

Jaroslav Capek
Photography with Foundation

Surrealism Beckons Photographers

Beyond Ordinary

This essay examines the Surrealist movement and its evolutionary path in the field of photography and is founded on the artwork of three photographers that are amongst the most influential and recognised artists of the era. It considers their relationships and how they influenced each other by being connected in their professional as well as personal lives. Furthermore, it considers the everlasting Surrealism established for the upcoming generations of photographers while creating strong foundations for more open and free-minded approaches towards the visual arts. The strong influence of Surrealist photographers has been ever since reflecting in the artwork of many emerging artists who have desired to express their ideas through unusual or nonchalant visual art creations or have sought to demonstrate their artistic abilities through the unconscious state of mind. Lastly, it concludes how the legacy of Surrealism persists in the world of photography until now.

The writer Guillaume Apollinaire coined the word Surrealism in Paris in 1917. He used it to describe two instances of artistic innovation. The first was Jean Cocteau's ballet Parade, and the second was Apollinaire's play The Breasts of Tiresias, which he subtitled a Surrealist Drama (Bradley, 1997). Nevertheless, according to Bradley, it was not until 1924 when Andre Breton published Surrealist Manifesto that launched the Surrealist movement and Surrealism. Initially, Breton did not see Surrealism as a newly emerging art style but as a cry of a mind turning back on itself, signalling, that Surrealism would establish innovative

perspectives in art. In general, the movement encompassed poetry, painting, prose, sculpture, photography, filmmaking, and interventionist activity (Bradley, 1997). In photography, surrealists sought to challenge notions of normality (V&A) using the advantage of more progressive and less bulky camera equipment. The newly introduced cameras were smaller, and more compact, allowing the artists to photograph in a more creative way. As a result, photographers started representing themselves under their own uniquely developed styles. They started challenging standard attitudes that were settled amongst the photographers not only by extravagant framing but also by breaking what was until then seen as photographic standards. Artists started exploring revolutionary photographic techniques such as photomontage, collage, post-production, staging or photogram (artstory.org). Many photographers of the era found it hard to make a living out of their artwork and had to search for work in the commercial sphere while putting their art tendencies in the shadow of their professional careers. Most worked in ateliers of magazines, newspapers, or commercial photography studios hence some of their images lacked post-production techniques and were captured using strong light contrast, long exposure photographs, and multiple exposure photographs instead of using darkroom techniques. As an example, serves a photograph titled *Dust Breeding* by Man Ray (Please see Appendix 1.) which is a long-exposure photograph taken in 1920 when a new group of surrealist photographers started emerging in Paris (Bate, 2009). Amongst the members of this group were Man Ray, an American-born photographer residing in Paris, Dora Maar, a French photographer of Croatian descent, famous for her contradictory relationship with Pablo Picasso and Lee Miller, another American photographer seeking refuge in Paris to escape her complicated childhood. These three photographers were among the pioneers of surrealistic photography. Connected through their artistic careers as well as their personal lives, their work unfolded into an influential collection of images. Usually, the term Surrealism evokes images that are depictions of juxtapositions of unreal dreamy environments, usually linked to complicated post-production techniques, nevertheless, it is important to highlight that in the wake of the photographic surrealist era, images were not representations of lengthy postproduction techniques but rather of experimentation with composition, exposure, and framing. Above mentioned *Dust Breeding* by Man Ray captured in Breton's atelier demonstrates that the first steps towards the surreal photographic captures were less experimental than in the later stages. The photograph evokes an impression of an aerial image of a landscape, however, in fact, it is a long-exposure composition of a glass plate covered by an extremely thick layer of dust (Ray, 1998, p. 137).

“I’m not a photographer of nature, but of my own imagination”. (Ray, 1998, p.9). At the dawn of his photographic career, Man Ray claimed that photography is not art, by which he meant that artists cannot limit themselves merely to duplicating reality (Ray, 1998, p. 16), however, his photographic career began after he photographed his canvas paintings for archiving purposes. Gradually he built himself into a professional photographer commissioning for reproductions of artwork, fashion photographs and portrait photographs. Outside his professional photographic career, Man Ray dedicated time to experimenting in his bathroom, where he discovered the charm of photograms which he labelled rayographs. As early as 1918, Man Ray used it to challenge standard conventions of perspective and underscore the indeterminate nature of photographed reality (Ray, 1998, p.207). As he made progress with his photographic career, he earned himself the nickname The Chemist due to the long hours he dedicated to experiments with chemicals in the darkroom. This endless effort to move his work forward towards new discoveries turned fruitful when in 1939 together with Lee Miller rediscovered the technique of solarisation (please see Appendix 3). They decided to break the rule of not opening the door of the darkroom during the development procedures. The surprising result they achieved soon domesticated among Surrealist photographers and became a new form of juxtaposition. In fact, Man Ray did not solarize everybody. On occasion, highly studied lightning during the sitting produced a portrait closer to the model’s true character than solarization would have done. That was the case of Salvador Dali, who was photographed in amazing lightning that gave his face an extravagant if not demonic effect (Ray, 1998, p. 124). The early years of Surrealist photography introduced changes in composition and framing, combined with low-key and high-contrast monochromatic imagery.

Surrealists exhorted the redemption of desire; however, surrealists were mostly men, and they came first in this redemption. The liberalized surrealist woman was a site of desire rather than a subject of desire. They were to represent it rather than inhabit it. Eventually, we understand this vision when we begin examining surrealist photography, which seems to be somewhat dominated by nudes and portraits of women. Many of these images present versions of femininity that, whatever the rhetoric then, can be seen as restrictive now, such as erotic objects (Ray, 1998, p. 203). Mistakenly, the men were not the only party involved in the subject of surrealist nude photography and portraiture. Newly, women began to penetrate this sensitive genre of photography. Hiring, seeing, or working with a female photographer

became to be a new standard in a generally male-dominated industry. Many nudes from that era were depicted by Miller, primarily a model herself, although she only received very little credit for it. Miller fell in love with the medium of photography during her relationship with Man Ray and has ever since been one of the most respected women photographers of the Modernist as well as the Surrealist era, especially amidst Britons. Her work is defined by art critics as looking for surreal contrast in the common notions of nature (please see Appendix 2). Nature helped Miller to escape the post-traumatic states of her childhood and later the atrocities she experienced while working as a war photographer (Penrose, 2019). Miller was very likely the only female war photographer to document the front-line combats in Europe and among her many exploits, she witnessed the siege of St Malo, the Liberation of Paris, the battling in Luxembourg and Alsace, the Russian/American colligation at Torgau, the liberation of Buchenwald and Dachau. She quartered in both Hitler and Eva Braun's villas in Munich, and captured Hitler's house Wachenfeld at Berchtesgaden on fire on the day of Germany's surrender (*Lee Miller Archives, 2023*). Lee's surrealist eye was always present. Unexpectedly, among the reportage, the mud, and bullets we find photographs where the unreality of the war assumes an almost lyrical beauty, sometimes with reference to other Surrealist artists (Penrose, 2019). Lee used her camera like a cookie cutter to snip pieces out of life, which in isolation assume a life of their own. Mysterious images appear sometimes threatening, often abstract, however, there is no direct link between the images. They are moments stolen from time and place (Penrose, 2019). During her time in Paris, Miller inspired many, but her close friend of Croatian descent, Dora Maar, sourced from her creativity the most.

Unfortunately, Maar is deemed to be one of the most overlooked Surrealists of all. Standing in the shadow of her partner Pablo Picasso, Dora Maar received only a little recognition for her artistic efforts. The public did not appreciate her artwork until she departed from this world. Coincidentally, her collections of negatives and photographs were found under the bed in the flat in Paris she occupied (Robin and Flores, 2003). Publicly recognised as Picasso's Weeping Woman, Maar invested her creative efforts into canvas paintings not paying much attention to photography as a newly emerging art style. Although she saw painting as an important element of her creative personality, she began getting attracted by the photography industry after being introduced to Ray and Miller. More importantly, spending more time with her new acquaintance Lee Miller, she became embraced by the magic of finding new realities through the viewfinder of the camera (Robin and Flores, 2003). The notoriously

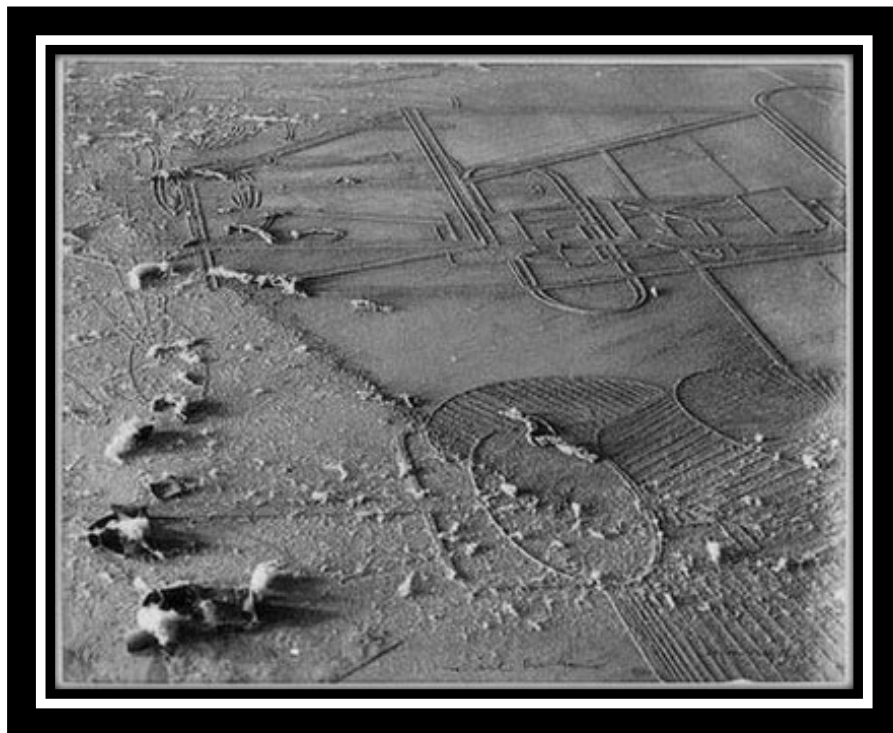
famous photograph called *Pere Ubu* (please see Appendix 4) demonstrates Maar's undisputable talent to create fantasy-like images without reaching for any complicated post-production technique. It is a portrait photograph of an Armadillo pup; however, the image resembles a creature that would be simply mistaken for existence from outer space. The image had to be examined by a team of biologists from the University of Oxford to decipher the mystery behind it. There is no doubt that Dora Maar was talented to capture a dream rather than reality, something she inherited from Miller and Ray.

“I would photograph an idea rather than an object, a dream rather than an idea” (Man Ray, 1998, p. 65). Surrealism does not allow those who devote themselves to it to abandon it when they please. Everything suggests that it acts on the mind as drugs do; like them, it creates a certain state of dependence and can drive a man to terrible acts of rebellion (Breton, 1969). The end of the modernist era did not cease the legacy of Surrealism. All Surrealist art forms' extravagant concepts and approaches laid the foundations for future generations while influencing the creative minds of liberally thinking artisans. Furthermore, technological advances of the second half of the twentieth century opened the door for new opportunities and gave Surreal photography more flexibility. Modern DSLR cameras with zoom lenses were the first step in creating surreal images without the need to use computer software to produce dream-like scenes during the development procedures. One of which is ICM (intentional camera movement) technique. An effective and simple zoom lens manipulation to create surreal, unrealistically looking photographs (Please see Appendix 5 & 6.). Some of the elements we are surrounded by on daily bases are hard to capture in a still image. Modern photographic equipment such as zoom lenses in combination with long exposure camera settings allows photographers to embed the natural elements into an otherwise still image. Nowadays, many Surrealist photographers reach for computer software to interpret their dreams, however, no matter the outcomes of the interpretations of their visions, the results are yet founded on the legacy of the Surrealist photographers as well as painters. Considering Man Ray's experiments with chemicals in the darkroom we know where the software engineers took their inspiration to design photo editing programs. Miller's extravagant framing of natural elements aided landscape photographers to begin seeking unusual occurrences in nature while depicting them from unusual perspectives. Maar's juxtapositions motivated upcoming generations of photographers to search for new realities in the dull world of publicity images for an image being a pure creation of the mind. It cannot be born from a comparison but from a juxtaposition of two more or less remote

realities. The more the relationship between the two juxtaposed realities is remote and true, the stronger the image – the greater its emotive power and poetic reality (Nord-Sud, as cited in Breton, March 1918). The legacy of Surrealism has motivated artists for almost a century now and will remain to motivate newly emerging photographers to rebel against the predefined myths of artistic stereotypes created by a society that is strongly based on material and financial oppression and has fallen blind to recognise the real values of the world of creative arts.

Appendixes:

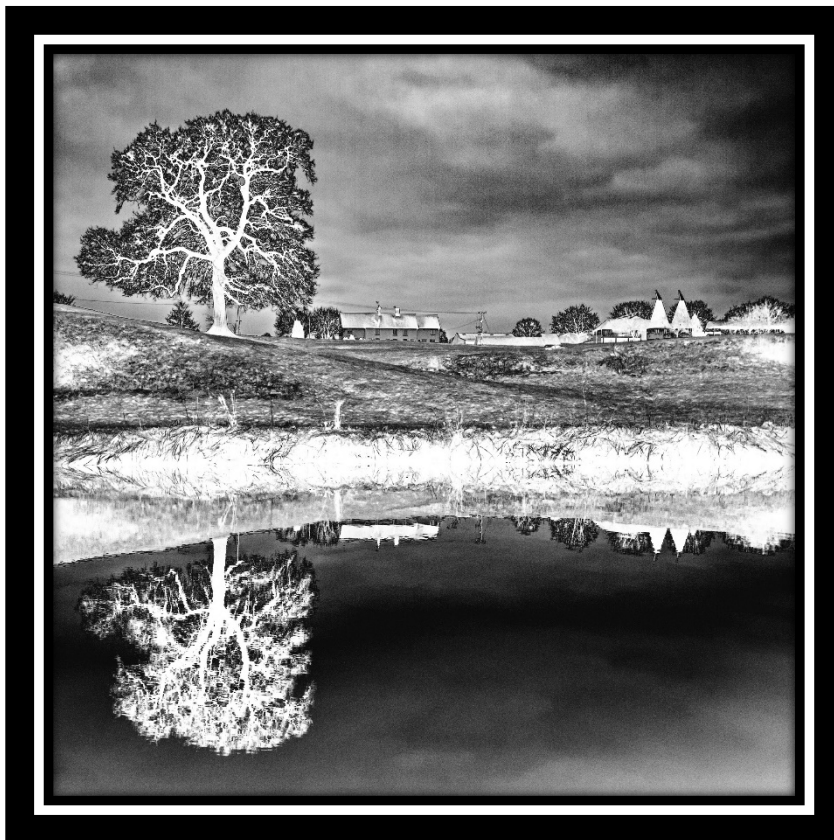
Appendix 1



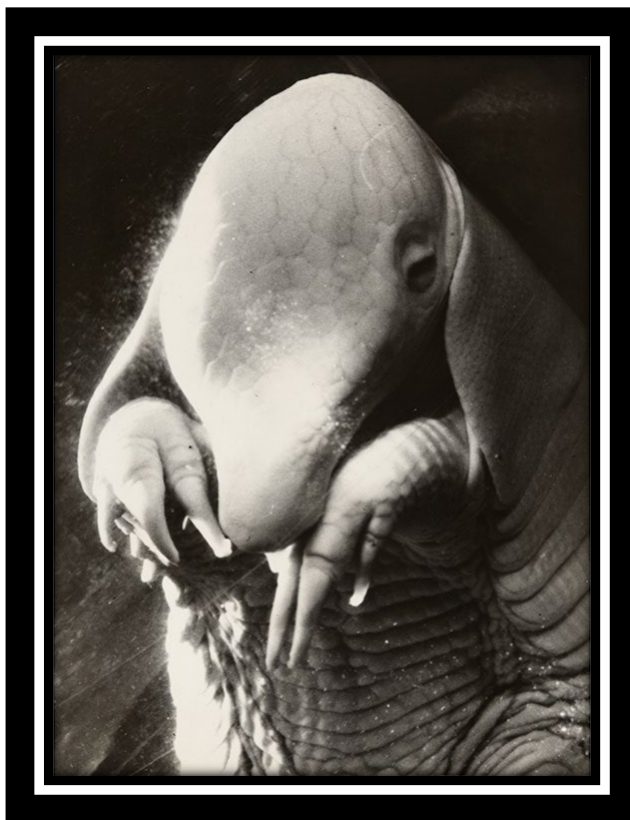
Appendix 2



Appendix 3:



Appendix 4



Appendix 5



Appendix 6



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