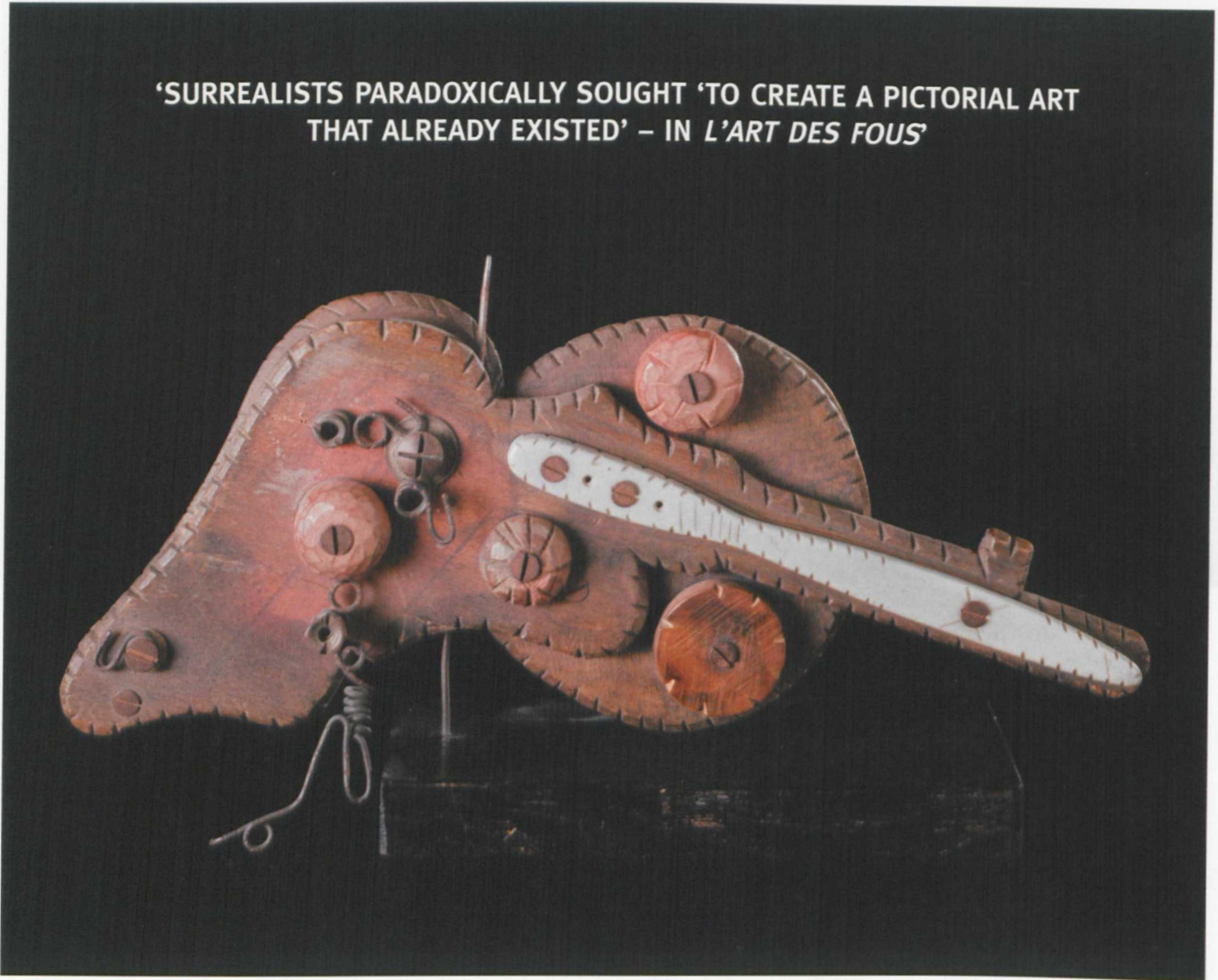# INSPIRATION AND UNREACHABLE PARADIGM – 'L'ART DES FOUS' AND SURREALISM

Thomas Röske discusses the history of Outsider Art and its relationship with Surrealism

'SURREALISTS PARADOXICALLY SOUGHT 'TO CREATE A PICTORIAL ART THAT ALREADY EXISTED' – IN *L'ART DES FOUS*'
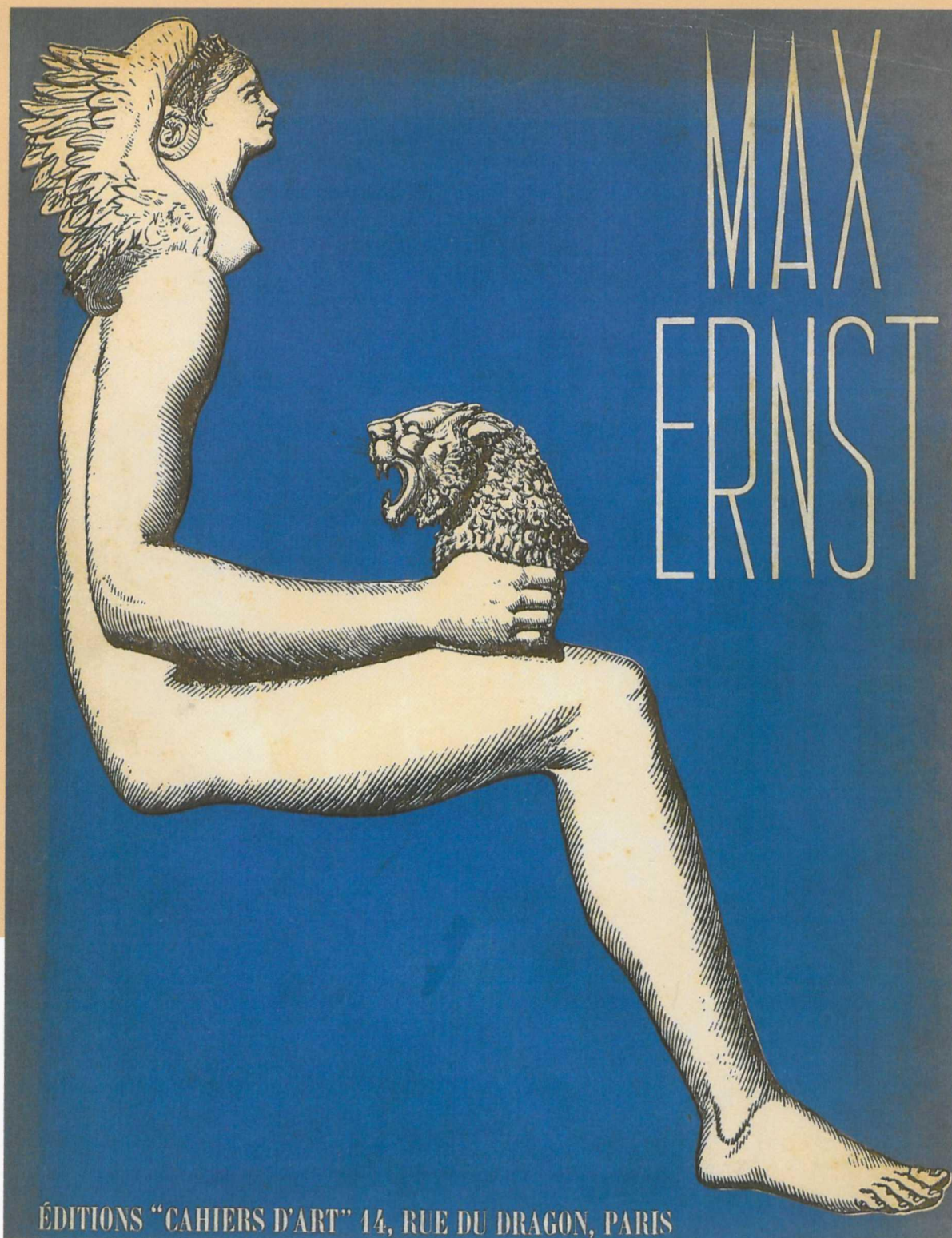
above
Guillaume Pujolle
Revolver, 1949–50
Wood, iron and plastic
5.9 x 9.4 x 2 ins
15 x 24 x 5 cm
Collection de l'Art Brut,
Lausanne.

opposite
August Klett (a.k.a. *Klotz*)
Fantastic drawings based on clouds, 1912
Pencil on document paper
8.2 x 6.5 ins
20.8 x 16.5 cm
Prinzhorn Collection, Heidelberg.

The group around André Breton looked at the art made in institutions in a different way than the German Expressionists before the First World War. Beyond national differences in the interpretation of psychiatric problems, and the knowledge that specific artists such as André Breton and Max Ernst had of psychiatry, what is especially important is the experience of the madness of the First World War, which not only politicised the Surrealists but also led them 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 against the traditional status quo – of which, to them, psychiatrists were excellent representatives.

1.)

(General v. Mackern. Exc. Orden, Silberspec.):
Neukastische Geschwungenenveraufdem Generall.

MAX ERNST

ÉDITIONS "CAHIERS D'ART" 14, RUE DU DRAGON, PARIS

Artistry of the mentally ill

What, however, did the Surrealists know of 'the art of the insane'? Today, it is commonplace to call Hans Prinzhorn's book *Bildnerei der Geisteskranken* (Artistry of the mentally ill) (1922) the 'Surrealist's Bible'. But what status did the book have in Paris at the start of the 1920s?

For France, it was not the first independent writing on the subject. 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. It 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 and probably also to the insignificant appearance of this paperback edition with 17 black and white illustrations.

In contrast, the appearance of *Artistry of the Mentally Ill* revealed the fact that for the author the aesthetic rather than the medical elements were primary. With roughly 350 pages in 10 x 8.5 inch format, bound in black linen with white embossed lettering, the publication was reminiscent of an art book. The quality of the paper and the 187 illustrations, of which 20 were in colour, made this even more apparent. Up to that

point, no publication had shown so many works of this kind or in such quality. *Artistry of the mentally ill* made this subject matter visible for the first time.

Its reception as an illustrative work was, 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*, (1) seem at first to contradict its appearance as an art book. However,

Prinzhorn was not so interested in diagnostic views. For him, what was 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. Particularly 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 and 'more real' than work by professional artists. The latter, in spite of their 'longing for inspired creativity', ultimately produced 'intellectual substitutes' in his eyes. 2)

Prinzhorn persisted in the ideology that art was
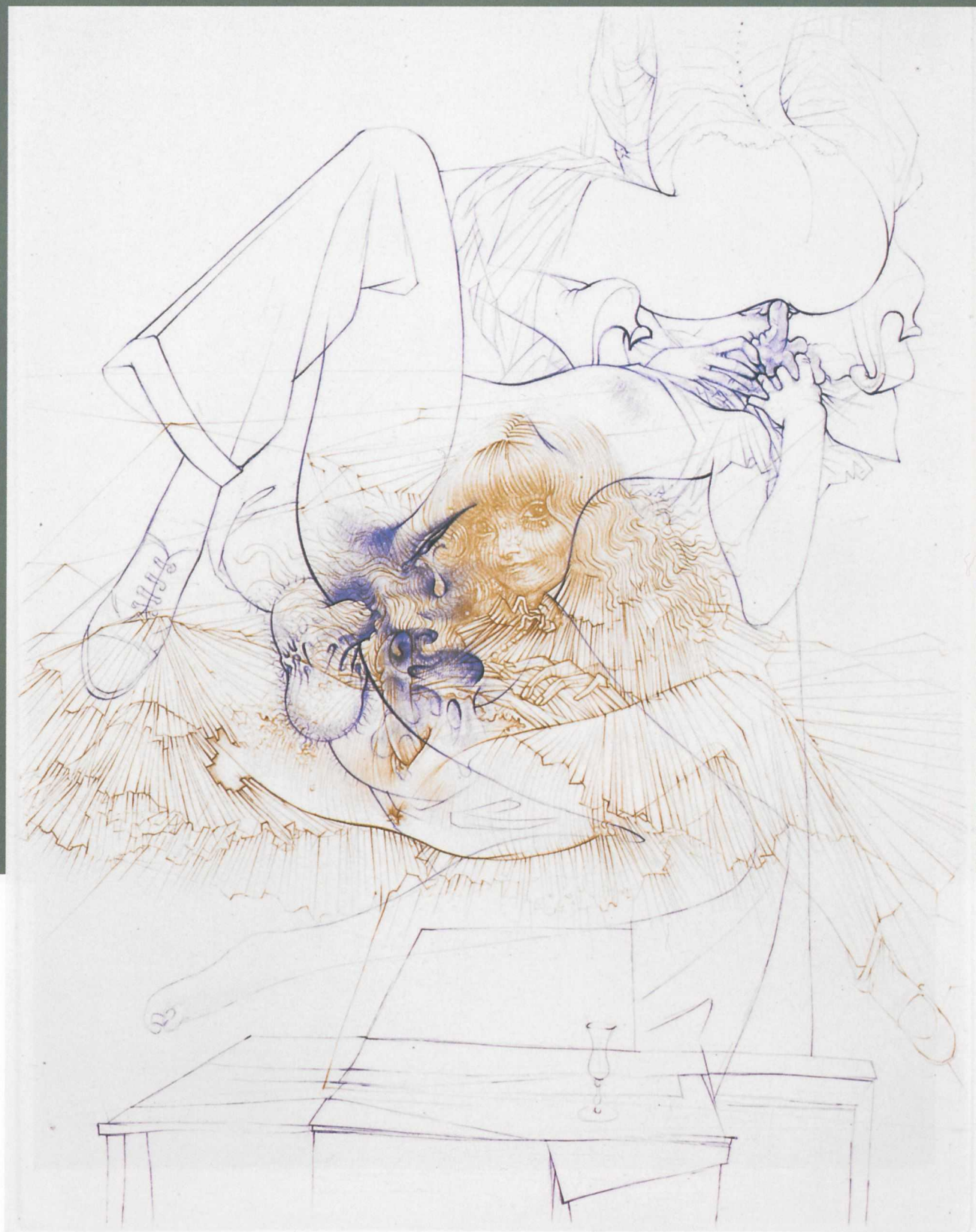
essentially the creation of expression, and therefore only accessible through empathy. Both this view and his preference for expressive work justify calling his book a *Late Expressionist Manifesto* (Brand-Claussen). But at the same time, the author stands here at the crossroads of new interpretations. Because of his experiences in the War, after which he defined himself as a 'nihilist', he shared with the Surrealists a rejection of a traditional view of culture dominated by Rationalism. Like them, he turned to psychoanalysis (something that was still generally inconceivable for psychiatrists) and tried to connect – like

some Surrealists – the ideas of Freud and Jung. And in his fascination for the 'uncanny' in some institutionalised works, which limit rational and traditional aesthetic understanding, he seems to have intuitively sensed the new qualities of 'Surrealist aesthetics'.

The first originals of the Heidelberg collection were to be seen at an exhibition of 'Artistes Malades' in the Paris gallery of Max Bine, which presented 36 loans from Heidelberg beside other works. This was surely noticed by the Surrealists; André Breton and Paul Eluard even bought works from this show.

Four creative processes

The Surrealists referred to *l'art des fous* as an inspiration for their own art only in general terms, if at all. Therefore, the 'morphological relationships' between works by asylum inmates and Surrealist artists are explored as a basis for further discussion. Four of these correspondences in creative processes are now considered.

*Écriture automatique* – automatic writing – was at the birth of Surrealism, and Breton repeatedly emphasised it as the most important Surrealistic technique. Transferring the idea of creation without the control of consciousness onto drawing was obvious; André Masson was a pioneer in this. It offers the possibility of juxtaposing his 'automatic drawings' from 1924–26 with 'scribbles' from the Prinzhorn collection.

As has already been stated, this kind of mediumistic drawing was described as 'automatism' as early as 1900. (3) However, the Surrealists probably knew that French psychiatrists also used the term for other written and drawn productions by asylum inmates.

The second important creative process of

**above**

Heinrich M., *Untitled*, undated
Pencil, coloured pencil and
pen with red ink on paper
8.4 x 6.7 ins
21.4 x 17 cm
Prinzhorn Collection, Heidelberg.

Carl Lange, *Ein Beweis göttlicher Gerechtigkeit* (A proof of divine justice), ca. 1900
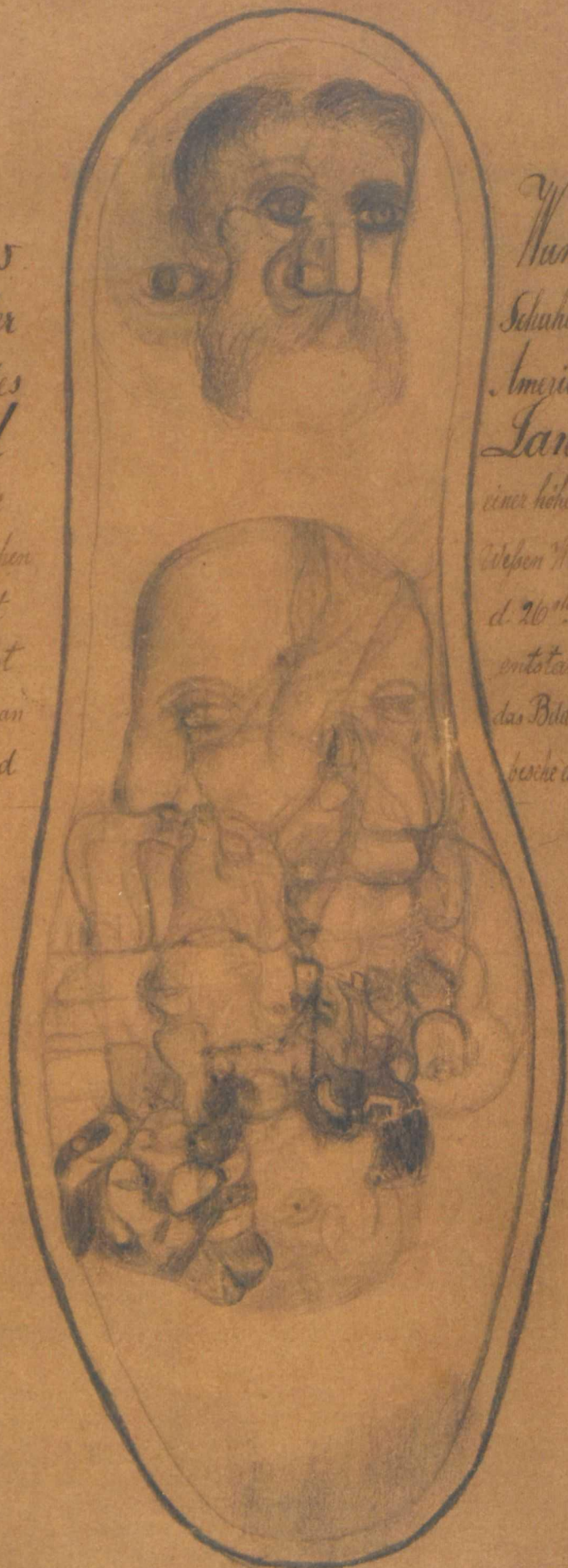
Carl Lange, *Das Wunder un der Schuheinlegesohle des Americaners Carl Lange* (*The miracle in the inserted sole of the American Carl Lange*), ca. 1898
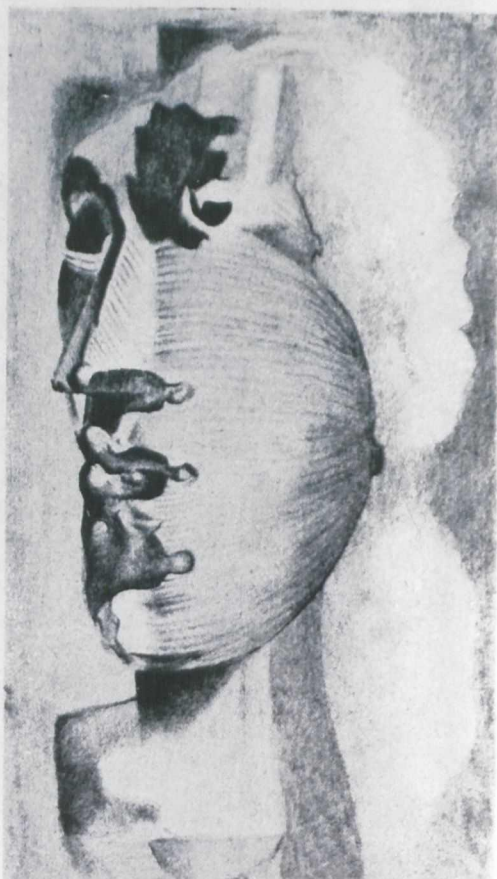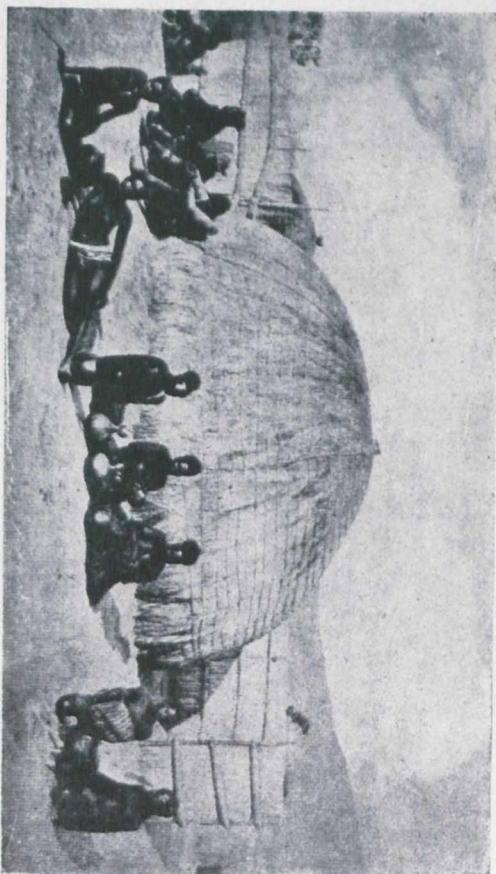
COMMUNICATION : Visage paranoïaque.

A la suite d'une étude, au cours de laquelle m'avait obsédé une longue réflexion sur les visages de Picasso et particulièrement ceux de l'époque noire, je cherche une adresse dans un tas de papiers et suis soudain frappé par la reproduction d'un visage que je crois de Picasso, visage absolument inconnu.

Tout à coup, ce visage s'efface et je me rends compte de l'illusion (?) L'analyse de l'image paranoïaque en question me vaut de retrouver, par une interprétation symbolique, toutes les idées qui avaient précédé la vision du visage.

André Breton avait interprété ce visage comme étant celui de Sade, ce qui correspondait à une toute particulière préoccupation de Breton quant à Sade.

Dans les cheveux du visage en question Breton voyait une perruque poudrée, alors que moi je voyais un fragment de toile non peinte, comme il est fréquent dans le style picassien.

Salvador DALI

1. *Ein Beitrag zur Psychologie und Psychopathologie der Gestaltung.*

2. H. Prinzhorn, *Artistry of the Mentally Ill,* 1922, transl. Eric von Brockdorff (New York, NY: Springer-Verlag, 1972), p. 272.

3. R. Cardinal, 'Surrealism and the Paradigm of the Creative Subject', *Parallel Visions,* exhibition catalogue, Los Angeles County Museum of Art (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), pp. 94–119. For the relationship between mediumism and surrealism, see P. Gorsen, 'Der Eintritt des Mediumsimus' in *Die Kunstgeschichte. Das Unerklärliche – der surrealistische Schlüssel,* in *The Message,* Kunst und Okkultismus (Art and Occultism), exhibition catalogue, Kunstmuseum Bochum (Köln: Walther König, 2007), pp. 17–32.

4. A. Breton, 'Cadavre exquis', in *Dictionnaire Abrégé du Surréalisme* (Paris: Galerie Beaux-Arts, 1938), p. 6.

5. Jörg Katerndahl, *Bildnerei von Schizophrenen. Zur Problematik der Beziehungssetzung von Psyche und Kunst im ersten Drittel des 20 Jahrhunderts* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 2005), pp. 53, 68 and 91.

6. John M. MacGregor, *The Discovery of the Art of the Insane* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), p. 291.

7. *Ibid.,* pp. 42–44 and 135.

8. A. Breton, second *Manifesto of Surrealism* (1930), in: Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism,* transl. R. Seaver and H. R. Lane (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1972), pp. 117–187.

Surrealism also goes back to *écriture automatique*. For André Breton and Philippe Soupault, the appeal of automatic texts lay in the poetic power of unexpected word arrangements. 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.

The Surrealists developed different processes to generate amazing analogous visual images. One was the *Cadavre Exquis* (Exquisite Corpse), 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.' (4) Max Ernst developed the combination of unrelated picture elements as a technique from Dadaistic collages and brought it to a point of high virtuosity, probably with a prior knowledge of drawings from psychiatric institutions. There are also several examples of this way of working in the Heidelberg collection. Recently, there has been a suspicion 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. (5)

A Surrealistic process which refers explicitly to insanity is the 'paranoiac-critical method' developed by Salvador Dalí from 1929. For his visual double meanings, which work like picture puzzles, he refers to changes of perception in specific forms of mental crises.

Corresponding ambiguities can be found in pictures in the Prinzhorn collection, for example in drawings by Carl Lange who copied images that were revealed to him in the sweat stains of his shoe soles.

A fourth Surrealistic picture process was excessively used by Hans Bellmer: the amalgamation of figures and their components, sometimes readable as growing or sprouting out of each other. This technique also allowed him to depict a condensing of sexual imagination. Like an anagram, eroticised body parts are freely fused and multiplied.

Similar approaches define some pictures in the Heidelberg collection. The most prominent examples are by August Klett (named *Klotz* by Prinzhorn).

True Surrealism
Finally, the Surrealist's perception of the art of asylum inmates incorporates their collecting and including it in their group exhibitions. Thus, Breton acquired two *objets d'aliénés* as early as 1929 at the 'Artistes Malades' exhibition in Paris. These are examples of a specific type of Surrealist object, beside the *objets naturels, objets trouvés, objets onirique,* and so on.

For John M. MacGregor, the Surrealists paradoxically sought 'to create a pictorial art that already existed' – in *l'art des fous.* (6) Even more than the pictures or sculptures made by 'madmen', this surely accounts for the fascination of *objets d'aliénés.* For the Surrealists, they were not only a model but, as 'finds' from the realm beyond reason, 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 why, for Breton, the memory never faded of the soldier he met in the sickbay of Saint-Dizier, who believed the First World War was a simulation and who 'conducted' the hail of shell-fire on the battlefield. And is not his book *Nadja* (1928) a report on a genuinely Surrealist life, which was coherent in a way never possible for the psychically stable members of the group?

These considerations shed a special light on the revolver of Guillaume Pujolle that Breton included in the exhibition 'Le Surréalisme', at the Maeght Gallery in Paris, 1947. (7) This 'famous object' (Bellmer) will inevitably have recalled the position described in the second *Surrealist Manifesto* (1930) that 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.' (8) Although a lot of Surrealists may have admitted to dream of this, it would have taken a madman to actually do it.