Introduction

The terrains of artistic practice and of art history are structured in and structuring of gendered power relations.¹

Nearly 30 years after the publication of Griselda Pollock’s groundbreaking feminist art-historical polemic *Vision and Difference* in 1988, there remains a significant lack of close analysis of the roles played by women artists in the histories and practices that characterise surrealism and modernism. A survey of the flagship contemporary journal *Modernism/Modernity* reveals quickly the scarcity of articles focusing specifically on identifying, exploring, and theorising the intersections – the overlaps and touching points, interpenetrations and connections – between the two historical, theoretical, and aesthetic categories, an area of intellectual history which consequently exists as a contested field.

The critically neglected presence of women artists working within this contested field further complicates matters. Constantly ‘rediscovered’, re-installed, or re-placed within each new generation’s reconceptualisations of modernism and surrealism, the woman artist occupies a permanently impermanent position, haunting the discourse at its margins, sometimes clear and visible, sometimes shaded out, occluded by reaction and repression. The work of the woman artist in modernism and surrealism comes (like that of the woman Dadaist, as Amelia Jones has argued) to resist the ‘normalizing’ and commodifying narratives of art-historical recuperation.² ‘Intersections’ suggests both crossings and overlaps, and the concept of intersectionality or an accommodating awareness of the inseparability of oppressive systems in their impact on socially constituted identities – ‘the distinct and frequently conflicting dynamics that shaped the lived experience of subjects in these social locations’, as Leslie McCall puts it.³

Surrealism/modernism

Forms of such ‘distinct and conflicting dynamics’ also circulate around aesthetic-historical categories and periodisations like surrealism and
modernism. Existing discussions demonstrate a variety of multifaceted and often contradictory critical perspectives denying unification, generalisation, or synthesis of such terms. Jacques Rancière, for example, regards surrealism as incommensurable with modernism, and contests that ‘Surrealism and the Frankfurt School were the principal vehicles for…countermodernity’; while Natalya Lusty extends Walter Benjamin’s assertion that surrealism ‘functioned as the radical other of modernism,’ observing that ‘feminist readings of surrealism have endeavored to illustrate how the transgressive function of surrealism as the radical other of modernism has rested on its appropriation of the disturbed female psyche and the violated female body as a metaphor for its revolutionary aesthetic and political practice.’

Susan Hiller identifies the relations between surrealism and modernism as much more intimately linked – surrealism, she suggests, is the ‘shadow side of modernism,’ making the two inseparable from each other, interdependent and yet different, one (modernism) material and solid, the other (surrealism) a visible absence cast by that solid form, a dark shape imitating yet different from its other. David Cunningham observes that ‘reconsidering the relation of surrealism to modernism or the avant-garde should not involve simply another re-jigging of curatorial categorisations derived (usually with considerable simplification) from the likes of Clement Greenberg or Peter Bürger, but should invite us to reconsider the nature of the very concepts of modernism and the avant-garde.’ Cunningham locates one of these intersections between surrealism and modernism in the process of reading (again with Benjamin) surrealism ‘against the grain.’ Where others prominently locate a Hegelian synthesis at the core of surrealism (as is the case in Hal Foster’s assertion that the ‘insistence on resolution, the Hegelian reconciliation of such dualisms as waking and dreaming, life and death…is the raison d’être of Bretonian surrealism’) Cunningham finds it in the ‘infinitely configured “plurality” of fragmentation,’ following Blanchot’s assertion that:

From the unknown – what is neither the pure unknowable nor the not yet known – comes a relation that is indirect, a network of relations that never allows itself to be expressed unitarily […] a non-simultaneous set of forces, a space of difference […] [T]he future of surrealism is bound to this exigency of a plurality escaping unification and extending beyond the whole (while at the same time presupposing it, demanding its realization).

It is this capacity of surrealism, its (dis)location in plurality, its presence as a ‘network of relations’ denying simple unification, which makes its interplays, intersections, overlaps, and dissonances with modernism (in its own fragmentary and contradictory nature) all the more fascinating and insistent.
Introduction

Women artists/surrealism/modernism

Since the 1970s, feminist art history has paid significant attention to women artists practising in the field of surrealism, from early critical and historical work by scholars of women’s surrealism including Gloria Orenstein, Whitney Chadwick, Katharine Conley, and Mary Ann Caws, and the transformative work on theorising modernism of October scholar Rosalind E. Krauss, to a range of recent exhibitions and publication on individual artists, as well as ‘women surrealists’ more generally, such as Angels of Anarchy: Women Artists and Surrealism (Manchester Art Gallery, 2009), Pallant House’s Surreal Friends (2010), LACMA’s In Wonderland: The Surrealist Adventures of Women Artists in Mexico and the United States (2012), and Tate Liverpool’s Leonora Carrington (2015). 13

A cursory survey of large-scale surrealist exhibitions and publications indicates, nevertheless, that these artists have still not secured guaranteed places within the field mapped by general surveys of both surrealism and modernism. Their under-representation in exhibitions such as Surrealism and the Object (Pompidou, 2013), Another World: Dalí, Magritte, Miró and the Surrealists (National Galleries of Scotland, 2010), Surrealism & Modernism: From the Collection of the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art (2003), and in surveys of modernism such as Jean-Michel Rabaté’s A Handbook of Modernism Studies (2013), suggests that the extensive work done on women artists has failed to alter the preconceptions of male creative authority and male discursive power that control and organise the institutions of art history, exhibition-curation, and critical writing.

Recent feminist art history has offered more nuanced and extended explorations of the interrelationship between modernism and surrealism, and of women’s roles in both. Marsha Meskimmon has identified the central issue, arguing that women ‘were an integral part of the social, economic and cultural exchanges characterised as “modern”, yet all too frequently their contributions to modernism as active participants in its debates and definitions have been undervalued if not effaced’. 14 In Annette Shandler Levitt’s The Genres and Genders of Surrealism (1999) an expanded conception of surrealism is discussed as an exploration of the inner and outer dynamics of modern ambiguity emerging after the First World War and centring on the notion of dépaysement (disorientation) as an effect on the viewer of the surrealist artwork. Levitt expands the field in part by focusing on women artists (like Leonor Fini and Dorothea Tanning) who deliberately distanced themselves from Breton’s surrealist ‘inner circle’, as well as on pre- or marginally surrealist male writers and artists.

Susan Rubin Suleiman’s Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics, and the Avant-Garde (2013) explores the subversive significance of play in women’s and men’s
engagements with modernism, noting (for example) ‘the renewal of interest in Surrealism, particularly in the work of women Surrealists, which gathered momentum in the mid-1980s.’ Suleiman’s preferred typology subsumes into the single concept ‘avant-garde,’ ‘however messy and full of dividing lines it might be,’ the broad categories of ‘modernism, post-modernism, and the historical avant-gardes,’ including surrealism – in part as a means of evading *October*-style argument about categories and periodisations.

Such subsuming can be contrasted with the arguments of critics like Meskimmon who prefer to eschew generalisations and inclusivities, rethinking categorisation itself as an outcome of the backward glance through a ‘sanitised veil’ of history of academic discourses:

> During the inter-war years in Europe and America there was no definitive consensus concerning the ‘modern’ or ‘modernism’; many different factions vied for the privilege to assert their ‘modernity’ and through this, their cultural dominance. To read the 1920s and 1930s through the sanitised veil of post-Second World War definitions of the modern and modernism is to reduce the complex and multiple discourses and debates of the day into a falsely unified whole.  

Feminist art historians might thus be divided between those who seek to parse the complexities of modernist allegiances and identifications, and those prepared to overlook these complexities for the sake of discursive and other economies. Either way, the continual need to re-evaluate modernism and surrealism invites the examination and framing of interplays and interactions within the tripartite nexus that organises the argument of this book: that of ‘women artists’, ‘surrealism’, and ‘modernism’. By analysing and exploring the complex and shifting marginalisations and centring, and visibilities and invisibilities within canons, of hitherto neglected women artists, further expansions of the surrealist and modernist fields can be effected.

*Intersections*

*Intersections* offers essays that develop from existing feminist scholarship on women in surrealism and modernism, establishing new modes of reading and criticism practised by a new generation of scholarship. The book frames discussions in an interdisciplinary variety of contexts of the three key terms women/modernism/surrealism. Revisiting the substantial feminist body of precursor work, the essays here explore questions of why specifically surrealism has been such a focus of work on women in modernism, and how and why within this focus certain artists have been neglected, while others (e.g. Frida Kahlo, Meret Oppenheim, or Lee Miller) have recently become ‘canonical’ figures within both feminist and wider canon formations. Scrutinising
women artists’ works with, and within, surrealism and in the context of modernism dynamises current scholarly understanding of all three terms, opening new and fruitful ways of encountering, and more boldly of undoing, histories and concepts that have defined all three. The essays in this critical anthology thus focus on the collisions, collusions, dialogues, and intersections between women artists, modernism and surrealism. They open up and stimulate discussion on persistent critical blindspots relating to the broad identity-categories of race, class, nationality, and location, questioning the processes by which certain artists (or artistic oeuvres) have been neglected, while others have become canonical figures.

The essays here challenge persistent canonical constructions in a number of ways. They explore the triple-structure ‘women artists/surrealism/modernism’ by focusing on little-known oeuvres, or on work produced at later periods in artists’ lives or in media deemed unusual in relation to their ‘typical’ oeuvre, or on work by artists who have hitherto been regarded as marginal or irrelevant to debates around modernism, surrealism, and the woman artist. The essays offer theoretical explorations of different generations of artists who fit in a variety of ways into the wider category of modernism and who intersect with surrealist practices and traditions in complex and sometimes problematic ways. These range from figures whose works precede and shape surrealism but have in fundamental ways been excluded from (and by) it, to those who actively contributed to some of the many manifestations of historical surrealism, to contemporary artists working in the historically expanded field of post-surrealist traditions. This volume offers case studies discussing manifestations of modernism and surrealism in specific national contexts including Czech, Swiss, North-American, Austrian, French, English, and Caribbean, and exploring some of the intersections between colonial and patriarchal repressions. The volume pays particular attention to artistic practice as a polymathic engagement in, and with, a multitude of media, ranging from writing and film making, to costume design and fashion.

As Rosalind Krauss asserts, historicism ‘works on the new and different to diminish newness and mitigate difference. It makes a place for change in our experience by evoking the model of evolution, so that the man who now is can be accepted as being different from the child he once was, by simultaneously being seen – through the unseeable action of the telos – as the same.’

The essays in this collection seek to evade such historicist flattening of newness and difference: they are not arranged chronologically, but brought together in loosely thematic categories, inviting resonances within the groupings, as well as outside of them with other essays. The categories encompass broadly differentiated practices – automatic, poetic, magical, combinatory, and the practice of fashion. These differentiated sections, mapping works in a variety of different media, themselves pro- and analeptically intersect with each other,
producing echoes, shared artistic and authorial concerns, as well as differentiations, and historical, national, generic, and other specificities. A key intersection of increasing significance in modernist and surrealist studies concerns social class. Most of the artists addressed here (like most of their male counterparts) share a similar upper-middle class or aristocratic background bestowing on them certain privileges of wealth and social position, a situation that does not invalidate the political content or radicalism of their work, but does necessitate being aware of the conditions of its production.

A significant and recurrent concern of authors in this volume is to explore what Susan Hiller has called ‘the repressed history of automatism within modernism’. Colin Rhodes examines the automatic practices of four artists, Hélène Smith (Catherine Elise Muller; 1861–1929), Aloïse Corbaz (1886–1964), Unica Zürn (1916–70), and Anna Zemánková (1908–86), tracing the interplays between (male) surrealists’ ‘partial appropriation or colonisation’ of such practices and artists, and the simultaneous relegation of these artists to ‘perform as footnotes’ and ‘marginalia’. In the process Rhodes reveals surrealism’s disappointingly bourgeois and conventional attitude towards outsider artists.

Katharine Conley’s essay on Susan Hiller (born 1940) focuses on her weaving together of the ‘legacies of modernism and surrealism with spiritualism’ and explores her embracing, in opposition to the claims of the original group of male surrealists, automatism’s ‘origins in spiritualism’. Conley’s exploration relates Hiller’s work to that of Leonora Carrington (1917–2011), with her emphasis on the spiritual origins of automatism, tying surrealism to a ‘tradition that prominently featured women artists’ (thus developing a thread introduced in Rhodes’s essay).

Guy Reynolds’s piece extends Conley’s focus on Hiller to other women artists working with the automatist surrealist legacy, namely Louise Bourgeois (1911–2010) and Helen Chadwick (1953–96). Reynolds explores the different and differentiated ways in which these artists negotiate and work the hybrid space where ‘the verbal and the visual meet and enter into dialogue’. He traces these three artists’ distinct and continuing feminist dialogues with the ‘legacy of modernism, with Freud’s legacy, and how we can write about cultural bequests’.

Following Reynolds’ exploration of the ‘intersections of image and word’ in these automatic practices, the next section focuses on little-known poetic practices (both writerly and visual) of artists conventionally regarded as working in visual media. Jonathan Eburne’s essay examines the 1937 collaboration Le Cœur de Pic (Heart of Spaces), by Claude Cahun (1894–1954) and Lise Deharme (1898–1980). Framed as a children’s nursery-book, this work of illustrated verse contrasts sharply (Eburne argues) with Cahun’s more explicit political writings of the same period. He explores the ‘political significance of understanding poetic language as a medium that negates, misdirects, and
disrupts the very relations of communicability or action it purports to enable,' and focuses on Cahun’s ‘surrealist insistence’ on ‘mediated political expression,’ which sees poetic language as a resistance, rather than expression of ‘cognitive certainty presumed by propaganda and protest writing alike’.

Catriona MacAra’s essay explores the intimate relations and dialogues between Dorothea Tanning’s (1910–2012) soft sculpture practice, and particularly the piece Emma (1970), and Gustave Flaubert’s 1857 realist novel Madame Bovary. McAra argues that for too long gendered readings of modernist and/or surrealist practices have been marginalised by biographical readings. Instead, she suggests, drawing on the methodological focus of Mieke Bal, that Tanning embodies Flaubert’s contradictory character as a form of écriture féminine and ‘autotopographical’ critique. For McAra, Emma functions as a ‘disruptive object within the modernist project, morphologically and thematically closer . . . to more playful neo-avant-garde, post-minimalist practices and feminist aesthetics.’

Victoria Ferentinou’s discussion focuses on Leonora Carrington’s little-explored novel The Stone Door, written in the 1940s and published in 1978. According to Ferentinou, in this novel Carrington questions ‘fixed meanings, linear movements and dualist categories’ through her modernist exploration of liminality. This exploration, however, is not a simple re-adaptation of modernist tropes, but a reworking through ‘the lens of surrealist ideas, such as the marvellous,’ providing a far more ‘transgressive framework’.

Hazel Donkin’s essay examines how the works of female surrealists impacted in the period after the Second World War on surrealist discourses on and theorisations of sexuality, gender, and the family, focusing mainly on the contributions of Nora Mitrani (1921–61) and Joyce Mansour (1928–86). Their engagement with these themes ‘in a climate of modernisation and increasing sexual freedoms’ is analysed through their image and text contributions to the key post-war journals Médium: Communication Surréaliste (4 issues, 1953–55), le surréalisme, meme (12 issues, 1956–59), BIEF (5 issues, 1958–60), and La Brèche (8 issues, 1961–65).

Part III explores the functions of the magical practices and discourses engaged in by women artists, viewing them in and as points of intersections between surrealism and modernism. Neil Matheson’s essay on Ithell Colquhoun (1906–88) and her practices, grounded in occultism and magic, views them as intimately bound to the spiritualism connected to automatism (previously discussed in Conley’s piece): ‘If we accept the occult as an integral aspect of the modern,’ writes Matheson, ‘contributing as it does to the emergence of new forms of subjectivity, then Colquhoun’s occultism falls more squarely within advanced modernism, anticipating key themes within postwar surrealism.’ Matheson notes the irony that despite this anticipatory value of Colquhoun’s work, and its close relations to surrealism’s own interest
in magic, she was excluded from the British surrealist group. It is interesting to observe that (similar to Rhodes’s conclusion about the partial inclusion into surrealism of the artists he discusses), it is Colquhoun’s actual participatory practice in occultism and her membership of ‘secret societies’, rather than any purely symbolic expression of these practices, that was a key reason for her exclusion.

Terri Geis’s essay continues the enquiry into ideological double-moves (in the main, by both the original surrealists and by their subsequent representations in different art histories). Geis explores connections between the ways modernist discourses tend to appropriate artists for specific purposes, and simultaneously exclude the possibility of their being significant shapers of these discourses. She examines some instances of the ‘complex level of exchanges’ at work within artistic encounters in the Caribbean, tracing some of the complexities of modernist primitivism as well as the ‘tensions surrounding colonial identity and assimilation’. As Geis asserts (following Edward Said, who asserted in *Culture and Imperialism* [1993] that ‘most histories of European aesthetic modernism leave out the massive infusions of non-European cultures to the metropolitan heartland during the early years of this century’), a number of studies of surrealism have examined the importance and, indeed, centrality of non-Western cultures and thought to the movement (often linking it, more or less problematically to anti-colonial protest). According to Geis, the role of women artists in relation to this area of surrealism has not yet been thoroughly investigated. She examines two moments of alliance in the Caribbean in the 1940s: first, the conversation through essays between André Breton (*Martinique: Snake Charmer* [1948]) and the Martinican writer Suzanne Césaire (1915–66) (‘The great camouflage’ [1945]); and second, the relationship between Maya Deren (1917–61) and the Haitian painter and voudou priest André Pierre (1914–2005).

Part IV examines a diverse range of combinatory practices as sites of both intersection and discord between surrealism and modernism in women artists’ works. Ilene Susan Fort discusses the stylistic combinations of surrealism and classicism in the work of the American artist, Helen Lundeberg (1908–99). Fort locates these stylistic combinations in the intersections between the appropriations of classicism in modern North American history and ideology, and surrealism’s own classicist appropriations in works by artists such as Giorgio de Chirico. In Lundeberg’s work these intersections ‘utilised ancient history and myth to explore and challenge contemporary cultural assumptions about gender and power’.

Reflecting on and extending earlier discussions in Part II of this anthology, the essays by Patricia Allmer, Elza Adamowicz, and Gabriele Schor focus on collagistic practices in poetic contexts. Allmer scrutinises Lee Miller’s (1907–77) documentation of textual surfaces, specifically in her photographs of
advertising surfaces in Germany in 1945, in the immediate aftermath of the War. Allmer argues that Miller’s textual landscapes engage dialogically with Dada collage techniques and strategies, and through this engagement intersect with Nazi ideologies of art and the aesthetic, deconstructing the ideologies of Nazi propaganda with the very modernist art forms they tried to repress and destroy.

Elza Adamowicz’s essay focuses on examinations of the collagistic practice of the French artist Aube Elléouët (born 1935) from the 1990s to 2012, and the negotiations through this practice of the female figure (dis)located within the intersections of modernism and surrealism, intersections closely bound to Elléouët’s personal identity and history, as the daughter of Jacqueline Lamba and Breton. Adamowicz explores this body of work as being in complex dialogue (‘complicitous, ironic, antagonistic?’) with ‘the theory and practice of collage of the first generation of surrealists’, examining relations ‘between a citational practice which looks back and a poetic practice which creates as yet never-seen dream landscapes, fantastic narratives, and imaginary creatures’. Adamowicz’s enquiry concludes with a consideration of Elléouët’s collage practice as post-surrealist, or postmodernist.

Gabriele Schor’s essay analyses the ‘feminist sensual poetics’ deployed in the work of the Austrian artist Birgit Jürgenssen (1949–2003), a corpus which emerges out of, and is closely bound to, specific iconographies of surrealism, particularly that surrealism engaged with by first generation women artists. Schor focuses her discussion on the ‘interplay of textual, poetic and iconographic elements’, discussing Jürgenssen’s practice in a specifically Austrian national context.

The final part of Intersections focuses on the practice of fashion. Rachel Grew’s essay explores the difficulty of containing Leonor Fini’s (1907–96) work in both surrealist and modernist discourses, suggesting (in a formula that might characterise the whole book) that ‘intervention is needed in these various discourses; one which emphasises ambiguity, overlap, and multiplicity’. According to Grew, Fini works at ‘the vanguard of an embodied discourse that enshrines the constructed artifice rather than the authentic “truth”, which has become an obstacle to art historical critique’. She traces ‘processes of embodiment’ in Fini’s work by focuses on two instances (from a wide oeuvre) of her theatrical designs: the group of costumes she designed for the 1949 ballet Le Rêve de Leonor (for which she was also the creator of the story and the set-designer), and the floral motifs connected with Fini’s designs for the 1969 production of Oscar Panizza’s Le Concile d’Amour (The Love Council).

The volume concludes with Emma West’s essay, which points to the recurrent art-historical and curatorial reduction of artists (both male and female) to a select number of works which seem to return eternally as definitive oeuvres. West focuses instead on lesser-known works by Elsa Schiaparelli
(1890–1973), which she explores as ‘cultural translations of surrealism’ in the context of ‘the modern split between an elite, aesthetic high modernism on the one hand and popular, commercial mass culture on the other’. Schiaparelli’s work, West suggests, transports surrealism into a new dimension, and she argues that these designs ‘allow the performance of surrealism on a scale unconceivable for its founders, revolutionising not just traditional fashion and ideas of femininity but also surrealism itself’.

Intersections between surrealism, modernism, and women artists are thus explored across a variety of oeuvres each critically neglected to a greater or lesser extent; each bearing a specific set of relations to, and distinctions from, the key practices, features, tropes, and ideological positions characteristic of various formations of surrealism; and each marking a specific set of intersections between surrealist and modernist aesthetic assumptions. One purpose of this book is to externalise and make explicit the ‘internal dialogue’22 that critics like Suleiman have noted taking place between women surrealists and their male counterparts. While (as critics and anthologists like Penelope Rosemont have been at pains to emphasise) ‘the Surrealist Movement has always opposed overt as well as de facto segregation along racial, ethnic, or gender lines’,23 such segregation returns in selective and repressive art-historical accounts. The essays in Intersections counter this segregational tendency by exploring how those lines of separation and distinction might blur, might touch, overlap, or entwine specifically surrealist contexts with those of modernist aesthetic practice, of what Ithell Colquhoun (citing Breton) called (in ‘The mantic stain: Surrealism and automatism’ [1949]) ‘the modern procedure’.24

Notes

5 Natalya Lusty, Surrealism, Feminism, Psychoanalysis (London: Ashgate, 2007), 10.
6 Lusty, Surrealism, 10.
10 Cunningham, ‘The futures of surrealism’, 52.
16 Suleiman, *Subversive Intent*, 12.
17 Meskimmon, *We Weren’t Modern Enough*, 2.
18 Rosalind Krauss, ‘Sculpture in the expanded field’, *October*, 8 (Spring 1979), 30.
19 Hiller, ‘Susan Hiller in conversation with Roger Malbert’.
20 Catriona McAra, ‘Emma’s navel: Dorothea Tanning’s narrative sculpture’, this volume.
21 Neil Matheson, ‘Desert islands: magic and modernity in the work of Ithell Colquhoun’, this volume.

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Krauss, Rosalind ‘Sculpture in the expanded field’, *October*, 8 (Spring 1979), 30–44.


