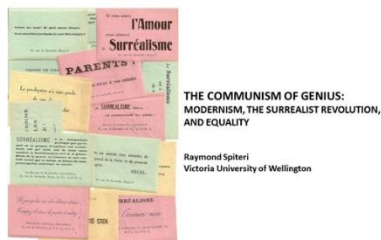


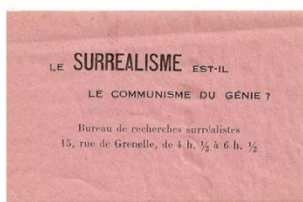
The communism of genius: modernism, the surrealist revolution, and equality.



The title of this paper comes from one of the surrealist *papillons* or butterflies, small flyers produced to publicize the launch of the surrealist movement in late 1924. A little larger than a business card at approximately 7 x 11 cm, these flyers included brief messages designed to spread the word about the imminent surrealist revolution:

If you love love, you will love surrealism
Parents: Tell your dreams to your children
Surrealism is within reach of the unconscious
Surrealism seeks you; you seek surrealism

These messages appeared over the address of the Bureau of surrealist research, and listed the hours when it was open to the public.



Papillon surréaliste: "Surrealism: is it the communism of genius?" 1924.
Printed paper, 6.7 x 10.3 cm.

One of the flyers posed the question: "Is surrealism the communism of genius?" This question makes an interesting claim: it brings together the exceptional gift of genius and the collective spirit of the community. Communism here refer less to a specific political system—at this point the surrealists were indifferent of the 1917 Russian Revolution, which Louis Aragon had recently dismissed as a "vague ministerial crisis"—rather, communism referred here to the imagination as a capacity shared equally by all people, and its potential to constitute new forms of community. It recalled one of

Lautréamont's dictums in the *Poems*: "Poetry is made by everyone, not by one." This belief posited an egalitarian force at the heart of surrealist experience, that poetry was not the preserve of specialists, but an attribute of everyone—indeed, for the surrealists, it was this capacity that made us human.

The communism of genius—this idea located equality at the heart of the surrealist enterprise. What I want to do in this paper is to explore what this equality may mean, and relate it to the central themes of equality, democracy and dissensus in the writings of Jacques Rancière. In so doing I want to suggest how both Rancière's thought and surrealism rub art history against the grain by foregrounding the dissensual character of aesthetic experience. For equality is also a question of politics—and in Rancière's thought equality, democracy and dissensus are less concepts than operations that question the given distribution of the sensible.

I first started reading Rancière after I was invited to contribute to a book project led by Aleš Erjavec that drew on Rancière's notion of an 'aesthetic revolution' to reconsider the role of the avant-garde in the history of twentieth-century art. One of the goals of this book was to broaden the model of the avant-garde from instances of the historical avant-garde—interwar movements like futurism, dada, surrealism, and Soviet constructivism—to address revolutionary Latin American art, the Situationist International, the 1960s counter-culture in the United States, and NSK in Eastern Europe. Rancière's notion of an aesthetic revolution was one way to understand the configuration of culture and politics that animated these movements.

In terms of my own work, I do not claim that my research is faithful to Rancière's categories. However, Rancière is concerned with a similar set of problems, and his work is useful to articulate what I see as a central issue in the study of surrealism: the relation between cultural endeavour and political action. As I have argued, surrealism not only exists in the contested space between culture and politics, but also employs the tension between these social fields as an integral element of its own stance.¹ Further, I consider this tension central to understanding the history of surrealism not only as a movement but also in its relation to the broader history of modernism.

One of the challenges of Rancière's thought is that it resists formulation as a stable conceptual system. It operates as a mode of practice rather than a conceptual system. Consequently, recurring patterns or problematics are recoded in different contexts. Equality, democracy, and politics—these

¹ Raymond Spiteri, "Convulsive Beauty: Surrealism and Aesthetic Revolution," in *Aesthetic Revolutions and Twentieth-Century Avant-Garde Movements*, edited by Aleš Erjavec (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 81.

terms describe the operation of dissensus that subverts a given distribution of the sensible. And I should not that, in this context, art history is also part of the distribution of the sensible challenged by Rancière's thought. So in the remainder of this paper I want to tease out one thread to demonstrate how surrealism operates as a dissensual community of sense.

I'll focus on Rancière's essay "The Aesthetic Revolution and its Outcomes," where he discusses of the emergence of the aesthetic regime of art in Freidrich Schiller's *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*. In the fifteenth letter Schiller identifies the play-drive as being capable "of bearing the whole edifice of the art of the beautiful and of the still more difficult art of living."² Rancière stresses that what is at issue is not Schiller's direct influence "but the efficacy of a plot [that] reframes the division of the forms of our experience."³ For Rancière the question of the 'politics of aesthetics' at stake in the aesthetic regime of art turns on the conjunction 'and' that links the art of the beautiful and the art of living. His analysis revolves around the interplay of autonomy and heteronomy: what is important here is the autonomy of aesthetic experience is also a heteronomy, distinguished from art as a set of objects and history of forms, on the one hand, and life as a distribution of defined subject positions, on the other.⁴

² Jacques Rancière, "Aesthetic Revolution and its Outcomes," *New Left Review* 14 (March-April 2002): 133.

³ Rancière, "Aesthetic Revolution and its Outcomes," 133.

⁴ "Firstly, the autonomy staged by the aesthetic regime of art is not that of the work of art, but of a mode of experience. Secondly, the 'aesthetic experience' is one of heterogeneity, such that for the subject of that experience it is also the dismissal of a certain autonomy. Thirdly, the object of that experience is 'aesthetic', in so far as it is not—or at least not only—art." Rancière, "Aesthetic Revolution and its Outcomes," 135.

Rancière describes the autonomy of aesthetic experience in a paradoxical way: “the artwork participates in the sensorium of autonomy inasmuch as it is not a work of art.”⁵ One way to reformulate this claim is to say that the autonomy of aesthetic experience in question here is an experience that does not coincide with the distribution of the sensible characteristic of any given state of society, nor the given history of the forms of art embodied in the discipline of art history or museum displays, which is also part of that distribution—this is what I take implied in the distinction between ‘artwork’ and ‘work of art’. In this context the opposition between art and politics, high art and popular culture, or art and life, which typically structure discussions of the art and politics, are interpretations of a more fundamental contradiction:

In the aesthetic regime of art, art is art to the extent that it is something else than art. It is always ‘aestheticized’, meaning that it is always posed as a ‘form of life’. The key formula of the aesthetic regime of art is that art is an autonomous form of life. This is a formula, however, that can be read in two different ways: autonomy can be stressed over life, or life over autonomy—and these lines of interpretation can be opposed, or they can intersect.⁶

Rancière goes on to plot the various permutation in terms of art becoming life, life becoming art, or art and life exchanging their properties.

The point I want to recover from the foregoing discussion is understanding of the autonomy of aesthetic experience as a mode of dissensual experience that takes place in the interval between art and politics: that one of the distinctive qualities of surrealism as a form of experience is that does not coincide with established definition of art or politics; it is neither art, not politics. (I would add, however, that aesthetic experience not necessarily dissensual; it can be consubstantial with existing distribution of the sensible, a point I’ll return to latter in this paper.)

In the remainder of this paper I want to explore the way surrealism can be understood as a mode of dissensus that constitutes a community of sense. As an example, I want to return to the idea of the communism of genius and consider the role of collective games in surrealism. In a 1954 essay André Breton discussed the important role of games in surrealism, emphasizing their communal character which “specifically appeared to strengthen the relationships that unite us, promoting awareness of our desires and what they could have in common.”⁷ Breton drew on Johan Huizinga’s recently published *Homo Ludens* to establish the link between play, poetry and community: “to see in poetry

⁵ Rancière, “Aesthetic Revolution and its Outcomes,” 136.

⁶ Rancière, “Aesthetic Revolution and its Outcomes,” 137.

⁷ André Breton, *Perspective cavalière*, edited by M. Bonnet (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), 50.

the human realization of the ludic demand at the heart of the community.” Play and poetry were two faces of freedom: to abandon either would undermine “the best in man.”⁸ The emphasis Breton places on play recalls Rancière’s discussion of Schiller’s fifteenth letter from *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*, where the play-drive bares “the whole edifice of the art of the beautiful and of the still more difficult art of living.”⁹



Man Ray, *Waking Dream: Sdoux*, 1924. Gelatin-silver print. 11.2 x 8.2 cm.
Photograph of the surrealist group in the bureau of surrealist research.

The surrealist interest in collective games had a long history dating back to the emergence of the movement in the early 1920s. In his account of the surrealists experiments with hypnotic trances in ‘The Mediums Enter’, Breton offers the first definition of surrealism as ‘a certain psychic automatism,’ and relates the experiments with trances to the discovery of automatic writing in 1919—a position he would reiterate in the 1924 *Manifesto*.¹⁰ In this context Man Ray’s photograph of Robert Desnos in a trance surrounded by the surrealist group serves to document this process: it emphasizes the collective dimension of the experience, offering evidence of the source of poetic inspiration in states where rational consciousness appeared absent. Breton would later stress this collective aspect of surrealist practice, describing the revival of automatic writing and interest in dreams in 1922 as the “true collectivization of ideas.”¹¹ Games played a similar role: “Games, too, were very popular with us [...]. It was perhaps in these games that our receptivity was constantly regenerated; at least they sustained the happy feeling of dependence we had on each other.”¹² Although automatism remained one of the founding principles of surrealism, it would be supplemented by collective games to reinforce the collective identity of the group.

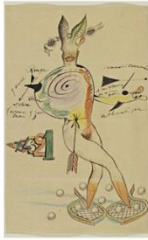
⁸ Breton, *Perspective cavalière*, 51.

⁹ Rancière, “Aesthetic Revolution and its Outcomes,” 133.

¹⁰ André Breton, *The Lost Steps*, translated by M. Polizzotti (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 90-91; André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, translated by R. Seaver and H. R. Lane (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969), 19-29.

¹¹ André Breton, *Conversations: The Autobiography of Surrealism*, translated by M. Polizzotti (New York: Paragon House, 1993), 56.

¹² Breton, *Conversations*, 57.



Cadavre Exquis by Yves Tanguy, Joan Miró, Max Morise, and Man Ray, 1929.
Composite drawing of ink, pencil, and colored pencil on paper, 35.9 x 22.9 cm.

Perhaps one of the most vivid examples of a collective game is the exquisite corpse. In this game, which could be played using words or images, one person would begin a phrase or drawing on a piece of paper, which is then passed to the next participant, folded so that the preceding contributions could not be seen.¹³ The result was a collective work whose significance was greater than the sum of its individual parts. In “The Exquisite Corpse, Its Exaltation” (1948) Breton would acknowledge the significance of these games: “they were stamped with a uniquely collective authority,” “endowed powerfully with that power of *drifting with the current* which poetry should never undervalue.”¹⁴

Indeed, this ‘collective authority’ is a theme that runs through discussions of games in surrealism: in the *Second Manifesto of Surrealism*, for instance, Breton noted the role of games in the ‘pooling’ of thought—in French *mise en commun*, to place in common, so pooling in the sense of a common fund or pooling of resources. Collective games had, according to Breton, “brought out into the open a strange possibility of thought, which is that of its *pooling*. The fact remains that very striking relationships are established in this manner, that remarkable analogies appear, that an inexplicable factor of irrefutability most often intervenes, and that, in a nutshell this is one of the most extraordinary *meeting grounds*.”¹⁵ Playing games constitutes a new mode of sociability, a community of sense, in which the resources of thought, such as words and images, are pooled into a common fund.

The communism of genius is only one aspect of surrealism. Although it is important in terms of the collective dynamic of the surrealist group, it is not readily acknowledged by art history or the museum, which still privilege the individual artist—surrealism as a history of proper names. While it would be tempting to see this reading as retrospective, it is contemporary with the emergence of the movement. For instance, while Breton celebrated the ‘collective authority’ of the exquisite corpse, he also carefully noted the names of the participants on the back of the drawings, and now these

¹³ André Breton, *Surrealism and Painting*, translated by S.W. Taylor (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 289.

¹⁴ Breton, *Surrealism and Painting*, 290.

¹⁵ Garrigues, E (ed.), *Les jeux surréalistes: Mars 1921–septembre 1962* (Paris: Gallimard 1995), 18; Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, 178-79.

drawings circulate under the proper names of the participants. This ambivalence is significant because the discipline of art history recuperates the dissensual dimension of the surrealist enterprise through the prism of the proper name as the work of individual artists. Indeed, the collective authority of surrealism coexisted with a discourse that promoted the individual artist as the agent of artistic production.

To go back to Rancière's proposition that in the aesthetic regime of art "art is art to the extent that it is something else than art," this 'something else' is in conflict with the categories of art criticism. As an example of this tension, I briefly look at an early response to surrealism in the pages of the leading French art magazine *Cahiers d'Art*.



In 1928 Christian Zervos, the editor of *Cahiers d'Art*, published as essay "The Surrealist Phenomenon." The catalyst for this essay was twofold: first, the controversy created by a feature article on Max Ernst that appeared in the previous issue of *Cahiers d'Art*, and second, the recent publication as a book of Breton's essay *Surrealism and Painting*. Zervos vigorously criticized surrealism on philosophical and aesthetic grounds. His principal objection was that surrealism substituted a moral attitude for an aesthetic one, thereby blurring the difference between painting, literature and life. In particular, he denounced it for failing to employ appropriate aesthetic means.



Pablo Picasso, *The Three Dancers*, 1925. Oil on canvas, 215.3 x 142.2 cm

Zervos rigorously distinguished between aesthetics and ethics: art was an autonomous realm subject to disinterested values, a realm beyond all ethical imperatives. The object of Zervos' criticism became obvious once he addressed the subject of painting. The techniques employed by surrealist artists threatened to undermine the critical categories used to legitimate the modernist avant-garde. To

demonstrate this point Zervos turned to the work of Picasso, which he took as an example of “true painting”:

We know that the value of surrealist painting comes from the liberation made by cubism and above all the recent work of Picasso [...]. This is why the surrealists consider Picasso the precursor to their pictorial efforts. But what they deliberately appear to neglect in the recent work of Picasso is the effort to attain the extreme degree of plasticity. To their eyes the plastic effort is incompatible with the moral event that they want to express. And this is the principal point in my disagreement with the surrealist painters. I would love to be able to place my pictorial experience at their service to help them understand that every time Picasso crosses two strokes, or that he describes an outline on a canvas, strokes and outlines become for us a living thing, because Picasso sees all things plastically.¹⁶

Zervos’ primary concern was to preserve the artist as an autonomous subject who embodied an idea through “plastic effort.” This act maintained the professional status of the artist before the canvas: thus Picasso, the modernist artist *par excellence*, “sees all things plastically.”



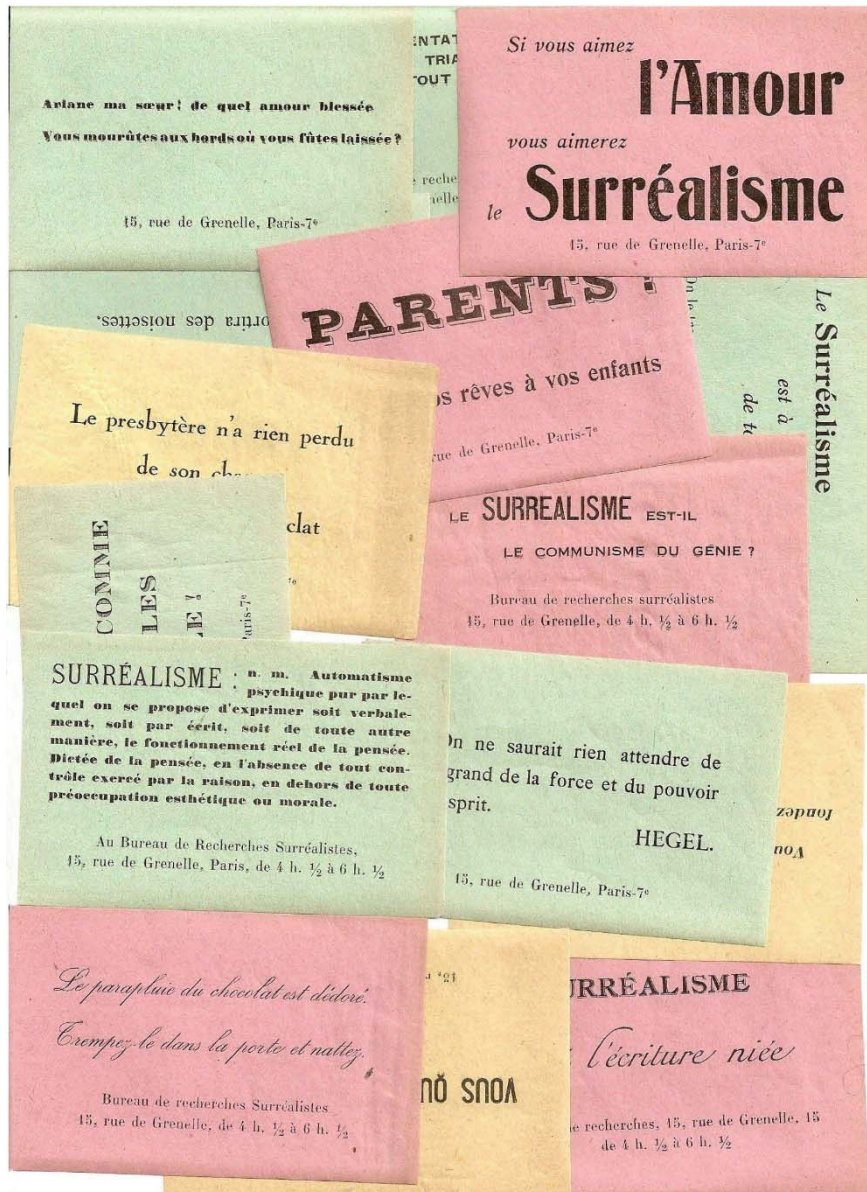
Max Ernst, *The Kiss*, 1927. Oil on canvas, 129 x 161.2 cm

As presented by Zervos, Picasso’s work exemplifies a type of non-dissensual modernism that removes the antagonism of politics from contemporary art, thus ensuring the peaceful coexistence of modernism within the postwar political consensus of the *rappel à l’ordre*—that is, within a distribution of the sensible in which modernism was able to flourish on the condition that it affirmed the values of the Latin classical tradition. After 1925 this was no longer in terms of an explicit debt to classical iconography, as in Picasso’s earlier neo-classical work, but a sense of the artwork as an autonomous construct, framed by an idealist aesthetic. Surrealism appeared unable to meet this aesthetic, hence Zervos’s offer to instruct artists like Max Ernst on the errors of their approach; yet the more profound risk was that surrealism would manifest a dissensual aesthetic that not only fell short of his aesthetic

¹⁶ Christian Zervos, “Du Phénomène surréaliste,” *Cahiers d’Art*, vol. 3, no. 3 (1928) : 114.

ideal, but, more importantly, established a link between a series of artistic manifestations and a radical oppositional politics.

Considering this problematic through the prism of Rancière's thought allows a more nuanced account of this dilemma facing surrealism by distinguishing between cultural dissensus and political dissensus: surrealism may well be an instance of dissensus within modernist culture, but it does not follow that this effect is sufficient to constitute an instance of political dissensus. And it is here that the surrealist movement would falter, since the efforts to establish a durable link with politically active groups were at best temporary, outstripped by the pace of historical events during the 1930s.



THE COMMUNISM OF GENIUS: MODERNISM, THE SURREALIST REVOLUTION, AND EQUALITY

Raymond Spiteri
Victoria University of Wellington

LE SURREALISME EST-IL

LE COMMUNISME DU GÉNIE ?

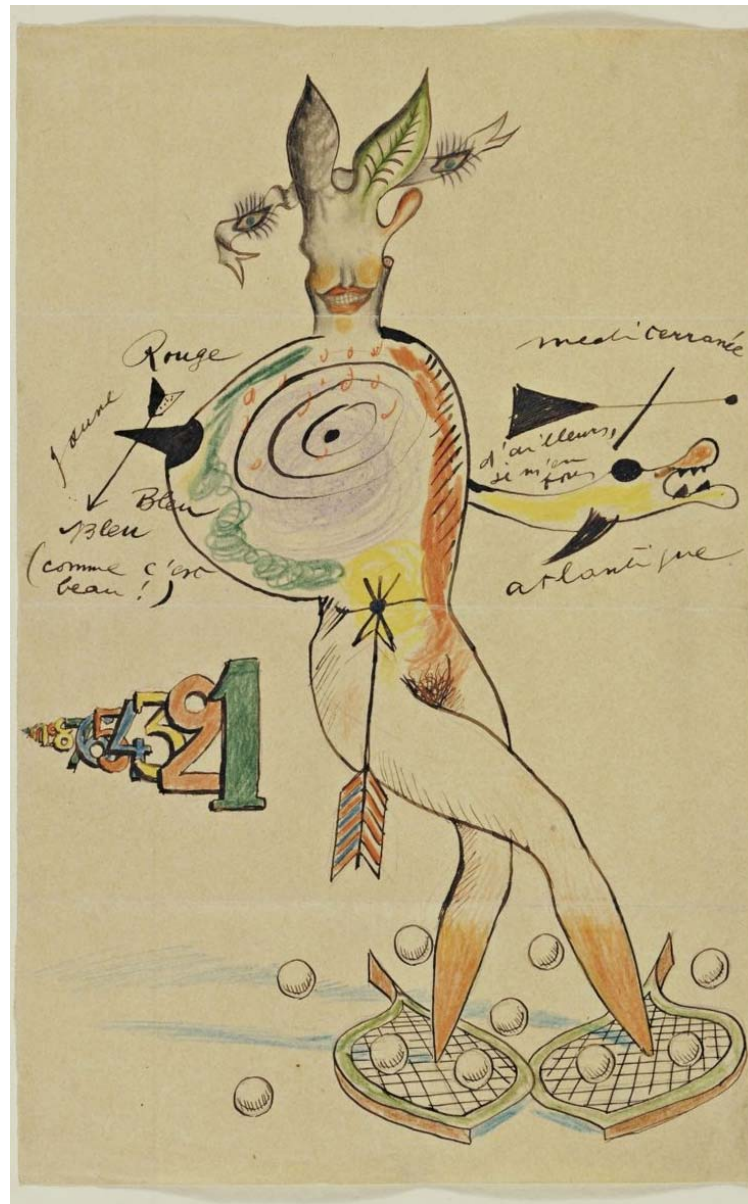
Bureau de recherches surréalistes
15, rue de Grenelle, de 4 h. $\frac{1}{2}$ à 6 h. $\frac{1}{2}$

Papillon surréaliste: "Surrealism: Is it the communism of genius?" 1924.

Printed paper, 6.7 x 10.3 cm.



Man Ray, *Waking Dream Séance*, 1924. Gelatin-silver print, 11.2 x 8.2 cm.
Photograph of the surrealist group in the bureau of surrealist research.



Cadavre Exquis by Yves Tanguy, Joan Miró, Max Morise, and Man Ray, 1929.
Composite drawing of ink, pencil, and colored pencil on paper, 35.9 x 22.9 cm.



Cover of *Cahiers d'Art* (May 1926).



Pablo Picasso, *The Three Dancers*, 1925.
Oil on canvas, 215.3 x 142.2 cm.



Max Ernst, *The Kiss*, 1927.
Oil on canvas, 129 x 161.2 cm.