

THE SURREALIST COLLECTION OF OBJECTS

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Abstract || In this article I shall discuss the Surrealist collection of objects as a form of art which arises out of mass production forces of the new era. These goods, deeply rooted in the capitalist laws of use-, exchange- and surplus-value, carry in themselves two materialist approaches which end in dialectical materialism. On the one hand, they epitomize the supreme forces of commodity fetishism ingrained in capitalist structures; on the other hand, they arouse unconscious desires which respond to the needs of the society of consumption. Thus, I will explore the act of object-collecting in the most radical Surrealist practices (dream objects, found objects, poème-objets, calligrammes, readymades and Surrealist objects) as a way to not only delve into a new art, but also to reflect on societal ongoing transformations and paradoxes.

Key-words || Collection | Commodity fetishism | Capitalism | Consumption | Commercial culture | Use-, exchange- and surplus-value | Materialism | Idealism | Surrealist objects.

What is decisive in collecting is that the object is detached from all its original functions in order to enter into the closest conceivable relation to things of the same kind. This relation is the diametric opposite of any utility, and falls into the peculiar category of completeness. What is this “completeness”? It is a grand attempt to overcome the wholly irrational character of the object’s mere presence at hand through its integration into a new expressly devised historical system: the collection. And for the true collector, every single thing in this system becomes an encyclopedia of all knowledge of the epoch, the landscape, the industry, and the owner from which it comes. It is the deepest enchantment of the collector to enclose the particular item within a magic circle, where, as a last shudder runs through it (the shudder of being acquired), it turns to stone (Benjamin 2002, “The Collector”, pp. 204-205).

In this passage, Walter Benjamin underscores the historical character of the object, which, once divested of the commercial laws of exchange-, use- and surplus-value, becomes a part of the collection system. Thus, the item is displaced from its original locus only to be circumscribed within a new milieu which charges it with magical properties. Likewise, Surrealist objects, in reversing Hegel’s idealism into Marx’s materialism, embody the inward drives of commodity fetishism which allow for their alliance with mass production forces of the new era. Therefore, I shall discuss the dialectical character of Surrealist goods by exploring the unconscious processes of the psyche and the fetishist forms of commodification ingrained in capitalist structures. Following Benjamin’s notions in *The Arcades Project* (2002), Freudian and Marxist postulates on fetishism, and Rancière’s claims in *The Politics of Aesthetics* (2004), the aim of this article is to argue for the impact of object-collecting as a way of acquisition on the most subversive Surrealist practices: dream objects, found objects, *poème-objets*, *calligrammes*, readymades and Surrealist objects. Ultimately, these acts of collection transfigure the physical qualities of the element at hand by virtue of the dislodgement from its natural medium and its immersion into a fantastic realm, which is symptomatic of society’s contradictions.

To begin with, I would like to explicate the Surrealist tendency to collect objects in view of Rancière’s theorizations on the distribution of the sensible; that is, the delimitation of the visible and the invisible, the audible and the inaudible, the thinkable and the unthinkable, the possible and the impossible (2004, p. 12). To put it simply, Rancière appeals to forms of inclusion and exclusion in the process of acceptance of a new artistic practice. Thus, the Surrealist category of object-collecting can be conceived as a previously disregarded art, which eventually is included within the aesthetic domain by revealing what is shared by an artistic community, that is, the tension of the object as a form of commodification and as a subjective act of creation. In Rancière’s terms, the accumulation of common goods can be an expression of the beauty of the ordinary, which “becomes a trace of the true if it is torn from its obviousness in order to become

a hieroglyph, a mythological or phantasmagoric figure” (2004, p. 34). The commodity fetish not only illustrates this enigmatic level of the true, but also enacts the antagonisms inherent in the modern era. This notion carries in itself two materialist approaches. Firstly, Marx’s theory of fetishism interprets human relations as an extension of the interplay with commodities. Secondly, Freud’s readings of fetish stand for the selection of an object which is attributed to a specific body part (Lehman 2007, p. 36). Hence, the antithesis between object and subject reveals the complexities of Surrealist works, which, by subverting the traditional mechanisms of art production, not only insist on the materiality of the aesthetic product, but also on the unconscious desires it arouses.

In order to exploit the inner and outer properties of the industrial item, the Surrealist collector, then, assumes the function of the historian, who, by appropriating events in his proximity, disrupts the spontaneous flux of history. He renders legibility to the undifferentiated mass of materials while, at the same time, he delves into their secret elements. In the same vein, the collector does violence to the article by tearing it from its natural medium and placing it within a universe of unusual significations. According to Benjamin, “the object constructed in the materialist presentation of history is itself the dialectical image. The latter is identical with the historical object; it justifies its violent expulsion from the continuum of historical process” (2002, “On the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress”, p. 475). Thus, the Surrealist artifact is an enactment of the dialectical movement, in that it carries in itself its own contradiction. Whereas it emphasizes its subjective value by reacting to commodity fetishism, it is also a form of art production which responds to the needs of a new market place. As Ulrich Lehman states: “Decorative objects with Surrealist over- or undertones, such as Alberto Giacometti’s plaster works, emerged from the utopian attempt by Surrealists in the latter half of the 1930s to create new object categories that would reflect systematic contradictions and display a novel definition of the work of art” (2007, p. 23). This utopian sense accounted for by Lehman can be interpreted as the Surrealist desire to open up new artistic registers which, by overcoming the boundaries among the different disciplines and genres, reflect the antagonisms of the modern era. Whereas this innovative aestheticism acts as a vehicle for the critique of capitalist power structures, it also belongs to such a rebuked system. Hence, the emphatic character of the Surrealist artifact entails an overturn of the exacerbated 19th-century materialism, that is, a shift away from its empirical and mechanical notions to the disclosure of its alienating constituents. In that sense, the detachment of the object’s components, which originally form a unity, generate a discordant effect. This is commonly known as the reversal of Hegel’s idealism, which results in the absolute segregation of object and subject, and in the penetration into the unconscious.

Materialist philosophy, unlike its idealist counterpart, interprets the world as matter in motion, which renders psychic processes concrete, and exists regardless and outside consciousness. Likewise, whereas idealism asserts the primacy of the enigmatic and unknowable, materialism attests to the plausibility of knowing the world and its laws (Cornforth 1952, p. 30). Hence, a profound emphasis is placed on the dialectics of the object, which correlates its external and internal nature, and the parallel between appearance and essence. This turnabout ends up in the formulation of dialectical materialism as “the fully, profoundly objective, completely materialist overall approach to the external world, the striving to comprehend the totality, the whole object—both its inner and outer aspects” (Gollobin 1986, p. 90). In this fashion, items are classified according to a desire for both unveiling the unconscious processes of the psyche and reflecting the movement of the subject into the object, which ultimately results in the reification of intellectual and creative acts (Lehman 2007, p. 24). Dalí’s progressive gradation is indicative of this exploration of the object in the domains of art. In the journal *Cahiers d’Art*, he proposes the following step-by-step definition:

1. The object exists outside us, without our taking part in it (anthropomorphic articles);
2. The object assumes the immovable shape of desire and acts upon our contemplation (dream-state articles);
3. The object is movable and such that it can be acted upon (articles operating symbolically);
4. The object tends to bring about our fusion with it and makes us pursue the formation of a unity with it (hunger for an article and edible articles) (1932, p. 207).

In line with the aforesaid progression, the journal *Cahiers d’Art* in 1936 enumerated the following objects in order to illustrate the Surrealist experimentations with a diversity of materials: dream objects, found objects, *poème-objets*, readymades and Surrealist objects, among others. In this periodical as well, Breton’s article ‘Crisis of the Object’ mentions the most renowned contributions, placing special emphasis on Max Ernst’s assemblages, Man Ray’s found objects, Marcel Duchamp’s readymades and Pablo Picasso’s Surrealist objects (1936, p. 22).

These plastic creations also affect 20th-century Surrealist prose and poetry, where the paradox of the industrial era is reflected. Precisely, dream objects manifest not only the psychological operations of the mind but also the laws by which the market place is ruled. Hence, imagination and reality are fused in these oneiric objects, which reenact the instinctive processes of human consciousness in the moment of awakening; that is, this grey area which could respond to Lacan’s imaginary as the site for delusory images and radical alienation in the process of the selfhood’s configuration.

This Imaginary¹ (the visual element) is articulated by the Symbolic (language), where the signifier and the signified are intertwined in the realm of signification, crucial to the interpretation of unconscious desires. As Benjamin remarks, “the realization of dream elements in the course of waking up is the canon of dialectics. It is paradigmatic for the thinker and binding for the historian” (2002, “On the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress”, p. 464). Similarly, the Surrealist recollection of dreams and the metamorphoses undergone by the object in this imaginary world is an epitome of its inner tensions. On the one hand, it needs to consolidate its position as a circulating commodity within the empirical world. On the other hand, it reveals dreamlike transpositions of reality emerged from the unconscious.

In *Nadja* (1928), Breton invests the object with introspective qualities which point to the symbolism of clothing. As Lehman states, “traces of the woman are felt in her sartorial shell, and evoke the metaphorical potential of clothing as simulacra” (2007, p. 25). In the same vein, Yves Tanguy in his *Indefinite Divisibility* (1942) [fig. 1], a work created out of amorphous figures, seems to suggest the idea that the subject moves into the object, that is, the technique and art of the individual pervades reality by virtue of dream figures which determine the visual aspect of the work. Thus, in this painting, the text is the realization of the drives by way of the creative process (Lehman 2007, p. 27).

The found object is another Surrealist practice based on the collection of unusual items and, once removed from its original context, their scientific and fantastic properties are exploited. The element is deprived of its functional value and, at the same time, is transposed into an enigmatic world of significations. *Emak Bakia* [fig. 2], *Fisherman's Idol* [fig. 3] and *Collage ou l'âge de la colle* are illustrations of found objects which show Man Ray's “marvelous faculty of grasping two mutually distant realities... of bringing them together and drawing a spark from their juxtaposition”². In *Emak Bakia* (1926) Ray's compositional elements are an old cello, obtained from the Parisian flea market, and the horse hair of the bow, used for playing the instrument. Man Ray points humorously to the age of the cello with the addition of a long white beard. *Fisherman's Idol* (1926) is the story of some pieces of cork found in the seaside resort of Biarritz. As Man Ray manifested, he was delighted by the beauty emanated from this object merged with net-floats and life-belts in tatters. Three vital elements took part in the configuration of the object (water, air and earth), and the fourth element (fire) was facilitated by Man Ray's imagination. *Collage ou l'âge de la colle* (1935) is the collection of objects that Man Ray kept in his desk (a T-square, tape measure, rulers, snapshots...). This found object is the result of the arrangement of goods that Man Ray's maid carried out. The grace of the items' ordering captivated the artist to such an extent that he

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1 | See Schwartz, Arturo (1977) citing Breton in *Man Ray: The Rigour of Imagination*. New York, Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 177

2 | See Breton (1928): *Nadja*, in Margaret Bonnet, Philippe Bernier Étienne-Alain Hubert, José Pierre (eds.), *Oeuvres Complètes*. Paris, Gallimard, vol. 1, 678.

rendered it a work of art by gluing it and punning on the word collage: in French *colle* is the equivalent to glue, *âge* answers for age, and the title literally means “Collage or the age of glue” (Schwartz 1977, p. 157). Through these illustrations, Man Ray’s collecting ability can be read as a way of actualizing “latent archaic representations of property connected with taboo” (Benjamin 2002, “The Collector”, p. 209). In other words, by appropriating these accidental goods, he confers them a sacred value to be experienced by others. Hence, the viewer is challenged to explore the nooks and crannies of his imagination in order to decipher the enigmas posed by the artist.

In *Nadja* (1928), Breton recounts his interest in the unusual items of the flea market at Saint-Ouen: “I searched for objects that I could not find anywhere else, old-fashion, fragmented, unusable, rather incomprehensible, in the end perverted in regard to whether I understood or liked them, as for example an irregularly shaped white half-cylinder, varnished and showing reliefs and indentations which meant absolutely nothing to me”³. In this passage, the object is interpreted according to the conditions of commodity production and its accidental encounter. Walter Benjamin, in his essay “Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia”, accounts for the temporal dislocation of the object as a fabricated commodity and its incidental discovery: “It first came across the revolutionary potential that appeared in the ‘outmoded’, in the first iron constructions, in the first factory buildings, in early photography, in the objects that are just becoming extinct, the grand pianos, the clothes of five years ago, mundane gathering places after the *vogue* begins to retreat from them” (1999, p. 210). With this statement, Benjamin seems to point to the revolution of the object in the industrial era, as it discloses potential forms of alienation, objectification and reification inherent in capitalist structures, that is, in the notions of fabrication, circulation and consumption. The item undergoes a series of transformations, from its form and texture to its perceptual experience, of which found objects are a unique example. In *Paris Peasant* (1926), Aragon intertwines past memories with a present event in which goods seem to be infused with human spirit:

What memories, what revulsions linger around these hash houses: the man eating in this one has the impression he is chewing the table rather than a steak, and becomes irritated by his common, noisy table companions, ugly, stupid girls, and a gentleman flaunting his second-rate subconscious and the whole unedifying mess of his lamentable existence; while, in another one, a man wobbles on his chair’s badly squared legs, and concentrates his impatience and his rancours upon the broken clock. Two rooms: a bar room with a zinc counter and a door opening on a low-ceilinged, smoke-filled kitchen, and a dining room extended at the end by an alcove just bit enough to accommodate a table, a settee and three chairs [...]⁴.

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3 | Caws, Mary Ann, ed. (2002): *Surrealist Poets and Painters: An Anthology*. Cambridge, MA & London, The MIT Press, 73.

4 | Personal communication with Henry Sussman. Also see Sussman, Henry (1997): *The Aesthetic Contract: Statutes of Art and Intellectual Work in Modernity*. Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press

Here, the accumulation of common articles is indicative of the unexpected transformations undergone by the object within the physical world, which dismantles rational and discursive modes of thought, and also points to the contact with the human as the agent of such transgression. In other words, the phenomenological constituents of experience (space and time) are replaced by subjective impressions which appeal to the sensuous faculties of the industrial article, rather than to its functionality.

Surrealist objects proper, another modality based on the idea of incidental discovery, are rooted in materialist and psychoanalytical notions of fetishism, by virtue of which their material properties and the dream world of the psyche are explored. In so doing, the Surrealist artist exploits metaphorical devices which open up a universe of textual and textural suggestiveness. Mechanisms such as the automatic writing or the fortuitous assembly of words or fragments present a complex of temporal and spatial discontinuities which frustrate expectations of intelligibility. This diversity of Surrealist projects, strategies and cross-disciplinary alignments can be called, in Sussman's terms, "aesthetic subcontracts"⁵. The collage, erected as the main compositional strategy of Surrealist objects, agglutinates disparate elements which generate unusual associations and often sexually suggestive narratives. Breton's *poème-objets* [fig. 4], Apollinaire's *calligrammes* [fig. 5], or Man Ray's assemblage photographs are the embodiment of *collage* techniques. Just as Man Ray's *L'Amour fou* [fig. 6] is an ensemble of diverse-natured photographs, Breton's *poème-objets* bring two disparate objects closer in order to generate unexpected meanings. These plastic and poetic compositions are inspired by Picassian *collages*, as they represent a synthesis of words and images, genres and materials⁶. Apollinaire's Surrealist *calligrammes* also resort to Picasso's fragmentary techniques, as they rescue an image emerged from the poetic discourse by virtue of complex associations of verbal and visual signs. According to Bohn, "the role of the reader is thus to identify textual patterns and to translate them into structural equivalents at the cognitive level" so that the structure beneath the surface can be elicited (Bohn 1993, pp. 20-21). Michel Leiris is representative of this tendency with his *calligramme* "LE SCEPTRE MIROITANT", where the words "amour", "miroir" and "mourir" reproduce a mirror effect resulted from the combination of the capital letters "ROI" and "MOI". Apparently, this image contains a psychoanalytical message related to narcissism, omnipotence and death (Spector 1997, p. 224). By virtue of this multiperspectivism, deeply rooted in Cubist strategies, Surrealist objects act out the antagonisms of Marx's materialist principle; that is, they define themselves by virtue of their connection with other objects or constituents, but in so doing, they consolidate their position within the production of commodities.

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5 | See Spector, J., Jack (1997) citing Breton in *Arte y escritura surrealistas* (1919-1939). Trans. by Pedro Navarro Serrano. Madrid, Editorial Síntesis, 224.

6 | See Jung, G. Carl, ed. (1964): *Man and his Symbols*. London, Dell, 295.

The subjectivism with which Surrealist objects are impregnated also helps Dalí and De Chirico develop their own strategies. Dalí's *paranoiac-critical* method, illustrated by his painting *The Persistence of Memory* (1931) [fig. 7], is based on the systematic manipulation of images and objects which generate delirious associations and interpretations. Likewise, De Chirico's compositions reveal dreamlike transpositions of reality emerged from the unconscious. As a founder of the so-called *pittura metafisica*, he manifests regarding the function of the object: "Every object has two aspects: The common aspect, which is the one we generally see and which is seen by everyone, and the ghostly and metaphysical aspect, which only rare individuals see at moments of clairvoyance and metaphysical meditation. A work of art must relate something that does not appear in its visible form⁷". His conception of *pittura metafisica* is overtly influenced by the philosophies of Nietzsche and Schopenhauer, who discovered the "dreadful void" and senselessness of life. In striving to find artistic expression for that emptiness, De Chirico delved into the existential dilemmas of contemporary man.

Lastly, Duchamp's readymades, conceived as an antidote to retinal art, respond to these eccentric experimentations with objects since they are elevated to the dignity of an artwork by the will of the artist. By being originated in the age of mechanical reproduction, they evoke Benjamin's theorizations on the decay of the aura in the modern artwork. He claims that the artwork possesses auratic qualities that are progressively exhausted as a result of mechanization within the industrial age:

Every day the urge grows stronger to get hold of an object at very close range by way of its likeness, its reproduction. Unmistakably, reproduction as offered by picture magazines and newsreels differs from the image seen by the unarméd eye. Uniqueness and permanence are as closely linked in the latter as are transitoriness and reproducibility in the former. To pry an object from its shell, to destroy its aura, is the mark of a perception whose "sense of the universal equality of things" has increased to such a degree that it extracts it even from a unique object by means of reproduction. Thus is manifested in the field of perception what in the theoretical sphere is noticeable in the increasing importance of statistics. The adjustment of reality to the masses and of the masses to reality is a process of unlimited scope, as much for thinking as for perception.⁸

Whereas found objects are charged with auratic qualities and segregated from mass culture, readymades are neutral materials which the artist arbitrarily selects and appropriates by signing and exhibiting them. Their acquisition is analogous to the activity of research that Marx mentions in the afterword of *Capital*, and that Benjamin evokes later on in his *Arcades Project*: "Research has to appropriate the material in detail, to analyze its various forms of development, to trace out their inner connection. Only after this work

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7 | Benjamin, Walter (1968): "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", in Hannah Arendt (ed.), *Illuminations*. New York, Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 225.

8 | See Paz, Octavio (1970) citing Duchamp in "The Ready-Made", in Joseph Masheck (ed.), *Marcel Duchamp in Perspective*. New Jersey, Prentice Hall, 88.

is done can the actual movement be presented in corresponding fashion. If this is done successfully, if the life of the material is reflected back as ideal, then it may appear as if we had before us an a priori construction” (2002, “On the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress”, p. 465). Here, an exhaustive analysis of the object is suggested in order to reflect on its sensuous and intellectual constituents.

Readymades, then, can be considered to be an enactment of that a priori construction and appropriation illustrated by research processes. At the same time, they become objects of idol and mockery, and are invested with magical properties which emphasize their disturbing, absurd nature. The selection of these pieces, devoid of aesthetic value, is based on “visual indifference”, which manifests Duchamp’s sense of irony, humor and ambiguity. Thus, Duchamp selected a series of items (the snow shovel, the comb, the urinal) encountered in daily reality and devoid of aesthetic pleasure. In his words,

The great problem was the act of selection. I had to pick an object without it impressing me and, as far as possible, without the least intervention of any idea or suggestion of aesthetic pleasure. It was necessary to reduce my personal taste to zero. It is very difficult to elect an object that has absolutely no interest for us not only on the day we pick it but which never will and which, finally, can never have the possibility of becoming beautiful, pretty, agreeable or ugly⁹.

Once the object is chosen, inscription, a substitute for the idea of fabrication, is another requirement in the configuration of the work. In the process of inscribing the object, the strategy of pictorial nominalism opened up an ample spectrum of rhetorical relations between the object and its name. Duchamp experiments with tautology, metaphor, synecdoche, allegory, anagrams and acrostics, among others. Some of these experiments are his *Bicycle Wheel* (1913) (bicycle wheel mounted on a stool) [fig. 8], *In advance of the broken arm* (1915) (snow shovel) [fig. 9], *Hat Rack* (1917) (hat rack) [fig. 10] and *Fountain* (1917) (urinal) [fig. 11] and. The last condition of the encounter between the object and the artist is the signature. Rather than attributing a special value to his authorship, Duchamp proliferates the signature of pseudonyms such as *Richard Mutt* (for the *Fountain*) and *Rose Sélavy* (for *Fresh Widow*). In addition to these defining characteristics, the imprint of the transient is pivotal to the configuration of readymades’ semblance. In many cases, the originals have disappeared (*Fountain* and *Bottle Rack*), and the only documentation that attests to their existence is a photograph. In other instances, multiple replicas have emerged as a way to subvert the idea of originality and preservation of the artwork (*Bicycle Wheel* and *Hat Rack*). Despite their connection with mass culture and commodity fetishism, readymades are also charged with a subversive spirit and,

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9 | See De Duve, Thierry (1997): “Echoes of the Readymade: Critique of Pure Modernism”, in Martha Buskirk & Mignon Nixon (eds.), *The Duchamp Effect*. Cambridge, The MIT Press, 104-107.

as a result, they negate their engagement with empirical reality.

The Surrealist collection of objects is a significant activity which eventually comes to be included within long-lived artistic disciplines (painting, poetry, sculpture). By placing emphasis on the intellectual and sensuous aspects of the object, this artistic practice seeks to reconcile the antagonisms of the industrial era. Hence the emergence of dialectical materialism. This tendency merges the twofold materialist approaches of Freud's psychoanalysis and Marx's processes of commodification inherent in capital structures. The aesthetic modalities commented here (dream objects, found objects, *poème-objets*, *calligrammes*, Surrealist objects and readymades) answer for commodity fetishism as a way of penetration into social relations in a widely objectified culture. Therefore, for the Surrealists, things are devoid of human mediation, and thus, converse and engage with one another in a reified universe of fantastic connections. This preliminary study of Surrealist artifacts has placed emphasis on the Marxist notions of commodity fetishism as a way of delving into the object's inner and outer properties. In so doing, I have explored different aesthetic domains (literature, painting, Surrealist objects proper) to prove the prominence of matter over ideas and to unravel the intersections between visual art and language. Nevertheless, the universe of Surrealist objects and their existing visual and rhetorical correlations is an ample field which requires further research to establish more solid relations.

Figures



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4

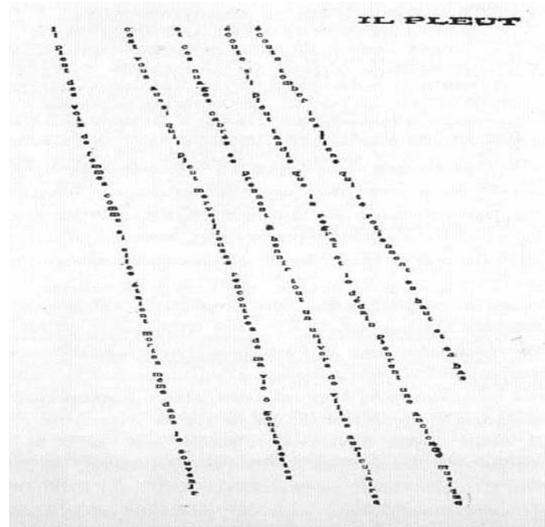


Figure 5

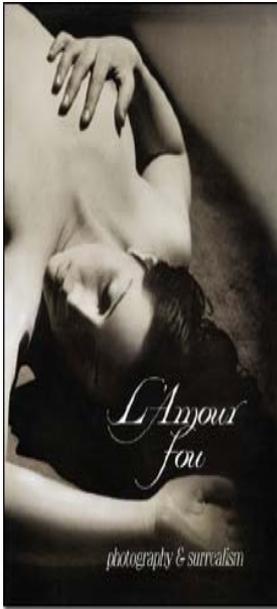


Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8

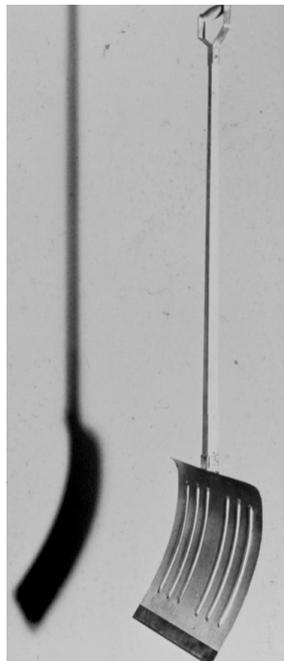


Figure 9



Figure 10



Figure 11

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