

ARTICLE

## **The 1938 *Exposition internationale du surréalisme* and *Acte manqué*: The Terror of Memory and the Terror to Come**

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SUMMARY

The often scandalous and outrageous actions, paintings, and literary *œuvres* the surrealists produced and presented to the public were mostly directed against the society of their fathers—more precisely, the social values and morals of the bourgeoisie, which, in the eyes of the surrealists, had provoked the terrors of World War I. In their opinion, society had to change, to undergo a radical transformation, in order to prevent such an event from happening ever again. Only through absolute freedom could society metamorphose into something transcending the past terrors. During the 1920s the surrealists lived their dream, experimenting with literature, art, politics, and philosophy. Everything seemed possible. Then, during the 1930s, the theories defended by the group seemed to fail. Unrest and political tension defined Europe. The surrealists had to watch in horror the development of something a little too familiar: the terrors of another World War that lurked on the horizon. In that respect, the last surrealist show in Paris, the *Exposition internationale du surréalisme* that took place in January 1938, reflected the anxiety of a group of artists caught between the terror of the past war and of the one that had yet to come.

KEYWORDS: Surrealism, Breton, Aragon, gender, politics, dance

The surrealists were always interested in politics: Roger Behrens points out that hardly any other art movement showed as much political engagement as the group around Breton (63). Again and again, they felt the need to take positions, to take a stand for their ideas—stepping out of the artistic field and into the political arena (Held 28). Standing up was always fueled by their desire to attack the known and familiar world of a society they detested, a society “vilipendée par les surréalistes” (Janover 127). “‘Transformer le monde,’ a dit Marx; ‘changer la vie,’ a dit Rimbaud: ces deux mots d’ordre pour nous n’en font qu’un,” declared André Breton in his manifesto (68).

This radical attitude was born from the destruction, devastation, and trauma provoked by World War I. In *Entretiens*, Breton recalled, “La guerre de 14 venait d’arracher [les jeunes] à toutes leurs aspirations pour les précipiter dans un cloaque de sang, de sottise et de boue” (Breton and Parinaud 21). André Masson for example, who was forced to enlist in 1915, was severely wounded in 1917: “Traîné d’hôpitaux en hôpitaux . . . on ne l’a réformé qu’en 1918” (Passeron 20). So, in the eyes of the surrealists, the old generation was responsible for the terrors they experienced in the war. Louis Aragon specified, “C’était une guerre de vieux, pour des raisons qui avaient exalté les vieux, qui ne touchaient pas les jeunes, et c’étaient les jeunes qui la faisaient pour eux” (Aragon, *Pour expliquer ce que j’étais* 36).

Therefore, after the cataclysmic events of the Great War, disillusion and anxiety with the so-called old world order reigned (Evans 77). Because the surrealists held the old generation, and

more specifically the bourgeoisie, responsible for the horrors of the beginning of the twentieth century, they rejected their traditions, values, and social morals. Against this background a new sensibility developed: the drive to change the world. Breton emphasized, “Tout est à faire, tous les moyens doivent être bons à employer pour ruiner les idées de *famille*, de *patrie*, de *religion*” (Breton, *Manifestes du surréalisme* 77). In order to do so, they defended a total liberty, a “*non-conformisme* absolu” (Breton, *Manifestes du surréalisme* 69) and a “révolution perpétuelle” (Aragon, “Libre à vous!” 24).

But at the end of the 1930s, the surrealists saw themselves again confronted with a tense political situation not unlike that of the beginning of the twentieth century. The economic instability in France—caused by a worldwide economic depression (originating from the United States after the 1929 crash)—persisted, resulting also in a great political imbalance: even though the Front Populaire “fut un moment exceptionnel en termes de mobilisation politique” (Morin and Richard 7), their aspirations failed. Compared to the political and economic weaknesses of the European republics, the totalitarian regimes increased in strength. The fascist threat became more and more acute. In an interview with Halo-Noviny in Prague in 1935, Breton underlined the importance of working together against the common enemy that was fascism:

Sous la menace fasciste on peut envisager une certaine trêve aux luttes idéologiques, sous réserve que le point d’application de l’effort de ces autres formations soit bien précisément la lutte contre le fascisme et la guerre. (*Position politique du surréalisme* 47)

More importantly, the surrealists identified specifically the Nazi’s ascension to power as one of the principal dangers for Europe (Goutier 422).

Furthermore, instead of creating an international cooperation, the countries had decided to close down; rearmament characterized interior politics, predominantly in Germany. Above all, pessimism and disillusion reigned. Instead of witnessing the evolution of mankind, the establishment of a new and absolute liberty founded on the “nécessités spirituelles les plus profondes, sur les exigences les plus strictes et les plus humaines” (“La Révolution d’abord et toujours!” 31), the surrealists had to look in horror as humanity—unchanged and unteachable, so it seemed—steered straight into a new catastrophe of frightening proportions.

Since the surrealists were terrified that the devastation of the Great War could repeat itself, their last great exhibition in Europe before the group’s exile in the United States—the *Exposition internationale du surréalisme* that took place in January 1938 in Paris—reflected the surrealists’ anxieties. The show “fait surtout place aux éléments négatifs, aux puissances de destruction du Surréalisme révolutionnaire” (Salomon). The very dark atmosphere of the project, explains Gérard Durozoi, “est en phase avec ce qui, dans l’atmosphère politique mondiale, se fait de plus en plus menaçant” (36). Confronted with the crisis at the time, the exhibition environment reflected the prevailing danger looming on the horizon. One of the journalists visiting the show even pointed out, “Aux temps incertains que nous vivons, il ne manquait plus que de nouveaux exploits surréalistes” (A.W.). At a time where “tant de désordres ont porté un pays aux destinées incertaines, cette exposition offre un motif de comparaison bien curieux avec la tragédie et l’incohérence présentes” (“Surréalisme”).

Originally, collective surrealist exhibitions were only designed to summarize the group's activities and ideas (Jean and Mezei 280). At the end of the 1930s, after researching new methods to represent their thoughts and artistic ambitions (Kelly 80), the surrealists started to use exhibitions as an *outil d'expression*. From that moment on the exhibition and its design came to be a characteristic for the rebellious attitude of the surrealists and their provocations. In contrast to the "white cube" exhibition space (O'Doherty 344), the group started to create total environments (Henri 21) designed to attack each of the spectator's senses in order to pull him or her out of an *attitude complaisante*. This sensory overload, or hyper stimulation, was supposed to force the visitor to face a new way of seeing the world (Zinder 125).

The first of such a manifestation was the 1938 show *Exposition internationale du surréalisme*. Radically different from all the other surrealist exhibitions that came before, its unique exhibition design broke not only with aesthetic traditions, but also with social customs and moral values (Mahon 11). Combining art and theatrical settings, the normally familiar and mundane space of the gallery became a strange place meant to dramatically express the fantastic imagination of Surrealism (Husslein-Arco 46).

Numerous scholars have researched the *Exposition internationale du surréalisme*: art historians Bruce Altshuler, Lewis Kachur, and Annabelle Görge, in particular, present a very detailed description and analysis of the event. It is not the goal of this paper to duplicate these efforts. Still, in order to understand the peculiar atmosphere of the show—which, as I stipulate, reflected the tense political, economic, and social situations of the period—it is nevertheless necessary to roughly outline its concept.

Through a peculiar exhibition environment, the group obliterated any distinction between imagination and reality: from Salvador Dali's *Taxi Pleuvieux*—positioned in the courtyard, right in front of the entrance to the gallery—walking along the *Rue Surréaliste*—lined by a series of mannequins designed by Max Ernst, Marcel Jean, André Masson, Maurice Henry, René Magritte, and Roberto Matta, among others—the visitors would make their way into the main hall of the exhibition, developed by Marcel Duchamp. In there, dead plants, dirt, and even a little pond (created by Wolfgang Paalen) covered the floor ("L'École des farceurs."). Four beds were positioned at each corner in the main room, and heavy coal sacks were hung from the ceiling.

It was this installation in particular that created the claustrophobic atmosphere so often commented by the press. Although Duchamp meant to introduce some gaiety into the exhibition design (Hahn 9), the coal sacks took on a predatory character (Demos 141). Not only did they darken the main room, their apparent weight also seemed to threaten the visitors underneath. In fact, the coal sacks were emptied and only filled with paper, but coal dust still fell from them, giving the impression of an intense mass dangerously looming overhead. One of the spectators commented that "la moindre trépidation pouvait faire tomber trois mille kilos de coke sur les invités" ("Dans un cadre loufoque et funèbre"). Furthermore, the walls of the gallery were painted pitch black, plunging the space into a seemingly everlasting darkness (Taylor 35), and only one meager light illuminated the strange and dark atmosphere—a furnace, placed at the center of the room, which caused the visitors to fear a fire might break out, despite being electric. In a letter to Julien Levy, Duchamp explained:

Les sacs de charbon sur le plafond ont développé une petite panique jusqu'avant l'inauguration de l'exposition, avant le vernissage—il a été décidé, de manière 'scientifique' que la poudre de charbon produit du gaz et que le moindre incident pourrait inciter un incendie (quelque chose comme des catastrophes dans les mines de charbon, tu sais). (Jean and Mazei 281)

Thanks to Duchamp and his installation, the main hall of the exhibition was transformed into a “foyer de dépaysement, une fantastique métaphore dans laquelle le spectateur, bon gré mal gré, se trouvait plongé” (Jean and Mezei 281).

This rather frightening exhibition design aside, the extraordinary show of 1938 further distinguished itself from earlier surrealist exhibitions by a spectacular performance planned and executed for the *vernissage*: the so-called *Acte manqué*, a theatrical staging of hysteria presented by the French dancer Hélène Vanel. Just like the show's environment, which was supposed to reflect the menacing and suffocating atmosphere of Europe at the time, the unique performance accompanying the exhibition demonstrated the overall fear and hysteria that reigned.<sup>1</sup>

Extraordinarily though, despite its importance for the exhibition, few studies mention the performance: Penelope Rosemont says that l'*Acte manqué* “was the first authentic example of surrealism in dance” (112), Alyce Mahon calls it a “proto-happening” (54), and Elena Filipovic talks of an important first illustration of performance art (194). Still, until recently only Don LaCoss had attempted a detailed analysis of the piece. Given the limitations of this paper, we forego a complete description of the *Acte manqué*.<sup>2</sup> But, considering its importance for the overall impact of the *Exposition internationale du surréalisme*, it is nevertheless necessary to at least briefly introduce the performance.

At midnight on 17 January, two hours after the surrealists officially opened the *Exposition internationale du surréalisme* to the public, Vanel (completely naked and tied with heavy chains) suddenly appeared from under the covers of one of the beds in the main hall, slowly lifting her body up (“Skandal um eine ‘Kunst’-Ausstellung”). Violently fighting these restraints and the covers that seemed to hold her in place, the intensity of the performance steadily increased. Such was her aggression that spectators could see the “plumes d'édredon voler sous le ciel de roussettes, un oreiller sauter en l'air” (Jovial). Finally free of her chains and leaving the devastated bed behind her, she disappeared backstage. Not long after, she came out once more—completely covered in bandages (Hugnet 342–43). Her movements seemed more and more distorted and desperate. Furthermore, in her arms she carried a living rooster that “caquetait de terreur” (Dali and Parinaud 236). Then suddenly Vanel disappeared again, only to reappear moments later like a “spectre, dansant vêtue comme une poupée ou une sorcière de Macbeth” (Dali and Parinaud 236). First approaching the furnace in the middle of the room, her “contorsion[s] zigzagante[s]” (Hugnet 342–43) finally brought her back to one of the beds. She jumped on top of it only to finish her performance by staging the notorious hysteric arch—a phenomenon where powerful muscle spasms force the upper torso of the subject to recline violently backwards, giving the impression of the body forming a curve (Eidenbenz 56).

Although often considered secondary to the *Exposition internationale du surréalisme*, a separate theatrical spectacle (Kachur 86–88) organized by Dali and meant only to represent a sexual act that was “unconsummated” (Herbert 144), the *Acte manqué* proved to be much more.

Just like the 1938 show, in a period ripe with tensions with a war already palpable on the horizon, the performance can actually be seen as a socio-political event. In that respect, the most obvious reference to conflict, aggression, and war—all put into the French context—was the rooster the dancer maltreated in the second part of the performance. Commenting on the aggressiveness of the animal, J. C. Cooper insists on it being a symbol of war (70). Considering furthermore that the rooster may also serve as a reference to France itself (Werness 91), one might understand that specific symbol as a warning to the visitors that France would be caught in another war. However, most importantly for our specific discussion, one needs to consider the main subject of *Acte manqué*: hysteria.

As a matter of fact, at the end of the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth, modern society and its artists especially expressed extreme fascination for the oft-disputed pathology (Didi-Hubermann 9). Never had a disease provoked such interest outside the medical community, nor had a medical disorder ever had such ties to art (Merlo 6). The surrealists, who were always searching for an *Enttabuisierung* of humanity's sexual drive or a so-called *Triebbefreiung* (Ladleif 43), defined the unconscious spasms and gestures symptomatic of hysteria as a form of expression for an individual's inner self. In order to free themselves from the control of a society they abhorred, they were looking to liberate the "tentacles of rationality" (Thali 208). The symptoms of hysteria, suggesting the psychological investment of an individual regarding their repressive environment, would give humanity the key "capable d'ouvrir indéfiniment cette boîte à multiples fond qui s'appelle l'homme" (Breton, *Manifestes du surréalisme* 111–12).

In fact, Breton himself started medical studies, holding a diploma of "médecin auxiliaire" (Görsen 43). His education in numerous hospitals largely influenced his thoughts concerning the signification and interpretation of madness, obsession, and hysteria. One place seemed to have marked him in particular: between July and November 1916, he worked as the assistant of Dr. Raul Leroy at the neuropsychiatry center in the military hospital of Saint-Dizier (Passeron 13). Breton recalls: "Le séjour que j'ai fait en ce lieu et l'attention soutenue que j'ai portée à ce qui s'y passe ont compté dans ma vie et ont eu sans doute une influence décisive sur le déroulement de ma pensée" (Breton and Parinaud 29). Here, where wounded soldiers driven mad by the terrors of the war were assembled and treated, he came to see hysteria as a powerful show of force of the subconscious (Bonnet 134). In fact, in modern times, the First World War was thought to cause hysteria (Eiblmayr 13): madness was simultaneously a symbol for the shaken soldier and a way to deal with the traumatic experiences. For Breton, madness, paranoia, and psychoses came to be poetic expressions of the subconscious, for once unleashed and uncontrolled. He equated hysteria with subordination; the disorder became a form of protest against the authority of society, a mechanism of social defense exposed through the brutality of the Great War.

And this is precisely where the *Acte manqué* fits in: in 1938, where social rebellion and political awareness became more important than ever, Vanel's convulsions and spasms became the very symbol of resistance. More than just an example of the ever-present eroticism in surrealist art, the hysteric was transformed into a medium designed to liberate the individual of the mechanisms of oppression caused by a domineering bourgeoisie (Krieger 7). Activated by the subconscious, the *Acte manqué* was the automatic expression of a body charged by a psychic rage that the individual could no longer contain. The hysteric was supposed to make "table rase des conditions présentes de l'existence" (Behar 294). Only that spirit, that wild beauty of the

subconscious, was able to bring down a civilization (LaCoss 50)—a civilization heading towards new disasters.

Still, even though the surrealists questioned the status quo of that very same society, the 1938 performance reveals that they still took part in it, because Vanel transforms into a “Symptomfigur” (Eiblmayr 15). The (male) idea of woman prevails, not the real thing. Janet Wolff says that “the very category of ‘woman’ is constructed in representation” (2). Representative of the patriarchal fabrication of woman, the very subject matter of hysteria—which is characterized as a feminine disorder, its “victims” displayed like a spectacle to the male audience (Hesford 356)—is in fact problematic. Hysteria does not represent the real woman, but only a *Wunschbild*, an idealistic image, of her (Von Braun 98) that man dominates. Vanel takes on the role of the frightening other: the irrational, the paranoid, and the delusional. Menacing the so-called “masculine system” (Wiltschnigg 63) built on rationality, she transforms into the cliché of the overemotional woman who cannot control her subconscious urges and desires. With her “puissance sombre, abominable et dégradée” (Kristeva 197), she strikes fear into the hearts of men and transforms into the very “synonyme d’un mal radical à supprimer” (Kristeva 86). It does not matter that the surrealists actually wanted to unleash that power to break through the hypocritical morals and values of bourgeois society. Admired as an “unreal creature” (Lampe 25), as a “demonized Venus” (Wiltschnigg 77), the surrealist hysteric—terrifying but beautiful, violent but sexual—reinforced the prevailing stereotypes. They created an image of woman that proved very difficult to overcome, one that “was like an albatross around the neck” (Chadwick 66).

Plus, even though Vanel was an artist in her own right and the influence of her creative theories on *Acte manqué* can’t be denied, she was nevertheless hardly more than an instrument. She is not the subject of the performance, but the object—a sexualized thing that the public greedily took in despite the shock provoked by her transgressive acts. In that respect, *Acte manqué* reinforces the “one dimensional subject-object relation” (Schor 28) in society. These reflections give way to a larger discussion on gender-specific representation in art, culture, and society, which would exceed the limits of this paper. But the few questions already raised show that, even if the surrealists talked about oppression and liberation, they ignore the one on whom they acted out these principles: the woman. That being said, although the specific issues of real-life women were never addressed, woman as a (male-constructed) image takes on an important role: it is through her body that traumas are addressed, changes visualized, and sociopolitical battles fought (Eiblmayr 15).

Through Vanel’s body and through the strange design of the *Exposition internationale du surréalisme*, the surrealists not only expressed the anxieties of their time, but they also forced spectators to confront their own disquiet in a time charged with the tensions of a new war. The two events were also meant to open their eyes to a possible (nevertheless utopian) way out of the crisis: to abandon all ties to a rational society that steered humanity, again, into catastrophe. Even Vanel’s play with the chains at the beginning of her performance may be seen as a reference to that. They evoked questions of domination and suffocation, and in particular the suffocation of the life force—something one needed to avoid at any price (Zizek 158). The tethers, and more importantly, Vanel ridding herself of them, symbolized the importance of liberating oneself from social bondage and from the chains of existence (Eliade 150). After this seemingly last try to wake up the French population, to make them see not only the dangers of a new war, but also their necessity

to act, how did they address the overwhelming menace that was fascism (and in particular National Socialism)?

In fact, the German threat was forever present in the *Exposition internationale du surréalisme*: throughout the halls of the gallery, everybody could hear not only the hysterical cries of Vanel, but also the noise of marching soldiers and German fanfare music. Furthermore, it can't be a coincidence that the surrealist show opened its doors shortly after the exhibition of so-called degenerate art in Munich, condemning any art that didn't meet the fascists' ideals. Breton points out:

Hitler et ses acolytes ont, hélas, fort bien compris que, pour juguler un temps de pensée de gauche, il fallait non seulement persécuter les marxistes mais encore frappés d'interdit tout l'art d'avant-garde. À nous de lui opposer en commun cette force invincible qui est celle du devoir-être, qui est celle du devenir humain. (*Position politique du surréalisme* 44–45)

Through their celebration of avant-garde art, the surrealists seemed to mock the very same cultural politics the Nazis defended with their derogatory show.

The performance too served to mock the fascists' ideals: in fact, Vanel, her body distorted by her craziness, had built a stark contrast to the perfect bodies promoted by the Nazis who celebrated a sane and healthy body (Görge 144). The German fascists wanted to fabricate “une nation nouvelle, purifiée de ses éléments étrangers et régénérée par des corps ‘sains’” (Guibert 33). Their propaganda made a show of the so-called integrity of body and spirit and the glorification of the Aryan body (Baxmann 193). National identity was cultivated through “physical hardening and purity” (Sjöström 73). Dance was extremely important for this development since it was able to stage the collectivity desired by the National Socialists. Dance as the expression of the national body code, as the expression of a “national psyche” (Baxmann 192), became of the utmost importance in the fascist cultural propaganda. Terms like “Geschlossenheit” and “Klarheit” (Richardson 64) defined very strict, regularized, and collective movements. Leni Riefenstahl's propaganda documentary film on the Berlin Olympic Games of 1936, *Olympia* (1938), can be seen as representative of that dance aesthetic: destined to represent the strength of the German people (and body), the thousands of dancers and gymnasts, moving in absolute unison, stood for the ideal body of a so-called master race (Guibert 34).

*Acte manqué*, on the other hand, seemed to be everything that the Nazis abhorred. First of all, the surrealists presented a soloist dance rejected by the fascists (Toepfer 122). Furthermore, the performance was never intended to be elegant or beautiful, at least in the very traditional sense of the term. The concept of the *explosante-fixe* was a powerful aesthetic in the eyes of the surrealists; in fact, Breton declared that the convulsive beauty represented in *Acte manqué* by Vanel's spasmodic body “sera érotique-voilée, explosante-fixe, magique-circonstancielle ou ne sera pas” (“La Beauté sera convulsive” 15). As such, the extreme contraction of the dancer's muscles contrasted radically with the fluid and harmonious gestures put forward by the Nazis. But most importantly, the *Acte manqué* represented a *mad*, a psychotic individual. The surrealists didn't put a strong and healthy body or mind at the center of their artistic aesthetic, but one that was considered sick, that of an insane person. Conversely, the fascists were looking to exclude any corporeal images they deemed dangerous to the integrity of the subject (Zimmermann 39). Maurice Fréchuret explains, “Les arts des régimes totalitaires, en niant la réalité de la maladie et de la

blesure, et en stigmatisant les formes prises par ces dernières, ne peuvent qu'opter pour des représentations nécessairement saines qui agissent sur le seul mode du préventif artificiel" (178). Therefore, the *Acte manqué*, idealizing the sick body and the wounded mind, served as a parody: the surrealist hysteric transformed into a true caricature of the German body-mind ideology, an anti-ideal of the cultural politics of National Socialism.

As an acknowledgement of the danger of a new world war (and of its horrors), an expression of the pessimism and melancholia reigning in the 1930s, an expression of trauma and anxiety, and a warning of the fascist threat, the *Exposition internationale du surréalisme* and *Acte manqué* seemed to mirror the tensions of the years before the Second World War. The show and its performance confronted the spectators with the situation, tried to violently wake them up from their stubborn refusal to see the danger and to provoke a reaction when faced with the truth. Finally, they were supposed to realize that the so-called rational or civil society was leading, again, to a new cataclysm. They were expected to break all ties with said society and start anew in a poetic state where the human being, totally free of any moral and social restrictions, could finally grow.

Unfortunately, nobody heeded the surrealists' warning, nor did they understand the utopian message of the group. The *Exposition internationale du surréalisme* and the *Acte manqué* were uniformly met with derision and laughter (Bridel 76)—and a little over a year later in September 1939, Europe was plunged into a new World War.

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Notes

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<sup>1</sup> In fact, exhibition design and performance were complementary. See also Lehmann, Maria-Rosa. “La mise en scène multi-sensorielle des expositions internationales du Surréalisme (1938, 1947, 1959)—*Spiegeleffekt* Exposition/ Performance.” In *La mise en scène dans tous ses états*, edited by Justine Guitard and Claire Picod, pp. 39–53, PU Perpignan, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> In fact, the very few images documenting *Acte manqué* only represent the last part of a highly complex performance: André Breton’s press archives bring to light that the event was constituted of three different parts, or multiple “sketches surréalistes” (Fegdal, 28 January 1938, n.p.). See also Lehmann, Maria-Rosa, “L’*Acte Manqué* (1938): Le surréalisme entre folie et performance—Un corps placé sous le signe de l’hystérie.” *Acta Iassyensia Comparationis (AIC)*, n°17, 2016, pp. 47–56.