

Disfigured Ground: Architectural space and representation in the creative practices of Dada and Surrealism

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This paper examines how the representation of architectural space was radically repositioned in a number of creative art practices of the 1920s. The creative strategies of flattening, cutting, framing and transparency implicate architecture, not only eroding the spatial certainties of figure and ground but the techniques of architectural representation that were used to describe them. These practices were intrinsically related to the “transgressive” avant-gardes of Dada and Surrealism and exist as part of a broader project to dismantle the boundaries between artistic mediums and, in the process, undermine the subjective nature of architectural experience. Through these projects, and the contemporaneous interest in ethnography, space was freed from its passive, contextual relationship to art and reconceptualized as an “artefact”: a fixed, flattened object that could be positioned in time and verified through aesthetic experience. This paper focusses on the works of three artists: Francis Picabia, Alberto Giacometti and Max Ernst. It demonstrates the way in which each artist undertook works that specifically and deliberately questioned the nature of architectural space and its relationship to the art object. These radical approaches blurred the well-established architectural categories of context and object, figure and ground, and were instrumental in avant-garde strategies of making architecture from the 1970s to the present.

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There is a famous Man Ray photograph of Marcel Duchamp’s Large Glass, covered in dust and standing in Duchamp’s New York studio. Photographed in close-up, and tilted ninety degrees so the normally vertical surface becomes a flat, seemingly infinite horizontal plain, the obsessive lines of the glass can be seen folding into architectural contours that frame the bizarre machinery of the Large Glass and evoke the outlines of architectural shapes. These contours are characteristic of Duchamp’s method which collapses the distinction between line, drawing, surface and spatial contour. The lines are lifted (or projected) off the surface, and, mirroring the way the piece originally functioned, are projected back into 3-dimensional space. The glass has, in Man Ray’s photo, all of the characteristics of an architectural plan. Despite being stripped of its characteristic “transparency” the Large Glass is radically reprogrammed in Man Ray’s photograph to question the relationship between an art object and an architectural space. This unique perspective draws an idiosyncratic focus on a number of important and under-recognised aspects of the spatial and architectural themes that underpin the Large Glass.

In his 1937 review of the Large Glass, Frederick Kiesler, solitary architect of Surrealism, described the work as the first ever “X-ray of architectural space”. Praising the work’s transparency, as well as the seamless integration of painting, sculpture and architecture, Kiesler saw the Large Glass as paradigmatic in defining a new conception of space where, instead of passively residing in space, the art object would take a role in actively creating it. His review suggests an ancestry that connects the radical and nihilistic processes of Dada with a broader thinking about architectural space and its representation. These creative strategies of flattening, cutting, framing and transparency evoke and then undermine architecture, not only eroding the spatial certainties of figure and ground but the techniques of architectural representation that were used to describe them. The work of Duchamp, like the historical avant-garde in general, haunts the present investigation.

This paper examines the way in which ideas relating to architectural space were uniquely developed in the creative practices of Dada and Surrealism. Furthermore, it considers the way that, following the theme of “artefacts”, space is positioned and even constructed as an artefact. Where the history of architectural spaces in Surrealism has focused primarily (and predictably) on the external dreamscapes of the Surrealist city, this paper begins to uncover an “interior” architectural space, revealed through the work of a number of key practitioners and corresponding to the evolution of a series of radical representational techniques. The paper’s primary focus is works by three artists—Francis Picabia, Alberto Giacometti and Max Ernst—all of whom have been central to the “reconstruction” of historical avant-garde practice in critical theory and art theory.

The motivation for re-examining the nature of architectural space in Dada and Surrealism develops from the awareness that a schism exists between architectural readings of this period, and recent critical developments in “art theory” that have repositioned thinking pertaining to the historical avant-garde. In particular, a number of recent works in art theory have strongly linked the work of individual Dada and Surrealist artists with themes relating to architectural space. Amongst recent scholarship into the historical avant-garde George Baker (2007), T. J. Demos (2001), David Joselit (1998) and Hal Foster (1995, 2004) have all explicitly identified the importance of architectural space in redefining the nature of medium in artistic practice in the 1920s. A similar argument is implied in the work of a number of other writers, including Rosalind Krauss (1994). Despite this growth of scholarship in the arts on this topic, the centrality of architectural space to the critical theory of Dada and Surrealism is at odds with current writings in architecture. The two major works of scholarship on architecture and Surrealism—Dalibor Veseley’s special issue of *Architectural Design* dedicated to the subject *Surrealism and Architecture*, published at the end of 1978 and Thomas Mical’s *Surrealism and Architecture* published in 2005—have both stressed the inability of Surrealism to assimilate ideas relating to architecture into their work and a broader indifference to architectural space in the period.

The architectural response that is present in Veseley’s and Mical’s works is probably fuelled, to a large extent, by the polemical attack on Modernism that suffused Surrealist writing on architecture and the city. The Surrealists despised modern architecture with the same passion and zealotry that Le Corbusier reserved for the historical city. The annihilation of Paris proposed in Le Corbusier’s 1921 Plan Voisin was equally the annihilation of the kind of chance encounters and unpredictability that Breton and Aragon had, in the same decade, identified as central to the founding texts of the Surrealist movement. Aragon’s *Paris Peasant* (1924) and Andre Bréton’s *Nadja* (1928) and *Mad Love* (1937) all used the historical city as a backdrop to lived experience. Thus, at the heart of the tension between Surrealism and architectural Modernism was a fundamental rupture between the vision of the city as technological organism and as living site of eroticised desire. Architecture was presented, through Surrealism, as the frozen backdrop to a complex dream sequence, torn from any global narrative, separated from any spatial or social context and marked as the space of (chauvinistic) notions of erotic adventure and experiential gratification. Consider the following examples from Surrealist writing and photography.

In *Nadja*, the archetypal novel of the Surrealist movement, Breton’s text weaves the themes of Surrealism seamlessly into a fictional, autobiographical sojourn through Paris where the city frames the poet’s pursuit of the mentally unstable Nadja, documenting (from an exclusively male perspective) the psychological transition from initial “curiosity”, “anxiety” and “discomfort” towards “lust”, “love” and ultimately “boredom” and “indifference”. The text of *Nadja* is accompanied by photographs, commissioned from Jacques-Andre Boiffard, of the spaces where the primary activity in the novel takes place.

Storefronts, full of mannequins, gloves, corsets and shoes were a recurring motif in Surrealist photography, functioning as a museum of fetishistic and often perverted male desire. Such displays married the conspicuous lust for consumable goods with the internal fascination with objects and desire, functioning as a symbolic mediator between Freud and Marx. Eugene Atget's photo of the Rue De Strasborg is one of the most famous images of these displays; it exercised a seminal influence upon photographers such as Boiffard and Brassai. This imagery played not only upon the array of fetish items presented in the commercial shopfront, but equally the reflection of the street and city behind, marrying erotic desire with the everyday heartbeat of the city. This externalized architecture of the Surrealist city has already been widely explored in architectural history (Krauss, 1985; Walker, 2002) and it remains the dominant interpretation of these issues. However, alternate readings of architectural space in the formative practices of Dada and Surrealism are also possible. The remainder of this paper focuses on the relationship between lines, surfaces, interiors and space as a means of proposing a counter-reading of the relationship between architecture, Dada and Surrealism.

The role of architecture in Dada and Surrealism has continually functioned as a frame. Rigid, controlled and transparent, architecture housed the Surrealist fascination with the object and was the continual "ground" against which the "figures" of Surrealism were juxtaposed. This can be seen in the image by Man Ray entitled *Monument to the Marquis de Sade*, where the "line" is drawn as an enclosure, framing the body but also suggesting, quite deliberately, the model of an architectural plan. It can be read as a reference to the confluence that exists between the living, bracketed body and the objective frame that positions it. Referencing religion and morality in the context of the body, the image was reworked by Man Ray as the cover for his own personal copy of Sade's *120 Days of Sodom*.

While the importance of Sade to Surrealist thinking about space is beyond the scope of the present paper, Sade is a recurring theme in a number of Surrealist references to architectural space. This is due, in part, to the extent of Sade's incarceration which, ironically for such a celebrated libertine, extended for almost all of his adult life. The renegade Surrealist Georges Bataille even used an image of the castle where the Marquis de Sade was imprisoned to illustrate his Encyclopedia entry on "space". In this way, Bataille linked space with the systems of enclosure and incarceration that surrounded it arguing to "lock the Professors up in prison to teach them what space is" (Bataille, 1995). In the encyclopedia entry on "architecture" he had similarly lamented the inevitable formation of systems of power in buildings, where architecture masquerades as an organising device that the social/formless must work against. His work, and its interpretation through Denis Hollier (1975), is central to recent art theory and particularly the work that is concerned with Surrealism.

The remainder of the paper investigates the idea of an interior (or enclosure), and begins to establish its importance in reading architectural space in Surrealism. This fascination with interiority can be read as a kind of "homesickness", lamenting the traumatic collapse of familiarity in a landscape of immense violence and social upheaval. The argument is suggested in a recent work by Demos (2007), who argues for the importance of "exile" in understanding the work of Marcel Duchamp, who spent his life continually wandering from one spatial setting to the next. A number of the protagonists of Dada and Surrealism had been driven out of their homes by war or had been forced to move cities; a pattern that continued throughout the decades of their creative production. Recently it has been popular, especially in the revisionist histories of Hal Foster (1995) and Anthony Vidler (1992), to read these strategies of interiority against the "unheimlich" and Freud's contemporaneous essay "The Uncanny" where, as well as espousing his theory of primal fantasy and traumatic return, he sets up the conditions for an intrauterine architecture and the psychic fixation on a "lost" maternal interior. An obsession

with intrauterine spaces also features prominently in the architectural writings of Breton, Dali, Matta and Tristan Tzara. The present paper will investigate these three models of interiors; all labyrinthine in nature, and represented not just as space, but as artefact and art object.

Francis Picabia: interiors of escape

Consider two famous Surrealist images. The first is a photograph, probably taken by Man Ray, of a man enclosed by an empty frame: a hole, traversed by string. The man in the image is Francis Picabia and the work is called *Francis Picabia with St Vitus Dance*. It was published in *The Little Review* in 1922. The second photograph, by Picabia, is *Portrait of A Young American Girl in the State of Nudity*, from 1915. Both images conform to a fairly traditional model of a central figure, enclosed in a frame. However, they also engage notions of architectural drawing; in the first case, the three dimensional drawing in space with string and, in the second, through the literal use of mechanical drafting techniques. The first image suggests an interior; a 3-dimensional abstract space that corresponds to a number of other creative avenues that underpinned Dada and Surrealism. Picabia had specified that the work could not be hung against a wall: it needed to be hung in the centre of a space and appreciated from both sides. The string functions as the symbolic entrails of the space, wrapping and weaving, but, at the same time, removing the distinction between space and void.

The most famous and extreme example of this kind of “drawing in space” is Duchamp’s installation at the first papers of Surrealism exhibition in 1942. At this event Duchamp, at the invitation of Breton, used 16 miles of string to thoroughly disrupt the first major exhibition of Surrealism in exile in America. Unlike the frame of Picabia, Duchamp’s piece could not be appreciated from either side, as it disrupted any movement in the space or between it. Previously Duchamp had used string in a number of projects, generating curves for his “stoppages” by dropping a metre length of string from the height of a metre; his *With Hidden Noise*, from 1916, was made by dropping a mystery object (unknown to him) into a ball of string and enclosing it in copper plates so that its identity remained secret. Kiesler, a friend of both Duchamp and Picabia, had also used string to remove the frames in Peggy Guggenheim’s Art of this Century museum, where canvasses were hung floating in the architectural volume; disrupting and destabilising the traditional relationship between canvas and wall. This was only one of a number of examples in Kiesler’s work where this relationship was questioned.

In another photo by Man Ray, of Marcel Duchamp, the artist is depicted imprisoned in an arch. This photograph dramatises the relationship between the “architectural frame” as rigid and solid and the figure trapped within it. It also suggests, through Duchamp’s lifelong association with his feminine counterpart Rose Salevy, a process of gender identity and ambiguity enabled through the architectural interior. This reading is further supported by a brief analysis of the work Man Ray and Duchamp are parodying in their photograph; a drawing by the French neoclassical architect Jean Jaques Lequeu (see Duboy, 1986). Lequeu, a contemporary of de Sade, produced a drawing with the ambiguous title “...He is Free”. The title is ambiguous not because of its description—the drawing shows a naked youth scrambling from an arch—but because of its male categorisation which seems at odds with the clearly female body that is depicted. Possibly, as Rosenau conjectures, the “he” refers not to the woman in the arch, but to the male who has escaped her. A small bird is also featured in the drawing, flying across the top of the frame, and it too could be implicated in this reading of the picture. However, in the context of Lequeu’s work (who depicted himself with a male head on a female body on no less than seven occasions) a more explicit notion of the “freedom” referred to in the title is likely, referring probably to the implied hermaphroditic associations and the transgression of architectural form.

In combination, the image of Man Ray and the image of Lequeu are strikingly similarly framed and constructed works, and, through association amplify the relationship between the interior, architecture and gender ambiguity.

What is being suggested in all of these practices, and particularly in the frame of Picabia, is an enclosing interior where what is being exhibited, is space itself. The two dimensional drawing is extended outwards into space. It is space, as an artefact, exhibited conventionally but conceptualized radically. Each work, like Man Ray's photograph of Duchamp and Lequeu's drawing celebrates escape at the same time as it implies enclosure within the framework of architecture. But this is an escape from two types of interiority; the space of the arch and the line, representing architecture and the space of gender, the interior of the body.

Max Ernst: voyeuristic interiors

The second model of interiority in Dada and Surrealist practice is the "voyeuristic interior"; a space where architecture is projected onto the surface of the body. Rather than framing, this model of the interior spatialises the context and surface of the body using an unseen or immaterial architecture. One of the most suggestive and iconic examples, again from the formative Dada period, is Max Ernst's *The Master's Bedroom* from 1919. Heavily theorized in art, and by Krauss and Foster in particular, Ernst's work projects an architectural space over a 2-dimensional encyclopedia image through a technique known as overpainting; an approach where parts of an image are painted out while others are allowed to project through.

In *Beyond Painting*, his 1937 text, Ernst described the importance of architectural surfaces in the development of his early thinking about art. Architecture also featured heavily in the development of his creative process of "frottage"; a practice wherein surfaces are reproduced through rubbing. Grattage, a related practice, involved scraping paint off a canvas against a textured surface to leave the imprint of its contours. In each case architecture is buried in the surface of the image, directly encrypted in the canvas as the ground against which figures are revealed. Equally, through collage, a collision between architecture and the body is implied at the level of the city in his work, *The Garden of France*, where a giant female body is literally buried in the fabric of Paris; her contours directly mirroring the archaeology of the city. Other examples are found in Ernst's collages from the 1920s and 30s where the architectural frame remains rigid and bodies float beyond the architecture, viewed from the windows and through doors. In this creative practice, architecture becomes the frame through which the body is located and, in this case, excluded. It is also significant that many of these Ernst paintings include Freudian references, especially to the Wolf Man who voyeuristically views the dream of the wolves from his bedroom window. This was a dream later unravelled by Freud as relating to repressed desire and the traumatic return to an oedipal scene viewed as a child.

A similar practice to Ernst's framing of the body is also found in Man Ray's photo of Kiki Montparnass from 1924 and in his famous series of "untitled" portraits of Lee Miller from the early 30s. In each case the "traces" of architecture, articulated through shadow, are conspicuous within the image, locating the figure and dividing or articulating it. The images serve as another example of the window, space and the body in a state of hierarchical composition. A parallel case of melting female bodies and architectural elements together is found in the Surrealist photographer Maurice Tabard's work where not only the shadows, but the architectural elements themselves collide with the floating faces that disrupt the figure-ground. This seamless blending of architectural space and female form hasn't been widely discussed in any of the key works on Surrealist photography, but can be traced through a number of their most celebrated exponents.

The lens of the camera, frames the architectural enclosure, which then positions the body, and melts into it.

Surrealist photography repeatedly demonstrates a fascination with “flattening” architectural space by collapsing the figure-ground, while Surrealist and Dada painting, on the other hand, attempts to escape its flatness through visual illusions and the attempt to replicate the objectivity of photographic representation through an exaggeration of figure and ground. Ernst’s *The Master’s Bedroom* is one of many examples of this strategy of using skewed perspective to position bodies within architectural space. In the overpainting, as in the Picabia frame, space is exhibited as an artefact; used as a narrative to position the figure and its inevitable enclosure.

Alberto Giacometti: implied interiors

The third model of architectural interiority in Surrealism and Dada, is suggested by Giacometti and is titled *Passage*. This model depicts an imagined experience; a procession through spaces constituting an architectural journey. Here the “substance” of architecture is removed to reveal the spaces and enclosures that articulate it. Again, architectural space is projected as an artefact and art object. This approach has obvious similarities with the concerns of a number of recent artists, and particularly Rachel Whiteread and James Casebere, both of whom investigate space through meticulous studies of the voids or negatives left by architectural form.

The “flattened”, “fossilised” and “solarised” images of the Belgian photographer Raoul Ubac can also be read as a photographic version of this model where bodies, instead of receding into space, are frozen at its surface. There is a rhythm within Ubac’s and Tabard’s works where the figure, typically a female body, and the “ground”, an architectural frame, flow into each other and are frozen as one. Ubac’s solarised images have a distinctly disturbing architectural quality where the gyrating forms of figure and ground melt into each other and begin to resemble labyrinthine plans.

In his *Endless House*, constructed over several decades of his creative life, Kiesler equally “implies” a space through the construction of its boundaries in rough plaster. The *Endless House* was the most committed of the Surrealist attempts to recover the “intrauterine” space of pre-birth, through the typology of the grotto. Like “passage”, the space has no exterior. It reinforces a broader fascination with the cave and the grotto that is a recurring theme in, for instance, the Surrealist photography of Dora Maar. However the most extreme example of this model of this “interior” is, once again, Duchamp’s installation at the First Exposition of Surrealism in Paris in 1938. The exhibition, featuring works by all of the most prominent members of the movement, was co-ordinated by Marcel Duchamp at the invitation of Breton. Sitting in an entrenched and established bourgeois institution, the Surrealists used the interior to critique the expectations imposed by the exterior. The installation functions as an archetypal Surrealist interior, setting up a paradigmatic model of a miniature world, built of experience rather than aesthetics. Hanging paintings on recycled revolving doors installed haphazardly across the space, Duchamp had 1200 coal sacks hung from the ceiling, blocking out all of the lights in the room; Man Ray personally handed torches to visitors on the opening night so that they could view the artwork, tending instead, to use the lights to view each other and prevent falling over. The very real risk of explosion and flammability added to the heightened sense of spatial disorientation. At the entry, recalling the Surrealist fascination with the shop window, Duchamp set up a Surrealist street where all of the artists dressed their own mannequin. The installation functioned as a miniature utopia, refuting the political (and accelerating) realities of the outside or the cultural implications of the shell. Critics have pointed to the project as the surrender of Surrealism to the

forces of spectacle and institutionalization. Duchamp, when the exhibition opened, had already left for America.

In each case space was modelled as an internal experience, devoid of and articulated as an experiential, non-aesthetic artefact. In Giacometti's *Passage*, architectural experience is assembled as art object and interrogated by the pervasive gaze of the viewer. Interiors are transformed into exteriors, reconfiguring the complex spatial structure of art and dismantling the inherited values of architectural space. Exhibited as artefact and evaluated as object, these practices underpin the complex relationship between art practice, aesthetic experience and architectural adventure.

Conclusion

In George Baker's book *The Artwork Caught by the Tail* (2007), he argues that the primary instinct of Dada was a collapse of the medium; an instinctive and prolonged determination to escape the traditional boundaries of art, and especially those specific to medium. Drawing, painting, sculpture and photography were all mobilised in directions beyond the traditional boundaries implied by them. This emphasis on an "escape" from medium inevitably targeted architecture, becoming the primary (and often invisible) "medium" through which these practices were relocated. Drawing, in the work of Picabia and Duchamp, expanded into the infinite, string-lined interiors of the gallery; paint, in Ernst, was scraped onto canvas against the textured timber texture of the floor; models were draped in the shadows of unseen architectural elements in the iconic photography of Man Ray; sculpture, in Giacometti and Kiesler, was repositioned as a literal document of architectural space. Throughout these transformations the surrealism fascination with the interior was married with a deeper creative instinct to collapse art and the media through which it was represented. In each case architecture became the receptacle for the avant-garde mistrust of conventional art process and, to some extent, fuelled the Surrealist and Dada assaults on aesthetics.

These interiors of escape, voyeurism and implication are at the heart of creative practices in the period immediately following the First World War where the massive cultural and political upheavals triggered a period of reflective introspection. The interior and architecture adopted new roles no longer positioned as context or backdrop but suddenly underwritten with psychological and emotional values of shelter, protection and domesticity. The "inside" was no longer a literal dialectic, but a problematic and complicated social construct which, as in the case of Walter Benjamin for instance, could as easily be a novel or artwork as a physical and psychical architectural shelter. The practices of Dada, uniformly positioned as a radical assault on bourgeois taste, can equally readily, in this context, be aligned with a cultural reappropriation of architecture and a radicalised yearning for nostalgic notions of comfort and shelter. Architecture, in this light, functioned as its own sanctuary where the intellectual games of these avant-garde movements could be extended and interrogated.

Each of these practices reinforces the fascination of the "transgressive" avant garde with dismantling medium; collapsing the structures of artistic expression and dismantling the entrenched expectations of artistic expression. Kiesler's projection of an "x-raying" of space is not only the implied flattening and recoding of 3-dimensional space; but a repackaging of the function of the architectural interior. This dimension of creative practice, where space is "represented"; or even embodied; in the art object is central to a subtle repositioning of the historical avant-garde and its relationship to the less widely explored affiliations with contemporary architectural culture. Architectural space is the groundwork upon which a number of these intellectual practices were constructed.

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