptors—to fight fascism (that threatened free artistic expression) and economic blight (that threatened all artists’ ability to make a living wage through their craft). As the A.I.A. and the surrealists protested in Hyde Park, E.L.T. Mesens and Penrose opened a modest show of Picasso’s works on paper in the London Gallery on Cork Street, perhaps as a way to warm up London audiences for the Guernica exhibitions. The London Bulletin followed up in July in Jennings’ double issue on ‘The Impact of Machines” with a brief announcement for the October exhibition of Guernica at the New Burlington Galleries in London.468 The note was so small that any irony that Guernica might serve an example of the horrific impact that machines could have on people probably was lost on Mesens and his readership.
The *Guernica* Exhibitions: A Culmination of the Surrealist-Realist Debate

Michel Remy, the leading historian of British surrealism, and Charles Harrison, one of the foremost scholars of British modernism, have acknowledged the importance of the late-thirties debate between the supporters of surrealism and advocates of realism in England; however, neither scholar recapped the major arguments put forward by the opposing sides.469 An analysis of the polemics reveals how London’s art world responded to the surrealists, and how in turn, the surrealists defended their politics and art.

The first critique of surrealism appeared in *Left Review* in January 1936. In a book review of Gascoyne’s *A Short History of Surrealism*, Viscount Hastings, an English mural painter who had served as an assistant to Diego Rivera in San Francisco and Detroit, complained that the “extreme incongruity” of symbols and objects within single surrealist artworks made the works incomprehensible to anyone but the artist.470 He believed this was the reason why the surrealists needed to convey their aims in “non-surrealist” manifestoes. Hastings conceded that Picasso was a great talent and that surrealism was intended as a revolt against the “smug ineffectualness,” “false standards and complete decay” of bourgeois art.471 That said, Hastings railed on, “But surrealist art—in spite of undoubted talent and genius, remains the complete expression of bourgeois decadence, appreciated and patronized chiefly by a very limited and sophisticated group of bourgeois intellectuals.”472 At most, he viewed the surrealists as a confederation of bourgeois intellectuals who were “fellow travellers” with the proletariat.473 Hastings saw no evidence for the surrealist claims that their art was proletarian, Marxist, or “more revolutionary than the communist party.”474 Because of their interest in Freud, Hastings considered their theories idealistic and “in no way materialistic.” He interpreted their new Freudian
emphasis on the unconscious as simply a rehashing of the “old religious concept of a soul and a world of the spirit.”  

Six months later, as the London International Surrealist Exhibition was being taken down, Read reviewed T. A. Jackson’s, *Dialectics: The Logic of Marxism, and its Critics—An Essay in Exploration.* While Read admitted the importance of the book, he faulted Jackson, along with “most orthodox Marxians,” for refusing to acknowledge the relevance of anthropology and psychoanalysis to dialectical materialism. In the following issue of *Left Review*, Jackson responded to Read’s assessment of his book. Jackson countered that Marxists verify beliefs by checking to see if they work in practice, whereas “Pragmatists” such as the surrealists simply “make a belief true by acting as if it were true!” Reiterating Hastings’ view that surrealism was essentially an idealist movement, Jackson argued that Read and the surrealists were solipsistic idealists who attacked “‘orthodox’ (or ‘official’) Marxism” for “its alleged ‘flirtation with the ideology of capitalism.’” If anyone was flirting with the ideology of capitalism, Jackson believed the surrealists were.

In the same July issue as Read’s review of Jackson’s book, *Left Review* offered a special supplement on surrealism to which Read, Blunt, and Alick West contributed varying positions on the movement. As the leading spokesperson for surrealism, Read hailed the movement, Blunt denigrated it, and West—a communist literary critic who advocated that revolutionary movements take into account the psychological motivations of their individual members—feigned appreciation for surrealism, yet ultimately came out against it.

Read extolled surrealism as the only modern movement outside of Russia with an aesthetic that embraces “every manifestation of the creative impulse, breaks with every
convention of bourgeois academic art, [and] claims to be the only true application of the principles of dialectical materialism.” Despite his nod to Russian art, he suggested that constructivism was apolitical and confined only to the plastic arts, and he challenged the more current “official Soviet doctrine of socialist realism.” In explicit terms, Read claimed that the surrealist interest in the dialectical succession of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis was “more Marxist than the Marxians.”

Unlike realism, he asserted that surrealism synthesized the interior imagination with equivalent exterior manifestations in the real world. In making that argument, he emphasized that the imagination was free from control and moral conventions, yet was subjected to scientific scrutiny by Freud. For Read, “reality transformed by the imagination” was the true definition of art and the stated aim of surrealism. In comparison, he argued that socialist realists functioned like cameras and flirted with the ideology of capitalism due to their “pious respect for the pictorial conventions of the Royal Academy.”

In the same Left Review supplement, Blunt argued that surrealism was nothing more than anti-rationalist art and lacked the synthesis that Read described. At the same time, Blunt was willing to concede that in comparison to dada’s total anarchy, surrealism was a return to rationalism because it emphasized the “rational investigation of the irrational” and removed “repressions in the artist and, indirectly, in the spectator.” Taking a formalist and historicist approach in the tradition established by Joachim Winckelmann and refined by Heinrich Wölfflin, Blunt positively compared realism with classical and renaissance art’s tendency to imitate nature. On the other hand, he associated surrealism with a society in decay and chaos; and he saw similarities in the ways that gothic, baroque, and surrealist art privileged the artist’s imagination, the “exceptional,” the “novel,” and the
“monstrous.” Because he considered surrealism to be purely internal and personal, Blunt viewed it as mystical. He also implied, although he did not directly state, that surrealism was a bourgeois art form. Only the new realist art of the proletariat was capable of coming back to art’s “true path” of propaganda and “conveying ideas.”

West opened his contribution to the surrealist supplement with a lukewarm endorsement of surrealism—surrealist writers wanted to “free words and themselves from conventional associations”—but his assessment quickly turned negative. For West, surrealism was overly concerned with words, yet devoid of meaning, and its revolt from convention was hallucinatory and only momentary. Surrealism might negate bourgeois social conventions, but it offered nothing of substance to replace them. As an Oedipal revolt from the bourgeois world, surrealism’s power was dependent on the father whom it wanted to kill—“Only by contrast with bourgeois relations and from the bourgeois standpoint does surrealism achieve its aim of reaching ultimate meaning by destroying all accepted meaning, of making the word into a god-scraper.” If surrealism were to remain true to its claim that it was on the side of the worker and its aim of negating bourgeois society, West argued that it would have to turn to socialism and conduct its experiments in the external world.

Six months into the Spanish Civil War, art critic, folk singer, and painter A. L. Lloyd contributed an essay to Left Review on “Surrealism & Revolutions.” Lloyd, who also was a communist and trade unionist, argued that because the surrealists believed that everyone—“from millionaire to dustman, from London to Hong Kong” and “even the most primitive, the most backward” people—held the inner capacity for lyrical expression, surrealism was intent to destroy “the old bourgeois fable of the ‘Genius.’” Yet what Lloyd
could not see in early 1937 is that the surrealists effectively capitalized on Picasso’s reputation as a genius by featuring his art in numerous exhibitions at the London Gallery and elsewhere during 1938 and by bringing Guernica to England.

Lloyd went on to argue that in the history of bourgeois art, two currents existed—art that conformed to dominant class values, and art like that of Gustave Courbet that did not. He was accurate in complaining that the surrealists likened their art (including Picasso’s painting), which they argued implicitly conveyed their revolutionary values, to Courbet’s art that eschewed overt propaganda. Yet writing this article before Guernica was painted, Lloyd refused to acknowledge that surrealism was “conducive to social or revolutionary responsibility” in the way that Courbet’s painting was. While he saw Courbet as “materialist, fearless, and practical,” he viewed Picasso and the surrealists as “metaphysical, fearful, and irresponsible.” It is doubtful that Lloyd would have substantially changed his position after seeing Guernica, for he believed that Picasso’s paintings were not revolutionary in themselves, “but symptoms of a state of things of which revolutions can be the only outcome.” However, given his affiliation with the communists and trade unions, Lloyd would have most likely supported the sponsorship of the Guernica exhibitions by local Trades Councils. Lloyd went on to fault Breton for “Soviet baiting” when the Spanish people were fighting for their lives and freedom, and to condemn Salvador Dali for selling his pictures to wealthy supporters of Mussolini in Italy. Given those sales, Lloyd viewed Dali’s painting Spain—Premonitions of the Civil War as an outright fraud and prime example of the surrealists’ “fake metaphysics.” He argued the surrealists’ superficial interest in the picturesque, ecstatic, and exotic rendered their art individualistic and socially irresponsible. The surrealists mounted a “fake revolution” with
“no bearing on proletarian problems.” For Lloyd, the surrealists did little more than "sublimate the narcissism of the bourgeoisie, the ideas they have about their own bodies, their own desires, their own individuality, their own thoughts..."

Lloyd ended his essay with a concession that in addition to publishing their admirable “ARMS for the People of Spain,” the English surrealist group had raised considerable funds for the Spanish cause by January of 1937, and that the surrealists might even sway some members of the middle class away from fascism and toward the working-class movement. However, he believed that beyond these modest gains, any surrealist claim for revolution was self-deceptive:

These frivolous games of automatism and newspaper-clipping-creation, of goosy ghost-hunting and a hazardous preoccupation with chance, though in many cases of undoubted scientific interest and value, can play no serious part in making the proletariat conscious of its social and revolutionary responsibilities.

The following month, Read and Hugh Sykes Davies answered Lloyd’s attack. They conceded that Dali’s sales to Mussolini’s supporters were out of line. In an apparent effort to minimize the damage of his criticism, they noted that Benjamin Peret, Gascoyne, and Penrose had gone to Barcelona to support the Republican cause directly. They explained that their interest in the lyrical was driven by a belief that the lyrical elements of the unconscious needed to be “isolated, studied, and brought under rational control” through psychoanalytic and anthropological experiment rather than literary analysis. They also stated that their aim was to present their intellectual positions in clear, rational, and direct prose even if that might appear to contradict their lyrical art. Read and Davies were correct. The surrealists’ written statements such as “ARMS for the People of Spain” were always written in clear and direct prose. Without providing any visual evidence to back up
their claim, they also asserted that lyrical art could be socially responsible. In conclusion, they reiterated the English group’s commitment, as individuals and collectively, to the revolutionary activities around the war in Spain and Britain’s non-intervention.

Later in the spring of 1937, Blunt contributed an article titled “The ‘Realism’ Quarrel” to the Left Review debate. He argued that surrealism was a negative art, and that the most deeply concerned artists were instead focused on realism, not as a modern art form, but because the real world crisis made it imperative to step beyond the dream sphere into reality. In this regard, he suggested that English artists were lagging behind a growing number of French artists who saw painting less as a game and more as an aggressive activity in which the painter transformed energy in association with the “central realities of his period.” The key questions of a similar French debate the previous summer and for Blunt were: “Is the real revolutionary art of to-day to be realistic or non-realistic? ...If it is to be realistic, what will this new realism look like?” These questions could certainly be asked of Picasso’s art and Guernica in particular; however, Blunt took a different tack. In response, he reasoned that in times of crisis, some art (such as the art put forward by liberal members of the aristocracy during the French revolution and by the surrealists now) was revolutionary only in that it negated the existing standards of capitalist culture. Just as West had argued before him, Blunt suggested that surrealism offered no new culture to replace the old.

In contrast, Blunt advocated a new breed of realism by young members of the rising working class that he positively associated with the neo-classicism of Jacques Louis David. Blunt argued that up to that point, the proletariat had not embraced or made abstract and surrealistic art:
The more abstract forms of painting have up till now not gained the approval of the proletariat, which did not produce them, and which cannot find in them what it demands—namely, the expression of its own aspirations and ideas in a form which is easily and widely accessible.  

Blunt followed this bold but not entirely true line of reasoning with a relatively accurate assessment that the supporters of abstraction (Read and Penrose among them, though their names were not stated by Blunt) were willing to admit the difficulty in reaching the masses with their art, though they hoped to be able to do so in the future. That future came just over a year and a half later—far sooner than Blunt or the surrealists were able to anticipate—with the exhibition of Guernica at the Whitechapel Gallery. As it turned out, Blunt, Read, and Penrose underestimated the working class’s veneration of Picasso and its esteem for his abstracted art. This miscalculation led Read, Penrose, and Mesens to put greater and earlier emphasis on exhibiting Guernica at the prestigious New Burlington Galleries.  

For Blunt, this faulty view that the proletariat could not appreciate abstract art grew from his notion that the realism of Daumier, Courbet, and van Gogh of the late nineteenth century—a period when Blunt argued the proletariat had finally organized and was “capable of producing its own method of expression”—was the true indigenous art of the proletariat. As a captioned photograph in the communist bulletin To-Morrow shows, the British communists consistently related the proletarian cause to the communards of Paris (Figure 4.15). Blunt believed only the bourgeoisie held an interest in the developing abstraction of the twentieth century. He remained uncertain what form of realism would take hold given the new and lasting influences of cubism and surrealism on how subjects were presented and compositions were formed. In this sense, he inadvertently opened the door for his much later recognition of the power of a surrealist work such as Guernica to politically move the masses.
As Blunt drew out and Penrose conceded, the power of *Guernica* to convey a political message rested on the public’s interest and ability to decipher political meaning from a visually sophisticated and abstract surrealist painting. As a result, *Guernica* became the focus of the already intense debate between Blunt and members of the surrealist group—key among them Read and Penrose—arguing for more avant-garde and abstract imagery. Blunt, who visited the 1937 Paris World’s Fair in mid-July just before it opened, ignited the argument by drawing out *Guernica* for special critique in his review of the exposition for *The Spectator*:

> The gesture is fine, and even useful in that it shows the adherence of a distinguished Spanish intellectual to the cause of his government. But the painting is disillusioning. Fundamentally it is the same as Picasso’s bullfight scenes. It is not an act of public mourning, but the expression of a private brainstorm which gives no evidence that Picasso has realized the political significance of ‘Guernica’. The Spanish people will be grateful for the support of Picasso, but not consoled.⁵¹³

This quote conveys Blunt’s strong opinion, at least in 1937, that *Guernica* was more a “private brainstorm” than an act of “public mourning.” For Blunt, *Guernica* was simply an apolitical rehashing of Picasso’s bullfight scenes and etchings such as the *Minotauromachie* (Figure 4.16). At the time and even as late as 1973, Penrose took exception to Blunt’s position that Picasso’s painting was more personal than political, yet he was willing to admit that many viewers might miss the points made in Picasso’s paintings more generally.⁵¹⁴ In speaking of the mother’s figure in Picasso’s *Woman with a Dead Child* of 1937 (Figure 4.17), a preparatory drawing for *Guernica*, Penrose made a distinction between the political exigency of Picasso’s symbolic elements and the ability of some viewers to decipher the political meaning from his handling of the figure:

> The head, perched at the end of a long straining neck, reveals a powerful expression of agony due to the unprecedented distortions it has been given
and the associations they evoke. The eyes, brought together on the same profile, rock like small boats in a storm, the nostrils suggest birds caught in a gale, while from the mouth comes a scream, shrill and as piercing as the enormous tongue shaped like a flame. The tongue itself is surrounded by teeth sharp and dangerous with an outer cordon of lips drawn taut like the arc of a bow. Every feature is rich in echoes and metaphors. The grief expressed by this fusion of images is more than a passive acceptance of misery, it calls with authority for justice in clear and resounding eloquence. Yet this head might by some be called monstrous and ugly, in which case such qualifications would become meaningless. They would fail to name or clarify the visual experience which is offered convincingly on the canvas.\footnote{515}

The characteristics of the mother’s head that convey the expression of agony—her eyes in a single profile that rock like row boats in tempest, her nostrils that flit like birds in a gale, and the sharp flame that becomes her screaming tongue—are evident in many of Picasso’s preparatory sketches, including one frame of \textit{The Dream and Lie of Franco II} and all of the “Weeping Head” and “Weeping Woman” drawings and prints produced in June and July 1937, as well as in the mother's figure on the far left and the horse’s head in \textit{Guernica} itself. The British surrealists had also taken advantage of Picasso’s fame and beneficence in producing an earlier publication related to this theme. In June 1936 before the advent of the Spanish Civil War, the first edition of \textit{Remove Your Hat}, a book of 20 poems by Peret that were selected and translated by Jennings and Gascoyne, included a reproduction of one of Picasso’s drawings of \textit{The Death of Marat} on the frontispiece (\textbf{Figure 4.18}).\footnote{516} The surrealist poet Roger Roughton published the book as a Contemporary Poetry and Prose edition. As Robin Greeley has pointed out, the fallen figure of the Marat drawing from July 1934 is very similar to a preparatory sketch of a head of a fallen figure for \textit{Guernica} completed in late May 1937.\footnote{517}

Penrose and Moore saw \textit{Guernica} in progress on a visit to Picasso’s Paris studio with a lunchtime gathering of surrealist artists in late May 1937.\footnote{518} According to Moore, the
painting was still far from being finished at that point. Penrose and Moore were both struck with Picasso’s ploy to engage the group in a discussion about how best to link reality with the fiction of painting. Picasso literally pinned a long piece of real toilet paper onto the outstretched hand of the woman fleeing from the cabin on the right side of the painting. Intimating that she had been disturbed while sitting on the john when the bomb hit, he exclaimed, “There—-that leaves no doubt as to the commonest and most primitive effect of fear.” On Penrose’s next visit to Picasso’s studio on 21 June 1937 to collect Picasso’s donations for the Spain & Culture event, Penrose was pleased to have the opportunity to see Guernica complete prior to its hanging in the Spanish pavilion.

Picasso’s The Dream and Lie of Franco—a folder containing two etchings with nine sections each that was sold at the Spanish Pavilion in Paris in 1937—became a lightning rod in the surrealist realist debate (Figures 4.19 & 4.20). Picasso’s first explicitly political work, the initial 14 sections were completed along with an associated prose poem on 8 and 9 January 1937. Those initial sections satirically portray Franco as an abstracted and grotesque polyp or tuberous growth at battle with Spain and dismantling its culture. It was not until 7 June 1937 that Picasso added the final four sections, which related directly to his images of weeping women in the aftermath of the bombing of Guernica. As John Golding remarked, Picasso’s etchings and poem that make up The Dream and Lie of Franco break down distinctions between thought, writing, and visual imagery as surrealists demanded. Once complete, the entire set was to be printed and cut as post cards to be sold in the Spanish pavilion to aid the Republican cause. Instead folders of the two etchings that read like a Spanish alleluia or strip cartoon were sold to visitors to the pavilion, and in
early October 1937 Penrose purchased two sets from Picasso—one dedicated by Picasso to Penrose, and another for his lover and later wife, Lee Miller.522

Issue 1-3 of Cahiers d'Art in 1937 included the first and second states of The Dream and Lie of Franco. On 8 October 1937, Blunt singled out the etchings in a Spectator article titled, “Art: Picasso Unfrocked.”523 For Blunt, Picasso picked up on the dynamics around Franco’s grab for power, but not its political significance. For the etchings to perform a political function, Blunt felt they needed to be more realistic. As it was, only aesthetes would appreciate the abstracted images. For the masses to see the point, Picasso needed to express how the Spanish Civil War was “a tragic part of a great forward movement” in more explicit and positive terms: “He should have expressed this optimism in a direct way and not with circumlocution so abstruse that those who are occupied with more serious things will not have time or energy to work out all its implications.”524 Blunt went on to say, “For so many years he has been unaccustomed to looking anything in the face, that when he needs to do so he does not know how to set about it. What he does is to register horror—genuine, but useless horror.”525

Refusing to let Blunt’s statement stand, Read wrote a letter to the editor of The Spectator.526 Read pointed out that Picasso, rather than “being the idol of emasculated aesthetes” as Blunt had defined him, had been closely associated with the democratic Spanish government as the Director of the Prado and as the selected artist for the Spanish pavilion in Paris. Given the significance of both appointments in the fine arts, these facts did little to undermine Blunt’s assertion that Picasso’s etchings were devised with the cultural elite in mind. However, Read also noted that hundreds of thousands of people had seen Picasso’s painting in the virtual “market place” of the Spanish pavilion, and that it was
Picasso’s initial intention to sell the sections of the etchings as individual postcards to the poorest people. To buttress his argument that there was no evidence that modern art was unpopular, Read emphasized the popularity of Kauffer’s decorations for the ballet *Checkmate* at Sadler’s Wells:

...if Mr. Blunt were to venture into the cheaper seats he would find none of the superior abuse which might emanate from the stalls. It is only too evident to anyone who knows the real facts that the particular form of opposition to modern art adopted by Mr. Blunt comes from middle-class doctrinaires who wish to ‘use’ art for the propagation of their dull ideas. That the drab realism which these philistines have enforced in Russia and Germany should become the art of a country like Spain is happily a contradiction of its innate artistic spirit too improbably to entertain seriously.\(^{527}\)

Rather than giving any real evidence that the lower classes appreciated modern art, Read pegged Blunt as a dull middle-class doctrinaire, and he backhandedly associated Blunt’s interest in “drab realism” with fascist as well as soviet propaganda.

A week later, Blunt replied to Read’s letter.\(^{528}\) In Blunt’s view, because Picasso’s art that responded to the horrors of war was highly specialized and essentially private, it could not be easily applied to public problems. Perhaps knowing that *The Dream and Lie of Franco* had actually been sold as high-end etching sets rather than cheap postcards for the masses, Blunt also questioned the distribution of the postcards—to whom had they been distributed, and how widely were they selling? Picasso might be talented and Spain’s best-known artist, but he was not a popular artist in the way that Rivera and the Mexican realists were. A letter to the editor of *The Spectator* from the realist painter William Coldstream appeared on the same page as Blunt’s reply and confirmed Blunt’s position that Picasso was more interested in studio experimentation than in communicating the horrors of war to workers and the poor.\(^{529}\)
The following week, Read and Penrose each followed up with a letter to the editor.\textsuperscript{530} Read was stunned that Blunt and Coldstream might suggest that Picasso was out of touch with life. Both Picasso and Barbara Hepworth (whom Coldstream had condemned for the same reason) led full lives, perhaps because they were not associated with a political party or any particular group of workers. Both had full contact with others working in their craft. Penrose showed that Blunt had undermined his own argument that Picasso was not a popular artist by stating that Picasso was the best-known Spanish painter. Penrose also argued that the portrayal of personal emotion, such as horror and grief, made Picasso’s representations of private experience universal. Unlike Blunt who objected to the “appalling anguish” of \textit{Guernica} as effective propaganda for the Republican cause, Penrose argued that Picasso was savvy to portray the suffering of the Spanish people in the generally upbeat context of the Paris exhibition.

Blunt responded the next week by noting that Picasso and Hepworth’s associations with fellow artists only confirmed his argument that they were out of touch with worldly issues.\textsuperscript{531} To counter Read, Blunt iterated that an artist could be well known and have a limited audience with the ability to fully understand and enjoy his art. Blunt ended the long argument by reiterating that he had no quibble with Picasso expressing personal emotion, but that it should be supported with a true understanding of the war and “expressed in a manner intelligible to more than the happy few.”\textsuperscript{532} Blunt’s argument was as good as a call to action for Penrose. To show that Picasso could convey the political significance of the bombing in \textit{Guernica}, and to publicly affiliate Picasso with the politics and esthetics of British surrealism, Penrose began organizing the travelling exhibition of \textit{Guernica} in England with Picasso and Larrea in February 1938.\textsuperscript{533} Larrea wanted the exhibitions to be
both solemn and forceful and spelled out for Penrose that the more admiration Picasso garnered as an artist, the more it would help bring visibility to the Republican cause. Raising money was a secondary motivation for Larrea.534

The last Left Review article in the realist/surrealist debate came from the communist poet Randall Swingler in April 1938, who reported on the A.I.A.-sponsored meeting of distinguished artists representing the opposing camps of realists and surrealists the previous month.535 Swingler portrayed the realists as humble and honest servants to traditional practice, which he implied was associated with art’s social function and value. On the other hand, the surrealists were aggressive, vociferous, and pretentious in their “pseudo-philosophical, pseudo-psychological, pseudo-literary pseudo-phraseology which has nothing to do with painting.”536 He identified Penrose as the surrealists’ chief apologist at the meeting. Swingler argued that despite the surrealist view that painting depended on literary description to hold value, it should stand on its own. For Swingler, the artist’s job was to show the viewer that his vision was more accurate and acute than the layperson. However, the surrealist “is so frightened that he looks only into his own bowels.”537 For Swingler, the realists up to that point had fared almost as poorly, looking only within their own protective circle. Painting would need to expand its view to larger social relations to succeed, and in his estimation, the realists, though conscientious, had not yet achieved that wider perspective to tap into “real painting.” He ended by hailing the socialist realist art of Russia and the art of Spain (with which Picasso was deeply associated, though Swingler failed to recognize it) as the litmus test of real art.

About six months after Swingler’s article appeared, Guernica arrived on British soil on 30 September 1938, the day that Chamberlain signed the Munich pact on behalf of Great
Britain, acquiescing to Hitler’s annexation of the Sudetenland in the Czech Republic. *Guernica* and related drawings were first exhibited in England under the auspices of the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief at the New Burlington Galleries in London’s West End from 4 to 29 October 1938 (*Figure 4.21*). Around 3000 people who paid a 1/3d admission fee attended the exhibition. Consistent with other large exhibitions in London in the thirties, the event brochure highlighted the key dignitaries and famous people sponsoring the *Guernica* exhibition. Along with the General Secretary of the Communist Party of Great Britain and the Duchess of Atholl, four more Members of Parliament from the Labour and Liberal Parties served as official patrons. Other sponsors included Douglas Cooper, the leading collector (apart from Penrose) of Picasso in Britain; Peter Watson, modern art collector and a Director of the London Gallery; surrealists Hugh Sykes Davies and Kauffer; leftist publisher Victor Gollancz; and writers E. M. Forster and Virginia Woolf. Liberal Member of Parliament Wilfrid Roberts chaired the organizing committee, with Read as vice-chair, Penrose as treasurer, and Mesens as an honorary organizer.

Mesens’ *London Bulletin* took the lead in promoting the event (*Figure 4.22*). The cover of the October 1938 issue broadcast *Guernica*’s exhibition at the New Burlington Galleries. The issue contained Read’s assessment of Picasso’s painting as a modern Calvary, along with poems about Guernica and the rape of Europa by Paul Éluard and George Reavey respectively, an image of Picasso painting, and a photograph taken by Dora Maar of *Guernica* in Picasso’s studio (*Figure 4.23*). Consistent with the exhibition brochure, Maar also contributed a photograph of one of Picasso’s *Weeping Woman* drawings from 1937 (*Figure 4.24*). Linking Picasso to European and British surrealism, the October issue included catalogues for a pair of exhibitions held at the London Gallery: Giorgio de Chirico’s
works from 1911-1917 mounted on the first floor and an exhibition of Jennings’ collages, photographs, drawings, and oil paintings hung on the second floor. The French version of Pour un Art Révolutionaire Indépendent was also printed in that October issue (Figure 4.25). The cover page of the French manifesto was illustrated with a surrealist Mexican poster design that had been used to publicize a lecture by Breton. The poster was after a surrealist drawing by Rivera, perhaps to show that Rivera, whom Blunt had hailed as a realist capable of conveying powerful political messages, was in actuality aligned with the surrealists.

Éluard represented the French surrealists at the opening, and he wrote to Picasso to say that the painting looked better in London than it had in Paris due to New Burlington Galleries’ excellent top lighting. Picasso did not attend the opening, but Penrose wrote to him just as Guernica arrived in England to say that Sir Peter Chalmers Mitchell, a past director of the London Zoo who was in Malaga when it fell, would open the show along with the Spanish Ambassador. Penrose also let Picasso know that the “provincial towns” of Leeds and Manchester wanted to show Guernica in their municipal galleries, and that with Picasso’s permission, he could organize those exhibitions using the same strategies he had used with the New Burlington Galleries. He stressed the opportunity that Leeds and Manchester might provide for creating a sensation around the painting.

Between the two London exhibitions, the preparatory works traveled without the painting due to a lack of space—first in November to lecture rooms in Oriel College, Oxford for an exhibition sponsored by the Oxford Peace Council; and in December to the Leeds City Art Gallery. At every location including Manchester, the preparatory sketches were
shown along with Picasso's etching set *The Dream and Lie of Franco* and the oil painting *Weeping Woman* (1937), both from Penrose's private collection.544

*Guernica* and the related works were next shown in association with the Stepney Trades Council at the Whitechapel Gallery in London’s East End from 1 to 15 January 1939, where between 12,000 and 15,000 visitors filed through the exhibits. In lieu of an entry fee, Picasso had asked that visitors to the normally free Whitechapel Gallery contribute a pair of sturdy boots or shoes to a huge stockpile accumulating at the base of the mural.545 The shoes were then sent on to the dwindling Brigadists in Spain and the still increasing numbers of refugees. Major Clement Attlee, the Labour Party opposition leader and a key supporter of Republican Spain, was invited to open the Whitechapel exhibition. In December 1937, Attlee had visited the British Battalion in Spain along with other Labour leaders including Ellen Wilkinson and Robeson.546 Following his Spanish visit, the No. 1 British Battalion was named the “Major Attlee Company” for Attlee’s repudiation of Chamberlain’s non-intervention. In Spain, Attlee had expressed his admiration for the troops’ “courage and devotion to the cause of freedom and social justice,” and he committed “to tell the comrades at home of what [he had] seen. Workers of the World unite!”547 Opening the Whitechapel exhibition was one way to make good on his promise to the International Brigade, although the event must have felt bittersweet to him. The Brigades had been withdrawn from Spain following the Munich agreement, and Attlee had just welcomed the British Battalion home at Victoria Station on 7 December 1938. Jack Jones, a Liverpool dockhand who eventually would work his way up to the influential position of General Secretary of Transport and General Workers Union, took pictures of the
opening ceremony (Figure 4.26). Considered a war hero, Jones had been seriously wounded in battle as a member of the International Brigades the previous year.

*Guernica* and the preparatory sketches were last shown in England 1-15 February 1939 in H. E. Nunn & Company car showroom in Manchester, a site selected over the municipal gallery due to its cooperative proprietor and expansive wall space that could accommodate the extremely large canvas, which was unrolled from a large box, mounted on battens, and hung on masonry nails like a banner or theatre set. Although Penrose took the lead in organizing the exhibition with Picasso’s blessing, the Manchester Foodship for Spain, a local student activist group, sponsored the exhibition to coincide with Manchester and Salford Peace Week in an appeal for money and supplies for the Republican cause. A local dignitary, A. P. Simon, spoke at the exhibition’s opening, emphasizing for Mancunians (citizens of Manchester) that the painting was about what was in the minds of the people of Guernica when their town was bombed. As in Leeds and London’s East End, Manchester was primarily a working class city with strong leftist and Labour factions who had built a thriving anti-war movement. To draw in Mancunians, the Foodship’s press release announced that the exhibition would be open daily from 10am to 8pm, with a nominal entry fee of 6d as a contribution to the Foodship for Spain. While admission to this exhibition required an outlay of cash rather than a pair of boots as at the Whitechapel Gallery, it was less than half the price of admission at the New Burlington Galleries. As Penrose had stated in his letter to the editor of *The Spectator* to show that Picasso was a man of the people, the Manchester Foodship emphasized that Picasso had been appointed honorary chair of the Prado by the Spanish Republican Government. They
also made the hyperbolic and inaccurate claim that Picasso had been in Guernica when the bombing occurred and “under the influence of its terrible doom he painted his picture.”

Blunt’s view that Guernica was inferior to socialist realism for conveying a political message was not shared by the communist community in Manchester. The Foodship, which included graduates from the Manchester Art School who were involved in the Labour movement and local protests against the British Union of Fascists, embraced the mural. A leading member of the group, Harry Baines, a communist and one of the leading social realist muralists in Manchester at the time, helped to hammer Guernica to the wall in the car salesroom and was extremely proud of his role in helping to bring Picasso’s painting to the people of Manchester.553 As in London’s East End, “Guernica was a ‘must see’,” in the words of a young machinist Bernard Barry who joined Manchester’s Youth Communist League in 1936.554 In an interview with Helen Little, Barry confided that while he hardly knew of Picasso’s paintings, he was completely struck with Guernica’s “arresting iconography of the horrors of war.”555 As Read and Penrose had stated in their letters to the editor of The Spectator, and Blunt would later agree, Guernica’s complex and powerful imagery was a prime example of surrealism, Picasso’s individual creative genius, and political art more generally. As the response to Picasso’s painting in Manchester and London’s East End suggests, English working-class audiences saw these qualities in the painting.

During the five-month period that Guernica was exhibited in England, the surrealists orchestrated several exhibitions of their own work to bring the movement and their political goals to the attention of the general public. In October-November 1938, they contributed a surrealist section to the 64th Autumn Exhibition at the Walker Art Gallery in
Liverpool. In December 1938, Max Ernst’s paintings were shown at the London Gallery to aid Czech and Jewish refugees; and the following month, the London Gallery mounted the *Living Art in England* exhibition to raise additional funds for Czech and Jewish refugees who continued to pour in from Central Europe. These activities, coupled with the *Guernica* exhibitions, reinforced the British group’s relevance to local modern art and to the international surrealist movement, as well as their commitment to fighting fascism.

**The English Response to Guernica**

Golding, an English art historian who wrote about *Guernica* in 1973, reiterated Read and Penrose’s statements in the surrealist/realist debate that the painting’s surrealist qualities were its expressive distortion and its ability to evoke strong emotions, including grief and horror, through spare linear elements.\(^{556}\) As Agar did, Picasso pulled on both primitive and classical sources to complete *Guernica*, although Golding saw that blending as antithetical to surrealism, and Picasso’s cubist works and post-impressionist art more generally also combined those tendencies. Like paintings by Agar and other members of the British group, and much modern art, *Guernica* was a synthesis of abstraction and representation. Myfanwy Evans, editor of the art magazine *Axis* (first published in January 1935), consistently used Picasso’s art as an example of how representation and abstraction could be effectively combined in modern art to reflect “the internal truth of art.”\(^{557}\) According to Christopher Green, while Read was hesitant to embrace the heterogeneous nature of Picasso’s art in his first assessment of Picasso in 1930, by the mid-thirties Read and contributors to *Axis* were in agreement that Picasso successfully bridged the “accepted central opposition within vanguard art” between surrealism and abstraction.\(^{558}\) In his book *Art and Society* of 1937, a polemic that ironically argued against
the convergence of art and politics in propaganda of the late 1930s, Read opened the door to Freudian interpretations of Picasso’s recent non-geometric abstraction. For Read who wanted to distinguish Picasso’s art from Soviet and Nazi propaganda, Picasso’s art had a social function only in its “capacity to materialize the instinctual life of the deepest levels of the mind.” Read went on to say:

At that level we suppose the mind to be collective in its representations, and it is because the artist can give visible shape to these invisible phantasms that he has power to move us deeply. But in the process of giving these phantasms material shape, the artist must exercise a certain skill lest the bare truth repel us. He therefore invests his creation with superficial charms; wholeness or perfection, a due proportion or harmony, and clarity; and these are the work of his conscious mind, his ego. There, I think, the essential function of art ends; there ends the art of Picasso.

Penrose had mounted a similar argument in response to Blunt in The Spectator when he suggested that the portrayal of horror and grief made Picasso’s representations of private experience universal and was thus political. Swingler who defended the realists in April 1938 also believed that the artist and the layperson saw the same things, even if the true artist was able to see them more accurately and acutely.

In 1937, Europa Press and Stanley Nott of London published Paul Éluard’s Thorns of Thunder in English. That book of surrealist poems edited by George Reavey also featured a frontispiece design by Picasso—a portrait of Éluard drawn by Picasso on 8 January 1936. The publishers were capitalizing on an image familiar to them through one of the few collectors of Picasso’s work in London. The portrait was similar to ones in a set of etchings made by Picasso of Éluard in 1936, which Oswald Toynbee Falk had purchased from Zwemmer in mid-1936. In his foreword, Reavey described Éluard’s surrealist qualities—his ability to expand the frontiers of poetic intelligence and achieve unity through lyrical poetry—in a way that in turn he might have applied to Picasso’s heterogeneous painting
and surrealist poetry, if not modernism as a whole.\textsuperscript{563} For Read who wrote the preface, Éluard was important for his lyricism and for recovering the “true imaginative faculty in all its force and beauty.”\textsuperscript{564} As Lloyd pointed out in the realist/surrealist debate in January 1937, the surrealists believed that all humans were capable of lyrical production, and their democratic emphasis on lyricism was a gesture toward Marxism. In his response to Lloyd, Read also argued that the surrealists’ lyricism was socially responsible, rather than a superfluous flight into irrationality. Penrose had attributed these same lyrical qualities to Picasso’s \textit{Woman Lying in the Sun on the Beach}. Read praised Éluard for daring to be irrational and bringing “inhuman brightness” to his imagery, and for picking up on the “natural tone” of “our common humanity,” and the publishers believed that Picasso’s portraits of the artist highlighted these aspects of Éluard’s poetry.

The following year, to document his efforts on behalf of Picasso and the surrealists, Penrose collected a number of reviews of the October 1938 exhibition of \textit{Guernica} at the New Burlington Galleries.\textsuperscript{565} Even if the critics saw Picasso’s surrealist art as an abstraction of reality, they acknowledged that Picasso’s painting adequately expressed the horror of the bombing. William Walwyn, who had seen \textit{Guernica} in the Spanish pavilion, wrote in an article titled the “Picture of Horror” that although Picasso was farthest removed from life and ordinary men, he had conveyed the universal horror of the bombing.\textsuperscript{566} He encouraged readers to see the original painting in London to get true experience of war—saying that even the most hard-boiled will be impacted. On the same day, Jan Gordon for the \textit{Observer} noted that due to its massive scale and urgent angular patterns, \textit{Guernica} was almost too poignant in expressing horror and disintegration.\textsuperscript{567} He complained that with only two months to complete the picture, Picasso did not have the time to adequately fuse “the
drama of the composition and the insight of the [preparatory] drawings.” Gordon considered Picasso’s art excellent, but you needed “a cast iron soul to live with it.” For Gordon, moving from Picasso to the Goupil Salon in other rooms of New Burlington galleries was “a little like passing from a vociferous reviver meeting under Billy Sunday to a vicar’s tea party.” Eric Newton writing for the Sunday Times was the most effusive—Picasso was more brilliant that ever before because he was not so aloof and he was not creating art for art’s sake. Guernica in the eyes of Newton was Picasso’s most persuasive masterpiece; however, like Gordon, he believed the drawings were more powerful than the finished painting in conveying the horror of the bombing. Despite his pleasure that Picasso had painted a down to earth picture of the tragedy, Newton felt Guernica was too simplified and flat to be fully pregnant with meaning—“Picasso was leading up to a stupendous essay in cumulative anguish. But no. After all this travail—lo, a mouse. True, ‘Guernica’ is a pretty big mouse, but it is disappointing after the elaborate preliminaries.”

Despite Blunt’s view that Picasso had missed the political significance of the bombing of Guernica and Penrose’s belief that the painting indeed held political meaning but that most people would fail to see it, the working class attended the exhibitions of Guernica in far greater numbers than did the elite in London’s West End and Oxford’s lecture halls. By a five to one ratio, more viewers saw the painting in the Whitechapel Gallery than in the New Burlington Galleries. During the fortnight that the exhibition ran, newsreels, documentary films, and lectures were presented at the galleries to raise awareness about the conflict. On entry, visitors passed under a colorful banner of the “Major Attlee Brigade.” Penrose, Read, and Trevelyan guided visitors through the exhibits to explain the meaning of the mural and drawings. Despite his dim view of
Guernica in comparison to the preparatory drawings in October, Newton was excited enough to join them in leading public tours.

Penrose attributed the remarkably low crowds at the New Burlington Galleries to the public’s demoralization in the face of the Munich agreement. However, this fails to account for the distinct difference in the reception of Picasso by the working classes versus the sophisticated West End patrons. In London’s predominantly Jewish East End, folks hailed Picasso as the greatest living political artist. Author Michael Rosen, whose parents lived not far from the Whitechapel Gallery and visited the Picasso exhibition, claims that the leftist stronghold of the East End considered Picasso as “their guy,” and that reproductions of Picasso’s paintings were up on the walls of “the homes of virtually all of the Communist families that [he] knew as a child.” For Rosen’s father and many other Jewish communists, the Whitechapel Gallery was fondly called the “university of the ghetto,” for its extensive collection of Yiddish books and commitment to showing the works of Jewish modern artists, such as Jacob Epstein and Mark Gertler. From the elder Rosen’s perspective, Picasso’s propagandistic purpose for the modernist mural was more than acceptable—it was righteous. As Rosen has pointed out, the East Enders refused to toe Blunt’s party line that social realism was the only valid medium for political messages. Exhibiting Guernica fit with the communist struggle in the Jewish East End to defend their neighborhood against the British Union of Fascists and to raise local funds for the Spanish cause. Whereas, audiences at the New Burlington Galleries and in Oxford tended to question whether the mural was a properly aesthetic work or merely a form of propaganda, and they often found it lacking on both counts.
At the Whitechapel Gallery, people came to look at the large pile of all types and sizes of boots (estimated at between 400 and “thousands” of pairs) that had accumulated at the base of the mural, as much as they came to view Guernica.\(^{578}\) In addition to the shoes, the Stepney Trades Council collected the modest sum of £250 for the East London Foodship to Spain.\(^{579}\) Beyond their core issues of workers’ rights and wages, alternative food distribution had become an issue for the Trades Councils during the 1926 General Strike in Britain.\(^{580}\) For the refugees of Spain, volunteers canvased the tenement buildings of the East End to collect pennies for the Foodship’s “Million Penny Fund.”\(^{581}\) Guernica also became the centerpiece of Peace Week festivities in Manchester and Salford. The Foodship there distributed over 150,000 leaflets and held a public rally at the Free Trade Hall.\(^{582}\) Shortly after the opening of the exhibition, £3,000 was cabled from Manchester to Europe for milk and food for civilian refugees.\(^{583}\)

Penrose was privately disappointed with the level of crowds, funds, and press exposure he was able to garner with the exhibitions of Guernica in England, but he considered the campaign a moral success.\(^{584}\) His son Anthony remembers his father saying the painting was “well-received, but by totally bewildered people.”\(^{585}\) However, in a letter to Picasso, his father singled out Picasso’s positive effect at the Whitechapel Gallery—“The impression you have made on these simple people... was profound.”\(^{586}\) Those simple people included the painters John Craxton, John Sutherland, and Francis Bacon, as well as David Hockney’s father whose experience influenced his son.\(^{587}\) However, Penrose failed to even mention the Manchester exhibition in his biography of Picasso.

The dearth of reviews in Penrose’s archive of the Whitechapel and Manchester exhibitions is also noteworthy, given both the surrealists’ expressed interest in reaching
out to working classes and the positive reception of *Guernica* in the East End. The critic writing for *The Voice of East London* felt that *Guernica* was the “most advanced and provocative [painting] of modern times.” 588 To draw in the public as the Manchester show was being hung, the *Manchester Guardian* hailed *Guernica* as “a picture that should be seen and judged for oneself.” 589 Following the line of the London reviewers, that Mancunian critic believed that if the painting itself did not move you, you would be moved by the “magnificent concentrated energy and fine craftsmanship in some of the preparatory drawings.” 590 More effusive, the *Manchester Evening News* claimed, “No-one could fail to be impressed by a tremendous work which, more than any words, condemns the crime of war.” 591 Judging from these hyperbolic reviews, the painting was well received in the later venues. Perhaps there were in actuality fewer reviews of those final exhibitions, because most critics had chosen to weigh in on the first and more prestigious showing at the New Burlington Galleries. In addition, the Republicans had for all intents and purposes admitted defeat by early 1939, so Spain was becoming less of a news issue. By the time the painting had reached the Whitechapel Gallery, *Guernica* was old news to London’s art elite. Perhaps the critics had little interest in reporting on the later exhibitions because even Picasso’s supporters doubted that the masses would fully understand Picasso’s message or method of conveying it.

Indeed the situation in Spain seemed to play into Read’s increasingly peevish view that the time for mixing art and politics had past. 592 In January 1939, picking up on his ideas in *Art and Society*, Read reiterated this opinion in the *London Bulletin* to support the *Living Art in England* exhibition at the London Gallery, which included a range of surrealist and abstract art from European refugees and British artists. Trevelyan wrote a letter to the
editor taking issue with Read’s revised view that art was ultimately an individualistic act, rather than a manifestation of the collective unconscious.\textsuperscript{593} Trevelyan also objected to Read’s assessment that artists must give up the hope that art will ever “recover its social reference.”\textsuperscript{594} To make his argument, Trevelyan explained that the lecturers at the Whitechapel Gallery had praised the public’s understanding and enthusiasm for \textit{Guernica}, and he contrasted this with the indifference of the intellectuals of London’s West End. For Trevelyan, it was precisely \textit{Guernica}’s role in expressing the collective unconscious that accounted for its “surprisingly wide appeal.” Trevelyan believed a much broader public appreciated modern art than Read was willing to admit. Trevelyan complained that the entry fee of 1/3d at the New Burlington Galleries was established due to the “indifference of West End intellectuals.” It was out of reach for the common worker; yet was too meager to substantially contribute to the refugee fund. In his mind, the organizers of the New Burlington Galleries and London Gallery exhibitions had bought into Read’s fallacy that the time for political art was over and ran the risk of debarring the very people for whom exhibitions were “living” from enjoying “\textit{Living Art in England}.” Mesens responded to Trevelyan that there was no real inconsistency in Read’s view or the galleries’ position.\textsuperscript{595} Workers may find \textit{Guernica} and modern art appealing; but they would never be able to afford to buy paintings or in any other way support artists such as Picasso. For that, Mesens called for a new social order—“It is surely rather optimistic of Mr. Trevelyan to expect to wake up one morning and find it established.”\textsuperscript{596}

\textbf{Collecting and Selling Picasso in England}

Given the track record for exhibiting Picasso in London from 1921 forward, there was ample evidence to suggest that \textit{Guernica} had the potential to generate strong public
interest, but probably only a lukewarm response from the wealthy art establishment that mattered most for large donations. The West End’s lethargy in relation to Guernica was indicative of the lackluster reception of Picasso’s art in England. The English market for Picasso’s works—like all advanced modern art in the twenties—was extremely thin, with only a handful of collectors such as Hugh Willoughby and Cooper seriously interested in buying his art. Prior to World War II, British museums had acquired only six paintings by Picasso, and most of those works were from the first decade of the century. The initial large-scale solo exhibition of Picasso’s paintings in London was not until 1921 at the Leicester Galleries, a leading venue for European modernist art. The Leicester Galleries miscalculated its pricelist based on Picasso’s continental sales. The most expensive painting was listed at £780, and the prices were too high to attract London buyers. A total of only £92 in sales was realized from that exhibition of 72 drawings, prints, and paintings. From the large crowds who came to view the show, one could infer that Londoners were hungry to see works by Europe’s reigning painter. However, the dismal sales and mixed reviews reflected an English reticence to embrace Picasso’s art in financial and critical terms.

It was only in the early thirties that Picasso’s works began to sell and show more widely in London, and the dealers who represented surrealist artists—Reid and Lefevre Gallery, Mayor Gallery, Zwemmer Gallery, and the London Gallery—took the lead in that effort. In 1931, Reid and Lefevre Gallery held the second solo exhibition of Picasso’s works in London—Thirty Years of Pablo Picasso—in which about half of the works were loaned, and half were for sale. Reviews of that exhibition of 37 seminal works by Picasso were much more positive than those written ten years earlier. P. G. Konody, critic for the Observer, stated that the exhibition left little doubt that Picasso was “the dominating, the
most significant and the most inspiring figure in twentieth-century art."^{599} Cooper, who in 1932 came into a large fortune and began systematically buying up Picasso's cubist paintings, held numerous group exhibitions with his partners at the Mayor Gallery in Cork Street that included Picasso's works. The Mayor Gallery also mounted a large show of Picasso's drawings in 1934.

Zwemmer's Bookshop on Charing Cross Road, London's leading art publisher and dealer in Continental art books and journals, co-published the first English monograph on Picasso in 1930.\textsuperscript{600} The Zwemmer Gallery, which first opened in 1929, exhibited the \textit{Minotauroomachy} during its 1935 group Christmas exhibition and held three substantial shows of Picasso's works in 1936 and 1937.\textsuperscript{601} Not only was Anton Zwemmer responsible for giving \textit{Minotauroomachy} its name, in May 1936 he mounted the first solo show composed exclusively of works for sale by Picasso since the Leicester Galleries show.\textsuperscript{602} For that May exhibition, Zwemmer rehung the \textit{Minotauroomachy}; and in the first few months of 1936, Zwemmer sold four impressions of the etching to collectors including Penrose.\textsuperscript{603} Following suit with the Leicester Galleries' pricing scheme in 1921, Zwemmer was overly optimistic in setting the prices of Picasso's important and valuable paintings. According to Nigel Halliday, because London buyers at the time preferred figuration, Zwemmer asked the highest prices for Picasso's large figurative works.\textsuperscript{604} However, the highest priced painting remained unsold. Those that did sell went out the door for significantly less than their asking prices to the surrealist collector Edward James and Joseph Pulitzer, along with a number of Zwemmer's regular customers including Cooper, Lord Berners, and Raymond Mortimer.\textsuperscript{605} Falk, a merchant banker, bought four works and became one of Zwemmer's most important Picasso patrons.\textsuperscript{606}
In February 1937, Zwemmer held a special exhibition of 50 Picasso drawings that he had brought back from Paris. In May and June 1937, the Zwemmer Gallery mounted an exhibition of Joan Miró’s paintings and a large joint exhibition of works by Chirico and Picasso. Many of the works in those two exhibitions came from Belgian businessman René Gaffé’s collection. Zwemmer curated the joint exhibition of Picasso and Chirico’s works from Gaffé’s collection to show the origins of the two opposing camps of modern art—abstraction and surrealism.\(^{607}\) The show included 19 works by Picasso from 1901-1922, many seen for the first time in London; and nine paintings and a charcoal drawing from Chirico’s metaphysical period from 1912 to 1916. Following the trend established in the twenties, many of the works by Miró, Picasso, and Chirico remained unsold. Gaffé was anxious to sell the remainder from both exhibitions, and he asked his compatriot Mesens to arrange their sale in London. Mesens, armed with the knowledge that Penrose was in the market for Picassos and European modernism, encouraged Penrose to buy the paintings \textit{en bloc}. In turn, Penrose negotiated a lump sum of £6,750 for Zwemmer’s unsold paintings by Miró, Picasso, and Chirico. It was a remarkably low price in comparison to what the works would have brought on the continent.\(^{608}\) In accepting the offer, Gaffé congratulated Penrose on the astuteness of his investment:

\[\text{I can tell you in all sincerity that from the artistic point of view you have made a truly masterly coup and from the business point of view an excellent deal. You will soon realize this. But I am delighted for you. You have shown more guts than the picture dealers who ought to have leapt at such an opportunity.}^{609}\]

As Cowling has noted, Penrose acquired several major works by Picasso through the single purchase.\(^{610}\) In addition to 14 Picassos that dated from 1903 to 1921, Penrose purchased
from Gaffé several Chiricos, including *L’ange juif* (1916). One of Penrose’s co-directors at the London Gallery, Watson, also purchased Chirico’s *Melanconia* (1912) from Gaffé.

Rosenberg and Helft, a branch of Paul Rosenberg’s Paris gallery, held two exhibitions of Picasso’s works in London in 1937 and 1939. The London Gallery, which was operated by Mesens and directed by Penrose in association with Zwemmer and Watson, regularly featured works by Picasso in their publications and exhibitions after the gallery opened in early 1938. The London Gallery’s last exhibition prior to the advent of World War II was a blockbuster show of *Picassos in English Collections*, which included 18 works from Penrose’s collection alone. That exhibition coincided with the publication of the first full-length historical study of Picasso by a British author.

Penrose’s acquisition of Picasso’s *Minotauromacch* from Zwemmer in early 1936 further whet his appetite for Picasso’s works. By February of 1937, Penrose had cajoled Breton, who was in financial trouble, to part with a cubist collage by Picasso (*Head, 1913*). After the death of his parents in 1937, Penrose received a substantial inheritance and began investing heavily in surrealist art and Picasso’s works in particular. As a result, he soon became the leading collector, dealer, and promoter of Picasso’s art in England. In that role, he was able to appreciably increase his own wealth and provide a ready stock of pictures for sale through the London Gallery, which he bought and opened with his partners to market surrealist and modern European art.

In early spring of 1937 prior to initiating the purchase from Gaffé, Penrose traveled to France to make his first purchase directly from Picasso of a highly erotic painting of a female bather, *Woman Lying in the Sun on the Beach* (1932), which he had admired in *Cahiers d’Art* and considered a “minute lyrical masterpiece.” Given their budding
friendship, he paid Picasso only £90 for the painting. It was around the time that he was wrapping up the purchase from Gaffé that Penrose saw Guernica completed in Picasso’s studio and gathered Picasso’s donated drawings for the Spain and Culture rally and auction in late June. After vacationing that late summer with Lee Miller, Picasso and Dora Maar, Agar and Bard, the Éluards, and Man Ray and his girlfriend in Mougins, France, Penrose purchased his favorite portrait of Miller from Picasso on 4 October 1937 as a “love-gift” to Miller who had returned to Egypt to be with her husband.617 At the same time, Picasso dedicated a set of The Dream and Lie of Franco etchings to him. Perhaps in a show of solidarity with Picasso’s plan to sell impressions of The Dream and Lie of Franco to aid the Republican cause, Penrose came away from Picasso’s studio that day with two sets of the etchings—his own impression dedicated by Picasso and another set for Miller.618 Penrose immediately sent Miller her set along with the most recent copy of Cahiers d’art, which featured Guernica and the preparatory drawings associated with it.619 However, he held onto her portrait by Picasso so that he could include it in a surrealist exhibition that he was organizing at the Gordon Fraser Gallery in Cambridge in late 1937.620

In a letter written to Miller in Cairo in late October 1937, Penrose expressed his immense satisfaction with the Picassos, Mirós, and Chiricos that he had amassed over the past year and a half and that were now hanging in his home at Downshire Hill in Hampstead:

‘La jeune fille a la Mandoline’ [sic], that very subtle cubist Picasso, hangs over the table in the living room with your portrait on the wall next to it, still waiting for its frame, making a strange contrast of past and present. Then there are Chiricos everywhere honeycombing the walls with metaphysical interiors. The hall is full of Picasso engravings and drawings and the dining room looks very impressive with the big Miró nude and ‘La femme en vert’ of Picasso. 621
His pride of ownership of the paintings was palpable in his letter to Miller. The letter reads as if the Picassos, Chiricos, and Miró had become a living part of his identity and had infused his home with a metaphysical presence. Although he seemed to approach his Picassos as individualist works, Penrose wrote that letter to Miller within days of his letter to The Spectator to defend Guernica as a populist painting that might transcend Picasso’s individualist art. Penrose’s newfound sense of ownership came with an increased comfort in promoting Picasso’s work. As Cowling has noted, Penrose’s letter to the editor of The Spectator marked the first time that Penrose had publicly championed Picasso and presented himself as someone who could speak definitely about Picasso’s intentions as an artist. Around this time, Penrose also began visiting Picasso more regularly without Éluard or other friends present. As Cowling has pointed out, their new more intimate relationship was reflected in Penrose’s purchase of Weeping Woman (Figure 4.27), which had been painted near the end of October 1937 after Guernica was completed. Penrose bought the painting directly from the artist for a ridiculously low price of £284.622 On first seeing it, Penrose was awestruck by what he considered to be an unprecedented combination of realism and magic in the oil painting.623 Sometime in late 1937, Penrose purchased two different states of a closely related etching also called Weeping Woman.624

When Penrose sent the balance he owed on the oil Weeping Woman to Picasso in April 1938, he outlined his goals for the newly opened London Gallery and sent Picasso the first number of the London Bulletin.625 In that letter, Penrose gushed about the effect that Weeping Woman had on him and the people who had seen it in England:

I am more and more delighted to own this magnificent canvas, which continues enormously to impress me and the dozens of people who have seen it. In these dreadful times, when we live on a diet of atrocities, each
worse than the next, this picture is like a drug and gives me courage. It misses nothing of this tragedy, but surpasses it.  

Penrose’s estimation of the painting as surpassing the tragedy of Guernica stands in stark contrast to Blunt’s view that Picasso was incapable of expressing the horror of the situation in politically powerful terms. Penrose also had to back pedal and forewarn Picasso that he would find a picture of himself with Éluard in the first issue of the London Bulletin. In their hurry to make deadlines, no one had secured Picasso’s permission to use the photograph before publication. As Penrose stated it, they had gone ahead with the publication because Picasso’s support was critical to them.  

To encourage Picasso to contribute to a future issue, Penrose emphasized that Read, Éluard, Cooper, and Breton were collaborators on the London Bulletin. However, it was not until the October 1938 exhibition of Guernica at the New Burlington Galleries that Picasso was heavily featured in the London Bulletin. Despite his obvious manipulations to enlist Picasso’s support in marketing the London Gallery and contributing to the London Bulletin, Penrose ended his April letter with his condolences to Picasso about the Spanish situation—“I can’t express the horror and disgust the news from Spain causes me.”  

Penrose wasted no time using Weeping Woman as a political weapon in England. He included the oil painting in the Realist and Surrealist exhibition at the Guildhall, Gloucester the following month. That exhibition, designed to draw out the surrealist/realist division among artists who had united on the Popular Front in England, coincided with the London May Day protests that the surrealists mounted with the A.I.A. against Chamberlain’s non-interventionist policies. Later in the year, Penrose went on to exhibit the Weeping Woman oil painting in all five of the Guernica exhibitions in his efforts to sustain the political narrative that the surrealists established for Guernica. Weeping Woman was also featured
in the London Gallery exhibition *Picasso in Some English Collections*, mounted in May-June 1939 just before the Gallery was shuttered for good and World War II began. As Cowling notes, that exhibition capitalized on the publicity generated from the *Guernica* exhibitions, and over a third of the exhibits were from Penrose’s private collection. 629

Apart from Penrose’s purchases directly from Picasso, his collection was built from two large acquisitions—the Gaffé pictures in the summer of 1937 and an extensive collection of modern art and ethnographic objects purchased from Éluard. 630 On 27 June 1938 in Paris, Éluard drew up an agreement for Penrose to purchase over 100 works for £1600, a non-negotiable price that Éluard considered fair. 631 That gentlemen’s agreement was an attempt to move beyond a capitalist transaction. In fact, the sum was deeply discounted even in London’s soft market. Penrose immediately communicated his good fortune to Mesens. 632 He would reserve 20 to 25 favored works for himself and share the remainder with Mesens to sell as part of the London Gallery’s stock. Penrose wrote to Mesens that, “He would instruct Éluard that ‘should he speak about the sale, he should simply say that the London Gallery is buying it’.” 633 Over the years Penrose profited significantly from the purchase, which included 10 recent drawings and prints by Picasso. From the purchase, Penrose also gifted a small postwar cubist painting by Picasso to Read. The most notable work by Picasso was a carved and painted wood cubist construction of “a glass, knife, bread and salami on a table top decorated with a piece of real upholstery fringe.” 634 According to Cowling, it was the lone cubist construction that Picasso relinquished from his private collection. Picasso had gifted it to Éluard, who in turn sold it to Penrose for 100 francs, a price far under what either man paid for many of the ethnographic objects in the collection.
For Penrose, *Guernica* had a simplicity and economy of form like in primitive art. He felt that *Guernica* implied the presence of the enemy of all mankind and held no easy symbols of good and evil. In 1964 possibly in preparation for a lecture, Penrose wrote a short essay on *Guernica*. He warned that the painting derived from Picasso’s own myth and that there was a danger in fixing the meaning of its symbolism. In Penrose’s mind, it was better to leave some ambiguity to allow a choice of interpretations and involve the spectator, given that the painting had gone through many changes and had evolved through Picasso’s own self-questioning. However, counter to Blunt in the late 1930s, Penrose believed *Guernica* did contain symbols of hope in the winged soul of the horse, the man with the clenched fist holding corn in front of a sun disc, and the lamp. To defend his position, Penrose alluded to comments made by Éluard about the painting. Penrose, Read, and Eluard considered horror a universal human emotion. For them, the commonality of that emotion made the tragedy understandable to the masses, even if the common man was unable to fully understand the political ramifications of the bombing. Éluard believed the expression of horror was even more vivid in the way that Picasso had reinvented the bombing scene as a mythic picture. Penrose and Éluard both felt by fictionalizing and abstracting the tragedy, Picasso was able to stir deep compassion for, and understanding of, the human condition rather than simple hatred for the fascists. For them, unlike Blunt, *Guernica* was optimistic in that it was a victory over the misery bought about by evil men. Based on his knowledge of Picasso, Penrose argued that the artist had preferred to arrive at truth by joining the imagination and nature rather than preaching his message.

However, counter to his own position that the symbolic meaning of various elements should not be fixed, Penrose claimed that the horse in the painting was a sign of
the pathos of dying. For Penrose, the horse was like a soul, curled as if it were returning to womb, with its head raised in place of a clenched fist. Indicative of the sexual proclivities of both Penrose and Picasso, Penrose went on to say that the horse, with its head toward the sky and open mouth spitting in defiance like the “last salvo from a fortress that will not surrender,” was like an ejaculation in the final consummation of love. For Penrose, the detached and unharmed bull was a symbol of brute force, angry and watching for an unseen enemy. The bird signified escape rather than peace. Penrose drew out how Picasso’s bull diverged from the meaning of the bull and the sun in Mithraic rites. In those ancient rites, the bull became a life-giving symbol of the sun only when it was slaughtered. In *Guernica*, Penrose felt that Picasso slaughtered the sun and replaced it with an electric lamp. In line with his emphasis on ambiguous symbolism, he also associated the lamp with the lamp of truth, and he felt its remainder in the face of such evil in the modern world was the last insult for the people of Guernica. He drew attention to the four women in the painting: the woman and dead child signifying birth and death as they appeal to the bull; a woman raising her arms in terror and anguish to the far right; and more centrally the visages of two appalled women—one serene, her arm raised with the lamp, and the other running from the cabin. He likened the male figure lying face up as a dead warrior shattered beneath his horse and his head severed, showing his complicated destiny in besieged Republican Spain. Picasso’s message that the men were defenseless without arms to protect their women and children was in complete harmony with the messages about women and children in the surrealists’ hoardings and the Communist Party’s captioned pictures in *To-Morrow*. 
Conclusions

When it came to promoting the Spanish cause with Picasso’s works, the surrealists were caught in several double binds. Although the surrealists and the galleries that represented them were instrumental in introducing Picasso and his art to England, London’s wealthy patrons and critics remained reluctant to embrace Picasso in the late thirties. This was the case even if critics across England were willing to concede Picasso’s immense stature and that *Guernica* and his preparatory sketches were powerful expressions of the horror of the Basque bombing. In early 1939, the surrealists needed to show Breton their support for Trotsky, who believed the Popular Front against fascism undermined the communist revolution. Yet since August 1936, they had joined the A.I.A. to make significant contributions to the Popular Front for the Spanish cause. In both alliances, the surrealists claimed to be on side of the working classes. But as their realist detractors pointed out and ample evidence suggests, the surrealists were firmly lodged in London’s elite art world. In reality, there was very little that the surrealists needed to do to encourage the working class to support Republican Spain, because Pollitt and the Communist Party had been so successful in raising the issue with workers.

Armed with the connections and knowledge that came from being both a leading patron of Picasso’s art in England and the executive director of the London Gallery, Penrose was in a unique position to plan and promote the English exhibitions of *Guernica* and Picasso’s related preparatory works. The advantages available to Penrose had as much to do with his privileged status in London’s art market as they did with his affiliations within the surrealist movement. The same could be said for Mesens as an experienced modern art dealer and the managing director of the London Gallery. No less important in defending
Picasso’s art against the realists and in promoting the *Guernica* exhibitions was Read’s authority as one of Britain’s leading critics. However, because by 1938 *Guernica* had become the most recognizable icon of the Republican cause, and because these men were the accepted leaders of the British surrealist group and pulled off the exhibitions, their ability to bring *Guernica* to London, Oxford, Leeds, and Manchester consolidated the British group’s role in the Popular Front. Nonetheless, the surrealists’ political efficacy was inextricably tied to Penrose’s, Mesens’, and Read’s personal relationships with artists and collectors, as well as their expertise in negotiating London’s art market and high society. As a result, the group’s Marxist position was belied by the means with which it was realized.

Although many of the British surrealists had been protesting in a People’s Front with the realist members of the A.I.A since the inception of the Spanish war, it was primarily through the Spain & Culture rally, the 1938 May Day protests, and the *Guernica* exhibitions that the surrealists showed just how adept they were at organizing large-scale political events and stirring national sentiment for intervening in Spain. This was the case, even if the *Guernica* exhibitions did little to convince Blunt and realism’s defenders in England that Picasso’s surrealist art could convey the political significance of the bombing of Basque civilians. Whether or not the realists accepted the political power of *Guernica*, the painting became a poignant culmination to the realist-surrealist debate in England.

Although the Spanish war was essentially over by the time *Guernica* was shown in England, the exhibitions also came at an opportune time for the surrealists to validate their dual, and in many ways antithetical, commitments to Breton’s Trotskyist F.I.A.R.I. and the Stalinist A.I.A. leadership at home.
Despite the surrealists’ purported radicalism, they never fully broke away from English prejudices about class or modern art. As entrenched as Penrose, Mesens, and Read were in London’s art market, they relied on familiar paradigms for presenting Picasso’s art to the English upper and lower classes. As a result, they developed a two-pronged approach for showing *Guernica*—first and foremost to London’s art elite at the New Burlington Galleries, and as an afterthought to the working poor at the Leeds municipal gallery, London’s Whitechapel Gallery, and a car salesroom in Manchester. Perhaps because they believed a show in the prestigious New Burlington Galleries would generate more money and publicity for the cause, they were far more invested in promoting that initial exhibition. Yet in their zeal to make an impact with Picasso’s painting, the surrealists remained blind to the implications of the longstanding trend of heavy foot traffic, low sales, and mixed reviews of Picasso’s work in England. In fact, had the surrealists been open to it, the working class communists of the East End might have helped them to build a stronger argument for *Guernica* as a surrealist political statement.

Chapter 4 Endnotes

411 In January 1937, Picasso accepted an invitation from Spanish government to produce a mural for the Spanish pavilion at the *Exposition Internationale des Arts et Techniques dans la Vie Moderne Paris 1937*. On 26 April 1937, a scheduled market day, the town of Guernica in the Basque country of northern Spain bombed. Picasso was so moved by the death and devastation that he began making preliminary sketches for a mural about the bombing on 1 May. He began painting the canvas ten days later on 11 May and continued to revise the composition until the end of June. As Anthony Blunt has indicated, the precise date that the canvas was completed is unknown. However, the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia and the Tate Gallery put the completion date at 4 June 1937. By the time Roland Penrose visited Picasso’s studio on 21 July, it was complete. (See: Cowling, *Visiting Picasso: The Notebooks and Letters of Roland Penrose*, 32.) Blunt saw it finished and hanging in the Spanish pavilion in Paris in mid-July. (See: Anthony Blunt, *Picasso’s *Guernica*’ (New York and Toronto: Osford University Press, 1969), 59, note 2.).

412 The Trades Union Congress formed local councils such as the Stepney Trades Council as part of the early twentieth century syndicalist movement. The syndicalist movement was inspired by Marx, but was not communist.

413 The manifesto was written in late July 1938 and was first published in English translation as “Towards a Free Revolutionary Art” in *Partisan Review* in New York that fall. At about the same time, E. L. T. Mesens and Roland Penrose published the manifesto in French as “Pour un art révolutionnaire independent” in no. 6 of
the London Bulletin (October 1938), along with photographs of Picasso working on Guernica, an essay about the painting by Herbert Read, and poems about Guernica by Paul Éluard to publicize the first exhibition of Guernica in London that month. In the following issue of the London Bulletin (coinciding with Whitechapel and Manchester exhibitions of Guernica), they published the manifesto in English translation as "Towards an INDEPENDENT Revolutionary Art." Although the manifesto was signed by Breton and Diego Rivera, Breton later stated that Trotsky was the primary author.

The Trades Union Congress A conservative member of parliament from Birmingham, Neville Chamberlain was Chancellor of the Exchequer from November 1931 to 28 May 1937. From late May 1937 to 10 May 1940, he served as Prime Minister.

Nigel Wheale, "Reframing 'Guernica'," The fortnightly review, http://fortnightlyreview.co.uk/2013/03/reframing-guernica/. Works from the Prado included paintings by Titian, Rubens, Velazquez and Goya.

Blunt, Picasso's 'Guernica'.

Robertson et al., Angels of Anarchy and Machines for Making Clouds, 193.

Ibid., 194-195.

Ibid., 195.

Surrealist Group in England, International Surrealist Bulletin No. 4. The International Surrealist Exhibition was held in London from 11 June to 4 July 1936. The surrealists met at Roland Penrose's residence at 21 Downshire Hill in Hampstead on 7 July to draft and sign their statement for the International Surrealist Bulletin No. 4 that was published in September. The Spanish Civil War began with a coup led by a small group of right-wing military leaders in mid July, and Nationalist forces executed poet Federico Garcia Lorca on 19 August 1936—both were polarizing events for the surrealist group.

Roughton, "Surrealism and Communism," 74-75.


As exemplified by a pamphlet published by the Communist Party of Great Britain, the Communist Party took a much more radical stand than the National Council of Labour in demanding an end to the arms embargo and calling British workers to action in defense of the Spanish Republic. (See: Warwick Digital Library, Spanish Civil War Collection, Document 15/3/8/228, Images SA01-06-001 and SA01-06-002, pamphlet titled Harry Pollitt’s Call to Action: Defend the Spanish Republic.) However, in the month of September 1936 alone, the National Council of Labour raised close to £17,000 from the General Council of the Trades Union Congress, a host of trade unions (including ones associated with the visual arts, craft industries, and design), local trades councils and labor parties, and individuals. (See: Warwick Digital Library, Archives of the Trades Union Congress, Folder: Spanish Rebellion: International Solidarity Fund 1936-37, Issuing organization: National Council of Labour of Great Britain, 1936. Document 292/946/28/23.) Although the National Council of Labour was eager to support the Republicans with humanitarian aid, they refused to demand that the British government lift the arms embargo as the Communists implored them to do. (See: the communist bulletin, To-Morrow, December 1936, p. 5.) In building their case for lifting the embargo, To-Morrow emphasized that Spanish men were unable to defend their families without weapons. As with Guernica and Picasso's Weeping Women, the surrealists' hoardings, and the Spain & Culture rally, the emphasis was on saving women and children, even if the plea was for arms.

Robertson et al., Angels of Anarchy and Machines for Making Clouds, 194. The anti-fascists were from all walks of life and political persuasions, however, the Communist Party of Great Britain organized the anti-fascist protest against Mosley's planned march. The anti-fascist protesters were primarily men, however, women living along the route dumped garbage and human waste onto the police from windows as well.
On the Occasion of the Artists’ International Congress and Exhibition We Ask Your Attention,

the people of Spain,” distributed with Contemporary Poetry and Prose, no. 7, in November 1936; and in their broadsheet, “On the Occasion of the Artists’ International Congress and Exhibition We Ask Your Attention,”
In 1937-1938, prior to the exhibitions of Guernica and 67 preparatory drawings and paintings, the British surrealists mounted or were included in at least nine shows: in March-April 1937, the A.I.A. co-sponsored exhibit Unity of the Artist for Peace, Democracy and Cultural Development; in May 1937, a Zwemmer Gallery exhibition of paintings by Joan Miró; in June 1937, a Zwemmer Gallery show of works by Picasso and Giorgio de Chirico; in late fall 1937, a surrealist exhibition at Gordon Fraser’s Cambridge gallery; a London Gallery exhibition opening at midnight on 24 November 1937 of Surrealist Objects and Poems; in May 1938, a London Gallery show of Picasso’s works on paper and the Realist and Surrealist exhibition at the Guildhall, Gloucester; (These exhibitions were held the same month that the surrealists took part in May Day protests against Chamberlain.); in June 1938, an exhibition of Paul Delvaux’s paintings at the London Gallery; and in July 1938, Humphrey Jennings’ Machine exhibition at the London Gallery.

Cowling, Visiting Picasso: The Notebooks and Letters of Roland Penrose, 32. Cowling states that Guernica was complete by the time that Penrose visited Picasso’s studio at rue des Grands-Augustins on 21 June 1937. Morris and Radford suggest that Picasso did not attend the “Spain and Culture” rally because he was putting the finishing touches on the painting. See: Morris and Radford, Story of the A.I.A., 33.


Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art Archives, Edinburgh, RPA 630/1/3.


The Duchess of Atholl (previously Katherine Marjory Murray) was Scotland’s first woman Member of Parliament. She entered Parliament in 1923 initially as a member of the Conservative Party in opposition to the Labour Party and Ramsay MacDonald. Although in the twenties she voted against bills supporting the expansion of rights for women, in April 1937, she led an all-woman delegation to Spain and was a close ally of the suffragettes. Her trip to Spain inspired her book, Searchlight on Spain. She became a staunch supporter of the Spanish Republicans, opposed appeasement to Hitler, and fought poverty at home. She was one of the rare Conservatives to come out publically against Chamberlain’s non-intervention in Spain. In addition to chairing the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief, she agreed to sponsor the newly formed International Brigades’ Dependents and Wounded Aid Committee in June 1937. Charlotte Haldane formed that committee, and her secretarial staff were all communists according to Hugh Thomas, even if the group was sponsored by less radical figures such as the Duchess. See: Hugh Thomas, The Spanish Civil War (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1986), 609. By the time the Brigades were dismantled in October 1938 following the Munich agreement, the International Brigade Fund had raised over £42,000. It was also rumored to be a front for recruiting members of the British section of the Brigade. See: Tom Buchanan, Britain and the Spanish Civil War (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 142. On 23 April 1938, a national emergency conference was called at the Queen’s Hall in London to bring together Pro-Republican leaders including the Duchess of Atholl and Harry Pollitt, the General Secretary of the Communist Party of Great Britain, in a United Front. See: ibid., 169. By the late thirties, the Conservative Party cast her aside, and she was vilified as the “red” duchess in the conservative press. In 1938, she attempted to gain a seat in Parliament as an Independent and lost.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Morris and Radford, Story of the A.I.A., 33.


Morris and Radford, Story of the A.I.A., 41.

This was the case even though Penrose was a practicing Quaker.

van Hensbergen, Guernica: The Biography of a Twentieth-Century Icon, 86.


Ibid. Betty Rea designed the pole with clenched fist that adorned the banner, and Phyllis Ladyman embroidered the banner. They were not surrealist artists.

Ibid., 32.

Gooding, Ceri Richards, 36.

Morris and Radford, Story of the A.I.A., 41.

Ibid.

Midway through completing the murals, they were burned in a suspected arson attack, confirming the confluence of art and politics. (See: van Hensbergen, Guernica: The Biography of a Twentieth-Century Icon, 88.)

A copy of the 11-page January 1938 A.I.A. Artists News Sheet, which contained Jack Chen's offending remarks was enclosed with the A.I.A.’s retraction letter sent by James Holland to Penrose on behalf of the surrealists. For a copy of the Artists News Sheet, see the folder “Artists News Sheet--The Artists International Association” in the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art Archives, Edinburgh, GMA A35/1/1/19 1273 Artists International Association. The New York exhibition was on 5th Avenue and contained 150 works.


Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art Archives, Edinburgh, GMA A35/1/1/19 Artists International Association, 1272 Letter from Surrealist Group "To the Editor of the Artists News Sheet," 16 Feb 1938.


Jack Hastings, "The Surrealists," Left Review 2, no. 4 (1936): 186. Although he did not mention Eileen Agar’s Autobiography of an Embryo specifically, her painting was an apt example of the incongruous imagery to which Hastings referred.

Ibid.

Ibid., 519. Read stated, "The two fields of knowledge which I am anxious to include within the scope of dialectical materialism are anthropology and psycho-analysis, more particularly their common ground in social psychology."


Ibid., 566. Twisting the usual meaning of pragmatism, Jackson defined Pragmatists as strictly logical in seeing beliefs as "primary, originating, and ultimately inexplicable." Therefore Pragmatists such as the surrealists did not try to explain beliefs, but simply use them.

Ibid.


Maynard Solomon, ed. Marxism and Art: Essays Classic and Contemporary (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1974), 493. Although West had previously experimented with automatic writing, he took the side of the realists in the supplement.

Read, "Surrealism--the Dialect of Art," ii.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid., iii.

Ibid.

Anthony Blunt, "Rationalist and Anti-Rationaist Art," ibid., iv. Blunt used the term "Superrealism."

Ibid., v.

Ibid.

Ibid., vi.

Alick West, "Surréalisme in Literature," ibid., vi.

Ibid., viii.


Ibid., 895.

Ibid., 896.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid., 897.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.
Picasso’s mediation between the public and private began through numerous private images such as the first wife Olga Koklova for his lover Marie-Thérèse. As the title of the drawing suggests, Picasso’s rehashing of the painting was coming along before he painted Guernica. During the summer of 1938, Penrose and Mesens reached the conclusion that the New Burlington Galleries would be the perfect location to display *Guernica*, due to the surrealist’s history with the gallery, its reputation for showing avant-garde art, and its spacious exhibition hall. (See: van Hensbergen, *Guernica: The Biography of a Twentieth-Century Icon*, 88.)

Blunt, "The 'Realism' Quarrel.


Ibid.


Robin Adèle Greeley, "The Body as Metaphor: Picasso and the Performance of *Guernica*," in *Surrealism and the Spanish Civil War* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006), 172-73. Greeley and others have speculated that the figures in the Marat drawings serve as a metaphor for the murderous jealousy of Picasso’s first wife Olga Koklova for his lover Marie-Thérèse. Greeley goes on to suggest that Picasso rehashed numerous private images such as the *Death of Marat* for Guernica’s much more public statement about suffering. As the title of the drawing suggests, Picasso’s mediation between the public and private began long before he painted *Guernica*.

Giacometti, Max Ernst, Paul Éluard, André Breton, and Moore’s wife Irina attended that studio visit. Picasso was excited to show them how the painting was coming along.


Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art Archives, Edinburgh, GMA A35 RPA 600, Copies of debate in the *Spectator* between Blunt and Read on Picasso’s art: October 1937. Blunt’s 8 Oct 1937 article, “Art: Picasso Unfrocked,” appeared on col. 1, p. 584 of the *Spectator*. Portions of Blunt’s article, which constituted an attack on Picasso, were drawn out in red pencil in the margin most likely by Penrose.

Ibid.
women members of Parliament.

Italy from Mussolini.

Ivy’s husband Sir Austen was a Mussolini supporter. His favorite artists, Ignacio Zuloaga, was opened by Lady Ivy Chamberlain at the New Burlington Galleries. The Leeds exhibition was held 9-23 December 1938. Professor Bonamy Dobrée, a respect English scholar, opened the Leeds exhibition. While Picasso’s works were shown in Leeds, an exhibition of one of Franco’s favorite artists, Ignacio Zuloaga, was opened by Lady Ivy Chamberlain at the New Burlington Galleries. Lady Ivy’s husband Sir Austen was a Mussolini supporter, and Lady Ivy had received the Gold Medal of Merit of Italy from Mussolini.

van Hensbergen, Guernica: The Biography of a Twentieth-Century Icon, 91.

Wheale, “Reframing Guernica”. Admission to the Whitechapel was normally free and remains free today.

Thomas, The Spanish Civil War, 792-93. Like the Duchess of Atholl, Ellen Wilkinson was one of the first women members of Parliament.

Ibid.

Wheale, "Reframing Guernica".
549 Ibid. See also: Ian Youngs, "Picasso's Guernica in a Car Showroom," B.B.C. News, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-16927120?print=true. Youngs points out that given the anti-war message of Guernica, it is ironic that the car dealership suffered damage during the Blitz in 1940 and was bombed again by the IRA in 1996. The site at 32 Victoria Street in Manchester is now the backside of a large Harvey Nichols department store. In each location that Guernica was exhibited following the Paris exhibition, it was mounted in similar fashion.

550 van Hensbergen, Guernica: The Biography of a Twentieth-Century Icon, 95.

551 Helen Little, "Guernica...In a Car Showroom?," Tate, http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/articles/guernica-car-showroom. According to Helen Little, the Manchester & District Anti-War Council was formed in 1933 from a coalition of working-class and leftist organizations and trade unions.


553 Wheale, "Reframing 'Guernica'." According to Wheale, Baines was trained in the Manchester Art School as a muralist. In 1937, Baines' painting was included in a Tate Gallery exhibition, Contemporary British Mural Painting, bringing national attention to his work.

554 Little, "Guernica...In a Car Showroom?".

555 Ibid.

556 Golding, "Picasso and Surrealism," 120.


558 Ibid.

559 Herbert Read, Art and Society (London and Toronto: William Heinemann, 1937), 203-04. Read argued against the convergence of art and politics, not because he believed art should not be political, but because he was against the kind of blatant propaganda put forward by the fascists and Stalinist regime.

560 Ibid. In Read’s relatively reductive view of the psychodynamics of creativity, he argued that “the sensational awareness of the ego is brought into direct contact with the id, and from that ‘seething cauldron’ snatchs some archetypal form, some instinctive association of words, images or sounds, which constitute the basis of the work of art. Some such hypothesis is necessary to explain that access, that lyrical intuition, which is known as inspiration and which in all ages has been the rare possession of those few individuals we recognize as artists of genius.”

561 Ibid.

562 The set of etchings was the result of collaboration between Éluard and Picasso for an illustrated edition of Éluard’s poem Grand air. Reavey along with other authors, including Man Ray, Samuel Beckett, and Gascoyne translated the poems. The book included a preface by Read and a foreword by Reavey.


564 Éluard, Thorns of Thunder: Selected Poems with a Drawing by Pablo Picasso, viii.

565 Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art Archives, Edinburgh, RPA 535/1 and RPA 535/3 include Guernica: Catalogue and exhibition publications with 67 preparatory paintings, sketches and studies at the New Burlington Galleries 4-29 October 1938 and news cuttings for reviews of the Guernica exhibition.

566 William Walwyn, “Picture of Horror,” (newspaper not noted or included in clipping), 9 October 1938.


568 Ibid.
Ibid.
Ibid.


van Hensbergen, Guernica: The Biography of a Twentieth-Century Icon, 95.

Wheale, "Reframing 'Guernica". Also see: Cowling, Visiting Picasso: The Notebooks and Letters of Roland Penrose, 42.


Wheale, "Reframing 'Guernica". Wheale quoted Rosen’s introduction to the symposium, Exhibiting Guernica 1939-2009, held at the Whitechapel Gallery—"You may know the bitter joke that came out of the Soviet Union against this [Picasso’s] kind of art. Impressionism is what you see. Surrealism is what you think. Expressionism is what you feel. Social Realism is what you hear."


Wheale, "Reframing 'Guernica".

The Trades Union Congress sponsored the 1926 General Strike from 3 May 1926 to 13 May 1926 as a call for the government to prevent wage reductions and improve conditions for 800,000 locked-out coal miners. Over 1.5 million transportation and heavy industry workers struck in 1926; however the government enlisted middle class volunteers to maintain essential services, and the strike was ultimately unsuccessful.

Little, "Picasso in Britain 1937-1939," 163.

"Guernica...In a Car Showroom?".

Ibid.

Cowling, Visiting Picasso: The Notebooks and Letters of Roland Penrose, 42.

Youngs, "Picasso’s Guernica in a Car Showroom".

Wheale, "Reframing 'Guernica".

Little, "Picasso in Britain 1937-1939," 163.


"Guernica...In a Car Showroom?". Little quotes from the Manchester Guardian, 2 February 1939.

Ibid.

Youngs, "Picasso's Guernica in a Car Showroom".

Read, "In What Sense 'Living'?,” 5-7.


Ibid.


Ibid.

Roger Fry included works by Picasso in the Manet and Post-Impressionists exhibition at the Grafton Galleries in 1910 and in the Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition also at the Grafton Galleries in 1912.
first solo exhibition of Picasso's drawings in London was held in 1912 at the Stafford Gallery. For a fuller summary of Picasso's exhibition history in England, see: James Beechey et al., "Picasso in Britain 1920-1939," in Picasso & Modern British Art, ed. James Beechey and Chris Stephens (London: Tate Publishing, 2012), 104-06. And: Helen Little, "Picasso and Britain: A Selected Chronology of Exhibitions and Acquisitions 1900-1960," ibid., 220-27. Beechey notes that the buyers of Picasso’s art in the twenties tended to be wealthy, prominent businessmen, such as Samuel Courtauld and William McInnes. However, they typically bought early works and rarely acquired more than one painting by Picasso.

511 The Christmas exhibition ran from 14 December 1935 to 25 January 1936. The Minotauromachy was mentioned in many of the reviews of the exhibition.
513 For the Zwemmer Gallery sales records, see: Tate Gallery Archives 992.4.3. Impressions of the etching were sold to buyers for 20 guineas each. Penrose purchased his impression on 22 February 1936.
514 Halliday, More Than a Bookshop: Zwemmer's and Art in the 20th Century, 137.
515 Ibid., 137-138.
516 Ibid., 138. From the May 1936 Picasso exhibition, Falk bought two wash drawings, a bullfight charcoal drawing, and a pencil drawing of a woman.
517 Ibid., 138.
518 Ibid., 140. Halliday does not list the price of the sale, but Cowling provides more details and sets the price of the entire sale from Gaffé to Penrose at £6,750. See: Cowling, Visiting Picasso: The Notebooks and Letters of Roland Penrose, 31.
520 Ibid., 31-32. According to Cowling, Penrose acquired a preparatory drawing of a female nude for Les Demoiselles d’Avignon (£315); an analytical cubist painting of Fernande Olivier titled La Femme en vert (£720); the 1910 cubist portrait of Picasso’s dealer Wilhelm Uhde (£675); Girl with a Mandolin modeled by Fanny Tellier (£900); and an important cubist collage Man with a Violin of 1912 (£135).
521 Halliday, More Than a Bookshop: Zwemmer's and Art in the 20th Century, 139-40.
522 Anton Zwemmer had contributed about a quarter of the money required to open the London Gallery and served as one of its directors. Penrose sold inherited farms in Norfolk and Suffolk to come up with the rest of money needed. Peter Watson, who bought one of the Chirico paintings from Zwemmer in 1937, was also a director of the London Gallery. The Chirico paintings that Penrose and Watson purchased from Zwemmer in 1937 were illustrated with attributions to their new owners in the London Bulletin, no. 6 (October 1938): 15, 18. Many of the Chirico paintings shown by Zwemmer in June 1937 were reshown at the London Gallery in October 1938. Zwemmer Galleries and the London Gallery shared an interest in Chirico paintings from 1911-1917. Neither gallery represented paintings by Chirico from other periods.
614 Cowling, Visiting Picasso: The Notebooks and Letters of Roland Penrose, 32. Cowling notes that Penrose attained the distinction of having the greatest collection of Picasso's works in England through the purchase of Gaffé's paintings.

615 The London Gallery closed in 1940 due to the War.


617 Ibid., 36.

618 Ibid., 36.

619 Ibid.

620 Ibid., 36-37. Immediately following the Cambridge exhibition, Penrose sent the portrait to Miller in Cairo. In a show of his monetary acumen and ability to manipulate the system, he let Miller know in a separate letter that he had shipped the painting with a declared value of £30 and an insured value of £300.

621 Ibid., 36. Cowling quotes a letter from Roland Penrose to Lee Miller dated 25-26 October 1937, sent to Cairo from 21 Downshire Hill. The letter is currently in the Lee Miller Archives.

622 Although Cowling suggests that Penrose misremembered purchasing the painting just after the painting dried, Penrose purchased Weeping Woman in January 1938 while in Paris for the Exposition internationale du surrealism, which was organized by Breton and Éluard at the Galerie des Beaux-Arts. This date is firm based on a letter Penrose wrote from Paris to Miller in Cairo at the time. See: ibid., 37-38.

623 Ibid., 38.

624 According to Cowling, the two states of the Weeping Woman etching purchased by Penrose were completed by Picasso in early July 1937.


627 Ibid., 39.

628 Ibid.

629 Ibid., 46.

630 Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art Archives, Edinburgh, GMA A35/1/1/RPA 138, Éluard, Paul--collection of art: sale to Roland Penrose, 1938. Éluard's collection that was sold to Penrose included 101 works by European artists including one sculpture and one portrait by Giacometti; 40 Ernst works; eight Miró paintings; six Chirico paintings; four Magritte paintings; four Tanguy paintings; three works each by Arp, Benquet, Dali, Man Ray, and Picabia; as well as works by Bellmer, Brauner, Chagall, Dominguez, Hayter, Klee, Paalen, Seligmann, Styrsky, and Toyen. One work by Ernst went to Humphrey Jennings's wife, Cecily; and a Tanguy, Derives d'azur was resold to Onslow Ford. Mesens took Ernst's La rose du desert. The collection included notable paintings by Ernst including L'éléphant de célèbes, Oedipus Rex, and La révolution la nuit. In addition to the European works, Éluard's collection included 19 "Ethnographical Objects" from the Hebrides, Pacific Islands and Pacific Northwest, south and central America, and west Africa, and the Philippines.

631 Cowling, Visiting Picasso: The Notebooks and Letters of Roland Penrose, 44.

632 Ibid.


Summary Conclusions

As a group, the British surrealists were like an ocean of contemporary revolutionary values on every front—aesthetically, creatively, culturally, socially, and politically. Their statements and actions came together loosely but in unison like waves rushing to shore, always waves of advanced avant-garde thought and practice, pushing forward against the suck of Stalinist politics and socialist realism on one side, and the staid status quo of the British establishment on the other. Though the model does not fit the Hegelian dialectic of thesis-antithesis-resolution that they purportedly espoused as surrealists, the British group’s comfort with a full spectrum of found objects and creative products that they embraced as surrealist art mirrored their blinded, often varying, and always-enthusiastic embrace of a Marxist sensibility.

The group’s oldest and most revered member, critic Herbert Read, filmmaker and painter Humphrey Jennings, and the artist/collector Roland Penrose had long associated with the political left and held liberal views. Their younger peers, the writers David Gascoyne and Charles Madge, had less experience to go on and were forming their leftist views as the British group was forming. However, it was the rise of fascism across Europe, the Spanish Civil War, and Joseph Stalin’s purges against his communist enemies that propelled many members of the British surrealist group, such as Eileen Agar, to unify around a platform for creative freedom and social emancipation.

From his anarchist perspective, Read took the upper hand in constructing the surrealist political platform, even if Roger Roughton and the communists in the group were more supportive of Stalinist Russia and castigated Read for his support of Leon Trotsky.
Although the various spokesmen of the group sometimes disagreed about just how surrealism was to embody Marxist ideals, none of them admitted the shortcomings of their arguments for surrealism as a revolutionary model for political or social change, and they never conceded that surrealism was anything less than an ideal medium for expressing Marxist political beliefs.

Their opponents, including the communist critic Anthony Blunt and his associates in *Left Review*, as well as the surrealists’ socialist realist allies in the Artists International Association (A.I.A.), had to point out the inconsistencies in the surrealists’ sometimes heavy-handed posturing. Agar, from her supposedly apolitical humanist and anti-fascist perspective, also was able to discern clearly the British group’s inability to commit to a Marxist proletarian revolution with the same fervor as André Breton and the French surrealists. It is remarkable that as a woman, she was able to voice her aesthetic theories and political opinions in ways that were both heard and appreciated by her male counterparts. Penrose was perhaps best in summing up the British group’s less radical position in comparison to the French surrealists’ demands for social change when he reminisced about Jennings’ power to present the British people to themselves as a way of strengthening national identity in a time of political crisis across Europe. For Jennings who portrayed the British working classes in familiar scenes of their daily life and for Paul Nash who made artworks evocative of the British countryside, national interests were a large part of what uniquely defined British surrealism. Jennings’ associate in filmmaking, Len Lye had a more international perspective as a New Zealander, even if his film *The Birth of the Robot* promoted British ingenuity and industrial progress in a similar way. Although Lye and Agar each professed to be an apolitical humanist, they both drew attention to British
colonialism in subtle ways. It is unfortunate that more attention has not been paid to the references to African culture in Agar’s paintings of the early thirties including her *Family Trio* series and her largest painting *The Autobiography of an Embryo*. Likewise, I hope this dissertation contributes to an expanding field of film studies that recognizes the significance of Lye’s experimental surrealist vision in shaping the goals and tenets of British documentary film.

At every turn, from the 1936 International Surrealist Exhibition in London to exhibiting Pablo Picasso’s *Guernica* in England at the close of the Spanish Civil War, the group’s leaders attempted to transcend the conflicting values of individual members and gloss over the unevenness of their political positions. As the extended debate between the surrealists and social realists played out in *Left Review*, the surrealists defended their political goals and their art against their detractors most often by asserting strong denials. However, in that process, they became more proactive in defining how surrealism might embody revolutionary political values. Their ability to do this reached its zenith as they promoted and exhibited *Guernica* in support of the Spanish Republicans. At the same time, in mounting that spectacular venture, when the fascists in Spain and Germany had gained the upper hand and the stakes had risen substantially in protecting human rights and freedom, Penrose, Mesens, and Read pooled all of their capitalist resources in England to promote Picasso’s political art. They adopted these capitalist strategies even though, and perhaps because, as stated in their “ARMS for the People of Spain,” they believed that fascism was foremost an extreme and rapacious form of capitalism, and that the ideology fostering the British government’s non-intervention was associated with it. Nonetheless, Read’s and Penrose’s extensive connections to cultural leaders like Paul Robeson and
governmental officials sympathetic to the Republicans proved extremely useful in raising money and awareness for the Spanish cause. To promote Guernica, they eagerly capitalized on their extraordinary success in buying and selling Picasso’s paintings in London’s conservative art market—an upscale market that was for the most part uninterested in collecting Picasso’s artwork, even if it was inspired by Picasso’s genius. However, by focusing so heavily on impressing wealthy patrons in London’s West End, they failed to recognize Picasso’s immense reputation among the working class communists of the East End. The surrealists’ deep connections to the cultural elite of London made it less likely that they would fully invest in the Guernica exhibitions at the Whitechapel Galleries or in Leeds and Manchester. It was Julian Trevelyan, from his strong socialist-minded point view in support of the working classes, who saw more clearly than the rest of the surrealists that Guernica, as a prime surrealist painting, held tremendous potential for rallying London’s working poor in support of the Republican cause.
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APPENDIX 1: Chapter One Figures

Figure 1.1. *Surrealism*, 1936, mass produced paperback, edited by Herbert Read to promote the movement and the International Surrealist Exhibition. Collage cover design by Roland Penrose links Hugh Sykes Davies, the leading British surrealist poet, with his French counterparts.

Figure 1.2. Surrealist Group in England, *International Surrealist Bulletin No. 4*, September 1936.
Figure 1.3. Exhibition Poster for International Surrealist Exhibition at the New Burlington Galleries, London, June-July 1936.

Figure 1.4. Exhibition Catalogue for International Surrealist Exhibition at the New Burlington Galleries, London, June-July 1936.

Figure 1.5. Henry Moore, *Figure*, 1933-34, exhibited in London in 1936.
Figure 1.6. International Surrealist Exhibition entrance at the New Burlington Galleries, London, 1936.

Figure 1.7. Installation at the New Burlington Galleries, London, 1936. Far bottom left painting: Paul Nash, *Harbour and Room* (1932-36). Foreground sculptures: Henry Moore, on left *Reclining Figure* (1933) and on right *Figure* (1934).
Figure 1.8. Special Double Number of *Contemporary Poetry and Prose* published on the eve of the London exhibition, edited by surrealist poet Roger Roughton, June 1936.

Figure 1.9. David Gascoyne, *Perseus and Andromeda*, 1936, exhibited in London in 1936. Photograph from Tate Gallery website with permission, copyright David Gascoyne estate.
**Figure 1.10.** Edward Burne-Jones, *The Doom Fulfilled*, 1884-85.

**Figure 1.11.** Henry Moore, *Reclining Figure*, 1931, bronze cast of lead original. The lead original was exhibited in London in 1936.
Figure 1.12. Henry Moore, *Reclining Figure*, 1931 (on pedestal in the foreground) faces one of Hans Bellmer’s photographs, *Variations on the Assemblage of an Articulated Child* (undated in the catalogue), hanging on the wall in the gallery installation that was demanded by Breton.

Figure 1.13. Eileen Agar, *Quadriga*, 1935. Exhibited in London in 1936.

Figure 1.14. Installation at the New Burlington Galleries, London, 1936. Third painting on bottom row to the left of the doorway is Eileen Agar, *Quadriga*, 1935.
Figure 1.15. Paul Nash, *Harbour and Room*, 1932-36, exhibited in London in 1936. Photograph from Tate Gallery website with permission.
Figure 1.16. Paul Nash, *Swanage*, c. 1936. Photographic collage like three exhibited in London in 1936. Photograph from Tate Gallery website with permission.

Figure 1.17. Installation at the New Burlington Galleries, London, 1936. Paul Nash’s found driftwood object, *Marsh Personnage (Found Object interpreted Vegetable Kingdom)*, is on a pedestal to the left of Picasso, *Woman in a Chemise*, 1913.
APPENDIX 2: Chapter Two Figures

Figure 2.1. Eileen Agar’s *The Angel of Anarchy* I paired with a photograph of Herbert Read, the author of “Poetry and Anarchism” and his son, in the *London Bulletin No. 7*, December 1938 - January 1939, p. 24.

Figure 2.2. Eileen Agar, *The Autobiography of an Embryo*, 1933-34, oil on board, Tate Gallery. Photograph from Tate Gallery website with permission, copyright The Estate of Eileen Agar.
Figure 2.3. Julian Trevelyan, *The Potteries*, 1938, oil on canvas, Swindon Gallery.

Figure 2.5. Men and women of the Maasai tribe shave their heads and wear beaded necklaces like the figure in the bottom right of the fourth panel of Agar's *The Autobiography of an Embryo*.

Figure 2.6. Eileen Agar, early state of *The Autobiography of an Embryo*, 1933-34, oil on board, Tate Gallery. Photograph from *Eileen Agar: An Eye for Collage*, Chichester, West Sussex: Pallant House Gallery and AVA Publishing, 2008, copyright The Estate of Eileen Agar.
Figure 2.7. Eileen Agar, detail of *The Autobiography of an Embryo* showing a sperm-like form rising toward a putti figure.

Figure 2.8. Highlighted robed statues in the three right sections of *The Autobiography of an Embryo* reminiscent of a *Draped Standing Youth* from Rhodes (c. 550 BCE) in the British Museum collection.
Figure 2.9. Highlighted figure in *The Autobiography of an Embryo* similar to *Male Statue*, Limestone, excavated from Temple of Nabu, Nimrud, Iraq, c. 810-800 BCE, from the British Museum Collection, acquired 1856.

Figure 2.10. Alfred Jarry, *Illustration of Père Ubu*, 1896. Image from Wikimedia Commons.
**Figure 2.11.** Highlighted figure similar to Père Ubu in *The Autobiography of an Embryo.*

**Figure 2.12.** Highlighted African-like figures in *The Autobiography of an Embryo.*
Figure 2.13. Akorino elders inaugurating a Church Compound, Nairobi, Kenya. Photograph by Timothy Gachanga from the Open University Website.

Figure 2.15. Jomo Kenyatta, First President of Kenya after Independence from Britain, Still photo from YouTube promotional video, http://wn.com/MZEE_JOMOKENYATTA_KASEMA_RUDI_MASHAMBANI

Figure 2.16. Photograph of Kikuyu People by Andy Davy on Flickr and in Wikipedia Encyclopedia of Images, Creative Commons License.
Figure 2.17. Archaeopteryx Display, Gallery of Paleontology and Comparative Anatomy, Jardin des Plantes, Paris.

Figure 2.18. Duck, Painted Pottery, Cyprus, c. 600-450 BCE, from the British Museum Collection, acquired 1894.

Figure 2.19. Gallery of Paleontology and Comparative Anatomy, Jardin des Plantes, Paris.
Figure 2.20. Eileen Agar wearing *Ceremonial Hat for Eating Bouillabaisse* with *The Hand of Fate*, c. 1936, photograph from *Eileen Agar 1899-1991* by Ann Simpson with David Gascoyne and Andrew Lambirth.


Figure 2.23. Royal Air Force de Havilland DH82 Tiger Moth Biplane. Produced from 1931-1944, first in service in 1932, and used extensively in WWII.
Figure 2.24. First English translation of the manifesto “Towards an INDEPENDENT Revolutionary Art” drafted by Leon Trotsky, André Breton, and Diego Rivera, printed in the *London Bulletin* No. 7, December 1938 - January 1939, pp. 29-31.

Figure 2.25. Eileen Agar, *Angel of Anarchy I*, 1934-36, second bust of four versions.
Figure 2.26. Eileen Agar, *Ceremonial Hat for Eating Bouillabaisse*, made of a cork basket, shells, and a lobster tail, modeled by Agar, c. 1936.

Figure 2.27. Page from *London Gallery Bulletin* No. 1, April 1938, with dresses by Norine.

Figure 2.28. Elsa Schiaparelli wearing a hat of her own creation.
Figure 2.29. Sheila Legge as the Surrealist Phantom in Trafalgar Square, performance staged to open the exhibition in summer 1936.

Figure 2.30. Eileen Agar, *Glove Hat*, c. 1936.

Figure 2.31. Eileen Agar dancing on a roof outside Mougins, France in 1937. Photograph by Joseph Bard.
**Figure 2.32.** Salvador Dali Holding a Mannequin, International Exhibition of Surrealism at the Galerie des Beaux-Arts, Paris, January-February, 1938, with mannequins by Maurice Henry (left) and Man Ray (right), photograph by Denise Bellon from Gérard Durozoi, *History of the Surrealist Movement*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2002.

**Figure 2.33.** Salvador Dali’s ink drawing over photo (by Horst P. Horst) of a model wearing a necklace of Galalith stars from Elsa Schiaparelli’s summer 1929 collection.
**Figure 2.34.** Eileen Agar, *Rococo Cocotte*, c. 1937, mixed media, destroyed.

**Figure 2.35.** Eileen Agar, *Ladybird*, 1936, paint on gelatin silver print. Image from ArtStor (source University of California, San Diego).

APPENDIX 3: Chapter Three Figures

**Figure 3.1.** *London Bulletin No. 3*, June 1938.

**Figure 3.2.** Len Lye in production on *The Birth of the Robot*, 1935.
Figure 3.3. Humphrey Jennings in production on *The Birth of the Robot*, 1935.

Figure 3.4. Cover of special edition of *London Bulletin* Nos. 4-5, July 1938. Produced by Humphrey Jennings as a guest editor.

Figure 3.5. Vacuum sugar apparatus from the 1851 London Exhibition paired with Max Ernst’s *La Femme Chancellante* (1923), *London Bulletin* Nos. 4-5, July 1938.

Figure 3.7. Filmmaking workshop in London in 1929, conducted by the Russian director Sergei Eisenstein (wearing a policeman’s helmet). Lye is seated on far right (smoking with a hat). Other participants include Hans Richter (lower left, with scarf), Mark Segal (beside Richter, ‘playing’ a warming pan), Lionel Britton (holding a telephone), Jimmy Rogers (behind the camera). To his right: Towndrow, Basil Wright (with glasses and a cigarette) and Michael Hankinson. Photograph from: Horrocks, Roger. *Len Lye: A Biography.* Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2001, courtesy Len Lye Foundation.
**Figure 3.8.** Len Lye, *Photogram*, 1947, self portrait with 1930 photogram, *Self Planting at Night*.

**Figure 3.9.** Eileen Agar, *Untitled Collage Head*, c. 1930s.

**Figure 3.10.** Len Lye, *The King of Planets Meets the First Man*, 1936, oil painting.
Figure 3.11. Illustration captioned ‘Copulation fetish by impotent negro paranoiac’ instructed by God to build the ‘first church of perpetual motion’ in Edward J. Kempf, *Psychopathology*, St. Louis: C.V. Mosby, 1921, which inspired Len Lye’s kinetic sculpture.

Figure 3.13. Film still from *The Birth of The Robot*. Father Time hand cranking the gears to turn the carrousel of the gods in the opening scene.

Figure 3.14. Film still from Humphrey Jennings’ *Locomotives*, Produced for the G.P.O. Film Unit, 1934.

Figure 3.15. Detail of giddy colonial tourist running roughshod over a pyramid in *The Birth of The Robot*. 
Figure 3.16. Film still from *The Birth of The Robot*. Animal skeletons and strange rock forms reminiscent of Paul Nash’s surrealist objects found in Swanage along the Dorset coast appear along the horizon during the sandstorm.

Figure 3.17. Film still from *The Birth of The Robot*. The “Garage” mirage blurs in and out of vision.
Figure 3.18. Film still from *The Birth of The Robot*. Musical notes transformed into oil drops bring the skeleton to life as a robot.

Figure 3.19. Film still from *The Birth of The Robot*. As the classical temples and roads of Europe are drawn on the landscape, the robot’s shadow appears like the Long Man of Wilmington, a chalk figure cut into the Sussex downs during the 16th or 17th century.
Figure 3.20. *Long Man of Wilmington* by User:Cupcakekid at en.wikipedia - Own work. Licensed under Creative Commons Attribution 2.5 via Wikimedia Commons

Figure 3.21. Film still from *The Birth of The Robot*. After coming to life, the robot’s shadow overpowers the industrialized world and he points over his head to three warplanes flying in formation.
Figure 3.22. Film still from *The Birth of the Robot*. The Robot, deeply associated with Venus’ life force, waves back to her from the position held by Father Time who had been surrounded by hand cranks in the beginning of the film.


Figure 3.25. Film still of workers’ housing and industry from the opening of *Spare Time*.

Figure 3.26. Bill Brandt, *Coal Miners’ Houses, East Durham*, 1937.
Figure 3.27. Humphrey Jennings, *The House in the Woods*, 1939-44, oil on canvas. Photograph from the Tate Gallery website with permission.

Figure 3.28. Film still of workers from the beginning of *Spare Time*. 
Figure 3.29. René Magritte, illustration for the first front cover of the *London Gallery Bulletin* No. 1, April 1938.

Figure 3.30. Film still from *Spare Time* showing pairs of dancers.

Figure 3.31. Film still of one of several British audiences depicted in *Spare Time*.
Figure 3.32. Film still of men purchasing postal orders in *Spare Time*.

Figure 3.33. Film still from *Spare Time* evocative of Thanatos.

Figure 3.34. Fade in of the dancehall bandstand in *Spare Time*. 
Figure 3.35. Film still of coal miners’ houses from *Spare Time*.

Figure 3.36. Film still of a fast moving carnival ride from *Spare Time*.

Figure 3.37. Film still of a store clerk and customer from *Spare Time*.
Figure 3.38. Stills from Len Lye, *N or NW (North or NorthWest)*, 1937. Top left: actress Evelyn Corbett; top right: map of NW London; bottom two frames: animation to show Corbett’s dressing that was dropped by the G.P.O. because it was too experimental. Photographs from: Horrocks, Roger. *Len Lye: A Biography*. Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2001, courtesy Len Lye Foundation.

Figure 3.39. Film still from *Spare Time* with surrealist-like Headlines.
Figure 3.40. Film still from *Spare Time*. Mancunian Morris Troupe band plays “Rule Britannia” on kazoos in an open field.
APPENDIX 4: Chapter Four Figures

**Figure 4.1.** Pablo Picasso, *Guernica*, 1937, oil on canvas, 11’ x 25.6.’

**Figure 4.2.** Promotional ad for humanitarian contributions to the Spanish people against fascism in Roger Roughton’s *Contemporary Poetry and Prose*, August-September 1936. Funds were to be sent to the National Council of Labour of Great Britain (previously the National Joint Council), which comprised representatives from the Trade Unions Council, Labour Party, and Co-operative Movement. The British Labour Movement officially supported Britain’s non-intervention policy through November 1936 and provided only humanitarian aid to Spain.
Figure 4.3. Promotional ad seeking contributions for arms for the Spanish cause in Roger Roughton’s *Contemporary Poetry and Prose*, November and December 1936. Contributions were to be sent to The Special Fund managed by Harry Pollitt, General Secretary of the Communist Party of Great Britain.

Figure 4.4. John McNair, *In Spain Now!*, pamphlet of his first hand account of fighting in Spain during the time that the Penroses and David Gascoyne were in Barcelona from late 1936 to early 1937. Image provided by Roland Penrose Archive, Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh.

Figure 4.6. Artists painting a hoarding in London’s Bouverie Street on 7 February 1939 urging people to support relief action during the Spanish Civil War. Photograph from Getty Images.
**Figure 4.7.** Program for the Spain & Culture Rally and Auction held 24 June 1937. Design by Pablo Picasso (1937) dedicated to the mothers and children of Spain.

**Figure 4.8.** Pablo Picasso, *Weeping Woman*, 16 June 1937, pencil and crayon on paper. Donated by Picasso to the Spain & Culture rally in support of Basque children at the Royal Albert Hall, 24 June 1937. The drawing was purchased by Hugh Willoughby and was subsequently acquired by Roland Penrose. Photograph from the Tate Gallery website with permission.


Figure 4.12. Surrealists demonstrating in Hyde Park with Chamberlain masks made by F.E. McWilliam, May 1938. From left to right: James Cant, Roland Penrose, Julian Trevelyan, Geoffrey Graham.

Figure 4.15. *To-Morrow*, Communist Bulletin, December 1936. Caption: “Eleven miles out of Madrid the Spanish People’s Militia, at a barricade made of bedding and tables, await the approach of Franco’s Italian and German tanks, artillery and aeroplanes. The heroism of these workers finds parallel only in that of the Paris Communards, and the workers and peasants of Russia in the great proletarian revolution.”

Figure 4.16. Pablo Picasso, *Minotaumachia*, etching, 19.5” x 27.25” (Listed as “Not Yet Named” in the Zwemmer Christmas 1935 exhibition catalogue), completed in December 1935 prior to the exhibition and named by Zwemmer.

Figure 4.18. Pablo Picasso, *Death of Marat*, in *Remove Your Hat: Twenty Poems* by Benjamin Peret. Poems selected and translated by Humphrey Jennings and David Gascoyne, with a note by Paul Éluard, published by Roger Roughton's Contemporary Poetry and Prose Editions, 1936. Photograph by author.
Figure 4.19. Pablo Picasso, *The Dream and Lie of Franco I*. These nine sections were completed 8 January 1937, etching inscribed from Picasso to Roland Penrose on 5 October 1937.

Figure 4.20. Pablo Picasso, *The Dream and Lie of Franco II*. Five sections with aquatint were completed 8 January 1937, and the final four sections were added 7 June 1937, etching inscribed by Picasso to Roland Penrose on 5 October 1937.
Figure 4.21. Front side of pamphlet promoting the New Burlington Galleries Exhibition of Guernica and 67 Preparatory Drawings, 4-29 October 1938.

Figure 4.22. Cover of the London Bulletin, October 1938, promoting the New Burlington Galleries Exhibition of Guernica and 67 Preparatory Drawings, 4-29 October 1938.
Figure 4.23. Page from the *London Bulletin*, October 1938, featuring Picasso and *Guernica*.

Figure 4.24. Page from the *London Bulletin*, October 1938, featuring one of Picasso's *Weeping Woman* drawings from 1937. The photograph is credited to Dora Maar.
Figure 4.25. French version of *Pour un Art Révolutionaire Indépendent* published in the *London Bulletin*, October 1938.

Figure 4.26. Clement Attlee opening the *Guernica* exhibition at the Whitechapel Galleries in London, January 1939.
Figure 4.27. Picasso, *Weeping Woman*, 26 October 1937, oil on canvas, purchased by Roland Penrose from Picasso in November 1937. Photograph from Tate Gallery website with permission.