Max Ernst in 1929:
Collage and the Politics of the Outmoded

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Abstract: In 1929, Max Ernst returned to collage with *La Femme 100 têtes*, a cycle of 147 collages with brief captions. Although collage had been central to Ernst's early work, he shifted to frottage after the 1924 Surrealist Manifesto. This paper explores Ernst's return to collage amid a critical moment of division within the surrealist movement, polarized by debates over surrealism's revolutionary role, collective creativity, and its relationship to political action. In this context, *La Femme 100 têtes* exemplifies how collage, with its use of ambiguity and refashioning of outdated materials, navigated the cultural and political impasse surrealism faced. The work challenged the modernist avant-garde's aesthetic project, adopting a position beyond art but before politics. However, collage's subversive potential was ultimately absorbed into art history as a new cultural form.

Keywords: Max Ernst; André Breton; collage; outmoded; surrealism; modernism.

If it is the plumes that make the plumage it is not the glue that makes the gluing (ce n'est pas la colle qui fait le collage).

One day in the summer of 1929 a painter I knew asked me: "What are you doing these days? Are you working?" I replied: "Yes, I'm making gluings [je fais des collages]. I'm preparing a book that will be called La Femme 100 Têtes*." Then he whispered in my ear: "And what sort of glue do you use?" With that modest air that my contemporaries admire in me I was obliged to confess to him that in most of my collages there wasn't any glue at all.*

Max Ernst, "Beyond Painting"[1]

The December 1929 issue of *La Révolution surréaliste* reproduced three collages by Max Ernst: *The Spirit of Locarno, Nostradamus, Blanche of Castile and the young Saint Louis*, and *Joan the Hatchet and Charles the Bold* (fig. 1).[2] Although *La Révolution surréaliste* had previously reproduced examples of Ernst's collage paintings, this was the first time it had reproduced any of Ernst's actual collages. These collages came from an unrealised project, *Morceaux choisis de l'histoire de France*, which was conceived as a surrealist 'history' of France. This theme was related to Ernst's recent marriage to Marie-Berthe

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[1] Max Ernst, "Beyond Painting," in *Beyond Painting: and Other Writings by the Artist and his Friends* (New York: Wittenborn, Schultz, 1948), 13.

[2] *L'Esprit de Locarno, Jeanne Hachette et Charles le Téméraire*, and *Nostradamus, Blanche de Castille et le petit Saint-Louis*, reproduced in *La Révolution surréaliste*, no. 12 (December 1929) 23, 59, and 48 respectively.

Aurenche, which according to a family legend made him a prince consort, since the Aurenche family traced its genealogy back to the sister of Louis XVII, which gave the family a claim to the French throne through descent.[3] While this family myth may have nourished Ernst's imagination, the collages assumed an altogether different character in the pages of *La Révolution surréaliste*, where they became absurd parodies of the genealogies and mythopeoia of regal history.[4] While Ernst soon abandoned the *Morceaux choisis* project, he continued to explore the possibility of collage, completing his first collage cycle, *La Femme 100 têtes*, before the end of the year.[5] This return to collage represented an important shift in both Ernst's practice and in the general position of the pictorial arts in the surrealist movement, a shift away from automatism towards the collage-image as the basis of surrealist pictorial practice.

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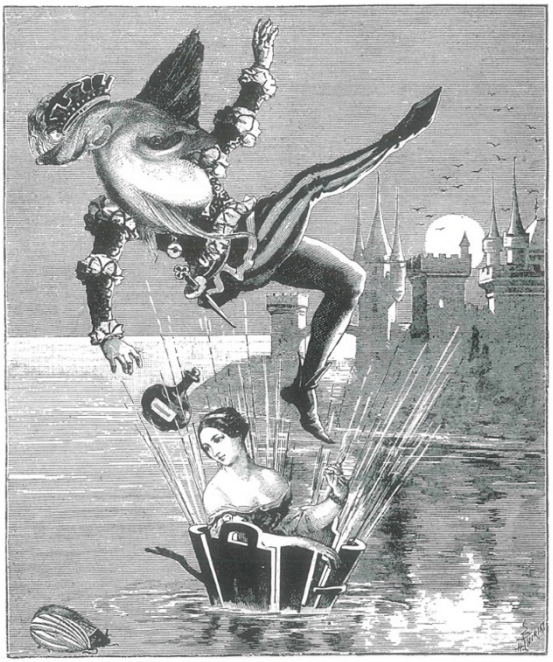
[3] Werner Spies, *Max Ernst Collages: The Invention of the Surrealist Universe*, translated by John William Gabriel (London: Thames and Hudson, 1991), 127. On this myth see Patrick Waldberg, *Max Ernst* (Paris: Jean-Jacques Pauvert, 1958), 262-65.

[4] The *Morceaux choisis* project may also be related to a passage in Breton's *Nadja*, where he describes a street peddler's nonsensical explanation of prints of historical scenes. See André Breton, *Nadja*, translated by Richard Howard (New York: Grove Press, 1960), 97.

[5] *La femme 100 têtes* was followed by two more collage-romans: *Rêve d'une petite fille qui voulut entrer au Carmel* (Paris: Éditions du Carrefour, 1930), and *Une semaine de bonté ou les sept éléments capitaux* (Paris: Éditions Jeanne Bucher, 1934).

l'époque 1917-20, tel qu'il se présentait en France alors que finissait une guerre et que commençait une paix.

Le moderne de ce temps-là, comme tous les modernes, est fait d'un bric-à-brac où il faut se reconnaître. Eléments encore vivants, encore effectifs venus des premières années du siècle, comme la boîte de corned-beef qui venait de Jarry, éléments pensés cinquante ans plus tôt mais qui n'affleuraient soudain qu'à la faveur de circonstances nouvelles, comme tout ce que le moderne d'alors doit à Lautréamont, éléments qui ne prendront force que plus tard, quand l'ombre du cubisme aura retiré sa tache portée, vieux bagages des derniers jours, on pourrait se perdre entre ce gibus, cette



JEANNE HACHETTE ET CHARLES LE TÉMÉRAIRE *Max Ernst.*

Fig. 1. Max Ernst, *Jeanne Hachette et Charles le Téméraire*, 1929. Collage, reproduced in *La Révolution surréaliste*, no. 12 (December 1929): 59. © Max Ernst. ADAGP/Copyright Agency, 2024.

This essay examines the circumstances of Ernst's return to collage in 1929, situating it in the context of a profound crisis that polarized the surrealist movement into antagonistic factions. At issue was the revolutionary position of surrealism, particularly the collective character of creative endeavour and its relationship to political action. Collage, with its refashioning outmoded material, systematic use of ambiguity and contradiction, and emphasis on the role of the figurative image, represented an aspect of surrealist practice that could not only contest the aesthetic project of the modernist avant-garde in the late-1920s, but also exemplified a practice that could navigate the cultural and political impasse that confronted surrealism, adopting an ambivalent position beyond art, yet before politics.

In this context, Ernst's return to collage was outmoded twice over. First, it recycled the outmoded material of engraved line illustration from the nineteenth century. By the time of the First World War photomechanical reproduction had largely replaced the use of woodcut or steel line engravings to illustrate mass circulation magazines or newspapers.[6] Second, while the source material was the most obvious link with the outmoded,

[6] Indeed, Adorno would associate surrealism with "late nineteenth-century illustrations that belonged to the world of the parents of Max Ernst's generation." Theodor W. Adorno, "Looking Back on Surrealism," in *Notes to Literature*, edited by Rolf Tiedemann, translated by Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 104.

Ernst's return to collage was itself a manifestation of the recently outmoded. Collage had been the foundation of Ernst's practice since 1919—either directly or altered by over-painting, and as inspiration for the collage-paintings 1922-24—but in 1925 Ernst would turn to frottage as the basis for his practice. This shift was in part a response to debates in the surrealist movement on the role of automatism in creative endeavour. Since the publication of Breton's *Manifesto of Surrealism* in October 1924, where Breton defined surrealism "once and for all" as "psychic automatism in its pure state," automatism served as a "touchstone" to the surrealist status of a work.[7] Ernst developed frottage to answer this debate. In the 1936 essay "Beyond Painting" he dated the discovery of frottage to August 10, 1925, allowing him to claim frottage as the "real equivalent of that which is already known by the term *automatic writing*."[8] Whereas collage employed readymade imagery, frottage (and its adaption to painting in the form of grattage) retained a trace of the inchoate materiality of the source textures. Ernst discovered the "sudden intensification of [his] visionary capacities" in pencil rubbings of textured surfaces; these drawings provoked the "hallucinatory succession of

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[7] André Breton, "Manifesto of Surrealism," in *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, translated by Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969), 26; Max Morise described automatism as a "touchstone" for surrealism in "Enchanted Eyes," in *The Sources of Surrealism*, edited by Neil Matheson, 324.

[8] Ernst, "Beyond Painting," 8.

contradictory images superimposed, one upon the other, with the persistence and rapidity characteristic of amorous memories" (fig. 2).[9] The return to collage in 1929 was thus a return to an earlier moment in Ernst's development as an artist, a technique initially rendered outmoded by the invention of frottage.

Although collage never eclipsed automatism, it did exert a pervasive influence after 1929 on artists associated with *La Révolution surréaliste* and *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution*. Aragon gave collage legitimacy in "La Peinture au défi [The Challenge to Painting]," the essay he wrote to accompany an exhibition of collages held in March 1930.[10] "The Challenge to Painting" represented the most important contribution to the debate on the role of the pictorial arts in the surrealist movement since the first instalment of André Breton's essay "Le Surréalisme et la peinture [Surrealism and Painting]" in July 1925.[11]

[9] Ernst, "Beyond Painting," 7.
[10] *Exposition de Collages*, Paris: Galerie Gœmans, March 1930.
[11] André Breton, "Le Surréalisme et la peinture," *La Révolution surréaliste*, no. 4 (June 1925): 26-30.

Fig. 2. Max Ernst, *Les diamants conjugaux*, 1926, from the portfolio *Histoire naturelle* (Paris: Éditions Jeanne Bucher, 1926). Collotype after frottage, 43 x 26.4 cm. Collection Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam, MB 1995/3 26 (PK) / Photography: Studio Tromp. © Max Ernst. ADAGP/Copyright Agency, 2024.

Aragon identified collage as a fundamental aspect of surrealist pictorial practice, noting that "all the painters who can be called surrealists have used collage, at least momentarily."[12]

To understand Max Ernst's return to collage, I want to locate his practice in relation to two debates—one cultural, one political—that unfold in the late 1920s. The first is a polemic against surrealism in the pages of *Cahiers d'Art*, the influential art magazine edited by Christian Zervos, which vigorously promoted the modernist avant-garde.[13] The second debate is a renewed attempt to define a collective political position within the surrealist movement.

Cahiers d'Art and surrealism

In 1928 Christian Zervos published "Du Phénomène surréaliste" in *Cahiers d'Art*. The catalyst for this essay was twofold: first, the controversy generated by an article on Max Ernst by Jean de Bosschère in

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[12] He continued: "If collage for several of them is closer to *papier collé* than to what we encounter with Max Ernst, since it is little more than a modification of the paint can, still for most it plays an important role, and it appears at a decisive moment in the evolution it designates." Aragon, "The Challenge to Painting," in *The Surrealist Look at Art*, edited by Pontus Hulten (North Venice: Lapis Press, 1990), 66-67.

[13] *Cahiers d'Art* was founded in 1926, and closely associated with the promotion of canonical modernist artists, notably Picasso. Zervos would commence publishing the 33-volume catalogue raisonné of Picasso's work in 1932. On *Cahiers d'Art* see Kim Grant, "*Cahiers d'Art* and the Evolution of Modernist Painting," *Journal of Modern Periodical Studies* 1, no. 2 (2010): 216-27.

the previous issue of *Cahiers d'Art*; and second, the recent publication of *Le Surréalisme et la peinture* as a book.[14] Although Bosschère's article was generally favourable towards Ernst, Zervos appended an editorial note critical of surrealist painting.[15] Zervos increasingly perceived Breton and surrealism as a challenge to *Cahiers d'Art*, since he directed several polemical asides on surrealist painting in articles on Auguste Renoir and Henri Matisse during 1928.[16] In "Du Phénomène surréaliste" he accused surrealism of substituting a moral attitude for an aesthetic one, thereby blurring the difference between painting, literature, and life—a position that threatened to undermine the critical categories he used to legitimate the modernist avant-garde. To demonstrate this point Zervos turned to the work of Picasso, which he took as an example of "true painting": "every time Picasso crosses two strokes, or that he describes an outline on a canvas, strokes and outlines become for us a living thing, because

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[14] Jean de Bosschère, "Max Ernst," *Cahiers d'Art* 3, no. 2 (1928) : 70-73; André Breton, *Le Surréalisme et la peinture* (Paris: Gallimard, 1928).

[15] See the "Note de la rédaction" in Bosschère, "Max Ernst," 69. I discuss Bosschere's article in "Modernism and its Discontents: The Case of *Cahiers d'Art* and Surrealism in 1928," *Modernism/Modernity Print* + 5, cycle 2 (21 September 2020), https://doi.org/10.26597/mod.0162.

[16] See, for instance, Christian Zervos, "Idéalisme et naturalisme dans la peinture moderne: III – Renoir," *Cahiers d'Art* 3, no.2 (1928) : 49-51; "Idéalisme et naturalisme dans la peinture moderne: IV – Henri Matisse," *Cahiers d'Art* 3, no. 4 (1928): 159-63. The latter article is largely a critique of *Le surréalisme et la peinture*, illustrated with paintings by Matisse.

Picasso sees all things plastically.[17] This defence of Picasso contested Breton's overture to the Spanish artist in *Le Surréalisme et la peinture*, which attempted to annex Picasso for surrealism.[18]. *Cahiers d'Art* had long stressed the 'literary' character of Ernst's work, a point Zervos had reiterated in the editorial note he appended to Bosschère's article in the previous issue, where he described Ernst as a "literary type par excellence," and dismissed his "efforts to attain plastic form" as "a parody of the inimitable work of Picasso."[19] Viewed in the context of artistic debates

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[17] "On sait que la libération qui fait la valeur de la peinture surréaliste leur vient du cubisme et surtout de l'œuvre récente de Picasso […]. Mais ce qu'ils semblent délibérément négliger dans l'œuvre récente de Picasso c'est l'effort pour atteindre à l'extrême de la plasticité. A leurs yeux l'effort plastique est incompatible avec l'événement moral qu'ils veulent exprimer. Et c'est là le principal point sur lequel je ne suis nullement d'accord avec les peintres surréalistes, j'aimerais pouvoir mettre mon expérience picturale à leur service et leur faire comprendre que toutes les fois que Picasso croise, par exemple, deux traits ou qu'il promène un contour sur la toile, traits et contours deviennent pour nous une chose vivante parce que Picasso voit toutes choses plastiquement." Christian Zervos, "Du Phénomène surréaliste," *Cahiers d'Art*, 3, no. 3 (1928): 114.

[18] As Breton noted in *Le Surréalisme et la peinture*: "we claim him [Picasso] unhesitatingly as one of us." *Surrealism and Painting*, translated by Simon Watson Taylor (Boston: MFA Publications, 2002), 7. On this point see Elizabeth Cowling, "'Proudly We Claim Him as One of Us': Breton, Picasso, and the Surrealist Movement," *Art History* 8, no. 1 (March 1985): 82–104.

[19] "Ses efforts pour atteindre à la plastique n'aboutissent qu'à lui faire parodier l'œuvre inimitable de Picasso." "Note de la rédaction," Bosschère, "Max Ernst," 69. Tériade had earlier stressed the literary qualities of Ernst's work in a review of the frottages for *Histoire naturelle* : "Dans le domaine de

of the 1920s, Zervos's defence of Picasso was part of a broader effort to distance the artist from surrealism, particularly in light of the surrealists' attempts to align their movement with radical politics, a position that threatened to undermine the peaceful coexistence of modernist avant-garde within the postwar political consensus of the call to order.[20] Although surrealism's moral attitude appeared unable to meet this aesthetic criterion, Zervos generously offered to educate the surrealists on their errors. What was left unstated here was that by falling short of this aesthetic ideal, surrealism might succeed in establishing a link between a series of artistic manifestations and a radical oppositional politics.[21]

The Bar du Château meeting

The second factor behind Max Ernst's return to collage was the surrealists' renewed efforts to engage in some form of collective political activity—an initiative with the potential to realize Zervos's unstated fear. On February 12, 1929, Breton and his

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l'illustration où on se trouve et où Max Ernst doit avoir une belle place, tout dessin doit contenir sa littérature l'illustration." Tériade, "Max Ernst (Boutique Pierre Chareau)," *Cahiers d'Art* 1, no. 4 (May 1926): 80.

[20] Kenneth E. Silver, *Esprit de Corps: The Art of the Parisian Avant-Garde and the First World War, 1914-1925* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989); Christopher Green, *Cubism and Its Enemies*: *Modern Movements and Reaction in French Art, 1916-1928* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987).

[21] For more on the political context of Zervos's essay, see my "Modernism and its Discontents."

colleagues sent a letter to seventy-three individuals associated with the surrealist movement, canvasing their willingness to participate in some form of common action.[22] The letter asked two questions: whether or not one's activity should be limited to an individual form; and what sort of common activity was possible. The letter was followed by a general meeting on March 11 at the Bar du Château in Montparnasse. The meeting began calmly enough, with a review of the responses to the initial letter. Breton then took the floor, stating it was necessary to examine the degree of moral qualification of each attendee.[23] Breton focused his attention on the young contributors to *Le Grand Jeu*, a recently established review loosely associated with surrealism, accusing them of a profound lack of moral and intellectual rigour that betrayed an ambiguous political position—an ambiguity that threatened to dissipate the tension between culture and politics animating surrealism.[24]

Although the Bar du Château meeting concluded in an impasse, it nonetheless forced the participants to declare their position on the question of collective action. The immediate effect was to polarize surrealism into three factions: those who

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[22] The recipients of the February 6 letter are listed in "A suivre: Petite contribution au dossier de certains intellectuels à tendances révolutionnaires," *Tracts surréalistes et déclarations collectifs*, edited by José Pierre, 2 vols (Paris: Terrain Vague, 1980), 1:99.

[23] "A Suivre," *Tracts surréalistes*, 117.

[24] On the Bar du Château meeting see Maurice Nadeau, *The History of Surrealism*, translated by Richard Howard (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 154-58.

remained faithful to Breton's position; the contributors to *Le Grand Jeu*, who demurred when challenged to accept the moral rigour required of revolutionary intellectuals; and the so-called 'dissident' surrealists who rejected Breton's authority and would regroup around the review *Documents*, which published its first issue in April 1929. The divisive effect of the meeting was amplified in June when Aragon and Breton published "A suivre: Petite contribution au dossier de certains intellectuels à tendances révolutionnaires," a detailed account of events leading up to the Bar du Château meeting and its immediate aftermath, which appeared as a supplement to *Le Surréalisme en 1929*, the special issue edited by Breton and Aragon of the Belgian review *Variétés*.[25] This account reopened the wounds of the Bar du Château meeting, exacerbating tensions, and setting the scene for the polemical balancing of accounts in the *Second Manifesto of Surrealism*, which initially appeared in the December 1929 issue of *La Révolution surréaliste*, before being published as a book in 1930.[26]

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[25] "A suivre" was published as a supplement on pink paper in *Le Surréalisme en 1929*, i-xxxii.

[26] André Breton, "Second Manifeste du surréalisme," *La Révolution surréaliste*, no. 12 (December 1929): 1-17; reprinted as *Second Manifeste du surréalisme* (Paris: Kra, 1930); translated as "Second Manifesto of Surrealism," in *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, 119-94.

Ernst's Return to Collage

It is difficult to date precisely when Ernst returned to collage, particularly in relation to the Bar du Château meeting, since the existing literature on Ernst does not provide accurate biographical details for early 1929. According to John Russell, Ernst began work on *La femme 100 têtes* "one day, in 1929," after an illness confined him to bed while staying on a farm in the Ardèche.[27] Werner Spies is more specific, drawing on his conversations with the artist:

> Legend would have it that Max Ernst composed *La femme 100 têtes* while convalescing in bed. He did spend a few weeks at the country house of his wife's parents, the Aurenches, in Le Fex de Vesseaux, Département Ardèche. It was there, Max Ernst told me, that he made the collages for the book. He had brought the material with him from Paris, having spent the preceding months adding to it from the bookstalls along the Seine. Certain elements are known to have been in his possession for

[27] "one day, in 1929, in the Ardèche, while staying on a farm, Max Ernst was confined to bed for a couple of weeks. A sharp pair of scissors, and he was away: *La Femme 100 Têtes* was complete and published within the year." Max Ernst and John Russell, *Max Ernst: Life and Work* (1967), 189. Krauss has noted the mythic character of this account, which reproduces the "collage conditions" of Ernst's original discovery of collage. See Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), 81.

> several years. The work itself, Max Ernst said, took him only a few weeks. The collages for *La femme 100 têtes* were presumably finished by the end of May, because the cycle was mentioned in a special number of the Belgian journal *Variétés*, dedicated to "Surrealism in 1929," which appeared in June.[28]

Ernst was not at the Bar du Château meeting on 11 March. It would have been imprudent for him not to attend this meeting given the importance of the issue for surrealism; thus it is highly probable that he was not in Paris at the time.[29] This would date his sojourn in Ardèche and his commencement of *La femme 100 têtes* before March 1929.[30]

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[28] Spies, *Max Ernst Collages*, 126-27.

[29] Ernst did respond to the initial February 12 letter: "J'estime extrêmement utile un minimum d'organisation. En principe, je sue prêt à mener une activité commune avec *toutes les personnes* du questionnaire … J'estime de la plus grande importance de continuer les actes de terreur que les surréalistes ont menés." "A suivre," 111.

[30] A comment in Eluard's correspondence reinforces this timeline: "Je suis révolté de l'attitude de Max Ernst qui me laisse aussi sans nouvelles. Je viens de lui adresser un véritable ultimatum. Je veux en finir avec la négligence, l'indifférence, je veux avoir à fiare (sic) à une hostilité précise ou à une vraie solidarité." (Eluard to Bousquet, February 13, 1929, in Paul Eluard, *Lettres à Joë Bousquet* [Paris: Editeurs Français reunis, 1973], 72.) Ernst's negligence would be understandable if he was convalescing from an illness at the time. This would date Ernst's return to collage around February 1929. In March Ernst held a solo exhibition at the Galerie Flechtheim in Berlin, so he may have travelled to Berlin to attend the opening. (*Max Ernst*, Galerie Flechthein, Berlin, March 2-31, 1929.) Eluard returned

In this context a direct causal link between the Bar du Château meeting and Ernst's return to collage is unlikely. Ernst had apparently decided to return to collage prior to the meeting, since, as Spies has noted, he had been collecting the source material for the collages during the preceding months. Zervos's campaign against surrealism in *Cahiers d'Art* may have been more influential, since Ernst's collages denied the plastic values precious to the modernist avant-garde; furthermore, Breton had praised Ernst's early collage-paintings in *Le Surréalisme et la peinture* for their "sense of culture"—an endorsement that would have rung all the more true after the recent criticism of his work in the pages of *Cahiers d'Art*.[31] In this context, collage would have appeared an attractive option for Ernst, reiterating the difference between surrealism and the modernist avant-garde.

Nonetheless, it is impossible to divorce Ernst's return to collage entirely from the effect of the Bar du Château meeting. Although political considerations did not consciously motivate his initial decision to resume collage in 1929, the time necessary to complete an ambitious work like *La*

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briefly to Paris during March 6-15; he did not mention visiting Ernst during this period in his correspondence with Gala. (Paul Eluard, *Lettres à Gala* [Paris: Gallimard, 1984], 43-47.) Ernst had definitely returned to Paris by April 10, when Eluard visited his atelier at Meudon. (Eluard, 10 April 1929, *Lettres à Gala*, 58-59.)

[31] Breton's comments appeared in the fourth instalment of "Le Surréalisme et la peinture," *La Révolution surréaliste*, no. 9-10 (October 1927): 38-39. On this point see my article "Modernism and its Discontents."

Femme 100 têtes would have certainly alerted Ernst to the wider implications of this decision. Indeed, the polarization of the surrealist movement into antagonistic factions corresponded to a parallel shift in the pictorial practice of artists associated with surrealism. The collage-image increasingly became associated with faction around Breton in the work of Max Ernst, René Magritte, Man Ray, Yves Tanguy, and Salvador Dalí—a position Aragon would articulate when he claimed collage as the surrealist technique *par excellence* in "The Challenge to Painting."[32] André Masson would break with Breton in favour of *Documents*, while Joan Miró maintained a neutral stance, neither aligning nor breaking with Breton.[33]

La Femme 100 têtes

La Femme 100 têtes was published in December 1929 by Éditions du Carrefour. The book reproduced a cycle of 147 collages, plus an "Avis au lecteur" written by Breton; each plate was accompanied by a short caption, similar to the captions that accompanied illustrations in nineteenth-century novels.[34] The source material for the collages was

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[32] Aragon, "The Challenge to Painting," 66-67.

[33] See Masson and Miró's responses to the February 12, 1929, letter on collective action, in "A suivre," 105-106.

[34] André Breton, "Avis au lecteur pour « La Femme 100 têtes » de Max Ernst," in *Œuvres complètes*, 4 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1988-2008), 2:302-306; translated by Mark Polizzotti and Mary Ann Caws as "Notice to the Reader of *The Hundred Headless Woman*," in André Breton, *Break of Day* (Lincoln: University of

outmoded illustrations: principally late-nineteenth-century halftone woodcut and steel engravings from illustrated magazines like *La Nature* and *Le Magasin pittoresque* or illustrated novels. The consistent use of line to generate half-tone patterns allowed Ernst to assemble elements in a way that appeared seamless when reproduced, enhancing the strangeness of the picture.

In his preface, Breton located *La Femme 100 têtes* in a marginal position within the hierarchical structure of bourgeois culture. The outmoded source material Ernst employed recalled childhood, a period before the imagination was subordinated to the arbitrary authority of bourgeois culture—and for Breton and Ernst's generation, a time before the trauma of the First World War.[35] According to Breton, the illustrations in these books opened a breach between the moralizing tone of a text and the sensational character of the visual image. Whereas the "path of knowledge" replaced "astonishing virgin forests with the most depressing deserts," illustrated books evoked the memory of the "shining or sombre pages" that "determined the particular nature of our dreams, the elective reality of our love,

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Nebraska Press, 1999), 45-50. Breton noted his fascination with these captions in *Nadja*, and his "Avis au lecteur."

[35] "La splendide illustration des ouvrages populaires et des livres d'enfance, *Rocambole* ou *Costal l'Indien*, dédiée à ceux qui savent à peine lire, serait une des seules choses capables de toucher aux larmes ceux qui peuvent dire qu'ils ont tout lu." Breton, "Avis au lecteur," 2:302; "Notice," 45.

and the incomparable development of our life."[36] Indeed, Breton identified dissensual force in the pages of these books:

> And if that is how a soul is formed, what can we expect of a common and simple soul that fashions itself every day on images rather than texts, […] of an utterly candid soul that simultaneously vibrates in millions of men and that, in the bright revolutionary daylight, because it is simple and candid, will carve out its own veritable emblems in the unchanged colors of its exaltation?[37]

Breton's strategy here is typical of his efforts to mobilise the tension between the cultural and political dimension of surrealism, employing poetic rhetoric to entangle the two registers.

Ernst's achievement in *La Femme 100 têtes* was to accentuate and recover the power that illustrated books held in childhood. Breton identified the

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[36] "La route de la connaissance, qui tend à substituer progressivement à la plus étonnante forêt vierge le plus décourageant des déserts sans mirages, n'est malheureusement pas de celles qui permettent qu'on revienne sur ses pas." Breton, "Avis au lecteur," 2:302; "Notice," 45.

[37] "Et s'il en est ainsi la formation d'une âme, que veut-on qu'il advienne de celle, commune et simple, qui se façonne chaque jour plutôt sur les images que sur les textes […] de celle, toute de candeur, qui vibre à la fois dans des millions d'hommes et qui, au jour révolutionnaire, parce qu'elle est simple et candide, saura se tailler, dans les couleurs inaltérées de son exaltation, ses véritables emblèmes." Breton, "Avis au lecteur," 2:302; "Notice," 45.

surrealist quality of *La Femme 100 têtes* with "our will toward complete dislocation [*dépassement*] from everything," a strategy whose value "depends on taste, daring, and the success, by one's power of appropriation, of certain *displacements*.[38] Such displacements—Breton used the term *détournements*—would realize the untapped potential of the source material, disrupting the conventional circuit of associations surrounding an object to realise the promise that illustrated books once held during childhood.[39]

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[38] La surréalité sera d'ailleurs fonction de notre volonté de dépaysement complet de tout […]. Toute la valeur d'une telle entreprise—et peut-être de toute entreprise artistique—me paraît dépendre de goût, de l'audace et de la réussite par le pouvoir d'appropriations à soi-même, de certains *détournements*." Breton, "Avis au lecteur," 2:305; "Notice," 48, translation modified. This passage amounted to an alternative definition of surrealism. Both Aragon and Ernst cited it in their writings on collage; see Aragon, "The Challenge to Painting," 51; Max Ernst, "Beyond Painting," 13.

[39] Ernst would supplement the collage technique with a second strategy, the use of language against itself. Ernst used the polysemy of language, particularly the discrepancy between sound and meaning, to disrupt rationality and build a complex, multi-layered text. Indeed, the title *La Femme 100 têtes* embodied this principle, since, as Spies has noted, the homophonic phrase is open to four interpretations: *La femme cent têtes* (the hundred-headed woman); *La femme sans tête* (headless woman); *La femme s'entête* (a woman with her own head = an obstinate woman); *La femme sang tête* [*têter*] (bloodsucking woman). Spies, *Max Ernst Collages*, 224.

Poetic Revelation

According to Werner Spies, a key element in *La Femme 100 têtes* is the alchemical principle of "contradiction as the path to knowledge."[40] This is evident in the theme of poetic revelation. Although this theme is arguably central to all of Ernst's work, the use of late nineteenth-century illustrations as the source material for *La Femme 100 têtes* meant that it occurred in a context that engaged with the outmoded. This theme also engaged with the political potential of illustrated books once harboured, since poetic revelation was consonant with the innocence of the "utterly candid soul" who would "carve out its own veritable emblems in the unchanged color of its exultation" "in the bright revolutionary daylight."[41] This innocence is evident in the first chapter of *La Femme 100 têtes*, which included four plates based on the theme of the Immaculate Conception: *L'immaculée conception manquée*, *La même, pour la deuxième . . . , . . . et la troisième fois manquée*, and *L'immaculée conception*.[42]

The first plate, *L'immaculée conception manquée* (fig. 3), depicts a man standing next to a table who looks towards a woman sitting upright on a bed, her arms resting on her knees, while a wailing baby and a domestic hare appear in the foreground. There is an absence of intimacy between the two figures; the man coolly stares at the woman, who shelters under

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[40] Spies, *Max Ernst Collages*, 221.
[41] Breton, "Avis au lecteur," 2:302; "Notice," 45.
[42] *La Femme 100 têtes*, plates 2, 3, 5 and 12.

a blanket. The man operates a switch placed on the table, perhaps trying to consummate their relationship, an attempt doomed to failure. A bottle and an eye-like circular shape echo the position of the two figures; these objects seem to be gendered, yet their positions reverse the gender of the figures. The phallic bottle parallels the position of the woman, while the feminine eye-circle parallels that of the man. The plate appears to contrast the instrumental gaze of positivist science with the revelatory gaze of the poet. In the first case, the man's gaze objectifies the woman and the act of conception falters. In the second case, conception does occur, but only in the reader's imagination. It was in this sense that Ernst described collage as

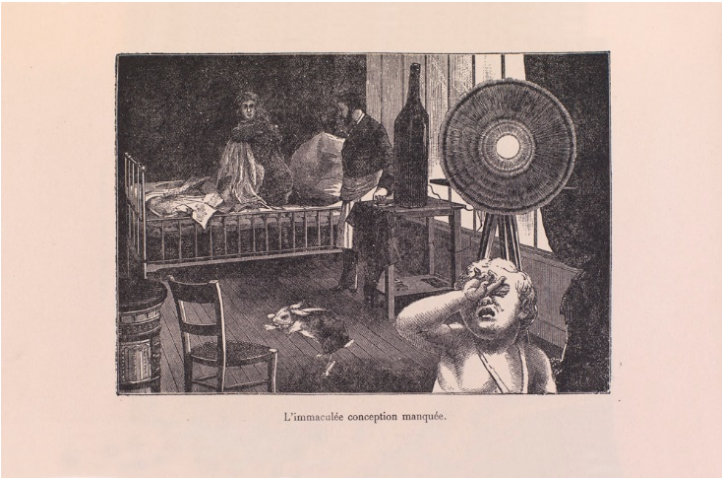

Fig. 3. Max Ernst, *L'Immaculée Conception manquée*, 1929. Collage, reproduced in *La femme 100 têtes* (Paris: Editions du Carrefour, 1929), plate 2. Digital

image courtesy KB, National Library of the Netherlands, The Hague, KW KOOPM K 317. © Max Ernst. ADAGP/Copyright Agency, 2024.

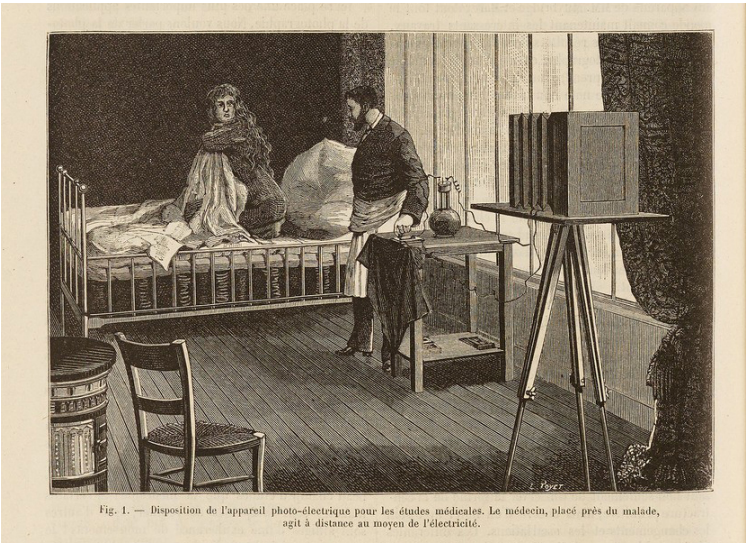

Fig. 1. — Disposition de l'appareil photo-électrique pour les études médicales. Le médecin, placé près du malade, agit à distance au moyen de l'électricité.

Fig. 4. "Disposition de l'appareil photo-électrique pour les études médicales," illustration in Albert Londe, "La photographie en médecine," *La Nature*, no. 535 (1 September 1883): 216. Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France.

"something like the alchemy of the visual image."[43] The poetic act gave birth to strange beings: the bottle and eye conceive a wailing baby, while the man and woman conceive a hare.

Although Spies has cautioned against reading Ernst's collages in terms of their original source material, a recourse to this material is illuminating in this case.[44] Ernst based *L'immaculée conception manquée* on an illustration from *La Nature* of a camera for photographing medical patients, particularly hysterical women (fig. 4 above).[45] Ernst made four alterations to the original illustration: he covered the camera apparatus with the bottle and eye-motif, and in the foreground he introduced the domestic rabbit and wailing baby.[46] In this way Ernst effaced the original context, while preserving aspects of its affective content, particularly the expressions of the female patient and the medical orderly. The collage

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[43] Ernst, "Beyond Painting," 12.

[44] Spies, *Max Ernst Collages*, 221-23.

[45] The original illustration is reproduced in Spies, *Max Ernst Collages*, doc. 665. The illustration appeared in an article by Albert Londe, "La Photographie en médecine," *La Nature*, no. 535 (1 September 1883): 215–18. Londe was the chief photographer at Salpétrière, so the illustration has a direct link to the study of hysteria. See Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), 284, n64.

[46] The original collage is in the collection of the Musée national de l'Art moderne in Paris as Max Ernst, *L'Immaculée Conception manquée*, 1929. Engravings cut and pasted on paper pasted on cardboard, 10.2 x 14.8 cm (AM1999-3[2]). I was not able to obtain a reproduction of the collage to accompany this essay, but the image is available on the museum's website: https://www.centrepompidou.fr/en/ressources/oeuvre/c5e95d

exemplified Ernst's description of the mechanism of collage in "Beyond Painting": by introducing the bottle and eye-motif into the illustration from *La Nature*, Ernst not only 'displaced' the original context, but produced a "chance meeting" between these elements: bottle and eye engage in an "pure act like that of love," which resulted in the baby.[47] This profane immaculate conception contrasted to that of the man and woman, whose meeting is mediated by the institution of medical science, resulting in a domestic hare, impotently suspended between the chair and floor.[48]

The first chapter concluded with a plate entitled *L'immaculée conception* (fig. 5). Ernst based this collage on an illustration of a large pipe organ; upon this background he placed a naked woman who gazes towards a large, masked face.[49] Unlike the series of failed immaculate conceptions, which all depicted cluttered environments, the organ provided a calm and ordered setting.

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[47] Ernst, "Beyond Painting," 13, translation modified.

[48] "In the first image, the spark is still embodied in the leaping hare—a tame hare, significantly—while a trinity of Creator, phallic kerosene bottle, and glowing mandala-like vulva make the cupid in the foreground wail at a new 'malheur des immortels'." Spies, *Max Ernst Collages*, 228.

[49] The original illustration was entitled "Le grand orgue de Crystal Palace, à Londres" and is reproduced in Spies, *Max Ernst Collages*, doc. 671.

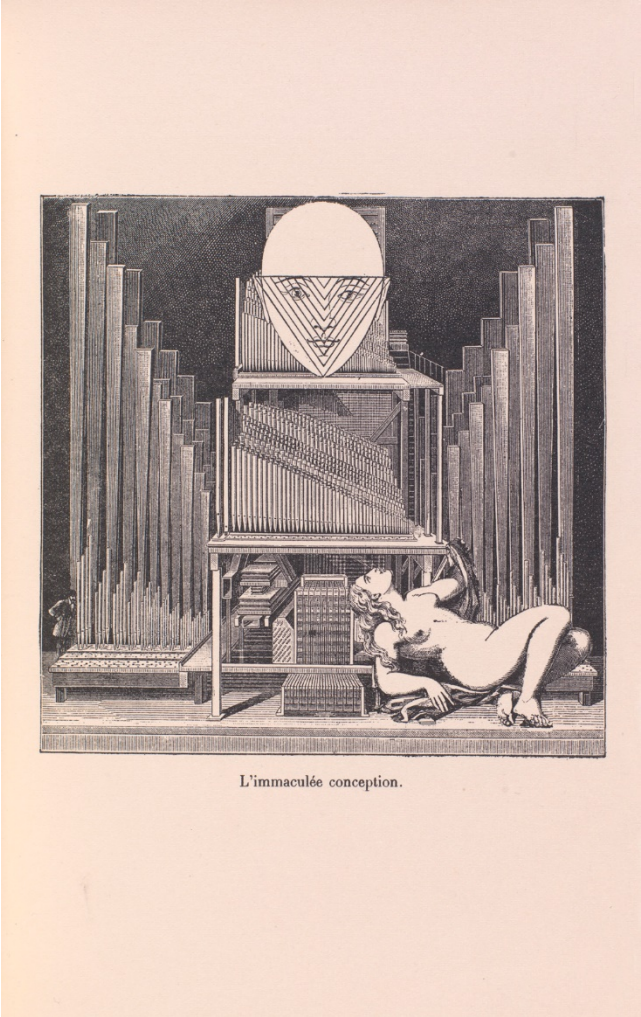

Fig. 5. Max Ernst, *L'Immaculée Conception*, 1929. Collage, reproduced in *La femme 100 têtes* (Paris: Editions du Carrefour, 1929), plate 12. Digital image

courtesy KB, National Library of the Netherlands, The Hague, KW KOOPM K 317. © Max Ernst. ADAGP/Copyright Agency, 2024.

The organ was also an evocative metaphor for the process of conception, suggesting an ideal balance between the sacred and profane, science and art—a balance notably absent from *L'immaculée conception manquée*. Since the organ was not located in a church, it suggests a sense of profane wonder and fascination with modern technology, contrasting it to the instrumental use of technology in *L'immaculée conception manquée*.[50] Whereas the woman in the first collage adopted a defensive pose, resisting the man's gaze, in this collage the woman appeared more solicitous, offering herself before the masked face. This openness to experience facilitates conception; yet in this pose she could appear as both child and mother.[51] Here Ernst implicitly drew a parallel

[50] Indeed, on the extreme left a man leans forward to examine the organ's mechanism. This attitude was typical of the popular character of the illustrations in *La Nature*, which represented scientific discoveries as a spectacle for a mass readership, rather than specialised knowledge of professional scientists.

[51] Similarly, the artistic or imaginative connotations of the organ identify it as the instrument of conception, effected here under the sign of art rather than science. Spies has noted the similarity of *L'immaculée conception* and Titian's *Venus and Organ Player*. *Max Ernst Collages*, 228.

between fascination, wonder and the poetic revelation of the marvellous.[52]

Ironically, perhaps, *La Femme 100 têtes* exemplifies the predicament facing surrealism that Walter Benjamin diagnosed in his contemporaneous essay, "Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia," published in 1929.[53] While Benjamin identified the political import of surrealism in what he called "profane illumination," which transposed the surrealist experience of the marvellous more firmly into an anthropological, materialist context, he also cautioned that the surrealist accent on the anarchic "energies of intoxication" risked subordinating the "methodical and disciplinary preparation for the revolution entirely to a praxis oscillating between fitness exercises and celebration in advance."[54] In the final section of the essay, he located the articulation between political action and the experience of the marvellous in what he called "image-space [*Bildraum*]." Significantly, this space is

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[52] The theme of poetic revelation is central to the final ninth chapter in *La Femme 100 têtes*. I have discussed this chapter in "Envisioning Surrealism in *Histoire de l'œil* and *La femme 100 têtes*," *Art Journal* 63, no. 4 (Winter 2004): 4-18 and "'Talk about complications!': Surrealism's Trouble with Women," *International Journal of Surrealism* 1, no. 1 (Fall 2023): 21-39.

[53] Walter Benjamin, "Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia," in *Selected Works, 1927–1934*, vol. 2, edited by Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith, translated by Rodney Livingstone and Others (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 207–221. Edmund Jephcott is credited as translator of this essay.

[54] Benjamin, "Surrealism," 209, 215-16.

opened at moments of social and political crisis when culture is stripped of its metaphoric veils and "action puts forth its own image […] so that no limb remains untorn."[55] Although it is tempting to read Ernst's use of collage in *La Femme 100 têtes* as one attempt to map this image-space, to do so misses one crucial factor: that the image-space only assumes its full scope in moments of crisis.[56] It is open to

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[55] "[…] in all cases where an action puts forth its own image and exists, absorbing and consuming it, where nearness looks with its own eyes, the long-sought image space is opened, the world of universal and integral actualities, where the 'best room' is missing—the space […] in which political materialism and physical creatureliness share the inner man, the psyche, the individual, or whatever else we wish to throw to them, with dialectical justice, so that no limb remains untorn. Nevertheless—indeed, precisely after such dialectical annihilation—this will still be an image space and, more concretely, a body space. For in the end this must be admitted: metaphysical materialism […] cannot lead without rupture to anthropological materialism. There is a residue. The collective is a body, too. And the *physis* that is being organized for it in technology can, through all its political and factual reality, be produced only in that image space to which profane illumination initiates us. Only when in technology body and image space so interpenetrate that all revolutionary tension becomes bodily collective innervation, and all the bodily innervations of the collective become revolutionary discharge, has reality transcended itself to the extent demanded by the *Communist Manifesto*." Benjamin, "Surrealism," 217-18. On this point see Sigrid Weigel, *Body-and Image-Space: Re-Reading Walter Benjamin*, translated by Georgina Paul with Rachel McNicholl and Jeremy Gaines (London: Routledge, 1996).

[56] Hal Foster has analised Ernst's collage-novel through the perspective of Benjamin's theory of the outmoded and the Freudian uncanny in *Compulsive Beauty* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), 174-82.

question if France was facing such a crisis in 1929. The image-space of *La Femme 100 têtes* thus occupied an ambiguous position, suspended between the promise of revolution in which "no limb remains untorn," and the debate over the validity of surrealism as an artistic strategy.

Collage, with its refashioning outmoded material, systematic use of ambiguity and contradiction, and emphasis on the role of the image, represented an aspect of surrealist practice irreconcilable with the aesthetic project of the modernist avant-garde in the late-1920s. In *La Femme 100 têtes* Ernst mobilised the latent energy of the outmoded to reinforce surrealism's challenge to painting. This strategy served to contest the legitimacy of the modernist avant-garde promoted by *Cahiers d'Art* and other cultural publications, as well as reinforce surrealism's oppositional stance towards bourgeois culture. By returning to collage Ernst abandoned any concern with the formal values of modernist painting and proudly assumed the mantle of a "littérateur," which Zervos had applied in a pejorative sense in 1928. Although the form and structure of *La Femme 100 têtes* attempted to work through the impasse surrealism had reached on the political front, it did not succeed in resolving this impasse, but simply delineated the problematical relation of creative endeavour to political action. The anachronistic character of the source materials distanced this material from contemporary experience, while the poetic form of the cycle insulated it from political action. Culturally, it represented a strategic move that manifested the oppositional character of Ernst's practice, its

negation of the aesthetics of the modernist avant-garde and the doctrine of artistic autonomy associated with *Cahiers d'Art*. Politically, *La femme 100 têtes*, like surrealism in general, remained stranded in the cultural arena, unable or unwilling to transform creative endeavour into political action; it continued to equivocate before the commitment necessary to realize political revolution. At best, surrealism maintained an ambivalent position beyond art, yet before politics. Indeed, while collage initially refused the autonomy of modernist pictorial form, it was rapidly recuperated as a new cultural form to be assimilated into the history of modern art within the decade.[57] Collage thus serves as an example of the vicissitudes of the outmoded: the outmoded late-nineteenth century illustrations become recuperated as a new cultural form—a process that has implication for any understanding of the relation between art and revolution.

[57] The 1936 exhibition *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, for instance, included examples of Ernst's dada and surrealist collages. See Alfred H. Barr (ed.), *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1936).

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