

Automatism and Psychoanalysis in the Pages of the *London Bulletin* (1938-40):

From Herbert Read to Humphrey Jennings

Caterina Caputo

“[The organic] is the most original and most vital principle of poetic creation;

and the distinction of modern poetry is to have recovered this principle.”

(Read, *Form in Modern Poetry* 11)

Introduction

The first issue of the journal *London Bulletin* (fig. 1) was published in 1938 and quickly became the voice of surrealist artists in England, offering them a suitable platform for sharing their artistic experimentations. An editorial statement explained the aim of the project: “It is proposed to issue a monthly publication which will include in addition to the catalogue of the current exhibition essays, poems, illustrations, notes and criticism on the painters and sculptors presented by the London Gallery. . . Also, it will publish news concerning artists, and social, political and ethical sidelights” (“London Gallery New Management”).¹

The *London Bulletin* was published between 1938 and 1940,² in the crucial months that preceded the outbreak of the Second World War, when England had become a place of refuge for many artists and intellectuals who fled from

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² For more information on the *London Bulletin*, particularly in regard to the role played by Mesens and Penrose as editors of the magazine, see Caputo, *Shaping Surrealism in Britain* 287-311.

totalitarian regimes. Founded by Belgian surrealist artist E.L.T. Mesens, together with English painter and collector Roland Penrose, the journal was meant to complement the activities of the London Gallery, which the two colleagues had purchased at the end of 1937 with the intention of spreading surrealist artworks across the Channel.³ A total of twenty numbers was published between April 1938 and June 1939, a period which coincided with the activities of the London Gallery while it was located on Cork Street; the last issue, instead, went to press in June 1940, a year after the gallery was forced to close down because of the war.⁴

The bulletin, however, was never just a mere publicity tool for the gallery, but had the ambition to become an independent instrument with a cultural scope, as the change of its title from *London Gallery Bulletin* to the more general *London Bulletin* shows. The journal's main goal was to promote French and continental surrealism, as well as the young British cohort that established itself in 1936 following the *International Surrealist Exhibition* of London.⁵ In more general terms, the bulletin ended by becoming a reference platform for the avant-gardes in England, following the purpose of other previous British modernist publications, such as *Axis: A Quarterly Review of Contemporary "Abstract" Painting and Sculpture* (1935-1937), which aimed to renew the British cultural scene.⁶ Peter Brooker and Andrew Thacker pointed out that editors and sponsors of modernist journals shared an ambition in cultural and social renewal; "they felt . . . that they would make a difference; that a 'fight for purely aesthetic motives' or for 'a new sort of literature' [or art] was worth the struggle, the quarrels" (1). Furthermore, starting a magazine in which to publish theoretical texts, articles, and artworks enabled avant-garde movements' reflections to reach a wider audience, so much so that the magazine itself functioned as a form of manifesto (2). Thus considered, the *London Bulletin*, as a whole, may be read as a sort of avant-gardist manifesto and, as a consequence, a means for sharing and establishing a new artistic canon: it was a collective public manifestation around which surrealism in Britain organized itself from 1938 to 1940.

³ The London Gallery was a pre-existing display space on Cork Street. Founded in October 1936 by Noël Norton and her cousin Marguerita Strettell, the gallery was initially dedicated to modernist art and the international avant-garde. In 1937 it was acquired by Mesens and Penrose.

⁴ The bombing of London caused severe damage to the Cork Street building; thus, the gallery resumed its activity in Brook Street from 1946 to 1950 when it closed for good.

⁵ The *International Surrealist Exhibition* was the first of its kind organised by the surrealists in London. The aim was to bring the works of art and the true "spirit" of the movement to Britain. Held at the New Burlington Galleries, the exhibition was accompanied by lectures given by surrealist artists themselves.

⁶ For this aspect, see Caputo, *Shaping Surrealism in Britain*.

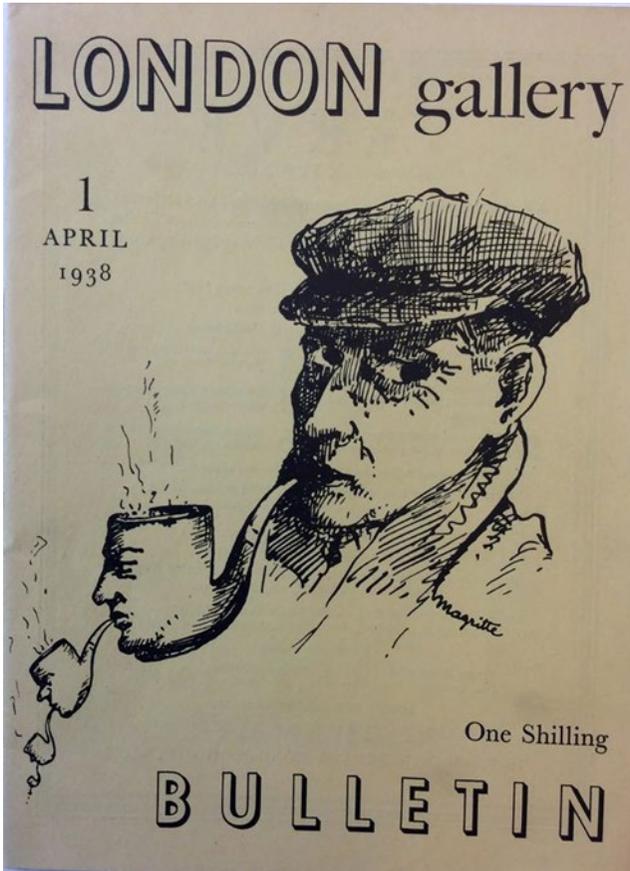


Figure 1: Cover of *London Bulletin*, no. 1, 1938. © René Magritte by SIAE 2022.
Author's personal collection.

This article aims to further explore and assess the *London Bulletin's* scope and role in England. My argument is that the journal shaped the identity of British surrealism, which arose at the crossroads between British modernism, continental surrealists' experimentations, and psychoanalytic theories of the unconscious that had spread throughout Great Britain from the beginning of the century. By analysing two major figures of British surrealism, Herbert Read and Humphrey Jennings, as well as the seminal surrealist notion of automatism, this study intends to shed new light on how the British group elaborated its peculiar response to the francophone surrealist canon, developing an alternative aesthetic both to the formalist ideas — which proliferated in the United Kingdom since the 1910s and

were still strongly rooted in British art criticism of the period⁷— and modernist trends characterising some British experimentations of the interwar years, mostly based on literary tendencies and abstractions (see Charles Harrison 168-203).

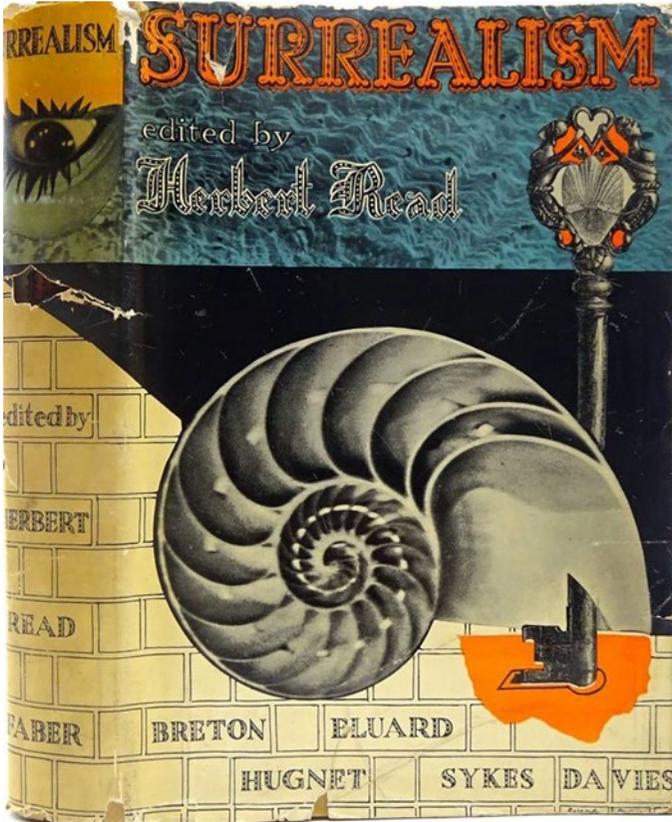


Figure 2: Cover of *Surrealism*. Edited by Herbert Read, 1936. Author's personal collection.

Premise: Herbert Read and Freudian Theory

Through the publication of articles, columns, and translations of theoretical texts, together with a rich array of images, the *London Bulletin* offered its readers a wide

⁷ British formalism was mostly based on the Bloomsbury group critics' theories of aesthetics. In 1914, in the book *Art*, Clive Bell coined the term "significant form," and explained: "lines and colours combined in a particular way, certain forms and relations of forms, stir our aesthetic emotions. These relations and combinations of lines and colours, these aesthetically moving forms, I call 'Significant form'; and 'Significant form' is the one quality common to all works of visual art" (8).

selection of surrealist poetry, writing, and artwork, providing an impetus for debates on art and politics, such as the artists' role in modern society or the dichotomy between abstraction and figuration in paintings and sculptures. The editorial published in the sixth issue further specified the journal's scope:

Since its appearance in April of this year *London Bulletin* has assumed the position of the only *avant garde* publication in this country concerned with contemporary poetry and art. Although its first number was practically a monograph, by various hands, concentrated on the work of the surrealist René Magritte, it has rapidly extended its range, reflecting besides exhibitions of painting other activities of living interest in its pages. (Editorial Statement)

As for their French forerunners, the issues on social activism, on the one hand, and themes such as the unconscious and the mechanisms linked to psychic automatism applied to art, on the other, were at the core of the editorial plan.⁸ However, when the first issue of the *London Bulletin* appeared in April 1938, such themes were not entirely new to Anglo-Saxon readers, who had become familiar with the movement's theories thanks to *Surrealism* (fig. 2).

Edited in 1936 by art critic Herbert Read on the occasion of the *International Surrealist Exhibition* of London, the book *Surrealism* featured on the cover the logarithmic spirals of the *Nautilus pompilius* shell (fig. 3) taken from Scottish mathematical biologist D'Arcy Wentworth Thompson's *On Growth and Form* (1917), a book that strongly fascinated artists at that time, as it visually traced the signs of both the nature of the universe and the definition of beauty. Such illustration was in line with Read's recent interest in biology and organic forms applied to the poetic act of creation, as discussed in his 1932 essay *Form in Modern Poetry*, in which a work of art is considered organic when it "has its own inherent laws, originating with its very invention and fusing in one vital unity both structure and content" (9).

⁸ The urgency felt by surrealist artists in London to involve themselves in the political events of the period was expressed from the moment the group was formed. These discussions were the focus of heated debates held during the meetings which the English surrealist group organised beginning in 1937, first at Penrose's home, and starting in 1938, at the London Gallery. In particular, during the winter of 1937, the group felt the need to voice its dissent; for example, in one of the notes drafted they exhorted all members to stand up against the status quo: "Never was it more necessary to shout than now. The 'Slot Machine' with its galleries, wheels, transmutations situated within the inevitable precision of dialectical materialism asks you to lay out your fireworks, your poisoned sweets, your packet of sperm, your dissecting instruments, your telescopes on its market stalls" (Typewritten note).

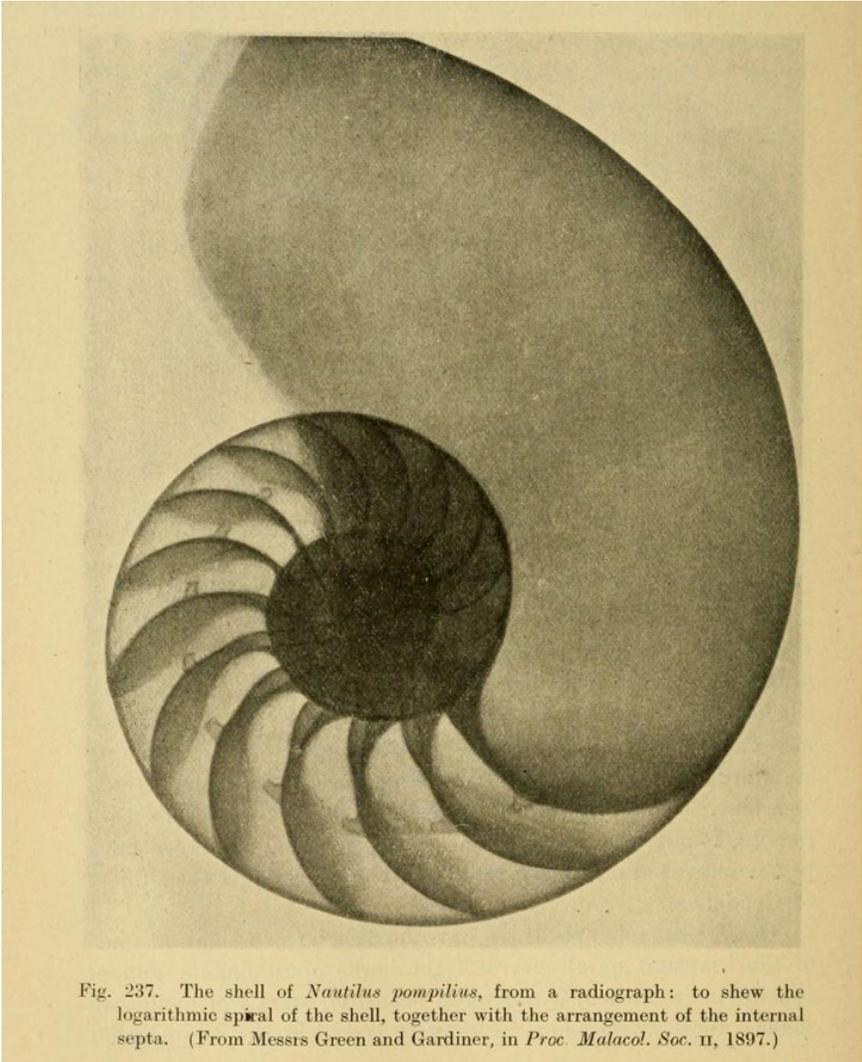


Fig. 237. The shell of *Nautilus pompilius*, from a radiograph: to shew the logarithmic spiral of the shell, together with the arrangement of the internal septa. (From Messrs Green and Gardiner, in *Proc. Malacol. Soc.* II, 1897.)

Figure 3: The *Nautilus Pompilius* Shell, from Thompson D'Arcy Wentworth, *On Growth and Form*, Cambridge University Press, 1917, p. 494. MBLWHOI Library. <https://archive.org/details/ongrowthform1917thom/page/494/mode/2up>.

This conception remained at the core of Read's theories on art in the 1930s, such as in his volume *Art and Industry* (1934), in which he wrote that all beautiful lines are drawn under "mathematical laws organically transgressed" (36). Within these ideas, Read developed over the decade an ambiguous line between organic and geometric abstractions that strongly affected modernism in Britain.

Prior to the arrival of surrealism in England, he applied the notion of "vital unity" also introducing Unit One, the British group formed by Paul Nash in 1933

to promote modern art, architecture and design. "Each artist is a *unit*," Read explained in the Unit One exhibition book, "in the social structure they must, to the extent of their common interests, be *one*"⁹ ("Unit One Introduction" 12). Defending the independence of forms from other factors, Read believed that nature was the creator of (universal) shapes; thus, in terms of creation, art and life should be considered as a unit, in a perpetual (vitalist) dynamic process of transformation of the individual and, therefore, of the society as whole. As scholar Paul Binski has pointed out, Read borrowed from German art historians — specifically Alois Riegl — the idea that the character of art was due to the will to form, which is a reflection of the artist's personality, subjectively ("The Reception of *Principles of Art History* in England" 124). Nevertheless, the English critic went beyond such subjective function theorized by scholars of the Viennese school, as he extended subjectivity to the social structures that he investigated through the socialist ideals he discovered in the Arts and Crafts movement's writings, from William Morris's to John Ruskin's, as clearly emerged not only in *Art and Industry*, but also in his *Art and Society*.

Emblematically, in *Surrealism* Read kept all these previous aesthetic theories intact, just integrating them with André Breton's surrealist manifestos. Justifying the arrival of surrealism in England as "the natural and inevitable product of historical forces" (Sykes Davies 120), the book included illustrations and contributions from members of the Parisian group (André Breton, Paul Éluard, and George Hugnet),¹⁰ as well as from English associates or sympathizers.¹¹ Read reserved a long introduction to himself, in which he retraced the stages of the movement and its philosophical references and he stressed — again — the "vital unity" of the creative activity and, as a consequence, the organic process of forms that underlay surrealists' artistic practice. He wrote:

[I]t is only now, with the aid of modern dialectics and modern psychology, in the name of Marx and Freud, that they [poets and painters] have found themselves in a position to put their beliefs and practices on a scientific basis, thereby initiating a continuous and deliberate creative activity whose only laws are the laws of its own dynamics. (Introduction 28)

⁹ Italics is in the original. The first and only Unit One exhibition was held in 1934 accompanied by the book *Unit One: The Modern Movement in English Architecture, Painting and Sculpture*, edited by Herbert Read.

¹⁰ The essays written by French surrealists are: André Breton, "Limits Not Frontiers of Surrealism;" Paul Éluard, "Poetic Evidence;" and George Hugnet, "1870 to 1936."

¹¹ The first English translations of several important theoretical surrealists' texts appeared in the special fifth issue of the journal *This Quarter* (1932), focusing on the French movement.

Read strongly contributed to shaping the identity of surrealism in Britain, combining Breton's theories¹² with his own peculiar ideas on art that, soon after, had an impact on the dissemination and reception of the movement in Britain. He, however, never officially joined surrealism; yet a series of factors, including the movement's anti-orthodox communism ideology, its interest in Freud, its emphasis on the social impact of art, and its vision of the artistic act as characterised by a creative vitalist impulse, led him to take an interest in and promote surrealist poetry in England. Thus, from 1936, Read became the chief critic within the Anglo-Saxon cohort, a status he would maintain until 1939, when he began distancing himself from the group for various reasons, including political ones ("Herbert Read is forever lost to us," wrote Mesens to Breton in 1940). In particular, Read revisited Freudian theory as applied to art by French surrealists taking advantage of his previous psychoanalytic studies as well as of his interest in organic forms and society. For example, using terminology from Freud's *New Introductory Lecture*,¹³ Read defined the notions of "manifest content" and "latent content" with the aim of explaining the mechanism of "dream formation" and its application to poetry — the "poem formation" — while foregrounding the parallels between both processes (Introduction 65-67). Although theoretically ambiguous, Read's unusual interpretations in which he applied Freudian theories to art, as well as his reflections on abstract and organic forms, helped to shape the identity of English surrealist artists, which was apparent on the pages of the *London Bulletin* since its inception.¹⁴ In this regard, his collaboration with the bulletin was emblematic: he introduced European painters, including René Magritte and Pablo Picasso, to the periodical's readers, and published a series of essays essentially aiming to highlight both the social role of art and the artist, and the universal value of art forms.¹⁵

¹² With reference to the first *Surrealist Manifesto*, Read quoted in his introduction: "The image is a pure creation of the mind. It cannot be born from a comparison but from the bringing together of two more or less distant realities. The more distant and accurate the relationship between the two realities brought together are, the stronger the image is — the more emotional power and poetic reality it will have" (75). This quoted text was written by Pierre Reverdy and published in the French journal *Nord-Sud* in 1918. It was later borrowed by André Breton, who cited it in the *Manifeste du surréalisme* of 1924.

¹³ The English translation of Freud's *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-analysis* (original version *Vorlesungen zur Einführung in die Psychoanalyse*, Hugo Heller, 1916-17) first appeared in London in 1922, published by George Allen & Unwin Ltd.

¹⁴ On Read and psychoanalysis see Doheny (70–85). However, in this essay, Doheny does not refer to Read's writings on surrealism.

¹⁵ Articles by Herbert Read published in the *London Bulletin* include: "Magritte;" "Picasso's 'Guernica';" "In What Sense 'Living'?" "The Development of Ben Nicholson;" "An Art of Pure Form." In addition, Read wrote some columns for the journal. Shortly before, Read

Read became acquainted with Freudian psychoanalysis before the foundation of the surrealist movement. In fact, he had already discovered Freud's theories in the 1910s in the socialist contexts he frequented at that time. Certainly, among the first sources of his knowledge was the socialist magazine *The New Age*, edited by Alfred Richard Orage. Together with articles on literature and the debate on socialism, *The New Age* included pieces regarding psychoanalysis as well. Read also discussed these themes in his reviews: between 1916 and 1922, he collaborated with the publication writing the column "Readers and Writers."¹⁶ The magazine was among the first English periodicals outside the field of medicine to take an interest in psychoanalysis, even before the publication of the English translation of Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*, which was first printed in London in 1913.¹⁷ In fact, Freud's name appeared in *The New Age* in 1912, in a review of Louis Calvert's *An Actor's Hamlet* by Alfred Randal, who viewed Shakespeare's *Hamlet* through notions extrapolated from psychoanalytic studies: "The clinical experience of Freud and his school proves that repression is not destruction" (378).¹⁸ The interest in Freud's psychoanalytic theories spread very early in British literary circles and, as in Paris, its application developed much sooner in literature than in visual art. Nevertheless, Freud's most important books were officially translated into English in medical-scientific contexts by psychoanalysts and psychiatrists such as Montague David Eder, Joan Riviere, and the leading American psychanalyst Abraham Arden Brill, who also wrote reviews on psychoanalysis books for non-scientific journals, demonstrating the aim to spread studies on human psychology to a wider readership.¹⁹ In the pages of *The New Age*, in fact, Read had the opportunity to discover not only Freud, but also Carl Gustav Jung's theories, as Eder had enthusiastically reviewed Jung's *Psychology of the Unconscious* in an issue of *The New Age* published on 20 July 1916. More than a decade later, when

published one of his most important works, *Art and Society* (1937). Emblematically, an entire chapter of his book was dedicated to "Art and the Unconscious."

¹⁶ One of Herbert Read's first articles on Karl Marx appeared in 1918 in the column "Readers and Writers." On *The New Age* see Martin and Ardis.

¹⁷ As Wallace Martin points out, the circulation of this work by Freud was initially restricted to medical circles, and only with the publication of *On Dreams* (translated by David Eder) did Freudian theory begin to reach a broader audience.

¹⁸ Louis Calvert's *An Actor's Hamlet* contained a preface entitled "The Mentality of Hamlet." The complex character of Hamlet fascinated many writers of the period who were interested in literary studies in relation to modern psychoanalytic research. Among these was Read, who in his introduction to the volume *Surrealism* refers to Shakespeare's Hamlet as presented by John Dover Wilson in his 1935 essay *What Happens in Hamlet* (Introduction 47-48).

¹⁹ See English translations of Freud's books: *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1913); *On Dreams* (1914); *Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1914); *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1914); *Totem and Taboo* (1919); *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis* (1922); *The Ego and the Id* (1927).

surrealism reached the shores of England, Read remained faithful to his personal vision of the unconscious and psychoanalysis, so much so that as early as 1936 he began studying the theories of Jung and introduced them in *Surrealism*, referring to the categories elaborated by Jung in *Psychological Types*, which was translated into English in 1923 (Introduction 28-29).²⁰ In doing so, Read shaped surrealism's theoretical stance in Britain, distancing it from French surrealism's precepts, still strongly anchored to Freud's studies.

British Surrealism and Automatism in the *London Bulletin*

In 1938, on the occasion of the publication of the first number of the *London Bulletin*, Read investigated the notions of myth, dream, and poetry in an article which appeared in the magazine *Transition*. The critic exemplified the transcription of a dream in a poetic tone of monistic vision as an act of creating art: "Visual or verbal, all art is predominantly eidetic, emotionally aware of the plastic reality of its images. In this art resembles the dream. . . . The dream, in fact, is a combination of acute sensational awareness with an unnatural order" ("Myth, Dream and Poem" 179). Such a dichotomy between reality (the exterior world) and subjectivity (the inner world of humans) emerged as the most important pillar of the first issue of the *London Bulletin* as well, in which Read described Magritte's artistic approach, interpreting his logical syllogism as a tool that served to discover new "truths," which would otherwise remain concealed: "Like the logic of reasoning, the logic of imagination has its syllogism, which is an instrument for making judgements or discovering truth" ("Magritte"). By transposing mental images on the canvas, Magritte let the unconscious materialise; in doing so, he showed to the observer the principle underlying the form of his painting, namely the "truth" which Read referred to in his article.

Magritte's paintings were then on display at the London Gallery (and partly reproduced in the *London Bulletin*) as the first solo-show dedicated to the Belgian artist in England, with the aim of introducing the British public to continental surrealist artists whose works were not yet well-known in the United Kingdom.²¹ The exhibition presented some of the most mysterious and ambiguous compositions created by Magritte up until that time, such as *Red Model*, *Rape*, *Chasm of Silver*, *Key of Dreams*, *You Will Never Know*, *Barbarian*, and *Secret Life IV*: all these canvases were characterised by juxtapositions of various familiar objects (like eyes, glasses, hats, feet, shoes, etc.) with seemingly unrelated images, with

²⁰ Read already referred to Jung's studies in 1931 in *The Meaning of Art*. His interest in Jungian theories led him to edit the first English collection of Jung's major works in 1959, *The Collected Works of C.G. Jung*. However, his first interest was in Freud, and later Ernst Kris.

²¹ It followed solo-exhibitions dedicated to Paul Delvaux, Max Ernst, Joan Miró, Wolfgang Paalen, Man Ray, and Yves Tanguy, to mention a few.

the aim of questioning the notion of “truth” in the visual and the verbal, and its relationship to human perception.

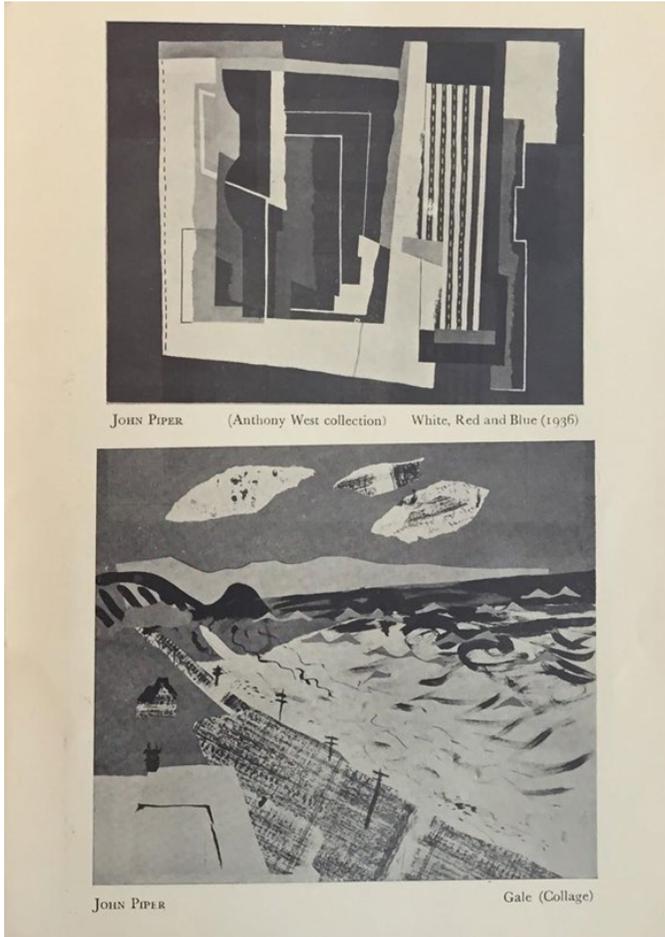


Figure 4: John Piper. *White, Red and Blue* (1936), and *Gale* (Collage). *London Bulletin*, no. 2, 1938, p. 10. © John Piper by SIAE 2022. Author’s personal collection.

Magritte was met with immediate success in the British avant-garde context, becoming the artist who sold the highest number of canvases at the *International Surrealist Exhibition* of London in 1936, the show that launched him on the British artistic scene. The paintings were mainly acquired by artists of the English surrealist group, including David Gascoyne, Humphrey Jennings, and Roland

Penrose (see Caputo, *Collezionismo e mercato* 41), a fact that confirmed their fascination with the Belgian painter's work and poetry. Significantly, the incongruous associations used by Magritte soon became the subject of works by English artists, who tried to apply them in both abstract and figurative paintings. Thus, beginning with its second issue, the *London Bulletin* hosted such new experiments. For example, to aid in the investigation of the dialectic connection between reason and imagination, and inner and outer worlds, the journal published descriptions of surrealist practises linked to associations and to automatism, applying this interpretation to the artworks of the new members of the English surrealist group and its sympathisers, who were still experimenting with surrealist techniques. Thus, Paul Nash presented collages by painter John Piper (fig. 4) as filled with subjective values, "designed and executed, in front of Nature, with an astonishing accuracy of visual aim, prompted by a very sensitive perception." According to Nash, "although the solution of [Pipers'] equation is in 'abstract' terms, the features of his design retain the influence of association" in psychoanalytic terms, referring thereby to the technique of visual verbalisation of thoughts, emotions, memories flowing freely to consciousness. Other examples emphasised the new approach of artists to the inner world (the unconscious), such as the landscapes of Nash, which for Roland Penrose represented "the new world behind the mirror" and "[t]he outside world which forms long avenues of sensations as it penetrates the dark and fertile regions of the subconscious, reappears again carrying with it unexpected echoes, enriched with new meanings" ("Transparent Mirror"). Penrose was referring to Nash's surrealist work reproduced in the bulletin, like *Landscape of a Dream* (1936-1938).²² In this canvas Nash depicts a landscape with frames and transparent mirror-like folding screens; thus, objects visually fuse reality and representation. Penrose continued his description of Nash's landscapes, highlighting the equivalence of time and space in the compositional narration: "A landscape contains the mirror — the eye. The painted canvas is again a mirror. . . . One reality leads into another with the assurance that both exist instantaneously and in the same place." Certainly fascinated by Magritte's juxtapositions of different levels of realities, reflections on reality and human perception were at the core of Nash's investigations at that time, so much so that one month after Magritte's first solo exhibition at the London Gallery, in the journal *Country Life* he explained that his own "unseen" landscapes "belong to the world of lies, visibly, about us. They are unseen merely because they are not perceived" (qtd. in Charles Harrison 325). In the same issue of the bulletin, the ambivalent dichotomy between image and reality, between subjectivity and objectivity recalled by Nash's landscapes reproduced in that number, was further exacerbated by the photograph *The Painter and the Barbarian* (fig. 5): a shot of Magritte at the London Gallery while posing as Fantômas — the

²² Nash's painting today belongs to the Tate Gallery; see <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/nash-landscape-from-a-dream-n05667>.

protagonist of surrealists' much beloved French novels and film series of the same name from the 1910s — as depicted in his painting *The Barbarian*, then on display at the London Gallery. This comparison ironically questioned the ambiguity of representation and reality, interrogating different linguistic codes as well as media (painting and photography).

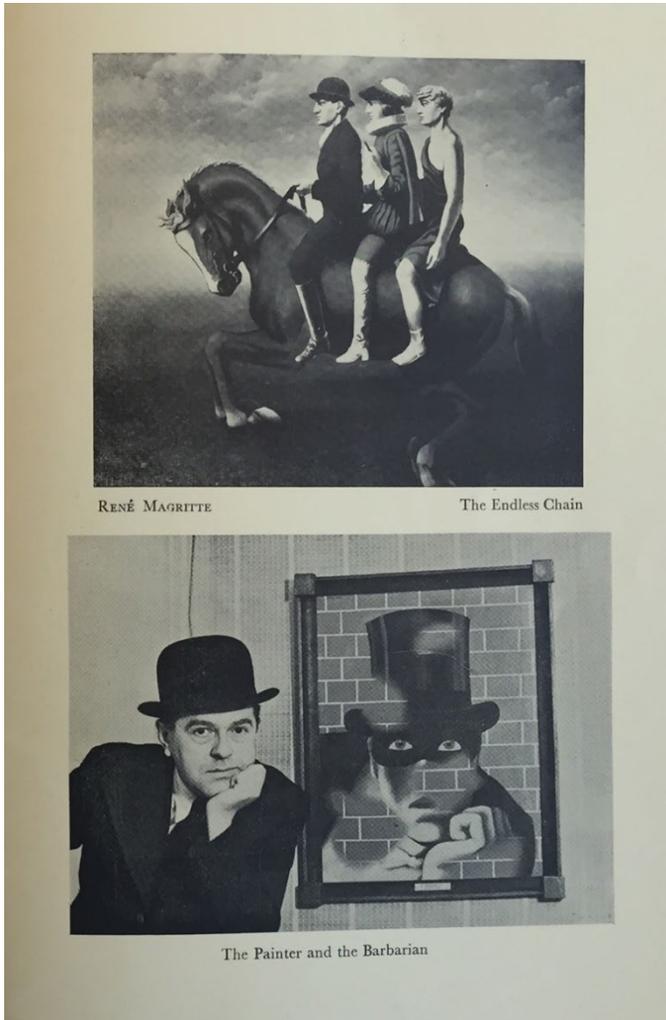


Figure 5: *London Bulletin*, no. 2, 1938, p. 19. © René Magritte by SIAE 2022.
Author's personal collection.

In the context of this interest in visual juxtaposition of reality and representation, subjectivity and objectivity, it is worth noting that other British surrealist artists who collaborated with the *London Bulletin* who were also fascinated by imposing automatism and psychoanalytic theories onto the creative act created peculiar experiments, such as the ones on photography by Humphrey Jennings, who gravitated around the surrealist group in London since its foundation in 1936. Although Jennings's involvement with surrealism in England is known (see Walker 93-114), his theoretical and artistic contribution to the *London Bulletin* needs further investigation, in particular in relation to his peculiar interpretation of psychoanalysis theories applied to the visual realm.

Humphrey Jennings's Photography and the "Unconscious Fantasy"

In a letter written to André Breton in 1940, Mesens mentioned the figures who had taken an active part in the initiatives of the surrealist group in Britain, among them Humphrey Jennings, who in 1938 acted as assistant editor of issues 3 and 4-5 of the *London Bulletin*. Specifically, the English artist stood out for having elaborated a new visual grammar obtained from the use of photography and psychoanalytic studies. He shared with other artists and critics who gravitated around the British surrealist group (including Herbert Read) an early interest in socialism and Freudian theories.

After graduating in English literature at Pembroke College in Cambridge,²³ Jennings undertook a number of jobs including painter, photographer, and documentary filmmaker at the left-wing production agency General Post Office Film Unit (GPO) in London. In 1937, he took part as a photographer and filmmaker in Mass Observation, a social research project that specialised in recording the everyday lives of ordinary people throughout Britain.²⁴ As scholar Ian Aitken pointed out, in his films from the 1930s, Jennings was concerned with exploring "the revelation of the symbolic in the everyday, through the use of an impressionistic style dependent on juxtapositions and association" (216). Jennings had likely first come into contact with theories of psychoanalysis during the period

²³ Since his childhood, Jennings had been exposed to the milieu of English socialism. His parents were friends of Alfred Richard Orage, upon whose recommendation the young boy was sent to the Perse School in Cambridge, where he began studying in 1912. Then, he continued his education in English literature at Pembroke College in Cambridge. During these years, Jennings founded the modernist magazine *Experiment* in 1928, and supported the *Cambridge Experiment Manifesto* two years later.

²⁴ Mass Observation was founded in 1937 by Jennings together with anthropologist Tom Harrisson and writer Charles Madge. "Mass Observation develops out of anthropology, psychology, and the sciences which study man," Jennings wrote in 1937 in a letter to the *New Statesman and Nation* (Jennings, *Humphrey Jennings: Film Maker, Painter, Poet* 17). On Mass Observation and British social anthropology, see Hubble (54-60).

in which he studied literature in Cambridge, and later, between 1931 and 1933, during his stay in Paris, where he met the French surrealists. However, only when he became involved with surrealism in England did these ideas effectively translate into visual experimentation, most certainly influenced by the surrealists associated with the London Gallery.

In the *London Bulletin*, Jennings shaped his ideas on photography drawing directly from Freud's writings. The artist mostly investigated the unconscious through the Freudian lens of latent mnemonic residues he found in the indexicality of the photographic. When in autumn 1938 he held his first solo exhibition at the London Gallery, he published the text "Who Does That Remind You Of?" in the bulletin. In this essay, he applied to photography the notion of "unconscious fantasy" taken from Freud's essay *Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (203), thereby introducing the idea of the photographic act as "the memory of an unconscious fantasy" (Freud, qtd. in "Who Does That Remind You Of?" 22), since "[t]he camera is precisely an instrument for recording the object or image that prompted that memory." In the book cited by Jennings, Freud introduced the principle of *déjà vu* as a psychic phenomenon which formed part of the category of altered memories; here Freud wrote that "[t]here are unconscious fantasies (or day dreams) just as there are similar conscious creations, which everyone knows from personal experience" (321). Jennings believed that photography represented the encounter between the mechanical tool (the camera) and imagination (the man), between the unconscious and experience, containing both an indexical reality and a repressed memory-trace — an "unconscious fantasy" indeed— that can only re-emerge through the image.

In the context of its latent mnemonic capacity, the photographic image had already visually been addressed in the previous issue of the *London Bulletin* (no. 4-5), which was edited by Mesens and Jennings together, specifically on a page of images entitled "Rimbaud in London" (fig. 6). These photographs reproduced everyday urban street life by showing hidden stories: two photos by Roland Penrose which immortalised the surrealists' beloved French poet Arthur Rimbaud's London dwelling (which was soon to be demolished), placed in dialogue with a shot by Jennings called "Child's Wall Drawing" showing a hasty sketch on a wall in the suburbs of Lancashire, which conjured the image of a childhood corrupted by the modern world of industrialisation, machinery, and the war, also recalled by the drawn shape reminiscent of a war cannon (22). In the next page, "Homage to Freud" showed the father of psychoanalysis and his sculptural portrait.

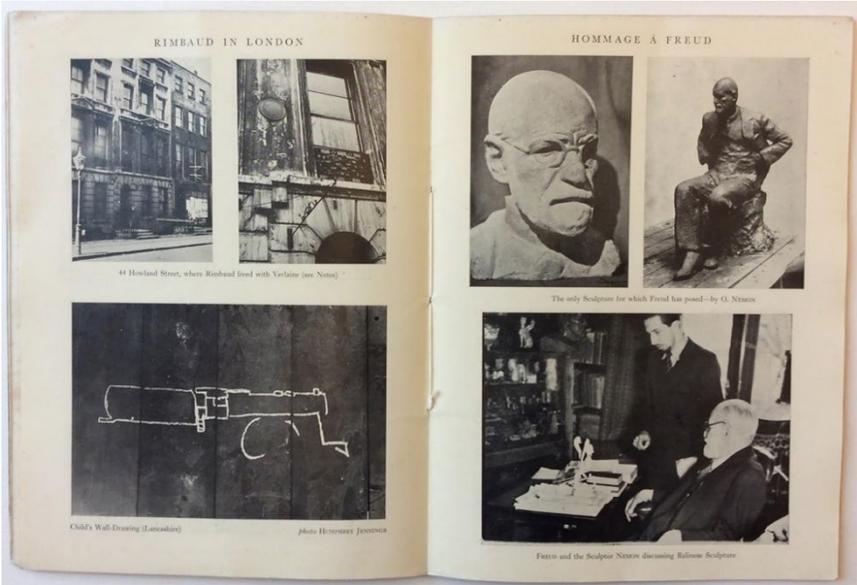


Figure 6: "Rimbaud in London" and "Hommage à Freud." *London Bulletin*, no. 4-5, 1938, pp. 22-23. Author's personal collection.

The motifs of machine, industrialisation, and modernisation, juxtaposed with the notions of art and fantasy, represented the focus of Jennings's artistic reflections in those years, as shown in his paintings' continuous references to the locomotive and the iconography of the horse (fig. 7), reproduced in number 6 of the bulletin. This topic emerged also in his article "The Iron Horse," which opens with the statement "[m]achines are animals created by man" (22). The title of this text was taken from the short story of the same name, *The Iron Horse, or, Life on the Line: A Tale of the Grand National Trunk*, by the nineteenth-century Scottish writer Robert Michael Ballantyne, who narrates the tale of an imaginary engine driver and the events linked to his work on a train in the British railway system. Jennings's research was strongly anchored in British culture and literature, from sixteenth to nineteenth century,²⁵ quoting in the bulletin William Blake, Robert M. Ballantyne, William Morris, and John Ruskin (Jennings, "Do Not Lean Out of the Window" 13-14). More precisely, Jennings reproduced an extract from Ballantyne's story in the issue of the *London Bulletin* dedicated to the exhibition *The Impact of Machines* (no. 4-5, 1938), which was organised at the London Gallery by Jennings, together with Mesens and Arthur Elton, his colleague at GPO Unit

²⁵ Jennings' interest in British literature is attested to by various drafts, reworkings of papers, and research notes on the topic stored in the Jennings Papers at the Cambridge University Library (GBR/0012/MS Add.10097/2).

Film.²⁶ Revealingly, in his essay “The Iron Horse,” Jennings again quoted Freud to justify his approach to art and the industrialized world; citing Freud’s *Totem and Taboo*, he wrote that only in one field had the omnipotence of thought been retained in our own civilization, namely in art. As Freud wrote, “[i]n art alone it still happens that man, consumed by his wishes, produces something similar to the gratification of these wishes, and this playing, thanks to artistic illusion, calls forth effects as if it were something real” (qtd. in “The Iron Horse” 28).

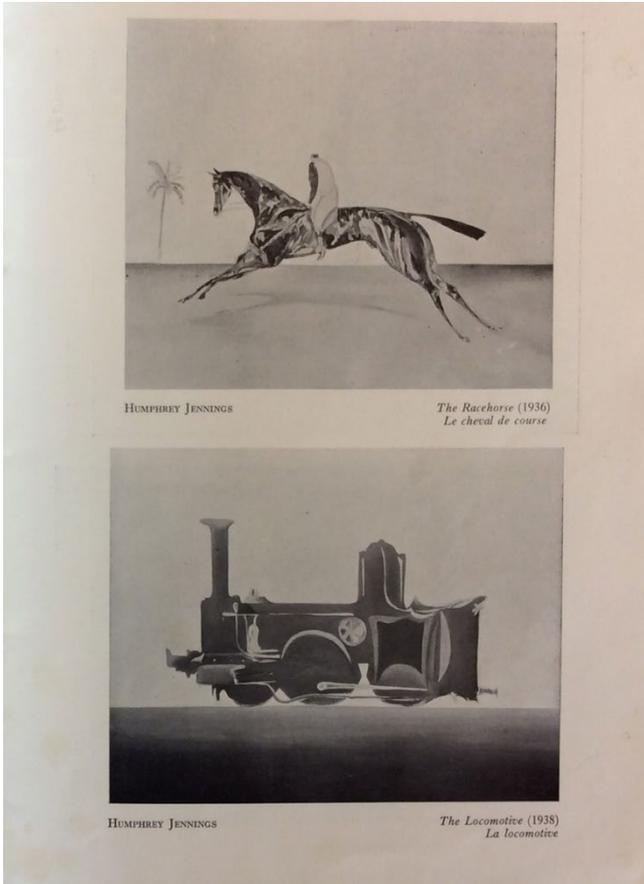


Figure 7: *London Bulletin*, no. 6, 1938, p. 23. Author’s personal collection.

Such interest in questioning the meaning of representation in relation to human perception was already evident in Jennings’s artistic research prior the period when he took part in the British surrealist group, as seen, for example, in his two

²⁶ An analysis of the exhibition *The Impact of Machines* can be found in my *Shaping Surrealism in Britain* (287-311).

photo-collages *Seal*²⁷ and *Swiss Role*,²⁸ in which the boundaries between photography and painting vanish in the name of the ambiguity of the vision and the equivocal contents.

Likewise, a rich display of images published in the *London Bulletin* was intended to short-circuit the concepts of mimesis and representation in art, therefore the idea of illusion: Giorgio de Chirico's *The Anxious Journey* (1914) is juxtaposed with Edward Wadsworth's *Sussex-by-Pass* (1937) beneath the respective headings "Day of Dream" and "Night of Reality" (fig. 8). The mystery of ordinary things, discovered by de Chirico's metaphysical art and beloved by surrealists from the very beginnings in the Twenties, was reproduced in the journal next to Wadsworth's recent surrealist painting as a sort of continuous historical path towards a modern avant-garde language in British art.

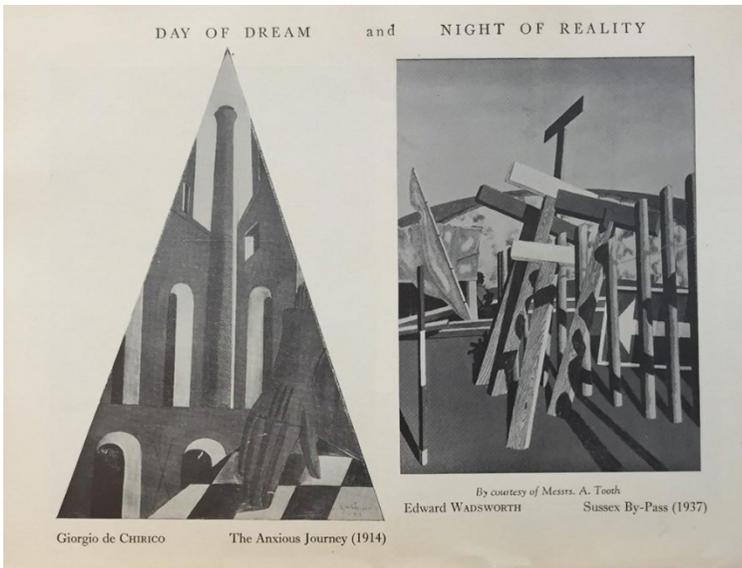


Figure 8: Giorgio de Chirico. *The Anxious Journey* (1914). *London Bulletin*, no. 3, 1938, p. 13. © Giorgio de Chirico by SIAE 2022. Author's personal collection.

²⁷ The collage *Seal* was exhibited in 1938 at the Guggenheim Jeune Gallery in London, in the show that Peggy Guggenheim dedicated to collages, papier-collés, and photomontages. Today, the work belongs to the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York (<https://www.guggenheim-venice.it/it/arte/opere/seal>).

²⁸ The collage *Swiss Role* is reproduced in Jennings, *Humphrey Jennings* (14). Jennings made a painted version of this collage that today belongs to the Tate Gallery (<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/jennings-swiss-roll-t03213>).

A Few Conclusions

The last issue of the *London Bulletin* (no. 18-20, 1940) concluded with a reference to the eighteenth century British novel *The Monk* by Matthew Gregory Lewis, which, according to Peter Brook, was “one of the first and most lucid contextualisations of life in a world where reason ha[d] lost its prestige” (249).²⁹ The text was an extract from Pierre Mabilles’ “Monk’ Lewis” in his 1940 anthology *Le miroir du merveilleux*, which emphasised, on the one hand, the immense possibilities of the imagination and dreams, and on the other, the *merveilleux* of everyday life and things: “reason, going beyond the sordid plane of common sense and logic where it crawls today, will join, at the stage of the transcendencies, the immense possibilities of the imagination and the Dream” (Mabilles, “Monk’ Lewis” 49). The attempt to reconcile objectivity and subjectivity, rationality and the irrational, imagination and reality, that Mabilles pointed out in this text, characterized (theoretically and visually) all issues of the *London Bulletin* during its two years of publication by continuous reference to psychoanalytic studies and its application to art. This clearly delineated the surrealists’ distance from the previous constructivist and formalist aesthetics that, albeit ambiguously, had shaped English modernist publications of that time, in particular *Axis* (1935-1937) and *Circle* (1937). The British surrealists’ vision from mechanical to natural (vitalistic) forms is clearly shown, for example, by the dialogue between the image of a *Useful Object* (a drawing of a mechanical device), Kurt Schwitters’s dadaist painting *Le eere*, and Henry Moore’s biomorphic *String Sculpture* (an asymmetrical sculpture made of wood and two sets of elasticated strings) (fig. 9), or between Man Ray’s *Aerographie*, Max Ernst’s *La mariée anatomie*, and Wolfgang Paalen’s organicist forms of *Pays Médusé* (fig. 10), all reproduced in *London Bulletin* no. 4-5 (24, 41).

To conclude, the shuttering of the *London Bulletin* ended an important chapter of surrealism in Britain. During its existence, the journal spread a new artistic vision and elaborated for the British group the technique of automatism that, while developed in accordance with Breton’s precepts, was at the same time shaped by previous experiments by English modernists as well as by interpretations of psychoanalytic theories. Thus, abandoning the previous modernist mythology of progress and functionalism, surrealism in England moved toward a peculiar artistic practise that primarily focused on the interaction between the self and the modern world, between the rational and the unconscious, and formalistically led towards the “vital unity” of form and content that Herbert Read had theorised in 1932 with regards to modern poetry (*Form in Modern Poetry* 9).

²⁹ In the Thirties, Lewis’s novel received attention from French surrealist writers. For example, in 1931 Antonin Artaud published the book *Le moine (de Lewis)* in which he rewrites the novel.

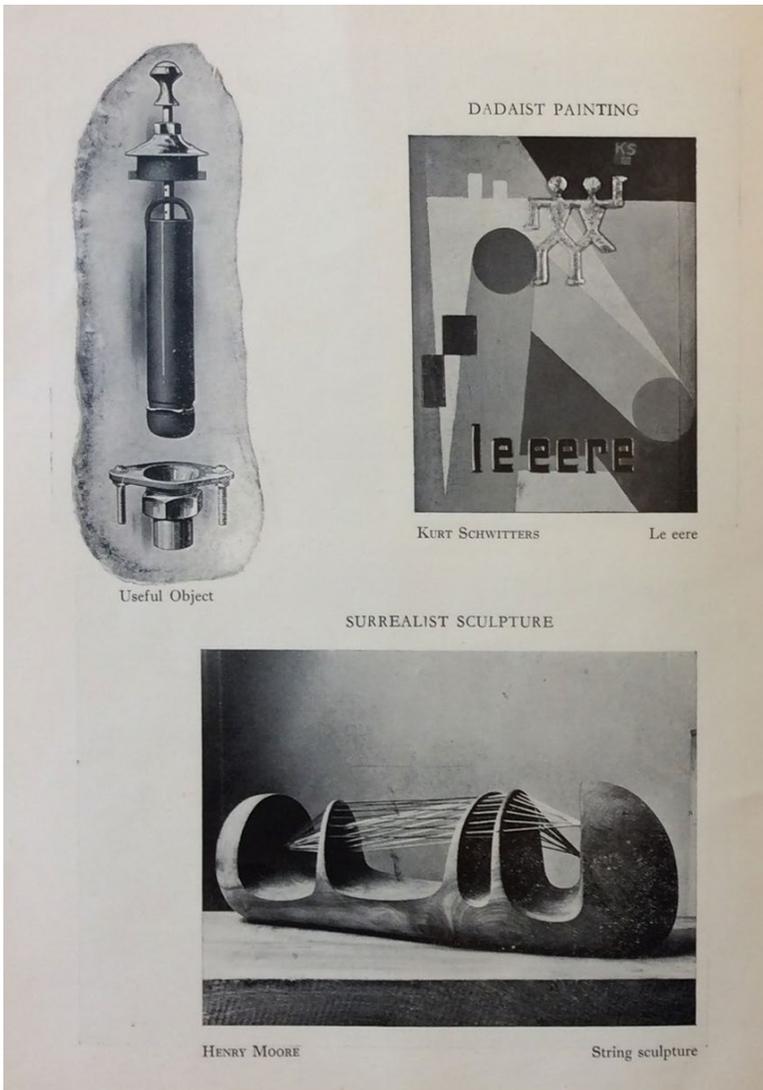


Figure 9: *London Bulletin*, no. 4-5, 1938, p. 24. Author's personal collection.

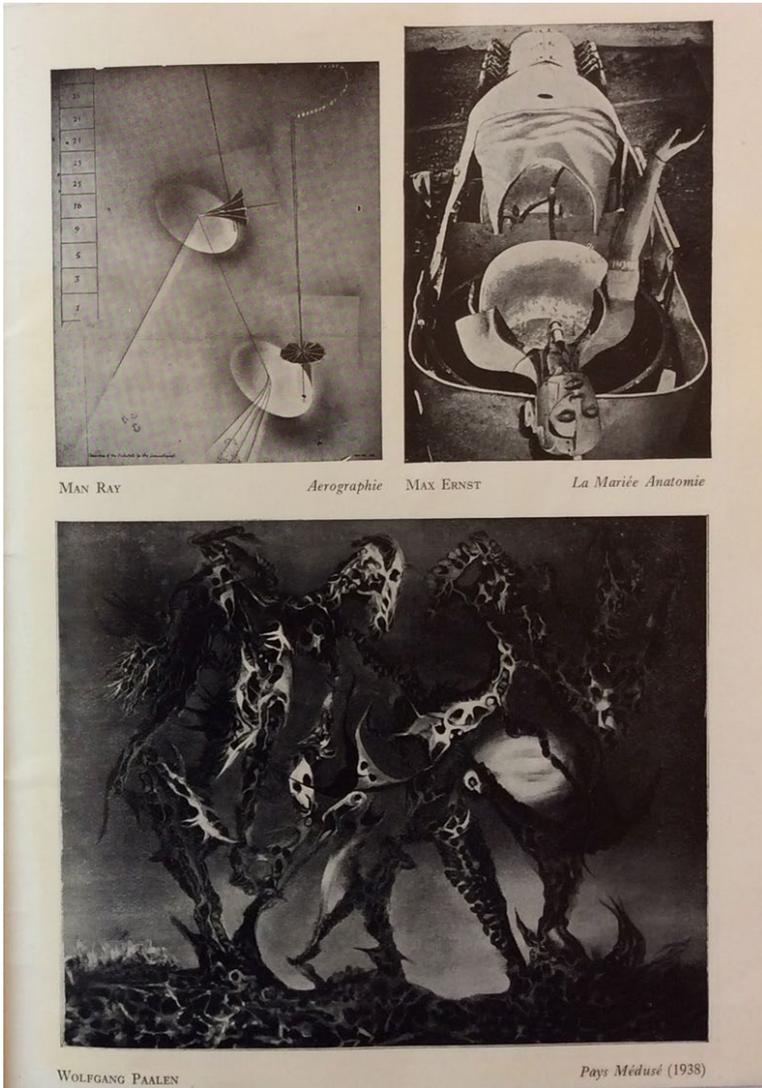


Figure 10: *London Bulletin*, no. 4-5, 1938, p. 41. Author's personal collection.

Significantly, after the Second World War, British surrealists' research and experimentations strongly affected the young generation of artists who gravitated around the new Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA), "the only place in London to see and find out about avant garde art" (Massey, "'At Home' with Avant Garde" 56).

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