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| **Automatism** |
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| Both Dada and Surrealist writers and artists experimented with ‘automatic’ creative production. Dadaists including Francis Picabia, Tristan Tzara, Hans Arp and Kurt Schwitters wrote ‘automatic’ poems from 1918, so called because they were transcribed without delay, serious consideration or revision. Dada visual artists, including Arp, Sophie Tauber and Marcel Duchamp also relinquished creative control of their works by employing chance. At the same time a group of writers in France around André Breton experimented with automatic writing as a new method of exploring the unconscious. |
| Both Dada and Surrealist writers and artists experimented with ‘automatic’ creative production. Dadaists including Francis Picabia, Tristan Tzara, Hans Arp and Kurt Schwitters wrote ‘automatic’ poems from 1918, so called because they were transcribed without delay, serious consideration or revision. Dada visual artists, including Arp, Sophie Tauber and Marcel Duchamp also relinquished creative control of their works by employing chance. At the same time a group of writers in France around André Breton experimented with automatic writing as a new method of exploring the unconscious. In 1919 Breton and Philippe Soupault published *Les Champs Magnétiques*, the result of their first experiments with automatic writing which tried to tap new poetic imagery through uncontrolled outbursts of imagination. In the period 1922 – 24 dream accounts were added to automatism. In the *First Manifesto of Surrealism* (1924) the movement is defined by Breton as ‘pure psychic automatism by which it is intended to express, either verbally or in writing, the true function of thought.’ Surrealist visual artists also explored automatism. Surrealist automatism was influential in the development of modernist visual art. Robert Matta’s (1911 – 2002) concerns with psychological states in the late 1930s set a precedent for American abstraction. CoBrA (1948 – 51), an avant-garde collective established in Europe, favoured automatic techniques and influenced developments in European abstraction.  Dada writers and artists sought spontaneity and freedom and often produced works according to the laws of chance. It has been argued that the Surrealists also made good use of chance but simply theorised it in psychoanalytical terms (Hopkins 69). Breton worked as a doctor treating shell-shock victims in 1916 and had developed an interest in psychiatry, particularly the work of Pierre Janet (1859 – 1947). Under the influence of Janet’s concept of automatism, a condition in which an activity is carried out without conscious knowledge by the subject, he used automatic writing as a therapeutic tool. Breton was also familiar with the work of Sigmund Freud (1856 – 1939) and his idea of the dream as a product of the unconscious mind influenced the experiments conducted during the ‘sleep period’ between the collapse of Paris Dada in 1922 and the founding of French Surrealism in 1924. Throughout the 1920s automatism in relation to visual art was much discussed. Breton believed in automatism and encouraged artists to explore it. André Masson experimented with doodles, Salvador Dali, Yves Tanguy, Rene Magritte and Paul Delvaux produced images that originated in dreams and Dali’s invented his **‘**paranoiac**-**critical method’. Joan Miró relied on chance, spilling colour on his blank canvas to begin a composition in a gestural fashion. Max Ernst developed two processes, ‘frottage’ (rubbing over a textured surface such as a wood floor to produce patterns that may suffice or may be refined) and ‘grattage’ (scraping away paint to reveal colours and textures). Oscar Dominguez invented the process of ‘decalcomania’ (applying paint to paper that is then folded or pressed against another sheet to reveal a pattern). These are provocations for images and this idea is related to Leonardo da Vinci’s notion of staring at a stain on a wall and seeing battles, clouds and forests (da Vinci). In 1933 Breton acknowledged that in painting automatism would combine with premeditated intentions (Breton, Surrealism and Painting 70). Max Ernst’s *The Kiss* (1927) is a good example of how automatism evolved to include both chance and careful consideration. List of Works Breton, André. *Surrealism and Painting*. London: Macdonald, 1965. Print.  da Vinci, Leonardo. “Treatise on Painting: Rules for the Painter.” 1651. at http://www.mirabilissimeinvenzioni.com/ing\_treatiseonpainting\_ing.html.  Hopkins, David. *Dada and Surrealism: a Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004. Print. |
| Further reading:  (Aragon)  (Aragon, A Wave of Dream)  (A. Breton)  (A. Breton, The Lost Steps)  (Cardinal) |