1922

Hans Prinzhorn publishes *Artistry of the Mentally Ill*: the "art of the insane" is explored in the work of Paul Klee and Max Ernst.

In the first decades of the century, many modernists drew on "primitive" art, while some also mimicked the art of children (e.g., the Blaue Reiter Expressionists). By the early twenties a third interest—the art of the insane—completed the set of exotic models. Today, these three might strike us as odd, but for modernists like Paul Klee they were natural, even necessary guides in the search for "primal beginnings in art." This points to a persistent paradox of the modernist search: that expressive *immediacy* would be pursued through the *mediation* of artistic forms as complex as tribal objects and schizophrenic images.

The reassessment of the art of the insane followed that of primitive art. Either dismissed out of hand or viewed in diagnostic terms, such art was ready for reevaluation. Yet most modernists saw it only according to their own ends: as intrinsically expressive, boldly defiant of convention, or directly revelatory of the unconscious, which for the most part it was not. The Romantics had also viewed the primitive, the child, and the insane as figures of creative genius unfettered by civilization. But in the modernist version of this trio the medium shifted from the verbal (poetry) to the visual (painting and sculpture), and the recovery of the art of the insane was complicated by its denigration after Romanticism. For by the middle of the nineteenth century this art was viewed less as a model of poetic inspiration than as a sign of psycho-physical "degeneration." A key figure here is the Italian psychiatrist Cesare Lombroso, who, along with his Hungarian follower Max Nordau, spread this ideological notion to several discourses. Lombroso understood madness as a regression to a primitive stage of psychophysical development—a model that prepared a phobic association of primitive, child, and insane, which persisted in the twentieth century alongside the idyllic association of the three as creative innocents. In *Genius and Madness* (1877), a study of 107 patients, half of whom drew or painted, Lombroso detected this degeneration in "absurd" and "obscene" forms of representation.

Schizophrenic masters

This discourse of degeneration continued through psychiatry into psychoanalysis as it emerged in the late nineteenth century; and the diagnostic reading of the art of the insane persisted too. Like his French predecessor Jean-Martin Charcot, Sigmund Freud extended this approach through reversal, as he looked for signs of neurosis or psychosis in the work of "sane" masters like Leonardo or Michelangelo. By the turn of the century, with the clinical work of the German Emil Kraepelin and the Swiss Eugen Bleuler, focus fell on schizophrenia, which was understood as a broken relation to the self, as manifested in a dissociation of thought or a loss of affect—in any case, in a disruption of subjectivity marked by a disruption of image-making. This diagnostic approach was challenged only gradually, first with *L'Art chez fous* (1907) by Marcel Réja, the pseudonym of the French psychiatrist Paul Meunier, who examined the art of the insane for insight into the nature of artistic activity per se, and then with *Artistry of the Mentally Ill: A Contribution to the Psychology and Psychopathology of Configuration* (1922) by Hans Prinzhorn, who pursued this line of inquiry in a way that was provocative to several modernists.

Significantly, Prinzhorn studied art history (at the University of Vienna) before he turned to psychiatry and eventually to psychoanalysis. This unique training led the Heidelberg Psychiatric Clinic to appoint him in 1918; there he studied and extended its collection of art to some 4,500 works by 435 patients, most of them schizophrenics, from various institutions. With 187 images from this collection, his book included a "theoretical part," ten case-studies of "schizophrenic masters," and a summary of "results and problems." It was thus very selective; it was also often contradictory. On the one hand, Prinzhorn aimed not to be diagnostic; he saw six "drives" active in schizophrenic representation, but present in all artistic composition as well. On the other hand, Prinzhorn did not seek to be aesthetic; indeed, he cautioned against any direct equation with "sane" art, and, even as he called his ten favorites "masters," he used the archaic term *Bildnerei* ("artistry" or "image- making") in his title, in contradistinction to *Kunst* or "art." Nevertheless, Prinzhorn did refer to van Gogh, Henri Rousseau, James Ensor, Erich Heckel, Oskar Kokoschka, Alfred Kubin (who studied the art of the insane), Emil Nolde, and Max Pechstein. And further connections were made first by modernists, then by enemies of modernism—most infamously in the 1937 Nazi exhibition "Entartete 'Kunst'" ("Degenerate 'Art'") which attacked modernists like Klee through this association with the mad [1].

▲ 1903, 1907 ● 1908 ■ 1913, 1925c

▲ Introduction 1, 1900a ● 1900a, 1903, 1908 ■ 1937a

Zwei „Heilige"!!

Die obere heißt „Die Heilige vom inneren Licht" und stammt von Paul Klee. Die untere stammt von einem Schizophrenen aus einer Irrenanstalt. Daß diese „Heilige Magdalena mit Kind" immer noch menschenähnlicher aussieht als das Machwerk von Paul Klee, das durchaus ernst genommen werden wollte, ist sehr aufschlußreich.

„Ethik der Geisteskrankheit."

„Der Besessenen wahnsinniges Reden ist die höhere Weisheit, da sie menschlich ist . . . Warum haben wir diese Einsicht gegenüber der Welt des freien Willens noch nicht gewonnen? Weil wir äußerlich die Herren des Wahnsinns sind, weil die Geisteskranken von uns vergewaltigt werden, und wir sie daran hindern, nach ihren ethischen Gesetzen zu leben . . . Jetzt müssen wir den toten Punkt in unserem Verhältnis zur Geisteskrankheit zu überwinden trachten."

Der Jude Wieland Herzfelde in „Die Aktion" 1914.

1 • Paul Klee, *The Saint of Inner Light*, 1921, juxtaposed with a work by an unknown schizophrenic, in the brochure for the Nazi exhibition "Degenerate 'Art'," 1937 (texts translated below)

Two "Saints"!!

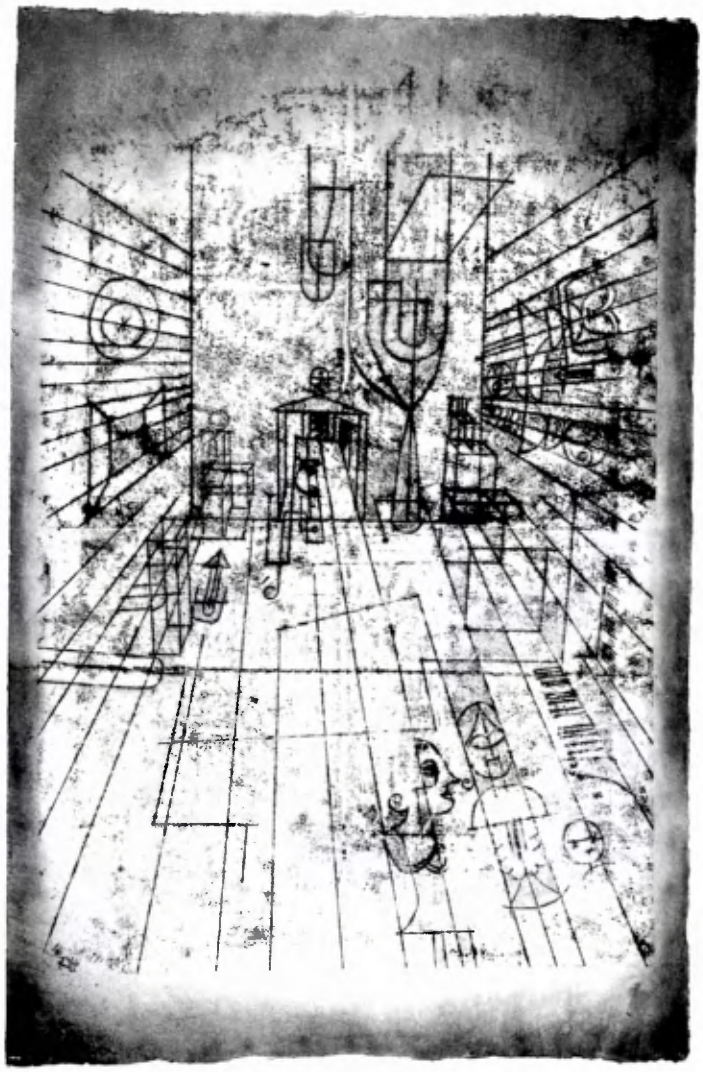
The one above is called "The Saint of Inner Light" and is by Paul Klee.

The one below is by a schizophrenic from a lunatic asylum. That this "Saint Mary Magdalen and Child" nevertheless looks more human than Paul Klee's botched effort, which was intended to be taken entirely seriously, is highly revealing.

"Ethics of Mental Illness"

"The crazy talk of obsessives is the higher wisdom, for it is human.... Why have we yet to gain this insight into the world of the free will? Because, superficially, we are in command of insanity, because we do violence to the mentally ill and prevent them from living in accordance with their own ethical laws.... Now we must seek to overcome the blind spot in our relationship with mental illness."

The Jew Wieland Herzfelde in "Action" 1914.



2 • Paul Klee, *Room Perspective with Inhabitants*, 1921
Watercolor and oil drawing, 48.4 × 31.5 (19 × 12½)

As his allusions suggest, Prinzhorn was interested in Expressionist art; his art-historical and philosophical models also inclined him toward a psychology of expression. Hence the six "drives" that govern the "artistry of the mentally ill": drives toward expression, play, ornamental elaboration, patterned order, obsessive copying, and symbolic systems, the interaction of which was said to determine each image. But here, too, Prinzhorn risked contradiction. For drives toward expression and play suggest a subject open to the world in a way that the other drives do not; on the contrary, compulsive ornamenting, ordering, copying, and system-building suggest a subject in rigid defense against the ▲ world (whether internal or external), not in empathic engagement with it. Even as Prinzhorn posed the former drives as correctives to the latter, he came to admit this essential difference between artist and schizophrenic:

> *The loneliest artist still remains in contact with reality.... The schizophrenic, on the other hand, is detached from humanity, and by definition is neither willing nor able to reestablish contact with it.... We sense in our pictures the complete autistic isolation*

▲ 1908

1920–1929

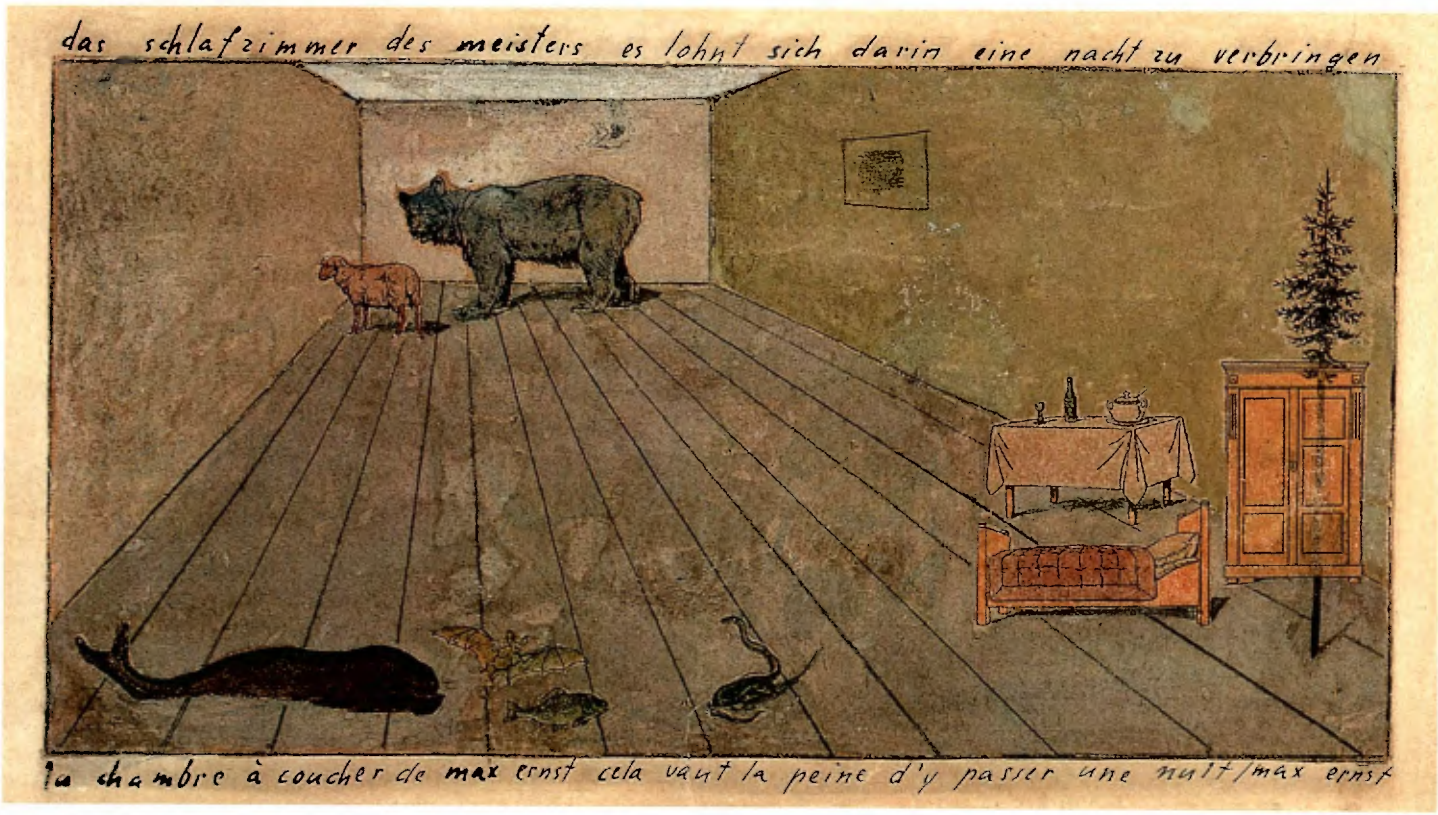
and the gruesome solipsism which far exceeds the limits of psychopathic alienations, and believe that in it we have found the essence of schizophrenic configuration.

The modernists most engaged by the art of the insane were Klee, the German Dadaist-turned-Surrealist Max Ernst (1891–1976), ▲ and Jean Dubuffet (1901–85), the French founder of *art brut*; all knew *Artistry of the Mentally Ill* well. Klee and Ernst often contrived fantastic systems that sometimes mixed forms of writing and drawing—what Kraepelin once disparaged as the "word and picture salad" of schizophrenic representation. They also often experimented with bodily distortions that evoke psychic disturbance more than formal play. Klee sometimes enlarged the eyes or heads of figures (a common trait in the art of children, too), or extended other features into ornamental patterns (a tendency of schizophrenic representation noted by Prinzhorn), as in the scrolled wreaths and wings of his *Angelus Novus*, a drawing owned • by Walter Benjamin, for whom it was an allegorical angel of history-as-catastrophe. Even more disruptively, Klee sometimes repeated certain parts of the body (like the face) in other parts, as if to literalize a schizophrenic sense of self-dislocation; Dubuffet did much the same thing.

This apparent anxiety about body images could prompt a paradoxical treatment of boundaries in Klee and Ernst as in schizophrenic art. Sometimes boundaries are effaced, or exaggerated, and sometimes they are exaggerated to the point of effacement again—as if, in the attempt to underscore the lines between self and world necessary to a sense of autonomy, these distinctions were undone. Klee evokes a collapsing of figure and ground, a merging of subject and space, in *Room Perspective with Inhabitants* **[2]**. The anxiety about boundaries could also prompt a counter to this collapse—a paranoid vision of the world as estranged, and hostile in its estrangement. Ernst evokes this alienation in *The Master's Bedroom* **[3]**, where both the odd occupants and the skewed space seem to gaze back at the artist-viewer in threat, as if a traumatic fantasy, long repressed, had suddenly returned to possess its "master."

In-between worlds

In 1920, in the midst of his involvement with the art of the insane, Klee wrote his famous "Creative Credo," which begins: "Art does not reproduce the visible; rather, it makes visible." This principle points to the special status of the primitive, the child, and the insane for Klee: as inhabitants of an "in-between world" that "exists between the worlds our senses perceive," they "all still have—or have rediscovered—the power to see." This power is visionary for Klee, and as early as 1912, in a review of the Blaue Reiter, he deemed it necessary to any "reform" of art. And yet, just as Prinzhorn wanted to see schizophrenic art as expressive, only to discover that it is often radically *in*expressive, that is, expressive only of withdrawal, so Klee wanted to see an innocence of vision there, only to discover an intensity that often bordered on terror—the terror of the subject lost in space, as in *Room*



3 • Max Ernst, *The Master's Bedroom*, c. 1920
Collage, gouache, and pencil over a page from a schoolbook, 16.3 × 22 (6⅜ × 8⅝)

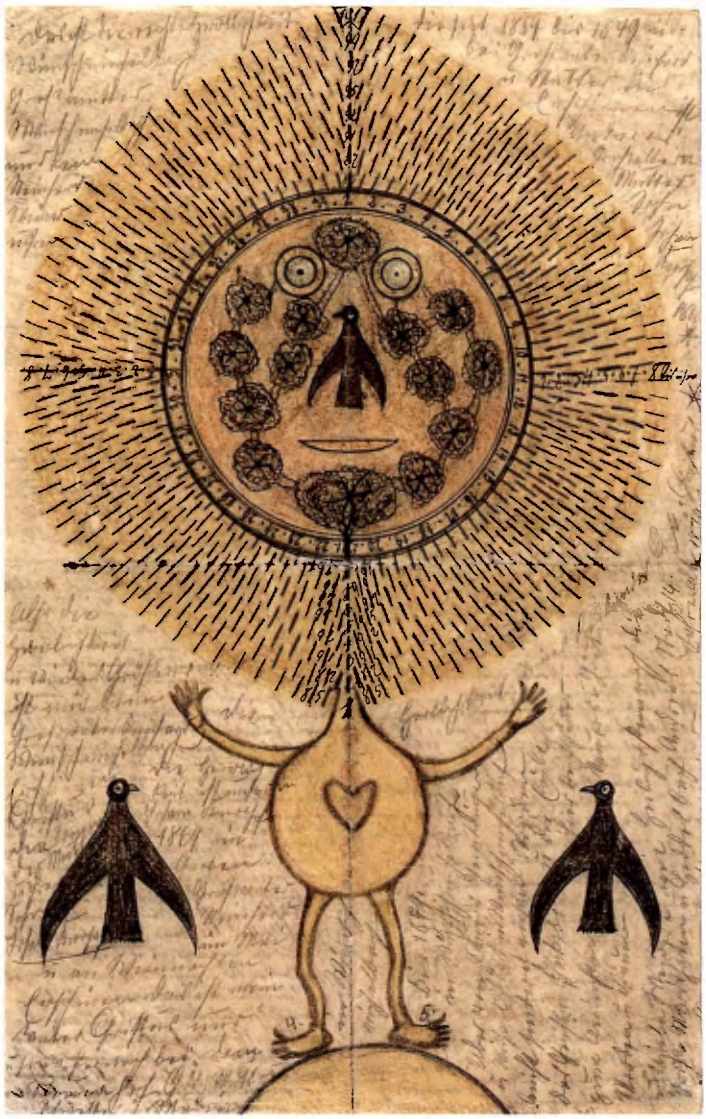
▲ 1924, 1946, 1959c • 1935

1920–1929

Perspective with Inhabitants, or of visible objects become viewing subjects, as in *The Master's Bedroom*.

▲ According to Oskar Schlemmer, his colleague at the Bauhaus school of art and design, Klee knew of the Heidelberg collection before Prinzhorn lectured near Stuttgart in July 1920; and according to another colleague, Lothar Schreyer, Klee identified with work represented in *Artistry of the Mentally Ill* upon its publication in 1922—and this at an institution, the Bauhaus, renowned for its rationalism. "You know this excellent piece of work by Prinzhorn, don't you?" Schreyer has Klee remark. "This is a fine Klee. So is this, and this one, too. Look at these religious paintings. There's a depth and power of expression that I never achieve in religious subjects. Really sublime art. Direct spiritual vision." When Klee simply illustrates "religious subjects," as in his "angels," "ghosts," and "seers," he often does not achieve this "power of expression." However, when he evokes "direct spiritual vision," he often approaches it—an expression that "makes visible." Yet precisely here Klee runs the risk of a primal vision that, far from innocent, is hallucinatory—the risk of an image that possesses the artist. This state, too "direct," too "sublime," is evoked in some schizophrenic representation, such as *Monstrance Figure* by Johann Knüpfer **[4]**, one of the ten Prinzhorn "masters" whose work Klee would have known. A "monstrance" is a "making visible"; in the Roman Catholic Church it is an open or transparent vessel in which the Host is displayed for veneration. But this "monstrance figure" is monstrous—an image that, however obscure to us, appears too transparent to the "religious vision" of its schizophrenic maker, the intensity of which shines through untamed. Some Klees catch a glimmer of this same intensity, and it burns away his innocent idea of the art of the insane.

Ernst had no illusions about the innocence of schizophrenic representation; on the contrary, he exploited its disturbances for his own antifoundational ends—to disrupt "the principle of identity" in art and self alike. Even before World War I he had encountered the art of the insane during his studies at the University of Bonn (which included psychology); at one point, he planned a book on such images. "They profoundly moved the young man," Ernst wrote in his art-treatise-cum-auto-analysis *Beyond Painting* (1948). "Only later, however, was he to discover certain 'procedures' that helped him penetrate into this 'no man's land.'" Already in his early Dadaist collages made in Cologne, Ernst not only assumed a quasi-autistic persona, "Dadamax," but also imaged the body in quasi-schizophrenic guise as a disjunctive, dysfunctional machine. These estranged schematic images are more caustic than the ironic mechanomorphic portraits of
• fellow Dadaists Duchamp and Picabia, for they point to the narcissistic damage produced by the war (in which Ernst was wounded). In one collage based on a found printer's proof, *Self-Constructed Small Machine* **[5]**, the body is a bizarre broken apparatus. On the left is a drum figure with numbered slots, on the right, a tripod personage, suggestive of a camera and a gun, as if the subject of military-industrial modernity were reduced to



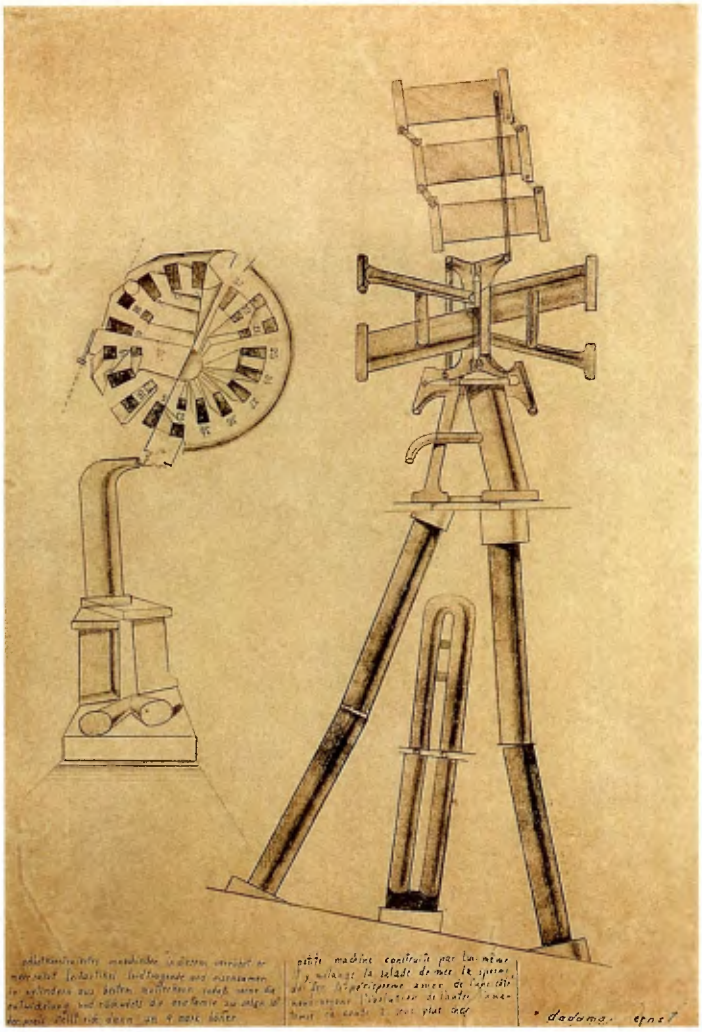
4 • Johann Knüpfer, *Monstrance Figure*, 1903–10
Pencil and ink on writing paper, 20.9 × 16.4 (8¼ × 6½)

two functions: those of recording machine and killing machine. Below runs a confused account of this armored "anatomy," in German and in French, that conflates sex and scatology, as a child or a schizophrenic might. This "self-constructed small machine" is indeed reminiscent of a mechanical substitute for a damaged ego, as found in some schizophrenic representations, but it is a substitute that only debilitates this ego further. In his alienated self-portrait, then, Ernst evokes the *development* of the military-industrial subject as a *regression* to broken functions and disordered drives.

Traumatic fantasies

These early collages (which include, as in *The Master's Bedroom*, "overpaintings" on found representations from old schoolbooks)
▲ were crucial to the definition of the Surrealist image. They "introduced an entirely original scheme of visual structure," André Breton wrote when they were first shown in Paris in 1921, "yet at

▲ 1923, 1925c • 1916b, 1919 ▲ 1924



5 • Max Ernst, *Self-Constructed Small Machine*, c. 1920
Stamp and pencil rubbings of printer's block with ink on paper, 46 × 30.5 (18⅛ × 12)

the same time [they] corresponded exactly to the intentions of Lautréamont and Rimbaud in poetry." Lautréamont was the nineteenth-century poet-hero of Surrealism whose enigmatic line—"beautiful as the chance encounter of a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissecting table"—was adopted as its aesthetic motto. Already the French poet Pierre Reverdy had defined Surrealist poetics as "two realities, more or less distant, brought together." Now, with the example of the Ernst collages, Breton could also define Surrealist art as "the juxtaposition of two more or less disparate realities." Such juxtaposition is a principle of collage, but, as Ernst once remarked, "Ce n'est pas la colle qui fait le collage" (It's not the glue that makes the collage); other "procedures" might produce this catalytic effect as well. Key here is the connection between a disruption in representation and a disruption in subjectivity, and it is difficult to imagine this aesthetics of dis / connection without the model of schizophrenic art. Indeed, when Ernst moved to Paris in 1922 to join the Surrealists-to-be, he brought a copy of *Artistry of the Mentally Ill*—as a gift for Paul Éluard, who in the same year collaborated with Breton on a poetic simulation of madness titled *Immaculate Conception.*

Ernst connects disruptions of image and self in *Beyond Painting.* The book opens with a "vision of half-sleep" dated "from 5 to 7 years," in which little Max watches his roguish father make "joyously obscene" marks on a panel. This first encounter with painting is cast in terms of a "primal scene," which Freud defined as the fantasy of parental intercourse through which children tease out the riddle of their origins. Ernst uses this trope of the primal scene in the origin stories of all the procedures "beyond painting" that he introduced into the Surrealist repertoire—collage, *frottage* (an image produced through rubbing), *grattage* (an image produced through scraping), and so on. Through such procedures he sought to "desublimate" art—to open it up to psychosexual drives and disturbances. Again, his hallucinatory ideal seems underwritten by schizophrenic representation: "I was surprised," Ernst writes of these experiments, "by the sudden intensification of my visionary capacities and by the hallucinatory succession of contradictory images superimposed, one upon the other, with the persistence and rapidity characteristic of amorous memories."

In this way Ernst worked not only to deploy traumatic fantasy in art, but also to develop it as a general theory of aesthetic practice: "It is as a spectator that the author assists ... at the birth of his work.... The role of the painter is to ... *project that which sees itself in him.*" Here again, with the primal scene in mind, Ernst positions the artist as both a participant inside and a voyeur outside the scene of his art, as both an active creator of his fantasy and a passive receiver of his image. The visual fascinations and sexual confusions of the primal scene govern not only his definition of collage—"the coupling of two realities, irreconcilable in appearance, upon a plane which apparently does not suit them"—but also his description of its purpose—to disturb "the principle of identity," to "abolish" the fiction of "the author" as unitary and sovereign. His provocative images effect this disruption formally more than thematically. For example, even as *The Master's Bedroom* alludes to a primal scene, it is in the formal dis / connection of the image—its contradictory scale, anxious perspective, mad juxtaposition (table, bed, cabinet, tree; whale, sheep, bear, fish, snake)—that traumatic fantasy is evoked, paranoid affect produced. Such are the "'procedures' that helped him penetrate this no man's land" of schizophrenic representation. HF

FURTHER READING

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