

DANCE

SURREALISM AND ...

From the first essay on art published by André Breton in 1925 in *La Révolution surréaliste* the methodology of surrealism was conjunctive: *Surrealism and Painting*. The conjunction implied *distance* as also *dialogue*. Henceforth, not only will it be a question of surrealism and painting, but of many other practices, including surrealism and dance. Many of the epistemological problems presented to the early surrealists by painting are structurally equivalent to those of music, but since Breton lacked a notable musical intelligence the question of music never achieved an authoritative *formulation* and dance has scarcely fared any better, but there is compelling material to outline what a surrealist conception of dance might entail.

SURREALISM AND ... THE BALLETS RUSSES

What is at issue is not, primarily, the taste of given surrealists, though mention might be made of Valentine Hugo for her considerable dance culture and relation to the Ballets Russes (see Hugo, 2002). Here, however, the issue of the Ballets Russes and surrealism is more complex for grasping what may be distinctively surrealist in dance as Breton disliked the *beau monde* and took ballet as the emblem of that world, paying little attention to it until Max Ernst and Joan Miró collaborated with the Ballets Russes' *Romeo and Juliet* in 1926 (with music by Constant Lambert, choreography by Bronislava Nijinska and George Balanchine, curtain by Ernst, and set and costumes by Miró). Aragon and Breton denounced this collaboration saying that Ernst and Miró could not seek shelter from Picasso's collaboration with the Ballets Russes (Aragon and Breton, 1926: 31). And yet . . . this is complicated by the surrealists' earlier response to the ballet *Mercure*, 1924

(choreography by Léonide Massine, music by Satie, and set and costumes by Picasso) which the surrealists, in the collective declaration *Hommage à Pablo Picasso*, declared their “profond and total admiration for Picasso” (Collective Declaration, 1980: 16), whilst in the inaugural installment of *Le Surréalisme et la peinture*, Breton spoke of Picasso’s Cubist work as recreating in him an experience of childhood the toys of which would make one cry with rage and pity today holding out the possibility of toys for the duration of a life, a kind of life where toys stood for non-alienation (Breton, 1972: 6). And, a *strange thing*, Breton shares with his readers “I never received this impression so strongly as on the occasion of the ballet *Mercury*, a few years ago” (7). A certain experience of the dance made available to Breton a powerful image of (non)-alienation as well as a sense of rupture and continuation.

AISTHESIS: THE STATE OF A SURREALIST

What is there in surrealist experience or *aesthesis* and its conceptual repertoire that could be extended to musical or choreographic *aisthesis*? It is notable that there is no entry for *dance* in the *Dictionnaire abrégé du surréalisme* of 1938, and the entry for Hélène Vanel, the dancer recruited by Georges Hugnet and Paul Éluard and assisted by Salvador Dalí—so he says—for her *L’Acte manqué* (sometimes called *Danse hystérique*), only appears in the “Supplément.” Likewise, in the *Dictionnaire général du surréalisme et de ses environs*, where several dancers associated with surrealism from Valentine Hugo to Alice Farley are mentioned, whenever a dancer’s entry is given the reader is instructed to refer to the entry on “danse,” for which nothing is given other than the names of certain dancers. No attempt is made to characterize *dance* or even a culture of dance in the world of the surrealists.

There is in surrealism no programmatic work of fundamental aesthetic on dance so maybe the question should be something akin to, What does dance (and *mutatis mutandis* music) make *available*, what in surrealist sensibility could be receptive to the *availability* of dance? What is to be understood by *surrealist sensibility* or *aisthesis*? A state. Not a state of mind (a dispositional attitude), but rather an affective, corporeal continuum of mind, a form of embodied *inscription* marked by receptive openness (*disponibilité*), even



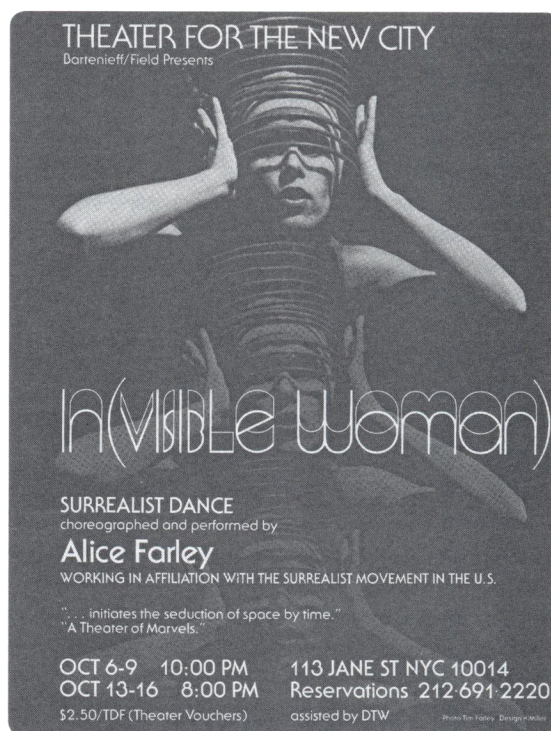
Hélène Vanel at the 1938 International Surrealist Exhibition. Photograph by Keystone-France/Gamma-Keystone via Getty Images.

vacancy, one imaginatively disconnected from yet available, to a world—of which the types are: the dream, the hypnagogic state, trance, passivity—these are surrealist *states* of being in which, through surprise, the experience of the uncanny, the unforeseen, the history of affectivity, the syntax of affection (*the geography of syntax*, in Francis Gérard’s language)—void, as it were, of *auto-affection*—can become transformed. Breton’s definition of surrealism as a mode of pure psychic automatism is already a choreographic conception, a form of *inscription*, that is, of movement as a *network* of wild thoughts in contact with force, counter-force, and bifurcation. Gérard describes the “L’État d’un Surréaliste” in terms of choreographic movements of separation: “the absolute indifference to all that surrounds it. . . . In this blessed condition there is observed a general enervation in the body” in the movement of which states there appears a form of arche-writing (“the different *figures* in which thought tends to become *fixed*”), and which becomes *weighted*: “the mind made heavy by the *weight* of the forms which

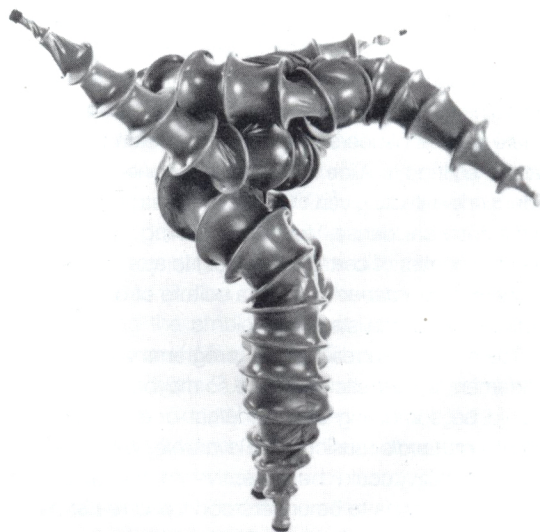
it uses is delayed in its departure, or, at the very least, is retained," and the terms of this weighted arche-writing achieve differentiation, that is, inscription, through materiality and force. And here is the passage where Gérard formulates the significance of the conflict, the moment of relation and separation in terms of the phenomenon of appearing: "If one could as clearly make the other systems of word associations appear, beyond the consonances [that is, the pre-existing harmony among terms], one would [thereby] denounce *the links that a culture forms*, the personal experience of an individual, *the geography of syntax* and one would glimpse from closer in a total liberty where automatic experience, freed from the associations formed by words, would unfold a *rush of forces* [élan des tendances]" (Gérard, 1924: 29–30)

DANCE AND ETHNOGRAPHIC FORCE

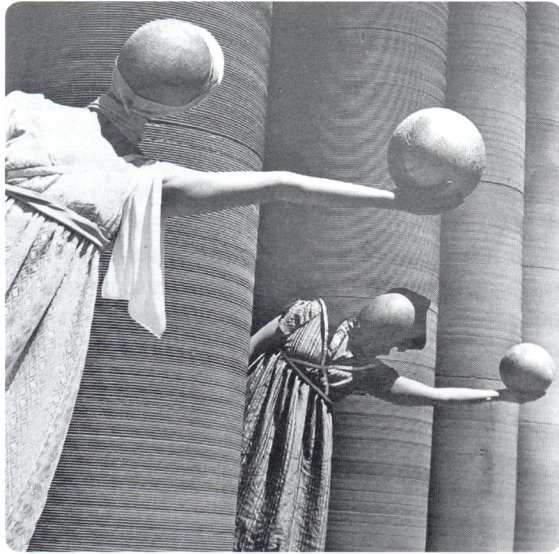
For this experience of radical passivity, which could de-structure—*separate*—the *social* syntax of affection, something more would be needed for the surrealists than Western art (or popular) music and dance-forms had to offer, something whose force would depend almost wholly upon the extent to which it represented not only a *change of frame* but something which deprives us of "systems of reference, to disorient us within our own memories" (Breton, 1996: 60). For surrealism, drawing upon its encounter with ethnography, such a function would be performed by dance as an anthropological *phenomenon*, something at once universal yet located, and disorienting. The metaphors of listening, attending, and receptivity waiting so important in surrealist experience prepares the way for music as the sound of alterity, and dance as the embodied inscription of *separation*. First to articulate the experience of this *force* of dance and music (which quickly will become cries, screams, and sounds) is Antonin Artaud (1970) in 1931 when he heard the intervals of the Balinese Gamelan and experienced their dancers at the Exposition coloniale in Paris in 1931. It is notable that when Artaud introduces the impact of the encounter with Balinese dance and music—an anthropology of sounding—he speaks of the entry of phantoms, of the appearance of personages in their spectral state (the language of separation) in an action (*drame*) which does not develop as movements between sentiments but rather as movements between states of mind marked by the elimination of words and the triumph of a (new for



Poster for the performance of *In(Visible Woman)*, design by Alice Farley, photograph by Tim Farley. Courtesy of Alice Farley.



Anggrek, the Human Life of Plants, performance by Alice Farley, photograph by Thomas Kristich. Courtesy of Alice Farley.



A Fortunate Light, performance by Alice Farley, photograph by Raman Rao.
Courtesy of Alice Farley.

Artaud) viscerally felt conception of gesture and voice (Artaud, 1970: 44). Then in 1931–3, Michel Leiris, reporting the ethnographical Mission Dakar-Djibouti, published a suite of photographs of ritual dances and performances from the Dogon of Mali which again stress the physicality of embodied language here described as Corybantic, hovering between order and chaos in liminal states of separation (Leiris, 1933: 75). There is, too, in 1945, Breton's extended description of the Hopi Antelope dance which essays a formal and culturally symbolic description of the dance to convey the cosmology of which the dance is expressive (Breton, 1999b: 194, 196). Common to Artaud, Leiris, and Breton, in their detailed descriptions of dance—Balinese, Dogon, Hopi, and later Vaudoun—is the encounter as a form of witnessing. The ceremony of attention appropriate to this form of witnessing is conveyed in the attention to the *choreographic* dimension of the performance: the steps, the phrases, pace, and emerging forms—in his Note-book of his journey to the Hopi Indians, Breton will even transcribe the musical notation describing the rhythm of the *Snake Dance* (Breton, 1999b: 199). There is in each, too, the recognition of a distinct religious or cosmological structure active in the performance. In a little known theatre bill written for the visit of the African American choreographer and ethnographer Katherine Dunham

and her troupe to Paris in 1949 (Breton, 1999c: 1003), Breton quotes the Haitian writer and ethnologist Jacques Roumain quoting the dance historian Curt Sachs' *Histoire de la danse* (Sachs, 1938) on dance as a sacrificial means of participation in larger forces—a conception of dance at work in the surrealist dance of Hélène Vanel, Françoise Sullivan, and Alice Farley.

AT THE SOURCE(S) OF SURREALISM: AUTOMATISM—THOUGHT—IS DANCE

Breton himself, after experiencing Hopi Indian dance and the dance of Voudoun ceremonies in Haiti (Breton, 1998: xiii) also came to see an implicit commonality among the ritual dance, automatic experience, and the Salpêtrière hysterics—now understood as possessed—at the origin of surrealism (Breton, 1999a: 160). Dance is at the very source of surrealism's imaginary: in the choreography of desire and power in the Salpêtrière hysterics, which would also provide models for the dance of Jane Avril, but also, less known today, Mme Magdeleine G. as reported by Théodore Flournoy (1904: 357–4), the same Flournoy who reported the mythography of Hélène Smith and her detailed dances of other Martian worlds. Consider, too, the prevalence of the iconography of dance in surrealist practice above all in the work of Ernst: *Danseur sous le ciel* [*Le Noctambule*], c. 1922; *L'Ombre*, 1923 amongst many. It is also significant that Picasso's *Jeunes filles dansant devant la fenêtre*, 1925, was first published in *La Révolution surréaliste*, vol. 4, 1925. We cannot imagine the work of Joseph Cornell without dance; and when, following Freud, Breton writes of Gradiva, it is her *démarche* on the verge of becoming a *pas*—her dance step—in the nascent liminal movement *to the other side* that most moves him. Dance as choreographic *inscription* may well lead to a new way of understanding the origins and development of surrealist thinking and its continued impact on post-Second World War thought through Blanchot. It may even be said of the new philosophical sensibility that emerged in Europe after the Second World War that surrealism prepared the *ground*, as captured in the surrealists' developing attitude to the movement-forms made available by ethnography, with models for a breach with Western ideas of structure, sign, and play.

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Further Reading

- Farley, Alice (2011) "Notes Toward a Surrealist Dance," in *Invisible Heads: Surrealists in North America, an untold story*, edited by Thom Burns and Allan Graubard. Flagstaff Chicago Los Angeles New York: Anon Editions.
- Farley, Alice and Allan Graubard (2011) *Alice Farley Interviewed by Allan Graubard*, in *Invisible Heads: Surrealists in North America, an untold story*, edited by Burns and Graubard. Flagstaff Chicago Los Angeles New York: Anon Editions.
- Lamantia, Philip (1982) "Alice Farley: Dancing at Land's End," in *Free Spirits: Annals of the Insurgent Imagination*. San Francisco: City Lights Books.
- Rosemont, Franklin (1979) "Isadora and the Magicians," in *Cultural Correspondence* no. 10–11: *Surrealism and its Popular Accomplices*.
- Teige, Karel (1979) "Movies, Sports, Dance," in *Cultural Correspondence* no. 10–11: *Surrealism and its Popular Accomplices*.