

from A BOOK OF SURREALIST GAMES compiled by Ahstair Brotechie

SURREALIST GAMES

Poetry should be made by all (Lautréamont)

The Surrealists initiated the most radically liberating critique of reason of the century. Their brilliant investigations were conducted through art and polemic, manifesto and demonstration, love and politics. But most specially and remarkably, it was through games, play, techniques of surprise and methodologies of the fantastic that they subverted academic modes of enquiry, and undermined the complacent certainties of the reasonable and respectable. Playful procedures and systematic stratagems provided keys to unlock the door to the unconscious and to release the visual and verbal poetry of collective creativity.

These methods and experiments were at the centre of the Surrealist provocation of bourgeois normalities. They borrowed children's games, invented techniques to exploit the unpredictable outcomes of chance and accident, and discovered new and creative uses for automatism. To facilitate their own researches into the secrets of the human heart and mind they appropriated, with magisterial *insouciance*, procedures of enquiry from the academic disciplines of psychology, sociology, anthropology and philosophy. They arbitrarily transformed innocent objects into magical images, and reinstated the fetish in the ceremonies of art.

Surrealist games and procedures are intended to free words and images from the constraints of rational and discursive order, substituting chance and indeterminacy for premeditation and deliberation. Surrealism takes the logic and continuity of the dream to have a truly *given* significance, equalled only by the revelatory power of the unexpected analogy, the marvellous conjunction. . . . *I madly love everything that adventurously breaks the thread of discursive thought and suddenly ignites a flare illuminating a life of relations fecund in another way* wrote Breton. Such 'chance encounters' transgress

deductive laws and transcend the logical systems of classical rationalism.

Such relations — the *spontaneous, extra-lucid, insolent rapport* . . . *between one thing and another* . . . *which common sense hesitates to confront* — may be discovered in dreams, in the mental play of poetic reverie, in the induced trance and the *systematic disordering of the senses* famously prescribed by Rimbaud, and in the practice of automatic techniques. To these solitary exercises of the imagination, significantly freed in each case from the composing rules of logical discourse, the Surrealists added the absorbing and ordered procedures of creative collaboration and the game. These activities they valued especially for their emphatic repudiation of individualistic artistic value, and their potential for collectively achieved revelation.

They have those characteristics of games defined by Roger Caillois, the French critic associated for a time with the Surrealists: they are freely entered into; separated from the run of ordinary 'serious' life, they are circumscribed by their own time and space; they are uncertain, their outcomes not predetermined; they are economically unproductive and not concerned with material interests; they are governed by rules; they are associated with imaginative projection and make-believe. In elaborating the famous definition provided by Huizinga in HOMO LUDENS thus far, Caillois might have added that they are entered into for pleasure, and may bring unpremeditated insights. In many of these aspects they have much in common with art.

In one particular and important respect Surrealist play is more like a kind of provocative magic. This is in its irrepressible propensity to the *transformation* of objects, behaviour and ideas. In this aspect of its proceedings Surrealism makes manifest its underlying political programme, its revolutionary intent. The First Manifesto ends: *It [Surrealism] leads to the permanent destruction of all other psychic mechanisms and to its substitution for them in the solution of the*

principal problems of life. Sweeping and vague as it is, it cannot be doubted that this grand ambition was serious. Subsequent publications and manifestos developed and elaborated a complex of insights relating the life of the individual psyche to the dynamics of society and history, some powerfully original, some simplistic, some absurdly extreme or utopian. This is not the occasion for a history of Surrealist political interventions and provocations, nor for the re-telling of the complex story of its own political travails, the bitter arguments, confrontations, expulsions and reconciliations. But there is no other movement in the history of this troubled century, surely, which has linked ideas of revolutionary political change so closely to the operations of magical transformation in art and poetry, and sought to subvert familiar social relations and received ideas in every sphere by subjecting them to rigorously witty and fantastic interrogations.

Here collected for the first time is a compendium of Surrealist games, strategies and procedures. It is for those who wish to employ for themselves the techniques of Surrealist enquiry and discovery; it sets out the rules and directions for playing the games. There has been nothing like it: much of the material gathered here has been previously documented only in obscure journals, or in magazines long since defunct and difficult to come by. It is presented in the spirit of its subject, to offer the means to fulfil those aims (among others) of Surrealism described by its early historian, Julien Levy:

To exploit the mechanisms of inspiration.

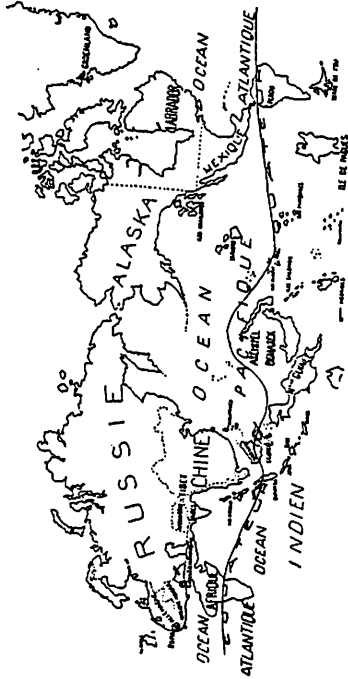
To intensify experience.

We have lived for too long in the dreary region of *homo economicus*, our lives shadowed by principles of self-interest, utilitarian 'necessities', instrumental moralities. But we are permitted to hope; to revive those great and optimistic words of Breton: *Perhaps the imagination is on the verge of recovering its rights.* We must welcome, as did the Surrealists, the re-entry into modern life of *homo ludens*, the imaginative man at play, the intuitive visionary.

MEL GOODING, 1991

Transform the world, said Marx; change life, said Rimbaud: for us these two watchwords are one.

ANDRÉ BRETON



The world in the Surrealist era, 1929

THE GAMES AND PROCEDURES IN THIS SECTION ARE IN THE SPIRIT OF BRETON'S 'WATCHWORDS': THEY AIM TO TRANSFORM AND REVALUE THE CATEGORIES INTO WHICH WE HABITUALLY ORDER THE FAMILIAR WORLD, AND SUBSTITUTE A SURREALIST VIEWPOINT FOR THE CONVENTIONAL ONE. METHODS OF INTERPRETATION AND ALTERATION, THEY TAKE A NUMBER OF FORMS: 'INQUIRIES' OR QUESTIONNAIRES; EXPERIMENTS WITH REAL OR IMAGINED OBJECTS; OUTRIGHT PROVOCATIONS; IRONIC OR FANTASTIC PLAY WITH CONVENTIONS OF DEFINITION AND CLASSIFICATION AS FOUND IN DICTIONARIES, BIBLIOGRAPHIES AND ENCYCLOPEDIAS; COMIC SUBVERSIONS OF FOLK WISDOM (PROVERBS, SUPERSTITIONS); NEW VERSIONS OF EXISTING GAMES.

Surrealism is . . .

Surrealism appears to me in its essentials as a sort of rage, a rage against the existing state of things.

GEORGES BATAILLE

Everything leads me to believe that there exists a certain point, a state of mind in which life and death, the real and the imaginary, the past and the future, the communicable and the incommunicable, high and low, cease to be perceived as contradictions. It would be useless to seek in Surrealist activity any impulse other than the hope of determining this point.

ANDRÉ BRETON (*Abridged Dictionary of Surrealism*)

Surrealism is founded on the belief in the superior reality of certain forms of association, hitherto neglected, in the supreme importance of dreams, the undirected play of thought. It leads to the ultimate destruction of all other mechanisms of thought and to its substitution for them in the resolution of the main problems of life.

ANDRÉ BRETON (*Manifesto*)

The vice known as Surrealism consists of the disordered and passionate application of the stupefying *image*.

LOUIS ARAGON (*Abridged Dictionary of Surrealism*)

It is not to belittle Surrealist activity — as it has unfolded from 1924 to the present day — to consider it as a game, in fact as *The Great Game*, whose prizes in the eyes of those who played and lived it, can be calculated in promises of freedom, love, revolution, and in anything else that intransigent desire can aspire to.

PHILIPPE AUDOUIN

Surrealism is the desperate attempt of poetry to incarnate itself in history.

OCTAVIO PAZ

It is true that to some extent Surrealism can be all things to its practitioners, but this constant flux has a consistent central core: a redefinition of freedom in the widest possible terms. With this objective, Surrealism set itself in stubborn opposition to all the mechanisms of oppression it perceived at work in the world. Not only the obvious institutions of state, religion, the family, etc. but also habits of thought, rationality, causality, the dominance of the conscious mind.

These mechanisms are seen by Surrealism as operating through a system of false dualities, based on Cartesian logic, which must be reconciled or abolished. The Surrealist idea of the 'image' being one means for this end (see note to ONE INTO ANOTHER).

Breton, in his only essay devoted to games (published in *MEDIUM*, II, 2, 1954), specifically relates them to these preoccupations:

If there is one activity in Surrealism which has most invited the derivation of imbeciles, it is our persistent playing of games, which can be found throughout most of our publications over the last thirty-five years. Although as a defensive measure we sometimes described such activity as 'experimental' we were looking to it primarily for entertainment, and those rewarding discoveries it yielded in relation to other considerations in mind; right from the start it proved useful for strengthening the bonds that united us, and for encouraging sudden awakenings of our desires whenever these were held in common. Furthermore, the urgent need we felt to do away with the old antinomies that dominate work and leisure, 'wisdom' and 'folly', etc — such as action and dream, past and future, sanity and madness, high and low, and so on — disposed us not to spare that of the serious and the non-serious (games).

As for the various games perennially requested, let us note for the record those of scholarly notation (minus 20 to plus 20); definitions (what is . . .); conditionals (if . . . when . . .); 'the exquisite corpse' (written or drawn); intervention of the irrational (characteristics of an object, embellishing a city; elaborating upon a film); the visitor

OTHER WAYS OF MAKING TEXTS

(would you open the door?), etc. and to the greater satisfaction of the pleasure-principle, those procedures and recipes in the visual arts immediately put within everyone's reach by their inventors: collage, frottage, fumage, collage, spontaneous decalcomania, candle-drawings, etc.

Luckily the recent publication of Johan Huizinga's work *HOMO LUDENS* should make all the leech-like aren't-you-ashamed-of-your-selves-at-your-age crew retire into their worm-eaten shell. This work demonstrates, in fact, that the existence of the game, a free activity if ever there was one, 'affirms in a permanent way and in the highest sense the supratlogical character of our situation in the cosmos'. It concludes with the necessity of 'seeing in poetry mankind's realisation of a ludic requirement within the community'. And the great Dutch historian and thinker specifies that 'All things that have come to be recognized in poetry as conscious qualities — beauty, a sense of the sacred, magical power — are implied from the outset in the primary quality of the game.' It is clear that to shut oneself off from game-playing, or at least from the play of the imagination as adult discipline prescribes it, is to undermine the best of one's own humanity.

Surrealist ideas changed over the many years in which it was active, yet its general direction remained undeviating. After the war Michel Leiris published *AURORA*, a novel from his youth of twenty years before. His preface to this work ends with a description which is eminently applicable to the achievements and unchanging ethic of Surrealism itself:

... despite the black and frenetic style of its prose, what I like about this work is the appetite it expresses for an unattainable purity, the faith it places in the untamed imagination, the horror it manifests with regard to any kind of fixity — in fact, the way almost every page of it refuses to accept that human condition against which some will never cease to rebel, no matter how reasonably society may one day be ordered.

To make a Dadaist poem

Take a newspaper.

Take a pair of scissors.

Choose an article as long as you are planning to make your poem.

Cut out the article.

Then cut out each of the words that make up this article and put them in a bag.

Shake it gently.

Then take out the scraps one after the other in the order in which they left the bag.

Copy conscientiously.

The poem will be like you.

And here you are a writer, infinitely original and endowed with a sensibility that is charming though beyond the understanding of the vulgar.

TRISTAN TZARA

THE PARANOIAC-CRITICAL METHOD

The Paranoiac-critical method was the invention of Salvador Dali and is an extension of the method of Simulation into the field of visual play, based on the idea of the 'double-image'.

According to Dali, by simulating paranoia one can systematically undermine one's rational view of the world, which becomes continually subjected to associative transformations. 'For instance, one can see, or persuade others to see, all sorts of shapes in a cloud: a horse, a human body, a dragon, a face, a palace, and so on. Any prospect or object of the physical world can be treated in this manner, from which the proposed conclusion is that it is impossible to concede any value whatsoever to immediate reality, since it may represent or mean anything at all.' (Marcel Jean) The point is to persuade oneself or others of the authenticity of these transformations in such a way that the 'real' world from which they arise loses its validity. The mad logic of Dali's method leads to a world seen in continuous flux, as in his paintings of the 1930s, in which objects dissolve from one state into another, solid things become transparent, and things of no substance assume form.

The Paranoiac-critical method is thus the reverse of the children's 'picture-puzzles' in which people are hidden in drawings of trees etc., and resembles more the 'double-images' employed by psychologists: the two faces that become a vase, and other similar illusions such as faces seen in rocks, landscapes in marble and the anthropomorphic forms of plants such as the mandrake root.

None is perhaps so striking as the face discovered by Dali in the photograph opposite, whose true orientation is indicated.

It is not to be despised, in my opinion, if, after gazing fixedly at a spot on the wall, coats in the grate, clouds, a flowing stream, if one remembers some of their aspects; and if you look at them carefully you will discover some quite admissible inventions. Of these the genius of the painter may take full advantage, to compose battles of men and animals, landscapes or monsters, devils and other fantastic things. . . .

LEONARDO DA VINCI (Treatise on Painting)

How to Open at Will the Window onto the Most Beautiful Landscapes in the World and Elsewhere.

ANDRÉ BRETON (on Decalcomania)

THE PURPOSE OF SURREALIST VISUAL TECHNIQUES IS TO OPEN A WINDOW ONTO THE MARVELOUS THAT LIES CONCEALED BEHIND THE EVERYDAY. THIS REVELATION CAN BE ACHIEVED BY DIFFERENT MEANS: BY MANIPULATING MATERIALS, OR BY PLAY WITH IMAGES, WHETHER GIVEN OR FOUND.

THE FIRST CATEGORY OF TECHNIQUES INCLUDES THOSE THAT ARE ESSENTIALLY AUTOMATIC; THESE: 'FREEZE' CHANCE EVENTS IN WHATEVER MEDIUM IS BEING USED, TO CREATE ARTIFICIALLY LEONARDO'S 'BLOTS' AND 'CLOUDS', AND IN THIS WAY THEY PROVOKE SPONTANEOUS IMAGES FREE OF CONSCIOUS INTENTION. ONCE THESE IMAGES APPEAR THEY CAN BE ELABORATED; IN MARCEL JEAN'S WORDS, THEY PROVIDE 'THE POINT OF DEPARTURE FOR POETIC HALLUCINATION'.

INTO THE SECOND CATEGORY FALL VARIOUS METHODS OF DIRECTLY RE-INTERPRETING EXISTING IMAGES TO PRODUCE NEW, MORE PROVOCATIVE OR BEAUTIFUL VISIONS, DELIRIOUS AND MONSTROUS AMALGAMATIONS.

INQUIRIES

*Many Surrealist games depend on questions and answers, where the inquiry is intended to throw up the unexpected, and also reveal unsuspected and perhaps fundamental information about the persons responding. Surrealism, in a number of these procedures, pushes the inquiry to the point of *inquisition*, which can make these games extremely uncomfortable experiences.*

THE GAME OF ILLÔT-MOLLO

For two, or preferably three or four, players.

A method for writing prose texts. The players begin writing, and as they do so, each in turn, in strict rotation, speaks aloud a word from the phrase he is writing at that moment. The other players must incorporate this 'marker-word' into their text, immediately coupling it with another word, which remains secret. Proceeding thus (marker-word + secret word), each player writes a text which parallels that of the other players. The marker-words and the secret words may be joined in whatever way the players choose.

In the examples below, marker-words are italicised.

Player A

Your hair of rare feather swims in the vulnerable night that spreads upon folds of inaccessible fog. This evening I'm bogged down and your damp shoulders end up burying me under the gaze of the veiled bird of smiles and mad laughter. Come at daybreak*, under the murderous flames, drowsy from homecoming. Boredom leaks from the wells around your devil's eyes, in which the glow-worm is born. Here I designate under the strength of unknown territories, the little-known discord of hands painted on an eye, the limpid open eye of the night.

Player B

The hair of Death is rare in the night, the night, night wherein it spreads no fog.

The fog is dismal, the evening too, and shoulders sob, an end to childhood.

A gaze reached us through the veil and I laughed suddenly. Full-stop* perhaps. Flame and love. To drowse tomorrow from boredom retrieved from its well of ferns where devils danced.

The glow-worm of the seas designates its victims and the territories of foot-prints are known in the town, where our wakings are painted. An eye wends its way there and opens, opens.

*In French 'point du jour' = day-break, 'point' = full-stop.

SYLLOGISMS

For three players.

Using the same procedure as the preceding games, the three players construct a syllogism. The first player writes down the first premise, a proposition beginning with 'All', then conceals it by folding the paper. The second player writes down the second premise and conceals it. The third player writes the conclusion, beginning with 'Therefore'. The syllogism is then read out.

All aristocrats look with terror at the scaffold.
There's nothing at all on the desert's arid palm.
Therefore the falling salt is a handkerchief.

OPPOSITES

For a minimum number of three players.

The first player writes a sentence, a question or a statement, at the head of a sheet of paper, and passes it to the next player. This player writes the absolute opposite of this sentence, phrase by phrase, according to any idea of 'opposite'. He then folds the sheet to cover only the first sentence. This has the effect of transforming the negation into an affirmation, which the third player must, in turn, negate. Before passing on the sheet, this player also folds it, but only so as to cover the previous sentence. This process may continue as long as the players desire, or the paper allows.

When my mother swigs champagne.
My father's corpse gets drunk on chianti.
Our mothers' infants dry up tearlessly.
The moribund waters my fatherland.
An infant desiccates our universe.
An old corpse waters their afterlife.
Two infants absorb what precedes death.

M. SANDOZ, F. R. SIMON, M. ZIMBACCA

EXPERIMENTS WITH OBJECTS

In these procedures the object is considered in terms of its possible meanings or functions, as opposed to its actual ones. An 'irrational' approach to knowledge is pursued with the po-faced doggedness of conventional scientific enquiries.

TO DETERMINE THE IRRATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS OF OBJECTS

For any number of players.

A set of questions about a possible object is agreed among the players.

A previously selected object is then revealed or nominated and one of the players reads out the questions one by one, in fairly rapid succession. The others write their answers, which should be brief, concise and immediate. At the end of the experiment they are compared.

This is a record of parts of a game played where the object was A PIECE OF PINK VELVET.

IS IT DIURNAL OR NOCTURNAL?

Nocturnal. [Y O]

IS IT FAVOURABLE TO LOVE?

Very favourable, despite its deplorable colour. [R Ca]

IS IT CAPABLE OF METAMORPHOSES?

Capable: heron, jade, soured wine, mountains. [P E]

WHAT IS ITS POSITION IN RELATION TO THE INDIVIDUAL?

Completely enveloping the head. [C M]

WHAT ERA IS IT FROM?

Louis XVI, before the Revolution. [M H]

WHAT ELEMENT IS IT?

Air. [T T]

WITH WHAT HISTORICAL FIGURE CAN IT BE ASSOCIATED?

Gérard de Nerval. [A G]

HOW DOES IT DIE?

At night, by hurling itself into a pond. [A B]

WHAT SHOULD IT MEET WITH ON A DISSECTING TABLE IN ORDER TO BE BEAUTIFUL?

A pair of moustaches. [B P]

WHAT PART OF A SLEEPING WOMAN'S NAKED ANATOMY WOULD YOU PLACE IT ON?

The throat. [A B]

AND IF SHE WERE DEAD?

Lower half of the face, veiling the mouth. [A B]

WHAT ILLNESS DOES IT CALL TO MIND?

Hysteria. [G W]

WHAT PART OF PARIS DOES IT LIVE IN?

French Academy. [T T]

WHAT MIGHT ITS PROFESSION BE?

A martyr. [P E]

IN WHAT MATERIAL DO YOU SEE IT WRAPPED?

Dried sperm, lightly translucent. [T T]

IS IT HAPPY OR UNHAPPY?

Desperate, despite appearances. [B P]

WHAT LANGUAGE DOES IT SPEAK?

English. [M H]

WHO IS ITS FAVOURITE POET?

Verlaine. [J-M M]

WHAT PLACE DOES IT OCCUPY WITHIN THE FAMILY?

A 15-year-old girl who's left the fold. [A G]

HOW WOULD YOU KILL IT?

With a dagger thrust. [R C]

HOW DOES IT GET AROUND?

In an American car driven by a chauffeur. [B P]

WHAT SEXUAL PERVERSION DOES IT CORRESPOND TO?

Female homosexuality. [C M]

WHAT SCENT GOES WITH IT?

Armpits. [R C]

WHICH PAINTER DOES IT CORRESPOND TO?

Manet. [R C]