Surrealism in the Imperfect

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Abstract: Inspired by Walter Benjamin's encounters with surrealism in Paris during the late 1920s and early 1930s, "Surrealism in the Imperfect" proceeds from a reflection on browsing for books as a formative period of research. The article focuses on the history of post-WWII surrealist publishing and the turn-of-the-millennium remainder market as terrain for reconsidering Benjamin's notion of "profane illumination" as consistent with the surrealist movement's project of revaluing the concept of value.

Keywords: Bookstores; remainders; profane illumination; value.

A few steps away from the Pompidou Center for Modern Art in Paris lies a bookstore that was, until 2013, called "Mona Lisait." Since then, the site has been occupied by several other booksellers; the most recent is a "cultural recycling" company called BOOKOFF, operated by the French wing of a Japanese corporation founded as a small, secondhand bookshop in Kanagawa in 1990. Branding its boutiques as "cultural recyclers," the corporation describes its mission as "at heart, to perpetuate the values of cultural transmission,

collective labor, and eco-responsibility."[1] This is rather flowery rhetoric for a chain of for-profit secondhand book, manga, and video-game shops. All the same, I find it fascinating that the same storefront on the rue St. Martin has housed only discount bookstores over the past several decades—rather than, say, becoming a supermarket. These have neither been upscale, independent *librairies* such as one can still find throughout the city of Paris, in spite of skyrocketing rents and increasing pressures from international conglomerates such as Amazon.fr. Nor are they the more specialized antiquarian booksellers that still line many of the smaller streets throughout the Latin quarter. Rather, these are discount franchises that have persisted in selling books and other print media alongside the high-traffic tourist shops and high-price restaurants (such as the Michelin-starred Benoît) that line the streets around the Pompidou Center.

Founded in 1987 by the bookseller René Baudoin, the inaugural Mona Lisait bookstore opened on the boulevard Bonne Nouvelle in the 2e arrondissement, eventually expanding into chain of nine such boutiques across the city, as well several others elsewhere in France.[2] Baudoin died in a road accident in 1999, after his bicycle was struck by a car. After a devastating warehouse fire in 2012, the company filed for bankruptcy the following year,

[1] See the company's French website: https://lingonbook.fr/a-propos/. Accessed July 19, 2024.

[2] See the company's website: https://monalisait.fr/content/4-nos-librairies. Accessed July 13, 2024.

liquidating all but one of its branches in 2013. Mona Lisait now consists of two surviving boutiques: one on the rue du Faubourg Saint Antoine in the 11e arrondissement, which opened in 2009, and a second, more recent, branch located at the place Gambetta in the 20e.

A snapshot of Mona Lisait roughly twenty-five years ago would strongly resemble the present boutique in the 11e, which I visit whenever I have the good fortune of returning to Paris. Then, as now, the bookstore specializes in remaindered books: publishers' overstock, undersold titles, and odd-lot bulk purchases. The storefront on the rue Saint Martin, a block or so from the Pompidou Center and around the corner from some of Paris's most celebrated beer bars, was a bit more spectacular, featuring innumerable postcards, cookbooks, coffee-table books, and art monographs "at reduced prices." [See Figure 1]. Passing tourists could find a cheap picture book about Paris or Salvador Dalí, almost without batting an eye. Then as now, such titles are bought and sold in bulk lots— if not for a dime a dozen, then at least for a comparably cut-rate wholesale cost. Unlike BOOKOFF, however, Mona Lisait carries a stock of remaindered rather than secondhand books, meaning that they are sourced from publishers rather than from consumers.

Fig. 1 “At reduced prices.” Mona Lisait bookstore, Paris 75004, circa 2005.

The store’s name, Mona Lisait, offers a telling commentary upon its stock of discount books. [See Figure 2]. Invoking the English title for an Italian painting not even housed at the Pompidou Center, but at the Musée du Louvre across town, the implicit dislocation in the store’s name registers the explicit relocation of the books themselves: the store’s stock, like the painting its name and iconography reflect, have been diverted from their original publication circuit and subjected to an alternative mode of cut-rate distribution. A book is designated as a remainder when a publisher decides to liquidate its remaining stock of a title or edition that has either failed to sell well, or which has been returned from stores in high quantities; other bulk purchases can occur when a publishing house is forced into

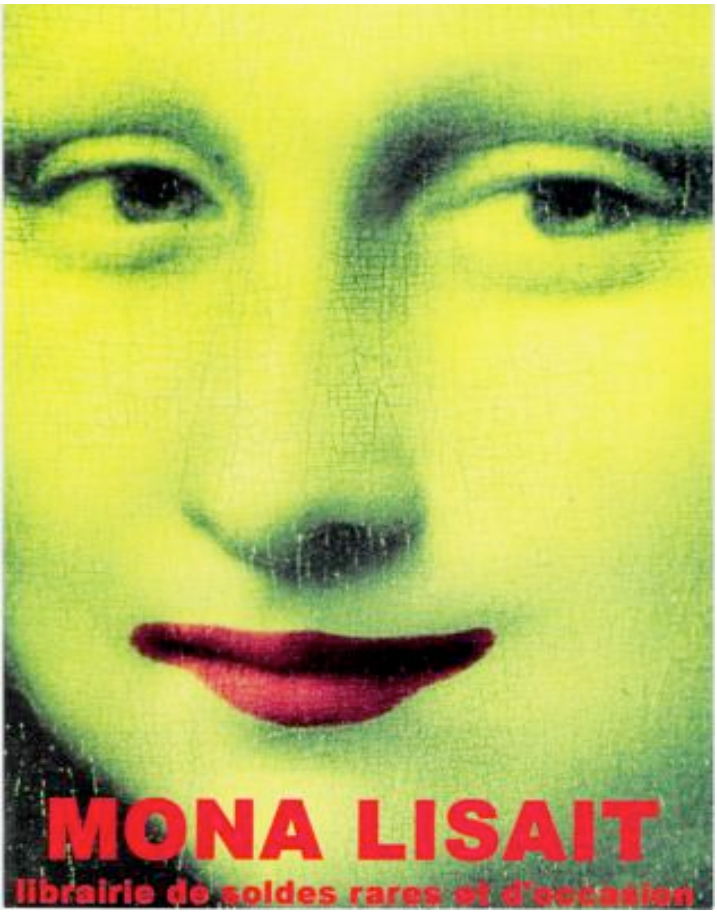

Fig. 2 Mona Lisait herself, possibly reproduced on a shopping bag.

bankruptcy and liquidates its remaining stock. More interestingly, the store's name also offers a suggestion about how one might read such books. In recasting Leonardo da Vinci's sitter, *La Joconde*, as a verb, the pun in the store's name proposes that "Mona," whoever that may be— me, or at least, *mona*, that which is mine— reads. But according to the store's name I am not reading in the present tense, but in the imperfect. Mona *Lisait*: Mona, she or I, was reading.

It is time to read, the store proclaims. But to do so is to read imperfectly.

I begin this essay on surrealism with an anecdote about the Mona Lisait bookstore because it was the place where much of my own research on the surrealist movement began in earnest. On a research trip to Paris as a graduate student, I found that the store's stock of remaindered books, which extended through its capacious basement, housed all sorts of scholarly titles, historiographies, and works of poetry and fiction, as well as erotica and *bandes dessinées*. It also had an avant-garde section. At the time I first began visiting Mona Lisait, this section offered a discontinuous history of the surrealist movement, a piecemeal assortment of what looked to me, at first, like a shoddy and out-of-date representation of surrealist writing. I had never heard of most of the authors; back in the U.S. I had studied articles in surrealist periodicals of the 1920s and 30s, but here were texts published in the 1960s and 70s, long after the movement had ceased to be

truly relevant, according to most of the critical literature I'd read.

What I stumbled upon in the basement of Mona Lisait exceeded these parameters. For, in addition to discounted books from French scholarly presses and other small publishing houses around the country, Mona Lisait carried the overstock of *Le Terrain Vague,* an avant-garde publishing house founded by Eric Losfeld in 1955. From the mid-1950s through Losfeld's death in 1979, Terrain Vague was the publisher of record for the surrealist movement in France, during a period of its history that spanned the late career—and, in 1966, the death—of André Breton, as well as the resulting debates about whether or not an organized surrealist movement could continue with him.[3] Terrain Vague was, incidentally, Losfeld's second surrealist-oriented publication venture; the first, *Arcanes,* was named after Breton's *Arcane 17*.[4] The name "Terrain Vague," meaning "no man's land," is itself suggestive of the surrealist movement's own imaginary, in its recourse to liminal or otherwise marginal spaces, from urban wastelands and nocturnal street-scenes to France's overseas colonies. Such terrains were therefore not "vague" at all, but were instead overdetermined sites of profound historicity, registering centuries of class warfare, urban renewal, and colonial violence, as well as generating

[3] For a recent account of such debates, see Jérôme Duwa, *Les Batailles de Jean Schuster: défense et illustration du surréalisme (1947-1969).* Paris: L'Harmattan, 2015.

[4] Eric Losfeld, *Endetté comme une mule.* Editions Tristram, 2017; 65.

new, autochthonous forms of inventiveness and insurgency.

Losfeld's anecdotal account of the name is telling, for much like "Mona Lisait," it suggests a displacement. "It was Breton," he writes, "who baptized le Terrain Vague," which he did without realizing that "terrain vague" was the literal translation of Losfeld's Flemish patronym.[5] Here, too, the terrain is overdetermined. Drawn to surrealism as much by affective fealty as by objective chance, Losfeld was the publisher who carried the works of the surrealist movement in its later decades, issuing reprints and new writings alike in addition to a variety of translations, historical works of experimental literature, and semi-pornographic or otherwise scandalous texts. An advertisement printed in one of its journals suggests the overall spirit of the publisher, defying, but also playfully brandishing, Christian iconography [See Figure 3]. Losfeld's memoir, published in 1979, likewise documents this well-husbanded irreverence. In keeping with the eventual fate of his remaining back catalogue, the memoir is titled after the questionable profitability of book publishing: *Endetté comme un mule, ou la passion d'éditer.* The title suggests that even in its heyday, Losfeld's press bore a mule's burden of heavy debt; the book's original cover features Losfeld making an obscene gesture, *le bras d'honneur* [See Figure 4], at once flaunting and flouting financial ruin.

[5] Losfeld, *Endetté,* ibid.

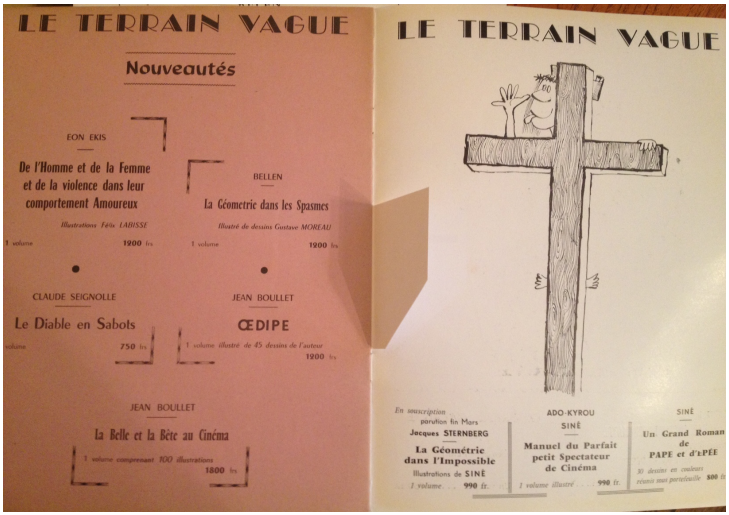

Fig. 3 A flyleaf advertisement for Le Terrain Vague.

Fig. 4 Éric Losfeld, *Endetté comme une mule, ou la passion d'éditer* (1979).

Until very recently the historical period represented by Losfeld's imprint has been generally discounted by critics, as by literary history, as the movement's own "terrain vague," a phase of waywardness or even exhaustion. As Anne Foucault observes in her aptly titled *Histoire du surréalisme ignoré,* the post-WWII surrealist movement in France faced a problem that persists to this day: the perception that it constituted "a 'second surrealism,' or even a surrealism after surrealism, a group trying to survive even though history had passed it by."[6] As Foucault and other recent scholars—and surrealist adherents— have maintained, however, this period was in fact a remarkably rich moment for surrealism in Paris, as throughout the world, with new generations of writers, artists, and intellectuals joining the older group of Parisian familiars. "What struck me most from the start," Losfeld reflects, describing his earliest encounters with the group during the 1950s, "was the extreme youthfulness of almost all the regular participants, outside of Breton, [Benjamin] Péret, and Toyen."[7] The publishing record of Terrain Vague reflects this influx: Losfeld's catalog included the surrealist-oriented film magazine *Positif,* edited by Adonis Kyrou, who also wrote a major study of surrealism and film. The press also put out the surrealist journals *Bief: Jonction*

[6] Anne Foucault, *Histoire du surréalisme ignoré* (1945-1969): *Du Déshonneur des poètes au "surréalisme éternel."* Paris: Hermann, 2022; 13. My translation.

[7] Losfeld, *Endetté,* 55.

Surréaliste, which ran from 1958-1960; it was continued by *La Brèche: Action Surréaliste,* from 1961-1965, and then by *L'Archibras*, from 1967-1969. In addition to the journals, the press also carried a variety of surrealist and surrealism-oriented series, such as the *désordre* imprint [see Figure 5], which featured current works by the likes of Jean Schuster, André Thirion, Gérard Legrand, and Robert Lebel, as well as reprints and collected works by authors such as Nora Mitrani, José Pierre, and others. This is a far different pantheon of surrealists, one observes, than the core group of surrealists that published in *La Révolution Surréaliste* and similar periodicals during the canonical interwar period of the 1920s and early 1930s, which included writers such as Breton, Paul Éluard, and Louis Aragon, as well as painters such as Max Ernst, Salvador Dalí, and Juan Miró. By the late 1950s, surrealism's "customhouse of desire," as one American critic termed it, had become something of a clearing house.[8] Even as surrealism had, by most accounts, become canonized as a "major" and bankable art movement by that point, one finds its publications looking increasingly homespun, with the exception of the five lavishly printed issues of *Le surréalisme, même* (1956-1957), which more or less marked the end of the group's brief tenure at Jean-Jacques Pauvert's publishing house, before moving to Eric Losfeld's.[9]

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[8] J. H. Matthews, ed. and trans. *The Custom-House of Desire: A Half Century of Surrealist Stories.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975.

[9] Jean-Jacques Pauvert published the final, revised edition of Breton's *Manifestes du surrealisme* in 1962. Thanks to Raymond

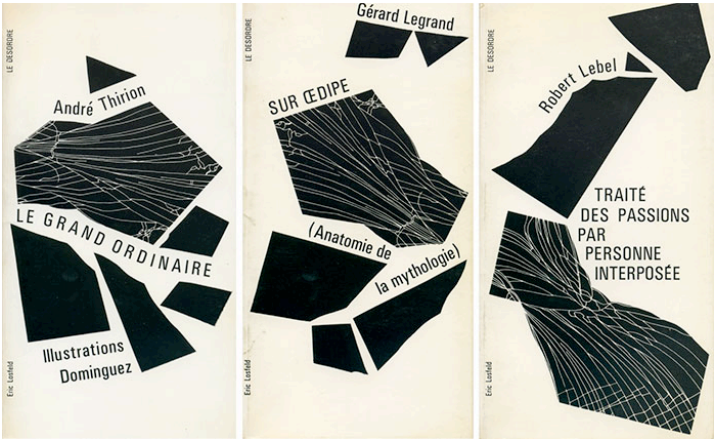

Fig. 5 Three titles in *Le désordre* series, Terrain Vague.

Such broad shifts in personnel and production value are reflected in the movement's intellectual guide-posts as well: whereas the interwar group had largely oriented its thought according to the work of Freud, Marx, and Hegel, the practicing surrealists were now attentive to occult knowledges, "Magic Art," ethnography, and reflections on the movement's own history, along with an abiding interest in eroticism that increasingly resembled something that looked like

Spiteri for pointing out this fact in conversation about the complex publication history of surrealism in France.

feminism, even if opposed to the Beauvoirian leanings of the French feminist movement.[10]

When I arrived in Paris as a proverbially bright-eyed young graduate student in 1999, many of the books and journals from this "late" or allegedly secondary period were still readily available, and often quite cheaply. The last generation of "late" surrealists were all dying, but their leavings, their literary remains, could still be found and purchased easily. The same was the case with the Parisian group's publisher: After Eric Losfeld's death in 1979, the publishing house was kept in business and ultimately reinvented by his daughter, Joëlle Losfeld. She put out a magnificent two-volume collection of surrealist tracts and documents in 1980 and 1982, and she continued to publish and reprint surrealist texts under the Terrain Vague imprimatur into the early 1990s.[11] This included, for instance, an elegant reprint edition of the collective surrealist pamphlet of poems and drawings dedicated to Violette Nozière [See Figure 6].

[10] See, for instance, Annie Le Brun, "Un Stalinisme en jupons," in le *Nouvel Observateur*, 27 février 1978. Rpt. *Vagit-Prop, Lâchez tout et autres textes.* Paris: Ed. Ramsay/ Jean-Jacques Pauvert, 1990; 219-224.

[11] See José Pierre, ed. *Tracts surréalistes et déclarations collectives, tome I (1922-1939) and tome II (1940-1968).* Paris: Terrain Vague, 1980-1982.

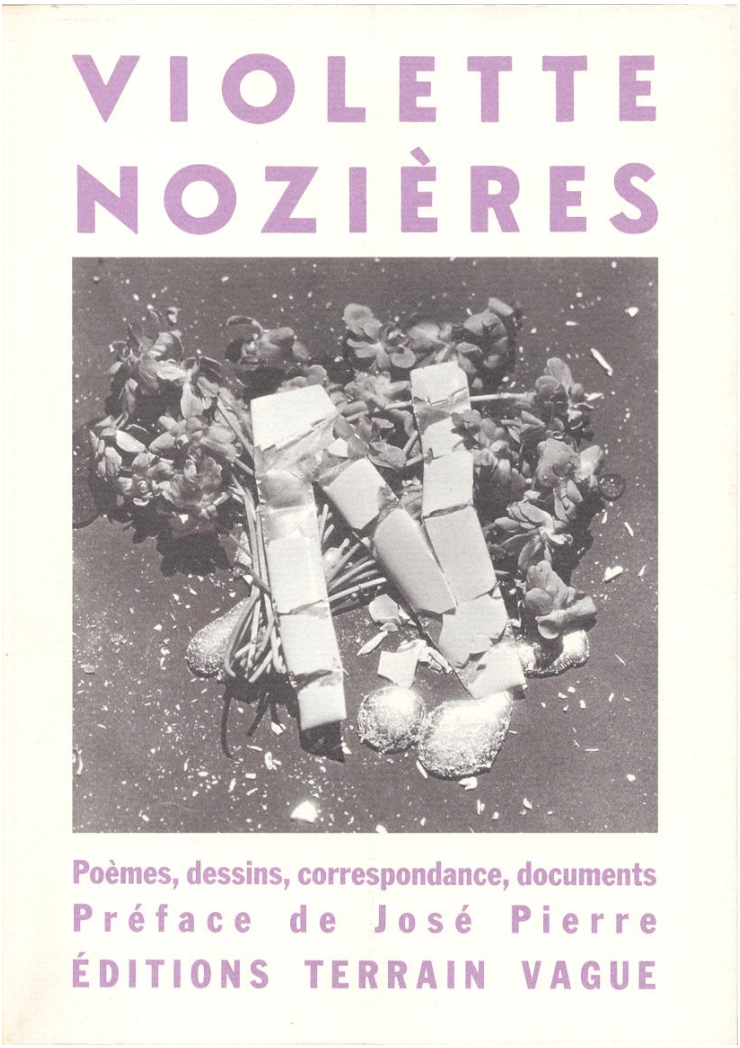

Fig. 6 *Violette Nozières* (orig. 1933), Editions Terrain Vague, 1991.

The occasion for the 1934 pamphlet was the poisoning murder of a railroad engineer named Jean-Baptiste Nozière by his 18-year-old daughter, Violette, who claimed after her arrest that her father had been sexually abusing her for nearly six years. (I wrote about this in my dissertation and first book, *Surrealism and the Art of Crime).*[12] The original *Violette Nozières* pamphlet was but one example of such collective surrealist interventions, one of the innumerable tracts collected in Losfeld's two-volume compendium. The point of its republication in 1991 was to pull it out of the archive, so to speak, in order that it might gain renewed circulation in book form. I bought a copy that had found its way into Mona Lisait, somewhere in the liminal space between a publisher's overstock and an accidental discovery.

Soon after Joëlle Losfeld launched a new *maison d'édition* under her own name in 1992, she liquidated the overstock of Terrain Vague. It all ended up in the basement of Mona Lisait. It is for this reason that the store's bottom floor could offer such a marvelous, if piecemeal, education in one of the late phases of the surrealist movement— and, with its bargain-basement prices, it offered me a relatively affordable one as well. I now own an incomplete set of the magazine *Bief,* for instance; some issues had long since sold out, but others

[12] On the Violette Nozière case, see esp. Sarah Maza, *Violette Nozière: A Story of Murder in 1930s Paris.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011; see also my *Surrealism and the Art of Crime*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008, esp. 198-214.

remained available. Even today you can perhaps still buy Jean Schuster's account of the Parisian surrealism's late years, entitled *Archives 57-68*, a collection of essays that chronicles the movement during the years immediately before and after André Breton's death in 1966. This was far from a chronicle of the so-called heroic period of surrealist activity during the 1920s and 1930s, as I've suggested, but an account of the imperfect vestiges of the Parisian group's later phase. Schuster's book documents the "battles for surrealism" that took place in the final years of Breton's life, and with renewed intensity after his death, leading to certain members of the Parisian group declaring in 1969 that surrealism had officially ended. Reciprocally, the Parisian surrealist group represented in Losfeld's catalogue consisted of a group of francophone writers and artists that no longer represented the expansive ranks, say, of the 1947 International Surrealist Exhibition or the "surrealism at midcentury" Almanach of 1950, which had both been major international events. Losfeld's surrealism was instead a newer group of adherents who, at the time, might unflatteringly have been considered epigones: José Pierre, Jean Schuster, Nora Mitrani, Gérard Legrand, Robert Benayoun, Joyce Mansour, Jean-Louis Bedouin, Annie Le Brun, Adrien Dax, and others. A 1960 photograph of the Parisian group by Dénise Bellon [see Figure 7] shows each member donning an identical white mask; the group's anonymity here is striking, even disconcerting.

Fig. 7 Dénise Bellon, *Surrealists at the Désert de Retz*, France, circa.1960. Permission pending.

Whether signifying their solidarity or their virtual lack of distinctiveness, the masked faces implicitly challenge any presumption about surrealism's status as a major artistic movement with their spectacular anonymity.

An analogous strategy characterizes the group's literary self-representation as well. A period advertisement for Losfeld's press integrates the

prewar and postwar surrealists (along with figures associated with the dada movement) according to its own curious taxonomy, presenting its catalogue authors as so many ornithological specimens [See Figure 8]. From kingfisher (Francis Picabia) to hoopoe (Jean-Claude Silbermann), the catalogue advertisement offers a field guide to new and familiar names alike. The birds of surrealism may be innumerable, the ad suggests, and possibly even hard to distinguish; yet to the discerning eye they reward careful observation. The message of Losfeld's advertisement could just as easily be understood negatively: surrealism had long since become just another art movement, as pretty to look at as an assortment of songbirds and birds of prey, but no longer avant-garde or revolutionary.

In concert with this negative assessment, scholars and journalists have traditionally glossed over this later phase of surrealism as a second-rate enterprise, the last remnants of an exhausted movement.[13] A 1999 obituary of José Pierre, a key figure during this period, puts it succinctly: as a testament to his belatedness within the movement, Pierre "did not meet [André] Breton until 1952, when the movement was already on its last legs - like a flaccid carnival balloon it expired in a tired sigh with its auto-dissolution in 1969."[14]

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[13] See, again, Anne Foucault's *Histoire du surréalisme ignore* for an account of, and an important corrective to, such tendencies.

[14] James Kirkup, "Obituary: José Pierre." Saturday, April 17, 1999. http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/obituaries-jose-pierre-1087670.html.

Fig. 8 Period advertisement for Éric Losfeld's surrealist series.

The auction of Pierre's estate in 2011 was likewise handled haphazardly, even contemptuously, by the Druot auction house in Paris: Pierre's collection of books, papers, and original works of art by surrealist and other artists was liquidated without either fanfare or proper documentation.[15] André Breton's own massive archive was auctioned in 2003, amid a far greater degree of public attention and protest; yet it was sold off all the same, although much of it ended up in museums and libraries, and in several notable cases, was donated rather than sold. As is well known, Breton's daughter, Aube, donated the full contents of one wall of her father's studio to the Pompidou Center; less visibly, she also returned a bird-headed ceremonial frontlet to the Kwakwaka'wakw, the First Nation people from whom it had originally been stolen.[16]

Like the period in surrealism it represents, the liquidated stock of late surrealist journals and imprints housed in Mona Lisait likewise presented something of an imperfect remainder. Less out-of-date than discontinuous and incomplete, it represented only a minoritarian part of the surrealist movement in its myriad forms and iterations. It

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[15] http://www.connaissancedesarts.com/marche_art/actus/scandaleuse-vente-jose-pierre-a-drouot-88406.php

[16] On the Breton auction, see my "Breton's Wall, Carrington's Kitchen," *Intermédialités* 18, automne 2011 (appeared 2012), 17-43. On the repatriation of sacred objects from Breton's collection, see esp. Marie Mauzé, "Domestic and International Repatriation: Returning Artifacts to First Nations Communities in Canada," *Zeitschrift für Kanada-Studien* 30.2 (2010), 87-101.

offered little, moreover, toward any direct comprehension of the movement's global proliferation and word-historical resonance, a scope of activity I have been reckoning with ever since. Even so, this trove of cut-rate bibliographic merchandise offered an irreplaceable education in the history of surrealism, precisely on account of its discontinuous, rather than canonical, contents. Beyond my own accidental encounters with unfamiliar books in the name of dissertation research, my perusals in Mona Lisait afforded—perhaps necessitated—a reflection on my own place in the systems and practices of cultural transmission according to which surrealism continues to evolve as a global phenomenon. For one, I grew increasingly aware of the material basis of historical knowledge-production, by which I mean the publishing industry and its distribution channels, particularly the role of small presses and bookstores (rather than public, state-sanctioned libraries) in the circulation of experimental or countercultural materials. My familiarity with the shelves in Mona Lisait also disclosed how *partial* my access to this circulation actually was— and thus also how incomplete, how imperfect, my knowledge of what constitutes "surrealism" as a body or object of knowledge would ever be. This remains the case.

At the same time, the process of building my research library from discounted books (which has continued ever since) is inextricable from questions about value: not only the value of an individual book or an education or an experience, but also the value of the pleasure and privilege of browsing for books on the rue Saint Martin. (Was this research? Did I

consider browsing—even shopping—as a kind of intellectual labor?) To be attuned to value in the context of surrealism is, certainly, to become attentive to the various markets through which surrealist works (whether textual, visual, or plastic) change hands, as well as those cultural channels which individual surrealists trafficked in, including the acquisition of Indigenous art. But it is also to reflect on the extent to which surrealist (and other) works might also somehow exceed the economic logics of such markets. What, in other words, is the value of "value" in this context? My hypothesis is that surrealism itself offers a discourse and practice of revaluing "value" in anti-capitalist terms, an investigation of value informed by, but in no way restricted to, the Marxisms studied, appropriated, and revised by surrealist writers and artists over the past century.

One of the factors that contributes to this project of revaluation, I propose, is the movement's oft-discounted tendency toward reflexivity, its participation in what might be considered a second-order evaluation of its own practices. As throughout the 1920s and 1930s, post-WWII surrealist groups around the world debated, often vituperatively, the viability of a group's contemporary directions, the viability of its collective leadership, and the political and aesthetic commitments of its contributors.[17] In Paris as throughout the world, surrealist groups persistently interrogated the very *raison d'être* of surrealism itself: its value, understood otherwise

[17] See Duwa, *Les Batailles de Jean Schuster,* esp. 25-90.

than through exchange-value, market value, or commercial success. Self-reflexive and even tautological, precisely on account of the influx of epigones and so-called minor figures, surrealist discussions often rehearsed many of the movement's most shopworn reference points—revolution, the marvelous, automatic writing, Sade and Lautréamont, the legacy of André Breton. Yet in doing so they also surpassed the limitations of such oft-recycled rhetoric. In examining the journals and compendia of the movement's allegedly "second" phase from the 1950s into the 1960s and 1970s, one witnesses the working practices of intellectuals who thought seriously about questions of cultural transmission, appropriation, and forms of experience irreducible to the utilitarian values of global capitalism. In turn, the group's investment in forms of thought that fell outside the canon of European intellectual history— including hermeticism, myth, and the occult sciences—indicated a genealogy of discontinuous knowledges that likewise amounted to a practice of revaluation. The attention to alchemy, myth, astrology, and Indigenous knowledges in surrealist discourse was part of a broad interrogation of epistemology and the history of science that formed a counter-discourse to imperial knowledge-production and colonial cultural erasure. As with so many other ways of knowing and systematizing thought, this history— as well as the surrealist means of assembling and assimilating it—was imperfect, at once incomplete and underappreciated; yet as a practice of revaluation it is constitutive of one of surrealism's more emphatically experimental aims.

I am interested in the extent to which the most minor and the most ambitious of surrealist projects converge in the revaluation of value.[18] I am joined in this supposition by the contemporary surrealist writer and theorist Michel Löwy, who centers on such convergences to trace continuities between surrealism and other insurrectionist movements such as the Situationist International. Löwy singles out, for instance, the humble practice of aimless wandering—the *dérive*— which he describes as an activity that, "in its playful and irreverent form, […] breaks away from the most sacred principles of modern capitalism, with its iron laws of utilitarian rationality."[19] What is the nature of this breaking way, beyond a fleeting suspension of expectations or an experiment in pedestrian waywardness? Referring to it as a "point of absolute divergence," Löwy attributes "magical virtues" to the *dérive*, which render its break with normativity "an enchanted promenade through the domain of freedom, with chance for its only compass."[20] Löwy's romantic rhetoric pulls together a century of surrealist terms and concepts in articulating the virtues of wandering, but it hardly seems to furnish

[18] On the "revaluation of value" as an anti-capitalist project, see Brian Massumi, *99 Theses on the Revaluation of Value: A Postcapitalist Manifesto.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018. I discuss this project in further detail in my current book-in-progress, *The Great Surrealist Bargain Basement.*

[19] Michel Löwy, *Morning Star: Surrealism, Marxism, Anarchism, Situationism, Utopia.* Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009; 4.

[20] Löwy, *Morning Star*, ibid.

an explanation. Heeding the urgency of Löwy's attention to nonconformist ways of experiencing and occupying the world, I propose that the rhetoric of magic and enchantment functions here as a critical apparatus for revaluation rather than as wish fulfillment or mystification. For Löwy, the *dérive* is a (small scale) practice continuous with the surrealist movement's broader fusion of historical materialism with anarchist-libertarian concepts of emancipation. In tandem with this optic, yet also diverging from it, I propose that the "magical virtues" Löwy identifies as continuous with the project of revolution are instead continuous with the project of revaluation. In practice, the uselessness and aimlessness of wandering become virtues rather than demerits, yielding experiences that draw their energy from the unprescribed field of chance they afford. From games and collective activities to chance encounters in the street, surrealist practices do not so much abolish the "iron laws" of capitalism, as accumulate sensory and conceptual data toward qualifying the lived experiences these practices yield. This data consists of affects or intensities irreducible to the transactional logics of the marketplace: desire, love, illumination, violence, confusion, revolutionary energy, pessimism, insight. Understood as a project of revaluation, the anti-capitalist exigency of surrealist practices hinges not on the overthrow of capitalism as a global system, but on the instigation of heterogeneous and all all-but-accidental fluctuations in experience even from within this system. It is a "magic" of constructed slips, exceptions, and accidentals: the domain, in other words, of the imperfect.

Surrealism, I propose, incorporates a project of revaluation that has been no less fundamental to the movement's global circulation than its recourse to the language of revolution—or, for that matter, to the language of psychoanalysis, with its own magic of slips, exceptions, and accidentals. This project suggests that there might be a way to consider the movement's humblest activities—as well, perhaps, as its overarching ambitions— as something other than expressions of utopian longing or, for that matter, gestures of futility. As a decidedly second-order operation, the project of revaluation instead aggregates such activities (whether *dérive*, collage, or surrealist game) toward the stimulation of potentially nontransactional experiences, a kind of archive of possibility. This I what I understand the closing line of Breton's 1924 *Manifesto* to signify, in claiming that "existence is elsewhere": the project of living, of existing, under conditions of liberation demands seeking out such anti-capitalist "elsewhere" at every turn, within the intimacies of everyday experience as much as beyond the horizon of proletarian revolution.[21]

To return for a moment to Mona Lisait and the afterlives of Eric and Joëlle Losfeld's Terrain Vague: I propose that such claims about the capacity for revaluation can likewise be made on the order of intellectual circulation. The alternative modes of distribution and consumption at work in the market for remaindered books, for instance, offer a

[21] André Breton, "Manifesto of Surrealism" (1924), in *Manifestoes of Surrealism.* Trans. Richard Howard and Helen Lane. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969; 47.

comparable field of possibilities for revaluation. The remainder bin designates neither an intellectual dead end—the proverbial dustbin of history—nor an infinite wonderland of speculative resources prime for extraction. Rather, they designate a second-order economy that persists within existing capitalist networks for distributing books as commodities. It's an imperfect arrangement at best; some books fall out of circulation entirely, while others seem to linger on indefinitely. Either way, there is no prescription for how (and whether) to read them—and this, for me, is significant. Certainly, the remainder market operates as a by-product of the corporate juggernaut of contemporary publishing—at once caused and ultimately recuperated by large-scale capitalism. Yet even so, this second-order market nonetheless constitutes a provisional rerouting of its economy of return, an instance of *dérive* within the life cycle of commodities, and it is a drift that goes only further afield through the acts of browsing, selection, and even acquisition, not to mention reading. For it is here that the remaindered book, as a material object, lingers at the margins of commodification while also standing at the threshold of ideas; imperfectly situated within either realm, it raises questions of value in both. Beyond transactional questions about whether the book is worth purchasing at such-and-such a price or whether it will reward the time spent reading it, such questions can amount, I propose to a reflection on the magnitude of the publishing industry, the all-but-unfathomable plenitude of unread books, and

the disquieting bottomlessness of possible readings and potential misinterpretations.[22]

This provisional rerouting finds its complement in surrealist thinking, I propose, as an open set of practices that work inventively within, through, and upon such imperfect second-order economies. It is hardly a paradox to note that surrealism persists as both a liberationist discourse and practice *and* as an aggressively monetized component of the culture industry. Surrealist works have long circulated as commodities, after all, just as they have circulated through clandestine channels, networks of friends and lovers, borrowings and citations, misreadings and alterations. In no case, however, can the means of circulation *fully* determine how a discrete work of poetry or art will be taken up by a reader or how a surrealist tract might shape one's behavior. No surrealist declaration can fully guarantee that conducting a *dérive* will feel like absolute divergence and not like mere exercise. The "experience of freedom" to which Löwy points as the "profound meaning" of the *derive* is contingent on the affective or even existential intensity of that experience as you or I experience it. It is largely for this reason that Löwy, among others, insists that surrealism "is not, has never been, and will never be a literary or artistic school, but is a

[22] For further meditations on remaindered books and the prospects of reading, see my "Bargain Basement Thought," *Against Value in the Arts and Education.* Ed. Sam Ladkin, Robert McKay and Emile Bojesen. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016; 97-112.

movement of the human spirit in revolt."[23] It is not a formula; it is a future-imperfect.

One learns of the analytical prospects of the remainder bin from none other than André Breton, whose obscure flea marked peregrinations feature in canonical works such as *Nadja* (1928) and *L'Amour Fou* (1937). Writing about the St. Ouen flea market on the northern outskirts of Paris, Breton writes, "I go there often, searching for objects that can be found nowhere else: old-fashioned, broken, useless, almost incomprehensible, even perverse." [24] It is important, of course, to distinguish a flea market from a bookstore specializing in remainders; whereas both describe second-order markets, the former is generally understood as a market for secondhand goods rather than as an outlet for liquidated stock. Yet I invoke the comparison to demonstrate the extent to which the profound meaning of the artifacts Breton seeks out is not an intrinsic property of the "perverse" objects themselves, but a phenomenon of their recirculation. Breton encounters them according to their status as rerouted, second-order commodities. For Breton, the discovery of unusual "found objects" such as the "irregular, white, shellacked half-cylinder covered with reliefs and depressions that are meaningless to me" he describes in *Nadja* [see Figure 9] amounted to a kind of creative act.[25]

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[23] Löwy, *Morning Star*, 2.

[24] André Breton, *Nadja* (1928), trans. Richard Howard. New York: Grove, 1960; 52.

[25] Breton, *Nadja,* ibid.

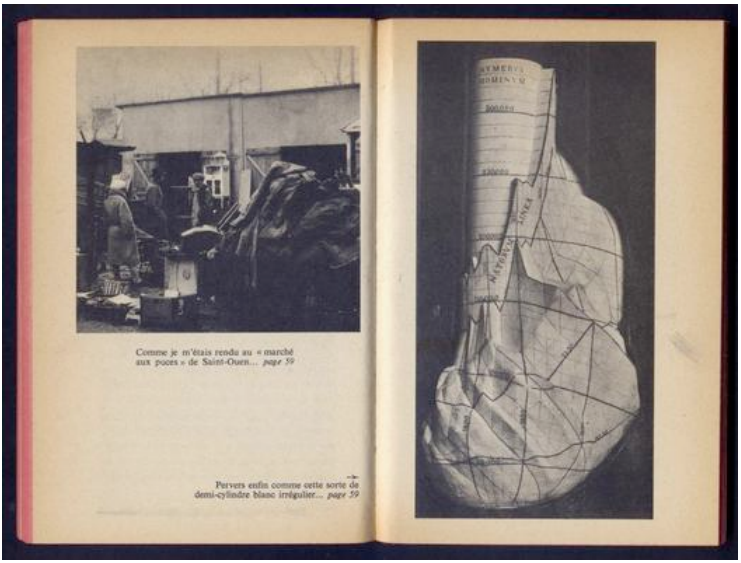

Fig. 9 The Saint-Ouen flea market (left) and a "find" [trouvaille] (right) from Breton's *Nadja* (1928).

By this logic, the work of poetic or artistic creation was no longer the magisterial province of *homo faber*, man the maker, but instead a function of once's chance encounter with such objects, as their determinative event. It is through such encounters that the objects, discounted and obsolete, become charged with surplus meaning and intensity. It is at the same flea market that Breton also happens upon a "brand new copy of Rimbaud's *Oeuvres Complètes*, lost in a tiny, wretched bin of rags, yellowed nineteenth-century photographs, worthless books,

and iron spoons."[26] The volume turns out to belong to the saleswoman, a communist activist and poet named Fanny Beznos, with whom Breton subsequently struck up a correspondence. Breton recounts such "trouvailles" as a series of "quite unexpected, quite improbable" events that reprise the "extremely deep and vivid emotion which the reading of Rimbaud gave me around 1915."[27] These recursions have the simultaneous effect of reprising Breton's earlier emotion as an attribute of the chance encounter and, in turn, of revaluing the material objects themselves (half-cylinder, Rimbaud volume) as the tokens or totems of the encounter.

There's nothing especially new about this point about Breton's interest in found objects and the surrealist project of revaluation—it is, in fact, a second-order insight of its own. With a perspicacity that has shaped the scholarly appraisal of surrealist objects ever since his writings came back into circulation in the 1960s, Walter Benjamin praised Breton's sensitivity to the "revolutionary energies that appear in the 'outmoded,'" naming as sites for such appearances "the first iron constructions, the first factory buildings, the earliest photos, the objects that have begun to be extinct, grand pianos, the dresses of five years ago, fashionable restaurants when the vogue has begun to ebb from them."[28] It is

[26] Breton, *Nadja,* 54-55.

[27] Breton, *Nadja,* 52.

[28] Walter Benjamin, "Surrealism: Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia," in *Selected Writings, Vol. II, 1927-*

here is where a surrealist practice of revaluation begins to suggest its difference from the romantic or "Gothic" Marxism often ascribed to Benjamin.[29] It is not the outmodedness of certain antiquarian objects that beer the "revolutionary energies" Benjamin attributes to surrealist practice, as if this historical motive force could be extracted as a physical or metaphysical property. Rather, Benjamin's dialectical account of how such energies "appear" hinges on the technicity of encounter, experience, and recirculation, which enable the objective, material life of capitalism to register as subjective, affective intensity. Writing in 1929 abut a movement he had followed since visiting Paris in 1927, Benjamin describes the surrealist movement according to its profound investment in "living experience." As he writes: "Anyone who has perceived that the writings of this circle are not literature—demonstrations, watchwords, documents, bluffs, forgeries if you will, but at any rate not literature—will also know, for the same reason, that the writings are concerned literally with experiences, not with theories and still less with phantasms." [30] The nature of such experiences, moreover, is a kind of political awakening to which Benjamin refers as "profane illumination, a

1934. Edited by Michael Jennings. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999; 210.

[29] See Margaret Cohen, *Profane Illumination: Walter Benjamin and the Paris of Surrealist Revolution*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.

[30] Walter Benjamin, "Surrealism," 208.

materialistic, anthropological inspiration."[31] In his characteristically elliptical fashion, Benjamin proposes that this "illumination" at once discloses the "revolutionary energies" concealed in the "outmoded" objects he associates with surrealism, and bursts forth in tandem with this disclosure as its affective consequence. What both enables and becomes perceptible through this profane illumination is, in other words, the shift in the status of a commodity that renders it "outmoded." The rerouted currency of the objects Benjamin lists (Löwy refers to this as a "detour through the past")[32] enables the possibility that they can spark a historical awakening to the vicissitudes of capitalist economics, from the promissory dream-worlds of commodity fetishism to the alienation and ruination on which the system is predicated. Through the revaluation of its evacuated commercial value, a used, discounted, or otherwise recirculated material object can function as an "objective image" that testifies to its vexed status within the capitalist system.

Approached in this Benjaminian light, the surrealist project of revaluing "value" bears (at least) two sets of consequences. The first has to do with one's own contemporary investments in concepts, as well as measures, of value. What does it mean for *me* to encounter surrealism, at whatever stage in life:

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[31] Walter Benjamin, "Surrealism," 209.

[32] Michel Löwy, *La revolution est le frein d'urgence: Essais sur Walter Benjamin*. Paris: éditions de l'éclat, 201; 83.

what sensory data corroborates or exceeds the institutions and social return on trafficking in surrealism as an object of study? It is in the domain of experiences, Benjamin maintains—the domain of affects and intensities—that surrealism's potentiality as an experimental movement manifests itself most powerfully as "profane illumination." By heeding Benjamin's insight that surrealist writings are concerned "literally with experiences, not with theories and still less with phantasms," I wish to take seriously the initial part of his proposition, in perceiving surrealist writings not as literature but as "something else—demonstrations, watchwords, documents, bluffs, forgeries if you will, but at any rate not literature." [33]

With this in mind, I would consider it remiss to approach surrealism itself, as a "movement of the human spirit in revolt," according only to a restricted canon of so-called major works. For this reason, I consider it both imperative and illuminating to attend to the undervalued remainders of the surrealist movement in its late or "secondary" period, in its global dissemination, and in its allegedly minor figures. The movement has always constituted an evolving set of practices rather than a static corpus of masterpieces, which also means moving beyond the framework of Breton and Benjamin and engaging in the expanded field of its global activities, offshoots, and reinventions.

[33] Walter Benjamin, "Surrealism," 208.

Thinking with and through its remainders and watchwords, bluffs and misunderstandings, surrealism—understood expansively—might best be described as the evolving set of activities and experiments carried out under its name. What makes such activities and experiments historically meaningful, and urgent, are not their results—which are unpredictable and often prone to disappointment. Surrealism, once again, is not a formula. Rather, what makes such experimental art necessary, and worth learning from, are the processes themselves: its restless, and perhaps even inexhaustible, capacity for reinvention and reuse. By sifting through the remainders, leftovers, oversights, and apparent redundancies one encounters in approaching the surrealist movement, it becomes possible to gain a resonant image of the practices at work in it, precisely because they *don't always work.* The value of surrealism is not extractable, contractable, as a principle of utility; rather, consistent with its own practice of revaluation, the value of surrealism requires a second-order revaluation of its exchanges and transformations within the sphere of lived experience.

For me, this amounts to a reckoning with the adventure of artistic and political radicalism itself, a confrontation of my own investments and the creative processes that animate them. It might be altogether different for you. But even so, I propose that in contemplating surrealism from however far downstream we might find ourselves, we witness, in place of silent monuments to greatness, the noisy archive of restless experiment: neither the new, nor

the known, but the remainders, the by-products, of a movement dedicated to rethinking what these very terms might even designate. We must not discount this.

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