Surreal Things: Surrealism and design, 11 - 12 May 2007

Speakers’ Abstracts

Professor Tim Benton
Corbu surrealiste! Surely not?
Despite collaborating with Charles de Beistegui on his Surreal apartment high over the Champs Élysées, Le Corbusier never came out explicitly as a Surrealist. He was certainly influenced by Surrealism, however, in his paintings, his eye for natural objects and arguably in his architecture. When he met Salvador Dali at a dinner in celebration of the life of Gaudi, he was told that architecture aspires to be perfectly comestible. Corbu didn't believe that but I will show that expression of contradiction was at the heart of his work and that in some ways he does follow some of the methods of Surrealist invention.

Stephanie D'Alessandro
Refashioning Dalí's Venus
Among the many works by Salvador Dalí, perhaps none is more deeply embedded in the popular imagination than the Venus de Milo with Drawers, a reproduction of the famous 130-120 BC marble (Musée de Louvre), altered with pompom-decorated drawers in the figure's forehead, breasts, stomach, abdomen, and left knee. According to various accounts, Dalí produced the work in 1936, calling upon Marcel Duchamp to help find a cabinetmaker to outfit the plaster reproduction with drawers. In the early 1960s, the object was made into an edition in bronze, painted white to resemble plaster. New research on the original 1936 plaster, now in the collection of the Art Institute of Chicago, suggests a more complex story, one that demonstrates how the Venus both inflected and reflected trends in fine art, fashion, design, advertising, and the decorative arts. This lecture will trace the fascinating refashioning of Dalí's Venus.

Professor Martin Eidelberg
Freeform Fun: American Biomorphic Design
While Americans were familiar with Surrealist landscapes populated by incongruous objects and melting forms, this did not influence their design vocabulary to any considerable extent. There were exceptions, most notably Salvador Dalí, who while residing in the United States in the 1930s and 40s designed department store windows, dream sequences in Hollywood films, jewelry, neck ties, greeting cards, dishes —anything that enriched his persona and wealth. The abstract Surrealism of Hans Arp influenced American design in more profound ways. Biomorphic forms first appeared sporadically in the 1930s and then, in the post-war period, became almost endemic. ‘Freeform’ shapes, as they were generally known, could be found in small and large scale works and in any material scale; in graphic design, furniture, ceramics, jewelry, textiles, etc. While it began in elite artistic circles, it quickly became a popular and democratic mode of expression, a welcome diversion from the norm of industrial planning.

Dr Krzysztof Fijalkowski
**A Surrealist Manifesto of the Philosophy of Furnishing: Officina Undici**

The Italian design team Officina Undici (Ugo Sterpini and Fabio de Sanctis) constitute one of the few moments when the surrealist movement itself has endorsed and engaged directly with the problem of product design. Creators of extraordinary one-off furnishings during the 1960s, their work drew on a broad range of unorthodox and often found materials, promoting chance, error and deliberate bad taste with the intention of challenging the roles and meanings of furnishing. Saluting their sabotage of modern domestic design, André Breton suggested that Officina Undici’s statement of intent could be taken as a surrealist manifesto for the philosophy of furniture. This paper will aim first to present the work of Officina Undici, secondly to situate it within the French surrealist group of the 1960s, and finally to use this case study to consider and problematise the very notion of a surrealist functionality.

**Lewis Kachur**

**Corps exquis: Fashioning the Surrealist Body**

In 1934/5, Salvador Dalí overpainted a photograph in which the features of Mae West were magically transformed into an apartment. As in Man Ray's related painting, the idol's lips in themselves evoke a displaced body. As an ensemble, the double image of the interior and the "star" raised the surrealist object to environmental scale, offering up the female body (and the erotic) as a structuring principle of architectural design.

While Man Ray photographed many fashion models, Dalí became the Surrealist artist most interested in applying the movement’s principles to design. His themes include not only the body in space, but also how it is covered, and what it sits or rests on. A key application was Dalí’s intensive exchange of ideas with the couturier Elsa Schiaparelli in the late 1930s. Dalí’s interest in exoskeletons, as exemplified in the lobster, finds expression in both Schiaparelli’s lobster dress, as well as the black Skeleton dress, in which the body is embraced by its own ribcage.

The form of Mae West’s plush lips, sofa-size, found their way into Schiaparelli’s salon. As recognized by gallerist Julien Levy and others, Schiaparelli established a profile as the Surrealist designer. To a degree she can be contextualized among the growing ranks of female Surrealist artists. At times she explores the erotics of the Surrealist body, at other times Surrealism functions as an embellishment or surprising detail –Surrealism as style.

Dali was one of the planners of the International Surrealist exhibition at the Galerie Beaux-Arts in Paris in 1938, which marked the apogee of collaborative Surrealist design, both in the interior spaces created, and in the elaboration of fashion and furniture. The sixteen display mannequins which greeted the visitor in the gallery hallway--"kidnapped from the windows of the Grands Magasins", as Man Ray put it--were each dressed by a different Surrealist artist or writer. These "couturiers of eroticism" created a kind of Surrealist anti-fashion show, among other metaphors.

Dali altered the initial design of his mannequin to incorporate couture: no less than a (shocking) pink facemask designed by Schiaparelli. (Dalí even brought this unsettling ski mask to New York for his show the following year.) Fashion magazines like Vogue reported on this, viewing the opening as a fashion event. The magazines also reviewed the Surrealist exhibition extensively, as congenial to their world view.
Vogue would even go so far as to stage art “shows” in their pages, thus further intermingling the worlds of display, fashion, and art.

Vogue is the source of the story that to accommodate the overflow crowds awaiting entry at the vernissage, decorator Jean-Michel Frank opened his shop next door. Inside, Dalí’s Mae West sofa welcomed spectators, unexpectedly leaving its own lipstick trace on the collar of Surrealist exhibition practice. It was in part for the pursuit of such design affiliations – including Bonwit’s windows and the World’s Fair pavilion – that the artist would find himself, in the following year, expelled from the ranks of official Surrealism.

Dr Alyce Mahon
Surrealism, Desire and Labyrinthine Space
In this paper I will assess how the Surrealists used the feminine, in corporeal and metaphoric terms, as an avant-garde theme and aesthetic strategy in both their art works and their collective exhibitions. I will consider how desire was not simply represented by the Surrealists but spatialised in what I argue are feminine terms – most notably in the form of the labyrinth. As a ritualistic space which speaks of fantasy and the bodyscape, the labyrinth evokes the unconscious, journeys of self-and sexual-discovery and initiation, and total surrender to desire. From the erotic tableaux of André Masson to the animated gallery walls of the 1959 EROS exhibition, my paper will thus demonstrate that the Surrealists both choreographed and assaulted the (male) gaze.

Alistair O'Neill
Get a head, get a hat
This paper considers the surreal hat as a defining symbol of the reception and dissemination of Surrealism in Britain in the inter-war years. The International Surrealist Exhibition arrived in London in 1936, but by this point in time Surrealism had grown from a movement in literature and art into a visual style of disturbance favoured in design and the decorative arts.

The emphatic response by the British popular press towards the exhibition opening pulled focus on the dress and demeanour of the artists exhibiting, often at the expense of a formal consideration of the artworks on display. The elaborate headpieces worn by British artists Sheila Legge and Eileen Agar were some of the most photographed features of the event and these uses of a hat – fusing the concerns of fashion, artist’s dress and art practice – crystallised the possibility of demonstrating Surrealism as an everyday practice.

Gavin Parkinson
Surrealism’s Designs on Nature
Because of the determined Paris-centrism of most of the scholarship on Surrealism, both the movement and its creative output are usually associated with a modernist lineage that begins with Baudelaire’s reflections on modernity, the urban space, and the figure of the flâneur. Initially this paper introduces an alternative view by drawing attention to the vast engagement with natural themes throughout Surrealism, before turning to specific books on natural design that informed the art of the Surrealists. Some of these sources are well known: J. Bell Pettigrew’s three volume Design in Nature (1908), for instance, and D’Arcy Thompson’s On Growth and Form (1917/1942). As a case study, though, I look at a lesser-known book, Édouard Monod-Herzen’s Principes de Morphologie générale (1927), which provided significant inspiration to Surrealist artists and writers in the 1930s, such as Salvador Dalí, Matta, Wolfgang Paalen, and Nicolas Calas. But I also look at the research of
the biologist Jagadis Chunder Bose, which underlies Monod-Herzen’s influential discussion of the principles of natural design.

Hans Stofer
The Other Side of The Coin, or, Ever More Real
Ever since I was a little boy I have been attracted to objects and their power to enchant. When I first encountered Meret Oppenheim’s “Dejeuner en Fourrure”, I discovered a juxtaposition of objects and materials which created a new enchantment of ambiguity in the familiar that was later to show me the direction for my own work.

I love Surrealism's ability to suffuse everyday materials and objects with humanity's darkest emotions whilst simultaneously beguiling the onlooker with an ironic playfulness. When we look at the world today, it is clear that Surrealism lives on through its legacy of semiotics of materials that we all use, whether consciously or unconsciously.

This lecture investigates the designer maker's perception of objects and exploration of the language of materials, and looks at object displacement as a means of communicating and expressing ideas that reach beyond the functional and rational, with the potential of turning the surreal into something that is real.