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Inspiration and Unreachable Paradigm – *L'art des fous* and Surrealism

The group around André Breton looked at the art made in institutions in a different way to, for example, the German expressionists before the First World War. Beyond national differences in the interpretation and treatment of psychiatric problems, and the knowledge that specific artists, for example André Breton and Max Ernst, had of psychiatry, what is especially important is the experience of the madness of the First World War that later led the surrealists not only to a politicization but also to fundamentally interrogate concepts of rationality and reason. Much more radically than the expressionists, they took the *fous* as an example and posited what they understood of their thinking, actions and creativity cogently against the traditional status quo – of which, to them, psychiatrists were excellent representatives.

A misunderstanding has been pointed out; that the surrealists incorrectly conflated their criticism of the existing symbolic order with the crisis in the symbolic order subjectively experienced by the mentally ill.¹ Such an analysis misjudges the tension the surrealists deliberately maintained between reason and insanity. This also becomes clear in their attitude towards “the art of the insane”.

Artistry of the Mentally Ill

What, however, did the surrealists know of this art form? Today it is a commonplace to call Hans Prinzhorn's book *Bildnerei der Geisteskranken* (*Artistry of the Mentally Ill*) (1922) the “surrealists' Bible”.² But what does this phrase mean exactly – how can we interpret it sensibly? What status did the book really have in Paris at the start of the 1920s?

It was not the first independent writing on the subject in France. In 1907, the psychiatrist Paul Meunier, under the pseudonym of Marcel Rejá, brought out his book *L'art chez les fous* which already emphasised the aesthetic qualities of different types of works of asylum art.³ *L'art chez les fous* was read by art enthusiasts and surely also by artists, but it was not notably influential. This may have been due to historical circumstances, to the presumably small print run, probably also to the insignificant appearance of this paperback edition with 17 black-and-white illustrations.

In contrast, the look of *Artistry of the Mentally Ill* already reveals the fact that for the author, aesthetic and not medical elements were primary (fig. 1).

With its roughly 350 pages in 26 × 21.5 cm format, bound in black linen with white embossed lettering, the publication was reminiscent of an art book. The quality of the paper, even more the 187 illustrations, of which 20 were on plates, made this even clearer. Up to that point, no publication had shown so many works of this kind, and in such quality. Therefore *Artistry of the Mentally Ill* made this subject matter visible for the first time. Probably because of this, it immediately became a success. The first edition of 1,500 copies sold out quickly, the second appeared soon after in 1923.

Its reception as an illustrative work is, of course, even more justifiable in foreign countries. At that time in Paris, only a few people could read German. Thus for the artists around André Breton the “Bible” was arguably above all a ‘Picture Bible’.

Would reading the text have softened the emphasis? The careful term “Bildnerei” (artistry) in the title, and the subtitle: *A Contribution to the Psychology and Psychopathology of Configuration*, seem at first to contradict its appearance

as an art book. However, Prinzhorn was not much interested in diagnostic views. For him, at stake was nothing less than a new basis for looking at the art made by people who had become extreme outsiders because of their unique mental experiences, and also through their isolation in institutions. Especially because these men and women created work that was supposedly outside all tradition and with no thought of an audience, it was more authentic for him, “more real” than work by professional artists. The latter, in spite of their “longing for inspired creativity”, ultimately produced “intellectual substitutes” in his eyes.⁴

Prinzhorn persisted in the ideology that art was essentially the creation of expression, and therefore only accessible through empathy. Both this view, and his preference for expressive work, justify to call his book a “Late Expressionist Manifesto”.⁵ But at the same time, in this the author stands at the crossroads of new interpretations. Because of his experiences in the War, from which he returned as a “nihilist”,⁶ he shared with the surrealists a rejection of traditional reason-dominated culture. Like them, he turned to psychoanalysis (something that was still generally inconceivable for psychiatrists) and tried to connect – like some surrealists⁷ – the ideas of Freud and Jung.⁸ And in his fascination for the “uncanny” in some institutionalised works, which limits rational and traditional aesthetic understanding (in particular with the drawings by Natterer, see cat. 13, 15, 76, 77), he seems to have sensed the new qualities of ‘surrealist aesthetics’.

However, at first only Prinzhorn’s thoughts about the artistry of the mentally ill and the art of the time became known to French speaking audiences through an article he wrote for the Belgian magazine *Variétés* in 1929.⁹ Later,

in the beginning of the 1930s, Ernst Jolowicz translated sections of *Artistry of the Mentally Ill* at meetings of a small circle at Sainte-Anne Hospital in Paris.¹⁰ And in 1955, a chapter of the book (about August Natterer), translated by Meret Oppenheim, appeared in the magazine *Medium*.¹¹ A complete French translation was only published in 1984.¹²

The *Variétés* article appeared in time for an exhibition of *Artistes Malades* in the Paris gallery of Max Bine, in which 36 loans from Heidelberg were also to be seen for the first time.¹³ Our exhibition reconstructs the selection, which must also have been noticed by the surrealists (cat. 56–91). Alongside this, the collection of the psychiatrist Auguste Marie was exhibited, as it had been at another Paris gallery at the turn of 1927/28 (see cat. 49–55 and text by von Beyme). To our knowledge, there were no other exhibitions on the subject in Paris. In terms of publications, we can only mention the small book by the psychiatrist Jean Vinchon, *L’Art et la folie* (1924); it proffered 28 illustrations, but a substantially more conventional interpretation than Prinzhorn’s work.¹⁴

Four creative procedures

The surrealists referred to *l’art des fous* as an inspiration for their own art only in general terms, if at all. Therefore in the exhibition we look at “morphological relationships” (Spies) between asylum art and surrealist art, and correspondences in creative processes – as a base for further discussion. Using four of these processes, we juxtapose drawings, prints and paintings by surrealists with works from Prinzhorn’s book.

1. Automatic drawings

Écriture automatique is at the birth of surrealism, and Breton emphasised it over and over again as the most important surrealist technique. The transferring of the idea of creation without the control of consciousness onto drawing was obvious. André Masson was a pioneer in this (see text by Steinlechner). We juxtapose four of his “automatic drawings” from 1924–26 with “scribbles”, “ornamental” and “playful-symbolic drawings” plus one ‘informal’ painting from the Prinzhorn collection.¹⁵

Two sheets of paper that must come from a mediumistic context (cat. 7 and 11) remind us that as early as 1900, such “received” works were described as “automatism”.¹⁶ However, the surrealists probably knew that French psychiatrists also used the concept for other written and drawn productions by asylum inmates, for example the drawings of the so-called Baron de Ravallet (real name Albert G.) (cat. 51).¹⁷

2. The combination of unrelated elements

The second important creative process of surrealism also goes back to *écriture automatique*. For the authors André Breton and Philippe Soupault, the appeal of the classic automatic texts in *Les Champs Magnétique* (1920) lay in the poetic power of unexpected word arrangements. In the first surrealist manifesto, Breton refers to it in Pierre Reverdy’s call for the creation of images “born [...] from a juxtaposition of two more or less distant realities”: “The more the relationship between the two juxtaposed realities is distant and true, the stronger the image will be”.¹⁸ As a prototypical example, the comparison of a young man’s beauty with the “unexpected meeting between a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissecting-table” in the Comte de Lautréamont’s *Chants de Maldoror* (1869) was repeatedly cited.¹⁹

The surrealists developed different processes to generate amazing analogous visual images. One was the *Cadavre exquis* (cat. 19, 20), a “game with folded paper in which a sentence or a drawing is constructed by several people, without each knowing the contribution of the previous player.”²⁰ Max Ernst developed the combination of unrelated picture elements as a technique from Dadaistic collages, and brought it to a high level of virtuosity, probably with a prior knowledge of drawings from psychiatric institutions (see my text). In fact there are also several examples of this way of working in the Heidelberg collection (cat. 13, 15, 17, 18, 20). Recently a suspicion has arisen that this accumulation corresponds to a widespread prejudice among psychiatrists of the time about what ‘mad art’ looked like, resulting in a pre-selection of work in their donations to Heidelberg.²¹

3. The paranoiac-critical method

A surrealist process which refers explicitly to insanity is the *paranoiac-critical method* developed by Salvador Dalí. For his visual double meanings (cat. 23, 25, 26, 28), which work like a picture puzzle, he refers to changes of perception in specific forms of mental crises (see text by Gorsen). Hans Bellmer creates pictures in a similar manner; in our example (cat. 28), the already ambiguous representation in a print is complicated further by overprinting it with another etching. Here the dense association of different sexual images has generated formidable graphic expression.

Corresponding ambiguities can be found in pictures in the Prinzhorn collection (cat. 22, 24, 27). Nevertheless, information about the artists is usually too insubstantial to justify the adjective “paranoiac” as a kind of diagnosis. Our juxtaposition does not include *The Witch’s Head*

by August Natterer, which has frequently been compared to Dalí (fig. 2) since it is neither illustrated in *Artistry of the Mentally Ill*, nor was it present in the mentioned Paris show in 1929. It is doubtful that Dalí ever saw the picture.

4. Figure amalgamations

The fourth surrealist picture process was also used by Hans Bellmer: the amalgamation of figures and their components (cat. 32, 39), sometimes readable as growing or sprouting out of each other (cat. 34). This technique also allowed him to depict a condensing of sexual imagination. Like an anagram, eroticized body parts are freely fused and multiplied (see the contribution by von Beyme).

Similar approaches define some pictures of the Heidelberg collection. The combinations here are especially evocative. All four creative techniques sidestep easy rational understanding of the representations and lead to forms of thinking close to primary processes. But the last of the four juxtapositions especially influences the perception of the one and of the other. Inevitably, the viewer starts to erotize the pictures of Klett (cat. 30, 31) and Anderes (cat. 33). And through the sadistic tendencies in the drawing of Schneller (cat. 35), those in Bellmer's *Céphalopode* become clear (cat. 36).

Drawings and paintings by Unica Zürn offer many more examples of figure fusions (cat. 41–48). We have assembled a small retrospective of this 'late surrealist' (and lifelong companion of Hans Bellmer) in the exhibition, because she was one of few artists close to Breton who knew insanity not just as an idea (see texts by Brand-Claussen and Safarova). For the first time, an overview of her artistic development includes two pictures which she drew in 1962/63 while staying in Sainte-Anne Hospital (cat. 46, 47).

True surrealism

Finally, the surrealist's perception of the art of asylum inmates incorporates their collecting and including it in their group exhibitions (see text by von Beyme). Thus Breton acquired two *objets d'aliénés* (cat. 49, 50) as early as 1929 (at that early Paris exhibition with *artistes maladies*). These are examples of a specific type of surrealist object, beside the *objets naturels*, *objets trouvés*, *objets onirique* etc.²²

For MacGregor, the surrealists paradoxically sought "to create a pictorial art that already existed" – in *l'art des fous*.²³ Still more than for pictures or sculptures made by "madmen", this surely accounts for *objets d'aliénés*. For the surrealists, they were not only a model (for Breton for example, cf. p. 161), but as "finds" from the realm beyond reason, they are examples of a true surrealism – inasmuch as acts of maniacs that would not be carried out by the psychically healthy could be seen as truly surrealist acts.

This is the reason why, for Breton, the memory of the soldier of Saint-Dizier who believed the World War was a simulation and who "conducted" the hail of shell fire on the battlefield (see p. 116–118), "never faded"²⁴ – and surely also the reason for the reprint of the 1926 newspaper report in *La Révolution Surréaliste* about two Czech asylum inmates who thought they were wild animals and tore each other to pieces (see p. 134–136). And is not *Nadja* (1928) a report of a genuinely surrealist life, which was coherent in a way that was never possible for the psychically stable members of the group?

These considerations shed a special light on the "famous"²⁵ revolver of Guillaume Pujolle (cat. 1) which Breton included in the exhibition *Le Surréalisme* at the Maeght Gallery in Paris in 1947.²⁶ The object will inevitably have called up

from memory that position in the second surrealist Manifesto (1930) which has generated so much discussion: "The simplest surrealist act consists of dashing down into the street, pistol in hand, and firing blindly, as fast as you can pull the trigger, into the crowd."²⁷ – Although many a surrealist may have admitted that they have already once dreamed of doing this, it would need a madman to carry it out.

Notes

- 1 H. Foster, "Blinded Insights: On the Modernist Reception of the Art of the Mentally Ill", *October* 97 (Summer 2001), 3–30, especially 18–30.
- 2 W. Schmied, „Prinzhorn und die Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts“, in Klages, *Prinzhorn und die Persönlichkeitspsychologie*, ed. F. Tenigl (*Hestia* 1986/87) (Bonn, 1987), 65–79, S. 72; W. Spies called it "one of the holy books of the Surrealists" already in 1967 ("Genie und Irrsinn. Zur Ausstellung 'Art Brut' in Paris", *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 16 May 1967, 12); J. M. MacGregor "underground Bible" of the Paris of its time (*The Discovery of the Art of the Insane* [Princeton, 1989], 281).
- 3 M. Réja, *L'Art chez les fous* (Paris, 1907). For earlier interest in asylum art in France cf. MacGregor, *The Discovery of the Art of the Insane*, 103–116, 170 ff.
- 4 H. Prinzhorn, *Artistry of the Mentally Ill*. [1922], transl. Eric von Brockdorff (New York, 1972), 272.
- 5 B. Brand-Claussen, "Prinzhorn's *Bildnerie der Geisteskranken* – ein spätexpressionistisches Manifest", in *Vision und Revision einer Entdeckung* (Heidelberg, 2001), 11–31.
- 6 H. Prinzhorn, "Die erdentrückbare Seele", in *Der Leuchter* 8 (1927), 277–296, 279.
- 7 R. Zuch, *Die Surrealisten und C.G. Jung* (Weimar, 2004).
- 8 See T. Röske, *Der Arzt als Künstler. Ästhetik und Psychotherapie bei Hans Prinzhorn (1886–1933)* (Bielefeld, 1995), 221 ff.
- 9 H. Prinzhorn, "A propos de l'art des aliénés", in *Variétés* Vol. 1 (1929), 577–581; Breton's remarks about Prinzhorn's book in his essay "L'art des fous, la clé des champs" (1948) lead to the assumption that he only read the *Variétés* article.
- 10 See I. Hägele, *Der Einfluß von Art Brut auf Richard Lindner* (Mikrofiche-edition) (Berlin, 2003), 111–118.
- 11 H. Prinzhorn, "August Neter" (transl. M. Oppenheim), in *Médium: Communication surréaliste*, Nouvelle Série 4 (January 1955), 27–30.
- 12 H. Prinzhorn, *Expressions de la folie. Dessins, peintures, sculptures d'asile*, ed. Marielène Weber, transl. Marielène Weber and Alain Brousse (Paris, 1984).
- 13 The issue of *Variétés* was published on 15 March, the exhibition at Max Bine was shown from the 31 May to 15 June 1929.
- 14 J. Vinchon, *L'Art et la folie* (Paris, 1924); a revised edition was published in 1950.
- 15 Prinzhorn, *Artistry of the Mentally Ill*, 44, 46 and 261.
- 16 R. Cardinal, "Surrealism and the Paradigm of the Creative Subject", *Parallel Visions* (Princeton, 1992), 94–119, 96 and 105. For the relationship between mediumism and surrealism, see P. Gorsen, "Der Eintritt des Mediumismus in die Kunstgeschichte. Das Unerklärliche – der surrealistische Schlüssel", in *The Message. Kunst und Okkultismus*, Kunstmuseum Bochum (Cologne, 2007), 17–32.
- 17 M. Leroy, "Dessins d'un dément précoce avec état maniaque", *Bulletin de la Société Clinique de Médecine Mentale* 4 (1911), 303–308. I thank Marielène Weber for pointing this text out to me.
- 18 A. Breton, "Manifesto of Surrealism" [1924] *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, transl. R. Seaver and H. R. Lane (Ann Arbor, 1972), 1–47, 20.
- 19 A. Breton, *Entretiens – Gespräche* (Amsterdam, 1996), 51.
- 20 [A. Breton], "Cadavre exquis", in *Dictionnaire Abrégé du Surréalisme* (Paris, 1938), 6.
- 21 J. Katerndahl, *Bildnerie von Schizophrenen* (Hildesheim, 2005), especially 53 f., 68, 91.
- 22 See the entry "Objet" in *Dictionnaire Abrégé du Surréalisme*, 18 f.
- 23 MacGregor, *The Discovery of the Art of the Insane*, 291.
- 24 Breton, *Entretiens*, 35.
- 25 H. Bellmer in a letter to G. Ferdière 24 February 1948, quoted after Alexander Stefanov, *Considérations sur l'œuvre des Guillaume Pujolle*, Maitrise d'histoire de l'art, Panthéon Sorbonne-Université Paris (Paris, 1999), 42.
- 26 *Ibid.*, 42–44 and 135.
- 27 A. Breton, "Second Manifest of Surrealism" [1930], in Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, 117–187, 125.