

Towards an Esthetic of Literary Journals: Surrealist Pages in *VVV*, Surrealist Consumption in *View*¹

Jacqueline Chénieux-Gendron

Can one define the characteristics of that singular object, the surrealist journal? A journal whose required elements constitute a place (*lieu*), a fabric which a surrealist and only a surrealist could have woven? Without any particular answer in mind, I would like to explore this line of questioning through the example of *VVV*, the journal published by André Breton and his friends in New York during the Second World War, even though they seemed to have no need for such a venture and could publish almost anything they wanted in the American journal *View*. This freedom of choice has prompted critics to treat *View* and *VVV* as equivalent, or else to speak *View* as “the other journal of the surrealist movement.”² My method combines a visual and factual approach, an approach that is also phenomenological in addressing the conditions of reading. My aim is to provide both a framework for and a point of insertion into what I think of as the pragmatics of surrealist text and image which I believe has been insufficiently brought into play.³

My proposed way of working is phenomenological in the original sense of the term, in that I approach the journal as an *object*: a visual object, but also an object pertaining to the visual arts; an object to be read and an object pertaining to

¹ This article was originally published in French in *Pleine marge*, no. 20, 1994, pp. 135-61 under the title “Pour une esthétique des revues: Pages surréalistes de *VVV*, pages de consommation dans *View*.” The editors are grateful to the author both for permission to publish this translation and for her extensive collaboration with the translators to produce this English version. It is with great sadness that we note Jacqueline Chénieux-Gendron’s passing on 1 September 2022.

² Before the creation of *VVV*, *View* was one of the most receptive venues in New York for the work of André Breton, especially in its first period. But a second journal was to emerge.

³ Critics have presented multiple aspects of this history, which is complex, involving issues of dispersal and emigration, and a subsequent, necessarily centripetal regrouping. See the important works of Sawin and Loyer.

knowledge. In addition, it is an *objet bricolé* (to use Claude Levi-Strauss's term in his discussion of first societies) — an object produced in unique circumstances with “heterogeneous” and “limited” tools. In the case of *VVV*, money was always tight, and the search always on for talented *and* inexpensive printers to be paid by patrons of the arts. The *VVV* portfolio,⁴ announced in issue no. 2-3, was one of two ventures intended to make the magazine self-supporting. Advertising, the other source of which we know, provides further information on how the group proceeded. The Italian painter Enrico Donati, a friend of Marcel Duchamp, once told me how he would make the rounds of wealthy people connected to the journal, as well as galleries sympathetic to the surrealist group.⁵ For readers of the time as well as now, the revue is also a *perverse object*, to be used and handled in any way and in every sense. No order of reading is imposed, and materially readers can choose where to start and where to allow their reveries to wander. For young readers, it is a *magic object*: an *open sesame* to “the world” and the uses to which it can be put; far more than the “the book,” its pages offer “new,” ephemeral, and preciously immediate connection to events. Perhaps the revue is even an *objet de perspective* (an *object made in perspective* — Guy Rosolato) or a *transitional object* (Donald Winnicott: a space where the fears we harbor of annihilation and the “lost object” are resolved and dissipate; a space where nostalgia and projection merge). Finally, for both its creators and its contemporary readers, the journal is really a “thought office,” as Aimé Césaire so aptly described the objective for his own journal *Tropiques*: “centre de réflexion” ‘a center for reflection,’ he states, and I understand this term in its fullest sense: both a place where the world is reflected and where a person reflects; a centrifugal space which is also be centripetal, a bureau where one can “s’exprimer elles-mêmes, parler, créer” ‘speak, express oneself, create’ *for a few*, and in opposition to a “société de consommation culturelle” ‘society of cultural consumption’ (Leiner v).⁶

Which is precisely what is striking in *View*'s production: it looks like something offered for cultural consumption — certainly challenging, selective, and elegant in the best sense of the word. But the vast periodical ensemble encompassing

⁴ Fifty copies were published, with eleven original works by André Breton, Alexander Calder, Leonora Carrington, Marc Chagall, Max Ernst, David Hare, André Masson, Matta, Robert Motherwell, Kurt Seligmann, and Yves Tanguy, and sold for \$100 each. (Bernard J. Reis collected the revenue.)

⁵ Pierre Matisse, Nierendorf, Julius Carlebach, the Wakefield Gallery, Julien Levy, Pierre Bérès, Curt Valentin of the Buchholz Gallery along with several others and, as always, Peggy Guggenheim; but also the perfume and fashion milieus: Roger and Gallet (formerly the House of Jean-Marie Farina), Caron perfumes, Weil perfumes, Helena Rubinstein, and Elsa Schiaparelli — Donati, when I interviewed him, delightfully prided himself on having spoken Italian when working with Schiaparelli.

⁶ Where no published English version is cited, translations of French quotations are by the translators of this article.

American and international modernity and including surrealism *reflects* the fluid state of a society on the point of becoming global, without seeking either to reflect on it or reorient it.

View, this beautiful journal published in New York from September 1940 to spring 1947 by editor Charles-Henri Ford, quickly welcomed the French surrealists along with their highly international entourage, and stood up for them in the face of their detractors.⁷ Taking the lead from Breton and his group, beginning with issue 6 of the first series (June 1941), the journal insists that Salvador Dali is “anti-surrealist” (Calas, “Anti-Surrealist Dali”). In issue 7-8 (October-November 1941), edited by Nicolas Calas, André Breton was interviewed soon after his arrival from Marseille via Fort-de-France in early July of that year. Previously, in the third issue (November 1940), *View* had announced plans for *Gold*⁸ (which would have been edited by two surrealist painters, Matta, originally from Chile, and Gordon Onslow-Ford, originally from England), a journal “continuing the line of the Paris **Minotaure** . . . and E. L. T. Mesens’ **London Bulletin**” (“Reports and Reporters”). *View* also announced Ivan Goll’s Franco-American project, *La France en liberté*, which we can assume was the initial announcement of the journal *Hémisphères*, a continuation of the project begun in Marseille.⁹ In short, New York did not lack for journals in which the surrealists could show their work. There had already been *New Directions in Prose & Poetry*, with its 1940 special issue on *Values of Surrealism*; now there was *View*, and there would be other journals close to Breton. But were these journals really “surrealist” in the eyes of these exacting surrealists – recognized and considered as such by Breton and his group? Not to his mind, it appears, since when taking stock of his stay in the United States on a postcard addressed to Victor Brauner on 12 December 1944, Breton recalled, “On a fait quatre numéros de revue (VVV). Rien d’autre ou presque” ‘We did four issues of the journal VVV. Nothing else, or almost nothing’ (Beaumelle and Monod-Fontaine 357). A cruel assessment.

Yet *View* does reflect surrealism! And in such a way that critics have confused the virtual image seen in the mirror with the “real” one. During its long life, surrealism was *consumed* by *View* to the point where a cursory reading can lead to superimposing the poetic and visual fields of one journal on the other; and *VVV*,

⁷ Born in Mississippi in 1910, Charles-Henri Ford was a connoisseur of art; he had already published the jazz review *Blues* in Columbus in 1929 and went on to publish three chapbooks of poetry. Through William Carlos Williams, William Faulkner, Parker Tyler, and Sylvia Beach, among many others, he was already circulating widely in literary and artistic milieux.

⁸ The title refers to “treasures of the mind,” as Gordon Onslow-Ford indicated to me in a telephone conversation in July 1992. Yet . . . , for lack of money (gold . . .) the journal would never be launched.

⁹ *Hémisphères* published six issues under the editorship of Yvan Goll (1891-1950). Goll, a bilingual poet (French and German), had published a journal titled *Surréalisme* (only one issue) in 1924, which defined, without great originality, a “new poetic movement.”

less voluminous and with fewer contributions, then appears as a subset of *View*. Through its preferences and choices, surprising on the American continent at that time, especially with regard to the texts, *View* is, in my eyes, *surréalisant*, you might say — in the manner of surrealism. Numerous surrealists were published in its pages, including at least one important text by Breton titled “The Legendary Life of Max Ernst,” in April 1942 (preceded by a brief discussion on the need for new myths). But the first issue of *VVV* was not yet printed. *View* also published two stories by Leonora Carrington, articles by Nicolas Calas whose book, written in English and titled *Confound the Wise*, would be published in 1941; texts by André Masson and writers of the surrealist diaspora (including Benjamin Péret, who wrote from Mexico, Georges Henein, who wrote from Cairo, and Maurice Blanchard, some of whose texts must have been carried over from France by a friend).¹⁰ Long after the original French version came out in Paris in 1929, *View* published an American translations from *Hebdomeros*, the strange novel by Giorgio de Chirico (series IV, no. 4). Edouard Roditi’s translation of Raymond Roussel (beginning in III, 4, Dec. 1943) and Lionel Abel’s essay, the first ever on Lautréamont to be published in the United States (IV, 4) also appeared in *View*. Lautréamont had already been translated in Great Britain in *Contemporary Poetry & Prose* in 1936 and is the subject of an article by Aimé Césaire in *Tropiques* in February 1943. Finally, *View* shared the surrealists’ interest in *art brut* (IV, 2-3 included a letter from Jean Paulhan to Jean Dubuffet) and in children (there are pages for children in the third series).

During the six years of its existence, *View* regularly published images by surrealist painters, and also special issues devoted to them — e.g., Max Ernst in issue 2 of the first series, and Marcel Duchamp in issue 1 of series V in March 1945.

View owes its continued survival, in fact, to this diversity of approach, supported by Charles-Henri Ford’s practice of inviting guest editors. In October-November 1941 (I, 7-8), he invited Nicolas Calas to introduce surrealism; and in May 1945 (V, 2), he invited Paul Bowles to talk about Indigenous Americans, especially those of South America. The presentation was equally diverse: in six years, seven series and a total of thirty-seven issues were published in a range of different formats. At times, *View* took the form of a newspaper (as in the first series), at times a themed journal, and at times a color “magazine.” The mock-ups of the covers are also pleasantly varied.¹¹

Thus, *View* was home to a broad range of interests. How were collaborators chosen and solicited? I asked Charles-Henri Ford, director of the revue and a poet,

¹⁰ It is hard to imagine Maurice Blanchard, a secretive poet, engineer, and mathematician, sending poems to anyone in the United States.

¹¹ The title pages of issue 6 of the first series, “Anti-surrealist Dalí,” are in the format of a small journal (38 x 26 cm); the first page of issue 7-8 has its title in the same size (“Interview d’André Breton”). The second series, issue 1, is a small leaflet (18 x 26 cm), with a pale blue cover, wholly dedicated to Max Ernst.

and his reply was: "Whatever prestigious people I could get, but also whatever pleased me in the moment." Consumption is often performed through the gaze, and this sophisticated journal explores the state of poetry and its place in the world: the "view" in question is a view of poetry and the arts. This journal intends itself as a window on the world, it sketches a panorama, a mobile one, and offers its vast unfolding to the readers. It refuses to choose. Rather it gathers pleasure like nectar. There is no mission statement, no intellectualist reflection on the project, not even in the first issue. Just the allusive subtitle: "*View* through the eyes of poets." The opening is sudden, instinctual, devoid of intention. Format and layout seem to be modified simply for the sake of *pleasure* and change.

To *displease* the intelligentsia of good taste is a boundary never crossed by the revue; nor is the boundary of coherence. First comes poetry with the publication of attractive collections, beginning in the third issue in the first series¹²; then painting in the second series, with issues devoted to Max Ernst, a double-issue on Tanguy and Pavel Tchelitcheff in tandem, before the *Vertigo* issue, inspired by Roger Caillois, and the one presenting the American works of the fantastic. However, in the third series, at exactly when the surrealists were publishing mostly in their own journal, i.e. *VVV*, *View* becomes more anthological in character, and even eclectic.

One final boundary, however, and surely the most important one, relates to the meaning which *View* and the surrealists each attribute to the word *poet*. At *View*, political non-engagement is the rule. For the surrealists, a poet is someone who thinks about the world in its totality, up to and including, almost necessarily, its social and political configuration. For Charles-Henri Ford and William Carlos Williams, poetry excludes the order of the *polis*. In a letter dated 25 February 1942 and published unabridged by Charles-Henri Ford in May 1942, in a special issue specifically devoted to the surrealist painter Yves Tanguy, William Carlos Williams calls for this non-engagement to be respected. As if in response, *VVV* is launched in June, the month after the publication of this letter.

VVV: A Proclamation

VVV, on the other hand, comes across as totalizing and locked into its own strange intuitions, with analogy and an interweaving of signifiers playing a central role, along with breadth of coverage and an eclecticism quite different from that of *View*.

¹² The poet Wallace Stevens is interviewed in the first issue; there is an examination of Marxism in contemporary literature (Brecht), but also of the non-engaged modernists: Jean Cocteau in France, T.S. Eliot in Great Britain. There is a report on other journals in Great Britain and on poetry publications on the West Coast. Among the collections published in this first series are William Carlos Williams, who had long been translating Philippe Soupault, and Maurice Blanchard, the French poet appreciated by Paul Éluard and René Char, but little-known nonetheless.

First of all, nothing in the *margins*, the editorials, the advertising pages, could be transferred from *View* to *VVV*. Nothing surrounding *View* is surrealist. While certainly suggestive and poetic, *View* is both linear and descriptive. It informs, it sums up. *VVV*, on the other hand, wraps itself in a layer of quite complicated declarations of intention.

Let us take a close *look* at the editorial, which is a *carmen figuratum*, an image in words that is also a riddle. The riddle, says Aristotle, is a stylistic devi that combines impossible things while stating existing things (*Poetics*, 21, 1457 b 25).¹³ The connection or rather multiplication of small metaphorical units is what creates the effect of a riddle. In that sense this page is a visual riddle, distinct from the acrostic where bizarreness is resolved by reading vertically.

The published first issue lists the American sculptor David Hare as issue editor in addition to André Breton and Max Ernst, who serve in this capacity in subsequent issues; the editorial committee includes Matta and William Carlos Williams. These last two, in addition to Motherwell himself, eventually disappear from the list, Motherwell and Matta being closely connected.¹⁴ On the other hand, after the publication of the first issue,¹⁵ *VVV*'s editorial committee expands to include Marcel Duchamp, following his arrival in New York.

Another striking element is the words, which appear in a box in each issue of the magazine (three, in all) (fig. 1), and which, working from top to bottom, force us to read two series of repeated signs: *VVV*, *V*, *VV*, *VVV*, *V*, *VV*, *VVV*, *VVV*. A clear rhythm is created: first, a call (*VVV*, in the middle of the page), then two dactyls in the form of a response, and finally a pause. But unlike the acrostic which produces meaning, this vertical alignment produces rhythm at the expense of sense. Turning to the horizontal, the call, or question, develops through sequential as well as rhythmic responses. The first group of responses, or explanations, is of a *political-and-poetic* order (poetic in an all-encompassing sense, as understood by surrealism), starting with liberation of the Mind, and going through necessary *stages*. The second group is of a psychological, psychoanalytical, and esoteric order. *Between* each group, the horizontal and the vertical, there is a leap, a beyond; "*not only . . . beyond this . . . Whence . . .*". The second group is also guided by the semantics of pivotal words producing shifts in meaning: from *one*, we move to *some of us*, and from there to *whence*, and *towards*. Semantically, everything leads towards a world *re-directed*.

¹³ The example given in *Poetics* is this: "I saw a man welding bronze on another man with fire," a sentence with a double metaphor which, when decoded, refers to placing cupping glasses on the skin (22, 1458a) (31). The riddle is characterized by a syntactically correct utterance on which metaphoric effects are grafted and multiplied.

¹⁴ During the summer of 1941, which preceded the first issue's release, the two had gone together to Mexico City and were staying with Wolfgang Paalen and Alice Rahon.

¹⁵ Marcel Duchamp arrived in New York on 25 June 1942 on the Portuguese ship *Serpa Pintor* (Gough-Cooper and Caumont 23).

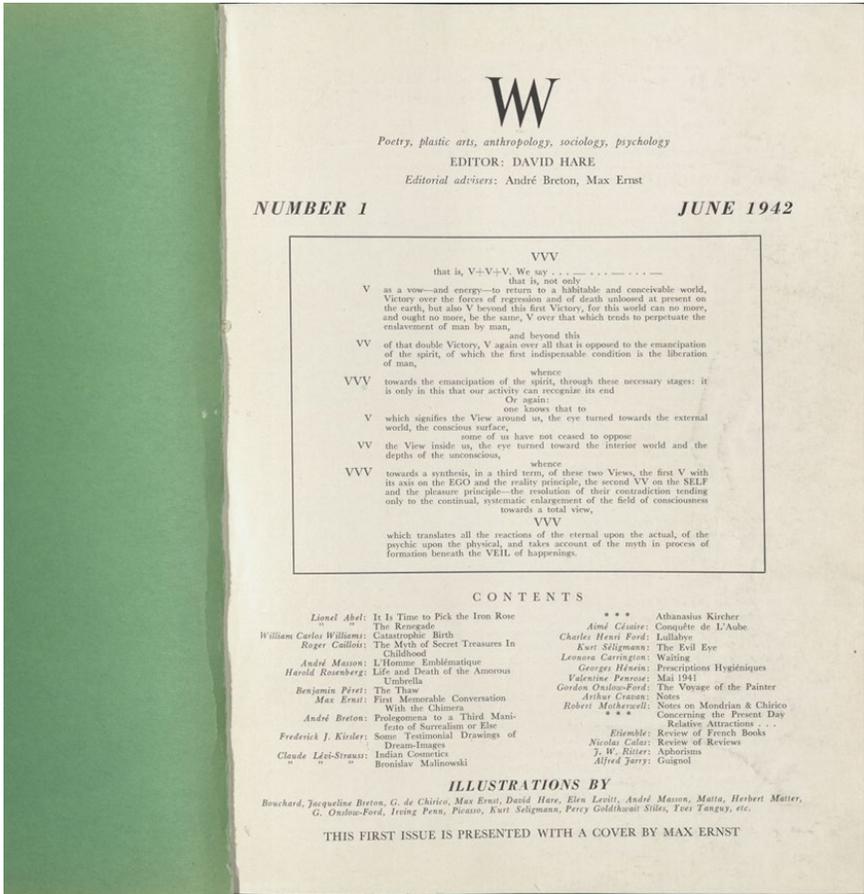


Figure 1: VVV, no. 1, June 1942, p. 1.
Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

The V evokes Vow and Victory, Churchill’s gesture, the vow that urges us toward a livable world, the vow which, through decisive Victory, is supposed to defeat the forces of regression unleashed simultaneously in the world, but also the vow to establish politically, beyond a purely military Victory, a world in which man would no longer be dependent on man, and in which man would no longer enslave man. Paragrammatically, from the outset, the *vow* is an essential element of the *world*. The world “contains” the vow to change it.

In the second sequence, VV is centered on the idea of a double Victory against the forces of regression massed against of the spirit. *Man* has become *spirit*.

At this point, VVV becomes, purely and simply, an emblem of the impulse for change. It is a paragrammatical reminder of words with the power of movement (*whence, towards*).

My point is to show that editorial work involves the production of an image, a crystalline visual object where meaning is refracted in all directions. The riddle turned visual becomes a multifaceted *analogy*.

The circle closes on an equivalence: “or again” — leading us to a further equivalence *between the sign and the thing signified*. “V” as in “vow,” which began the first sequence, is “V which signifies . . .”, which prompts another equivalence: “VVV which translates.” Here, in contrast to what Breton so often lamented as early as 1935, as well as in the texts brought together in *Le surréalisme et la peinture*,¹⁶ the sign does not merely “survive” the thing signified in a withering process of rationalist impoverishment: it is *declared to be that thing*.

The final sequence questions oppositions such as *eternal/actual, psychic/physical, myth in process of formation/happenings* in a rhythmic and semantic high point. The human spirit, its durability, and its yet-to-be-invented mythic dimension, is everywhere set in opposition to the sociological and factual order, conceived of as unquestioned appearance. VVV is said to be “a sign that has always existed and can disappear only momentarily, like a river that has passed underground: *the sign of the spirit of invention*.” Spirit is a flash of light. “Find the lightning in VVV,” suggests this page of advertising, apparently without humor, and I can’t help but recall Marcel Duchamp’s sarcastic collage, proposed (and later accepted by Breton) for the collection *Jeunes cerisiers garantis contre les lièvres* (*Young Cherry Trees Secured Against Hares*), in which instead of the Statue of Liberty’s austere visage, we suddenly see André Breton’s virtuous face, strong-willed and gazing out at us with amusing and unsettling sexual ambiguity: the new phallic mother. All this is situated in a global political dimension, with André Breton bringing the flame of a *libertarian model* to the New World.

At the same time, and this is essential, each issue of VVV seems to have been organized around a theme or a watchword.

The proof lies in an unpublished letter written by David Hare to William Baziotés on 16 July 1942, housed in the Archives of American Art, in which Hare suggests that the surrealist journal begins with a *defined plan* and a title for a springboard. This is not to say that the journal is organized thematically. *Minotaure* proceeded in the same way. For example, the flyleaf of issue 7, which is predominantly white, contains only the number 7 centered on the page, and the phrase “le côté nocturne de la nature” ‘the nocturnal side of nature’ centered at the bottom of the page. A glance at the table of contents shows how the whole issue plays on notions of border, side, face and interface, right-side-up and upside-down.

Here in VVV, in 1942, the theme of freedom is inscribed in the project *independently* by guest editor David Hare: the issue “is to be devoted [e]ntirely to

¹⁶ In the 1965 edition see for example “Max Ernst” (English text in *View*, April 1942), “Yahne Le Toumelin” (text from 1957), and “René Magritte” (text from 1961).

liberty," and he goes on to suggest, interestingly and curiously, some of the planned themes:

Comparing for example the artist which is free in expres[s]ion but not free in life, the object which is cons[e]crated to freedom but which is not free, the object which is not cons[e]crated to freedom but which is free. (The statue of liberty) (the sculpture of [Giacometti] etc.) Miro free in expres[s]ion but not in life- Jarry, free in life. And also the problem of individual freedom which is of co[u]rse Anar[chy] as [op]posed to the social freedom for which laws are necessary thereby making it not f[r]ee by def[i]nition etc.

This letter clearly illustrates that the magazine starts from a state of reverie where the individual contributors develop their own intuitions and associations: surrealism continually seeks the meaning of its own expression.

It is as though *View* and *VVV* were in the same relation as Matta's notions of *landscape* and *inscape*. *VVV* claims to cast a visionary gaze on the internal world, a gaze potentially modelled on mathematical ideas as well as the esoteric tradition or prophetism.¹⁷ But this gaze is also a "naturally" *poetic vision*, such as that of Aimé Césaire or Leonora Carrington.

Finally, one of the levels of reading most often passed over by critics is the political. In "Prolegomena to a Third Manifesto of Surrealism or Else," published in English and French in issue 1 by Breton, the focus is on the final phrase, scarcely a political reflection, that appears after the subtitle: "Les Grands Transparents" ('The Great Invisibles') (25). But read the counterpart as well, also printed in italics like an inserted phrase or illustration, and which has rarely been considered by critics: "Retour inopiné du Père Duchêne" 'Unexpected Return of Père Duchêne' (23), a diatribe against Pétain, printed in a pastiche of the Hébertist revolutionary newspaper *Le Père Duchêne*. Before focusing on the glimpse offered of the future, let us consider the denunciation offered of the present, involving a notion of political commitment. *Le Père Duchêne*, a newspaper of the 1791 Revolution, was penned by those referred to as "the enraged." Here, the diatribe directed at Pétain and his "collaborators" loses none its power for being free of reprisal, and it is remarkably strong in its thinking which imbues the overall effect of burlesque with an impressive lyrical tone, and through its derision and its call to revolt it reflects the present, as described and actually lived, in its total *vulgarity*. It should be read in the manner and with the humor of the actress Arletty. Nazism is measured against those who voted for it, against the way its soldiers' wits have been dulled, described as being decked out in uniforms of "vieilles épiluchures" 'old potato peel,' and finally against the involvement of part of the Church of France, which

¹⁷ The dreams on the fourth dimension are related to these algebraic surfaces of the "4th degree" photographed by Man Ray and presented on advertising paper, reproduced here. Prophetism figures in the image titled *The Last Beast*.

are denounced in colorful terms like the scandals surrounding food distribution. Moreover, the entire text has a beautiful rhetorical coherence, in part because it blends a popular salty loquaciousness with the required theme of sex. “Foutre!” (Fuck!), an exclamation used repeatedly, is echoed in “Jean-foutre,” a play on names such as Jean-Paul.

VVV: Design and Touch

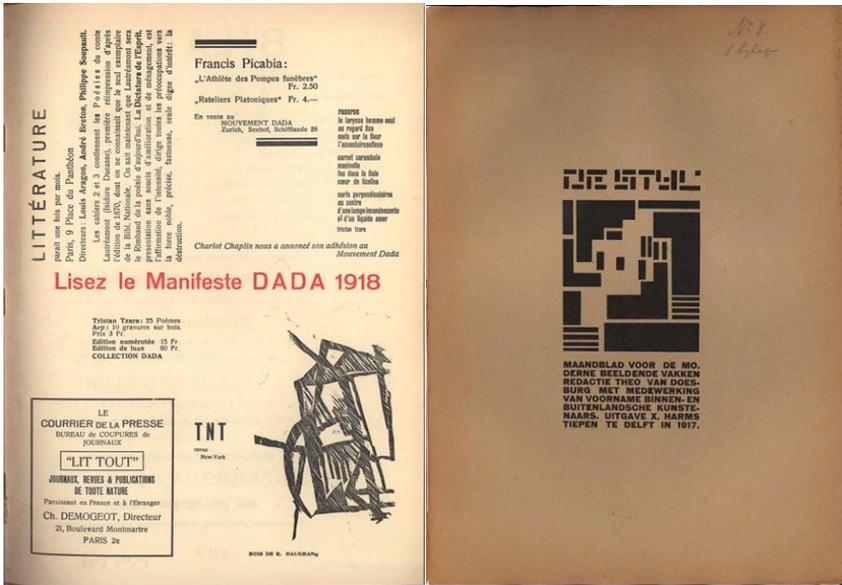


Figure 2 (left): *Dada*, no. 4-5, n.p. International Dada Archive, Special Collections and Archives, University of Iowa Libraries.

Figure 3 (right): Front cover of *De Stijl*, vol.1 no. 8, June 1918. International Dada Archive, Special Collections and Archives, University of Iowa Libraries.

The idea for VVV begins with the layout. First and foremost, opening an issue of VVV is a way of reencountering, of re-viewing the familiar: the layout follows well-established models, far removed from the typographic originality of 1920s Europe in the pages of the *Dada* or *De Stijl* journals, where the text was often printed at an angle or vertically (figs. 2 and 3). The influence of *Minotaure* as well as the *London Gallery Bulletin* is clear, even though this is a reduced *Minotaure* of almost skimpy dimensions. The refugees of New York lacked funds. They no longer had Skira to turn to. They could not solicit Peggy Guggenheim endlessly. *Minotaure's* original large format is replaced with a pleasing one that can be held in one hand.

Minotaure does function as a model, and just as for *Minotaure*, the VVV editorial board invited well-known artists to design the cover. After an invitation to

Chagall¹⁸ goes wrong, the simplest solution is to invite the renowned painters who were members of the editorial board to contribute. Max Ernst and then Marcel Duchamp each design covers, and finally, Matta, very close to André Breton. The layout is similar to that of *Minotaure*, with its use of columns and a certain taste for illustrations in boxes above or below the articles to fill in the spaces seamlessly. What does change, and requires a special response, is the reproduction of half-page, color illustrations, which are cut horizontally and result in unexpected play. Also, one page folds out to reveal a magnificent image by Max Ernst.

But *VVV* plays with more than the reader's vision. There is also the sense of *touch*. We know that vision is related to touch, and not only metaphorically. Dalí even played with and would continue to play with the sense of *taste*, and once again not only through metaphor. In the context of this Anglo-Saxon society with its Puritanical sensibilities, where touch is largely taboo, in this society of consumption where the inevitable "Please do not touch" expressly forbids any potential depreciation of merchandise, we have become familiar with Marcel Duchamp and Enrico Donati's Gallic joke, developed later in 1947 for the deluxe edition of the exhibition catalogue *Le surréalisme en 1947: "Prière de toucher" 'Please touch,'* featuring a pink rubber breast. In direct response to the sense of touch and the need to handle, *VVV* invites readers to fold and unfold illustrations (including that beautiful image by Max Ernst in the fourth issue), and especially to play with various cut-outs.¹⁹

One of them, located on the inside of the back cover (fig. 4), concludes issue no. 2-3 (March 1943): a cut-out shaped like a female mannequin covered with a fine wire grid, like a birdcage. The caption suggests the light touching supposedly favorable to fantasy, in a game for two or for one. In the same issue, there is a complicated game by Frederick J. Kiesler (fig. 5), which relativizes the notion of point of view: we are invited to rotate cardboard ellipses around an eyelet inserted in the page in a process which reveals a portrait of André Breton, whose signature appears and disappears on the ellipse above the image of his poem-object titled *1713*.

¹⁸ The collaboration is announced on page 69 of issue 1 for the cover of issue 2. After that, according to information provided by Charles Duits, Breton and Chagall no longer spoke to each other: "Je lui ai demandé de faire la couverture de *Triple V*. . . Mais, un Christ, non! Il n'a rien trouvé de mieux que de planter un Christ au beau milieu de son dessin. Alors, vous comprenez, cher ami. . . ." 'I asked him to make the cover for *VVV*. . . . But not Christ! He couldn't think of anything better than putting Christ right in the middle of his design. . . . So, you understand, my friend. . . .' (Breton qtd. in Duits 86; ellipses in source).

¹⁹ For further readings of the transgressions and "tactile" qualities of the journal *VVV*, see Erin McClenathan, "Displaced Maneuvers: Tactile Surrealism in *VVV*'s Handheld Cinema" and Andrea Gremels, "El único punto de resistencia: Cultural, Linguistic and Medial Transgressions in the Surrealist Journal *VVV*."

Twin-Touch-Test

By Kiesler

Place your hands on top of either side of the wire screen; run both hands simultaneously gently down, fingers and palms remaining in close contact.



Photo: Thomas Bourchard

Repeat
and
Repeat
until you
can answer
the following
question:

*Is it an
unusual
feeling
of
touch?*

If so,
can you write
an analysis of
your experience
in no more than
one hundred
words.
Give also your
explanation of
the phenomenon.

Five Prizes

*will be given for the best
solutions:
each one a full year's
subscription of VVV*

- If you have not a large sheet of chicken wire approximately two by two feet—you can use for the test the back cover of this copy.
- Put the magazine flat on a table, lift back-cover into vertical position, join hands on both sides of wire-screen, fingertips touching each other and slide gently along screen towards you.
- Repeat experiment ad libitum.
- This also applies to a team of two persons:
 - a) Put magazine flat on table
 - b) lift back-cover vertically
 - c) both persons stand or sit next to each other
 - d) the one at the left holds the bulk of magazine tightly down on the table
 - e) the person to the right grips the edge of the cover firmly
 - d) the two remaining hands now join across the wire-screen, fingertips touching
 - e) proceed as indicated above

CUT OFF

this coupon and mail it with your address to:
Room 3308, 10 East 40th Street, New York City

**before July First
1943**

YOUR NAME

ADDRESS

Figure 4: Frederick J. Kiesler, "Twin-Touch-Test." Back cover of VVV, no. 2-3, Mar. 1943. © 2022 Austrian Frederick and Lillian Kiesler Private Foundation, Vienna.

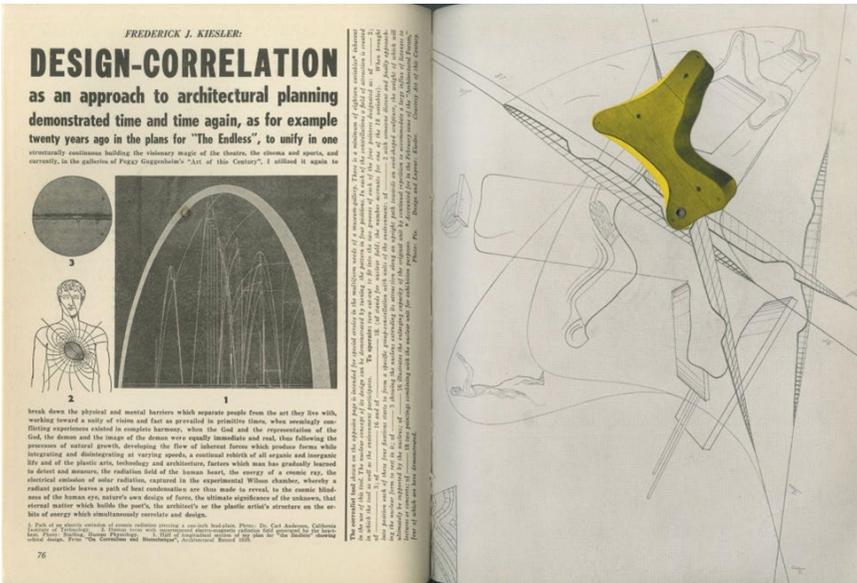


Figure 5: Frederick J. Kiesler, “Design-Correlation.” VVV, no. 2-3, Mar. 1943, pp. 78-9. © 2022 Austrian Frederick and Lillian Kiesler Private Foundation, Vienna.

Another cut-out by Marcel Duchamp appears in issue 4 (February 1944). With criticism generally focused on seriousness, Marcel Duchamp’s penchant for playful manipulation has been overlooked. Yet what is *Boîte verte* (1934) — the scribbled notes on scraps of translucent tracing paper are reproduced thematically (!), with Duchamp’s ironic endorsement, in *Marchand du sel* — what is *Boîte verte* but a cardboard box containing a chaotic collection of scraps of paper that we can and want to handle, like Virgilian spells for our times, and which produce different playful possibilities? Imagine the terror of today’s collectors and librarians faced with all these possible outcomes. In VVV, Duchamp brings back in photographic form the object rejected by *Vogue* magazine — this time on two superimposed pages, one of which is a cutout. This had been his response to a contest in which *Vogue* had asked artists for the best portrayal of George Washington for a future cover. In *Genre Allegory*, we see bloody bandages reproduced on a page and highlighted by shiny stars, so that the fabric of the object is both that of the banner symbolizing the 48-state Union and the bandages on the war wounds that created the Union, while on the preceding page, whose intense blue partially covers it, the profile of the president-general is shown in silhouette *at the same time* as a map of the USA, in a vague approximation well-suited to the paranoid-critical gaze. These bands of fabric evoke bloody bandages from the battlefield, and to the extent that we cannot look at Washington without identifying him with his country (an idea reinforced as we handle the deep blue glazed paper), and that we realize through

the very same handling of the object that Independence was built upon war (the one waged against the British, but also the one that pitted the South against the North, and including the guerillas buried so deep in memory that they only surface reluctantly for having led to the decimation of the Native Americans) — to exactly that extent, wars are always revolting. My interpretation is further supported by Matta's canvas reproduced contiguously on the opposite page — *Prince of the Blood* (1943). At the same time and in the same glance: a blood prince,²⁰ and a prince of slaughter. The antimilitarism of the surrealist milieu is virulently manifest, with no concern for pleasing the majority in these years of "holy war" against Nazism, and no toleration of willful forgetting of the sacrificial wars upon which the American nation was founded. Never will war be waged with a clear conscience, not even against Nazism.

One last thought on this handling and touching, and on the difference between Georges Bataille's journal *Documents* and this surrealist journal of Bretonian inspiration. In *Documents*, the images accompanying articles are demonstrative and intellectualist, showing, to take a well-known example, an enlarged human big toe filling a page so as to demonstrate excess as a value. By contrast, illustrations in *VVV*, persuasive and playful, have the stamp of Breton and Duchamp upon them, and use "touch" to evoke both desire and disgust.

VVV: The Voices of Poetry

The textual dimension cannot be ignored. The tone is obsessive. The presence of surrealist poetry is strongly felt in these pages; just consider Breton's long poem *Les États Généraux!* From a textual perspective, perhaps the journal *Tropiques* is another model for *VVV*. *Tropiques* is much more spartan than *VVV*; it has no images and has the horrid shape of an exercise book. Still worse, there are noticeable vagaries in the technical composition; for example the titles are followed by a period, and there are all sorts of minor typographical and technical flaws. But this is a publication that makes sense through its texts. We can read the editorial mission in the first issue: "Terre muette et stérile. C'est de la nôtre que je parle. Et mon ouïe mesure par la Caraïbe l'effrayant silence de l'Homme" 'Mute, sterile land. I'm speaking of our land. And my ear measures against the Caribbean the frightening silence of Man.' ("Présentation" 5)

In unison with the Bretonian "peu de réalité" 'paucity of reality,' Césaire's text captures in a single sentence all the revolt contained in the silence of the

²⁰ In the vocabulary of royalty, "Blood Prince" designates a prince who holds a place in the order of succession to the crown. For further readings of *VVV*'s critique on colonialism including the example of Matta's "Blood Prince", see Geis 1–12.

oppressed.²¹ I need not recall that *View* publishes a number of great poets and writers of this era (Nicolas Guillen, Wallace Stevens, Paul Bowles, William Carlos Williams, and René Char just after the war), as well as the great “figures” (Roger Caillois, Jean-Paul Sartre) — but not Aimé Césaire. Not through willful exclusion, but simply because the Americans with whom Césaire corresponds are Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Claude McKay, and not Charles-Henri Ford.²²

What are those active in *VVV* seeking to represent in the maze of their “inscape,” pushing the complicated machinery of their intentions forward in the construction of their vision? The pages of *VVV* signpost, sometimes lyrically and sometimes allusively, the points of magnetic attraction in the history of surrealist thought, already firmly established by then.

First, their interest in the indigenous populations of the Americas and in American science fiction signals their awareness that a way of thinking is developing in other places.

Then, an exaltation of love, of revolt, of play, themes from the 1920s and 1930s which the surrealists brought with them and express in a tone different from that of the *View*.

Finally, the pages of *VVV* act as an anchor for a thinking in process. First, the surrealists are seeking to *represent* their own collective action, staging what sometimes looks like a self-celebration; and second, through their research into the new myth (relating to the “Grands Transparents”), they push the use of signifiers to a point where the *brouillage* (interference) discussed by Michael Riffaterre reaches a saturation point.

Primitivism mixed with a *poetic* science fiction: we should highlight the presence of ethnologists in *VVV* calling attention to Indian and Oceanic populations.²³ However fleeting their contributions, it is significant that renowned

²¹ We know that by chance Breton read the first issue of the journal, which had just come out in April 1941, as he passed through Fort-de-France (he recounts the story in *Hémisphères* 2-3, winter 1943-44, under the title “Un Grand poète noir” (“A Great Black Poet”). From that moment on, according to Césaire, having been read by Breton, *Tropiques* seems a little different: “Breton nous a apporté la hardiesse” ‘Breton brought us boldness’ (Leiner vi). In addition, since communications were easier between Martinique and New York than between New York and Occupied Europe, Aimé Césaire, before coming to New York himself in 1945, was able to send Breton important poems that were immediately published in *VVV*.

²² Claude McKay, author of the novel *Banjo* (1936).

²³ In addition to Max Ernst’s and Breton’s personal interest at this time in the treasures of Julius Carlebach in New York, as well as Breton’s interest in Hopi country, where he travels in 1944 and keeps a journal, we should remember the earlier exhibition of American Indian art (along with paintings by Yves Tanguy) at the surrealist gallery on rue Jacques-Callot in June 1927. Breton’s appreciation for Oceanic art also dates from this earlier period: the exhibition at the same gallery in 1926 of “Objets des îles” and paintings by Man Ray is especially significant.

ethnologists Claude Lévi-Strauss²⁴ and Alfred Métraux²⁵ were called upon to remind readers that human “nature” cannot afford to forget its roots. In the second issue, Alfred Métraux offers a brief article on two tapa images from Easter Island, taken from his book *Easter Island*, published shortly thereafter. In the last issue, a text by Robert Allerton Parker²⁶ mentions the drawings and works of Arthur Bernard Deacon, an English ethnologist who died while doing that same field research in the New Hebrides.

By reference to Robert Allerton Parker, who writes for the general public, the surrealists draw attention on at least two occasions to the great poets of science fiction. Parker discusses H. P. Lovecraft and Clark Ashton Smith in “Such Pulp as Dreams Are Made on” (*VVV*, no. 2-3)²⁷ and in “Explorers of the Pluriverse,” a text from the catalogue of the *First Papers of Surrealism* exhibition (which is linked to the publication of *VVV* in so many ways and which opens four months later in October 1942). Parker returns to the work of Benjamin Paul Blood (1832-1919) and Charles Hoy Fort (who died in 1932), whom he contextualizes in the tradition of Poe and Melville. His highlighting of the poetic quality of their writing and the singularity of their fate signals a reversal in surrealist taste which usually rejects utopian writers in favor of *le merveilleux*. Even though the surrealists might well be rediscovering their predilection of twenty years earlier for popular novelists, this is nonetheless a significant turnabout in “surrealist” values.

Despite the lyrical exaltation of love by Denis de Rougemont, author of *L'amour et l'Occident (Love in the Western World)*, a close friend of Breton and like him an émigré, there are few examples in *VVV* of lyrical prose. Now is more the hour of sarcasm. Revolt²⁸ and play, on the other hand, are presented as fundamentally

²⁴ Claude Lévi-Strauss met Breton on the boat that took them from Marseille to Fort-de-France (see *Tristes Tropiques* 22), and has the same admiration as the New York group for the beautiful exhibition rooms of the Museum of Natural History, and for the pieces held by dealers in so-called primitive art (see his article in *La gazette des beaux-arts*, New York, Sept. 1943).

Aside from the obituary for Malinowsky, the only article by Claude Lévi-Strauss in the first issue refers to one of his first moments of Brazilian fieldwork and focuses on the designs of the ritual face paint worn by the Kaduveo Indians.

²⁵ Alfred Métraux was then working at the Smithsonian in Washington.

²⁶ Robert Allerton Parker, sociologist and biographer, published on various messianic groups: in 1935, a book on the Oneida community, *A Yankee Saint*; in 1937, “an anthropological study” of the Father Divine movement, titled *The Incredible Messiah*. He also translated Céline into English.

²⁷ Note the playfully significant allusion to Prospero’s well-known utterance “We are such things as dreams are made on” in Shakespeare, *The Tempest* (4.1.155-6).

²⁸ Anecdotally we might reread Charles Duits, the most feverish and the most talented of witnesses, in *André Breton a-t-il dit passe*: “[Breton] était à mes yeux l’avatar de la Révolte.

connected: the joint presence of Leonora Carrington and Aimé Césaire is emblematic. The revolt of the Black man joins that of the poet and artist refusing plain reality. As for Breton, the themes of revolt and play appear frequently, and as I have shown above, he evokes Nazi soldiers occupying French territory in the most vulgar terms.

The insight Césaire found in the writings of Leo Frobenius, the famous German scholar, and his reading of the “primitive” worlds is that “a culture is born not when man seizes, but when man is seized. He is seized by the world and, in turn, he acts the world, he mimes the world. . . . He is seized, in other words, he is *possessed* exactly as in voodoo” (Leiner xvii). Though distant in so many ways, I would like to connect these sentences to an insight central to the thought of Nietzsche, and his meditations on the fragment from Heraclitus: “[A]s children and artists play, so plays the ever-living fire” (62). For Nietzsche, to imagine the play of the World does not involve imagining a world without players: on the contrary, play must be sought in the player himself. Human thought *is* dance and play, a convulsive revolt against the grip of history. Through this central insight, Césaire’s thinking, *as well as* Leonora Carrington’s revolt, *as well as* the surrealism of Breton and Max Ernst and a few others, are all connected *at this level of philosophical conception*.

From here we might go further into philosophical thought on “play.” This positive view of play found in the surrealism of Aimé Césaire as well as Breton is the opposite of the way it is conceived in the philosophical writing of Jean-Paul Sartre. We should note that in *L’imaginaire* and *L’être et le néant*, published respectively in 1939 and 1943 in France, Sartre uses play in a metaphorical sense that devalues it. The café waiter “is playing at *being* a waiter” (*Being* 102). The system of thought proposed by Sartre is a clear movement away from the surrealist creed; it refutes the idea of play as a positive exercise of human consciousness, and relegates the imagination to impoverished forms of consciousness-of.²⁹

Not surprisingly, Leonora Carrington contributes a narrative for each issue of *VVV*, and while in Mexico in 1943 she sends the narrative of her descent into the hell of insanity, “Down Below,” a text deeply admired by Henri Michaux.³⁰ We

Mais il ne laissait pas au plâtre le temps de prendre. Et je découvrais que la Révolte est une idole elle aussi, une figure de plâtre, une convention, que la révolte véritable est contestation permanente de toutes les images publiques, y compris celle de la révolte” ‘Breton was in my eyes the avatar of Revolt. But he wouldn’t let the plaster set. And I was learning that Revolt is also an idol, a figure in plaster, a convention, and that true revolt is a permanent contestation of all public images, including the image of revolt’ (65).

²⁹ For further discussion of Sartre’s approach to play and its relation to surrealist play, see Timothy Mathews, “Jeu du langage, imaginaires du jeu” and “Dreams, Schemes and Wordplay.”

³⁰ As he often told Henri Parisot and me.

know the joyous ferocity with which she refuses the world as it is. One text from *Grand midi* (High Noon) by Césaire, whose work is also published in each issue, deserves special reading: “Conquête de l’aube” (Conquest of Dawn), in *VVV*, issue 1:

Mon enfance

*belle selon les masques et les sagaies et les pygargues et les tornades et les lunes
frénétiques*

plonge loin des toussaints aux froides entournaures.

My childhood

*beautiful through masks and assegais and ernes and tornadoes and frenetic
moons*

*dives deep beyond the all saints with their frigid, dreary vestments (41)*³¹

Or in issue no. 4, “Batouque”:³²

soleil, aux gorges!

*noir hurleur, noir boucher, noir corsaire batouque déployé d’épices et de
mouches*

Endormi troupeau de cavales sous la touffe de bambous

saigne, saigne troupeau de carambas.

sun, go for their throats!

black howler black butcher black corsair batouque bedecked with spices
and flies

³¹ Editor’s note: Césaire shortened this poem considerably in later versions; it seems that the quoted lines do not appear in any published translation. Anny Curtius, Marie Culpepper, Emily Wieder, and Michel Laronde provided helpful advice regarding this translation.

³² Gremels also stresses the connection between Breton and Césaire in *VVV* and includes a reading of “Batouque” (33–37).

Sleepy herd of mares beneath the bamboo thicket

bleed bleed herd of carambas (26; 153)

We should also look again at the two pages of poems and drawings by André Masson, "L'homme emblématique" (The Emblematic Man) in *VVV*, no. 1; and remember André Breton's allusion to Rimbaud in his talk at Yale, his call to "le génie de la jeunesse" 'the genius of youth' which can do no other but be conjoined with revolt ("Situation du surréalisme" 46; "Situation of surrealism" 69).

The meaning of surrealist play, then, is to be found in its common root with revolt. Play is especially evident in issue 2-3 (March 1943) during the darkest period of the war, with Frederick Kiesler's handleable object mentioned earlier, and with the account of Peggy Guggenheim's exhibition, *Art of This Century*. If the rules of the game are complicated, even better! As we have seen, the cover of this same issue suggests play through sensation and the illusion of sensation. The deck of cards invented by several artists together in Marseilles during the agonizing winter of 1940-41 is also reproduced in this issue: a testimony to the *power of defiance*, of *contempt* for this, the time of defeat, and to hope against all the odds (Breton's words).³³ Instead of the worn out symbols on cards let us find different places to fascinate us: the inventiveness of man's thought (having much in common with different forms of play) is far from over.

VVV Shows Its Colors

Surrealist thought has always believed it should present itself as going forward, and the journal's layout is particularly well suited to displaying this constant element in the establishment of surrealism. This self-representation includes the place where its discourse is conceived. Painting also often conforms to these strategies, but the viewer's gaze can avoid connecting with it if led along by style or directed by market pressures. I will therefore focus on textual rather than visual examples, and point out in passing that surrealist painting is quickly exhibited and "understood" in New York during the war years.³⁴

³³ "La puissance de défi, de mépris et aussi d'espoir envers et contre tout" "The power of defiance, of contempt, and also of hope against all odds" ("Jeu de Marseille" 89).

³⁴ A chronology, described in a letter signed by Matta: Matta and Yves Tanguy, accompanied by Kay Sage, leave for New York in October 1939 at the invitation of Marcel Duchamp. They are favorably received, as Julien Levy recollects in his memoirs. In April 1940, Levy exhibits Matta as well as Tchelitchev and Walt Disney. Kay Sage eagerly receives a visit from David Hare and his wife Suzie, as well as Paalen and Buñuel, at her apartment in the Village (*Matta* 268). In the same letter, Matta declares having met that winter (1940), through David Hare, the group of American artists called "1054," which included Lee Kamrowski, Robert Motherwell, Pollock, Baziotés, and of course Gorky. The following winter (1940-41), another

Self-representation is especially evident in the text of Breton's speech to the students of Yale (issue 2-3, 1943). In Breton's eyes surrealism *continually recapitulates the totality of its own past*; and in the process of presenting itself, it theorizes the present. A structural necessity, perhaps? For history is lived and takes shape before our eyes, and in an eloquent prosopopoeia often used for rhetorical effect, surrealism speaks in Breton's own voice:

[C'est dans *Au*] *Château d'Argol* de Julien Gracq où, sans doute pour la première fois, le surréalisme se retourne librement sur lui-même pour se confronter avec les grandes expériences sensibles du passé et évaluer, tant sous l'angle de l'émotion que sous celui de la clairvoyance, ce qu'a été l'étendue de sa conquête.

[It is *Au*] *Château d'Argol* of Julien Gracq, in which surrealism returns freely upon itself to confront the great feeling-experiences of the past and to evaluate, as much from the viewpoint of emotion as from that of clairvoyance, the extent of its conquest. ("Situation du surréalisme" 45; "Situation of Surrealism" 67)

And Breton goes on to credit himself for making possible the "triomphe mondial, incontestable, de l'art d'imagination et de création sur l'art d'imitation, triomphe que consacre l'éclat sans précédent de la dernière exposition internationale du surréalisme à Paris" 'incontestable world triumph consecrated

person with introductions to make appears on the scene. At the New School of Social Research, Gordon Onslow-Ford organized a series of lectures, directed by Meyer Schapiro, and titled *Surrealist Painting: an Adventure into Human Consciousness*, where he developed his own theories and those of Matta, and spoke of their conversations together during the summer of 1939 at the Château de Chemillieu (Ain), which Gertrude Stein rented, and where the Bretons, Kay Sage and Yves Tanguy, Gordon Onslow Ford, Matta, as well as Marcel Jean and the Catalan painter Esteban Francès would all meet.

- March 1942: An exhibition at the Pierre Matisse Gallery: *Artists in Exile* (including works by Matta)

- June 1942: first issue of *VVV*

- 14 October 1942: the opening of the exhibition *First Papers of Surrealism*.

- 26 October 1942: The opening of the rooms dedicated to *Art of this Century* at Peggy Guggenheim. Breton's essay "Genèse et perspectives artistiques du surréalisme" ("Genesis and Perspective of Surrealism") appears in the catalogue.

- 1943: Exhibition *War and the Artists*, Pierre Matisse Gallery

- 1944: Sidney Janis: *Abstract and Surrealist Art in America*, an exhibition which travels all around the United States, the catalogue turning into a report in book form.

- 1944: *Art in Progress*, MOMA.

by the unprecedented brilliance of the last international exhibition of surrealism in Paris' (45; 67).

Breton anchors his descriptive discourse in a sociological view of world history, while at the same time adopting a psychological perspective which questions the very meaning of history, both individual and collective (emphasizing the importance of Freud).

The speech is already totalizing in ambition, but Breton takes a step further still onto the stage of the mind. Ultimately representational strategies are integral to the production of surrealist assertions: Breton systematically uses the future tense ("The twentieth century will appear in the future . . ."), and even affirms (without humor) that he, Breton, predicted no less than the date of the Second World War: "Cette phrase de ma 'Lettre aux voyantes' de 1925, qu'on trouvera dans la réédition de 1929 du *Manifeste du surréalisme*: 'Il y a des gens qui prétendent que la guerre leur a appris quelque chose; ils sont tout de même moins avancés que moi, qui sais ce que me réserve l'année 1939'" 'this sentence from my 'lettres aux Voyantes' of 1925 which can be found in the 1929 re-edition of the 'Manifesto of Surrealism': 'There are people who pretend that the war has taught them something; they are all the same less well off than I who know what the year 1939 has reserved for me' ("Situation du surréalisme" 49; "Situation of Surrealism" 75). So many deictics!

"Observez qu'alors. . . ." 'Note that [at that time]. . . .' (46; 69)

"[I] est assez clair à *distance* que. . . ." 'it is quite clear *from a distance* that' (47; 70; italics mine)

"Je ne crains pas de dire. . . ." 'I do not hesitate to say. . . .' (46; 69)

Breton stages his own discourse. Let's not forget that all the collaborators on the journal were asked to be clear about the impact of their work (see the letter from David Hare quoted above), and it is easy to understand why they would see and resolutely emphasize the long shadow cast by the impact of their work.

So now we have a *resemantization* of commonplace thoughts, and an *analogic over-semantization* characteristic of riddles; texts in the journal now begin to crystalize, especially the famous "myth" of the *Grands Transparents* (The Great Transparent Ones or "Great Invisibles").

Faced with the weight of the present, the task is to draw the shape of the future. A flight from reality, then? Certainly not, but rather to construct a *template* and a support for a different society. In what manner? Telling stories? Certainly not that either; this myth has nothing to do with science fiction, for *it has no narrative form*. Breton is proposing a *metaphor* for the future, a mold in which to pour the future. Which is metaphorized by the im-perceptible and omnipresent shape of the *Grands Transparents*, which designates the intentionality of any perception. Located somewhere between *our* I and *their* energies, the "myth" of the *Grands Transparents* describes the shape of things as indefinitely modifiable. Marcel Duchamp dreams

that “n’importe quelle forme est la perspective d’une autre forme selon certain *point de fuite* et certaine *distance*” ‘any form is the perspective of another form according to a certain *vanishing point* and a certain *distance*’ (*Marchand du sel* 63; “Green Box” 45). In 1938, Matta dreams that “une morphologie psychologique serait le graphique des idées. Elle devrait être conçue avant que les images optiques nous donnent une forme des idées” ‘a psychological morphology would be the graphics of ideas. It would have to be conceived before the optical images give us a form of the ideas; (*Entretiens morphologiques* 70; 218).³⁵ On the basis of recent theories on matter as energy, Matta and Duchamp construct their reveries, whereas Breton, ultimately, returns to the Diderot of the *Addendum to the Letter on the Blind*.³⁶

Breton’s analogy is a simple one: the situation of mankind is to find signs of the unknown in the transparency of the world, to imagine beings different from himself and against whom he might even have to defend himself, for Diderot is concerned with people blind at birth. A person blind at birth is surrounded by shadow, and the rest are surrounded by transparent air. Just as shadow is deceptive because it is never homogenous, the air might conceal beings who. . . . The transparency of air is perhaps simply the consequence of air itself being

³⁵ Translation by Gordon Onslow-Ford in *Entretiens morphologiques*.

³⁶ Breton refers to Diderot in two different texts, one of them private and dating from 1942, but recently published in the book produced by Matta, *Entretiens morphologiques* (it is a note sent to Matta by Breton during the first half of that year), and the other in “Genèse et perspective artistiques du surréalisme,” the text which Breton wrote for *Art of this Century*, the catalogue by Peggy Guggenheim (October 1942). See above.

From the letter of 1942:

“Si tous les corps ne sont pas autant de miroirs, c’est par quelque défaut dans leur contexture, qui éteint la réflexion de l’air. . . . C’est apparemment le fond de la toile, l’épaisseur de la couleur et la manière de l’employer qui introduit dans la réflexion de l’air une variété correspondant à celle des formes” ‘Bodies aren’t all mirrors because of the fabric of their context, which eclipses the reflections of the air. . . . The background of the picture, the thickness of the colors and their application introduce variety into the reflections which corresponds to the variety of forms.’ (Letter 129)

And in “Genèse et perspective artistiques du surréalisme”:

“Et qu’est-ce à votre avis que des yeux ?” lui dit M de... ‘C’est, lui répondit l’aveugle, un organe sur lequel l’air fait l’effet d’un bâton sur ma main. . . . Cela est si vrai, continua-t-il, que quand je place ma main entre vos yeux et un objet, ma main vous est présente, mais l’objet vous est absent. La même chose m’arrive quand je cherche une chose avec mon bâton, et que j’en rencontre une autre” “And in your opinion,” M. de... asked him, “what are eyes?” “They are an organ,” the blind man replied, “on which air produces the same effect that my staff produces on my hand. . . . This is so true that when I place my hand between your eyes and an object, my hand is present to your sight, but the object is absent from it. The same thing happens to me when I seek one object with my staff and instead I find another.”] (“Genèse” 51; “Genesis” 13)

reflected, for the world could only be seen isotropically in an imaginary “absolute” vision. For the blind as well as the sighted, objects produce unavoidable accidents on a personal journey, open to all the fluences of their respective fields. Ultimately, Breton, Matta, and Duchamp taken together, rather than calling for a reverie on the notion of *passage*, are calling for a sort of *generalized anamorphosis*. For if we bring in the twin notions of time and subjectivity, at that point forms captured by looking can be a threshold of forms that are *other*.

This distrust of sight runs parallel to the value given to heuristic imagination. The unknown is presented as accessible to the hypothetical strength of the mind.³⁷ Two characters stand on this stage of a theater of ideas: man and world. They are separated by the transparency of the air, charged with any and every possibility, and all danger.

So in the end, what is at stake in this performance? Our strength (perhaps defensive strength) lies in our will to intellectual conquest. The intellectual offering of the text of “Les Grands Transparents” is the one the Church Fathers call the *libido sciendi*. When we know *everything* of the world around us and our sight has encompassed all things, rather than heeding disgust, what remains is to address the unconscious root of attraction and repulsion alike: the *libido*. The transparency of the air beckons. A field of speculation is *offered to us as a gift*. A failure to imagine “les Grands Transparents” would be *intolerable*.

In such a way the conquest of the unknown brings clarity to the *libido*.

And here the work of the signifier intervenes: “les Transparents” are parents in a trance: “la métaphore d’une puissance qui, tout en pouvant prendre des aspects cosmiques ou ésotériques, n’est autre que celle de l’inconscient lui-même dans ses potentialités de desire” ‘the metaphor of a force which, for all its cosmic or esoteric dimensions, is in fact the force of the unconscious itself and the potential of desire’ (40). They are also parents whose transparency is the emblem of the unconscious character of fantasy.³⁸

But still to consider is the hypersemantized syntagm “Grands Transparents” as it transforms into a rebus (much like a dream in Freud³⁹). Looking at the

³⁷ It has not been noted that Georges Bataille says exactly the same thing as Breton in the text Bataille published in the 1947 exhibition catalogue titled “L’absence de mythe” (“The Absence of Myth”). In this absence suggested by Bataille, “la pâle transparence de la possibilité est en un sens parfaite” ‘in one sense the pale transparency of possibility is perfect’ (65; 48) The word transparent is the same, but for Bataille, it is an abstract noun, whereas Breton stages the idea by transforming it into the conditions of a relation: a dramatization of ideas, and an affinity for theater.

³⁸ See Guy Rosolato, “Les Grands Transparents: de la scène originaire au mythe de création.”

³⁹ The dream as rebus was carefully noted by Breton in the notebook in which he took notes on the first translation into French of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, titled *La science des rêves*. He copied the sentence: “Le rêve est un rébus, nos prédécesseurs ont commis la faute de

catalogue *First Papers of Surrealism*, readers are led to ponder on myth by the piece titled “De la survivance de certains mythes et de quelques autres mythes en croissance ou en formation” (“On the Survival of Certain Myths and on Some Other Myths in Growth or Formation”) “staged” by André Breton. The series culminates with the three myths of Rimbaud, the *Übermensch*, and the *Grands Transparents*: the *Grand Transparent* appears here in an image taken from Michel Meier’s book,⁴⁰ a giant whose transparent belly carries the young Orpheus. The images are included, it seems, to give shape to a word, or conversely to spark a key word (i.e., the syntagm *Grand Transparent*). Once again we see the notion of a *genealogical foundation* at work.

Like the dream for Freud, the “myth” of the *Grands Transparents* is a rebus for Breton. But myth is not taking any narrative form.⁴¹ The text contains no narrative syntagm or any narrative syntax. It begins and concludes in a moment of astonishment, as when an invisible presence appears to us in a dream, and as word play turns into image.

VVV announces its intentions, which include the political; it takes shape and is handled; it sings to the sounds of lyrical poetry; it shows itself and proves itself. Never before, perhaps, has the project of fashioning the review as a surrealist object been so fully brought to fruition. Looking at previous reviews, perhaps that genealogy will one day be brought back into light. That would be another journey.

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l’interpréter en tant que dessin, c’est pourquoi il leur a paru absurde et sans valeur” “The dream is a rebus, our predecessors . . . made the mistake of judging the rebus as if it were a pictorial composition, which is why it seemed to them to be absurd and without value” (“Cahier” 12).

⁴⁰ As Masao Suzuki has pointed out.

⁴¹ In a brilliant 1991 study, Romy Golan underscores the narrative dimension of Breton’s thought, particularly in the myth of the *Grands transparents*, which she contrasts with the turn toward the formal dimension (the image) favored by the abstract expressionists (353). For my part, I insist on the dual function of myth for the surrealists: form as well articulation through language. For Breton, myth is a rebus.

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