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| Surrealism and Dance |
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| The Surrealists set out to destabilise the Western European paradigm that ‘knowledge’ and ‘truth’ are sight-based and rational, and to challenge artistic conventions rooted in that line of thought. As an embodied art form, dance enabled the Surrealists to work outside these visual arts conventions to produce dynamic and multi-sensory experiences. Dance, then, played an integral role in the Surrealist quest to recover truths suppressed by the development of modern Western culture over the past five-hundred years, and art based on linear perspective was one of the Surrealists’ most worthy opponents.  Photographer Man Ray’s short experimental film *Le* *Retour à la raison* (1923) is an early example of the Surrealist interest in dance. With the interjection of the word ‘Dancer’ among a montage of rayographs, still photographs, manipulated stills, and film clips including the twisting torso of Kiki de Montparnasse, Man Ray equated the moving properties of film with dance. As a moving montage, the film simultaneously challenged the ‘truth value’ of the photographic medium yoked to the static image of Western perspective. |
| The Surrealists set out to destabilise the Western European paradigm that ‘knowledge’ and ‘truth’ are sight-based and rational, and to challenge artistic conventions rooted in that line of thought. As an embodied art form, dance enabled the Surrealists to work outside these visual arts conventions to produce dynamic and multi-sensory experiences. Dance, then, played an integral role in the Surrealist quest to recover truths suppressed by the development of modern Western culture over the past five-hundred years, and art based on linear perspective was one of the Surrealists’ most worthy opponents.  Photographer Man Ray’s short experimental film *Le* *Retour à la raison* (1923) is an early example of the Surrealist interest in dance. With the interjection of the word ‘Dancer’ among a montage of rayographs, still photographs, manipulated stills, and film clips including the twisting torso of Kiki de Montparnasse, Man Ray equated the moving properties of film with dance. As a moving montage, the film simultaneously challenged the ‘truth value’ of the photographic medium yoked to the static image of Western perspective.  The intersection between film and dance offered the Surrealists an alternative route into knowledge operating outside the Western visual arts canon. As an embodied art form, dance is connected to the Surrealist idea of automatism or involuntary actions operating beyond the realm of conscious control such as a heartbeat or behaviours produced by intoxicants or mental illness. Louis Buñuel and Salvador Dali’s silent film *Un Chien Andalou* (1928) was originally set to the beat of tango music, in an exploration of the erotic as a bodily experience that cannot be entirely controlled. Likewise, Hélène Vanel’s gyrating dance-piece *l’Acte* *manqué* (1938) staged a poignant critique of the customs and constraints of polite bourgeois behaviour by tapping into theories of hysteria as another manifestation of automatism.  The Surrealist engagement with embodiment extended to collaborations with important ballet companies and choreographers. For example, in 1926 Joan Miró and Max Ernst designed and created the costumes and sets for Serge Diaghilev’s *Romeo and Juliet* with the Ballets Russes. Similarly, the American-born surrealist Dorothea Tanning created the set and costume designs for George Balanchine’s *The Night Shadow* in 1945.  Image: Joan.jpg  Figure 1 Joan Miró (1893-1983). Roméo et Juliette, Costume design for Alice Nikitina, ca. 1926. Charcoal crayon and tempera. Howard D. Rothchild Collection. pf MS Thr 414.4 (105). Bequest, 1989.  http://hcl.harvard.edu/images/libraries/houghton/exhibits/diaghilev/original/49\_2c.jpg  The Surrealist artist Salvador Dalí worked frequently with choreographers. He was commissioned to design the sets and costumes for Leonide Massine’s *Bacchanale* (1939) for the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo — a production in which the breast of a huge swan was used as an entrance by the dancers. In *Labyrinth* (1941), another choreographic work Dalí designed for Massine, the torso of a gigantic bust of a man served as way for the dancers to enter the stage. Dalí created designs for a production of *Romeo and Juliet* (1943), which choreographer Antony Tudor declined to use. Despite this rejection, the Surrealist artist continued to receive dance commissions. In 1944, for instance, he worked on *Sentimental Colloquy* and *Café de Chinitas* and *Mad Tristan*. In this last piece, three horses’ heads loomed over the performers. Dalí created the sets and costumes for Ana Maria’s production of *Three Cornered Hat*, which Ballet Espanõl premiered at the Ziegfeld Theatre in New York in 1949. Dalí was involved in dance as late as 1961, when he worked on Maurice Béjart’s *Gala*.  Some of the Surrealists were interested in dance beyond Western theatrical expressions. While exiled in the United States during the Second World War, Max Ernst and André Breton designed their travel itineraries through the western states with the goal of seeing Hopi and Zuni dances. Each amassed extensive collections of indigenous regalia, especially masks.  The influence of Surrealism on dance extended to Canada, where Françoise Sullivan and Jeanne Renaud of the Automatists (a multi-disciplinary group of artists in Montreal initially influenced by the French Surrealists) to access the subconscious in their early choreography. Sullivan wrote about adapting the Surrealist ideal of using spontaneity the importance of spontaneity and the subconscious for choreographic experimentation in her essay ‘L’danse et l’espoir’ [‘Dance and Hope’], which was published in the Automatists’ 1948 manifesto *Refus global*.  The Surrealists’ embodied practices of automatism also inspired the Action Paintings of American abstract expressionists such as Jackson Pollock, who blurred the boundaries between painting and dancing (as documented by Hans Nemuth’s film of Pollock at work on a glass canvas). |
| Further reading:  (Ades)  (Buñuel and Dali)  (Carter)  (Duncan and Berman)  (Fienup-Riordan)  (Garafola)  (LaCoss)  (Lindgren)  (Maurer)  (Ray)  (Richardson) |