



“Surrealism and Abstract Expressionism: From Pyschic to Plastic Automatism.” In Isabelle Dervaux. *Surrealism USA*. New York: National Academy Museum in conjunction with Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2005; pp. 56-65.

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During 1941 and '42 European Surrealism became fashionable in New York City. The keen and sudden interest in this shopworn vanguard was particularly remarkable considering that Art Concret (subsequently incarnated as Abstraction-Création) had superceded Surrealism eleven years earlier. By the time the movement took hold in the United States, it appeared old-fashioned, extravagantly idiosyncratic, and even, at times, quaint, to many younger American artists. Yet, in the early forties, as artist Dorothea Tanning has noted:

Surrealists in New York . . . were welcomed everywhere. The doors of penthouse and brownstone alike were open to them . . . Shipwrecked Surrealism. For some it was stimulation, excitement. For others, simply amazing. For yet others, absurd and "controversial."<sup>1</sup>

The city's art season in the winter of 1941 was notable for a series of vignette exhibitions at the New School for Social Research, featuring such Surrealists as Max Ernst, Joan Miró, and Yves Tanguy as well as their precursor, the Italian metaphysical painter Giorgio de Chirico. The openings of these shows were timed to coincide with four lectures by English ex-patriot Surrealist Gordon Onslow Ford elucidating the movement. Ford discussed how painters might gain access to their own unconscious by "plunging into the depths of the unknown self" so that they could create work that addressed "the unconscious of every sensitive person."<sup>2</sup> He concluded the series by urging his fellow Surrealists to collaborate with young American artists so that together they might "make a vital contribution to the transformation of the world."<sup>3</sup>

In May, two months after Ford's talks, the German army occupied Paris, which until then had been the world's undisputed art capital, and André Breton, Surrealism's major theorist, escaped to New York, where he once again assumed the day-to-day leadership of the group. Ernst moved to New York the same year. In October the American magazine *View* published a special Surrealist edition, and that November New York's Museum of Modern Art inaugurated major retrospectives of the art of Salvador Dalí and Joan Miró, providing Americans with overviews of the veristic and the abstract modes, respectively, of Surrealism. A few weeks later the Japanese staged the surprise bombing of Pearl Harbor that catalyzed the United States' entry into World War II. To thoughtful New Yorkers, who suddenly found their nation propelled into war, MoMA's ratification of Surrealist irrationality must have seemed particularly prescient.

New York City's romance with Surrealism continued into the following year. A number of prominent Surrealists, including Ernst, Roberto Matta Echaurren, André Masson, and Tanguy exhibited their work in the New York galleries of Pierre Matisse, Curt Valentine, and Marion Willard. That fall Surrealism claimed title as New York City's regnant vanguard when the exhibition "First Papers of Surrealism," alluding to the movement's probable steps toward naturalization and U.S. citizenship, opened in the

Whitlaw Reid Mansion. It featured Marcel Duchamp's bizarre installation of five miles of string, which consisted of labyrinthine passageways partially disguising the elaborate architecture of the mansion where the exhibition was staged. However, the sensationalism of Duchamp's theatrics paled in comparison to Peggy Guggenheim's stunning Frederick Kiesler-designed Surrealist space, *Art of This Century*, which opened a few weeks later, with its dark curving walls and amoeba-like pedestals and chairs.

Among the artists presented in "First Papers of Surrealism" were the Americans William Baziotes and Robert Motherwell, who joined Matta in initiating an attempt to supplant Surrealism by forming a splinter group, even while this notable exhibition was still on display. Matta hoped to challenge Surrealism by focusing on his idea of a truer, more authentic approach, based on the definition of psychic automatism found in Breton's 1924 manifesto.<sup>4</sup> Matta was one of three younger European Surrealists (the other two were Ford and the Austrian artist Wolfgang Paalen) who, in the late thirties, had embraced automatism as an improvisational creed. With Motherwell's assistance and Baziotes' advice, Matta, a charismatic Chilean painter and architect who had been employed in Le Corbusier's studio in Paris as a draftsman prior to becoming a Surrealist in 1937, worked that fall and the following winter to form a group of American artists who would champion automatism as a generative idea. The group, which was self-conscious but extraordinarily short-lived, included, in addition to Motherwell and Baziotes, Peter Busa, Gerome Kamrowski, and Jackson Pollock.

Automatism, however, was not a new idea to any of the American artists working with Matta; they had all been well aware of it since the late thirties and each had already incorporated aspects of it into his work. Since the organizing ethos of this group was not new, the artists probably sacrificed only four Saturdays to Matta's meetings—which consisted of aleatory games, explorations of improvisational techniques, discussions about reality as an ongoing transformation, and references to the simultaneous worlds that could be accessed through occultist practices, as well as Motherwell's impromptu lectures on aesthetics—because of the great esteem then being accorded Surrealism by both fashionable and serious audiences. The possibility of showing up artists such as Dalí, Ernst, Tanguy, and the other Surrealists then being celebrated was no doubt a major factor in their participation. During these sessions, according to Busa, "Matta would look at our work and make comments as to what dimension we were reflecting. He also had organizing attitudes and was interested in whether you were reflecting a rhythm that would be associated with water or with fire or with rock forms . . . One didn't have an image to begin with, but rather a hand and a motor ability."<sup>5</sup>

In addition to these exercises, Matta asked each artist to keep a record of his thoughts to see if together they formed a communal unconscious. Apparently each day at four in the afternoon members of the group concluded that they were all in closest touch with their unconscious. To reinforce the idea of a collective identity, Matta

required the Americans to keep an hourly log of their rolled dice, so that they might later determine when congruencies occurred.

Although at first encouraged by the concept of a new collective, Pollock was the first to leave the group, and the others soon followed suit, each going his separate way, including Matta, who later cited differences with Motherwell on aesthetic issues as the reason for his departure.<sup>6</sup> Always a charmer, Matta once again ingratiated himself with his Surrealist peers and even helped Breton and Duchamp put together an issue of the Surrealist periodical *VVV*, which was published in March 1943, soon after the members of his group had dispersed.

Although the small enclave's activities did not lead to a showdown exhibition with the Surrealists, they did dramatize, however briefly, the importance of the automatist approach, which Motherwell renamed "plastic automatism" and credited as the key generative concept that enabled Americans to move away from Surrealism and develop the independent styles that were later grouped under the Abstract Expressionist rubric. Motherwell's plastic automatism placed far greater emphasis on the creative potential of the artist's chosen medium than the Surrealists did. His argument deserves careful analysis since it underscores a subtle yet crucial distinction between the Surrealists and the incipient Abstract Expressionists in the way each group characterized the type of agency responsible for expressing the unconscious. In consideration of the enormous stylistic gulf that eventually separated the two groups, which, ironically enough, were both indebted to Breton's first Surrealist manifesto, we might say that many Surrealists—with the possible exception of André Masson and Miró (Surrealism's abstract wing)—regarded themselves as the primary conduits for channeling unconscious ideas. In contrast, the majority of Abstract Expressionists placed far greater emphasis on their chosen artistic medium as both the means and the language through which their unconscious indirectly revealed aspects of itself. For the Surrealists, who were essentially latter-day Romantics, expression was more direct, since they could put themselves directly in touch with their unconscious by relying on techniques such as automatic writing (where the artist becomes a medium to a spiritual or intuitive force), decalcomania (involving a transfer of paint from one flat surface to another), and frottage (which is created like a traditional rubbing). For the Abstract Expressionists, the unconscious constituted part of a dialectic, which depended on intimations that were already translated on reception into one's chosen artistic medium so that it became the unconscious' mediated surrogate and not its direct revelation as many Surrealists thought. The difference between the veristic Surrealism of Dalí, who willed himself into a paranoiac state in order to create his artworks, and the approach of the Abstract Expressionists, who opened themselves up to painting as if it were the preferred language of the unconscious, is substantial. However, the gulf between the abstract Surrealists and the Americans who would become Abstract Expressionists is far less pronounced since the Americans' automatism depended on increasing the media's role.

Before assessing further these different responses to the unconscious, it helps to understand how this psychological approach was framed first by the Surrealists and subsequently the Abstract Expressionists.<sup>7</sup> Unlike some cognitive psychologists who have recently theorized that the unconscious can only be understood as a proto-consciousness resembling Freud's preconscious (that is, a dynamic move towards consciousness),<sup>8</sup> Surrealists viewed it as a separate entity that represents, according to Breton, a "disdainful awareness of our discontinuity."<sup>9</sup> We might analogize the Surrealists' unconscious as a secularized equivalent to the mystics' third eye—a lost mode of perception that once connected humanity to a marvelous and separate realm now accessible only through dreams, hallucinations, orchestrated paranoia, and a variety of automatist techniques—a terrain that could be discovered through automatic procedures that might catch it unaware. Matta describes its accessibility in the following way:

Automatism is a method of reading "live" the actual function of thinking at the same speed as the matter we are thinking of, to read at the speed of the events, to grasp unconscious material functioning in our memory with the tools at our disposal. Automatism means that the irrational and the rational are running parallel and can send sparks into each other and light the common road.<sup>10</sup>

Regarded by the Surrealists themselves as unquestionably true yet troublingly obstreperous, their depictions of the unconscious came to resemble centuries of religious depictions and elaborate fantasies that have colonized spiritual realms with strange creatures who defy reason at the same time that they appeal to blind allegiance and a desire for transcendence. This similarity with established religious art can be attributed to the Surrealists' well-publicized anti-Catholic stance since their well-known rejection of the Church became a cornerstone of their self-definition. Their anti-Church stance may be one reason why Breton has been referred to as the group's ensconced "pope." In addition to populating the unconscious so that it resembles a secular religion and yet constitutes another orthodoxy, the Surrealists posited the unconscious as Europe's Other in terms of ethnicity, age, sanity, and gender, since so many of Breton's cadre were men. The Surrealists' carefully articulated unconscious—as grand a fiction as heaven, hell, and purgatory—might be conceptualized as a Pandora's Box that resides within each individual.

Differing from this disjunctive Surrealist unconscious, the Abstract Expressionist version existed mainly as a possibility that gave rise to the hopeful dynamic of continually becoming conscious without ever being directly accessible. Although its contents might appear in dreams and be trapped through a variety of automatist games, as could the Surrealist unconscious, the Abstract Expressionists did not envision the unconscious as a potential conduit to a no-longer-accessible realm defined as "the marvelous," as Matta's description suggests. For them, its chief characteristic was

its amorphous potential, which was not at all understandable until it became imminent. The initial and necessary translation of this amorphous content works to the advantage of the unconscious since it preserves its distinct otherness while spontaneity and *pentimenti* (layering), which became the group's trademarks, are signs of their improvisational way of working, reinforcing the contingency that attends the unconscious' conversion to an artistic medium. Unlike Dalí's paranoiac-critic method, which plays with the ability of the artist's ego to transform the world at will into double and even multiple images, the Abstract Expressionists, despite, or perhaps because of, all the macho posturing, were forced to make themselves passive attendants, waiting for the unconscious to reveal its contents indirectly through their work. Expression in this latter case is deflected away from the artist and toward the unconscious; in this situation the unconscious creates, and the artist responds to *its* traces. More than just an internalized muse, the Abstract Expressionist unconscious is a dynamic agency triggering creation. The product of this creation is both personal, since the artists chose to ratify their automatist findings, and universal, since it was assumed to be the supra-personal potential in each human being. In order to circumscribe this unknown force, the Abstract Expressionists subscribed to a range of metaphors for it, including references to ambiguous spatial depths, allusions to cave paintings and subterranean realms, comparisons to myths, tragedies, tribal works of art, unicellular life, and energy. The modern practice of a suggestive but undefined iconography that reinforced the preeminence of form over content took on a new meaning for the Abstract Expressionists. They conflated their allusive subject matter with their improvisational style to circumscribe, without delineating, the unconscious' otherness.

This type of thinking can be gleaned by reading the many poetic statements made by the Abstract Expressionists. One of the most telling references to this view was made by Adolph Gottlieb when he referred to Melpomene, the muse of tragedy, an allusion that was perhaps intended to refer as well to the inherent tragic fate of humans who understand themselves and their motives so incompletely:

I disinterred some relics from the secret crypt of Melpomene to unite them through the pictograph, which has its own internal logic. Like those early painters, who placed their images on the grounds of rectangular compartments, I juxtaposed my pictographic images, each self-contained within the painter's rectangle, to be ultimately fused within the mind of the beholder.<sup>11</sup>

Crucial to the Abstract Expressionist point of view is the concept that artistic content, similar to Melpomene's relics, is not created but discovered. Only after an initial uncovering of eternal truth is the artist free to orchestrate it according to his or her stylistic inclination so that the scattered references that comprise that ultimate truth can be orchestrated into an articulate work of art whose meaning viewers are able to intuit. Instead of relying on unmediated expression, the Abstract Expressionists cultivated

opportunities for unconscious manifestations, thus relieving themselves of full responsibility for the pure, inspirational coin of their work, which they preferred to accept as a gift from the unconscious.

Far less poetic though certainly as telling as Gottlieb's insight into Melpomene and myth is Motherwell's 1944 paper (and later the 1959 essay) in which he repositioned Surrealist psychic automatism as the plastic automatism that the American vanguard was initiating. Originally titled "The Place of the Spiritual in a World of Property," the first piece represents the concerted effort of a twenty-nine year old, working as a full-time painter for less than four years, to justify to himself and others his approach to the world, including his unofficial alliance with Surrealism and his subsequent disaffiliation from it. Later retitled "The Modern Painter's World," Motherwell's 1959 essay attempts to reconcile, among other things, the polarities of Marxist materialism and the artist's own quest for secularized spiritualism as well as differences between Surrealism and abstraction. The paper was presented at a conference on "Arts Plastiques" (hence, we might suppose, the motivation for the term "plastic automatism"), part of Mount Holyoke's "Pontigny en Amérique" summer program, which included as speakers the Surrealist printmaker Stanley William Hayter, the abstractionist Jean Hélion, and the art historian and tribal arts specialist Robert Goldwater. In consideration of his fellow participants (and in observance of the polarization of Surrealism into opposing camps that MoMA's Dalí and Miró exhibitions had ratified), Motherwell attempted to forge a synthesis between the Surrealist and formalist realms by transferring responsibility from himself as key originator to oil painting as not only his chosen technique and material but also the ideal psychic medium for channeling his innermost thoughts. He opined:

In the greatest painting, the painter communes with himself. Painting is his thought's medium. Others are able to participate in this communion to the degree that they are spiritual. But for the painter to communicate with all, *in their own terms*, is for him to take on their character, not his own. Painting is a medium in which the mind can actualize itself; it is a medium of thought.

Thus painting, like music, tends to become its own content.<sup>12</sup>

Later in the essay, Motherwell distances himself even more from standard definitions of Surrealism when he claims that Masson, Miró, and Picasso are plastic not psychic automatists since their work "is actually very little a question of the unconscious."<sup>13</sup>

This course of thinking is fully complicit with the rebellious approach of Paalen, who formally separated himself from the Surrealists about the time he undertook to give Motherwell a "postgraduate education in Surrealism."<sup>14</sup> In an essay, written the same year he was teaching the intricacies of Surrealism to Motherwell, Paalen wrote:

Automatism . . . can be no more than incantatory *technique*, and not creative expression.... The kaleidoscopic flow of the painter,



emancipated in automatism, [is] nothing but raw material.... In order that there may be a poem or a painting, language must become articulate. The overflow multicolored sauce or the verbal inflation finally become as boring ... as the petty algebra of rectangular plastic purism."<sup>15</sup>

The following year Paalen extolled automatism's ability to "prefigure" reality rather than "represent" it, as Dalí had, in a published essay, which Motherwell knew intimately since he had translated it from French to English.<sup>16</sup> As "incantatory *technique*," automatism provided an initial outlet for the unconscious. However, after providing a means for artists to open themselves to the potentiality of their innermost selves, the unconscious, according to Paalen, would then retreat so that artists' egos might assume the more self-conscious job of transforming this raw and incipiently artistic data into full-fledged works of art.

Paalen's insight regarding automatism's initial role serves as a background for Motherwell's description in 1959 of the tripartite system that Miró employed. After noting the enormous impact this Spanish artist's work had on Abstract Expressionism, Motherwell describes how Miró employs a free-associative or automatist technique to seed his previously prepared painterly ground with intuitions that are more preconscious than unconscious. Motherwell makes certain his readers understand exactly the type of creative protocol being discussed. He writes, "The Unconscious is inaccessible to the will by definition; that which is reached is the fluid and free 'fringes of the mind' called the 'pre-conscious,' and consciousness constantly intervenes in the process." In order to approach this preconscious, one must refrain, according to Motherwell, from "'moral or aesthetic a priori' prejudices (to quote André Breton's official definition of surrealism), for obvious reasons for anyone who wants to dive into the depths of being."<sup>17</sup> During this period, the artist doodles, "if," Motherwell cautions with his characteristic penchant for hyperbole, "one understands at once that 'doodling' in the hands of a Miró has no more to do with just anyone doodling on a telephone pad than the 'representations' of a Dürer or a Leonardo have to do with the 'representations' in a Sears catalogue."<sup>18</sup> He concludes his analysis by referring to an interview that James Johnson Sweeney conducted with Miró some years earlier in which the Spanish artist stated:

What is most interesting to me today is the material I am working with. It supplies the shock which suggest the form just as the cracks in the wall suggested shapes to Leonardo. For this reason I always work on several canvases at once. I start a canvas without a thought of what it may become. I put it aside after the first fire has abated. I may not look at it again for months. Then I take it out and work at it coldly like an artisan, guided strictly by rules of composition after the first shock of suggestion has cooled . . .



first the suggestion, usually from the material: second, the conscious organization of these forms; and third the compositional enrichment.<sup>19</sup>

From the above discussion, we can conclude that plastic automatism became an Abstract Expressionist form of creative invocation, codified by Motherwell in 1944 and emended by him in 1959, which allows artists to court their unconscious as the Other residing within them—an Other, however, which has already been reified in terms of an artistic medium. In this initial, improvisational stage, subjectivity is viewed dialectically: it represents a cultivation of the unknown—hypostasized as the Other—which is assumed to lie within oneself and therefore one's essential aspect. The putative traces of this purported unconscious then become the incentive for the known self's or the ego's painterly investigation, which culminates in a work of art that is identifiable as belonging to a particular artist. Configured in this way, plastic automatism might be regarded as an artist's nonverbal conversation, which is predicated on painted signs that are construed as particularly personal. As such, it correlates with the conclusion of Symbolist poet Arthur Rimbaud that the source of his creativity is the "I [who] is someone else."<sup>20</sup> We might also add that when plastic automatism encodes the self as Other, it simulates itself as a natural expedient, appearing as part of the norm rather than a highly elaborate construct. Although many Abstract Expressionists have construed their art as their surrogate, this represents a highly artificial view of creation, since its source is the painterly or drawn traces of an alien Other identified as the unconscious, which is then reified in terms of indexical and metaphoric signs that the Abstract Expressionists chose to consider as clues to their own individuality.

We might better appreciate the degree of artifice involved in both the process of plastic automatism and the consequent assumption of an unconscious behaving as a creative wellspring if we compare them to the machinations of the Picturesque. This eighteenth-century aesthetic category paradoxically reconfigured nature in terms of artistic elements so that it (nature) could be construed as a painted scene on a par with those created by Claude Lorrain. Lorrain, a seventeenth-century French painter working in Italy, schematized his Arcadian scenes in such a convincing manner that it usurped the landscape mode for several centuries, becoming the way in which nature was conceived. For the Abstract Expressionists the unconscious was first imaginatively constructed and then colonized before they could occupy it. We therefore might analogize it as a poetic scheme, similar to the Picturesque, which is predicated on nature and yet separate from it. Like the Claude-glass—the darkened monocle named after Claude Lorrain and guaranteed to turn any natural view into its painted equivalent, including even simulated discolored varnish, which was regarded as requisite for old master status—the Abstract Expressionists' unconscious was believed to be a mode of in-depth seeing as well as an internal font of universality, which artists could individually peg according to their own style and preferred iconography. A psychological viewfinder for this hypothetical realm

and highly ideological terrain, the concept of the unconscious enabled artists to distance themselves from their subject even as they conceived it to be the Other residing within themselves. Invoking this perspective initiated a dialectic in which the unconscious was thought to constitute an initial expressive force, which was mediated on inception, so that expression was first indirect before being regarded as a type of incipient internal communiqué that the Abstract Expressionists attempted to understand as they self-consciously orchestrated it into works of art.

Ironically enough, even though the unconscious was assumed to be an actual internal force that needed to be circumscribed and yet not delimited through allusive rich and dense metaphors furnishing it with an identity, its Abstract Expressionist incarnation was, in fact, a synecdoche. The word “unconscious” in this situation necessarily misrepresents itself since no one term can ever adequately describe the intuitions and feelings that have been lumped under such a freewheeling and far-ranging categorical designation, and the same is true of painted images alluding to it. For this reason we may look at Abstract Expressionist automatism as a two-tiered situation: first the artists assumed the existence of an unconscious, which today would be regarded as a mythic confabulation; then they populated it with allusions to ancient cultures and natural history in accordance with their assumptions. Thus the Abstract Expressionist unconscious was first engendered as “nature” before it was reconceived, like the Picturesque, in artistic terms, which idealized and naturalized it, thereby masking its ideological roots.

- 1 Dorothea Tanning, *Birthday* (Santa Monica and San Francisco, 1986), p. 19.
- 2 Martica Sawin, *Surrealism in Exile and the Beginning of the New York School* (Cambridge, MA, 1995), p. 158.
- 3 *Ibid.*, pp. 165–166.
- 4 Two key sources on this updated and abstract brand of Surrealism are Sidney Simon, "Concerning the Beginnings of The New York School: 1939–1943, An Interview with Peter Busa and Matta, December 1966," *Art International* 11 (Summer 1967), pp. 18–20, and Sidney Simon, "Concerning the Beginnings of the New York School: 1939–1943, An Interview with Robert Motherwell, January 1967," *Art International* 11 (Summer 1967), pp. 20–23.
- 5 Sawin 1995 (see note 2), pp. 239–241.
- 6 Matta said, "With Motherwell especially I had a terrific incompatibility of ideas." Simon 1967 (see note 4), p. 18.
- 7 For an informative discussion of Pollock's changing views of the unconscious, cf. Michael Leja, "Jackson Pollock: Representing the Unconscious," in Marianne Dozema and Elizabeth Milroy, eds., *Reading American Art* (New Haven and London, 1998), pp. 440–464.
- 8 For a summary of this view cf. Donald Levy, *Freud Among the Philosophers: The Psychoanalytic unconscious and Its Philosophical Critics* (New Haven and London, 1996).
- 9 André Breton, *Surrealism and Painting*, trans. Simon Watson Taylor (New York, Hagerstown, San Francisco, and London, 1965), p. 46.
- 10 Martica Sawin, "Matta: The Early Years, 1937 to 1959," in *Roberto Matta Paintings and Drawings 1937–1959*, exh. cat., Latin American Masters and Galeria Lopez Quiroge, Beverly Hills, CA, 1997.
- 11 Caption in Sidney Janis, *Abstract and Surrealist Art in America* (New York, 1944), p. 119.
- 12 Robert Motherwell, "The Modern Painter's World" (August 10, 1944) in Stephanie Terenzio, ed., *The Collected Writings of Robert Motherwell* (New York and Oxford, 1992), p. 31.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 34.
- 14 Simon 1967 (see note 4), p. 21.
- 15 Wolfgang Paalen, "The New Image," *Form and Sense* (New York, 1945), p. 34 as cited in Irving Sandler, "Dada, Surrealism and Their Heritage: 2, The Surrealist Emigres in New York," *Artforum* 6 (May 1968), p. 29.
- 16 Wolfgang Paalen, "The New Image," *Dyn*, 1, (April–May, 1942), p. 9 as cited in Sandler, "Dada, Surrealism and Their Heritage: 2," p. 28.
- 17 Robert Motherwell, "The Significance of Miró," in Terenzio 1992 (see note 12), p. 120.
- 18 *Ibid.*
- 19 *Ibid.*
- 20 Wallace Fowle, *Rimbaud: Complete Works, Selected Letters* (Chicago and London, 1966), p. 305.