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## ARCHITECTURE AND SURREALIST AUTOMATISM: FROM HISTORICAL MODELS TO AI SPECULATIONS

**ABSTRACT:** This paper develops a theoretical framework for understanding contemporary architectural automation through the historical lens of surrealist automatism. Tracing a shift from André Breton and Philippe Soupault's automatic writing to René Magritte's problem-pairing and Salvador Dalí's paranoiac-critical method, it argues that surrealist automatism progressively moved from motor execution toward perceptual, associative, and interpretive forms of cognition. On that basis, the paper identifies three modes of architectural automatism—architecture built with automatist construction, architecture modelled on the inner world, and architecture persuasively interpreted as surreal—using them to reassess contemporary AI-assisted design. Rather than treating such systems as neutral instruments of efficiency, the paper asks whether they remain tools governed by intention or whether they reorganise design thought in ways that exceed simple instrumentality. Surrealist automatism, it argues, offers architecture a critical framework for understanding automatism/automation as an opaque, generative and speculative force.

**KEYWORDS:** surrealism, automatism, architectural cognition, paranoiac-critical method, unconscious processes, generative AI, design methodology

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Surrealist automatism offers architecture a theory of cognition that engages with perceptions, associations, and thoughts that operate prior to conscious intervention. Read in this way, automatism is not only a historical technique but a model for understanding how design may be extended by processes that exceed deliberate control. This perspective sharpens a contemporary question raised by AI-assisted design: do such systems remain instrumental tools, or do they alter design thinking in ways that make them something categorically different? Long before machine learning, surrealist artists engaged with misbehaving, opaque, and partially autonomous processes that redistributed agency and partly disabled intention. Reconsidered today, these practices allow automation to be understood not as an instrument of control, but as a speculative and creative condition that externalises cognition.

The paper proceeds in four steps. First, the paper reconstructs early surrealist automatism in André Breton and Philippe Soupault as grounded in psychological theories of the unconscious mechanisms of perception. Next, it shows how the translation of automatism into painting and architecture exposed the technical limits of this kind of automatism, and prompted translation into perceptual and interpretive automatism. Third, it examines Salvador Dalí's paranoiac-critical method and René Magritte's problem-pairing as models of relocated automatism. Finally, it uses these models to propose a framework for architectural automation as modes of externalised cognition, that is relevant today for engaging with AI-assisted design.

## 2. EARLY SURREALIST AUTOMATISM

Surrealism is the twentieth century art form most aptly associated with automatism. Surrealism began at the end of the First World War, then called the Great War, and was influenced by the burgeoning field of psychoanalysis seeking to understand the human psyche, specifically the part of the human psyche called the unconscious or the subconscious. Julien Levy, the legendary surrealist, writer and gallerist, wrote the book, *Surrealism*, in 1936, the year his Manhattan gallery held exhibitions by Magritte, Dalí, Leonor Fini and Max Ernst. Here, Levy wrote that surrealism's "fundamental doctrine is that poetry originates in, and appeals to, the subconscious."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> J. Levy, *Surrealism*, Black Sun Press, New York, 1936, p. 6.

On this topic, Levy quoted Dalí's unpublished 1934 lecture given in New York, at a museum that was then barely five years old, the Museum of Modern Art:

The subconscious has a symbolic language that is truly a universal language, for it [...] speaks with the vocabulary of the great vital constants, sexual instinct, feeling of death, physical notion of the enigma of space—these vital constants are universally echoed in every human.<sup>2</sup>

The date of surrealism's intertwining with automatism is plausibly 1919, when Breton and Soupault, months after returning home from military service, wrote a series of poems collected into a book they called, *Les Champs magnétiques*.<sup>3</sup> Critic and author Edmond Jaloux reviewed the book a few months later, saying that it contained "charming phrases, obscure, beautiful, and sweet."<sup>4</sup> As yet, no mention of automatism.

Next, in 1921 and 1922, Ernst travelled from Cologne to Paris and introduced Breton to Hans Prinzhorn's work, notably the 1922 book, *Artistry of the Mentally Ill*.<sup>5</sup> Prinzhorn's study catalogued art made by psychiatric patients, and his text gave the images theoretical weight, treating these productions as aesthetic objects shaped by unconscious processes. He argued that Gestalt perception revealed unconscious organising forces at work in every act perception and creation. For Prinzhorn, the absent-minded doodling that produced these artworks emerged from an iterative series of unconscious interpretations that are present in any creative process. He wrote:

There is a psychological urge whereby „every shape, no matter how undefined and unobjective, demands interpretation“ [...] Only the individual stroke springs from a blind impulse, while the integration of the separate parts is guided by their author, no matter how inattentive he may be.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>3</sup> A. Breton, P. Soupault, *Les Champs magnétiques*, Au Sans Pareil, Paris, 1920.

<sup>4</sup> L. Jenny, T. Trezise, "From Breton to Dalí: The Adventures of Automatism," *October*, 51, 1989, p. 106.

<sup>5</sup> T. Bauduin, "Surrealism and Madness," *Papers of Surrealism*, 8, 2010, p. 1.

<sup>6</sup> H. Prinzhorn, *Artistry of the Mentally Ill: A Contribution to the Psychology and Psychopathology of Configuration*, New York, Springer-Verlag, 1972, pp. 16–17.

Gestalt psychology proposed that the mind harbours unconscious organising mechanisms which guide how objects are perceived, for example the recognition of whole objects when only partial fragments are visible, and the recognition of groups and parts. Onto these mereological foundations, six unconscious drives operated on the objects and their parts, the urge to play, to interpret, to ornament, to order, to imitate, and to assign symbolic meaning. The description of these cognitive mechanisms *as unconscious* had two separate consequences for artistic automatism. First, aesthetic images that brought these unconscious drives to our attention were thereby revealing the unconscious by revealing the automatic actions of the mind. Second, the artist could be said to be operating automatically when they pursued absent-minded doodling.

Hearing of this from Ernst in 1922, Breton, now two years after writing the poems of *Les Champs magnétiques*, declared that they were the result of automatism. Art historian Laurent Jenny takes this rhetorical turn as a key moment in surrealist automatist theory, “the rhetoric of automatism... does not resemble any known rhetoric. This is because it inaugurates what one might call a *negative rhetoric*.”<sup>7</sup> Automatist authors claim to *not* have used their conscious, logical, rational approaches. But what is never clear is what *exactly* they have and have not done. Subjectively, artists may recognise automatism as a practice, but objectively, automatism is “a practice of writing which is, in fact, unverifiable.”<sup>8</sup>

Nonetheless, the aim of figurative surrealism was to locate something pervasive, something more common and available than knowledge of European art history. Dalí’s speech at MoMA on the value of the unconscious as a subject for art is made in these terms: “To understand an aesthetic picture, training in appreciation is necessary, cultural and intellectual preparation. For surrealism the only requisite is a receptive and intuitive human being.”<sup>9</sup> Magritte expressed the same sentiment when he wrote that the design of surrealist objects sought to convey the “feeling of the mysterious life of things (which should not depend on classic or literary allusions), which is only captured with a certain perceptiveness.”<sup>10</sup> Yet while they both sought to create images appealing to all sensitive people, the theories they developed about their techniques and the

<sup>7</sup> L. Jenny, T. Trezise, “From Breton to Dalí,” p. 107.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> J. Levy, *Surrealism*, p. 7.

<sup>10</sup> A. Danchev, *Magritte: A Life*, London, Profile Books, 2023, p. 297.

objects they designed were rooted in contemporary discourses of philosophy and psychology.

### 3. BRETON'S AUTOMATISM

Forms of literary automatism had been used by authors like Horace Walpole and Carlo Gozzi nearly two centuries earlier, but Breton's background in psychoanalysis afforded a new perspective.<sup>11</sup> Whereas contemporary spiritualists were using automatic writing to connect to spirits, independent entities, to other persons, Breton instead understood automatism as a means to contact and explore one's own unconscious.<sup>12</sup>

Breton learned about automatic writing during his military service. Working in a medical unit, he was exposed to what today may be called psychological trauma, and the new medical approaches at the time were based on psychoanalytic techniques.<sup>13</sup> The author most associated with surrealism and psychoanalysis is Sigmund Freud,<sup>14</sup> but other psychoanalysts and philosophers were referenced often in surrealist writings on creative automatism.

According to Soupault, Breton's automatic writing technique was most closely aligned with the work of psychoanalyst, Pierre Janet.<sup>15</sup> Yet Breton, in his published writings, never mentioned Janet. There was, I suggest, a hint of Janet in Levy's remark that poetry appeals to the subconscious,<sup>16</sup> "subconscious" is more Janet. Freud and Breton preferred "unconscious."<sup>17</sup>

According to psychiatry historian, Alexandra Bacopoulos-Viau, Breton did not acknowledge Janet's influence because "Janet's model

<sup>11</sup> A. Susik, "Chance and Automatism: Genealogies of the Dissociative in Dada and Surrealism," in D. Hopkins (ed.), *A Companion to Dada and Surrealism*, Chichester; Malden: Wiley, p. 402.

<sup>12</sup> K. Conley, "Surrealism and Outsider Art: From the 'Automatic Message' to André Breton's Collection," *Yale French Studies*, 109, 2006, p. 131.

<sup>13</sup> J. Haan, P. J. Koehler, J. Bogousslavsky, "Neurology and surrealism: André Breton and Joseph Babinski," *Brain*, 2012, 15, 12, pp. 3830–3838; M. Polizzotti, *Revolution of the Mind: The Life of André Breton*, rev. ed. Boston, Black Widow Press, 2009, pp. 20–25.

<sup>14</sup> For example: J. Levy, *Surrealism*, p. 5.

<sup>15</sup> A. Bacopoulos-Viau, "Automatism, Surrealism and the Making of French Psychopathology: The Case of Pierre Janet" *History of Psychiatry*, 2012, 23, 3, p. 260.

<sup>16</sup> J. Levy, *Surrealism*, p. 6.

<sup>17</sup> The history of their use of these words is too complex for much certainty to be gleaned on this point. See: S. Gardner, "The Unconscious Mind," in T. Baldwin (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Philosophy 1870–1945*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003, pp. 107–116.

of the mind would emphasise a struggle between two forces, synthesis (unity) and automatism (disintegration), with the former seen as ‘psychological strength’, the latter as ‘weakness’.<sup>18</sup> Surrealism scholar, Abigail Susik extended this argument by contrasting Breton’s approach to art theorist Viktor Shklovsky’s notion of artistic defamiliarization. For Shklovsky, habits of perception produce perceptual automatization, and art’s function is to shake up this automatization to help reveal the real object beneath perception.<sup>19</sup> Surrealist automatism, by contrast was the defamiliarization of this defamiliarization.<sup>20</sup> Breton instead considered automatism as a means of access to the inner psyche beneath social conditioning, beneath conscious intervention. Hence, surrealism scholar, Katharine Conley wrote that automatism is a “process that takes one down into the psyche, for Breton also constitutes a way back, as though in to a unique, original faculty to which easy access has been lost, except for those [...] outside culture.”<sup>21</sup> Breton’s automatism was originally therapeutic, but the enduring interest was exploratory, aesthetic, political and philosophical.

Breton described the process of writing the poems of *Les Champs magnétiques* in the 1924 *Manifest du Surréalisme*. Here he called the poems “the first purely Surrealist work.”<sup>22</sup> Breton described the process of generating these poems with Soupault as “systematic applications of automatic writing.”<sup>23</sup> Sometimes they wrote lines as quickly as possible, and passed the sheet of paper back and forth.<sup>24</sup> Sometimes they transcribed each other’s spoken words. When they pieced the texts together, there was no narrative, no logic, no thematic continuity. Soupault wrote that whatever rational approaches they already possessed regarding literary and poetic composition were irrelevant for the material they produced, so they understood themselves as being guided by unconscious

<sup>18</sup> A. Bacopoulos-Viau, “Automatism, Surrealism and the Making of French Psychopathology: The Case of Pierre Janet,” p. 262.

<sup>19</sup> A. Susik, “Chance and Automatism,” pp. 389–390.

<sup>20</sup> See here: D. Robinson, *Estrangement and the Somatics of Literature: Tolstoy, Shklovsky, Brecht*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 2008, p. vii.

<sup>21</sup> K. Conley, “Surrealism and Outsider Art,” p. 136.

<sup>22</sup> A. Breton, “Manifesto of Surrealism,” *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 1969, p. 37. For a detailed examination of Breton’s use of psychoanalytic language in his automatic processes, see: D. Lomas, *The Haunted Self: Surrealism, Psychoanalysis, Subjectivity*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2000, and D. Lomas, *Simulating the Marvellous: Psychology, Surrealism, Postmodernism*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2013.

<sup>23</sup> A. Breton, “Manifesto of Surrealism,” p. 37.

<sup>24</sup> A. Susik, “Chance and Automatism,” p. 403.

preference.<sup>25</sup> Surrealism and automatism were here bound together and Breton defined surrealism in his manifesto as, “psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express—verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner—the actual functioning of thought.”<sup>26</sup> Yet, any of surrealism’s many definitions need to be held lightly, because, as Levy, wrote:

Surrealism is not a rational, dogmatic, and consequently static theory of art—hence from a surrealist point of view there can be no accurate definition or explanation. The point of view is essentially anti-definitive and anti-explanatory. The surrealist object precedes definition.<sup>27</sup>

Or, as we have seen, surrealist practice precedes definition. Indeed, at the end of the manifesto, Breton endorsed “automatic writing”<sup>28</sup> and far more general methods like “absent-mindedness” and “distraction” as modes of opening to the surreal unconscious.<sup>29</sup> If surrealism is a purely cognitive method, do the works of automatism have any definable and verifiable external qualities? Or is the difference only in the quality of the creative experience?

Breton was expansive in his definition of surrealism, “in any other manner,” yet how automatism could extend to complex problem solving like architectural design was far from clear. Breton’s frequently repeated automatist definition gives sufficient freedom for spoken words and poetry produced in trances or other mediumistic states, doodling, found-objects collaged together, but processes like architectural design, where the resulting object needed physical endurance, functional fit and structural soundness, require a large degree of reasoned premeditation and conscious control.

Christian Zervos recognised this tension in his 1928 article in *Cahiers d’Art*. While automatic writing could plausibly evade premeditation, painting and by extension architecture could never entirely eliminate technical and compositional forethought, making pure automatism technically impossible. Within surrealism’s proscribed definitions, “it would be impossible to conceive of it for a painted work. The elimination of a

<sup>25</sup> A. Breton, P. Soupault, *The Magnetic Fields*, Atlas, London, 1985, pp. 7–11.

<sup>26</sup> A. Breton, “Manifesto of Surrealism,” p. 26

<sup>27</sup> J. Levy, *Surrealism*, p.5.

<sup>28</sup> A. Breton, “Manifesto of Surrealism,” p. 37.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.

picture's most essential preconceived pictorial elements seems a chimera and race towards nothingness."<sup>30</sup> For Zervos, surrealist automatism admitted text, but the physical execution of painting imposed technical challenges, and thereby theoretical obstacles, too insurmountable for the work to be authentically surreal. The elimination of the "most essential" elements also makes design impossible.

Then Breton began championing architecture, Ferdinand Cheval's *Palais Idéal*.<sup>31</sup> Photography does not always convey the fact that the building is something of an architectural sculpture, not completely fulfilling that third element of the Vitruvius triad: utility. It is rather too small to use domestically for anything beyond storing tools. The surreality of *Palais Idéal* was twofold. First the only function was monumental, perhaps a monument to architectural uselessness as the aura of architecture was so present. Uselessness is a virtuous surrealist position—by rejecting habitual use, the object resists being possessed by humans, and attains more of an individual and unique identity, thereby appearing a little more natural and alive. Second, surreality of *Palais Idéal* arose from the charmingly absent-minded nature of its construction. Ferdinand Cheval was the town postman, and each day he would pick up a stone or two that he found while delivering the mail. After decades of construction without a plan, it was a huge architectural doodle, undeniably a strange and wondrous artwork. Yet by breaking architectural function, it was open to Zervos' objection as the elimination of an essential element to permit the nomination as surreal. Here, it seems, architecture had to be *broken* to become surreal.

In 1925, Breton acknowledged perspectives like Zervos': "It has been said that there could not be a Surrealist painting."<sup>32</sup> But, Breton argued, "the mistake lies in thinking that the model can only be taken from the exterior world [...] The plastic work of art [...] will [...] refer to a purely interior model."<sup>33</sup> The interior model here has several potential meanings.

<sup>30</sup> C. Zervos, "Du Phénomène Surréaliste," *Cahiers D'Art*, 3, 1928, p. 114; "il serait impossible de le concevoir pour une œuvre peinte. L'élimination préconçue dans un tableau des éléments picturaux les plus essentiels me semble une chimère et une course au néant."

<sup>31</sup> E. Flavell, "The Distance from Dream to Reality": Ferdinand Cheval in the Surrealist Imagination, 1924-1945," *Aspectus*, 3, 2021, pp. 1-20.

<sup>32</sup> A. Breton, "Le Surréalisme et la peinture," *La Révolution Surréaliste*, 4, 1925, p. 27. Breton may also have been referring to M. Morise, "Les yeux enchantés," *La Révolution Surréaliste*, 1, 1, 1924, p. 16.

<sup>33</sup> C. E. Gauss, "The Theoretical Backgrounds of Surrealism," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 2, 8, 1943, p. 40, citing A. Breton, *Le Surréalisme et la Peinture*, p. 12.

While the context of surrealism rightly suggests that the “inner world” connotes the unconscious, Dalí would later associate this also with Kantian synthesis,<sup>34</sup> an association made often about Cubism in the 1920s.<sup>35</sup> There are too many categories and pure intuitions to elaborate here, but in brief, in *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant argued that human experience was shaped *a priori* by the mind’s intuitions of space and time, and by categories including substance and causality. That is, we perceive objects in space and time, linked by cause and effect, not because reality *must* be this way, but because our cognitive apparatus imposes these conditions. Hence the unconscious inner world includes Kantian intuitions and categories, and hence, incidentally, why space-time (a soft watch) is a surrealist object: it is a Kantian intuition (part of the inner world) made into an object.

In the Manifesto, Breton gave a more direct example of what might be meant by the model of the inner world, wherein he described a delirious vision:

removed from the sound of any voice, a rather strange phrase [...] I cannot remember it exactly, but it was something like: “There is a man cut in two by the window,” but there could be no question of ambiguity, accompanied as it was by the faint visual image of a man walking cut half way up by a window.<sup>36</sup>

Breton describes his personal predisposition towards the literary rather than the visual, but that immediately after this vision, “With a pencil and white sheet of paper to hand. I could easily trace their outlines. Here again it is not a matter of drawing, but simply of tracing.”<sup>37</sup> Can a complete work of architecture be experienced in a similar delirious vision? Capturing such visions is without a doubt a surreal enterprise, indeed, in the manifesto, Breton imagined the future possibility of a mechanical transcription of dreams, a collective recording device that might reveal latent structures in a shared unconscious.

<sup>34</sup> S. Dalí, “The Object as Revealed in Surrealist Experiment,” *This Quarter*, 5, 1, 1932, pp. 197–207 in H. Finkelstein (ed.), *The Collected Writings of Salvador Dalí*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1998. Dalí likely borrowed this interpretation from H. Kahnweiler, *Der Weg zum Kubismus*, Delphin-Verlag, München, 1920, p. 12.

<sup>35</sup> D. O’Brien, “Cubism and Kant,” in C. Vaughan, I. Vidmar (eds.), *Proceedings of the European Society for Aesthetics*, Vol. 10, The European Society for Aesthetics, Fribourg, pp. 482–506.

<sup>36</sup> A. Breton, “Manifesto of Surrealism,” pp. 21–22.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

Architecture that referred to a “purely interior model” was expressed later by Dalí in the architectural forms based on eggs, a stomach, a chrysalis and intra-uterine spaces, but it is clear that the physical automatism that began surrealist practice was no longer strictly necessary for the fabrication of surrealist artwork, thereby enabling the possibility of surreal architecture.<sup>38</sup>

Once the theoretical obstacle of automatism controlling the designer’s hands had been lifted, alternative automatisms were developed by Dalí and Magritte. What emerged in Dalí and Magritte is not a rejection of automatism, but its relocation from the mechanics of the hand to the automatisms of perception, association and cognition. Dalí’s theories offered surreal architectural functions and proposals for architecture based on “interior models.” Magritte developed a surreality based on creative process based on the relationships between objects.

#### 4. PARANOID AUTOMATISM

Dalí’s entry into figurative surrealism began around 1927 when he experimented with a painting technique related to Prinzhorn’s doodles.<sup>39</sup> Onto a flat and simple background, blue sky and grey concrete ground, dozens of loose brushstrokes are added. These strokes merge into fragmentary images of fear and desire. In the paintings of this style, *Honey is Sweeter than Blood* (1927), *Apparatus and Hand* (1927), and *Little Cinders* (1928), animals, bodies and faces seem to crystallise from improvised brush strokes.

Dalí’s mature entry into surrealism was marked by a more academic painting style, and the description of a paranoid-critical method, a method derived as much from psychopathology as from Gestalt psychology. What emerged in Dalí’s paranoid-critical method was not a rejection of automatism, but its relocation from the hand to perception and interpretation. Prinzhorn had shown how the mind possesses unconscious organising mechanisms capable of integrating stray fragments into coherent wholes. But Dalí grew restless with the logical, constructional aspect of this process. Doodling conveys an irrationality that comes together step by step, like detectives assembling fragments of evidence. This progressive accumulation could not account for visions and perceptions

<sup>38</sup> S. Weir, “Salvador Dalí’s Interiors with Heraclitus’s Concealment,” in G. Marinic (ed.), *Interior Architecture Theory Reader*, New York, Routledge, 2018, pp. 195–201.

<sup>39</sup> Notwithstanding several transitional works in 1928.

that appeared complete in their first instance. Sometimes too, the steps taken in the construction are not recognised as bearing any artistic intention at all. Dalí and Brassáï presented photographs of scrunched up and discarded bus tickets as “involuntary sculptures.”<sup>40</sup>

Arguably, Dalí’s most significant contribution to surrealist theory was his work on paranoia. Breton was aligned with the eminent German psychologist Emil Kraepelin, but Dalí turned instead to Paul Sérieux and Joseph Capgras, and then to Jacques Lacan’s doctoral research for an anti-constructionalist model of paranoia.<sup>41</sup> In the anti-constructionalist view, paranoia was not a reasoning madness, paranoid delirium is not pieced together like faulty logic, instead, unconscious delirium is embedded in perception. This shift was decisive. By arguing that paranoid mechanisms are conscious *and* unconscious, that meant that unconscious associations were necessarily built into every object in conscious perception, and thereafter every thought and experience. In the constructionalist mode, delusions are built sequentially, requiring interpretation and assembly. In the anti-constructionalist mode, the delusion is immediately coherent: perception itself is delirious, already charged with systematic associations, as Dalí wrote, “‘paranoiac phenomenon’ (delirium of systematic interpretation) is consubstantial with the human phenomenon of sight.”<sup>42</sup>

The paranoiac-critical method was thereby not surrender to the unconscious, but its conquest. Irrational perception made concrete for artistic effect. An imagined object that is automatically, paranoiacally, unconsciously perceived is presented to the designer’s mind who critically intervenes by making it concrete, by representing and fabricating it, etcetera, and the object is herein designed so that the audience experiences inspiring subconscious stimulation. By locating *and* activating unconscious mechanisms of perception, as Charles Gauss wrote for *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*:

Surrealist works are not important as poems, as pictures, as objects, but as being the residue left when we have stripped down our souls to the bare framework of the unconscious which is beneath all our selves and from which we never escape.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>40</sup> See K. Conley, *Surrealist Ghostliness*, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 2013, p. 69.

<sup>41</sup> S. Weir, “Surrealist Architecture: Dalí’s 1958 *Crisalida*, San Francisco,” *Journal of Surrealism and the Americas*, 13, 1, 2022, pp. 118–120.

<sup>42</sup> S. Dalí, *Dalí, Dalí!*, Julien Levy Gallery, New York, 1939, s. p.

<sup>43</sup> C. E. Gauss, “The Theoretical Backgrounds of Surrealism,” p. 39.

When describing his painting technique to a *New York Times* reporter, Dalí explained, “I do all my work subconsciously [...] I never use models or paint from life or landscapes. It is all imagination. That is, I see everything in a dream as I am working.”<sup>44</sup> When Dalí said, “all my work,” he did not mean that buying paint and cleaning the brushes was subconscious, but the design was subconscious, the selection and form of the subjects. On this point, the painter that Dalí regarded as “highly educational,”<sup>45</sup> was Magritte, and his creative method, described later, was not dissimilar. For the paintings of the 1930s, Dalí’s normal practice was still to paint landscapes and then locate “in a dream as I am working” surreal objects to add on top of the painted landscape. These new surreal objects however were not comprised of visibly doodled brush strokes, instead the component pieces are invisibly small. Therefore, Dalí referred to his famous soft watches as colloids.<sup>46</sup> Cheese, milk, fog and oil paint are examples of colloidal systems. This meant that the painted objects did not need to appear to be doodled, but could appear as compact and coherent objects irrationally (subconsciously) conceived.

The difference between passive automatism and active paranoia is exemplified in different readings of Art Nouveau architecture. Breton wrote: “What is Art Nouveau if not an attempt to generalise and adapt mediumistic drawing, painting and sculpture to the art of furniture and decoration?”<sup>47</sup> Dalí instead aligned Art Nouveau architecture with surrealist function, as accommodating irrational desires rather than opine on the mental states of the designers or builders.<sup>48</sup> Across both perspectives is a foundation for surreal architecture that is secure and transferable: the surrealists’ abilities to perceive unconscious agendas in the works of others. Art Nouveau’s architects, and Ferdinand Cheval, did not call themselves surrealists. Surrealists persuaded us to see that these architects were acting automatically, unconscious of their own desires.

<sup>44</sup> Anonymous, “Salvador Dalí Arrives: Surrealist Painter Brings 25 of His Pictures for Show Here,” *New York Times*, Nov. 15, 1934, p. 22.

<sup>45</sup> D. M. Johnson, “Influence, Dialog, Rivalry,” in *Dalí & Magritte*, Ludion, Bruxelles, 2019, p. 73.

<sup>46</sup> S. Dalí, *Notes pour l’interprétation du tableau / “La Persistance de la mémoire,”* unpublished manuscript, 1931, Gala-Salvador Dalí Foundation collection, Centre for Dalinian Studies, Figueres, s. p.

<sup>47</sup> D. Roberts, “Surrealism and Natural History: Nature and the Marvelous in Breton and Caillois,” in D. Hopkins (ed.), *A Companion to Dada and Surrealism*, Wiley, Chichester/Malden, 2016, p. 290.

<sup>48</sup> S. Dalí, “De la beauté terrifiante et comestible de l’architecture modern style,” *Minotaure*, 3–4, 1933, p. 72.

This process of analysing architecture such that unconscious intentions are seen as the main feature of the design became the model that Rem Koolhaas would use in *Delirious New York*. Accordingly, Koolhaas posited that *all architecture* is “inevitably” the result of the paranoid critical method.<sup>49</sup> Here Koolhaas astutely points towards the psychoanalytically technical yet ultimately very general way that the paranoid critical methods were defined and described, and the method’s tendency to resemble idea generation in general, rather than anything specifically *surreal*. Anyone having a vision of what their project might look like is having a surrealist moment, especially if they do their best to transcribe that vision.

## 5. PAIRING PROBLEMS

Around 1925, Magritte found surrealism, and moved to Paris in 1927 to work with Breton in the growing surrealist movement. That year he painted the first version of *La Clef des songes*, foregrounding odd combinations of words and images. Magritte painted many similar paintings with this name, all with simple, diagram-like compositions. Typically, a flat grey background is framed with four or six equal rectangles. In each rectangle is a familiar object like a shoe or a candle, painted in a direct and realistic style. A couple of words, written in flowing handwriting, are underneath each object. Underneath the leaf, for example, is written the French for “table;” underneath the suitcase, “sky.”

Over the next year, Magritte developed a series of eighteen relations between words and images, which he prepared as *Les Mots et les Images*, published in *La Révolution Surréaliste*.<sup>50</sup> In each of the eighteen relations, there are some qualities that repeat in nearly all. Typically, an image and a word are paired. And there are no words like “running” or “justice,” but words of objects that *could* be depicted in the adjacent image, like “sun,” and “horse.”<sup>51</sup>

Examining each of the eighteen possible relations that Magritte identified, and then their application into architecture might be a fruitful

<sup>49</sup> R. Koolhaas, *Delirious New York*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1978, p. 246. See: S. Weir, “Salvador Dali in Rem Koolhaas’ *Delirious New York*,” *The Journal of Architecture*, 27, 2–3, 2022, pp. 398–419.

<sup>50</sup> R. Magritte, “Les Mots et les Images,” *La Révolution Surréaliste* 12, 1929, pp. 32–33.

<sup>51</sup> Michel Foucault analysed some of these conjunctions in his 1973 monograph on Magritte, *This Is Not a Pipe*.

project, but for this essay on automatism, the focus is on Magritte's process. When pairing objects, Magritte described the first object as a question, and the design problem was to find "another object as answer, secretly connected to the first by links which are sufficiently complex to serve as verification of the answer."<sup>52</sup> For example, Magritte's answer for the problem of the grand piano, was a giant engagement ring large enough to surround the piano like an architectural frame. Magritte believed that there was some innate psychological connection between the two objects based on affinities. Consider next his written explanation, sent to Breton, on a breakthrough in the process.

One night in 1936 I woke up in a room where there happened to be a bird sleeping in a cage. A splendid misapprehension made me see the cage with the bird gone and replaced by an egg. I had grasped a new and astonishing poetic secret, because the shock I experienced was caused precisely by the affinity between the two objects: the cage and the egg, whereas previously I had provoked the shock by bringing together totally unrelated objects.

Preceding from this revelation, I tried to discover if objects other than the cage, thanks to the pinpointing of some elements peculiar to them, and a strictly predestined part of them, could not display the same obvious poetic quality that the egg and the cage had achieved through being brought together [...]

In the course of my researches, I became certain that the element to be discovered, the unique feature residing obscurely in each object, was always known me in advance, but that any knowledge of it was, so to speak, hidden in the depths of my thought.<sup>53</sup>

Magritte's revelation of 1936 was that the second object can hold a sympathy towards the first, rather than an antipathy. Notable is Magritte's repeated assertion about the location of the second object, the answering

<sup>52</sup> R. Magritte, *Selected Writings*, Surrey, UK, Alma Books, 2016, p. 140.

<sup>53</sup> R. Magritte, D. Sylvester, S. Whitfield, *René Magritte: Catalogue Raisonné, Volume 2. Oil Paintings and Objects, 1931–1948* The Menil Foundation, , Houston, 1993, pp. 16–17. There is reason to be skeptical of Magritte's account here, as the story of waking to imagine an egg inside a cage, Magritte wrote that this happened in 1936, but the painting was painted in 1933, P. Allmer, *Critical Lives: Rene Magritte*, Reaktion Books, London, 2019, pp. 176–178.

object, as within something unconscious, as somehow “hidden” inside his mind, hidden in thought, hence its surreality.

Applying this to architecture is a matter of framing the design questions accordingly, selecting first objects in need of a second object, or in need of a particular quality that can be conveyed with an object—insofar as a quality, blue, for example, may also be an object, blue paint. One of my own recent experiments in architectural speculation used Magritte’s problem-pairing for text-to-image AI. The first object, the architectural “problem,” was theatre and the answering object, shipwreck, producing unprecedented architectural forms based on latent affinities between the words.<sup>54</sup> This approach functions as a contemporary analogue to Magritte’s own “hidden” answers, an automatism shared between human ideation and the collected knowledge of a large language model and stable diffusion model. This might open another zone of surreality for architectural design, if the deep engagement with external cognition does not disqualify it from authentic human surreality.

The authenticity question may be resolved by substituting the larger question of whether or not we consider our tools to be coauthors, ink bleeds into paper to be creditable contributors to the watercolour, or the patterns in the timber and stone to be contributor to the architectural design. AI does possess an unconscious in the psychoanalytic sense, but their language contains latent, unexpressed quantities beyond human reason. But complexity is no measure of consciousness, these models are puppets. It is, in my view, an illusion that they appear to be casual agents in the data they generate, just as it is an illusion to say that the gun is the causal agent when a shot is fired.

## 6. SURREAL AUTOMATISM IN ARCHITECTURAL DESIGN

The history of early surrealist automatism shows that there are several ways that architectural design can engage automatist surrealism. Since surrealism is a diverse practice that evades definition, and automatism is a somewhat blurry concept—as many different parts of our cognition can be considered automatic—some kinds of automatism are contrary and/or incompatible with some others, but the method is reliable and effective for unsettling creative habits, and generating novel and authentic ideas.

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<sup>54</sup> S. Weir, S. Rich, “Shipwreck Hauntography,” *Footprint*, 35, 2024, pp. 51–66.

There are three fluid kinds of automatist surreal architecture.

1. Architecture built with automatist construction.
2. Architecture modelled on the inner world.
3. Architecture persuasively interpreted as surreal.

6.1. The first kind of surreal architecture are the buildings constructed without a design and assembled in an automatist manner, like Ferdinand Cheval's constructions where the design was unplanned and the result of innumerable spontaneous acts. Both Dalí's 1928-1929 paintings and Kurt Schwitters's *Merzbau* fit this schema.<sup>55</sup> Bird's nests, bee hives, termite mounds and similar forms might also be included in this category if we push surreality out beyond human participation.

All these works can be said to legitimately harbour evidence of the designer's unconscious mechanisms because every part of the building was materially set in place with the designer's hands. Two questions follow. Is a work of architecture automatist if one part of the design work was automatist? And, can architecture be correctly considered automatist surrealism if the architect used automatist means and then another more reasonable person constructed the edifice? This would depend if the architect could specify automatist elements into the construction. The clearest example of this is the exquisite-corpse method, where typically four people contribute a quarter of the design of a human figure. In the end, a singular figure appears that is independent of the intentions of any of the individual contributors. The autonomy of the figure is also significant for the person who architects their chosen instance of the exquisite corpse exercise, selecting the contributors and the subject (subjects other than human figures are all equally plausible.) This is arguably another form of surreal autonomous art making. If the architect saw in this object a deep resonance with their own inner world, who could refuse the process? Yet whenever we step beyond pure automatist construction, we are entering diluted automatisms, legitimate automatisms but very diluted, making misdiagnosis more likely.

If we extend cognition outwards to include artificial intelligence partners, the use of Magritte's pairings as prompts for expansion and representation become more intriguing. Whether or not these processes can

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<sup>55</sup> See: N. Spiller, *Architecture and Surrealism*, Thames & Hudson, London, 2016, pp. 26–29.

be understood as having any significance for the exploration of the unconscious psyche is debatable. It is certainly arguable that such processes are not capable of foregrounding latent knowledge within the designer, and are only capable of revealing latent knowledge within the language model, and thereby of revealing profound associations between concepts and knowledges that it has a unique capability to identify, compress and explain. In this way, models might be capable of producing new knowledge but the prompts might need some surrealist prompting to push this hidden knowledge to the surface. However, as models collect greater amounts of data from individual users, an AI model may be able to identify patterns of data in users consisting latent knowledge. Indeed, the capacity of AI to act as a form of extended memory is one of the most intriguing possibilities of not just using but living for decades with AI

6.2. The second kind of surreal architecture looks to the inner world as a model. Within this notion of the inner world are many aspects. In Breton's original model, automatic writing necessarily reveals the inner world, but the idea has three distinct branches.

6.2.1. The first branch of the internal model is the principle that architectural function is (or, perhaps, should be) aligned with human desires, both conscious and unconscious. Accordingly, architecture should respond to unconscious desires. Thomas Mical argued for surrealism's relevance to architecture theory as a countermeasure to the totalising power of modernism, which sought to rationalize away the irrational aspects pre-modern architecture.<sup>56</sup>

6.2.2. The second branch of the internal model accounts for the transcription of visions and dreams. Whether or not the reader would regard designing a building as faithfully as possible after seeing it in a dream as automatist or not, there is inarguably some automatic subconscious design work occurring in the process. Once we recognise the fact that the design and fabrication of buildings and paintings are (almost) never a single creative experience but are instead a series of many kinds of work, the designation of a project to be surreal or not based on the amount of automatism in the process becomes impossibly fraught.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>56</sup> T. Mical, *Surrealism and Architecture*, Routledge, London, 2004, p. 1.

<sup>57</sup> As noted by Magritte's friend, Paul Nougé, see: A. Danchev, *Magritte: A Life*, p. 175.

6.2.3. The third branch is Magritte's process of seeking answer objects within thought. Relatedly, the inner model for Dalí has three vital constants: the presence of death which can be seen in decaying objects; the anxiety of space-time shown as objects experiencing causal forces, like cheese *melting*, architectural beams bending and sagging; and the sexual instinct shown in the forms of human bodies and their varied appearance through pareidolia.<sup>58</sup> Across all these perspectives, the key observation is the great variety of ideas that can be drawn from the inner world.

Architecture, especially public architecture, too should be understood as attempting to appeal to, and engage meaningfully with, many universal or pseudo-universal human values: the human scale of objects and the space needed to comfortably perform bodily activities, still and windy, wet and dry, quiet and noisy, sunny and shady, warm and cold, cosy and bare, clean and dirty. Almost all works of architecture possess a sunny side and a shaded side, sunrise and sunset sides, these too I would call vital constants of architecture, to which people have fairly predictable unconscious responses. The placedness of objects was considered by Magritte too. When considering the object pairings, he wrote that there were not two, but "three points of reference: the object, the something linked to it in the obscurity of my consciousness and the light into which this something had to be brought."<sup>59</sup> So, if we accept the notion that surreality addresses vital constants, all architecture that responds to the site in a manner that is experienced unconsciously by the inhabitants, is thereby surreal; and here we arrive at Koolhaas' observation that surrealism seems to encompass all aspects of architecture, knowingly surreal or not.

6.3. The third kind of surrealist architecture is any work of architecture persuasively interpreted as surreal. This is aligned with the foundational notion of Koolhaas, but very infrequently executed successfully. Breton and Dalí provided exemplars with their writings on Art Nouveau. Such

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<sup>58</sup> For more on this topic, see: C. Wang *et al.* "Pareidolia in a Built Environment as a Complex Phenomenological Ambiguous Stimuli," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 19, 9, 2022; and S. Chalup K. Hong, M. J. Ostwald, "Simulating Pareidolia of Faces for Architectural Image Analysis," *International Journal of Computer Information Systems and Industrial Management Applications*, 2, 2010, pp. 262–278.

<sup>59</sup> R. Magritte, D. Sylvester, S. Whitfield, *René Magritte: Catalogue Raisonné. Volume 2*, p. 17.

interpretation can be laborious and research intensive, or spontaneous and unpremeditated, like using a door handle as a coat hook. Interpreting architecture as having a surreal function is a strong mode of interpretation. The automatism of such surreality is variable.

An extended third kind I consider most remarkable where it can be made to connect to 6.1. (automatist technique) is generative text-to-image AI. To include this in the list of automatic design methods is contentious, as it requires an extended model of cognition that includes an expanded unconscious. What is at stake here is not whether such systems possess autonomy or intention, but whether they can still be understood as purely instrumental—executing predefined ends—or whether they instead operate as cognitive systems that reorganise perception, association, and design thinking in ways that exceed their use as tools. My speculation is that their broad acceptance as extended cognition is the probable outcome. Several scenarios make the acceptance of surrealist imagery made with generative AI seem plausible:

6.3.1. Someone dreams of an extraordinary and moving image in unusually fine detail then during the morning's work prompts the image's appearance into existence.

6.3.2. Someone sees an image and is enamoured with it, then later learns that it was generated AI, and in spite of the disapproval of those around her, who say AI cannot make art, she continues to adore, and be moved by, the image. This is an example of making an object surrealist through interpretation.

6.3.3. An artist assembles a collage and then later learns that one of the images used was made by AI. The mereological problem of how parts contribute to the identity of a whole is somewhat disabling in examples like these. Though a surrealist flourish in an ornamental detail of an otherwise entirely conscious crafting of an image is unlikely to be granted the surrealist nomination.

6.3.4. An artist makes an image of an object in AI, then fabricates an object that corresponds to the image.

6.3.5. An artist takes an AI image and claims it, in the manner of Marcel Duchamp, as a ready-made artwork, seeking recognition for the idea.

6.4. There are very many plausible situations where AI is bound up into some surreal scenario. As far as I know it has not yet happened, but it will eventually occur that someone builds a building to look like its original AI perspective. Many may call this “surreal” but whether or not its purported surreality will endure is another question, and it seems unlikely if the process becomes common. Surreality in architecture through automatism and pseudo-automatist processes, given the anticipation of the increased automation of design through AI, will expand architectural cognition into all the kinds of surrealist architectures with new unconsciously satisfying affordances.

The future of architectural automatism need not lie in replicating historical techniques, nor in attributing consciousness to machines, but in extending cognition, blurring the boundary between tool and collaborator. As new tools externalise intuition, expand perceptual possibility, and generate forms that exceed individual intention, they revive the surrealist ambition to expose the hidden determinants of thought and harness them for architectural cognition. The architect’s role will remain based in selective judgment, translation of ideas into appropriate form, and critical testing of options and proposals. Whether mediated through human hands, collective practices, or language and diffusion models, automatism persists as an engine of estrangement, an invitation to design with, against, and beyond ourselves. Architecture becomes surreal not because it imitates past methods but because it continues to discover new ways to be designed, new ways to be interpreted, and new unconscious desires to accommodate.

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