



2014 HAWAII UNIVERSITY INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCES  
ARTS, HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES  
JANUARY 4, 5 & 6 2014  
ALA MOANA HOTEL, HONOLULU, HAWAII

OUTGROWING THE VERNISSAGE.  
THE OPENINGS OF THE  
EXPOSITIONS INTERNATIONALES  
DU SURREALISME IN 1938, 1947  
AND 1959: PIONEER  
EXPERIMENTATIONS OF  
PERFORMANCE ART

MARIA-ROSA LEHMANN

HISTORY OF ART

SORBONNE-PANTHEON PARIS 1

Maria-Rosa Lehmann  
History of Art, Sorbonne-Pantheon Paris 1

## **Outgrowing the vernissage. The openings of the Expositions Internationales du Surréalisme in 1938, 1947 and 1959: pioneer experimentations of Performance Art**

One aspect of surrealist art is still misrepresented in most publications: their performances. For the inaugurations of their international exhibitions in Paris, between 1938 and 1965, the surrealists organized different events that can be defined as pioneer experiments of Performance Art. This short presentation will explain why we need to study these art pieces and will introduce first analysis of the performances organized for surrealist international exhibitions.

### **Introduction**

With this presentation I will introduce my research concerning my thesis *Outgrowing the vernissage. The openings of the Expositions Internationales du Surréalisme in 1938, 1947 and 1959: pioneer experimentations of Performance Art*.

I will explain why such a study is necessary, for the research on Surrealism, the research on the history of exhibitions, and the history of Performance Art. For that I shall point out the absence of studies on surrealist performances in the existing bibliography in all three fields.

Subsequently we will take a closer look at these art openings. I will discuss the elements transforming the *vernissage surrealiste* into proto-performances – pioneer experiments of an art form introducing itself in the 1960s and 1970s.

We will also demonstrate the thoughts and reflections behind the unique study, explaining the importance of an enquiry largely underrepresented. We will raise questions which have been overlooked concerning the research of the surrealist movement, and by those studying the history of art exhibitions and the history of performance art.

A short presentation such as this will not be able to answer all the questions I'm trying to answer with my work. Nevertheless, I wish to present the first findings concerning the

subject: lost documents witnessing the evolution of the *vernissage surrealiste*, new photos and information about important actors of that mutation. After two years of extensive research this paper will give a preliminary report on the progress of my work, underlining the importance of the subject.

**I. The “vernissage surréaliste” in absence: A comment on the underrepresentation of**

**surrealist performance in the current publication history**

Since 1940, different aspects of Surrealism have been examined by a large number of art historians. In these publications, the authors mainly concentrated on questions concerning surrealist paintings and surreal objects. The strange nature of surrealist art and the methods used by the group, such as André Breton's automatic writing (*l'écriture automatique*) or the method of *critical paranoia* designed by Salvador Dali, have always fascinated scholars. Examining the bibliography of J.H. Matthews published in 1966<sup>1</sup>, we realize that the work on Surrealism is particularly rich. Their art work, their philosophy, the group's involvement in politics, as well as their ideologies about erotica and mysticism have been extensively studied. Moreover, since the 1970s, the feminist movement has opened enquiries on Surrealism towards new directions. The ambiguous position of surrealist artists towards women<sup>2</sup> inspired a great number of writings.

However, one research topic concerning the movement has only recently been in the focus of scholar's attention: the surrealist exhibitions. At the end of the 1930s, the surrealists started to experiment with the exhibition as an artistic tool. In their view, the art show was no longer a mere place of presentation towards a commercial goal, but rather an opportunity of expressing their ideas and philosophy even further.

This novel approach towards the art exhibition has fascinated art historians since the 1990s. Today, publications on that practice can be found at the centre of surrealist studies<sup>3</sup>. Because of these new publications, art historians have been able to discuss in detail the

---

<sup>1</sup> J.H., MATTHEWS, "Forty years of Surrealism (1924-1964). A preliminary bibliography", *Comparative Literature Studies*, Vol.3 (1966) p.309-350

<sup>2</sup> For the surrealists, women were defined as an absolute ideal, but at the same time deemed as *unheimlich* - a Freudian term, meaning that a situation or image can be familiar and strange at the same time. Sigmund, FREUD, « Das Unheimliche », *Imago. Zeitschrift für Anwendung der Psychoanalyse auf die Geisteswissenschaften*, N°.V (1919) p. 297-324.

<sup>3</sup> Bernd, KLÜSER and Katharina, HEGEWISCH, *Die Kunst der Ausstellung. Eine Dokumentation dreißig exemplarischer Kunstausstellungen dieses Jahrhunderts*, (Frankfurt am Main/ Leipzig: Insel Verlag, 1991); Bruce, ALTSHULER, *The avant-garde in exhibition. New art in the 20<sup>th</sup> century*, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994); Bruce, ALTSHULER, *Salon to Biennale. Exhibitions that made art history*, (London: Phaidon Press, 2008); Lewis, KACHUR, *Displaying the marvelous. Marcel Duchamp, Salvador Dali, and surrealist exhibition installations*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003); Ian, DUNLOP, *The shock of the new*, (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolsen, 1972)

experimental nature of the movement. The surrealists were ready to break and overcome all limits imposed by the art world<sup>4</sup>. This original way of looking upon Surrealism has influenced current PhD theses, which have discovered new documents on the movement that have been previously ignored<sup>5</sup>. Consequently these recent findings have renewed the interest for Surrealism.

This innovative way of thinking about the movement responds to a new field of art history: the history of art exhibitions. Since the end of the 20th century, we witness the growing importance of studies concentrating on the evolution of art exhibitions in general<sup>6</sup>.

The originality of the avant-garde is based on the will of shocking and surprising its public through the constant research of forever-changing, new experimentations. Treating the art exhibition as one of these experiments is a complete new approach<sup>7</sup>. Astonishingly enough, as the study of an exhibition allows us to better understand the context and surrounding in which a specific art group is situated<sup>8</sup>. For this reason we find more and more publications on the exhibitions of the Dada group, the futurists, and other avant-garde movements. Authors have started to analyze the effects of such an event and how these artistic experimentations have been received in an aesthetic, social and political discourse<sup>9</sup>.

However, studies on performances organized for the inauguration of these unique shows are virtually non-existing. This is even more astonishing considering the important place of such an event for the art show in general. The history of the art exhibition opening shall not be discussed here in detail. Its importance for the art world of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> David G, ZINDER, *The surrealist connection. An approach to a surrealist aesthetic of theatre*, (Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1980) p.125

<sup>5</sup> See: Annabelle, GÖRGEN, *Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme Paris 1938. Bluff und Täuschung – die Ausstellung als Werk*, (Munich: Verlag Silke Schreiber, 2008); Elena, FILIPOVIC, « Abwesende Kunstobjekte. Mannequins und die Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme von 1938 », in: *Puppen, Körper, Automaten. Phantasmen der Moderne*, (Düsseldorf: Oktagon, 1999)

<sup>6</sup> Scholars like Lewis Kachur, Bruce Altshuler and Jerome Glicenstein have institutionalized the questions concerning the history of art exhibitions.

<sup>7</sup> David G., ZINDER, *Surrealist connection*, p.64

<sup>8</sup> For a detailed explanation how an exhibition is a key moment in a painter's life see: Bernd, KLÜSER and Katharina, HEGEWISCH, Katharina, *Kunst der Ausstellung*, p.12

<sup>9</sup> Mary Anne, STANISZEWSKI, introduction to *The power of display. A history of Exhibition Installations at the Museum of Modern Art*, (Cambridge/ London: MIT Press), 1998, p.xix

Century has been documented in great detail by many publications<sup>10</sup>. Nevertheless, we need to evoke the significance of an art opening for the artists, as to establishing the reasoning behind the evolution we are going to discuss.

The *vernissage* truly is an event, a reception held to honor the inauguration of an exhibition which is in itself a key moment in the life of an artist<sup>11</sup>. Only a small, chosen circle has access to that celebration, an element which defines the art opening as a privileged event. One could say that the ceremony is not only the inauguration of an art show, but also its highpoint: the moment in which everybody important for the art world is united. Everybody wants to be seen during the inauguration of an art show of the avant-garde. Everybody wants to witness a new sensation. Basically, the ceremony draws in what we call the *tout-Paris*. Therefore, it is the perfect moment to organize something unique and shocking. The impact of such a performance would be considerable.

We can see why the surrealists saw the art opening as an important occasion to organize shocking performances. That is why the absence of studies on performances organized by the Surrealists for the inauguration of their art shows is so astonishing, considering that these *vernissages surrealists* can be defined as precursors for what we call Performance Art<sup>12</sup>.

Today, studies on Performance Art are numerous<sup>13</sup>. At the center of these studies are reflections on the evolution of Performance Art and the elements influencing its development.

Adrian Henri defines the avant-garde movements as starting point for Performance. In his opinion, Happenings as we know them today are principally based on ideas of art

---

<sup>10</sup> For more information about the subject, read: Hans-Peter, THURN, *Die Vernissage. Vom Künstlertreffen zum Freizeitvergnügen*, (Cologne: Dumont, 2002), the publications of Denis Diderot concerning the *Salons* of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century siècle, Emile, ZOLA, *L'œuvre*, (Paris: Les Rougon-Macquart, 1886) ; Klaus, BARTELS, *Wie Berenike auf die Vernissage kam*, (Darmstadt: Philipp von Zabern Verlag, 2004)

<sup>11</sup> A more detailed definition of the art opening, as well as a historic survey and its meaning for contemporary art can be found in my Master dissertation.

<sup>12</sup> Prototypes of the art form later labeled as Performance Art were the works of Yoko Ono, Carolee Schneemann, Joseph Beuys and Allan Kaprow respectively.

<sup>13</sup> For a good bibliography on the subject see : Moira, ROTH, « A history of Performance », *Performance art. (Some) theory and (selected) practice at the end of this century* (Winter 1997), p.73-83

movements of the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century<sup>14</sup>. A great number of scholars follow his line of thinking. They are referring to experiments on artistic expression conducted by the avant-garde. In their opinion these experiments declare the beginnings of Performance, Happening, action and Body Art<sup>15</sup>. In all of these publications, scholars concentrate on the importance of Futurism and Dadaism. Their significance is repeatedly underlined, whilst the impact of Surrealism is considered secondary and only mentioned in passing.

Today, some publications have started to see these surrealists exploits as precursors of Performance Art. Those authors establish the importance of the group for the evolution of an *après-guerre* art. And they place surrealism in its proper place. Adrian Henri, for example defines the movement as one of the most evident precursors of Performance Art<sup>16</sup>. Celia Rabinovitch follows his argumentation. In her opinion it was Surrealism who announced later tendencies towards *radical action* and performance<sup>17</sup>. David Zinder takes that reasoning even further. He thinks that what André Breton considered as *l'art d'évènement*<sup>18</sup> was later incorporated into happenings<sup>19</sup>.

This correlation between surrealist actions and Performance Art needs to be applied to the research on surrealist art openings. The private performance of Jean Benoit on the occasion of the exhibition in 1959 is already viewed as *happening déjanté*<sup>20</sup>. Now we must expand this interpretation on the other surrealist art openings between 1938 and 1965. The *vernissage surrealist* simply needs to find his place in studies about the history of performance art.

---

<sup>14</sup> Adrien, HENRI, *Total Art. Environments, Happenings, and Performance* (New York/ Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1974) p.13

<sup>15</sup> Silvia, EIBLMAYR et al., *Die verletzte Diva. Hysterie, Körper, Technik in der Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts*, (Munich: Oktagon, 2000) p.17

<sup>16</sup> Adrien, HENRI, *Total Art*, p.22

<sup>17</sup> Celia, RABINOVITCH, *Surrealism and the Sacred. Power, Eros, and the Occult in Modern Art*, (Cambridge/ Oxford: Icon Editions, Westview Press, 2002) p.9

<sup>18</sup> His expression was first used on occasion of the *Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme* in 1938.

<sup>19</sup> David G., ZINDER, *Surrealist Connection*, p.127

<sup>20</sup> Tobias, BEZZOLA et al., *Sade Surreal. Der Marquis de Sade und die erotische Fantasie des Surrealismus in Text und Bild*, (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2001) p.174

## II. The vernissage surréaliste in context: the evolution of a surrealist exhibition installation – an environment for performance explained by the example of the Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme in 1938

Surrealism was introduced by André Breton in his first Manifesto in 1924<sup>21</sup>. However the first manifestation of a surrealist exhibition as total environment takes place only at the end of the 1930s – with the *Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme*, in 1938, taking place in Paris at the Gallery des Beaux-arts of Georges Wildenstein<sup>22</sup>.

This ground-breaking exhibition was radically different from anything the surrealists had ever organized before. Being the first ever exhibition translating this idea of transforming the traditional space into a total environment, the first international surrealist exhibition in France plays a central part in the new research on surrealism.

Alyce Mahon comments that the event of 1938 overthrew social habits, morals and politics of the period in a way never seen before<sup>23</sup>. Rather than getting lost in a boring routine and answering to the bourgeois expectations, the surrealists fought against everything that came before them on global scale<sup>24</sup>. The group experimented with a sensory overload in order to force the visitor to face a new way of seeing the world<sup>25</sup>. The exhibition of 1938 created an environment of hostility and surprise by means of physical discomfort, meaning that the show attacked what the public considered as familiar and known.

Simple presentation was not enough anymore; the exhibition in 1938 can rather be seen as a fusion of art and theatrical *mise en scène*. The surrealists transformed the presentational, commercial space of a gallery into a theatre of their dreams and imagination<sup>26</sup>.

---

<sup>21</sup> André, BRETON, *Manifeste du Surréalisme*, (Paris : Editions du Sagittaire, 1924)

<sup>22</sup> Georges Wildenstein (1892-1963) was a gallery director, collector, editor and art historian who mainly concentrated on French art of the 18th and 19th Century.

<sup>23</sup> Alyce, MAHON, *Surrealism and the politics of Eros, 1938-1968*, (London: Thames & Hudson, 2005) p.11

<sup>24</sup> James D., HERBERT, *Paris 1937. Worlds on exhibition*, (Ithaca/ London: Cornell University Press, 1998) p.4

<sup>25</sup> David G., ZINDER, *Surrealist connection*, p.125

<sup>26</sup> *Les grands spectacles. 120 Jahre Kunst und Massenkultur* (Salzburg: Hatje Cantz, 2005) p.46



However, the exhibitions at the beginning of the movement have a mere informative function. They served to resume the group's activities<sup>27</sup>.

Finally we need to question the new approach of the surrealists towards the exhibition. In order to understand this mutation, we need to analyze in detail the measures undertaken by the artists. We need to question in what way this evolution can be defined by the surrealist ideology and how it influences the ideas of the movement. Demonstrating how and why the original role of an art exhibition changed for the surrealists is important to understand the reasons for the transformation of the art opening<sup>28</sup> from simple "meet and greet" to a tool of artistic expression.

Since the 1920s, the surrealists tried repeatedly to redefine their artistic position<sup>29</sup>. During this time experiments concerning artistic expressions have played a major place in their research. They demonstrate the will of the surrealists to break with artistic tradition and to overcome the limits of accepted artistic expression. Therefore, it stands to reason that questions concerning the use of the art exhibition as an artistic tool had to develop sometime in the history of the movement.

At this point we should be reminded of the nature of surrealism: attacking the known and familiar world of society<sup>30</sup>. Actually, it was the bourgeoisie the surrealists thought responsible for the horrors of the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The artistic climate in Paris between the two world wars was charged by a rejection of the old generation and their ways, because their actions resulted in the First World War. In order to break with these rejected cultural and sociological morals of the bourgeois society, the group's main concern were actions defined by radical insurrection. For the surrealists that preference for insurrection was

---

<sup>27</sup> Marcel, JEAN and Arpad, MEZEI, *Histoire de la peinture surréaliste*, (Paris : Editions su Seuil, 1959) p.280. The *Exposition Surréaliste* at the Pierre Colle Gallery in 1933 or the *Exposition surréaliste d'objets* at the Ladrière-Ratton Gallery in 1936, for instance, demonstrate the traditional design of an exhibition. For more information on the subject, see: Brian, O'DOHERTY, *Inside the white cube. The ideology of the gallery space*, (University of California Press, 2000)

<sup>28</sup> The French expression of this event is *vernissage*, translated with *private view*.

<sup>29</sup> Josef, HELFENSTEIN, *Meret Oppenheim und der Surrealismus*, (Stuttgart: Verlag Gerd Hatje, 1993) p.14

<sup>30</sup> Marie-Claire, BANQUART, *Paris des Surréalistes*, (Paris : Editions de la Différence, 2004) p.16-21

defined by activities deemed scandalous and outrageous by society<sup>31</sup>. In the 1920s, the most important tool for the group was to provoke situations that would raise public outcry from their spectators.

Concerning this subject, Max Ernst, one of the most prominent members of the surrealists, proclaimed in 1929: “I think it is of highest importance to continue the acts of terror the surrealists have organized.”<sup>32</sup> But perhaps the best reference would be André Breton, leader of the group who considered the public as “*enemy number one*” the surrealists needed to fight with all means<sup>33</sup>. In his second manifesto, he reminds the surrealist artist that, by means of different challenges and provocation, the public needed to be left in a constant state of exasperation<sup>34</sup>. This provocative nature of Surrealism and the cultural situation in Paris during that time explains why the group decided to transform their exhibitions into something shockingly new.

The problem was that, at the end of the 1930s, the public was no longer shocked by the surrealists’ activities. Due to the constant repetitive provocation, the public just got used to their shenanigans and the group lost their revolutionary appeal. Actually, even worse than that, their actions became a matter of amusement for society. The start of this tendency can be observed at the end of the 1920s. By visiting a spectacle of the avant-garde, the public *expected* to see something that would send a quiver down their spine, something exciting<sup>35</sup>. Being present at one of the avant-garde scandalous activities was *à la mode*. Spectators were looking forward to being rattled.

---

<sup>31</sup> Particularly the scandal at the *Banquet Saint-Pol-Roux* in 1925 at the *Closerie des Lilas*. Or the fascist aggression against the movie *L’âge d’or* by Louis Buñuel and Salvador Dali at the *Studio 28* in 1930. See : Gérard, DUROZOI and Vincent, BOUVET, *Paris between the Wars 1919-1939. Art life and culture*, (New York: The Vendome Press, 2010), p.328

<sup>32</sup> « J’estime de la plus grande importance de continuer les actes de terreur que les surréalistes ont menés. », André, BRETON, Louis, ARAGON, „A suivre – Petite contribution au dossier de certains intellectuels à tendances révolutionnaires », *Variétés. Numéro spéciale : Le surréalisme en 1929*, Bruxelles (1929) p.XV

<sup>33</sup> Alyce, MAHON, *Politics of Eros*, p.83

<sup>34</sup> André, BRETON, « Second Manifeste du Surréalisme », *La Révolution Surréaliste*, n°12, (15.12.1929)

<sup>35</sup> Carol, MANN, *Paris between the wars*, (London: The Vendom Press, 1996), p.80

Consequently, it seems to have been ever more difficult to really shock the public and to provoke serious outrage on the side of the bourgeoisie. The relationship with their public was important to change society - the most important mission for the surrealists. However this was endangered when the artists failed to make themselves heard or talked about.

The last years before the Second World War were defined by a climate charged by many political and cultural tensions<sup>36</sup>. These tensions were mirrored in the art world favoring national art: depicting French subjects from French artists<sup>37</sup>. However, the surrealist group was comprised of a great number of international artists: Max Ernst was German, René Magritte Belgian, Man Ray American and Salvador Dali Spanish. Because of this and the fact that the group acted in a hostile way to anything conform - political, socially, or cultural - the movement found itself more and more isolated. The artists were simply punished by magazines and critics, as much as the public by complete silence concerning their activities<sup>38</sup>.

The surrealists needed something new and ground-breaking in order to regain the attention, or better even, the indignation of the public. That way they could reassume their position as a real avant-garde movement which would not adapt to society's needs. Therefore, we could define the exhibition of 1938 as the last huge provoking outburst of a group defying to comply with what was demanded of them. The *Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme* wasn't merely a surrealist spectacle, but *the* surrealist event. That is why most of the publications studying exhibition installation or the history of exhibition in the 20<sup>th</sup> century focus on the 1938 show. It was definitely a pioneer event and defining for the following surrealist exhibitions.

---

<sup>36</sup> Shown in the famous failing of the *Font Populaire*.

<sup>37</sup> *L'exposition internationale* held in Paris in 1937 clearly demonstrates the favorable presentation of an art that could be defined as absolutely French.

<sup>38</sup> Elyette, GUIOL-BENASSAYA, *La presse face au Surréalisme de 1925 à 1938* (Paris : CNRS, 1982), p.50 /131-144

Considering the interest the 1938 show sparked in scholars, it is astonishing that the other major international shows are only ever treated in passing<sup>39</sup>. The exhibitions after the war, between 1945 and 1969<sup>40</sup>, still fail to receive their just attention.

Right after the war, and the return of André Breton from his self proclaimed exile (New York City), the exhibition *Surrealism in 1947* took place at the Maeght Gallery in Paris. Written off as dead or unimportant<sup>41</sup>, the movement had many difficulties to face after its “return” to France. Therefore, the event was a *tour de force* to show a movement strong and ready to face new challenges and to undergo new experiences. The exhibition demonstrated the group’s return to the French culture. The tone of the exhibition was slightly different to the one of 1938, but the original labyrinthine theme persisted.

The third important show in Paris is the *Exposition internationale du Surréalisme (EROS)* which took place in the gallery of Daniel Cordier in 1959. The main subject here, more than ever, was eroticism. It also shows the first signs of a blending between surrealism and newly formed art movements after the war. International collaboration was more important than ever before. A new generation of artists recharged and vitalized the group. And at the same time the surrealists influenced these artists following a different artistic presentation.

The last international surrealist exhibition, organized in André Breton’s lifetime, was *L’écart absolu* of 1965<sup>42</sup>.

---

<sup>39</sup> Art historian Alyce Mahon closely studies this phenomenon : Alyce MAHON, *Politics of Eros*, p.19

<sup>40</sup> Four years after the death of André Breton, Jean Schuster declares the death of the movement : Jean, SCHUSTER, « The fourth canto », *Le Monde*, (04.10.1969)

<sup>41</sup> Maurice Nadeau was the first to establish the myth of the end of surrealism in his publication on the movement in 1945. Since then the movement has always been represented with three phases: its birth defined by the horrors of World War I, its advancement as an important cultural movement in the 1930s, and its decline during and after World War II.

<sup>42</sup> In the mid 1960s performance artists were already establishing themselves in the art world. They had already developed their own language. Therefore, even though *L’écart absolu* is an interesting exhibition opened during a period charged of revolt and demonstrations, its performance won’t show new revelations concerning our study. So, I have decided to ignore this last show, at least for now.

It is clear that all of these exhibitions are exemplary and unique in their historic, cultural and social context. The fact that the shows of 1947, 1959 and 1965 have not received more attention and a more detailed analysis is something that needs to be changed, if we are to understand surrealism's importance for the artistic development in France after the World War II.

### **III. The *vernissage surréaliste* as forerunner of *Performance Art* and *Happening*:**

#### **Introducing three performances for the international surrealist exhibitions in Paris**

How the surrealists shocked their public with their new way of treating the art exhibition has already been demonstrated. With the development of their shows into installations, destined to assault the public's senses, they created a new art form. Nevertheless, the group took one step further: they organized outraging performances for their inaugurations. These performances always corresponded to the exhibition's context and always reflected its tone. From 1938 on, every opening ceremony of an international surrealist exhibition in Paris some is comprised of some sort of a performance.

It should be said that even though all these exploits are of different character, we can identify some common denominators.

The public's reaction is always defined by either complete, stunned silence or total outrage. Contemporary articles report this, bearing witness to the outcries of the public. A change in the public reaction can be seen as a mutation of the movement after World War II: the reintegration of Surrealism into the French Culture and the blending with a new generation of artists, as well as new ideas. All these performances played with provocation, as can be witnessed by their reception. That provocation is almost entirely characterized by a game of erotic more or less defined.

For the inauguration of the *Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme* in 1938, the surrealists decided to present a unique example of modern dance, the *Unconsummated Act*<sup>43</sup>, performed by Héléne Vanel. At midnight the half naked dancer gave a dramatic impression of a hysterical attack. She thrashed on the two beds in the main room, wriggled on the ground, twitching and shouting. At the end of the dance, she vanished back into the darkness through the reeds, splattering and soaking the unsuspecting bystanders<sup>44</sup>. Unfortunately, there are only a few remaining photos of the performance. In her thesis, Annabelle Görgeon assembles the five surviving images, documenting Héléne Vanel's *Unconsummated Act*. In his book Lewis Kachur features another photo yet largely ignored. Today, we can present one new photo! Found in a small French archive, it has survived all this time, showing the dancer in new positions.

The seemingly chaotic movements are dismissed by most scholars as a simple representation of sexual frustration, organized by Salvador Dali<sup>45</sup>. According to his biography, Salvador Dali supervised her rehearsals closely<sup>46</sup>, hinting that her performance was thought up in his mind<sup>47</sup>. That way Héléne Vanel is reduced to a mere mimic, acting out the artist's fantasies.

Very little is known about Héléne Vanel. She was only briefly affiliated to the Paris Surrealist Group. After her striking performance she seemed to simply vanish. That may be why her significance in history is underrepresented. My research, however, shows Héléne Vanel in a different light. Actually, she had been credible as a dancer and conceptual artist for

---

<sup>43</sup> The original title of the performance is *L'acte manqué*. For this paper we have adopted the official, accepted English translation. However, we should mention, that this translation raises many questions. Following the reasoning of scholar Don LaCoss, it is even false and should be reviewed. My thesis will cover this question in detail. Don, LACOSS, "Hysterical Freedom. Surrealist dance and Héléne Vanel's faulty functions", *Women and performance. A journal of feminist theory*, (2005) 15:2, p.48/49

<sup>44</sup> For a detailed account of her performance see: HUGNET, Georges, "L'exposition internationale", *Pleins et déliés. Souvenirs et témoignages 1926-1972*, (Paris : Guy Authier, 1972) p.342/343 or Salvador, DALI and André, PARINAUD, *Comment on devient Dali. Les aveux inavouables de Salvador Dali* (Paris : Robert Laffont), p.236

<sup>45</sup> Don, LaCOSS, *Hysterical Freedom*, p. 44/ 45

<sup>46</sup> DALI and PARINAUD, *Dali*, p.236

<sup>47</sup> Lewis Kachur surmises that her performance was entirely a product of Salvador Dali's famous method of theatrics. Lewis, KACHUR, *Displaying the marvelous*, p. 86-88

quite some time prior to her performance. Together with Lois Hutton, whom she met around 1920/1925<sup>48</sup>, she organized a dance collective called *Rhythm and Color*, described as “true nucleus of artistic creativity”<sup>49</sup>.

The archive of the New York Public library has a collection of newspaper clippings about her in internationally known magazines. Photos accompanying these articles show her dancing her unique style. Furthermore, their troupe has been described as vibrant and comprised of distinctive modern dancers<sup>50</sup>. She was also featured in a card collection called *The artistic dance*<sup>51</sup>. Even photos of an older H el ene Vanel exist, demonstrating her involvement with theatre, and her fondness for masks.

All of these documents are proof that her significance should be reviewed. James Herbert describes her performance for the 1938 exhibition as simple: one only needed to look at one of the remaining photographs in order to deduct the choreography<sup>52</sup>. This is only a simplistic description of her skills. Following our reasoning of her being a skilled artist, certainly doesn’t do her justice. When comparing all of these photos with publications showing modern dance diagrams, Rudolf Laban’s theory on modern dance, or even H el ene Vanel’s own theoretical contributions<sup>53</sup>, we can distinguish a complex and intriguing choreography, overlooked until now. My thesis will analyze the choreography mentioned, proving that her dance was, in fact, an intriguing and haunting piece of performance.

In 1947, Andr e Breton opened the second international surrealist show in Paris, *Le Surr alisme en 1947*, at the gallery Maeght. This time the surrealists decided to celebrate

---

<sup>48</sup> The two met at Margaret Morris’ dance school, but when exactly is still unclear. See: Margaret, MORRIS, *My life in movement* (London: Peter Owen Limited, 1969), p.46 or Carol, LOEB SHLOSS, *Lucia Joyce. To dance in the wake* (London: Bloomsbury, 2004), p.127

<sup>49</sup> Jacqueline, ROBINSON, *Modern dance in France. An adventure 1920-1970*, (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1997) p.77

<sup>50</sup> The Dance Magazine (May 1930), p.36

<sup>51</sup> #194 Helene Vanel, *The Artistic Dance*, German Card, Issued by Eckstein- Halpaus Dresden, approx 1933, 5.2cm x 6.2cm, Card set called “The Artistic Dance”

<sup>52</sup> James D., HERBERT, *Paris 1937. Worlds on exhibition*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998) p.144

<sup>53</sup> In her in-house newsletter: *Cahiers rythme et couleur. Prose, poems, croquis, annals, photographs*.

myth and magic, a decision influenced by André Breton's travels to Mexico, Martinique and Hawaii during the war<sup>54</sup>. The exhibition installation was supposed to open up an environment which was to help the spectator to arrive at a "rélévation mythique"<sup>55</sup>. The audience was to follow a labyrinthine quest through the show. The exhibition design can be seen as some sort of spiritual guideline, intended to open up the visitor's eyes to the real truth: myth.

The show provoked rather negative reactions. Although the event was said to be a "sensational reentry of surrealism in France"<sup>56</sup>, the intellectuals after the war deemed *Le Surréalisme en 1947* as too soft and irrelevant for its time. Jean-Paul Satre compared the exhibition with a pretty, but rapidly fading candy<sup>57</sup>. This attitude might be explained because, once again, the surrealists refused to answer to the favored directions in art<sup>58</sup>. They retaliated against political prescription in art and the call for an authentic subject matter in France<sup>59</sup>.

The luxury edition of the exhibition catalogue underlines this attitude of non-conformity. Together with Enrico Donati, Marcel Duchamp created more than just a catalogue. The front cover of the book was lined with black velvet, on which the artists placed a three dimensional, hand painted foam rubber breast. Enrico Donati recalls: "I made them all and painted every nipple. I put in the black velvet because I thought it looked naked."<sup>60</sup>

They titled this actual art object *Prière de toucher* - inviting, or daring the spectator to touch the precious work. The notion of touch was central for the exhibition of 1947. The dim lighting reduced the possibility of sight, whilst the grassy and wet environment underlined the surrealist's idea to use the sense of touch as opposed as sight. *Prière de toucher* reflects the general tone of the exhibition, as did the *Unconsummated Act* in 1938.

---

<sup>54</sup> Whitney, CHADWICK, *Myth in Surrealist painting 1929-1939*, (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1980), p.97/98

<sup>55</sup> JEAN, and MEZEL, *Peinture surréaliste*, p.341

<sup>56</sup> Anonymus, „Surréalisme", *Combat* (February 1947)

<sup>57</sup> Jean-Paul, SATRE, "Von der Radikalität des Surrealismus", *Neue Rundschau*, N°1 (1981) p.36

<sup>58</sup> After World War II, the art world favored more abstraction or social realism. The continued faith of Surrealism for desire and the unconscious, rather than real-life political action was deemed as escapist. Alyce, MAHON, *Politics of Eros*, p.108

<sup>59</sup> Alyce, MAHON, *Politics of Eros*, p.109

<sup>60</sup> Matica, SAWIN, *Surrealism in Exile and the beginning of the New York School*, (Cambridge/ London: MIT Press, 1995) p.394



The work also reflects the surrealists' attitude towards the traditional gallery environment. Marcel Duchamp's art object played with the museum and gallery tradition, in which it is strictly forbidden to touch any piece of art. The Surrealists therefore invited the spectator to be part of their game, to step upon the norms established by galleries and society and to follow their lead of insurrection. Seen like this *Prière de toucher* becomes more than just an art object. While handling the catalogue, one could not refrain from literally cupping the breast. Therefore the spectator was forced to participate with something we could call "performance". It could be interpreted as a pioneer example of the relationship between viewer and artwork. For many later performance artists, the idea of interaction and relation between them and their audience is of central interest<sup>61</sup>. To involve the audience in a performance and to provoke reactions is important in order to complete the work of art. The surrealists' experiments with performances anticipated this attitude.

Following this definition, *Prière de toucher* is transformed from exhibition catalogue to art object, and even to some sort of performance piece. Unfortunately we don't have time to further discuss the matter. It is necessary to carry out further research on this viewer participation and to study the public's reaction to the certainly erotic aspects of *Prière de toucher* in order to arrive at a conclusive analysis.

The *Exposition internationale du Surréalisme* (EROS) in 1959 opened at the highpoint of the cold war. Opposed to the politically charged situation and to the election of Charles de Gaulle, who, in the eyes of the surrealists underlined the dominance of the conservative<sup>62</sup>, the surrealists decided for a celebration of the erotic and desire, embodied by the mystical figure of Eros. Visitors were even warned of the nature of the events and its explicit contents. The gallery environment favored everything condemned by society. The design itself evoked

---

<sup>61</sup> Helge, MEYER, "Audience as participant in Performance Art", *InterArt Actual*, Canada, (2009)

<sup>62</sup> Alyce, MAHON, *Politics of Eros*, p.149

memories of a brothel (soft music, sweet smells, red velvet). And the artworks presented showed different fetishes.

The show culminated with a surrealist dinner, the *Banquet Cannibale*, organized by André Breton and based on a conception by Meret Oppenheim. Here a naked woman was stretched between burning candles on a table, as if ready for a sacrificial ritual<sup>63</sup>. The woman lay there totally still with her eyes closed while some invited guests ate the food spread out on her body.

The original version of the performance, called *Festin de Printemps* was organized by Meret Oppenheim in April 1959 in Bern. “Three couples, including the woman, partook, without silverware, of the exquisite repast laid out on the human table decked with wood anemones.”<sup>64</sup> André Breton, who liked the ambiguous meanings of most of Meret Oppenheims work<sup>65</sup>, asked her if he could reenact the performance for the inauguration of EROS.

The main difference between both events is that *Festin de Printemps* was an intimate dinner between friends of the artist. That way the celebration of spring, a renewal of some kind<sup>66</sup>, was staged as a private ritual. The golden-painted face transformed the naked woman into something sacred, a goddess. Combined with the fruit on the body, Meret Oppenheim referred to the sacred state of nature<sup>67</sup>.

The more public performance of *Banquet Cannibal* transformed the private ceremony in a scandalous event, presented for the voyeuristic eyes of the spectators<sup>68</sup>. This interpretation is enhanced by the fact that there are virtually no photos of *Festin de*

---

<sup>63</sup> Alyce, MAHON, *Politics of Eros*, p.163

<sup>64</sup> Brice, CURIGER, *Meret Oppenheim. Defiance in the face of freedom*, (Zurich/ Francfort/ New York: Parkett Publishers, 1989), p.70

<sup>65</sup> Isabel, SCHULZ, „*Edelfuchs im Morgenrot*“ – *Studien zum Werk von Meret Oppenheim*, (Munich: Silke Schreiber, 1993), p.123

<sup>66</sup> *Festin de Printemps* was also seen as some sort of fertility feast. Brice, CURIGER, *Defiance*, p.70

<sup>67</sup> The reference between fruit, nature and women has been used many times in the course of art history and survived until modern times. See: Kenneth, BENDINER, *Food in painting. From the Renaissance to the present* (London: Reaktion Books, 2004)

<sup>68</sup> Isabel, SCHULZ, *Studien zum Werk*, p.126

*Printemps*<sup>69</sup>. The documentation of the pagan ritual was not planned<sup>70</sup>. By changing the name to *Banquet Cannibal*, André Breton also enhanced the dark interpretation of the performance. Aside from the fact that the surrealists presented the female body as goddess like, they also posed her on a sort of alter – as a sacrifice. The word “cannibalism” underlines this meaning. The invited are there to eat from the woman, in some way to absorb her.

Meret Oppenheim’s reaction to the event was rather negative. She thought that André Breton failed to catch the meaning of her surrealist dinner. She condemned the public presentation of her idea: in her eyes the surrealists used it more as an amusement than a secret ritual for initiates<sup>71</sup>. Meret Oppenheim always favored some distance between her and the surrealists in order to underline her independence and artistic freedom<sup>72</sup>. After the disappointment of *Banquet Cannibal* she decided never again to participate at a surrealist show, as the “weird fantasies” of *après-guerre* surrealism made her sick<sup>73</sup>.

But it is wrong to only see the differences between both *Festins* and to underline the public character of *Banquet Cannibal*. Research shows that André Breton, even though he underlined the darker meaning of the performance, did not undermine the original idea of celebrating woman and nature.

## **Conclusion**

This was only a short introduction of the performances I will closely study and analyze. My goal is to shed new light on each of these events, as well as to clear any misconceptions.

---

<sup>69</sup> Only one image exists, poorly lit and out of focus.

<sup>70</sup> Conversation with Dominique Bürgi, friend of Meret Oppenheim and co-author of her catalogue. November, 19<sup>th</sup>, 2013

<sup>71</sup> Christiane, MEYER-THOSS, *Meret Oppenheim. Aufzeichnungen 1928-1985, Träume*, (Bern/ Berlin: Gachnang & Springer, 1986), p.45

<sup>72</sup> Christian, FLURI, “Revolte gegen die Fesseln der Vernunft”, *Nordwestschweiz*, (29.06.2013) p.24

<sup>73</sup> Francois, GRUNDBACHER, “Meret Oppenheim. La fée des surréalistes nous raconte ses dernières créations”, *Beaux-Arts Magazine*, N°18 (November 1984) p.32

I will underline H  l  ne Vanel's importance for the dance world and try to reconstruct her hysterical dance for the exhibition in 1938. I will explain how the performance reflects the surrealist's obsession with the mentally ill and hysteria. I will show how *Pri  re de toucher*, the exhibition catalogue of 1947, could be interpreted as some sort of performance piece and how the work experimented with viewer publication. In the end I will discuss the differences of *Festin de Printemps* and *Banquet Cannibal* of 1959 – particularly its darker interpretation. But I will also point out the commonalities of both performances. Instead of presenting *Banquet Cannibal* as a failed experiment, I will show how the sacredness of women and nature is still demonstrated by Andr   Breton.

But I will go further than that. I won't only concentrate on Surrealism. My goal is to show, that these performances directly influenced the exploits of later performance artists. When we compare *Danger Music* of Dick Higgins or G  nter Brus' *Action Psychodramolett* of 1971 with H  l  ne Vanel's *The Unconsummated Act*, we can definitely draw parallels between the surrealist performance and those artists establishing themselves later. But perhaps the most fitting example of a performance piece corresponding to that of 1938, is Valie Export's *Hyperbulie*, of 1973. I will present a new analysis of these exploits to draw a connection to the surrealist's experiments. It will demonstrate how the group's obsession with hysteria and the mentally ill<sup>74</sup> is mirrored in performance pieces of the 1960s and 1970s generation.

*The Unconsummated* act isn't the only surrealist performance echoed in later performance pieces. Valie Export's *Touch Cinema* from 1964 reminds one of Marcel Duchamp's work *Pri  re    toucher* from 1947, for example. And Carolee Schneemann's *Meat Joy* of 1964 and her *Body Collage* of 1967 remind us of *Banquet Cannibal* organized for the surrealist show in 1959. Many performance artists have centered their work on the use and

---

<sup>74</sup> Andr   Breton had worked for the hospital St Dizier at the Second Army Psychiatric Centre in 1916. Letters such as "Lettre aux Medecins-Chef des asiles de fous", *La R  volution Surr  aliste*, N  3 (April 1925) or "La cinquanti  naire de l'hyst  rie", *La R  volution Surr  aliste*, N  2 (15.03.1928) celebrate the hysteric and mentally ill as surrealist heroes, being oppressed by doctors and society.

placing food in a post-war world. It will be interesting to study how the Surrealists opened that direction.

These are only some of the performance pieces that will be examined for this thesis. I will introduce artists showing elements of surrealist performances. We will see how they were affiliated with the group, and consequently how that influenced their work. Additionally we can't ignore the research of Alyce Mahon. Her studies concentrate on the fact that Surrealism itself had been influenced by a new generation of artists after World War II<sup>75</sup>. We need to examine how the presence of these new artists affected the movement and their performances.

Considering the fact that these surrealist performances have never received detailed attention, we are talking about an important contribution for the research on the surrealist movement. Publications on surrealism only mention them in passing whilst talking about the different exhibitions they were organized for. Considering the significance of the inauguration for the art show in general, and for the surrealists in particular, it is astonishing that these performances have been largely ignored by scholars.

Therefore we can no longer ignore these artistic expressions. We can no longer treat these experiments as mere secondary byproducts, if we want to arrive at a complete documentation of Surrealism. In the end, we must acknowledge Surrealism as one of the most pertinent precursors of performance art and accept the significance of the *vernissage surréaliste*. The analyses of later surrealist performances are of great importance. They are capable of showing how surrealist ideas were integrated into the philosophies of a new generation of artists and writers. My research attempts to establish exactly that. I wish to assign a place to surrealist art openings in art history – particularly concerning the history of Performance Art.

---

<sup>75</sup> Alyce, MAHON, *Politics of Eros*, p.9