THE EROTIC SPECTACLE OF IDENTITY CRISES: STREETWALKING MANNEQUINS CRUISE THE 1938 INTERNATIONAL SURREALIST EXHIBITION

Karen Silberstein

In the entrance hallway leading to the main exhibition space of the 1938 International Surrealist Exhibition at the *Galerie des Beaux-Arts* in Paris, the visitor was greeted by fifteen female mannequins, each designed by a different artist. The installation, entitled "Mannequin Walkway," was also known as *les plus belles rues de Paris* because each mannequin stood under a street sign. The placement of the mannequins along the hallway suggested prostitution while many of the street names, like *rue cerise*, *rue d'une perle*, and *rue des lèvres*, made overtly sexual references to the female body. These street signs demonstrated, by metonymy, the central role of eroticism in the surrealist creative process.

Since Baudelaire adopted the prostitute as muse of the modern city, landmarks of French modernity such as Edouard Manet's *Olympia* and Picasso's *Demoiselles d'Avignon* have designated the prostitute as the embodiment of transgressive eroticism and the emblem of modernist approaches to representation. Given Surrealism's subversive intent, the choice of the prostitute as muse was surprising because it essentially conformed to nineteenth-century representations of femininity. The group's selection was all the more unexpected because prostitution was regulated by the French state until 1945. Curiously, first-hand accounts of the exhibition glossed over the selection of prositute as muse, while contemporary scholarship has neglected the exhibition almost entirely.[1]

I discuss the artist's identification with the mannequin as prostitute and as muse, and show how these identifications work to reconfigure constructions of gender. The mannequins' grotesque, uncanny, and abject appearance represented the transgressive, erotic pleasures of the creative process while their playful aspect parodied stereotypes of femininity. In many respects, the mannequins represented traditional, romantic constructions of femininity, such as the phallic woman and the virgin mother. However, the mannequin creations equally challenged heterosexual models of gender identity in unsettling ways.

The organization of the exhibition space foregrounded the erotic nature of spectacle and spectatorship. At the opening, dancer Hélène Vanel performed the *Acte manqué* in wild leaps and bounds over bordello beds draped with rose satin sheets. The café tables and chairs,

located in the centre of the room, afforded a view of four sumptuous beds placed in each corner of the main space. The juxtaposition of boudoir and sidewalk café, inside and outside, accentuated the analogy between the city and the brothel as marketplaces for the circulation and exchange of sensory stimuli.

All accounts of the 1938 exhibition – including Breton's – indicate that we should interpret the display allegorically, as a surrealist rendition of the modern city.[2] This allegorical approach corresponds to Walter Benjamin's vision of the modern city which attributes meaning to cultural artefacts.[3] André Masson envisioned the street signs as "emblematic plaques" and recollected that the sign placed above his mannequin, the *rue Vivienne*, represented the mythical capital of Surrealism because Lautréamont, hero to the Surrealists, had resided there.[4] The allegorical structure of the exhibition allowed the participants of the International Surrealist Exhibition of 1938 to achieve their primary objective – to create an experience that was jarring enough for the avant-garde *flâneur* to lose himself in the modern city.

Surrealist Georges Hugnet allegorized the relationship between artist and mannequin; likening it to that of Pygmalion and Galatea. Hugnet's analogy draws attention to the way the installation parodied art by equating it with fashion. As a statue, Galatea represents artistic inspiration in its purest form while the store mannequin has the utilitarian function of displaying commodities in an appealing light. In contrast to Hugnet's romantic vision of the mannequins, Breton described the layout of the exhibition as a direct reference to the *maison de passe* wherein the mannequins represent prostitutes.[5] Despite their differences, both models of femininity are products of male fantasy. The mannequin creation reflects the desires of the artist in much the same way that the prostitute adopts a seductive persona to reflect the desires of her client.

In this simulated "surrealist city," the mannequin-prostitute provided an ideal site for the surrealist artist to enact his relationship to art, the female body and consumer culture. The artist's identification with his creation highlights the precarious nature of his relationship to "reproduction" because according to nineteenth-century French folklore, the prostitute was believed to be sterile. The mass-produced status of the mannequins, gendered female, symbolically united the masculine faculty for artistic creation with the feminine capacity for procreation and therby, underscored the artist's ambivalent relation to "reproduction."

By placing their individual stamp on a mass-produced copy of the female body, these artists subverted the process of (re)production as they discarded the original to gain "mastery" over the copy.

Hugnet's account of the exhibition is noteworthy for reproducing a confusion of the model of the thing with the thing itself. The slippage between original and copy is already built into the dual signification of the mannequin, which, according to the *Petit Robert*, has denoted both the object and the live model since 1830. In relating the delivery of the unadorned mannequins to the Gallery, Hugnet wrote that a "disorderly convoy of naked women arrived gesturing wildly." These "svelte stars", he concluded, epitomized the "éternel féminin."[6] Although the mannequins are but inanimate objects, Hugnet's semantic register is more appropriate to the description of "real" women. Hugnet's narrative illustrates how the avant-garde aesthetic experience, which is an end in itself, can literally dispense with "reality." The pronounced artificiality of the mannequins shifts the focus of representation from creating an illusion of reality back onto the creative process, or alternately, to the relationship of the artist to the work of art.

The mass-produced model of the female body serves as an erotic object of exchange amongst the male artists, as well as between the artists and their public. According to Breton, the mannequin is exemplary of the modern "marvelous" which is the ultimate surrealist good.[7] The layout of the exhibition as department store and as brothel pays tribute to transitory, modern, pleasure-seeking pastimes and changing fashions. The spectacle of the mannequins lining the entrance hall led the viewers to imagine the red-light district as one giant department store where the shopper could pick and choose their goods or pleasures. As Rita Felski argues in *The Gender of Modernity*: "The department store sold not just commodities but the very act of consumption, transforming the mundane activity of shopping into a sensuous and enjoyable experience for a bourgeois public."[8] In both the department store and the Surrealist Exhibition, the shopper and the viewer are there to take in the display and blend with the crowd, but just as importantly, to see and be seen. In this commercial context, the store mannequin reflects back to the consumer an improved, more seductive version of him or herself. Conversly, the surrealist mannequin mirrors the transgressive desire of the viewer in an uncanny, repellent manner.

While the mannequins' grotesque appearance parodied the vulgarity of consumerism, it evoked the anxiety induced by female consumption.

Several mannequins conveyed the terror inspired by insatiable feminine desire of which Zola's Nana remains the prototype. Max Ernst, poised his mannequin with the corpse of a stone-headed man underfoot. This mannequin, draped in black veils and clad in torn black stockings, incarnated the prostitute as a destructive man-eater, conveying the fatal consequences of feminine desire. The pink silk lingerie that she wore under her widow's weeds proclaimed her dangerous but seductive duplicity. The male subject is trampled upon while the female subject is condemned to a state of perpetual loss as she repeatedly destroys the object of her all-consuming desire. In order to compensate for this widow's loss as well as her feminine lack, or perhaps, to shed some light on the matter, Ernst stuck a red light bulb between his widow's legs, which, according to Hugnet's story, Breton then pressured him to remove for reasons of decency.[9]

Whereas Ernst's mannequin illustrated the threatening nature of feminine desire, other mannequins evoked variation on the relationship of predator to prey. Marcel Jean ensnared his mermaid mannequin with a heavy fisherman's net while André Masson entrapped his mannequin's head in a birdcage. Wolfgang Paalen crowned his vampire-like mannequin with a bat frozen in flight. Salvador Dali endowed his mannequin with a vulture's head. In the courtyard, Dali installed a taxi "manned" by a shark-headed driver in the front seat, and in the back seat, a mannequin drenched by a continuous downpour of water from within the taxi.The ravished state of her peasant garb and tangled, matted golden locks smacked of abduction, thus perversely appealing to the viewer's predatory instinct.[10] These mannequins suggested that the roles of predator and of prey are paradigmatic of gender relations, while the shifting attributes of the predator/prey model are characteristic of the instability of gender constructions.

Dali's "Rainy Taxi" jarred the viewer by coding carnal pleasures in culinary terms. According to surrealist logic, this moist, blond maiden in distress covered with gourmet snails, and garnished with vegetation, looked good enough to eat. The live snails feeding upon the mannequin however, disoriented the viewer who would rather expect to see a live woman feeding on snails. As the viewers, along with shark-man, contemplate feasting upon this waxen dish, they were repulsed in part because the scene conjured up visions of a rotting corpse; in part because the soft and slimy interior of the snail evoked female anatomy in a sexually excited state. This representation of feminine sexuality

constituted the very incarnation of the abject as it simultaneously elicited the viewer's desire and disgust, fascination and fear.

Like Dali, Wolfgang Paalen played with abject reversals by dressing his mannequin with fungal growths and decaying organic materials, specifically, mushrooms and moss.The *champignon* is used to confect gourmet dishes but also signifies fungus. *Mousse* or moss evokes the register of *cuisine*, but indirectly, *couture* (*mousseline*). Paalen represented a waxen imitation of the female body that was, paradoxically, a source of creative nourishment and sensual pleasure, and a breeding ground for disease and rot. By substituting perishable mediums for fabric, Paalen's *couture* creation externalized the cliché of the female body as diseased but also exposed the fashion industry as an opportunistic perversion of art and nature. By literalizing the idea of a natural style, Paalen's gown mocks the equation of femininity with artifice while it reinforces the cliché associating women with nature and decay.

Whereas Paalen explores the meaning of dressing "naturally," Man Ray's mannequin subverts the representation of nudity. This minimally attired, fully exposed waxen figure was bare but for the light bulb and glass tubing in her hair, and the belt around her waist. The light bulb alluded to the *allumeuse* or "tease" while the glass tubing proclaimed her an artificial product of technology, thereby quelling the potential eroticism of this exposed, robotic prostitute. Indeed, as this mannequin cries false tears of glass beneath the street sign *rue d'une perle*, the viewer senses that the mannequin is bidding farewell to the erotic charms of ornamentation since the belt around her waist bears the message *Adieu foulard*. The belt and the glass tears suggest that the site of eroticism is located outside the body – on that which conceals or adorns. Paradoxically these solid glass tears are but empty signifiers. They highlight the mannequin's status as a an artificial copy of the exposed female body while their deceptive appearance radicalizes the commonplace belief that artifice constructs eroticism by suggesting that even nudity is constructed.

André Masson's mannequin, entitled "Le Baillon vert à bouche de pensée," showcases the deceptive nature of appearances in surrealist constructions of gender. In an unmistakable pun on female genitalia, Breton deemed Masson's mannequin to be the "pearl" of the exhibition. The artificial red fish suspended in the cage and lodged in the curls of the mannequin further alluded to female genitalia. Her head was

enclosed in a birdcage, while her mouth was gagged with a green velvet band and stuffed with a pansy. "Pensée" conspicuously puns upon "pansée" (bandaged) or the "gag." But Masson's title also played upon the double meaning of "pensée" denoting both thought and the pansy, a flower associated with memory. The mannequin's mouth was not only decorative, but commemorative and contemplative. The natural, sensual functions of the mouth were thrice inhibited (literally obstructed by thoughts and memories of the artist's projection).

In addition to the mouth, the mannequin's crotch was adorned, sporting an oval mirror featuring two glass tiger's eyes and crowned with peacock feathers. This decorative crotch-piece, like its masculine counterpart, the codpiece, underlined the connection between gender identity, artifice and spectacle. The male spectator hoping to penetrate the mannequin is thrown back upon himself. He is penetrated instead by the glass-eyed gaze of the crotch-piece which blurred distinctions between the subject and object of the gaze as well as those between masculine and feminine. *Le Baillon vert à bouche de pensée* mirrors the gender of the spectator. Masson's mannequin revealed the male surrealist's identification with the mannequin-prostitute but also his fear of the feminine other: if the viewer should be so bold as to smile into the mirror, he encounters the *vagina dentata* within himself thus recalling Baudelaire's poem *L'Héautontimorouménos*: "Je suis la plaie et le couteau?[...] Et la victime et le bourreau." This captive but decorative creature, silenced but quite literally seeing double, united the phallic with the feminine; and thereby resisted the notion that gender is based on binary oppositions.

Duchamp's partially nude and partially cross-dressed mannequin similarly challenged the heterosexual model of gender identity. The mannequin stands beneath the sign *rue des lèvres* and is bare from the waist down. The street name constitutes an overt reference to female genitalia while the lightbulb in her breast pocket, evokes the *maison de passe*. However, as if to camouflage these feminine codes, she is wearing his hat, tie, and jacket. The mannequin's attire conforms to the etymology of the word *mannequin* itself, which is derived from the Dutch diminutive for man. More importantly, Duchamp strategically scrawled his signature just above the mannequin's crotch, in this way, endowing his mannequin with a linguistic sign of the phallus. Indeed the photo of Duchamp's mannequin (by Man Ray) is shot from below and foregrounds the lower region of the mannequin's anatomy. In yet

another twist, this particular signature bore the name of Rrose Sélavy, that is, Duchamp's celebrated persona as a transvestite. If Rrose Sélavy is a cross-dressed man, then Duchamp's mannequin of the same name, double-crosses gender lines, producing a "mise-en-abyme" of gender as performance – a woman dressed as a man dressed as a woman...

Supporting Hugnet's claim that Pygmalion is a dominant metaphor for the artist's relation to the mannequin, Duchamp's dresses his Galatea in his own clothes from the waist up. But below lies the hidden difference of the cross-dressed other. Alternatively, below the hemline of Duchamp's jacket lies nothing but wax since the mannequin's phallic lack is bared for all the world to see. This cross-dressed mannequin defied the ostensibly fixed category of biology so often confused with gender identity. Duchamp's mannequin thus revealed the profound ambiguity of the popular saying that "the clothes make the man" while conspicuously enlisting the viewer to question what exactly "makes" the woman.

These bound, gagged, blinded, veiled, roboticized, organified female models alternatively beckoned, tantalized, shocked, repulsed and otherwise mocked the viewer. The mannequin as prostitute confronted the spectator with the construction of erotic spectacle according to the surrealist logic of displacement and rupture. The abject appearance of many mannequins did appear to subvert the principles of truth and beauty that Galatea represents. Indeed their walk on the wild side very much resembled Baudelaire's sacreligious itinerary. As one of the last, large-scale, collaborative efforts of first generation Surrealists prior to World War II, this exhibit deployed the mannequin-prostitute to celebrate, desecrate and parody commonplace associations of femininity with artifice and with consumption. Yet, in spite of their sometimes successful reconfiguration of the heterosexual model of gender identity, these artists ultimately adhered to the tradition whereby the artist "makes" the woman.

Columbia University

NOTES

[1] Historical accounts of the exhibition include: *Paris 1937-Paris*

1957 (Paris: Centre Pompidou, Gallimard, 1991), in Sarane Alexandrian, *Surrealist Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1977) and in *Salvador Dali 1904-1989, The Paintings, Volume I* ed. Descharnes, Robert & Néret, Gilles (Köln: Benedikt Taschen Verlag, 1994) and most recently, Bruce Altshuler *The Avant-Garde in Exhibition* Abrams: NY, 1994.

[2] First-hand accounts have been published in Breton's *Clé des champs* (1967), George Hugnet's *Pleins et Deliés* (1972), Marcel Jean's *Histoire de la peinture surréaliste* (1959) and Man Ray's *Autoportrait* (1964).

[3] Walter Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*. London: Verso, 1977 (176-178).

[4] J.P. Clébert *Mythologies d'André Masson*. Paris: Seuil, 1971.

[5] André Breton, "Devant le rideau" *La Clé des Champs* (Paris: Pauvert, 1967) 105.

[6] Hugnet *Pleins et deliés* (La Chapelle sur Loire: éditions Authier, 1972) 328.

[7] Breton *Oeuvres* Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Gallimard: Paris, 1988 321. "Le merveilleux n'est pas le même à toutes les époques; il participe obscurément d'une sorte de révélation générale dont le détail seul nous parvient: ce sont les *ruines* romantiques, le *mannequin* modern ou tout autre symbole propre à remuer la sensibilité humaine durant un temps."

[8] Rita Felski, *The Gender of Modernity* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1995) 67.

[9] Quant à Ernst, dressé au scandale par les excès de Dada, il avait imaginé un groupe dont un protagoniste, selon les apparences un chemineau à tête de lion, roulé à terre, enlaçait par le bas une veuve en grand deuil, voilée de crêpe jusqu'aux genoux (Hugnet, *Pleins et deliés* 333).

[10] According to Dali's recipe for the Taxi Pluvieux – "le Commissariat General de l'imagination publique" – "La d'Ame [sic] s'habillera de préférence avec une cretone sordide ou sera imprimé l'estigmate de l'Angélus de Millet et de ces sansationelles glaneuses [sic]" (Hugnet, *Pleins et deliés* 339).