



Body to Politics: Surrealist Exhibition of the Tribal and the Modern at the Anti-Imperialist Exhibition and the Galerie Charles Ratton

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Source: *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, No. 40 (Autumn, 2001), pp. 239-255

Published by: The University of Chicago Press on behalf of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20167548>

Accessed: 03-12-2018 18:10 UTC

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Body to politics

*Surrealist exhibition of the tribal and the modern at the anti-Imperialist exhibition and the Galerie Charles Ratton*¹

JANINE MILEAF

The December 1931 issue of *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution* (LSASDLR) reproduces a pair of photographs depicting an installation of tribal objects, figurines, photographs, and Marxist slogans (fig. 1).² The accompanying caption reads: “A l’Exposition La Vérité sur les colonies . . . (Salle organisée par Aragon, Éluard et Tanguy).”³ Left unexplained by this brief designation, and without further information given elsewhere in the journal, the images document a section of a protest

exhibition—The Truth about the Colonies—that opposed the French government’s concurrent International Colonial Exhibition. Five years later, another surrealist exhibition comprised a similar mix of artworks and artifacts (fig. 2). Missing the activist slogans and less pointed in its ideological position, the *Exposition surréaliste d’objets* at the Galerie Charles Ratton nonetheless shared its polemical predecessor’s focus on tribal objects. In each case, tribal objects were selected for their ability to evoke exotic imagery, but where the 1931 protest exhibition aimed to educate its viewers, the Ratton exhibition hoped to disturb them. The change in strategy parallels a shift in the political position of the surrealist movement in the mid-1930s. While it is generally believed that surrealism lost its political edge by the time the Ratton exhibition took place, this essay argues that in fact, it was the Ratton exhibition with its disquieting mix of eclectic objects, rather than the overtly ideological protest exhibition, that came closest to the surrealist conception of political praxis. Walter Benjamin’s 1929 essay on surrealism provides a contemporary gloss that characterizes this ideal in terms of physical shock. Whether or not the Ratton exhibition can be read as a successful political intervention, its organization and execution should be understood to have realized this surrealist ideal.

The spectacle of incorporation

The *Exposition Coloniale Internationale de Paris* followed a long tradition of monumental worlds’ fairs conceived in the service of colonialist ambition. It was contrived to win public approval for the notion of “La Plus Grande France,” or the merging of continental France with its extensive overseas territories.⁴ Situated in

1. A portion of this material was presented at the Middle Atlantic Symposium in the History of Art, sponsored by the University of Maryland and the Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts, National Gallery of Art, April 1998. I am grateful to everyone who responded to it at that time, especially Thierry de Duve. For funding the research and writing of the dissertation from which this essay derives, I would like to thank the Penfield Fund of the University of Pennsylvania, the American Council of Learned Societies, and the Henry Luce Foundation. For making archives available to me, thanks are due to Catherine Bensadek of the Bibliothèque Marxiste de Paris, and especially François Poli of the Galerie Charles Ratton/Guy Ladrière. I thank Jack Spector for lending me photographic materials. Finally for critical readings of the text, I am most sincerely indebted to my dissertation advisor Christine Poggi, as well as Susan Sidlauskas, Donald LaCoss, Raymond Spiteri, Nina Rowe, and Matthew Witkovsky.

2. I am using the term “tribal” in this paper to designate indigenous objects from Africa, Oceania, and the Americas, following the convention adopted by, and with the same reservations expressed by, James Clifford. See “Histories of the Tribal and the Modern,” *The Predicament of Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), pp. 189–191, especially 191n.1. I am also consciously echoing the title of William Rubin’s much maligned “Primitivism” in *Twentieth-Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1984) to add my analyses of these two exhibitions to our understanding of this fraught encounter. For critiques of the MOMA exhibition, see Clifford, *op. cit.*, as well as Thomas McEvilley, “Doctor Lawyer Indian Chief: ‘Primitivism’ in 20th Century Art at the Museum of Modern Art in 1984,” *Artforum* 23 (November 1984): 54–61 and Hal Foster, “The ‘Primitive’ Unconscious of Modern Art, or White Skin Black Masks,” *October* 34 (Fall 1985) reprinted in *Recodings* (San Francisco: Bay Press, 1985), pp. 181–208. At issue in these texts is the museum’s deployment of “primitive” art to reaffirm the modernist canon.

3. “At the exhibition The Truth about the Colonies, 8 avenue Mathurin-Moreau (Room organized by Aragon, Éluard, and Tanguy),” *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution* 4 (December 1931):40. Unless otherwise stated, all translations are mine.

4. Patricia A. Morton’s *Hybrid Modernities: Architecture and Representation at the 1931 Colonial Exposition, Paris* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2000) provides the most substantial examination of the Colonial Exhibition available in English. Her first chapter gives a

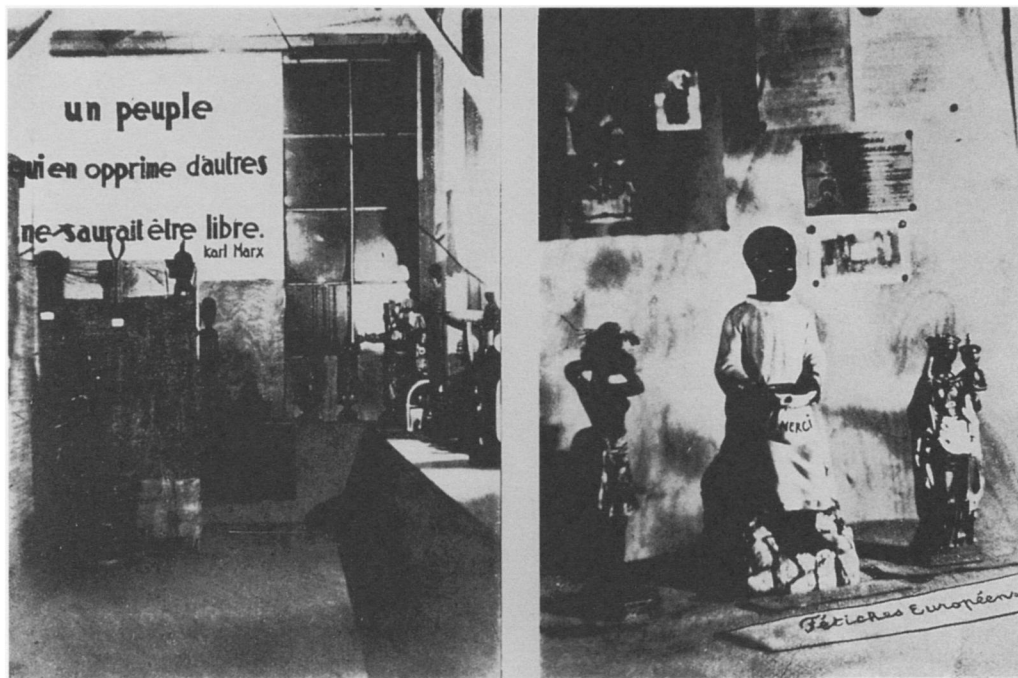


Figure 1. "A l'Exposition 'La Vérité sur les Colonies,'" *Le Surréalisme au Service de la Révolution* 4 (December 1931). © 2001 Estate of Yves Tanguy/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy of Jack Spector.

the Bois de Vincennes on Paris's southeastern edge, the Colonial Exhibition was largely devoted to representations of France's own territories, but also included submissions from seven invited foreign powers.⁵ Much like today's Epcot Center at Disney World, the Colonial Exhibition offered a microcosm of world cultures seen through pastiches of indigenous architecture. Full-scale buildings stood in for countries as disparate in their means and international positions as Cameroon (fig. 3) and the United States (represented by a rather convincing reconstruction of George Washington's Mount Vernon,

lengthy description of the individual pavilions and the general organization of the exhibition. Also see, *Le Livre d'or de l'Exposition Coloniale internationale de Paris* (Paris: Editions Champion, 1931); Charles-Robert Ageron, "L'Exposition Coloniale," in Pierre Nora, ed., *Les Lieux de Mémoire*, vol. 1 (Paris: Gallimard, 1984); Jean-Pierre Biondi, *Les Anti-Colonialistes, 1881-1962* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1992); Catherine Hodeir and Michel Pierre, *L'Exposition Coloniale* (Brussels: Editions Complexe, 1991); Herman Lebovics, *True France: The Wars over Cultural Identity, 1900-1945* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1992); and Marcel Olivier, ed., *Exposition coloniale internationale de Paris, Rapport général* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1932-1934).

5. These were Belgium, Brazil, Denmark, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, and the United States. Great Britain declined the invitation to

fig. 4).⁶ Although the exhibition's organizers expressed a desire to avoid sensationalism, no plan was considered too audacious for this display of French prowess.⁷ Versions of the Khmer temple at Angkor Wat (the original already in ruins at the time) and the Roman basilica of Septimius Severus sprang up along the paths of the Bois de Vincennes. A state-of-the-art zoological garden, with open-air habitats contained by deep trenches, sprawled on the southeastern edge of the park. And to commemorate the policy of growth and incorporation, France inaugurated a permanent Musée des colonies during the opening.⁸

participate because it had staged its own celebration of Imperialism in the mid-1920s; Germany had been stripped of its colonial territories after World War I and therefore was no longer an Imperial power.

6. The United States pavilion, which evoked its colonized past, belonged to the section of invited colonial powers. Morton argues that this equivocal contribution was designed to assuage domestic protest against US participation in the Colonial Exhibition. Morton (see note 4), pp. 63-64.

7. On the organizers' elevated goals, *ibid.*, pp. 70-79.

8. The redesignation of this museum first as the Musée d'Outre Mer and then as the Musée des Arts Africains et Océaniens, in addition to an ongoing debate about the building's proper use, attest to the misplaced optimism of the original conception.



Figure 2. Salon, *Surrealist Exhibition of Objects*. Courtesy of Guy Ladrière, Paris.

The Colonial Exhibition, which lasted from May to November, proved wildly popular; around 33 million people attended and the press generously praised the show.⁹ The appeal of the exhibition can be attributed in part to feelings of nationalism that were stirred by the devastation of the first World War, as well as to the unprecedented popularity of various forms of exoticism and “negrophilia” in Paris at the time.¹⁰ As Herman Lebovics argues in his book *True France*, the Colonial Exhibition pictured the French Empire as diverse, all-encompassing, and politically unified. Drawing on Fredric Jameson, Lebovics describes a process of “wrapping” of identities that allowed for the incorporation of indigenous cultures within a core of

European France that would not completely annihilate difference.¹¹ The popular press furthered this agenda by echoing the language of incorporation in its coverage of the extravaganza. The magazine *Vu*, for example, ran a contest asking readers to “guess the race” of individuals pictured in its pages, whose likenesses could also be seen walking about the exhibition grounds (fig. 5).¹² Titled “Les Français de Couleur,” this contest exemplified prevalent attitudes toward racial identity, and mirrored the government’s effort to encompass diverse peoples under the banner of French nationalism. The text that describes the competition further announces a faith in distinguishable racial characteristics, asking readers to

9. For statistics regarding visitors to the exhibition, see General A. Messimy, “Le Bilan financier de l’Exposition coloniale,” *L’illustration*, pp. 151–153 quoted in Lebovics (see note 4), p. 92. On the press response, see Morton (see note 4), pp. 94–95, and 359, n. 77.

10. On “negrophilia,” see Jean Laude, *La peinture française (1905–1914) et l’art nègre* (Paris: Editions Klincksieck, 1968), and Petrine Archer-Straw, *Negrophilia: Avant-Garde Paris and Black Culture in the 1920s* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2000).

11. Lebovics (see note 4), pp. 57, 79–81. Also see Fredric Jameson’s *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), pp. 101–29, 69.

12. “Dans cette sélection, *Vu* a encore choisi les dix photographies dont les expressions lui ont paru les plus typiques, et c’est pourquoi il demande aujourd’hui à ses lecteurs de confirmer son choix en reconnaissant par les seuls traits de leur visage, la race et le pays d’origine de ces dix enfants de la plus grande France, qui réalisent bien les plus beaux types de coloniaux.” “Les Français de Couleur,” *Vu* 168 (June 3, 1931):811, 818.



Figure 3. André Kertész. Togo Cameroon. Boileau et Carrière, architects. *Vu* 168 (June 3, 1931). Courtesy of the Estate of André Kertész.

rank each pictured race in terms of relative beauty.¹³ Display and the subsequent familiarity fostered through the process of viewing would help France to revise its national boundaries, both conceptual and geographic.

In opposition to the widespread enthusiasm for the Colonial Exhibition, the French Communist Party (PCF) and the surrealists eventually joined forces to foster anticolonialist sentiment through propaganda campaigns, demonstrations, and the protest exhibition *The Truth about the Colonies*.¹⁴ The two groups never

13. "Question subsidiaire: Classer dans l'ordre les trois plus beaux types humains de notre concours et nous indiquer le nombre de suffrages qu'ils auront respectivement obtenus." "Les Français de Couleur," *Vu* 168 (June 3, 1931):818.

14. Opposition by the French Communist Party was probably expected. Indeed, Lebovics has argued, following Charles-Robert

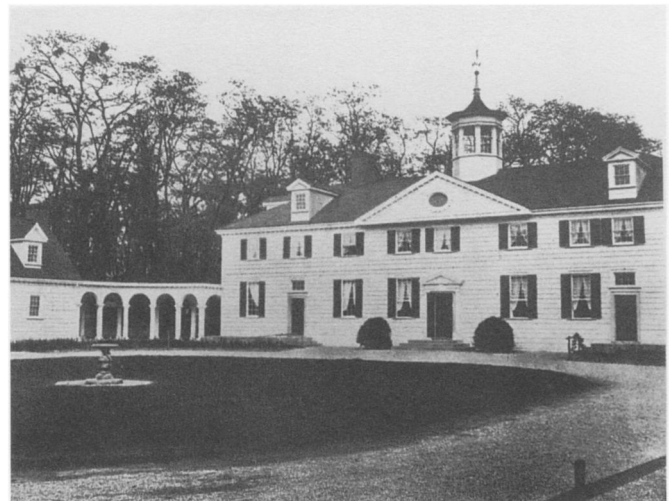


Figure 4. André Kertész. The United States. Reconstruction of Washington's House. Bryant, architect. *Vu* 168 (June 3, 1931). Courtesy of the Estate of André Kertész.

enjoyed congenial relations, but they consistently united in their disdain for colonialism. Indeed it was France's expansionist ambitions in the Moroccan war that originally inspired André Breton, Louis Aragon, Paul Éluard, Benjamin Péret, and Pierre Unik to join the Party in 1927.¹⁵ As part of this effort, the surrealists circulated two tracts that constitute some of the rare successful collaborations between the surrealists and the PCF.¹⁶ The first surrealist tract appeared in May of 1931, the month

Ageron, that France invited foreign powers to participate in the Colonial Exhibition specifically to counterbalance the rising popularity of Bolshevik and Communist factions. Charles-Robert Ageron, *France coloniale ou parti colonial?* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1978), pp. 230–231, discussed in Lebovics (see note 4), p. 84.

15. For more information on the surrealists' response to the Riff war in Morocco, see Helena Lewis, *The Politics of Surrealism* (New York: Paragon House Publishers, 1988), pp. 32–36.

16. Although there is no hard evidence that demonstrates that the surrealists and the PCF collaborated on these texts, the presence of foreign cosignatories and the retention of copies by the PCF suggest that the documents were at the very least in the interest of both groups. A PCF resolution from February, which proposes seven actions to be realized in the next six months, including the organization of the counter exhibition by the anti-Imperialist League, the writing of tracts and "papillons," and the publication of propaganda in the *Bulletin Colonial*, further implies that the surrealists wrote the texts in response to this plan of action. "Plan de Travail," February 2, 1931 (handwritten), February 16, 1931 (stamped), Document 461, Reel 69, Archives Bibliothèque Marxiste de Paris. Hereafter cited as Archives BMP.

the Colonial Exhibition opened; the second came later after a fire had ravaged the Dutch pavilion.

The May tract, "Ne visitez pas l'Exposition Coloniale" [Don't Visit the Colonial Exhibition], was signed by twelve surrealists, including Breton, Éluard, Aragon, and Tanguy.¹⁷ It attacked the French government for its exploitation and oppression of colonized peoples and portrayed the Colonial Exhibition as a denigrating ideological force. This tract further cited unwarranted arrests of foreigners identified as communists, forced labor in the colonies, the accumulation of wealth by the Banque de France, and in conclusion, it called for the evacuation of armies from the colonies and the indictment of the bureaucrats responsible for massacres in Annam, Libya, Morocco, and Central Africa. The tract's authors condemned the French government's promise of "an easy life" where exotic women catered to the needs of even the lower echelons of the military. Highlighting this hypocrisy, they proclaimed: "We haven't forgotten the beautiful recruitment poster of the colonial army: an easy life, black women with large breasts, a very elegant petty officer in a canvas suit rides a rickshaw, dragged by a local man—the adventure, the promotion."¹⁸ The image of a tropical paradise being sold to young men in order to entice them to join the army was, for the surrealists, particularly distasteful in its conflation of military power and pliant local culture. What is striking about this criticism is that it recognizes the screen of Western fantasy that drove visits to the Colonial Exhibition.

The second surrealist tract drafted to decry colonialism, "Premier bilan de l'Exposition Coloniale" [First Account of the Colonial Exhibition], July 3, 1931, focused on the hypocrisy of missionary practice. Surrealist scholar José Pierre contends that Breton authored this text with the help of Éluard.¹⁹ It followed a fire at the Dutch pavilion of the Colonial Exhibition, which caused the destruction of an invaluable array of indigenous objects. In their text, Breton and Éluard intimated that the fire resulted from capitalist and

17. The other signers were Benjamin Péret, Georges Sadoul, Pierre Unik, André Thirion, René Crevel, René Char, Maxime Alexandre, and Georges Malkine. "Ne Visitez pas l'Exposition Coloniale," reprinted in José Pierre, ed., *Tracts surréalistes et déclarations collectives 1922–1939*, vol. 1 (Paris: Le terrain vague, 1980), p. 195.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 195. "A propos, on n'a pas oublié la belle affiche de recrutement de l'armée coloniale: une vie facile, des négresses à gros nénés, le sous-officier très élégant dans un complet de toile se promène en pousse-pousse, traîné par l'homme du pays—l'aventure, l'avancement."

19. Pierre (see note 17), p. 453. Pierre bases this judgment on the memory of André Thirion.



Figure 5. "Les Français de Couleur," *Vu* 168 (June 3, 1931). Fonds de la Documentation Générale, Centre G. Pompidou—Musée National d'Art Moderne Paris.

missionary activity. Even if the blaze was not purposely ignited, the colonizing practices of these institutions ensured the destruction of untold treasures. Much more suspicious or perhaps sarcastic than the tract of May, this text accused missionaries not only of desecrating indigenous sacred objects, but also of conspiracy: "The missionaries, whose Pavilions weren't burnt, understand this all too well when they habitually mutilate fetishes and train native people in their schools to reproduce the features of their Christ according to the basest formulas of European art."²⁰

20. "C'est-ce que comprennent très bien les missionnaires dont le pavillon n'a pas été brûlé lorsqu'ils mutilent habituellement les fétiches et qu'ils entraînent les indigènes dans leurs écoles à reproduire les traits de leur Christ selon les recettes de l'art européen le plus bas . . ." "Premier bilan de l'Exposition Coloniale," reprinted in Pierre, (see note 17), p. 198–199.

The surrealists' moral outrage regarding France's co-optation of foreign cultures invites scrutiny of their own deployment of tribal objects at the protest exhibition and again at the Galerie Charles Ratton. Although admittedly fascinated by the so-called "savage" cultures, the surrealists refused the deceptive simulations of the Colonial Exhibition. Rather, as we will see, they chose to display tribal objects as representative, but not descriptive, of tribal life. At The Truth about the Colonies, the surrealists' intention was to shake a viewer's sense of reality through physical contact with objects, but at the same time to disseminate socialist doctrine.

Exhibiting opposition

On September 19, 1931, the surrealists and the PCF officially launched *l'Exposition Anti-impérialiste: La Vérité sur les colonies* [The anti-Imperial Exhibition: The Truth about the Colonies]. Few documents survive to reconstruct the circumstances of the planning and execution of the exhibition; it was all but ignored by the press and the two photographs published by the surrealists appear to be the only extant visual documentation.²¹ For textual evidence, surrealist scholarship has largely depended upon the autobiography of André Thirion, a writer and political activist who was instrumental in forming the liaison between the surrealists and the PCF.²² Rarely studied documents that survive on microfilm at the Bibliothèque Marxiste de Paris (BMP) provide further details about the exhibition.²³ These archives, the originals of which were sent to Moscow by the PCF in the 1930s, contain minutes from meetings on anticolonialist activities,

21. A brief announcement of the exhibition (September 22, 1931) as well as a short mention by Marcel Cachin (October 31, 1931) appeared in the communist daily *L'Humanité*. Cachin's visit to the exhibition on Friday, October 23, 1931, is further documented in Denis Peschanski, *Marcel Cachin Carnets 1906–1947*, Vol. III 1921–1933 (Paris: CNRS Editions, 1998), p. 608.

22. Thirion recalled that Alfred Kurella, a German delegate from the Communist International, initiated the exhibition and placed it in the hands of the surrealists: "As world head of the League, I'll let you have the Soviet Pavilion and some money. I'll put you in charge of the whole thing. You can represent the League, and you and your friends can handle it yourselves." Alfred Kurella quoted in André Thirion, *Revolutionaries without Revolution*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (New York: Macmillan, 1975), p. 289.

23. This archive was formerly attributed to the Institut Maurice Thorez. The original documents are apparently still held in Moscow. Cited in Hodeir and Pierre's survey of the Colonial Exhibition (see note 4), they have otherwise been largely overlooked.

letters reporting on the status of related protests, propaganda bulletins, copies of the surrealist anticolonialist tracts, and a long written report on The Truth about the Colonies. The following description of the protest exhibition draws upon these BMP documents, as well as Thirion's memoirs and the photographs published by the surrealists, to provide a fuller account of its components and structure than has been previously made available.

The Truth about the Colonies, clearly executed by the surrealists and consistently credited to them, may now be shown to have originated as part of a PCF plan. Contrary to generally held beliefs, the documents preserved by the BMP indicate that the Party not only conceived of the exhibition, but also deliberately obscured its organizational role in order to avoid political opposition. Indeed, this new information may help to explain the success of this particular collaboration even as the surrealist alliance with the PCF deteriorated in other contexts.

A "Plan de Travail," dated February 1931, records how the PCF carefully constructed its anticolonial strategy.²⁴ Concerned that its membership was too closely scrutinized and too readily arrested or detained, the Party contrived to distance itself from the protest exhibition through the formation of the anti-Imperialist League, a distinct group that would oversee the event and obscure the Party's actions. A confidential report made to the party before the opening of the exhibition delineates these intentions in a section labeled "Attitude of the Party toward this Exposition":

If the exhibition appears to have been organized by the Party, if from the start it has a clear Communist character, it will be immediately prohibited, even before the doors open. Not having had enough time to interest the masses or to be known by them, it would be practically impossible in our situation to alert and really mobilize the workers from the region of Paris and the rest of the country against a ban on the exhibition. That would be a heavy political and financial failure. To avoid a prohibition or at least to delay it as much as possible, it is therefore necessary to proceed in the following fashion: the League organizes and launches the Exhibition; the Party supports that initiative while clearly distinguishing itself from the League and even addressing necessary criticisms to it. The Party should wage its campaign of support little by little, and only progressively, gradually, when the Exhibition has gathered the most

24. "Plan de Travail," February 2, 1931/February 16, 1931, Document 461, Reel 69, Archives BMP.

numerous masses will it give this demonstration a more accentuated Communist character.²⁵

Imagining the growing support of “the masses” as the exhibition progressed, the Party intended to make its claim on this audience only after it assured itself of success. Just as the surrealist record says nothing of these maneuvers, the PCF reports to Moscow never once name the surrealists. The remarkable silence regarding the surrealists’ significant and uncontested contribution to the protest exhibition attests to the PCF discomfort with surrealism and desire to suppress its role when reporting to Moscow. The Party’s willingness to allow the surrealists to organize the exhibition can now be understood as part of their attempt to divert attention from itself.

The Truth about the Colonies took place in a leftist-identified neighborhood of northwestern Paris near the Parc des Buttes-Chaumont. It was housed in the former Soviet Pavilion, a modernist structure of wood with large glass windows that was built for the 1925 *Exposition des arts décoratifs* (fig. 6).²⁶ After the fair, the soviets reconstructed the building on the property of the Maison des syndicats and made it available for use by the PCF.²⁷ The exhibition welcomed the public three days a week, on Thursdays, Saturdays, and Sundays, and according to

25. “Si le Parti apparaissait dès le début comme l’organisateur de l’Exposition, si d’entrée cette dernière avait un caractère nettement communiste, elle serait immédiatement interdite, avant même d’avoir ouvert ses portes. L’Exposition n’ayant pas encore eu le temps d’intéresser les grandes masses, n’étant pas connue par celles-ci, il serait pratiquement impossible dans notre situation d’alerter et de mobiliser réellement les ouvriers de la région parisienne et de l’ensemble du pays contre l’interdiction de l’Exposition. Ce serait un lourd échec politique et financier. Pour éviter une interdiction ou tout au moins pour la retarder le plus possible, il est donc nécessaire de procéder de la façon suivante: La ligue organise et lance l’Exposition, le Parti soutient cette initiative tout en se démarquant nettement de la Ligue et en lui adressant même des critiques nécessaires; le Parti devra mener sa campagne de soutien en allant crescendo, et ce n’est que progressivement, au fur et à mesure que l’Exposition rassemblera des masses plus nombreuses qu’il donnera à cette manifestation un caractère communiste plus accentué.” “Note sur l’Exposition Anti-Coloniale,” August 20, 1931, Document 461, Reel 69, Archives BMP.

26. Morton clarifies that Konstantin Melnikov designed the Soviet Pavilion, rather than the Vesnin Brothers as Thirion mistakenly reported. See Morton, (see note 4), p. 336, n. 23.

27. The rebuilt pavilion contained a reconstruction of Aleksandr Rodchenko’s Worker’s Club, originally sited in a separate structure during the exhibition of 1925. It is difficult to determine whether remnants of this installation would have remained during The Truth about the Colonies. On the pavilion, see Jean-Louis Cohen, “The Misfortunes of the Image: Melnikov in Paris, 1925 (On Architecture and Photography),” in Beatriz Colomina, ed., *ArchitectuReproduction* (Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 1988), pp. 101–121.

a PCF report, received 4266 visitors by December. Compared to the tens of millions that swarmed the Colonial Exhibition, the turnout can hardly be considered overwhelming, but the Party claimed a success nonetheless, noting that 175 new members joined the anti-Imperialist League as a result.²⁸ Occupying two floors of the Soviet Pavilion, the exhibition contained three parts: a general orientation on the first floor and, on the second, a display of indigenous art and another about the USSR. Loudspeakers broadcast political commentaries to passersby, while “world music” selected by Aragon and Elsa Triolet added atmosphere.²⁹ Notebooks were spread around the rooms for comments from viewers. Thirion handled the ideological display on the first floor, and delegated the second-floor sections on “cultural problems” to Louis Aragon and “proselytizing” to Georges Sadoul.³⁰

Covering 350 square meters of wall space, Thirion’s ideological exhibit portrayed examples of both colonialist and revolutionary activity. It included texts defining colonial imperialism, notes from prominent figures in the PCF, photographs and caricatures of the Colonial Exhibition, a scroll quoting Lenin (“Imperialism is the last step of Capitalism”), and an issue of the putatively socialist newspaper *Le Populaire* sporting an advertisement for the Colonial Exhibition. An example of the kind of didactic material included in this room was a large color-coded map indicating the territories of different Western powers. On this map, ratios of colonial to indigenous territory were compared graphically: England’s holdings emerged as the most disproportionate, occupying 110 times more land than England itself. Six large panels followed; they portrayed such “crimes de conquêtes” as the division of Africa and foreign occupation of Tunisia and Morocco, instances of colonialist exploitation, positive views of indigenous life, and images of revolution and resistance to colonization. Forced labor, prostitution, famine, and the Moroccan

28. Roger Gaillard to the Secrétariat de la Ligue Internationale, December 2, 1931, Document 461, Reel 69, Archives BMP. Many scholars have taken the meager attendance record as evidence of the failure of The Truth about the Colonies. See Jack Spector, *Surrealist Art and Writing 1919/39: The Gold of Time* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 177–179, and Romy Golan, “Triangulating the Surrealist Fetish,” *Visual Anthropology Review* 10:1 (Spring 1994):54. Arguing that the surrealists’ anthropological concerns were somewhat superficial, Spector nonetheless credits them with going beyond a merely aesthetic interest in non-Western art.

29. Thirion, (see note 22), pp. 289–290.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 289.



Figure 6. Konstantin Melnikov, Reconstructed Soviet Pavilion of the Paris Exposition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts, 1925. Courtesy of the New York Public Library.

war for independence also figured in Thirion's portrayal of the struggle between the colonizers and the colonized.

The room dedicated to proselytizing aimed to critique colonialism by opposing it to the exemplary Soviet "politique des nationalités."³¹ Here, another panel charted the economic and cultural progress of the varied nationalities incorporated by the Soviet Union and pointed out that writings by Marx and Lenin had been translated into seventy languages and dialects. Other installations in this room bore such slogans as "Take your place among the builders of Socialism," or "In France, the greatest value goes to the bourgeoisie. In the USSR, the greatest value goes to the workers." There were photographs of Soviet "progress," describing current construction projects that would provide new housing, cultural clubs, public works, and collective farms. Opposing Czarist oppression of the peasant classes, this display proposed that the USSR had handled its national and racial diversity in a positive and progressive manner. Throughout these rooms, meaning coalesced in logically ordered grafts, charts, photographs, and displays.

Designed by Éluard, Aragon, and Tanguy—two poets and a painter—the "cultural problems" section provided viewers with an opportunity to confront the arts of colonized peoples directly. Though slogans and texts still punctuated the assemblages of objects, information did not dominate as it had in other rooms of the exhibition. Composed largely of indigenous art, and with at least one pointed display that included comparisons of European and "tribal" objects of worship, this section of the Truth about the Colonies came closest to surrealist exhibition practice as it was conceived in other contexts. Refusing to compete with the Colonial Exhibition, which attempted to recreate aspects of Asia and Africa in the Bois de Vincennes, this exhibition produced an alternative view of colonial life through direct presentation of indigenous objects in combination with Western artifacts.

The Truth about the Colonies divided its indigenous arts into three categories: "art nègre, océanien, et peau-rouge."³² Roughly translated, these categories correspond to the arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas. From Africa, there were large figural sculptures, a ritual table, so-called "fetishes," an "amazon," and funerary and festival masks, among other works. A portion of this area appears in the first

photograph in *LSASDLR*. Dominating the scene of tribal statuary is a banner proclaiming Marx's dictum "a people that oppresses others cannot be free" in a naïve hand—a device that contributed to the exhibition's aesthetic of protest and populist activism. Oceania found form in a braided and wooden mask from a "société secrète," an ancestral figure, a funerary statue from New Ireland, a tom-tom, a reproduction of a boat, masks, batiks, photographs of Java, and other ritual objects from New Hebrides and Sumatra. Totems, masks, and tapestries represented British Columbia and other parts of the Americas. In the spirit of protest, short texts accompanied these artifacts. They recalled such things as "the destruction of the art of colonized people by religious missions who, to consecrate the progress of Christianity, had gathered and burned anything that was considered a fetish and was often nothing more than the expression of a simple and human art without any particularly religious character."³³

A final area of the cultural problems room elaborates this striking critique of Christian proselytizing. In the photograph that appears on the right in *LSASDLR*, we see a small display of figurines, texts, and photographs with the label "Fétiches Européens." Since the grainy photograph is difficult to decipher, the PCF description of this grouping is worth quoting at length:

Through an ironic and striking opposition, things that could be called European fetishes are exhibited in the same room. First, there are propaganda tools of the Church, the innumerable images of piety in color, then ingenious adaptations of Christianity for each race: a baby Jesus and black virgins. Amusing photos reproducing the sculptures that one church built through a big exploiter from Java and where saints and all the sacred characters are of a more purely Asian type and present faces and profiles of Buddha. Other photos show the exploitation of indigenous peoples in work sites or enterprises belonging to religious missions.³⁴

33. "Tous ces objets sont accompagnés de courtes citations rappelant la destruction de l'art des peuples coloniaux par les missions religieuses qui, pour consacrer les progrès du christianisme font rassembler et brûler tout ce qu'ils considèrent comme fétiches et n'est souvent que l'expression d'un art simple et humain sans caractère particulièrement religieux." "L'Exposition Anti-Impérialiste: *La Vérité sur les colonies*," 3.

34. "Par une opposition ironique et frappante sont exposés dans la même salle ce que l'on pourrait appeler les fétiches européens. D'abord tout l'attirail de propagande de l'Église, les innombrables images de piété en couleur, puis les ingénieuses adaptations du christianisme pour chaque race: un enfant Jésus et des vierges noires. D'amusantes photos reproduisant les sculpteurs d'une église construite par un gros exploiteur de Java et où les saintes et tous les personnages sacrés sont du plus pur type asiatique et présentent des faces et des

31. "L'Exposition Anti-Impérialiste: *La Vérité sur les colonies*," 4, Document 461, Reel 69, Archives BMP.

32. "L'Exposition Anti-Impérialiste: *La Vérité sur les colonies*," 3.

Like the second surrealist tract, this acerbic arrangement ridiculed the hypocrisy of missionary practice. Equating Christianity with the “primitive” religions it hoped to subsume, the surrealists paired a “black” Madonna with a half-nude dancing figure. Between the Virgin and the whore stood an alms-begging figure of a type that was common in Europe at the time. Such statuettes of young black boys dressed in clerical garb held collection plates in their hands, begging donations to help support missionary activities. This ironic comparison mocks the European custom of translating Christian objects of worship into the racial types of tribal people, and suggests that money drives the dissemination of religious beliefs. Christian missions were furthermore notorious among European collectors of tribal arts for having destroyed indigenous arts in a crusade against idol worship. Here, the surrealists’ comparison of liturgical and tribal statuary pointed toward the cruel irony of missionary zeal—a particularly poignant critique after the fire at the Dutch pavilion had destroyed so many irreplaceable works.

Such juxtapositions, however disturbing in their effects, nonetheless aimed to instruct viewers about the actual practices of the surrealists’ opponents. Because of this, the protest exhibition fell short of the surrealist goal to unleash irrationality. Even this, the only surrealist-inspired section of the protest exhibition, ultimately maintained a logical exposition of ideas. Indeed, the seeming incompatibility of legible politics and surrealist art became increasingly problematic at this time. As is well known, the PCF began to thwart surrealist adherence to the Party in the early 1930s.³⁵ Discussions about the anti-Imperialist exhibition began just months after Aragon and Sadoul had returned from the November 1930 Second International Congress of Revolutionary Writers in Kharkov. While in the Soviet Union, they had signed an apology for their literary and surrealist activities. Thirion, who was barred from attending the Congress, soon resigned from the Party in protest of its attempt to exclude the surrealists. It was also in Kharkov that Aragon wrote the social realist poem “Front Rouge,” whose publication led to his arrest in January 1932 for incitement to murder and

provocation of insubordination in the army.³⁶ Even as they strained to understand Aragon’s newfound militancy, the surrealists circulated a petition to defend his right to express himself freely. Despite this rallying to his cause, Aragon renounced surrealism definitively in February 1932, choosing to ally himself instead with the doctrines of the Party. Breton stayed in the Party for another year, but was finally expelled along with René Crevel in 1933. By 1934, Stalin declared a policy of Socialist Realism that curtailed any further possibility of cooperation between the two groups.

The Truth about the Colonies exhibition occurred in the midst of these ideological negotiations, at a moment when Breton was still attempting to be optimistic about relations with the PCF. Although Aragon and Sadoul had reportedly already denounced surrealism at the Congress in Kharkov, the final break did not come until two months after the protest exhibition ended. The exhibition evidenced the status of these relations inasmuch as it equivocated between didacticism and outright surrealism. The common enemy of colonialism brought together the surrealists and the communists only long enough to elaborate their differences. Surrealism could not sustain the work ethic of communism and communism could not sustain the artistic independence of surrealism. The crucial use of tribal objects in the anticolonial exhibition inadvertently elucidates this predicament—Breton’s ultimate inability to comply with communist doctrine as well as surrealism’s problematic dependence upon the capitalist system.

Tribal objects had played a primary role in surrealist exhibitions since the inception of the short-lived Galerie Surréaliste in 1926. There, Yves Tanguy, one of the designers of *The Truth about the Colonies*, exhibited his surrealist paintings juxtaposed with objects from the Americas in 1927. A number of the surrealists, including Breton, Éluard, and Aragon, had long amassed these so-called “arts sauvages.” Éluard began a private collection when he traveled through the South Pacific and Asia in 1924. Chronically short of money and unwilling to submit to the requirements of bourgeois employment, the surrealists often raised funds for personal and professional needs through the sale and trade of their indigenous art collections. Astonishingly, given their simultaneous political activities, Breton and Éluard capitalized on the taste for colonial art that was generated by the very Colonial Exhibition that they protested.

profils de Bouddha. D’autres photos montrent l’exploitation des indigènes dans les chantiers ou entreprises appartenant aux missions religieuses.” “L’Exposition Anti-impérialiste: *La Vérité sur les colonies*,” 3.

35. This discussion is necessarily abbreviated; see also David Cauter, *Communism and the French Intellectuals 1914–1960* (New York: Macmillan, 1964), pp. 93–111, and Helena Lewis, *The Politics of Surrealism* (see note 15).

36. Lewis (see note 15), p. 108.

In July 1931, Breton and Éluard held a joint auction of their tribal art collections at the prestigious Hôtel Drouot. The auction fetched 285,000 francs, well exceeding estimations.³⁷ Perhaps not coincidentally, it was Charles Ratton, the owner of the gallery that would sponsor the Surrealist Exhibition of Objects in 1936, who urged Breton and Éluard to divest of their tribal holdings at that time.³⁸ This opportunistic marketing of tribal objects should not be dismissed. It points toward fundamental contradictions in the surrealist attitude toward colonialism, tribal objects, and foreign people and cultures. Indeed, an undeniable exoticism, which itself constitutes a form of colonial discourse, underlies the surrealist notion of the tribal.³⁹ Nonetheless, the surrealists' desire to foreground the *estrangement* of tribal arts in European contexts distinguishes their practice from the normalizing ideology of the Colonial Exhibition. The surrealists' methods of display stand in stark contrast to the simulation of colonial life launched at the Colonial Exhibition. Rather than providing a falsely convincing experience of foreign travel in order to familiarize the continental French with their overseas compatriots, the surrealists used the strategy of comparison to jolt viewers into political action.

The Galerie Charles Ratton

Five years later, in an independent venue and without the pedagogical requirements of the protest exhibition, the surrealists mounted the *Exposition surréaliste d'objets* [Surrealist Exhibition of Objects] at the Galerie Charles Ratton, located just off the Champs Élysées (figs. 2, 7–8). Not only had the address changed, but the atmosphere of this second exhibition was also quite revised. Sponsored by an upscale dealer of indigenous

art and lasting for only one week in May 1936, the Ratton exhibition marked a minor success, which was quickly followed by related exhibitions in London and New York.⁴⁰ Ratton's guest book documents the arrival of the Parisian elite at the threshold of surrealism (fig. 9).⁴¹ Such a relocation neatly exemplifies what Susan Rubin Suleiman has called surrealism's move from the street to the salon.⁴² Indicative of greater acceptance of surrealism on an international scale, this move further signifies the apparent dulling of its oppositional edge. In fact, surrealism's political heyday is often said to have ended around 1935.⁴³ Even as she argues against this characterization, Suleiman describes the double bind of bourgeois patronage of the avant-garde. However, the paradox works in both directions. Just as the surrealists, at their most committed, supported themselves and their work through the sale of tribal art, the apparent selling-out of the movement that is signaled by its success does not necessarily connote the evacuation of revolutionary and transgressive potential.

The Ratton exhibition featured an array of surrealist artworks, along with Cubist constructions, readymades by Marcel Duchamp, animal and mineral specimens, mathematical models, tribal objects, and curiosities of natural and artificial manufacture.⁴⁴ These objects filled

37. Antiqua, "L'Art et la curiosité," *Paris-Magazine* (September 1931):33.

38. See Letters 101 and 102, Paris, February 1931, Paul Éluard, *Lettres à Gala, 1924–38* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984), pp. 133–35.

39. On colonial discourse, see Homi K. Bhabha, "The Other Question," *Screen* 24:6 (November–December 1983):18–36. Asserting that the colonizer and colonized share in the production of colonial discourse, Bhabha identifies the stereotype as a kind of fetishism, a disavowal of the recognition of racial difference. There is no question that the surrealist use of the object as a metonym of culture operated within colonial discourse, nor that the surrealists' political intentions ever included the disruption of racially determined relations. Nonetheless, it seems valuable to pursue the question of the surrealist attempt to distinguish their practice from that of the French government along with their evolving strategies of exhibition and display in order to understand what constituted political praxis for the avant-garde in the years between the wars.

40. International Surrealist Exhibition at New Burlington Galleries, London (June 11–July 4, 1936), and Alfred Barr's *Fantastic Art, Dada, and Surrealism* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York (Dec. 7–Jan. 17, 1937). For a study of these exhibitions, see Zabriskie Gallery, *1936 Surrealism: Objects Photographs Collages Documents* (New York: Zabriskie Gallery, 1986).

41. Those signing the guest book included Picasso, Tériade, Paul and Nusch Éluard, Roland Penrose, E. L. T. Mesens, Julien Levy, Albert Jeanneret, Benjamin Peret, Mina Loy, Marcel Jean, Man Ray, Meret Oppenheim, Léo Malet, Georges Hugnet, and Henri-Pierre Roché. *Livre d'or*, MSS, Archives Galerie Charles Ratton/Guy Ladrière.

42. "This displacement is what I am calling, in metaphorical shorthand, the gradual, reluctant, perhaps totally unwilling, but nevertheless indubitable movement of Surrealism during the 1930s from the street to the *salon*." Susan Rubin Suleiman, "Between the Street and the Salon: The Dilemma of Surrealist Politics in the 1930s," reprinted in Lucien Taylor, ed., *Visualizing Theory: Selected Essays from V.A.R. 1990–94* (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), p. 149.

43. For characterizations of surrealism's supposed failed politics, see Maurine Nadeau, *The History of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Howard (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1989), p. 202; Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984); Lewis, *The Politics of Surrealism* (see note 15), passim; Robert Short, "The Politics of Surrealism 1920–1936," *Journal of Contemporary History* 1:2 (1966):20, 23–25; and Spector, *Surrealist Art and Writing* (see note 28), pp. 90–92 and passim.

44. For a more extensive discussion of the exhibition and its relationship to the surrealist theorization of objects, see J. Mileaf,



Figure 7. Entryway, *Surrealist Exhibition of Objects*. Courtesy of Guy Ladrière, Paris.



Figure 8. Salon, *Surrealist Exhibition of Objects*, showing Salvador Dalí's *Aphrodisiac Jacket*, 1936. Photo Courtesy of Guy Ladrière, Paris. © 2001 Salvador Dalí, Gala-Salvador Dalí Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

the gallery's entryway, vestibule, and salon, and even spilled out into the garden. They were grouped rhythmically in glass vitrines, on walls, pedestals, shelves, and in the case of Man Ray's "Mon Rêve," set directly on the floor (see fig. 2). Charting the diversity of the world's objects, the exhibition approximated a curiosity cabinet, but stopped short of any meaningful system of classification, favoring instead a seemingly random disposition of works.

The Truth about the Colonies had employed photographic and textual documentation to advocate political action through overt ideology. It approached a strategy of comparison, bringing together Western and indigenous objects—in that case Christian and African sculpture—to make each seem stranger in the context of the other. Within surrealism proper, such juxtapositions had been codified as the method for producing surrealist objects. The Ratton exhibition not only featured a similar mix of Western and indigenous objects; it further developed the method of juxtaposition as an exhibition strategy. In comparison to its predecessor, the Ratton exhibition did not draw political conclusions. Instead, it offered an array of provocative materials that were meant to elicit intense reactions from individual viewers. As explained by Breton in his accompanying texts, objects were conceived as both derivatives and vehicles of desire. Driven by attraction and fantasy, a viewer would move through the exhibition as if through a waking dream. Although clearly not the overt call to arms sounded by The Truth about the Colonies, the Ratton exhibition aimed at the disruption of bourgeois society through a reconceptualization of the state of individual consciousness.

In his brief catalogue essay, Breton credited the objects gathered for the exhibition with the ability to generate reverie: "These objects are particularly enviable in their sheer power of evocation, overwhelming us with the conviction that they constitute the repositories, in art, of that miraculous charm which we long to recapture."⁴⁵ Demonstrating his point, Breton's essay portrayed a dreamlike image of a train inhabited by snakes, an exotic woman with ivy hair, and other "object-beings" whose transformations "manifest the

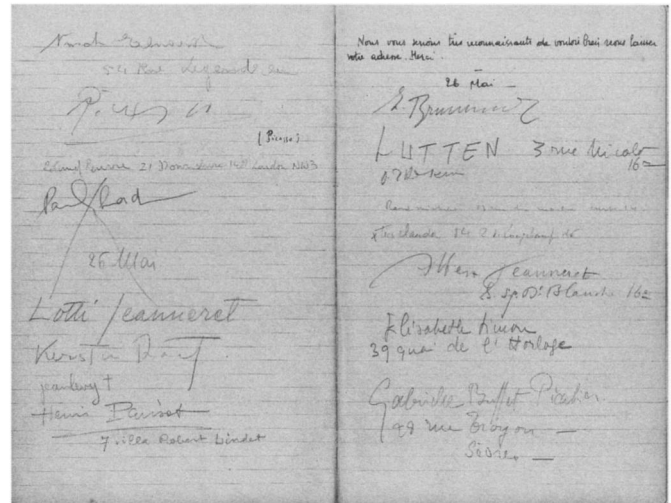


Figure 9. Guest book for *Surrealist Exhibition of Objects* including signatures of Pablo Picasso, Paul Éluard, Gabrielle Buffet-Picabia, and Roland Penrose. Courtesy of Guy Ladrrière, Paris.

perpetuity of the struggle between the aggregative and disaggregative powers which are disputing the nature between true reality and life."⁴⁶ In a review of the exhibition, Maurice Henry, who was also a contributor, further stressed the role of dream-states as provoked through everyday objects. He explained that the surrealist objects were "ready to blend with the everyday life of people and to replace to better effect the knick-knacks on shelves, mantel decorations, and, generally speaking, everything that has no other purpose than to furnish an empty space."⁴⁷ For Henry, the indeterminacy of the *objet trouvé* would confuse visitors and cause them to leave the exhibition with images as obsessive as those seen in dreams.

More descriptive of the mechanism for such disturbances was a longer essay written for a special issue of *Cahiers d'art* that accompanied the Ratton

⁴⁴From *Fountain to Fetish: Duchamp, Man Ray, Breton and Objects, 1917–36*" (Ph.D., University of Pennsylvania, 1999).

⁴⁵ "Les objets-dieux . . . dont nous jalouons très particulièrement le pouvoir évocateur, que nous tenons pour dépositaires, en art, de la grace même que nous voudrions reconquérir." André Breton, "Surrealist Exhibition of Objects," 1936, in *Surrealism and Painting*, trans. Simon Watson Taylor (New York: Icon Editions, 1972), p. 283.

⁴⁶ "Aux vitres, des être-objets (ou objets-êtres?) caractérisés par le fait qu'ils sont en proie à une transformation continue et expriment la perpétuité de la lutte entre les puissances agrégeantes et désagrégeantes qui se disputent la véritable réalité et la vie," *Ibid*, p. 282.

⁴⁷ ". . . sont tout prêts à se mêler à la vie quotidienne des gens et à remplacer avantageusement les bibelots d'étagères, les garnitures de cheminée et tout ce qui, d'une manière générale, n'a d'autre but que de meubler le vide." Henry, "Quand la poésie devient tangible: Une Exposition d'objets surréalistes," *Le Petit Journal* (May 24, 1936), unpaginated.

exhibition. In "Crise de l'objet," [Crisis of the Object], Breton further insisted that the "marvelous" be sought in objects that surround one in everyday life. "The objects which form part of the surrealist exhibition of May 1936 are of a kind calculated primarily to *raise the interdict* resulting from the stultifying proliferation of those objects which impinge on our senses every day and attempt to persuade us that anything that might exist independently of these mundane objects must be illusory."⁴⁸ It was not an invention of new systems of representation that Breton advocated, but rather a reconceptualization of the very things that were most familiar. Here, as in surrealism in general, Breton sought the confusion of dream and reality through the liberation of latent meaning. In his view, any object could derive from the wishes of its witness: "every piece of debris within our reach should be considered a precipitate of our desire."⁴⁹ Objects, as concrete representations of the surreal world of the dream or the unconscious, could cause a "crisis" in the nature of experience.

Among such potentially disruptive materials, the objects from Oceania and the Americas held a prominent place in the exhibition. Now exhibited without the expository frame of anticolonial propaganda, these tribal objects stood doubly as markers of surrealist fantasy, and as metonyms of tribal life. What is important to stress here is that despite their appropriating gestures, the surrealists managed to exhibit tribal objects as things that connoted use, or function, rather than mere aesthetics. The selection of masks, figures, dolls, and fetishes from New Ireland, New Guinea, North America, Mexico, and New Hebrides—against those from Africa, which by the 1930s were well-known in France—signaled a departure from the tastes of the Parisian art world. Elizabeth Williams has explained that the arts of America, though collected seriously in France since around 1850, were not considered aesthetically meaningful until after the 1928 exhibition of American art at the Louvre's Pavillon

de Marsan.⁵⁰ Valued for their roughness and relative lack of refinement, these tribal objects were also specifically equated with violent ritual in the surrealist imagination. In 1927, three years before an article on the same subject appeared in *Documents*, Paul Éluard wrote a catalogue essay about his admiration for the devastation enacted in Aztec and Iroquois ritual practices.⁵¹

The single document to accompany the Raton exhibition that explicitly dealt with notions of the tribal was another essay by Éluard, published in the "object" issue of *Cahiers d'art*. In "L'Habitude des Tropiques," Éluard again emphasized the ritual nature of tribal objects through concrete visual imagery. Like Breton's catalogue text, Éluard's essay strung together a series of images that did not so much explain the surrealist interest in the "tropics," as demonstrate a logic of imagination that he believed operated in "foreign" spaces. Naming the shores of New Guinea, Éluard cited purple fires, blue milk, and suns made of lead, gold, feathers, pure water, passion, and pleasure. He allowed his pen to wander into the present moment of his writing and follow a fly that sat itself upon a mirror in front of him. He then wrote of the inability of words to describe "the desires that turn around an object . . ." ⁵² While this essay did little to explicate the surrealists' understanding of foreign cultures or their artifacts, it reinforced the notion that such things might be *encountered*, rather than purely *admired*. In contrast to the Colonial Exhibition, or even the protest exhibition, the Raton exhibition attempted to present tribal objects as interactive, ritualized entities. In the context of an avant-garde art exhibition, such "authentic" encounters of foreign places were difficult if not impossible to summon. Consequently, it was the surrealist object, rather than its tribal counterpart, that succeeded in producing the participatory experience so valued in surrealism.

Salvador Dalí's contribution to the Raton exhibition staged an intoxicating interchange that emphasized the

48. "... les objets qui prennent place dans le cadre de l'exposition surréaliste de mai sont avant tout de nature à lever l'interdit résultant de la répétition accablante de ceux qui tombent journellement sous nos sens et nous engagent à tenir tout ce qui pourrait être en dehors d'eux pour illusoire." André Breton, "Crise de l'objet," 1936, translated in *Surrealism and Painting* (see note 45), p. 279.

49. "Toute épave à portée de nos mains doit être considérée comme un précipité de notre desire." *Ibid.*, p. 283.

50. Elizabeth A. Williams, "Art and Artifact at the Trocadéro: Ars Americana and the Primitivist Revolution," in *Objects and Others, History of Anthropology*, ed. George Stocking (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985).

51. Paul Éluard, "D'un véritable continent," in *Yves Tanguy et objets d'amérique*. Paris: Galerie Surréaliste (May 27–June 15, 1927), unpaginated. The 1930 *Documents* essay by Roger Hervé was noted by Rosalind Krauss in her ground-breaking essay on Giacometti's sculpture and his indebtedness to the circle of Georges Bataille. See Rosalind Krauss, "Giacometti," in Rubin, "Primitivism" (see note 1), p. 512, and Roger Hervé, "Sacrifices Humains du Centre-Amérique," *Documents* 2:3 (1930):205–213.

erotic component of encounters between people and things. In an article of 1932, Dalí described a method for soliciting sexual fantasy and physical contact that later became fundamental to surrealist art production. He identified four stages in the evolution of surrealist objects, the last of which was yet to be realized. In the final “edible” phase, objects would merge with their viewers through the act of cannibalism: “Suddenly it does not seem enough to devour things with our eyes and our anxiety to join actively and effectively in their existence brings us to want to *eat them*.”⁵³ Realizing this ideal, Dalí’s *Aphrodisiac Jacket* (fig. 8)—a smoking jacket studded with shot glasses full of crème de menthe—literally invited the viewer to consume art. Peeping out from behind the jacket’s lapels was an advertisement for a woman’s bra; a curvaceous, half-empty bottle of *Get Frères Peppermint* stood ready for refills. In a description of the assemblage, Dalí compared the shot glasses to St. Sebastian’s arrows, conceiving of them both as “anthropomorphic” because they demarcated the physical location of the wearer’s feelings: “pain objectifiable and measurable thanks to the number and position of the arrows.”⁵⁴

Meret Oppenheim’s now famous *Fur-lined Teacup, Saucer, and Spoon*, first seen in this context, proposed another kind of ingestion. Faced with the incongruous pairing of dime-store dishware and scrap of fur, the viewer would likely imagine the action suggested by the object. Brought to mouth, the bearded cup conveys both sensual pleasure and physical revulsion, binding the sensations of disgust and desire that characterize the surrealist erotic. Other works invited further transgressions of contact, both real and imagined. Alberto Giacometti’s celebrated *Suspended Ball* (fig. 8) with its sphere and wedge just missing a gentle caress, and Hans Bellmer’s *Ball Joint* (fig. 10), an eyeball stuck between the sockets of two doll’s arms, enact and elicit erotic fantasy.⁵⁵

52. Paul Éluard, “L’Habitue des Tropiques,” *Cahiers d’art* 1–2 (1936):29.

53. Salvador Dalí, “The Object as Revealed in Surrealist Experiment,” *This Quarter* 5:1 (September 1932):205.

54. “. . . douleur objectivable et mesurable grâce au nombre et à la position des flèches.” Salvador Dalí, “Analyse du Veston Aphrodisiaque de Salvador Dalí,” *Cahiers d’art (Numéro spécial sur L’Objet)* 1–2 (1936):57. The reference to Saint Sebastian has also been analyzed as related to themes of homosexual desire. One of Dalí’s earliest texts, entitled “Saint Sebastian,” was dedicated to his male lover, Federico García Lorca. See Salvador Dalí, *Oui: the Paranoid-Critical Revolution* (Boston: Exact Change, 1998).

55. Giacometti’s *Suspended Ball* has played a fundamental role in the theorization of surrealist objects. In “Objets surréalistes,” *LSASDLR* 3 (December 1931):16, Dalí identified it as a surrealist object *avant la*

In a dialogue between surrealist assemblages, perplexing curiosities, and indigenous objects from Oceania and America, the surrealists contrived a meeting of the tribal and the modern that focused not on aesthetic qualities or political didacticism, but rather on the potential for activating an embodied response to the work of art. Such a collision of concrete thing, physical sensation, and disordered logic exemplifies the surrealist ideal of political praxis. In theory, the entire exhibition would transport visitors through reverie to the realm of the marvelous, or the surreal, by enabling unconscious desire to become fused with the common experience of consuming art. By way of the body, objects would provoke imagined sensations and disturb a spectator’s perceptions. These disturbances would then upset the status of reality, rendering bourgeois society untenable and ushering in a new social order, perhaps more effectively than could any direct appeal to the masses.

Walter Benjamin’s 1929 essay on surrealism offers an apposite analysis of these phenomena, which locates revolutionary potential in the physical disturbance of the body.⁵⁶ In “Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia,” Benjamin named the essential surrealist experience of bodily convergence with the dream space as “profane illumination”—“a materialist, anthropological inspiration, to which hashish, opium, or whatever else can give an introductory lesson.”⁵⁷ Here, the notions of anthropology and materialism echo the tribal and the modern, producing images of “baseness,

lettre for its erotic capacities. Following Dalí, Maurice Nadeau reported the nature of its effect: “Now, everyone who has seen this object function has felt a violent and indefinable emotion, doubtless having some relation with unconscious sexual desires. This emotion has nothing to do with satisfaction, rather with irritation, the kind provoked by the disturbing perception of a great many objects of its kind.” Nadeau, *The History of Surrealism* (see note 45), p. 188. Rosalind Krauss advanced a related interpretation that emphasized the gender ambiguity of the two forms. Krauss, “Giacometti” (see note 51), pp. 511–512.

56. On Walter Benjamin and surrealism, see Margaret Cohen, *Profane Illumination: Walter Benjamin and the Paris of Surrealist Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); David Frisby, *Fragments of Modernity: Theories of Modernity in the Work of Simmel, Kracauer, and Benjamin* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1986); Richard Wolin, “Benjamin, Adorno, Surrealism,” in Tom Huhn and Lambert Zuidervaart, eds., *The Semblance of Subjectivity: Essays in Adorno’s Aesthetic Theory* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1997), pp. 93–122.

57. Walter Benjamin, “Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia,” 1929, in Peter Demetz, ed., *Reflections* (New York: Schocken Books, 1989), p. 179.

vengeance, and cruelty.”⁵⁸ Like Breton’s concept of the waking dream, profane illumination describes the merging of the self with the world through a dialectical intoxication that is both terrifying and exhilarating. More than mere drunkenness, this intoxication requires the recognition of the everyday, along with a negative shock to the senses: “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, the impenetrable as everyday.”⁵⁹ This abandonment, as Margaret Cohen has emphasized, requires a displacement of the visual. Just as Dalí demanded that we consume art, she characterizes profane illumination as “overcoming the alienation of the senses.”⁶⁰ Cohen’s Marxist turn of phrase mirrors Benjamin’s own communistic rhetoric. For in the end, it was the desire for revolution that Benjamin shared with the surrealists.

As a strategy for revolution, Benjamin argued for the merging of body and *representation*. “Only when in technology body and image so interpenetrate that all revolutionary tension becomes bodily collective innervation, and all the bodily innervations of the collective become revolutionary discharge, has reality transcended itself to the extent demanded by the Communist Manifesto.”⁶¹ As Sigrid Weigel has explained, this aspect of Benjamin’s thought proposes a politicization of art through the recognition that reality is known and articulated in images and that mental and physical realities interpenetrate.⁶² This model of thought closes the distance between mental image and physical experience, allowing the subject to literally enter his own image-space. The objects of the Ratton exhibition could thus be understood as concrete images that do not describe the world, but rather constitute the material of thought. Next to the radical transformation of society demanded by *The Truth about the Colonies*, the ambitions of the Ratton exhibition appear quite modest. Nonetheless, we can begin to understand how the second exhibition sought “revolutionary discharge” from

the individual viewer, as a conduit to the collective. Within the structure of the Ratton exhibition, eroticism, rather than rhetoric, aimed to alter world views. Unfortunately, testimonies from visitors to the Surrealist Exhibition of Objects do not survive. We can assume, however, that few were inspired to take revolutionary action; perhaps large-scale political actions cannot originate in an exhibition of art. What can occur, on the other hand, are slight disturbances—corporeal provocations that result in ongoing challenges to the status quo. Through the juxtaposition of tribal and modern objects, the Ratton exhibition worked to conjure disturbances that would linger in the body of the viewer.

58. *Ibid.*, p. 187.

59. *Ibid.*, p. 189.

60. Margaret Cohen, “The Art of Profane Illumination,” *Visual Anthropology Review* 10:1 (Spring 1994):46. For an extended analysis of vision in surrealism, see Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

61. Benjamin “Surrealism” (see notes 7), p. 192.

62. Sigrid Weigel, *Body- and Image- Space: Re-reading Walter Benjamin*, trans. Georgina Paul with Rachel McNicholl and Jeremy Gaines (New York and London: Routledge, 1996).

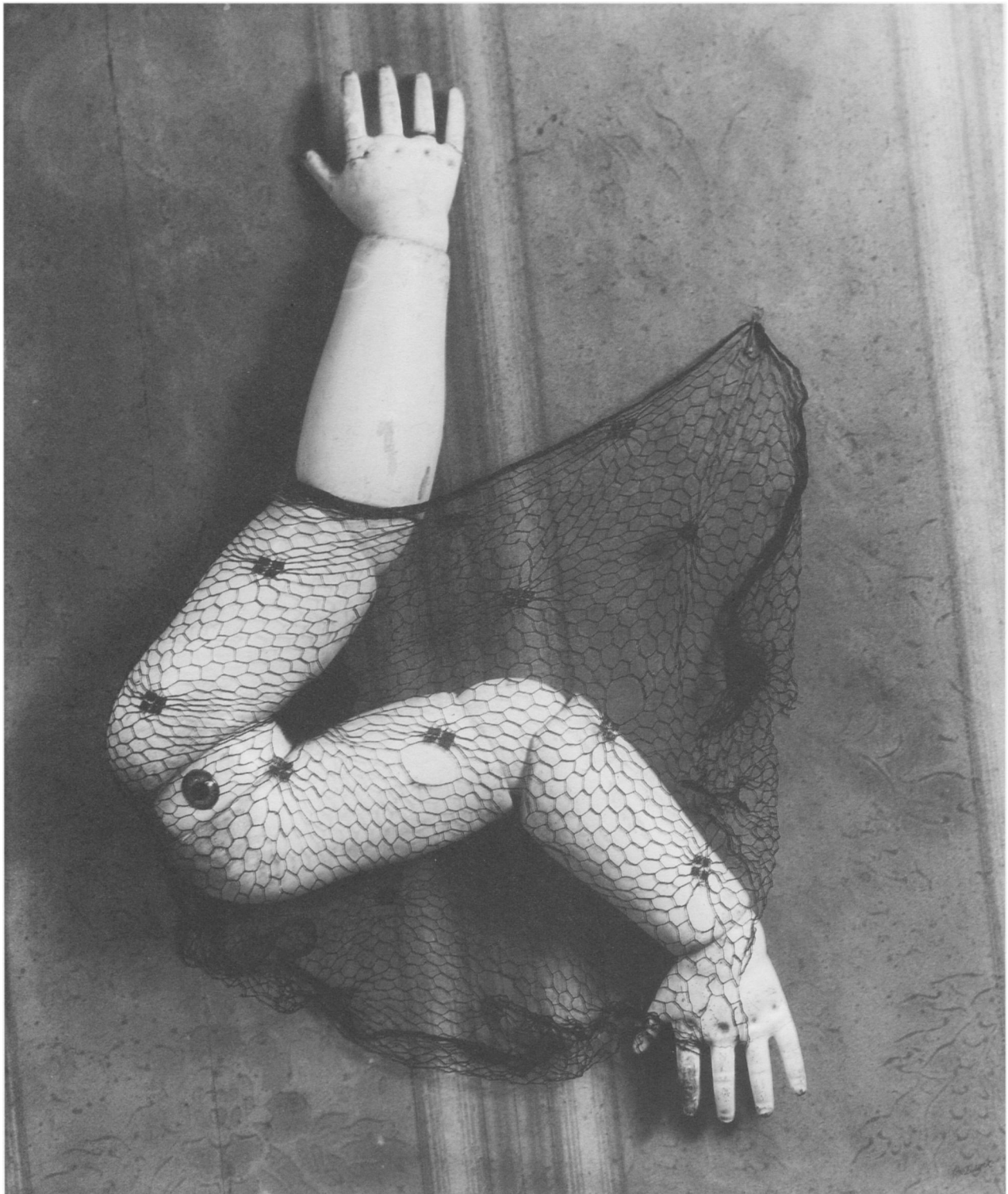


Figure 10. Hans Bellmer, *Ball Joint*, 1936. Photo Courtesy of Guy Ladrrière, Paris. © 2001 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris.