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Ghostliness: A Double Take at Surrealist Art

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Surrealist Ghostliness by Katharine Conley. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2013. Pp. 320, 50 illustrations. $55.00 cloth.

Katherine Conley gives her readers new cause to be fascinated by surrealism as she explores the phenomenon of *ghostliness* as an influential aspect in the movement. Conley proposes that ghostliness may be understood through the visual paradigm of anamorphosis, or the device of "seeing double," and understanding a work of art retroactively. In her introduction, Conley explores surrealism's marked lineage to baroque innovation in visual art, gothic imagination in literature, and the vogue of nineteenth-century spiritualist activities, elaborating the historical context for her theory. Throughout the book's eight chapters, Conley discusses a scope of individual artists whose work engages with the ghostly, focusing on the themes of spiritualism and the supernatural, automatism and the unconscious and conscious worlds, and the experiential feeling of bodies and things.

To illustrate her metaphor of anamorphic perception for ghostliness, Conley uses the classic example of Hans Holbein's celebrated painting, *The Ambassadors* (1533), and explains how the optical illusion functions: after first looking at the painting head-on, viewers who see it from a side angle perceive the emergence of a ghostly skull. This second look at the painting offers an alternate perspective that changes the viewer's comprehension of the work overall. Positing

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that "surrealist perception was necessarily double," Conley gives the example of the "picture-poems" of Apollinaire's *Calligrammes* (Calligrams, 1918) where the viewer must consider both the visual and textual sign-systems of the poem to interpret the work as a whole (xi). Other introductory examples of this doubleness include Marcel Duchamp's textual puns, such as "Rrose Sélavy" (the phonetic homonym for "Eros, c'est la vie") and the surrealist drawing game of the Exquisite Corpse, where each part of the corpse is drawn independently from the rest but comes together to form a complete body (13–14). In each example are two versions of the text and thus two realities—one literal and one metaphoric—where the "secondary version hides behind the first like a ghost standing in for an unconscious dream reality that we know exists but have trouble seeing simultaneously with the conscious reality" (xii).

Conley explains that, in relation to the theory of surrealism, anamorphic perception translates into the synthesis of dream and reality, or the conscious and unconscious worlds coming together to form what André Breton called "surreality." Just as Holbein's painting reveals the ghost of mortality for the viewer who takes a second look, the surrealist *double take* heeds those Freudian phantoms that have been repressed by the overly rational world. This analogy thus grounds Conley's examination of four particular aspects of ghostliness that will be read within the works of art she analyzes: (a) spiritualism as the "repressed" ghost of surrealism; (b) the rhythm of suspension and flow as seen in automatism and the Freudian idea of the unconscious; (c) the importance of the "sensual," experiential, and tactile nature of these works; and (d) the mechanisms of doubling within text, visual art, and representations or manipulations of the human body within the works of art (8).

Citing Franz Anton Mesmer's theory of animal magnetism in the early eighteenth century, as well as the rise in popularity of gothic literature in England, Conley traces a convincing historical lineage to spiritualism and the Freudian notion of the unconscious up to the surrealist experiments in automatism that Breton and his friends practiced together in the 1920s. Conley notes that spiritualism and its variants were explored by the young surrealists who had experienced the atrocities of World War I, and who looked towards unconventional ways of conjuring "ephemeral forces within the unconscious mind" (3). Yet, while spiritualism was of interest to the surrealists, they rejected the ghosts implicated in mediumistic communication and adopted instead the practice of automatism. Conley points out that Breton did not

outwardly affirm the presence of spiritualist ideas in the movement until the 1950s, thus making spiritualism "the repressed ghost of surrealism" which would surface at the end of the movement (8).

Throughout the eight chapters of her book, Conley gives us detailed insight to a selection of surrealist and post-surrealist artists whose ghostly works vary in subject and geographical location and are evoked in photography, film, painting, sculptural objects, and the installation of collected objects. Five of the eight chapters are devoted to women artists, giving due attention to female innovation within and inspired by the surrealist movement. The chapters are structured around the works of individual artists and are organized chronologically, giving perspective to a development in form and process of the art over the years, from 1923 to the 1990s. The book's illustrations, while limited to black-and-white, are integral visual references to the works of art discussed. Conley's skills at decoding the complex artworks are masterful; her descriptions illuminate the visibility of compositions and clarify the sometimes-overwhelming web of surrealist signification. The interpretations are often multiple for each work of art, showing how each artist has engaged with one or more of the four major aspects of ghostliness presented in the introduction.

One of the major characteristics of ghostliness discussed in the book is the recurring theme of the *sensuous* or experiential nature of the artworks. Conley recurrently refers to Michel Foucault and his metaphor of swimming to describe surrealist automatic writing as a "raw and naked act" and therefore one that is specifically tactile. In chapter 1 ("The Cinematic Whirl of Man Ray's Ghostly Objects") and in chapter 3 ("The Ethnographic Automatism of Brassaï and Dali's *Involuntary Sculptures*"), we are introduced to the idea that these objects have a life of their own (21). As we discover for the work of Man Ray, Brassaï, and Salvador Dali, what makes objects ghostly is that they have been manipulated, touched, or altered by the human hand. Conley underlines the importance of Tristan Tzara's idea of *patina* and Walter Benjamin's concept of the *aura* in order to suggest that the imprint of the thing, and the handling of the thing by the artist, are what imbue it with a second life and a certain ghostliness (27). This indexicality is exemplified in the photography of objects that have a *doubleness*—that is, evoke two different things simultaneously. Following Conley's thesis, this doubleness works as anamorphosis because the object has to be set, staged, or viewed in a different manner from the first. Similar to what Benjamin Buchloh has said about conceptual art, the perceptual

model of framing enables a different presentation of an object.[1]

For Brassaï and Dali's series of *Involuntary Sculptures* (1933), the manipulation is clear: a magnified close-up of the object distorts the idea of the thing itself, whereas a reading of the object's title reveals its utility and extends an individual interpretation of the object in everyday life. For Man Ray's work, too, the handling is done behind the scenes through the placement of his photographic objects—as in the positioning of the eggbeater that casts a shadow in *La Femme* (1920; The woman) or the way the round reflectors and laundry pins fit together to create a vision of *L'Homme* (1920; The man). More subtly, Man Ray's *Rayographs* (1920s–40s) show the sensuality of the object being placed on the photographic paper (23). In Man Ray's film *Retour à la raison* (1923; Return to reason), this type of manipulation results in objects that appear to "dance" on screen, thus reinvesting the already ghostly objects with another sense of palpability through their exhibition to the public (30).

The framing of an object proves to be the same process that makes Lee Miller's photography ghostly. In chapter 4 ("The Ghostliness in Lee Miller's Egyptian Landscapes"), the photographs that hold a double sense are similar to those by Henri Cartier-Bresson—captured in what he called a *decisive moment*, a spontaneous instant where the artist is privy to a remarkable and polyvalent image. Conley shows us that Miller's early portraits such as *Exploding Hand* (ca. 1930) and *Nude Bent Forward* (ca. 1930) are some of the most explicit in conveying doubleness (96–97). But this coincidence is not all left up to chance—it is the eye, the wit, and skill of the artist, whether it be written in the text that accompanies the photograph as in *Cloud Factory* (1939) or created in the composition of shadows within the photographs of *Domes of the Church of the Virgin (al Adhra), Deir el Soriano Monastery* (Syrian Monastery) (ca. 1936) and *From the Top of the Great Pyramid* (ca. 1937). While the artist's hands are never revealed in the final product, they have been clearly framing the world for our eye—as seen in "Pierre Alchinsky's Ghostly Palimpsests" (chapter 7). Alchinsky's appropriation and painting over of old maps is ghostly because of his artistry and manipulation of the paper object.

According to Conley, ghostliness exists in the liminal space between the human body and the thing. In citing Hélène Cixous's interpretation of the uncanny, Conley suggests that objects that acquire anthropomorphic qualities are just as ghostly as humans that become objects (52). Conley's next major theme of ghostliness is the thingness of the human body and its inevitable inanimate end, also

called the "corporeal pun" (15–16). Woodman's ghostly houses in chapter 6 ("Francesca Woodman's Ghostly Interior Maps") thus function as "house bodies" where "the living body becomes an anamorphic ghost" (156). Woodman's work, especially in the selected *House* and *Angel* series, clearly conveys this sense of ghostliness. Conley points out that the ephemeral bodies are always located in the in-between: halfway exposed and partially hidden by the house, Woodman blurs the distinction between what is animate and inanimate (167). Tanning's work (as seen in chapter 5, "Dorothea Tanning's Gothic Ghostliness") can also be put into the category of art that represents a kind of indescribable "slippage" between what is represented as body and thing, as her paintings portray subjects who exist in a place where the supernatural is ordinary and ghostliness reigns (123). Her later sculptural work perhaps more clearly evokes the tension between body and thing as in *Canapé en temps de pluie* (Rainy-day canapé, 1970), a couch that is doubly a mess of indistinct body parts.

The crossover between bodies and things is also present in chapter 2 ("Claude Cahun's Exploration of the Autobiographical Human") and chapter 8 ("Susan Hiller's Freudian Ghosts"), as the body becomes the vessel of certain intransient ghosts, which must be collected. Conley discusses Jacques Derrida's concept of "archive fever," applying it to both Cahun's personal "counter-archive" of the human body and Hiller's archeologically stylized installation of collected objects in the Freud museum. Both artists exploit the tension between what Freud called "the pleasure principle" or the life force, and the death force, or "archive fever." The discussion on Cahun's photographs, especially the analysis that ensues of the Bell Jar series (from Cahun to Man Ray to Lee Miller) is an example of the transgressive act that takes place within conceptualizing and ironizing the body as a thing. Conley's discussion on *Frontière humaine* (Human frontier, 1930) also illuminates Cahun's idea of the body as amorphous, ever changing, and thus ghostly. These ghosts are variants of the subject, confirming gender and identity as multiple and limitless, a kind of haunting that Breton referred to in his first line of *Nadja* (63), published in 1928. The chapter on Hiller's installation harkens back to the first argument of how we manipulate objects ourselves, putting a ghostly quality onto them with the attribution of affect or memory.

The concept of desire and the object is not discussed explicitly but is posed as an important, fundamental axis of surrealist thought. Does desire hold a place in ghostliness? Can desire be described as anamorphic? These are questions that could be discussed

further and were perhaps asked in "Anamorphic Love," an essay from the exhibition catalog *Surrealism: Desire Unbound* (2001) that preceded this book (xi).

Conley suggests that just like a surrealist collection whose meaning depends on the juxtaposition of its objects in reference to others, surrealist objects are to be put into circulation and shared within the community, giving them new significations as they pass from one person to another. Following the idea of Ghérasim Luca, these objects are to be treated as "offerings" since an object found is an object to be given (43). Whether it is in the process of crafting an artwork, exhibiting an object, or sharing it, the idea of imbuing things with new meaning seems to suggest a never-ending production of ghostliness.

Ghostliness, then, is a slippery subject. The distinction between art made ghostly and art that represents ghosts seems to blur. Are artists' hands generators of ghostliness? And if human hands initiate a kind of second sense to the material or object being artfully manipulated, is all creation ghostly? Conley's thesis thus suggests that ghostliness is synonymous with the movement of surrealism itself—and to an extent, perhaps all of modernity.

In dialogue with recent inquiries into *thing theory* as defined by Bill Brown, and evocative of Barbara Johnson's *Persons and Things* (2008), *Surrealist Ghostliness* also questions the life of objects and their relationship to the human body, suggesting that the world exists beyond what the earthly eye can see. Conley shows that the surrealists had already begun this investigation almost a century ago, necessitating another reading of the world—a reading that is anamorphic. Although the surrealists were not motivated by a specific ethical intention, Conley reminds us that their work does hold undercurrents of a project that is in discourse with what Mary Ann Caws has said in *The Surrealist Look* (1997)—that surrealism allowed for the space and thought of *otherness*.[2] This rings particularly true in the *Prolegomena to a Third Surrealist Manifesto or not* (1942), where Breton categorically rejects the rational idea of telos and declares that "man is perhaps not the center, the focal cynosure of the universe" and questions our existence alongside the presence of spirits, or "The Great Transparent Ones."[3] *Surrealist Ghostliness* shows us with verve how this alterity is embodied by the artwork of women and men open to the experience of such coexisting realities.

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NOTES

1. Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Allegorical Procedures: Appropriation and Montage in Contemporary Art," in *Art after Conceptual Art*, ed. Alex Alberro and Sabeth Buchmann (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 27–51, quotation on 31.
2. Mary Ann Caws, *The Surrealist Look: An Erotics of Encounter* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), 26.
3. André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969), 293; originally published as *Manifestes du surréalisme* (Paris: Jean-Jacques Pauvert, 1962), 161.