Terrors of the Encyclopedia: Max Ernst and Contemporary Art

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AFTER 1950 SURREALISM SEEMED A SPENT FORCE. One part pretidigitaton, one part kitsch, one part porn, there was something petty and smarmy about it, especially compared to the boldness of Abstract Expressionism, the immediacy of Pop Art, or the severity of Minimalism.1 By the 1980s, however, these movements were also exhausted. Irritated by the pretensions of Postmodernism, enthralled by the bathos of Neoexpressionism, the art world was ready for a Surrealist revival.

What sparked the revival was "Corpus Delicti," a brilliant essay published by Rosalind Krauss in 1985. Reworking the ideas of the fiery Surrealist dissident Georges Bataille, Krauss redefined Surrealism as a movement dedicated to the experience of the body, the collapse of all categories, and the subversion of the Cartesian ego.2 Many of these themes had been adumbrated by the Postminimalism of the late 1960s, with its rejection of formalist aesthetics and its emphasis on bodily experience.3 What was merely implied in Postminimalism, however, now became relentlessly literal.

The immediate beneficiary of the Surrealist revival was Hans Bellmer, a sculptor and photographer hitherto regarded as a marginal figure in the history of the movement. Bellmer's amusingly perverse sculptures, assembled from doll parts, were all breast, belly, buttock, and thigh. In the photographs he made of dirty stairs and bed frames, they acquired some of the lurid shabbiness of genuine pornography. Bellmer's disjointed figures provided the perfect symbol for Krauss's theory of Surrealism as the art of the shattered self. Younger artists looked long and hard at the Bellmer photographs published with Krauss's essay. Their influence is obvious, for instance, in Cindy Sherman's pictures of the late 1980s.

It gradually became apparent, however, that the Surrealist who had most profoundly explored the themes of bodily experience, category breakdown, and the divided self was Max Ernst. Since 1990 Hal Foster, David Lomas, and other critics have focused with increasing intensity on Ernst's work.4 Ernst's influence is both more indirect and more pervasive than Bellmer's. The history of the reception of Ernst's work is complicated. His eminence in the 1950s and 1960s gave way to relative oblivion in the 1970s and 1980s. After 1980 younger artists were rarely familiar with his work, but they could not avoid being aware of his innovations, which had profoundly affected popular culture. If they had not encountered Ernst's collage novels, assembled from nineteenth-century engravings, they had seen the neo-Victorian illustrations of Edward Gorey and the animated collages that Terry Gilliam contributed to the Monty Python movies that were indebted to them.
Already in Ernst's first collages of 1919–20, he abandoned the idea of the wholeness and self-sufficiency of the work of art. Inspired by Francis Picabia and Giorgio de Chirico, he set himself the task of making art from borrowed, contradictory fragments. Historically, these works by Ernst have been classified as contributions to the international Dada movement, but their metaphysical disquiet exceeds the usual Dada scale of emotions, which merely extends from glee to petulance.

In 1922 Ernst moved from Cologne to Paris, joining a group of poets and critics clustered around André Breton. In 1924, when Breton published his first Manifesto of Surrealism, Surrealism was essentially a literary movement. Gropping for visual equivalents to the poetry of Breton and his colleagues, the artists associated with the circle—Ernst, André Masson, Joan Miró, Yves Tanguy—experimented with different combinations of the styles of Picasso, Arp, and de Chirico. Toward the end of the decade, Surrealist painting divided into two main currents: biomorphic abstraction and oniric realism. It was the latter style, popularized by the younger artists Salvador Dalí and René Magritte, that became identified as “Surrealism” in the popular imagination.

Although Ernst worked brilliantly in all styles of Surrealist picture making, his collage novels are his most distinctive contribution to the movement. The first, La femme 100 tête (The Hundred Headless Woman), was published in 1929. Its fantastical narrative was spiced with large helpings of sex and violence like similar works by Dalí and Magritte but set apart from them by Ernst's exclusive reliance on nineteenth-century engravings as source material. Drawn from the vast reservoir of visual culture, Ernst's images seemed to offer a commentary on the collective unconscious, not on his private dream life. They were Postmodern before Postmodernism.

**IN THE FAMOUS OPENING PASSAGE** of his autobiographical essay “Beyond Painting,” Ernst describes a dream he had between the ages of five and seven, in which a father figure drew on a mahogany panel, transforming the random striations of the wood into images of animals. These mysterious and frightening transformations, he implies, were the model for his own activity as an artist. It seems likely, however, that this dream was an artifact of Ernst's maturity, a fantasy that corresponded to the preoccupations of the Surrealists in the 1920s, not to those of Ernst's childhood in the 1890s.

The passage in “Beyond Painting” that more credibly represents the starting point of Ernst's mature career appears a few pages after his account of the dream:

One rainy day in 1919 [when Ernst was 28], finding myself in a village on the Rhine, I was struck by the obsession which held under my gaze the pages of an illustrated catalogue showing objects designed for anthropologic, microscopic, psychologic, mineralogic, and paleontologic demonstration. There I found brought together elements of figuration so remote that the sheer absurdity of that collection provoked a sudden intensification of the visionary faculties.... It was enough at that time to embellish these catalogue pages, in painting or drawing, and thus I obtained a faithful fixed image of my hallucination and transformed into revealing dramas my most secret desires.

The catalogue in question, as Dirk Teuber discovered in 1980, was a teaching aid known as the *Bibliotheca Paedagogica* and, less pretentiously, as the *Kölner Lehrmittel-Katalog*.
Fig. 59
Max Ernst, Leaf Landscape, ca. 1920
Collage of cut printed reproductions, gouache,
and ink on printed reproduction
Collection François Peri, Paris
SM 361

Fig. 60
Glass workshop from Denis Diderot,
Encyclopédie, Paris, 1751–65

(Cologne Catalogue of Educational Aids). This was a visual atlas illustrating the vast variety of things with which students needed to be familiar: letters of the alphabet, geometric shapes and constructions, parts of the body, animals, primitive microorganisms, geological formations, maps, landscapes, industrial machinery, different kinds of scientific apparatuses, and so forth. Ernst came upon the Kolner Lehrmittel-Katalog because he was living in Cologne. If he had been in Paris, he would have encountered similar charts for children, illustrating animals, foodstuffs, tools, and the like, as well as more sophisticated catalogues intended for scientists and other savants.

Leaf Landscape (fig. 59) shows how much (or how little) work was required to transform a page from one of these catalogues into an “artistic” composition. Here Ernst began with a sheet illustrating different types of deciduous leaves, added at left the image of an embroidered tunic (its pattern rhyming with the veins of the leaves), and transformed the “background” of the sheet into a landscape by inserting a series of curving contour lines separated from one another by a ground of chalky white. The individual leaves assume the appearance of full-grown trees planted in regular rows on the irregular terrain. A few leaves seem to have been suppressed, creating an open area at lower right. In other examples, Ernst suppressed most of the items on the original sheet and added more dramatic backgrounds. In The Master’s Bedroom (cat. no. 21), an incongruous assortment of animals and furniture appears in a room with alarming canted floorboards; in a Still Life of about 1924 (SM 775), two monumental apples are planted in a road traversing a desertlike landscape.

The particular interest of Leaf Landscape lies in the fact that its pedagogical origins remain so clearly visible. As Werner Spies has shown, Ernst’s use of teaching charts places his work in a tradition reaching back to Diderot’s Encyclopédie, published in multiple volumes from 1751 through 1765. Visual illustrations played a considerable role in this enterprise, which in the end included 2,800 plates. Diderot’s aim in creating the Encyclopédie was to transfer knowledge—and, ultimately, power—from a narrow clerical class to a broader public. Once the volume appeared, it was no longer necessary to be a scholar and to read Latin to have access to the full range of human knowledge. In principle, anyone who could read the common language, French, could take advantage of the Encyclopédie, which covered both abstruse topics such as mathematics and philosophy and everyday ones such as papermaking and fishing.
The *Encyclopédie* includes two principal kinds of plates: perspectives and charts. The plates devoted to glassmaking, for instance, show both an overall view of a glass workshop, with craftsmen performing various tasks, and several charts of the different implements used by glassmakers, with the tools laid out in a grid, as if arranged neatly on a tabletop (see fig. 60). Other plates feature charts that illustrate variations of form: the five basic types of columns, or the seemingly infinite variety of antique saddles, for example.

The apparent simplicity of these illustrations, and of the encyclopedic project as a whole, conceals surprising philosophical complexities. The goal of diffusing knowledge to a broader public was bound up with a new idea of history as progress: new history was not just a random sequence of events but a meaningful evolution of the nature of society. Nineteenth-century philosophers such as Auguste Comte and Hegel transformed this idea of historical progress into a kind of secular religion in which practical and scientific knowledge played a critical role. Mired in ignorance, primitive man was prey to superstitious beliefs and to kings who claimed to rule by divine right. The advance of knowledge meant not only that men could gain power over the natural world but also that they were prepared to claim power over their own lives—that is, political power.

In Hegel’s famous chapter the “Master-Slave Dialectic,” knowledge overturns old relationships of power. At the beginning of Hegel’s metaphysical allegory, the master enjoys the fruits of power while the slave does all the work. However, the slave, through his labor, acquires real knowledge of the world, while the master, reduced to a mere consumer, becomes ignorant and disempowered. Ultimately the slave gains the power to overthrow his master. Hegel’s allegory provided the blueprint for Marx’s vision of a communist revolution to come: the workers, who operated and therefore understood the factories, would rise up and reject the capitalists, who merely provided the money for them. Hegel and the Encyclopedists shared the optimistic belief that to acquire information about the world was to feel more at home in it. What men had made, they could understand. What they could understand, they could master.

The discovery that this was not true produced what was perhaps the greatest intellectual shock of the twentieth century. This fallacy became brutally evident in the period 1914 to 1918, when the accumulated scientific, industrial, and administrative skills of Western civilization led to a bloodbath whose scope no one had anticipated and that no one knew how to stop (the military had estimated that a general European war would last five to six weeks—the duration of the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71). For Max Ernst—who served in the German army throughout the war—as for other artists and intellectuals of his generation, the experience of World War I led to a profound disillusionment with the Enlightenment ideals of reason and progress.

Already in the eighteenth century the philosophers of the Enlightenment felt some uncertainty about the validity of the *Encyclopédie* project. D’Alembert, in his Preliminary Discourse to the *Encyclopedia of Diderot*, admits that there is no one best way of organizing or explaining the totality of human knowledge. It can be presented genealogically, in terms of its actual development, or it can be presented logically, in terms of
basic categories such as memory, reason, and imagination; sacred history and secular history; science of man and science of nature; and so forth. The choice of categories, d'Alembert acknowledges, is arbitrary; different viewpoints might call for different systems of classification. Paradoxically, a logical exposition might prove useless, since readers would not know where to look for the information they want. The editors of the Encyclopédie chose, therefore, to publish their articles in alphabetical order, in the hope that the underlying logical arrangement of topics would somehow remain evident despite this arbitrary presentation.  

The idea of logical clarity is bound up, for the editors, with what d'Alembert calls “enchainment,” the dream of a comprehensive and coherent summary in which nothing is omitted and everything is given its appropriate place. “The most natural arrangement,” d'Alembert writes, “would be the one in which the objects followed one another by imperceptible shadings which serve simultaneously to separate them and to unite them.” As d'Alembert's editor remarks, the model for this “natural arrangement” is to be found in Buffon's Natural History, with its assumption that all living species could be organized into regular sequences, one species separated from the next by the smallest possible quantum of difference.

The chart used in Leaf Landscape embodies just this kind of enchainment. The contours of the leaves modulate from left to right, while the number and complexity of the veins increase from bottom to top. The chart is not just a compendium of individual examples; it is a guide to the analysis of leaves. To this extent it is a model for the Encyclopédie enterprise as a whole. However, Ernst's emendations of the chart constitute a subversion of the logic of the Encyclopédie: he deletes some leaves, breaking the enchainment, while adding other items that are similar in texture but do not belong in this particular sequence.

Ernst's attack on the logic of categories prefigures Magritte's word paintings, with their intentional contradictions between image and caption. But Ernst's true heirs in this respect are the Conceptual artists of the 1960s and later decades, who returned to the dictionary, the encyclopedia, and the atlas as material for their work. A long list of artists, including Edward Ruscha, Mel Bochner, Joseph Kosuth, Hanne Darboven, Gerhard Richter, Hans Haacke, Mary Kelly, and Martha Rosler, imitate and parody the formal language of encyclopedic documentation.

The closest to Ernst in spirit, however, are Bernd and Hilla Becher, who have, over the last fifty years, assembled a vast atlas of photographs recording blast furnaces, water towers, gas tanks, mine pitheads, and other industrial structures. Their work began to attract attention in the late 1960s, and their first book, Aneyme Skulpturen: Formvergleiche Industrieller Bauten (A Typology of Technical Constructions), was published in 1969. During these years no one was quite sure what to make of their work. For architectural historians, the Bechers' photographs were neutral documents; the "art" was in the buildings they recorded. For artists and critics attuned to contemporary art, however, there was something powerful and compelling about the way the Bechers assembled their photographs into series and grids of closely related structures (see frontis., p. 80). In a 1972 essay on the Bechers, the Minimalist sculptor Carl Andre
noted that their work included "structures with the same function (all water towers); structures with the same function but with different shapes (spherical, cylindrical, and conical water towers); structures with the same function and shape but built with different materials (steel, cement, wood, brick, or some combination such as wood and steel)." 16

This methodical exploration of permutations within a closed system was close in spirit to much Minimal and Postminimal work of the late 1960s—to the open and closed cubes of Sol LeWitt’s Serial Project No. 1 (ABCD) (The Museum of Modern Art, New York), the stacked cubes of Mel Bochner’s 36 Photographs and 12 Diagrams (Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus, Munich), the rearrangeable fiberglass sections of Robert Morris’s Untitled (Stadium) (Panza Collection, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York), and Andre’s own “carpets,” floor-bound grids made up of squares of various metals (lead, steel, copper, or zinc). In a 1966 essay, "Homes for America," artist Dan Graham had analyzed the tract housing of the post–World War II era as the product of a similar system of permutations: buyers in one Florida development could choose from eight different models and eight exterior colors, so that 2,304 arrangements were possible in a typical block of eight houses. 37 The Bechers’ work seemed to offer an industrial counterpart to Graham’s investigation of residential architecture.

The Bechers themselves saw their work as more in the tradition of “the 19th century, with the encyclopedic approach used in botany or zoology, where plants of the same variety or animals of the same species are compared with one another on the individual pages of the lexicon.” 18 Similarly, the architectural historian Joseph Masheck had compared their approach to the teaching methods of art historians and architectural historians, who explore styles by juxtaposing related but different works in pairs. 19

The Bechers’ work is not art history or architectural history, however. Although they usually identify the functions, owners, and locations of the structures in their photographs, they do not explain the engineering problems that determine the forms of their subjects. Their no-frills photographs seem designed for maximum clarity. Each structure is photographed from a direct, frontal point of view, selected to minimize visual drama. There are no shadows, no clouds, no movement, and no people. In the end these strategies, as Masheck observed, often make it hard to understand what you are looking at—how the structure is really organized, and how it relates to the landscape or the other structures around it. The Bechers’ formal choices make their pictures more impressive but less informative.

Like the less polished photographs in Edward Ruscha’s photo books (Twentysix Gasoline Stations, 1962; Every Building on Sunset Strip, 1966; Thirty Four Parking Lots in Los Angeles, 1967), the Bechers’ work is a kind of parody of architectural history. The artists evoke the encyclopedic tradition only to subvert it. Instead of rupturing the logic of a taxonomic chart by arbitrarily deleting items (as Ernst did in Leaf Landscape), they collapse taxonomy by providing an excess of information. If your goal is simply to understand how blast furnaces are designed, the 223 examples in the Bechers’ 1990 book Blast Furnaces tell you far more than you want to know. 20 Studying one beautifully printed image after another, you confront so many intricate details, so many similarities and subtle differences, that you cannot make sense of it all. Whether
arranged in linear sequences (in their books) or in monumental grids (on gallery walls), the Bechers’ pictures function as a kind of visual mantra, repeating one architectural form over and over, with minute variations, until the overwhelmed viewer achieves a state of catatonic bliss.

Yet there is more to the Bechers’ photographs. There is also, as Masheck suggests, a kind of Romantic melancholy transferred from Gothic ruins to industrial structures on the verge of ruin. Their images can be linked to Robert Smithson’s vision of the wastelands of Passaic, New Jersey, as “ruins in reverse.” (Smithson visited the Bechers in 1968 and with them toured the slag heaps around the steelworks of Oberhausen.) 21 The abandoned industrial structures photographed by the Bechers seem to be symbols for the intellectual bankruptcy of the two economic philosophies that dominated the twentieth century (free—market economics and communism). For the Bechers and their contemporaries, as for Ernst, the Enlightenment belief in the redemptive power of reason founders on the random currents of history.

MAX ERNST’S COLONIZATION OF THE ENCYCLOPEDIA claimed for art new realms of imagery hitherto reserved for technical illustrators. Pictures of chemical apparatuses revealed an unfamiliar but suggestive vocabulary of tubes, beakers, vials, wires, and rods, which Ernst brilliantly transformed in works such as his Hydrometric Demonstration of Killing by Temperature of 1920 (sm 346). Similar forms played an important role in the work of Marcel Duchamp and Francis Picabia, and they have been revived in more literal fashion by contemporary artists. Among the last are Wim Delvoye, Eve Andréa Laramie, and Monika Kulicka, who use tubes and beakers borrowed from the laboratory to construct elaborate parodies of chemistry experiments, impressive for their allegorical allusiveness rather than for their scientific content. 22

Medical and anatomical illustrations provided Ernst with a source of imagery even more striking than the Lehrmittel. As William Camfield notes, Ernst’s collage Stratified Rocks, Nature’s Gift of Gneiss Lava Icelandic Moss... (fig. 61) is based on a plate from the Bibliotheca Paedagogica, revealing the internal anatomy of a horse (fig. 62). In the original, the animal’s side has been cut away to expose its internal organs. The lungs, the rib cage, and a section of the intestines have been folded back to show the heart. It is a disturbing, even “Surrealist” image in its own right. 23 Ernst’s first move in adapting the plate was to make the horse less recognizable by rotating it so that it was upside down. 24 He then overpainted it, turning the image into a desert landscape, curiously divided between a perspectival view of distant buttes and mountains in
the upper two-thirds of the picture and a stratigraphic view of subsoil layers in the lower one-third. (For a German audience, this desert landscape would have recalled the immensely popular Wild West novels of Karl May.) The still-visible internal organs of the horse—lungs, ribs, intestines—are transformed into strange cacti growing from the barren soil.

Similar imagery of internal organs has been a recurrent feature of art since 1960, sometimes disguised, sometimes represented literally. In the 1990s the English artist Damien Hirst found a way to go one up on anatomical illustration by slicing open animals and putting their neatly cut-up corpses on display in large glass boxes filled with formaldehyde. Hirst’s work is notable largely for its shock value. A more subtle and effective use of such imagery occurs in the work of Kiki Smith, whose oversized print *How I Know I’m Here* (fig. 63) offers an elegant, white-on-black catalogue of the artist’s lungs, intestines, ovaries, tongue, kidneys, liver, stomach, and brain, all tied together by a delicate web of veins.

When scientific or medical imagery enters the realm of art, it loses its purely scientific character and begins to function as symbol or allegory. In *How I Know I’m Here* the interstitial images of the artist closing one eye, clapping her foot, holding a hand to her ear, biting into a piece of fruit, and (less delicately) picking her nose present an updated, funky version of the traditional allegory of the senses. The image of the body’s interior represents a return to what Mikhail Bakhtin calls the “grotesque body” of medieval culture. The medical theories of Antiquity and the Middle Ages saw the body as a microcosm of the universe, dominated by four humors (black bile, yellow bile, phlegm, and blood) corresponding to the four basic elements (earth, fire, water, and air). Beneath this relatively abstruse symbolism lay a popular understanding
of the body as a theater of birth, copulation, and death, of ingestion, digestion, and excretion. As Bakhtin writes:

The grotesque body . . . is a body in the act of becoming . . . The essential role belongs to those parts of the grotesque body in which it outgrows its own self, transgressing its own body, in which it conceives a new, second body: the bowels and the phallus [and the female genitals]. . . . Next to the bowels and the genital organs is the mouth, through which enters the world to be swallowed up. And next is the anus. All these convolutions and orifices have a common characteristic; it is within them that the confines between bodies and between the body and the world are overcome. . . . The acts of the bodily drama take place in this sphere. Eating, drinking, defecation and other elimination (sweating, blowing of the nose, sneezing), as well as copulation, pregnancy, dismemberment, swallowing up by another body—all these acts are performed on the confines of the body and the outer world.20

In the Renaissance the grotesque body was challenged and supplanted by the model of an idealized body corresponding to a radically new understanding of the relationship between self and world: "The new bodily canon . . . presents an entirely finished, completed, strictly limited body, which is shown from the outside." It is "closed, smooth, and impenetrable."22 This new image of the body is accompanied by a "new canon of behavior. Good education demands: not to place the elbows on the table . . . to eat without loud chewing, not to snort and pant, to keep the mouth shut, etc.; in other words, to close up and limit the body's confines and to smooth the bulges."20 Proper behavior includes a new definition of "correct" speech, "prohibiting all that is linked with feculation, pregnancy, childbirth."21

The new image of the body and the new canon of behavior express the new Renaissance ideal of "a closed individuality that does not merge with other bodies and with the world."2 Art and manners collaborate to define an aristocratic self profoundly different from the shapeless, permeable body characteristic of common people. However, this new definition of social difference opens up new possibilities for humor as social criticism. The bodily humor of the commedia dell'arte reverses the bodily hierarchy of high and low and, in doing so, suggests a carnivalesque inversion of social classes.23

In a similar vein, the critic Simon Taylor writes about Kiki Smith's work: "The way Smith explores the exterior and interior regions of the body, examining the nervous, digestive, and urogenital systems, skin, orifices, and bodily fluids, suggests an investigation of body symbolism, one that rejects the bourgeois hierarchy of the body, which privileges the head and demigrates the lower bodily stratum."24

It is not clear, however, whether social criticism is in fact the goal in Ernst's Stratified Rocks, Nature's Gift of Gneiss Lava Icelandic Moss or in Smith's How I Know I'm Here. Their imagery seems closer to the medieval vision of the body as a stage for the natural activities of procreation and digestion. It is significant, in this context, that Ernst thoroughly disguises the overall form of the horse as it appears in his source image. In his collage there is no sense of a ruptured body; rather the anatomical fragments (ribs, veins, viscera) seem to be growing spontaneously amid a natural landscape. Similarly, Smith arranges her internal organs into an abstract frieze, not a simulacrum of a bodily
cavity. Other works by Smith evoke a sense of horror or abjection, but not this one. Here the body is revealed, not dismembered.

The theme of the revelation of the body's interior also plays an important, albeit subliminal role in the work of Bernd and Hilla Becher. Many of the structures they photograph are designed for the transfer of gases, liquids, or molten substances. The tubes and tanks that appear so often in the Bechers' pictures are the industrial equivalent of the body's circulatory system. They contrast with the rectilinear girders around them, setting up an opposition between functional and structural elements—in effect, the arteries and bones of their subjects—that is especially clear in the pictures of entire industrial complexes (see fig. 64).

The Bechers' interest in industrial structures was shared in the 1960s and 1970s by both architectural historians and practicing architects. As early as 1961 the British architectural group known as Archigram had proposed temporary buildings that could be assembled and reassembled in different configurations, like elements from a child's Erector set. The end products looked more like machinery on a factory floor than like traditional buildings. Nevertheless, many of these temporary structures assumed a curiously human appearance, as demonstrated by Ron Herron's Walking Cities project of 1964 and Peter Cook's Exhibition Tower project for Expo 67.

The modular, science-fiction quality of these proposals was echoed in Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers' Centre Georges Pompidou, built in Paris from 1971 to 1977. Seeking maximum flexibility as Archigram had done, Rogers and Piano moved the structural frame of the building to the outside, leaving the interior space empty so that it could be reconfigured at will. Moreover, they moved not only the building's skeleton but also its internal organs to its exterior. It is this innovation that makes the design truly novel. The front facade is decorated by the building's system for pedestrian circulation: a series of glass-enclosed escalators, connecting with other glass-enclosed tubes that serve as external hallways (fig. 65). Other circulatory systems—heating vents and elevators—ornament the rear facade. In an echo of the anatomical diagrams discovered by Ernst, the functional organs are exposed instead of hidden.

**ERNST'S WORK CHANGED SIGNIFICANTLY** after he moved to Paris in 1922. Living in close contact with Paul Éluard, André Breton, and the other writers of what would later become known as the Surrealist group, Ernst increasingly adopted transgression rather than subversion as an aesthetic goal. Certain pictures of the 1920s, such as *The Blessed Virgin Chastises the Infant Jesus before Three Witnesses: A.B. P.E. and the Artist* (cat. no. 64) seem to illustrate scenarios suggested directly by Breton.³⁵ Rebelling against his own Catholic upbringing, Ernst also played with blasphemous parody in his 1923 canvas *Pietà or Revolution by Night* (frontis., p. 52) which revised the traditional Pietà
theme by showing the Christ figure as a beardless young man in modern clothes, supported not by the Virgin Mary but by an older man with a mustache and bowler hat.36

Such parodies remain a staple of art today, particularly works by Catholic artists. In a 1983 performance Marina Abramovic posed herself as the Virgin Mary, with her companion Ulay sprawled across her lap. Andres Serrano gained notoriety if not fame, with his 1987 Piss Christ, a photograph of a plaster statue of Christ plunged into a tank of golden orange urine. Ten years later, in 1997, Robert Gober created an elaborate installation centering on a cast-concrete statue of the Virgin Mary traversed by a sheet-metal culvert pipe and seated atop a roadside drain, as though she were the receptacle for all the dirty ditchwater of the world.37

However compelling Ernst’s paintings were, it is in his collage novels—La femme 100 têtes (1929; frontis., p. 106; figs. 30, 37, 72; cat. nos. 76–81, 167, 167a), Rêve d’une petite fille qui voulait entrer au Carmel (1930; frontis., pp. xvi, 282; fig. 38; cat. nos. 82–92, 169, 169a), and Une semaine de bonté (1934; frontis., pp. 20, 50; figs. 42–47, 67; cat. nos. 172, 172a)—that Ernst invented what Spies aptly describes as a Surrealist universe. There is no hard-and-fast line between Ernst’s earlier collages and his Surrealist work: the early collages foreshadow his later themes, while many of the later collages retain a Dada flavor. And yet, overall, there is a perceptible shift in his technique and symbolism.

As early as 1920, in The Master’s Bedroom and other works, he had used the motif of canted floorboards, borrowed from Giorgio de Chirico, to create an artificial, stage-like space, simultaneously vast and claustrophobic. In adapting de Chirico’s style to the new medium of collage, Ernst was reviving, at second hand, the German Symbolist tradition of Arnold Böcklin, Franz von Stuck, and Max Klinger, who had been de Chirico’s first models. Of course, Ernst had direct access to this tradition, and some of his later collages paraphrase specific works by the Symbolists.38

Symbolist elements were of relatively minor importance in Ernst’s Dada work but play a major role in his collage novels, as they do in the contemporary paintings of Dali and Magritte. As Spies has shown, this change in emphasis, from the intellectual rupture of the early collages to the uncanny melodrama of the later work, is accompanied by a change in Ernst’s source material. After arriving in Paris, he had continued to use educational and scientific images, replacing the Köhler Lehrmittel-Katalog with similar French sources, for example the popular science magazine La Nature.39 In 1929, however, Ernst began to rely heavily on nineteenth-century illustrated novels such as Les damnées de Paris and Le secret de Germaine. Spies points out that these attracted Ernst on account of their melodramatic subject matter and also because they were illustrated with wood engravings executed in a uniform manner; this uniform technique allowed Ernst to maintain a consistent style in his finished collages even when he combined images from different sources.40

Gustave Doré was another important model, for similar reasons. Doré’s illustrations to Dante’s Inferno (1861) and to Cervantes’s Don Quixote (1863) blurred the borders between the real and the fantastic, mingling horror, sensuality, fantasy, and (occasionally) humor. As Spies notes, Doré’s draftsmanship was spectacular but deliberately anonymous, designed to guide the engravers who carved the blocks for his
illustrations, translating flesh, stone, water, clouds, and sky into shimmering fabrics woven from parallel lines. His pursuit of realism culminated in a general air of unreality—what Spies calls the “effect of reproduction.”

Doré’s 1877 volume *London* is meant as a piece of reportage, but his melodramatic imagination and his fantastical style transform the city into a modernized version of Dante’s *Inferno*. Doré’s depiction of Ludgate Hill (fig. 66) shows the city streets filled with a crowd of intolerable density. It calls to mind T. S. Eliot’s description of London in “The Waste Land”:

Unreal City,
Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
I had not thought death had undone so many.

(Eliot here borrows from Dante [*Inferno* 3.55–57]: “ch’io non avrei mai creduto/ che morte tanta n’avesse disfatita.”) In Doré’s print the stream of traffic passes beneath a classical arch—a monumental pile worthy of John Martin or Thomas Cole—that turns out, on closer inspection, to be merely a railway bridge. In the distance the dome of Saint Paul’s rises like a heavenly vision.

The city views in Ernst’s collage novels manifest a similar combination of realism and unreality. A typical plate from *Une semaine de bonté* (fig. 67) shows a city under siege, with armies clashing on the ruins of a suspension bridge. The shattered obelisk in the foreground rhymes uncannily with the spires of the Gothic church in the distance, while the span of the bridge, its cables severed, has collapsed into the river. The contrast between serenity and destruction, between the geometric architecture and the frenzied figures, appears fantastic in its own right. To all this, which seems to have existed in Ernst’s source, he added the nude sleeping in the foreground, like a
naiad from Greek legend. With her appearance, the emotional key of the picture shifts abruptly from sublimity and aggression to beauty and desire. Or, the viewer wonders, is there a connection; is the beautiful woman in the foreground somehow the cause of the violence in the background?

The insertion of a beautiful nude figure into an everyday environment is also a popular strategy in contemporary art. From Hannah Wilke through Marina Abramovic, female performance artists have appeared nude in museums and galleries. More recently Vanessa Beecroft has hired phalanxes of nude or scantily clad models to stand motionless in public. In these performances, as in Ernst’s work, two different orders of reality intersect. One is the social world of streets and public spaces; the other is the ideal world of the classical nude or its profane double, the world of erotic fantasy.

Ernst sometimes underscored the difference between these worlds by utilizing nudes engraved in a linear, Neoclassical style that contrasted with the tonal style of the source material into which they were inserted. These Neoclassical nudes conform to the ideal body of the Renaissance—“closed, smooth, and impenetrable,” as Bakhtin described it—as opposed to the “grotesque,” penetrable body found in Ernst’s earlier collages (see fig. 61). They stand, in effect, for an idea of “beauty” that Ernst had tried to demolish in his earlier Dada work. This is not to say that Ernst’s Surrealist collages are “beautiful” in any conventional sense. Rather, they suggest a dramatic tension between real life and ideal beauty. In Ernst’s view of a fallen bridge (fig. 67), for example, the furor of battle is silenced or rendered insignificant by the peaceable slumber of the nude in the foreground. The nude functions as a kind of fetish.

In contemporary criticism the term “fetish” is generally meant in either a Marxist or a Freudian sense. Social historians use “commodity fetishism” to describe our tendency to endow expensive objects with quasi-magical powers, so that they serve as a distraction from exploitative social relationships. For psychoanalytic critics, a fetish is a stimulus or even a sine qua non for sexual excitement. Obviously, both kinds of fetishism can be found in real life. But do the Marxist and Freudian analyses actually explain fetishism?

In Capital, Marx says that a product becomes a fetish when people begin to attribute value to it in excess of the quantity of labor it contains—that is, its “labor value.” Insofar as it varies from the labor value, the price—or “exchange value”—is a distortion. It should be noted, however, that economists have spent more than a century arguing over the validity of the labor theory of value. If it is impossible to define the labor value incarnated in a product, then it is meaningless to describe a deviation from that value as commodity fetishism. Moreover, Marx has little to say about factors such as advertising or conspicuous consumption, which clearly contribute to commodity fetishism as a social phenomenon.

The Freudian analysis of fetishism is based on the argument that the sight of female genitals causes men castration anxiety and that the revelation of a woman’s naked body can therefore destroy the sexual desire aroused by her partially clothed body. The sexual fetish helps overcome this anxiety by providing a symbolic substitute for the alarmingly absent female phallus. However, the explosion after 1970 of
hard-core pornography, in print and more recently on the Internet, demonstrates that it is possible to be anatomically explicit without stifling desire; sexual fetishism is omnipresent in contemporary culture while castration anxiety seems to be disappearing.

Perhaps it would be prudent to adopt the everyday understanding of a fetish as something that is desired because it can fend off not only castration anxiety but anxiety in general. The child’s security blanket is a precursor to adult fetishes such as cars and jewelry. Unlike the security blanket, the adult fetish possesses qualities of beauty and harmony that offer some compensation for the ugliness and discord of everyday life.

In this sense, physical beauty is a common fetish. We try to be attractive, or to have an attractive partner. Much of popular culture consists essentially of the display of attractive men and women. This was not always the case. Our visual culture, in which we are constantly surrounded by images of beautiful bodies, clothed and unclothed, dates only from the fifteenth century. It came into being with the emergence of new techniques of visual reproduction, together with the “new bodily canon” described by Bakhtin. Of course, this bodily canon was not completely new; rather, it was the result of the revival of classical art. Without printmaking (and its descendant, photography) there could not have been such a proliferation of images. And without the classical revival the new reproductive technology might not have been devoted to idealized images of the body.

Images of the body were not absent from medieval art. For the most part, however, the medieval body was clothed in heavy robes that concealed its anatomy. When the naked body was revealed, it appeared as a collection of disparate parts: knobby shoulders and knees, skinny arms and shanks, bulging stomach and thighs, sometimes rendered with remarkable realism but no longer integrated into the harmonious schemata of classical art. This does not mean that the body represented in this way appeared unattractive to the medieval viewer, for beauty inhered in individual parts of the body to the medieval eye.

Medieval descriptions of beauty tend to take the form of enumerations. In one of Chrétien de Troyes’s romances, written in the twelfth century, a man praises his beloved for her “fair” tresses; her “bright” brow; the “brilliance” of her eyes; her “radiant” face, “where the hue of the rose suffuses that of the lily,” her “delicate” nose; her “dainty” mouth; her “ivory” teeth; her neck, which is “four times as white as ivory;” and her bosom, which is “whiter than freshly fallen snow.” To some extent, the literary strategy of enumeration simply reflects the nature of language, which cannot describe complex structures all at once (as a picture can) but must first list their elements and then describe their relationship. Nonetheless, the literary evocation of beauty begins to shift after the Renaissance. On one hand, beauty continues to be identified with radiance: in Madame de La Fayette’s eighteenth-century novel La Princesse de Clèves, the heroine is praised for “the paleness of her skin and her blond hair.” On the other, the enumeration of individual details tends to give way to more generalized descriptions. Beyond the heroine’s generic paleness and blondness, we learn only that “her features were regular, and her face and body were full of grace and charm.” Instead of listing her attributes, the other characters in the novel refer over and over to the heroine’s “beauty” as
if it were an abstract, metaphysical quality. Beauty has become something that inheres in the body as a whole, a quality of proportion that is less susceptible to verbal description than the beauty made up of separate elements.48

This change in literary conventions corresponds to a change in the visual culture of European society. Botticelli and Leonardo modified the classical ideal even as they revived it, and the ideal body type as represented in art has changed numerous times since the fifteenth century.49 What has remained constant, however, is the fixation on the nude (or seminude) body seen as a whole, positioned and depicted so that there is a harmonious relationship among its parts, bulges and hollows tastefully balanced, one contour leading gracefully into another. It is this unified, idealized body, not the real thing, that serves as the preferred fetish of Western culture since the Renaissance.

In the illustrations to his collage novels, Ernst both exposes and exploits this fetishistic image of the body. The disparity between the nude bodies (invariably female) and their realistic settings reminds us of their unreal character. Nevertheless, they continue to play their fetishistic role, arousing and consoling the viewer.50 In today's performance art the body generally retains its fetishistic character. Contemporary artists working in other modes, however, sometimes recycle Ernst's imagery in ways that defetishize the image of the body.

In *The Giant* (fig. 68), Jeff Wall combines the images of a nude woman and a university library. The twist, here, is that the two images are reproduced at different scales so that the woman towers like a giant over her surroundings. At first glance, the image seems to be a simple update of Ernst's collages, made with photographs and imaging software instead of engravings, scissors, and glue. The setting speaks of intellect, studiousness, self-discipline, while the nude, with her full breasts, trim figure, and erect posture suggests the untrammeled pleasures of the body. On closer inspection, however, the viewer discovers that the nude is not a twenty-something babe but a mature woman with gray hair and a wrinkled face who is studying a piece of paper. The anticipated image of the fetish breaks down. In our gallery of visual stereotypes, we have a place for sexy young women, and a place for desexualized older women; but we are not accustomed to seeing sexy older women.

A different kind of defetishization is at work in Kurt Kauper's *Gry Grant #1* (fig. 69). Kauper here invokes several different iconic images. One is of course the image of Grant himself, the suave, glamorous movie star, always impeccably attired. Another is the image of the desirable male nude (or seminude), familiar from advertisements, bodybuilding magazines, and the photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe.
The third is the nineteenth-century society portrait, showing a beautifully coiffed and
clothed woman posed in an elegant interior. (In his picture Kupfer alludes specifi-
cally to Ingres’s 1845 Portrait of the Comtesse d’Haussentville, in the Frick Collection.)
Each of these images could serve straightforwardly as a visual fetish, but in combina-
tion they are disorienting.

The Ernian image of a female nude appearing unexpectedly in an elegant in-
terior is by now familiar, retaining just enough shock value to serve as a staple of edgy
fashion photography (in the work of Helmut Newton, for instance). We are less ac-
customed, however, to encountering a male nude in this setting. Furthermore, Kupfer’s
handling of anatomy is subtly designed to subvert our desire to fetishize the body. The
muscular curves of the model’s abdomen and thighs are interrupted by tan lines cutting
across them, so that the exposed flesh of the groin looks pale and sad. Even in cul-
tures where the depiction of the male genitals is not taboo, their representation poses
an artistic problem, since they are so different in form and scale from the limbs sur-
rounding them. The ancient Greeks dealt with this by shrinking and stylizing the gen-
itals, so that they appear as a jewelry-like pendant to the muscular curve of the groin.52
Representing them as larger and more “realistic” (and yet not exaggerated in the man-
er of Robert Mapplethorpe), Kupfer makes it difficult to reconcile the resulting im-
personal sexuality of the groin with the cultivated charm of Grant’s visage.

The 1950s-style “good taste” of Kupfer’s setting also has a nostalgic value for
early twenty-first-century viewers, much as Ernst’s overstuffed Victorian interiors
did for the audience of the 1920s and 1930s. Hal Foster has drawn attention to the
links between Ernst’s collages and the interior as discussed in Walter Benjamin’s
essay, “Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century.” Benjamin describes the interior as a
kind of protective case for private life: “To live means to leave traces. In the interior,
these are emphasized. An abundance of covers and protectors, lines and cases is de-
vised, on which the traces of objects of everyday use are imprinted.” At the same
time, the habit of decorating with pictures and souvenirs of faraway places makes the
drawing room into “a box in the world theater”—a place from which reality can be
observed at a safe distance.53 Ernst’s recuperation of the Victorian interior provides a
model for contemporary illustrators such as Edward Gorey and Glen Baxter (and for
the literary Victorianism of J. K. Rowling’s Harry Potter and Philip Pullman’s Golden
Compass). Other artists, including the German Neo Rauch, adopt a strategy similar
to Kupfer’s, reviving the clothes, architecture, and attitudes of the conformist 1950s,
which by now seem not so much oppressive as reassuring.

WHILE THE FETISH USUALLY SERVES TO FEND OFF anxiety and aggression, it may also
do the opposite: excite these emotions and allow them to be discharged onto a symbolic
object. In the melodramatic narratives of nineteenth-century art and literature, beauty
and innocence are constantly under threat of death or violation.54 Edgar Allan Poe
wrote in his essay “Philosophy of Composition” that “the death…of a beautiful woman
is unquestionably the most poetical topic in the world.”55 This image recurs with
alarming regularity in paintings, among them Anne-Louis Girodet’s Burial of Atalanta,
1808 (Musée du Louvre, Paris), Paul Delaroche's *The Execution of Lady Jane Grey*, 1833 (National Gallery, London), and Léon Cogniet's *Tintoretto Painting His Dead Daughter*, 1843 (Musée des Beaux-Arts de Bordeaux). Shakespeare's tragic image of Ophelia throwing herself into a brook, singing old songs until she drowns, provided inspiration for paintings by Eugène Delacroix in 1844 and John Everett Millais in 1852; and Delacroix appropriated the motif of a beautiful girl floating lifelessly downstream for his *Young Martyr*, 1855 (Musée du Louvre, Paris).

A photograph from Gregory Crewdson’s Twilight series (fig. 70) reproduces the image of the drowned Ophelia but transfers it to the interior of a house whose living room has been mysteriously flooded. It typifies Crewdson's pictures, which are intended to look like film stills or entire films condensed into single images, and whose combination of quotidian detail (the out-of-date furniture, the lace curtains) with uncanny lighting effects is strongly reminiscent of movies such as Steven Spielberg's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. The discrepancy between action and setting characteristic of Ernst's collages has migrated from high art into popular culture and back again.

From Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley’s *Frankenstein* onward, science and medicine have played an important role in melodrama. Toward the end of the nineteenth century medicine and melodrama intersected in the psychiatric study of hysteria. Hysterical women seemed to be possessed by forces or even distinct personalities beyond their conscious control; their seizures often took the form of violent physical movements of a sexual character, punctuated by lapses into deathlike passivity. André Brouillet's 1887 canvas *Clinical Demonstration at the Salpêtrière* (fig. 71) shows the influential psychiatrist Jean Martin Charcot lecturing while his most famous patient, Blanche Wittman, gives a command performance of a hysterical seizure.

As David Lomas has demonstrated, Ernst and the Surrealists were fascinated by hysteria, which they saw as offering an escape from the fixed self of bourgeois culture. In Ernst's collages the medical laboratory becomes the stage for the Romantic melodrama of beauty under siege. In one plate from *La femme 100 têtes* (fig. 72), a courtroom is transformed into a medical theater with a beautiful unconscious patient recumbent on the operating table; the lawyers become doctors, staring uncertainly at their patient while two more hysterical women rise up in the audience, baring their breasts.

Sometimes the medical theater seems to become a torture chamber. This anxiety is particularly evident in representations of
surgery. In Thomas Eakins's *Gross Clinic*, 1875 (Jefferson Medical College of Thomas Jefferson University, Philadelphia), the patient's mother, at left, throws up her hands in horror at the wounds being inflicted on her son, even though the present injury will lead to his future well-being.

Ernst played on our fear that doctors are motivated not by benevolence but by pleasure in inflicting pain. *The Anatomy* (fig. 73), one of his early photo collages in this vein, anticipates the image of the dismembered body in a 1992 photograph by Cindy Sherman (fig. 74). In Sherman's photograph we see a series of plastic body parts (manufactured for medical instruction), reproducing a woman's head, shoulders, arms, breasts, hips, and sex. Lit in garish hues of green and yellow, they are arranged on a crumpled red satin sheet, as if to suggest an expensive hooker with her throat slit by a demented client. In Ernst's 1921 collage segments of a woman's (real) body are combined with mechanical elements and placed in a tin tub. We seem to see a dissected body placed in a tub so that the blood can drain out of it. The eeriness of Ernst's collage is increased by the play on the ambiguous border between animate and inanimate: what appears at first glance to be the spinal column proves, on closer inspection, to be a length of pipe. Both images are rendered more disturbing by the fact that the figures are upside down, their heads dangling limply at the bottom of the image while their genitals (realistic or abstract) are thrust into the place usually reserved for the head.

The linkage of desire and sadism in these examples is typical of early Modernist works ranging from Otto Dix's 1922 etching *Sex Murder* to Giacometti's 1932 sculpture *Woman with Her Throat Cut*. It is not clear whether these pieces condemn masculine aggression against women or celebrate it, and Sherman's photograph is freighted with a similar ambiguity. The transformation from living female body to inanimate mannequin has been read by some observers not as an expression of aggression but as a demonstration of the effect of the masculine gaze, suppressing the awareness of individual character in order to fetishize the body. Other critics, among them Julia Kristeva, have taken a more positive view of the image of the abject or disassembled body, seeing it as an allegory for the deconstruction and reconstruction of the self. In their view, if the natural body is defined by conventional social roles, the unnatural body is one that we can reinvent according to our own dreams and desires.

Apart from its sources in Surrealism, this line of thought seems to have been influenced by the English psychoanalytic school, especially R. D. Laing's popular books...
of the 1960s, such as The Politics of Experience. Arguing that schizophrenia reflects the horror of actual life in modern society, Laing proposed a curative descent into the depths of the soul, an experience he described in anatomical terms: “When our personal worlds are rediscovered and allowed to reconstitute themselves, we first discover a shambleness. Bodies half-dead; genitals dissociated from heart; heart severed from head; head dissociated from genitals…. Torn—body, mind, and spirit—by inner contradictions… a half-crazed creature in a mad world.”60 This vision of the inner self corresponds closely to the imagery in Hans Bellmer’s photographs, in Ernst’s Anatomy, and in Sherman’s work of the later 1980s and early 1990s.

At first glance modern images of dissected bodies such as those in Kiki Smith’s How I Know I’m Here (fig. 63) or Ernst’s own Stratified Rocks (fig. 61) also seem to be throwbacks to the grotesque body of medieval art and literature. There is an important difference between the medieval and the twentieth-century examples, however. The grotesque body is not really grotesque. It is more accurately described as a physical body within a worldview that accepts the coexistence of interior and exterior and the permeability of the boundary between self and world. In contrast, the dissected body in Sherman’s photographs, in Smith’s prints, and in Ernst’s photo collage is a shattered fetish; once unified, it has been ruptured by violence. Its multiplicity is not natural or self-sufficient because it is haunted by the memory of unity and perfection.61

This sense of ruptured wholeness finds its most effective symbol in the image of individual limbs that have become detached from the body. In one collage from La femme 100 têtes (cat. no. 80), a woman demands of a gentleman who is running away, “Open your bag, my good man.” The request is unnecessary, because we can already see the guilty evidence the man meant to conceal in his suitcase: it is a woman’s severed arm. Similarly, a recent sculpture by Robert Gober recreates, in meticulous detail, a man’s foot and calf emerging from the wall (fig. 75). The difference here is that the feminine arm in Ernst’s collage retains, even in its severed state, the sense of harmonious proportion that characterizes the fetishized body as a whole. Gober’s severed leg, by contrast, is a compressed version of the defetishized masculine body depicted by Kauper. Instead of evoking the desirable grace of a well-turned calf, it summons up the embarrassment of a hairy strip of pale flesh emerging in the gap between hiked-up trousers and too-short socks.

FINALLY, WE SHOULD CONSIDER THE IMPACT of some of Ernst’s technical innovations. Other than his assembling of collages from old engravings, the most significant of these is probably the technique of frottage, or rubbing. Ernst claimed to have discovered frottage in a mystical revelation inspired by the discussion of random forms and landscapes in Leonardo da Vinci’s Treatise on Painting. On August 10, 1925, finding himself obsessed with the patterns of grooves in the floorboards of his hotel room, he placed sheets of paper on the floor and rubbed them “at random” with a black lead pencil to see what images might emerge.62
A survey of Ernst’s first essays in the new technique suggests that the process was not in fact random. His compositions resemble illustrations for texts on natural history, a choice appropriate to the materials the rubbings are taken from: wood, leaves, chestnuts, and other natural substances. We are back in the encyclopedic world of Ernst’s collages of 1919–20. In the frottages, incongruities of scale induce a sense of surreality. Thus, wood grain is used to suggest the furrows of a field; individual chestnuts represent large clumps of foliage; and a single leaf rises up, as large as the tree trunks around it (cat. no. 57).

What is especially striking about the frottages, apart from their imagery, is the fact that they are not representations but impressions. What we see (at least in terms of texture) is the result not of artistic mimesis but of a cause-and-effect relationship between material and mark. In this sense, frottage is like photography, in which the image results from the interaction of reflected light and silver salts. Indeed, some of Ernst’s frottages resemble the contemporary photographs of Karl Blossfeldt, who specialized in close-up views of leaves and other natural forms. Blossfeldt framed his motifs against blank backgrounds and lit them from the side to accentuate their sculptural character. Ernst’s technique of rubbing with a pencil produced an effect of alternating light and dark areas like that in Blossfeldt’s photographs (which he may have seen when they were exhibited at the Nierendorf Gallery in Berlin in 1925).

Kiki Smith’s 1995 self-portrait My Blue Lake creates a similar effect. It is as if she had used her face as a printing plate, rubbing it with ink and then rolling it from side to side across the paper (fig. 76). The immediate antecedent for this process was Jasper Johns’s technique in his 1962 studies for Skin, in which he put oil on his face and hands, pressed them against sheets of paper, and then rubbed charcoal lightly over the sheets, so that it adhered to the oily areas but not to the dry paper. In fact, Smith used an unusual periphery camera to make her self-portrait, which she then printed as a photogravure. Difference in technique notwithstanding, the impulse underlying Smith’s work and Ernst’s frottages remains the same: to give a sense that the visible image is a literal trace and not a mimetic rendering. Smith, like Johns before her, lends new meaning to this procedure, reviving and transforming the mythology associated with Jackson Pollock, according to which the work of art is important, not as an image, but as a record of the artist’s activity—indeed, of the artist’s self.

In the late 1930s frottage was succeeded in Ernst’s work by the new technique of decalcomania, invented by his fellow Surrealist Oscar Dominguez. Decalcomania is effected by putting paints down on canvas, pressing a sheet of paper or glass on top of them, and then lifting the sheet. The combination of pressure and suction (produced
when the sheet is lifted) pushes and pulls the colors into strange, visceral ridges, like those on the surface of a sponge. As in frottage, the illusion of three-dimensional form is accentuated by shading that alternates rapidly from light to dark.

Ernst primarily deployed this technique in a series of landscapes, revising and enlarging his frottage landscapes of the late 1920s. The masterpiece of this new series was Europe after the Rain (cat. no. 135), begun in a European prison camp in 1940 and completed in 1942, after Ernst had escaped to the United States. Here decalcomania evokes a decaying landscape, where the organic forms of dying humans and animals mingle indistinguishably with the inorganic forms of buttes and mesas (recalling his 1920 collage Stratified Rocks). A sunny blue sky, slickly illusionistic, presides ironically over this scene of horror.

There is an unexpected affinity between such works by Ernst and the contemporary works of Ivan Albright, a leading American painter of the 1930s and 1940s. Albright’s style had evolved from a kind of mannerist Regionalism to a weird, caricatural realism. In effect, it was a home-grown American version of Surrealism, based on the multiplication and exaggeration of wrinkles and creases, so that every figure in his pictures seemed to be a hundred years old, and every surface seemed to be decaying. A similar combination of Surrealist imagery and hyperrealistic paint handling appeared in the canvases of Pavel Tchelitchew and David Alfaro Siqueiros, artists championed by the Museum of Modern Art at the same time Albright was in vogue.

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, after the “triumph” of Abstract Expressionism, this kind of creepy, tactile Surrealism no longer seemed to be an avant-garde style. And so it migrated to the realm of popular illustration, where it proved to be just the right vehicle for the horrific, blood-and-guts comic books of the era, such as Tales from the Crypt (see fig. 77). Public outcry against these comics led to a hearing in front of the Senate Committee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency and the institution of a new Comics Code forbidding their kind of imagery. The memory lingered on, however, inspiring R. Crumb and the other artists who began to draw underground comics in the late 1960s. The style’s weirdness and creepiness, its claustrophobia, and its insistence on embarrassing details of anatomy were perfectly suited for mocking the sanitized facade of mainstream American culture. More recently, creepy Surrealism
has recentered the world of high art in the work of artists such as Mike Kelley and Raymond Pettibon (see fig. 78), whose small, deliberately offhand drawings offer casual homage to the banished comics of the early 1950s. Other contemporary artists share Ernst’s fascination with the physical substance of paint but embrace it as a source of visual pleasure. In David Reed’s paintings, for instance (see fig. 79), the studied improvisation of Abstract Expressionism generates compositions of measured, baroque elegance. At first glance, his brushwork recalls the thick, painterly strokes of Willem de Kooning. However, Reed’s paint seems to have been applied with a squeegee rather than a brush: the pigment modulates from dense to thin and back again across the width of each stroke. As in Ernst’s decalcomanias, the smooth modulation of density creates a quasi-photographic illusion of three-dimensional modeling. The brushstrokes look like satin ribbons twisting and turning in space. The coils of paint are sublime not visceral. But Reed fights against the sheer visual seductiveness of his technique by dividing his canvases into rectangular quadrants or by outlining the twisting skeins of modulated paint with bands of flat color. Another artist, William Wood, utilizes the illusionism of the squeegee technique to create sci-fi abstractions that look like microphotographs of leaf tissue or of molecules arrayed in a crystal.

BEHIND THE DAZZLING VARIETY OF MAX ERNST’S OEUVRE, as seen over the course of decades, a few basic antitheses are visible: landscape and figure, grotesque realism and fetishism, the abstract space of Cubism and the perspectival space of Surrealism. These remain, to a striking extent, the oppositions that define the situation of art today, at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The Enlightenment idea of historical progress suggests that the story of modern art should be the story of a transition from one category to another: from fetishism to realism, or from perspectival space to two-dimensional space. Perhaps this was credible in 1860 or 1960. Today, however, the idea of progress no longer seems useful as a basis for thinking about modern art. It has become evident that the issues defined in the work of modern masters such as Picasso, Duchamp, and Ernst remain the crucial issues of contemporary art. The yardstick of innovation once used for the avant-garde no longer serves to measure artistic achievement. What counts, instead, is the creation of a distinctive personal idiom or a distinctive response to the challenging realities of a global society. From his first collages to mature masterworks such as Europe after the Rain, Ernst demonstrated what it meant to be an artist in a world of constant change.
1. In the catalogue for his 1936 exhibition, *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1936), p. 13, Alfred H. Barr Jr. wrote that the goal of the Surrealists was to expand the “freedom of the creative imagination.” This remained the orthodox wisdom about Surrealism even in the 1960s. See, for instance, William S. Rubin’s comments in his introduction to *Dada, Surrealism, and Their Heritage*, exh. cat. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1968), p. 15. The problem with Surrealism as defined in this way was that later movements such as Minimalism and Pop had little use for traditional ideas of the “creative imagination.”

2. Historically, Surrealism had been understood primarily in terms of the concepts of automation and the unconscious, which played prominent roles in the writings of André Breton, the official leader of the Surrealist movement. Krauss now proposed that these be supplemented by two new concepts taken from the writings of Bataille: *informe* (formlessness) and *broueuse* (lousey). *Informe* challenged not just the categories of traditional art but also the very idea of categories. *Broueuse* signified the rotation of the image of the human body from “the axis of inoffensiveness” (associated with an upright posture) to the “axis of material existence” (associated with animals and with the lower bodily functions). These concepts are powerful because they can apply to either content or form: a photograph of water might be *informe* and so might a painting by Jackson Pollock. See Rosalind Krauss, “Corpus Delicti,” in Rosalind Krauss and Jane Livingston, with Dawn Ades, *L’oeuvre vide: Photography and Surrealism*, exh. cat. (Washington, D.C.: Corcoran Gallery of Art; New York: Abbeville Press, 1985), pp. 55–100, esp. pp. 64–65. Krauss’s novel focus on Bataille seems to have been prompted by Denis Hollier’s book *La prise de la conscience* (Paris: Gallimard, 1974) and by his anthology *Le collage de sociologie*, 1937–1939 / textes de Georges Bataille (Paris: Gallimard, 1979). Bataille had also received attention in Dawn Ades’s exhibition catalogue *Dada and Surrealism Reviewed* (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1978), pp. 228–49.

3. The idea of *broueuse*, for instance, is clearly operative in Carl Andre’s sculpture of 1966 to 1969, which consist of bricks or metal plates arranged on the floor. Although his work seems rigorously abstract, its placement links it subliminally to the human body. Discussing his 1966 sculpture *Lever*, a row of bricks placed on the floor, Andre remarked: “All I am doing is putting Brancusi’s Endless Columns on the ground in stead of the sky. Most sculpture is epiphanic with the male organ in the air. In my work Priapus is down to the floor. The enganged position is to roll along the earth”; quoted in Ennio De Concini, *Carl Andre*, exh. cat. (The Hague: Gemeentemuseum, 1969), p. 40. Similarly, Robert Morris valorized *informe* in a 1968 essay, “Arte Form” (*Artforum* 6, no. 8 [April 1968], pp. 33–35). Minimalist artists in general justified the repetitive symmetry of their work as a rejection of outdated humanist ideals. Building on this rhetoric, Krauss argued in a 1973 essay, “Senser and Sensibility: Reflection on Post ’60s Sculpture” (*Artforum* 12, no. 3 [November 1973], pp. 43–53), that Abstract Expressionist painting aimed to express the artist’s private self, while Minimalist sculpture demonstrated that there is no private self—and that the self exists solely in its interaction with others. Krauss buttressed her argument with citations from Ludwig Wittgenstein and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. In her later writings, these authorities were replaced by Jacques Lacan and Roland Barthes. But the point remained the same: that the integrity of the self is a delusion, that we are torn apart by social forces beyond our control, that the wholeness of the body is merely a mask for the fragmentation of the soul.


5. Max Ernst, “Beyond Painting,” trans. Dorothy Tanning, in Max Ernst: Beyond Painting and Other Writings by the Artist and His Friends, ed. Robert Motherwell (New York: Wittenborn, Scholz, 1948), pp. 3–4. This essay was first published as “Vues de demi-sommeil,” in *Béton’s Journal La revolución surrealista*, nos. 9–10 (October 1, 1927), p. 7. The importance of wood grain in the dream suggests that the narrative actually dates from 1925, when Ernst discovered fototag. The automatist procedure, which begins with a pattern of random markings in which imagery is found, offered a visual counterpart to the practice of automatic writing. As such, it became a commonplace of Surrealist technique. Joan Miro, for instance, implied that he spread paint oil his canvas and then discovered images within it; see James Johnson Sweeney, *Joan Miro*, exh. cat. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1941), p. 53. The Surrealists found a precedent for this procedure in Leonardo di Vinci’s *Pintura on Painting* (which Ernst referred to in “Beyond Painting”), and contemporary authors also accorded it a central role in the origin of art. George Luker, for instance (*L’art primitif* [Paris: Gaston Duvoisin, 1930], pp. 33, 61–65), suggested that the first cave artists had started with blank surfaces but had recognized and augmented the subjective natural contours of cave walls. On some of the later history of the idea of found imagery, see Pepe Karmel, “A Sum of Destructions,” in Jackson Pollock: New Approaches, ed. Kirk Varnedoe and Pepe Karmel (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1998), pp. 87–88.


7. WilliamCamfield, *Max Ernst, Dada, and the Dream of Surrealism*, exh. cat. (Houston: Menil Collection; Munich: Prestel, 1993), chap. 3, n. 38, cites two key publications by Dirk Tiede in which Ernst’s source is identified and discussed: “Max Ernst’s Lebenritzel,” in *Max Ernst in Köln*, exh. cat. (Cologne: Kölnischer Kunstverein, 1980), pp. 206–40, and “Bibliothèque fantasmagorique—Une Neurerwerbung im Kunstrestreborn,” in *Max Ernst*, exh. cat. (Bonn: Kunst- museum Bonn, 1989), pp. 35–49. Ernst confuses matters by writing later in the passage, “Thus I obtained a faithful fixed image of my hallucination and transformed it into revealing themes my most secret desires” (quoted above p. 82)—from what had been before only some banal pages of advertising.” Although Ernst later used some images from advertisements, most of his early collages sources, including the Lebenritzel, are not advertising catalogues. It is possible that the reference to advertising here is an allusion to the extraordinary collage novel *What a Life!,* published in 1911 by E. V. Lucas, with Punch humorist George Morrow. *What a Life!* draws essentially from images found in an advertising catalogue. The Surrealists recognized Lucas’s use of found images as an important anticipation of their approach. See Werner Spies, *Max Ernst Collages: The Invention of the Surrealist Universe*, trans. John William Gabriel (London: Thames and Hudson, 1991), p. 247.

8. The firm of Les Fils d’Emile Deyrolle published both educational posters and scientific catalogues, such as the *Catalogue méthodique: Physique, instruments de précision, matériel de laboratoire, cabinets de physique et de chimie* (Paris: Les Fils d’Emile Deyrolle, 1907). The Deyrolle firm is still in business at its original address, 46 rue du Bac, although it is now primarily a taxidermist’s shop dedicated to rare specimens.

9. In “Beyond Painting,” p. 13, Ernst offers a Surrealist definition of collage,
not as a mechanical procedure of cutting and pasting but as "the chance meeting of two distant realities on an unfamiliar plane." The term "plane" here specifically seems to mean ground plane or background. Discussing the Lobnitzerr, the illustrated catalogue discovered in 1919, he comments (p. 14) that "the sheet absurdity of that collection ... brought forth an illusive succession of contradictory images... It was enough at that time to embellish these catalogue pages ... with a color, a pencil mark, a landscape foreign to the represented objects, the desert, a tempest, a geological cross-section, a floor, a single straight line signifying the horizon." Although Ernst became increasingly adept at seamlessly joining material from different sources, in his early collages the "contradictory" combinations of images are often already present in the source material. In The Master's Bedroom, for instance, the animals on the left (lamb, bear, whale, bats, and so forth) and the domestic furniture on the right (bed, table, cupboard) are all there in the original image; see the relevant sheet from the Bibliotheca Vindobonensia reproduced in Camfield, Max Ernst, chap. 4, n. 68.


12. For the five orders of classical architecture and the classical renderings of such, see Schmidt, Diderot, pp. 245, 242–43.


15. Ibid., pp. 49 (text and n. 59).


23. Other Dada artists employed similar medical imagery in less disguised form. Note, for example, the cutaway torso and exposed brain in Racial Haussmann's Dada Triumphal, 1920 (private collection), reproduced in Camfield, Max Ernst, p. 74, fig. 49.


25. See, for instance, Atsuo Gotoh's glass sculpture Untitled (Human Digestive System), 1961 (Staatsgalerie Stuttgart), reproduced in Gudrun Inhoden, Staatsgalerie Stuttgart: Contemporary Art (Stuttgart: Staatsgalerie Stuttgart, 1999), p. 23. The coiled and glistening loops of spaghetti in tomato sauce that often appear in James Rosenquist's paintings of the early 1960s seem intended to suggest digestion in general and intestines in particular; in Rosenquist's I Love You with My Food, 1961 (Moderna Museet, Stockholm), the juxtaposition of the spaghetti with a car grille and a pair of lovers evokes a backstage encounter and a bloody accident.


28. Ibid., p. 317; on the symbolism of the female genitals, see pp. 312–13.

29. Ibid., pp. 317, 320.

30. Ibid., p. 322, n. 8.

31. Ibid., p. 320.

32. Ibid.


35. Camfield, Max Ernst, p. 158.

36. See Camfield's summary of various interpretations of this work; ibid., pp. 137–38.


38. See Günter Meibek, "Im Zeichen des Handschachtes: Max Ernst, Klinger and Oedipus Rex," in Max Ernst in Köln, pp. 257–77, cited in Camfield, Max Ernst, p. 114, 345, n. 93. Meibek and Camfield identify Klinger's 1881 print cycle The Theft of the Goblet, with its series of uncanny images, as a source for Ernst's 1922 painting Oedipus Rex: A Glove. Abduction, the Klinger etching reproduced by Camfield (ibid., p. 345), also seems to have served as the inspiration for plate 190 in Ernst's Une semaine de bonté.


40. Ibid., pp. 96–97, 126.
41. Ibid., p. 98.


43. See, for instance, plate 30 of La femme 100 têtes, in which the classical whiteness of the nude is highlighted by its proximity to the tonal figure of an African American boy; the Neoclassical source for the nude is reproduced in Spies, Max Ernst Collages, fig. 689.


46. On medieval representations of the body, see Kenneth Clark, The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1956), pp. 400–415. For Clark, medieval representations of the body display a willful ugliness that expresses the Christian doctrine of original sin. While this interpretation may be apt in some cases, in most it perhaps is not, but rather reflects Clark’s strong preference for the classical ideal.


49. On changes in the ideal body type and their relation to fashion, see Anne Hollander, Seeing through Clothes (New York: Viking, 1978), esp. ch. 2, "Nudity.”

50. Lomas (Haunted Self), pp. 76–83; identifies the sexual provocative imagery of Ernst’s collage novels as an assault on the patriarchal order of Victorian society. I am not convinced that Ernst’s imagery here is as subversive as Lomas argues it to be.

51. The setting of Kauper’s Cary Grant #1, with its mantelpiece and mirror, seems implicitly to refer to Ingres’s Comtesse d’Haussonville. In April 2004 I mentioned this to the Ingres scholar Robert Rosenblum, who is my colleague at New York University. Soon thereafter, Professor Rosenblum, in conversation with Kauper, confirmed that he had Ingres’s picture in mind when he painted Cary Grant #1.

52. Kenneth J. Dover, Greek Homosexuality (New York: Random House, 1978), pp. 125–27, suggests that, in life as well as art, the Greeks believed that small male genitals were more attractive than larger ones.


56. Lomas, Haunted Self, ch. 2: “Seductions of Hysteria,” pp. 53–93; Lomas (pp. 74, 88–89) identifies the setting of Ernst’s collage in La femme 100 têtes (chap. 1, p. 2) as the studio in which Charcot had his patients photographed. For another psychological interpretation of Ernst’s collage novels, see Foster, Compulsive Beauty, pp. 75–84.


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A Retrospective

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THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART
New York

YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS
New Haven and London