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### Photographic Expressions of Consciousness

When originally conceptualized, photography found its merit in transferring reality into a physical medium. The invention of photography or, “light writing,” introduced a new understanding of an object that could be defined as an abstraction of its physical essence into another physical representation. Although a picture accurately represents what is in front of the lens, that does not necessarily negate the capacity of photography to transcend reality and the rational mind. Rather than a painting which simply interprets truth, photography actually shows truth in its depiction of a subject. The surrealist movement in photography manipulated this understanding to venture outside of rationality, confront the illogical, and access suppressed inclinations.

In his *La Poupée* series (1936-1938), Hans Bellmer exemplifies the surrealist mindset by constructing and photographing deformed dolls in various positions, with different parts and accessories, and in varying settings. One of the critiques of surrealist works such as that of Bellmer, is that they exploit the female form to mean something to be distorted and observed, like a specimen in a museum.<sup>1</sup> Women’s bodies are dismembered and reassembled, to suggest that the man has the power to construct her however he sees fit, with the female form having no agency of its own. One of Bellmer’s maquettes from *Les Jeux de la Poupée*, alludes to the artist’s

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Warner Marien, *Photography: A Cultural History* (New Jersey: Laurence King Publishing, 2015), 255.

repressed aggression and forbidden desires toward young girls. The subject of the image is a doll figure that is made up of individual, rounded deformed parts which allow for their manipulation. Propped up between a dark brown, high back chair and the sickly green wall in the background, the doll's hips and pelvis are shifted away from the frontal focus and the dismembered head is hidden behind bulbous breasts. No part of the doll's body is directly faced toward the camera lens, suggesting a lack of consent and reserved nature. The skin tone of the doll is discolored, with shades of pale pink and blue like that of a decaying body. Despite the ghastly nature of the doll, there is still an effort to preserve its innocent beauty, with the head being adorned with blonde hair and a blue bow. Since the doll is nude, save for schoolgirl-esque stockings, it's as if the doll represents a sacrifice to the scandal of innocence lost.

A distinguishing characteristic of surrealist works is the exploration of forbidden sexual tendencies, a venture into the unconscious and irrational mind to bring forth untapped imaginative inclinations. In this way, surrealism is tied to the Freudian theory of the unconscious. Like the surrealist notion of invoking the mind's beyond, Freud believed in the effectiveness of dreams and free-association of ideas in revealing suppressed desires and frustrations, which often were of a sexual nature. To understand why Bellmer was drawn to creating subjects with such themes of nostalgia, death, and aggression, one can look to the nature and volatility of the time of their inception. Residing in Germany during the domination of the Nazi state, Bellmer used his dolls to subvert the movement's authoritarian masculinity and purity. His dolls represented the dangerous femininity that the Nazis found disgraceful. As emblematic of Freudian theory, Bellmer also viewed the Nazi dictatorship as a reminder of his domineering father, which likely motivated him to rebel against such a system. Along this same vein, works such as the Bellmer doll show a certain propensity towards distorting the purity of childhood,

suggesting that Bellmer himself was robbed of his innocence as a young boy, perhaps through sexual abuse. His “fantasies of young girls” coming to the forefront as such a taboo sexuality, are shown to be aggressive in nature.<sup>2</sup> This is seen both through the detached head from the torso, and through the bruised patches of skin which suggest battery.<sup>3</sup>

Like Bellmer’s *La Poupee* series, Hannah Höch’s *Dada Dance*, 1922 represents art without rational boundaries and that which rebels against dominating ideologies of tradition. Höch’s work is a part of the Dada movement in art which seeks to reject conservatism, and subvert traditional ideas of artistic expression to create images of inconsistent chaos.<sup>4</sup> In her Dada portraits, Höch often portrays androgynous individuals who do not ascribe to conventional notions of feminine beauty.<sup>5</sup> This is in contrast to the pin-up nature of Bellmer’s *Marquette*, with her blonde hair, blue bow, and stockings. However, the two artists are similar in their utilization of dismemberment and reassembly in their images. Depicted in the collage of Höch’s *Dada Dance*, a dusty pink background frames two dancing figures with one in the foreground whose back is arched in motion, and the other figure slightly behind who is tall, slender, and stiffly elegant. The smaller figure is shown lifting up the edge of their blue-gray dress which is lined extensively with frills, to reveal white tights and clunky black heels. The head appears to be made of some copper-colored metal which offers a sharp contrast to the figure’s human-like form. This metal pin-head imagery is repeated on the slender figure, subverting traditional ideas of feminine beauty. Floating below the dancers, are black metal parts that appear to operate some sort of heavy machinery. Every individual part of the work appear as geometric cut-outs that

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<sup>2</sup> Therese Lichtenstein, “Games of the Doll,” *Art in America* (October 1999): 96.

<sup>3</sup> “Hans Bellmer,” The Art Story Foundation, <http://www.theartstory.org/artist-bellmer-hans.htm>.

<sup>4</sup> Mary Warner Marien, *Ibid.*, 241.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 243.

were spliced together in a sort of chaotically juxtaposed collage. This combination of sharp edges and geometric shapes with the softness of human-like figures, is enigmatic of the Dada style of having little regard for consistency. Although similar in their rebellion toward a system of militarism, the Dada Dance rebels in a more general way while Bellmer's *Marquette* is more personal to his inner desires and frustrations. Where Höch seeks to question traditional modes of feminine representation and rebel against industrialization, Bellmer is questioning and exploring his own subconscious battles.

Although not surrealist by definition, Gertrude Kasebier's *Portrait of Miss N.*, c. 1900 also works to turn antiquated notions about femininity against themselves. This portrait-style photograph of model and actress Evelyn Nesbitt depicts a woman seated on a plush chair or loveseat, dressed in a nightgown which rests below her shoulders. The woman's hair is half down, with dark curls cascading down her left shoulder and clavicle. Since her hair is down and both of her shoulders are exposed to the viewer, there is a suggestion of intimacy seeing as such a display would not be permissible in public. The model is leaning towards the camera with her left hand, adorned with a wedding ring, supporting her and her right hand holding a teacup which rests next to her thigh. Miss N.'s facial expression seems to convey a sense of resigned boredom, while the slight lifting of her eyebrows suggests a hint of lazy seduction. Kasebier's work combines an exploration of a woman's capacity for individual sexuality, while operating from the restricted paradigm of the traditional female role in society. Much of Gertrude Kasebier's photographic works seeks to critique the idea that female consciousness was limited to that of a sweet, nurturing caregiver and mother by illustrating their more individually sensual side.<sup>6</sup>

Since the portrait of Miss N. is still portraying a married woman who is in charge of pouring tea

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 189.

and other such domestic duties, Kasebier is trying to communicate that women can occupy both spheres of motherhood and sensuality.

When comparing Bellmer's doll with Kasebier's *Portrait of Miss N.*, there is the obvious distinction of the works' intention to either shock, or to invoke discussion. The doll reminds one of inanimate objects found in horror films that come alive to exact some sort of revenge. This particular doll represents the horrors of innocence lost and the subsequent deadly implications. In Bellmer's construction of the figure, he works to destabilize authoritarian notions regarding femininity while employing the scandal of his own mind. In contrast, Kasebier is far less scandalous. Since the portrait uses a model and actress for its subject, there is the clear goal to exemplify traditional notions of feminine beauty. If the viewer looks at the photograph without prior knowledge of the common themes from which Gertrude Kasebier operates, there is little indication of social commentary or rebellion.

When utilizing psychoanalysis to discuss photographic works, it is imperative to understand the context of the image and of the artist's life. Where Hans Bellmer employed shocking surrealism to reconcile unresolved sexual tendencies, Hannah Höch created her Dada works to reconcile with conservative artistic and societal boundaries. Where Bellmer deconstructed the feminine form to be grotesque and shocking, Kasebier kept in line with conventional feminine beauty. However different in their artistic approach, each of these artists used their work to deal with personal struggles. Bellmer was a tortured individual with a repressed and aggressive sexuality; Höch was constantly faced with the restrictions of tradition, both in the subject matter of her work and the sexism she faced as a woman in the industry; Kasebier had to deal with the oppressive notion that women should be confined to the

household without having any personal agency outside of being a caregiver. By analyzing these artists works' using psychoanalytic theory, their intended meaning can be greater understood.