

Photography: The Surrealist Ideal

Throughout its complex history, surrealism's pioneers constantly struggled to find a visual medium that was truly 'surrealist'. Where poetry succeeded in its ability to delve into the realm of unconscious thought and give form to the 'pure creations of the mind'¹, painting often failed, being 'too deliberate, too difficult, too *learned*'.² Indeed, Pierre Naville infamously stated that 'there is no *surrealist painting*.'³ However, in photography, artists found an unlikely visual 'key to the dilemma of surrealist style'⁴ that enabled them to capture the convulsive beauty – synonymous with the marvellous - at the heart of the surrealist aesthetic. André Breton himself set out a framework within which one can comprehend photography in light of surrealist thinking. He outlined three principles around which surrealist photography revolved; the *erotique-voilée*; the *explosante-fixe*; and the *magique-circonstancielle*, all of which epitomise the 'talismanic concept'⁵ of convulsive beauty that characterised surrealism. When one examines the photographic medium through this lens, as well as how artists used manipulative techniques and the act of doubling to cement their works within this framework, it becomes evident that photography stakes a significant claim to being the ideal surrealist medium.

André Breton's conception of beauty was clear. He announced that 'Beauty will be convulsive or it will not be.'⁶ As Rosalind Krauss demonstrates, by categorising the process by which reality convulses itself into its 'apparent opposite', an *indice* or a sign, he in turn created a theory that encompassed the visual language of photography. Krauss argues that for Breton, the reality captured in a photograph 'becomes a sign for what is absent'⁷ in a way that exposes the hidden, marvellous layer beneath the superficial façade of the world. This theory was based around the aforementioned central elements of convulsive beauty.

¹ André Breton, "Le Surréalisme et le peinture," *La Révolution surréaliste*, no.4, (July 1925): 28, in Rosalind Krauss, "Photography in the Service of Surrealism," in *L'Amour Fou – Photography and Surrealism*, ed. Alan Axelrod (New York: Abbeville Press, 1985), 15.

² Dawn Ades, "Photography and the Surrealist text," in *L'Amour Fou – Photography and Surrealism*, ed. Alan Axelrod (New York: Abbeville Press, 1985), 159.

³ Pierre Naville, "Beaux-Arts," in Krauss, "Service," 19.

⁴ Krauss, "Service," 24.

⁵ *Ibid*, 24.

⁶ *Ibid*, 40.

⁷ *Ibid*, 31.

The first, termed as the *érotique-voilée*, examines representation within nature, wherein 'one animal imitates another or as inorganic matter shapes itself to look like statuary.'⁸ Secondly, there is the *explosante-fixe*, the 'expiration of movement', where the image captured is that of movement or motion but where that movement has been stopped or frozen. In this way the convulsive beauty comes from the detachment of the photographic subject from the natural flow of its existence, becoming a sign of a reality made absent by the action of taking the photograph. The final aspect is the most connected to other forms of surrealist practice, the *magique-circonstancielle*. This element embraces the found object or fragment that conveys a message which makes a viewer aware of their own subconscious desires through instances of objective chance. All of the aspects characterise types of convulsive beauty that reveal the marvellous behind reality, but it is not to say that all surrealist photographs contain all three aspects. Rather, it is the case that in typifying only one, they allow the photographic medium to embrace the concept of convulsive beauty that was so central to Bretonian surrealism.

To understand the ways in which surrealist photography used Breton's theory to the extent that it can claim to be the ideal surrealist visual medium, it is necessary to explore some of the images that make up the body of work that is surrealist photography. If one begins with the *érotique-voilée*, one can see within pieces of this ilk the surrealist obsession with mimicry and the ways in which one object can 'signify' or even become another through the act of looking. Photographs were exceedingly capable of this, in much the same way as the *paranoiac-critical* paintings of Salvador Dalí were. Through this, entities can produce or reveal images entirely separate from the object depicted, in the way the markings of a moth suggest or even mimic a pair of eyes. It is what Dalí himself described when remarking how '(a) clear likeness of an orchid is coupled lyrically with the photographed inside of a tiger's mouth, where the sun in its thousand shadows is playing with the physiological architecture of the larynx.'⁹ Krauss mentions the publication of Karl Blossfeldt's photographs of natural vegetative forms echoing classical columnal carvings in *Documents* to reinforce this

⁸ Ibid, 31.

⁹ Salvador Dalí, "Photography: Pure Creation of Spirit," in *The collected writings of Salvador Dalí*, ed. Haim N. Finkelstein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 47.

surrealist fascination with imitation, even in work that falls outside the bounds of the movement.

Arguably one of the most significant examples of mimicry came from an artist that Breton

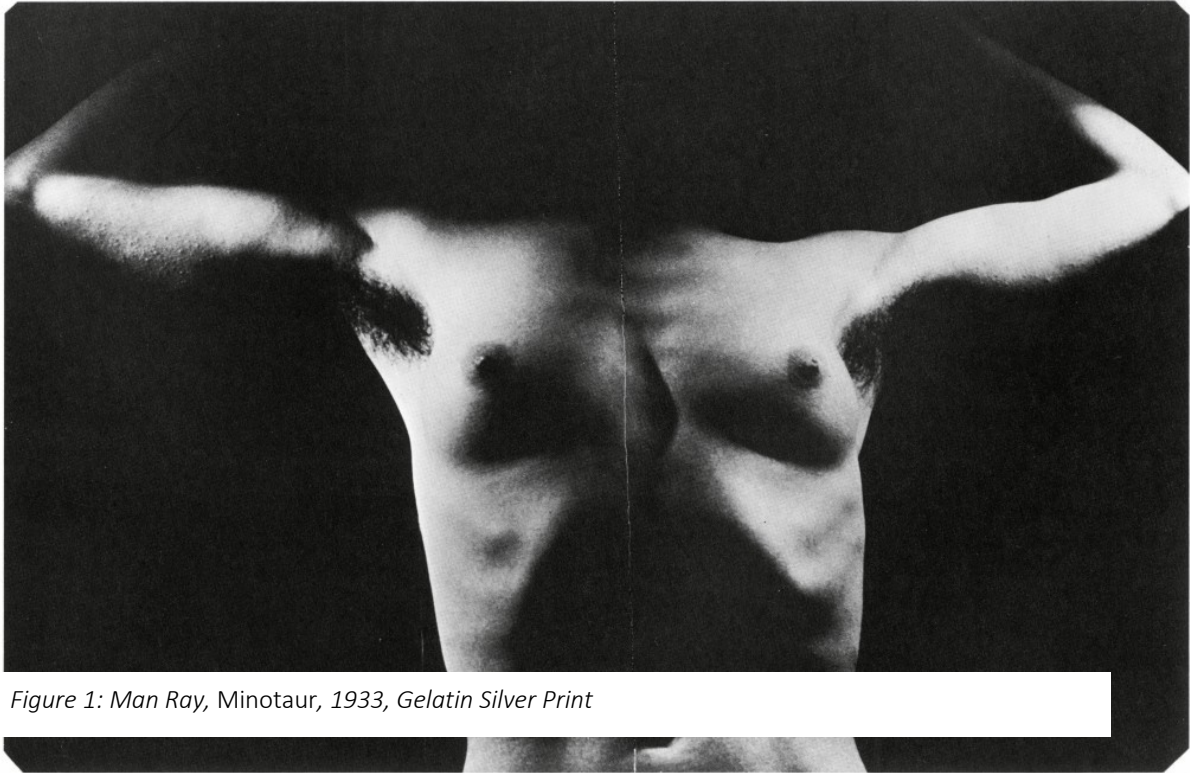


Figure 1: Man Ray, *Minotaur*, 1933, Gelatin Silver Print

hailed as one of the few true surrealists, Man Ray. His 1933 image *Minotaur* (Fig.1) captures a female torso, visually decapitated by shadow, in a pose that simultaneously suggests the body itself and the anatomy of the head of a bull. This is further reinforced by the use of cropping that ‘defines the bull’s physiognomy by the act of locating it,’¹⁰ bringing the bull into being by framing the torso without the context of rest of the body. The distortion of reality is caused in part by the frame itself, previously a relatively inconsequential aspect of visual media, as it becomes an active participant in the ‘redrawing’ of that which exists within it. By framing the subject as he does, Man Ray created a sur-reality that exists solely within and because of the frame. Additionally, the interplay of light and shadow that blurs the boundaries between physical presence and absence creates a hauntingly ominous image that suggests the otherworldly presence of the marvellous. The subject’s form morphs, seeming to belong to two planes of reality at once, and it is the viewer’s mind that

¹⁰ Krauss, “Service,” 19.

cements the image in either realm. Man Ray himself said that ‘architecture...is *not photogenic*. An apple, a nude, offer far more possibilities...’¹¹ These possibilities can be seen as the opportunities the natural form affords to a photographer who is able to capture something more than that which merely exists within his lens, as is evidenced by Ray’s *Minotaur*.



Figure 2: Raoul Ubac, *Le Combat des Penthésiléés*, 1939, Gelatin Silver Print



Where *Minotaur* is a straight, unmanipulated image, surrealist photographers often used post-factum techniques during the developing process to modify their images. These manipulated images were often strikingly distinct from straight

photographs, yet still typified, and even heightened, photography’s connections to Breton’s musings on convulsive beauty. Take, for instance, the work of the Belgian artist Raoul Ubac. Ubac’s 1939 piece *Le Combat des Penthésiléés* (Fig.2) exemplifies this use of manipulation to extend the medium beyond the limits of straight photography. Here, Ubac created an optical assault, using photomontage to build a new composition of posed nudes he originally took, before rephotographing the new image and exposing it to ‘successive attacks of solarization’, then repeating the process.¹² The practice of solarization exposes light-sensitive paper to sunlight during the printing process, opening the darkest areas of the image. This exposure reduces the shadows that delineate figures and objects within the image in what Krauss explains as a form of ‘optical corrosion’.¹³ Here, this ‘violent

¹¹ Man Ray, “On Photographic Realism (1935),” in *Photography in the modern era: European documents and critical writings, 1913-1940*, ed. Christopher Philips (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art/Aperture, 1989), 58.

¹² Rosalind Krauss, “Corpus Delecti,” in *L’Amour Fou – Photography and Surrealism*, ed. Alan Axelrod (New York: Abbeville Press, 1985), 70.

¹³ *Ibid*, 70.

deliquescence of matter' creates an image that is confused and organic, while simultaneously echoing the forms, shadows, and hues of a classical bas relief. Figures are recognisable individually but when taken in as a whole create an entirely unique image that is separate from its component parts. *Le Combat des Penthesiléés* is a clear demonstration of the way in which manipulative techniques could be used by photographers to reveal the marvellous behind the *érotique-voilée*, whereby the 'consumption of matter by a kind of spatial ether is a representation of the overturning of reality by those psychic states so courted by poets and painters...revery, ecstasy, dream.'¹⁴ There is a distortion of the shadow and perspective attributed to organic forms, a *cloisonné*, which in turn mimic the visual imagery of an entirely man-made object, akin to the visual parity suggested by the conjunction of Blossfeldt's microscopic photographs and classical architecture. This sociobiological connection further acts to reinforce the ability of photography to encapsulate the intrinsic surrealist ideal of the marvellous that lies behind visual reality.

The *explosante-fixe*, the act of arresting movement through the closing of a camera shutter, is again something of a fascination for surrealism's photographic practitioners. This 'delay'¹⁵, as Marcel Duchamp put it, typifies surrealist convulsive beauty in its deprivation of a moving body, inanimate or otherwise, from 'the continuum of its natural existence'¹⁶ and transforming it through its rigidity into a sign of a reality that is at once both present and impossibly detached. This is what Krauss delineates as the 'stop-motion of the still photograph'.¹⁷ Bodies in motion appear throughout photography, and images by surrealist photographers utilise this aspect of the medium to catch moments of great energy at a fixed point in time.

¹⁴ Ibid, 70.

¹⁵ Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1997), 112.

¹⁶ Ibid, 112.

¹⁷ Krauss, "Service," 40.

Brassaï's *Dancers at the Cabane Cubaine* (1931, Fig.3) captures a vivid instant centred on a couple in the midst of a dance. The moment is paused, the gazes fixed. Through the action of taking the photograph, the explicit reality becomes secondary to the apparent sur-reality of which the photographic elements become *indices*. The figures, both central and auxiliary, are devoid of their reality despite being naturalistic reproductions of the human form. Thus, their convulsive beauty comes from the separation of actors and action in the moment of the photograph, where the dancers are reduced to representations of their physical selves but deprived of the locomotion of their behaviour. This straight image exemplifies the *explosante-fixe* ideal, wherein the figures are no longer part of the human reality of the scene, but rather signifiers of a reality that is no longer part of their existence.



Figure 3: Brassai, *Dancers at the Cabane Cubaine*, 1931, Gelatin Silver Print

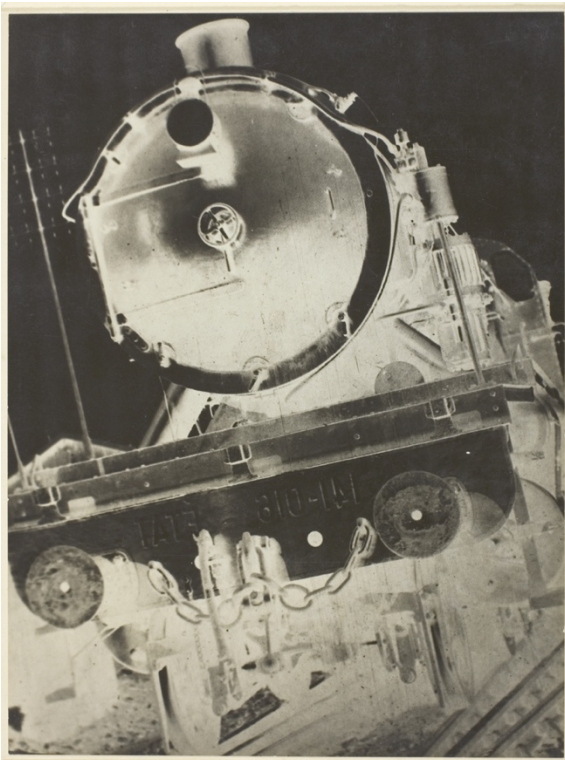


Figure 4: Roger Parry, *Illustration for Léon-Paul Fargue*, 1928, Photogravures

Similarly, Roger Parry's 1928 *Illustration for Léon-Paul Fargue* (Fig.4) depicts a steam locomotive that engulfs the majority of the frame, set at an irregular angle. Yet in contrast, the colours of the photograph have been developed in negative, making it a manipulated example of the *explosante-fixe*. Here, the steam train, a symbol of power and motion is caught at a point of apparent danger for the viewer. Through the technique of tonally negating the image, the seemingly familiar engine becomes something of an enigma, at once more overwhelming and oppressive than before, held in stasis by the camera lens. Parry's manipulated image of the

train is ‘thus a representation of an object already constituted as a representation.’¹⁸ Both these images, regardless of subject matter or subsequent manipulation, demonstrate Breton’s intrinsically surrealist need to capture a subject in motion in such a way as to remove it from reality and view its convulsive beauty outside of its quotidian realm of existence. What is absent here is movement, yet the photographs themselves become signifiers for that very absence.

The final aspect by which Breton’s framework is constructed is that of the *magique-circonstancielle*, instances of found objects or verbal and textual fragments that can be seen, in terms of the surrealists, as examples of objective chance. Chance had been a key element within surrealism since its inception, and its connection to the photography of the movement cannot be understated. Breton himself repeatedly makes reference in his written oeuvre of visiting flea markets to explore the bric-a-brac that could be found and documenting the ‘objets trouvés’, writing in *Nadja*: ‘I am often there...looking for objects one cannot find anywhere else – out of fashion, useless, almost incomprehensible.’¹⁹

Once again, it is Man Ray whose work can be seen to exemplify this element of Bretonian theory, most notably in his rayographs. In these works, ‘Man Ray described himself as using light itself as his new medium.’²⁰ Indeed, the very discovery of rayographs was itself a moment of chance, when he placed objects on some developing paper before turning on the light, recording the objects as phantasmic white forms on a black background. He experimented with exposure and type of object, but with little control as to the outcome, meaning that many of the completed works were dictated by elements of chance. This is evident in 1923’s *Untitled Rayograph (Hanging Lighter, Gauze, and String)* (Fig.5), in which the eponymous objects overlap and intertwine, being reproduced so faithfully on the photographic paper yet creating a composition that is far removed from reality. The result is something ‘both deeply mysterious and beautiful’, the objects having never before been ‘so near to life’.²¹ The connections to the subconscious are clear. The rayographs are

¹⁸ Krauss, *Myths*, 112.

¹⁹ André Breton, *Nadja*, (London: Penguin, 1999), 52.

²⁰ Jennifer Mundy, “Paris,” in *Man Ray – Writings on Art*, ed. Jennifer Mundy (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2016), 70.

²¹ *Ibid*, 80.

photographic acts which, as Ubac explained, transferred the medium from the 'rationalist arrogance' of its discovery to 'the poetic movement of liberation' through 'a process identical to that of automatism'.²² Krauss argues that these images 'seemed like those precipitates from the unconscious on which the automatist poetic practice was founded.'²³ Through their chance imprints, subjected to various light intensities and exposures, and held at different distances, the objects become 'emissaries from the external world' wherein the

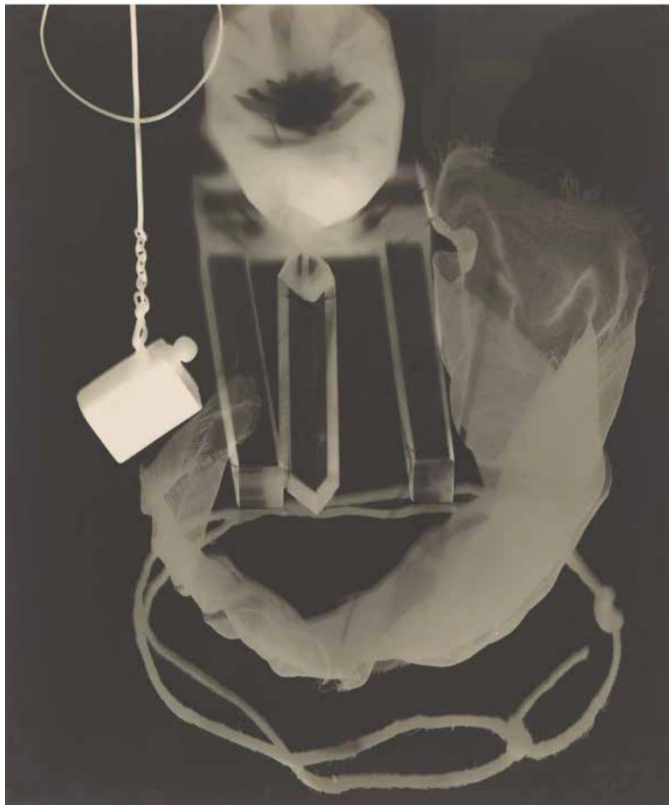


Figure 5: Man Ray, Untitled Rayograph (Hanging Lighter, Gauze, String), 1923, Gelatin Silver Print

viewer sees the object of their own desire as opposed to the object itself. As such, the convulsive beauty so salient to surrealism is present in the opportune meeting of the unremarkable, 'found' object of Breton's imagining and the constituent elements of photography. They create a 'photogram' inhabited by signs of purely marvellous, unconscious desire.

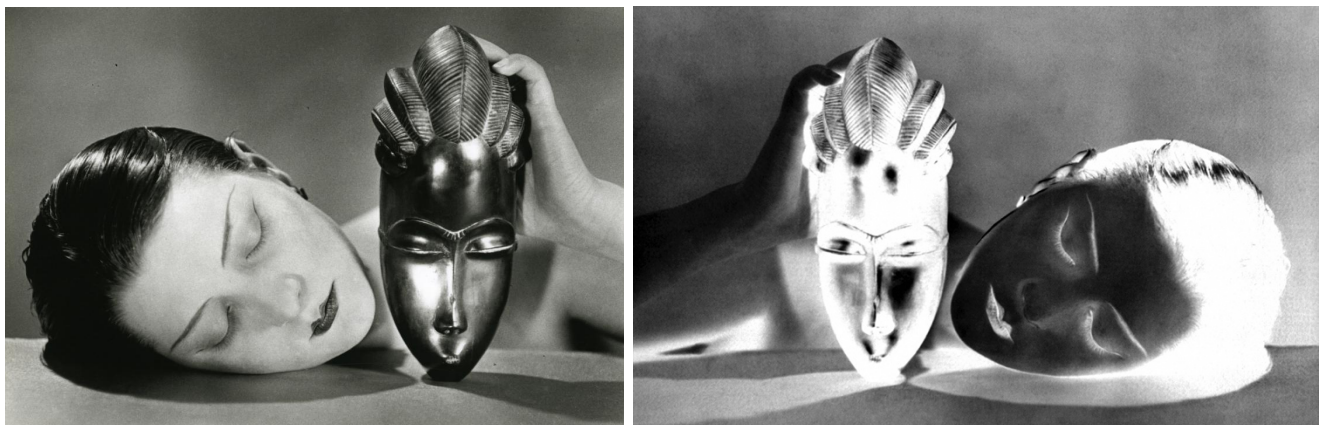
Outside his opus of rayographs, found or collected objects are present in Man Ray's more traditional works. Many of these pieces emit a more 'overtly symbolic or theatrical' tone.²⁴ Chief among these works is a double work known as *Noir et Blanche* (1926, Fig.6-7), depicting Kiki de Montparnasse, an artist, model, and singer who worked closely with Ray, with an African mask in both positive and negative productions. The composition of the photograph is distinct; Kiki's head is horizontal on a table, while she holds vertically the

²² Raoul Ubac, "Actuation poétique (1935)," in Kraus, "Service," 24.

²³ Krauss, "Service," 25.

²⁴ Jane Livingston, "Man Ray and Surrealist Photography," in *L'Amour Fou – Photography and Surrealism*, ed. Alan Axelrod (New York: Abbeville Press, 1985), 139.

angular, monochromatic mask, both pairs of eyes closed. Jane Livingston posits that instead of being an illusion, Kiki's head position creates an 'analogue' of it 'as a disembodied object...like a sculpture.'²⁵ In addition, the shadow cast by her head works in tandem with the adjacent sculptural head. Man Ray here captures two 'objects' of desire, those of the female form and the collectible, 'exotic' mask, but through his reproduction and negation of the image, he contorts the reality within the pictures' universe with a reversal of roles. In doing so, he blurs the line between 'object' and 'objectified' in an act of doubling, reducing both to signifiers of a subconscious reality in which there is a tension between accepted binaries. In the use of negation as manipulation, 'Kiki's whitest flesh is rendered electrically dark and the African wood mask eerily bright'.²⁶ Man Ray uses this formalism to comment on the 'cultural ramifications of "black" and "white"', a key aspect of surrealist politics, which often utilised an anti-nationalist rhetoric as demonstrated by their 'Anticolonial Exhibition' in 1931. As such, *Noir et Blanche* is both an exemplification of the surrealist's staunchly anti-colonial stance, as well as of the use of manipulation in tandem with *magique-circonstancielle* to explore the connotations of personal subconscious desire.



Figures 6 and 7: Man Ray, *Noir et Blanche*, (Positive Left, Negative Right), 1926, Gelatin Silver Print on Plywood

Not only is *Noir et Blanche* exemplary of a work utilising 'objets trouvés', but it is also demonstrative of a formal aspect of Bretonian surrealist thinking that pervades each aforementioned element. If we read the images as a pair, they become a work that encompasses what Krauss terms 'doubling'. Krauss argues that 'nothing creates (the) sense of the linguistic hold on the real more than the photographic strategy of doubling' in its

²⁵ Ibid, 139.

²⁶ Ibid, 139.

production of 'the formal rhythm of spacing.'²⁷ Linguistically, this phenomenon appears in the reduplication of unintelligible sounds to provide them with a meaning. For instance, the sound 'pa' on its own is inconsequential, but when doubled, 'papa' takes on an explicit meaning. In much the same way, surrealist photography draws on this doubling to endow works with purpose, becoming the 'signifier of signification.'²⁸ Outwith Ray, one can look at Maurice Tabard's 1930 work, *Untitled* (Fig.8), the redoubled portrait of a female model,



Figure 8: Maurice Tabard, *Untitled*, 1930, Gelatin Silver Print

superimposed and negated. The second image becomes a signifier of the original portrait, a distorted representative that takes on meaning only within context of the original simulacrum. It is a ghostly presence that suggests a reality only within the image, reducing the first's inherent, realistic singularity. Doubling, in the realm of surrealism's search for a surreality through photography and Breton's framework, '(opens) reality to a deferral'²⁹ whereby the double morphs into an *indice* of the marvellous, subconscious plane.

Man Ray, so fundamental to surrealist photography, explained the medium's importance thus:

'A photographer is not restricted only to the role of copyist. He is a marvellous explorer of those aspects that our retinas will never record and that every day inflict such cruel contradictions on those who idolize visions of what is known...'³⁰

²⁷ Krauss, "Service," 28.

²⁸ Ibid, 31.

²⁹ Ibid, 28.

³⁰ Man Ray, "Deceiving Appearances (March 1926)," in *Writings on Art*, ed. Jennifer Mundy (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2016), 88.

If the core tenets of surrealism are the concept of convulsive beauty and a discovery of the marvellous, it is difficult to ignore photography's claim to the throne as the ideal visual medium. Although it captures a moment of undeniable reality, when viewed through Breton's theory, photography can be seen as the only true visual medium with which the surrealists could carry out their investigations. With these three central elements, artists such as Brassai and Man Ray blurred the lines that denoted photography as a purely scientific process, using manipulation and framing to create a marvellous reality behind that suggested by the world around them. In conjunction with the act of doubling, which opens pathways through the subconscious, both straight and manipulated works engender what is absent in the medium. Photography epitomises convulsive beauty, capturing a singular instant populated by a wealth of images metamorphosing into convulsive signs of the marvellous before the viewer's very eyes.

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