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SUCH A DOLL!
MAN-MADE DOLLS IN GERMAN MODERN CULTURE
AND THEIR AFTERLIFE IN POSTMODERN VISUAL CULTURE

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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My dissertation “Man-Made Dolls in Modern German Culture and their Afterlife in Postmodern Visual Culture” seeks to move the discussion of doll-like artifacts beyond the psychoanalytical discourse, and offers to read these man-made dolls as a new modality of perceiving and desiring an anthropomorphous body. My study addresses the doll’s

dialectical relationship to the human body and her endless shape shifting ability. The doll's to-be-played-with-ness and her to-be-looked-at-ness strike a raw nerve among the doll makers I investigate in each of the chapters of the present study.

Chapter one examines E.T.A. Hoffmann's short story *Der Sandmann* under the lens of performance. I argue that Hoffmann, a composer and a music critic, ultimately raises the issue of the performing body and explores its possibilities and limitations through the presence of a musical automaton in the figure of Olympia.

Chapter two examines the doll the Austrian painter Oskar Kokoschka made in collaboration with the German Avant-garde doll maker Hermine Moos. I claim that Kokoschka, striving to create a three-dimensional image of his beloved around 1920, was exploring new ways of seeing to cope with the loss of his mistress.

Chapter three focuses on Bellmer's dolls featured in his photography books, *Die Puppe* (1934) and *Les Jeux de la poupée* (1935). In his photographs, he probes the female body, explores its insides, refashions and redesigns it. By turning the surface of the female body inside out and upside down, he reveals its reversibility and permutability.

Chapter four investigates fashion design with the late British fashion designer Alexander McQueen. In 1996, McQueen presented a Spring/Summer collection entitled *Bellmer La Poupée* – an overt reference to Bellmer's doll. The fashion show featured models wearing wigs and dresses cut in a way that emphasizes the fragmentation and deformity of the female body.

My conclusion focuses on a female photographer, contemporary American photographer Laurie Simmons and her series of photographs, entitled *The Love Doll*. Far from sexualizing the doll or deconstructing her as a mere product of male sexual fantasy, Simmons pursues with her beautiful doll photographs the exploration of the sensory apparatus initiated by Kokoschka and Bellmer

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract of the dissertation	ii
Acknowledgments	iv
Table of Contents	v
Introduction	1
Chapter 1: Reading the Doll, E.T.A. Hoffmann's <i>Der Sandmann</i>	11
Chapter 2: Painting the Doll, Oskar Kokoschka and Alma Doll	39
Chapter 3: Photographing the Doll, Hans Bellmer and His Dolls	86
Chapter 4: Fashioning the Doll, Alexander McQueen's <i>Bellmer la Puopée</i>	149
Conclusion: Laurie Simmons and <i>The Love Doll</i>	189
Bibliography	201

INTRODUCTION

“If the origin of my work is scandalous, it is because for me,
the world is a scandal.”

Hans Bellmer

There lies a contradiction within the doll: as an anthropomorphic artifact, the doll is linked to the human body with which she has an intimate and dialectical relationship. The doll validates, negates, and surpasses the human body all at once, and in so doing, she articulates and navigates the inherent tension with the latter. On the one hand, the doll mirrors and mimics the human body; on the other, she distorts and deconstructs it. She reveals the human body in its limitations and imperfections, discloses its mechanisms and automatisms, and even desacralizes it while she advances as the human body's perfected replica and displays her aura as an artifact.¹ Unlike its human counterpart, the anthropomorphic doll is polymorphous by nature and as such in a constant state of becoming: she embodies the limitless anatomical possibilities that the human body simply lacks. The doll is inherently playful and flirtatious: she's a tease and a lure; she is ludic without ever being ludicrous because the games one plays with her are serious and meaningful. And since the doll excites emotional and sexual drives in her creator and her consumer, violence may come into play, which explains why doll games are often intense, physical, and even brutal. Finally, the doll is meant to be looked at and in so doing, she emphasizes the significance of the sense of sight in the perception and representation of her as image. For the doll is image as much as surface. She is an image without real referent, a non-certified copy, the replica of a missing original. And she is surface, the silver screen of wishful and fearful projections, as well as the canvas that a penetrating gaze tries to pierce or on which a caressing look lingers.

These are the major themes my study of "Man-Made Dolls in Modern German Culture and their Afterlife in Postmodern Visual Culture" will address. Be it either the doll's dialectical relationship to the human body and her endless shape shifting ability, her to-be-played-with-ness and the violent games she inspires, or her to-be-looked-at-ness and her readiness to receive projections and different types of gaze, these topics illustrate some of the tensions and contradictions that strike a raw nerve among the various doll makers I

¹ See Walter Benjamin's definition of aura in his 1935 essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction."

investigate in each of the chapters of the present study.

The complexity inherent in the object doll is already inscribed within the German word for doll “Puppe” [doll], as the etymological dictionary of the German language by the Brothers Grimm informs us. There were actually two words for “doll” in German: the feminine nouns “Docke” in use in the 13th century, and “Puppe” a term of Latin origin (“pupa” meaning little girl in Latin), dating from the 15th century and henceforth replacing the older “Docke.” Since the Middle High German “Docke” and the Early New High German “Puppe” can both designate a doll and/or a doll-like human as well as a puppet and/or a puppet-like being, both words carry with them an uncertainty insofar as they neglect to indicate the nature of the inanimate objects they define (doll versus puppet), and fail to distinguish between living subject and lifeless object. And along with replacement, uncertainty seems to be one of the key characteristics of the German doll: whereas the term “Puppe” features dubiety when it comes to its nature (doll versus puppet), ambiguity when it comes to its referent (living subject versus lifeless object), and ambivalence when it comes to its gender (the feminine noun “die Puppe” encompasses both male and female dolls/puppets), the noun “die Docke” contributes further to the uncertainty already discussed by also including other meanings (wood log and/or textile), that almost metonymically allude to the raw materials constituting the doll/puppet. At the etymological core of “Puppe” lies a tension between matter (wood and cloth) and language that problematizes the very definition of the doll in German. However, this primary tension has not only engraved the “Puppe” almost like an ancient “Buchstabe” [character], carving the wood of the doll/puppet with inscriptions, but also wrapped her with textiles almost like a mummy, covering the doll/puppet with layers of meanings.

By uncovering the doll as a written sign inscribed like a “Buchstabe” and by unveiling its polysemic nature woven into a web of signs, this brief etymological survey reveals that the *Puppe* is at the epicenter of language and yet points to its limits. The doll

disrupts language, not only by challenging the mere concept of definition, but also by blurring the line between male/female, object/subject, matter/words. She is disturbing, confusing (in the etymological sense) and obscure and this may explain why it is linked to the nouns “pupa” and “pupil” whose etymology it forms. My investigation will not only reveal the *Puppe* as “pupa”, a stage before the emergence of a new organism, insofar as the doll represents a process of transformation in gestation, but also address its “pupils” since looking at the doll and the doll’s gaze both play a leading role in most of the stories involving the doll. And yet, seeing through the doll seems almost impossible because, as the etymological overview demonstrates, any clear definition of the “Puppe” in German is troubled by a polysemic excess. The boundaries surrounding the doll are so fluid and transient that any attempt to come up with a clear distinction between doll, puppet, and even mannequin – all encompassed within the noun “die Puppe” – is ultimately futile.

Therefore I decided to work on textual and visual materials (primarily literary texts, paintings and photographs) thematizing this inherent fluidity and transience. The originality of my research stems from my selection of materials coming from literature, painting, photography, and fashion, with a strong focus on 20th-century avant-garde visual artists. A short story by a German Romantic about a wooden doll driving a young man insane; the story of a correspondence between a doll maker and an Austrian Expressionist that originates the making and the painting of a life-size doll; two series of black and white photographs by a German Surrealist documenting the making of his doll and the experimental games he plays with her; and at last, a controversial collection by an avant-garde British fashion designer showing doll-like models wearing split and torn clothing: these are the sources constituting my corpus on dolls.

The doll makers who are the subjects of the following chapters, are mostly Germanic heterosexual male artists, with the exception of the British gay fashion designer Alexander McQueen, and the American heterosexual female photographer Laurie Simmons.

Surprisingly absent from the process of doll making until the second half of the twentieth century (the German Lotte Pritzel being the exception), female writers, sculptors, and photographers have since engaged with dolls in various creative ways. When appropriate, I explore their re-appropriation and subversion of existing man-made dolls as well as their creation of brand new ones at the end of each chapter.

Since monographs on doll makers and edited volumes on dolls often overlook the overarching argument of a genealogy, they usually fail to trace the lineage of a larger doll-making project. My interdisciplinary work attempts to map out this hidden history, which is rooted in a Romantic short story, initiated by an Expressionist painter, continued by a Surrealist photographer, and complemented by an avant-garde fashion designer. My dissertation follows a selection of man-made dolls across centuries and media, as they come and go through artistic movements within literature, painting, photography, and fashion, and in so doing, singles out in each instance a seminal episode in the process of doll making². The purpose of my examination is to demonstrate how influential Germanic artists have been on contemporary visual artists, and how relevant the discussion of dolls and doll making is today.

Although psychoanalysis has provided us with many useful tools for deciphering texts and images, it has shaped our understanding and reading of dolls and their makers in a way that potentially excludes other valid interpretations. Even though scholars have since long pointed to the shortcomings of Freud's reading of E.T.A. Hoffmann's *Der Sandmann*, his theory of the uncanny nevertheless remains central in the interpretation of this Romantic short story. Freudian theory has been largely appropriated by art historians, and for example the dolls designed by Kokoschka and Bellmer have been solely looked at through the lens

2 At this stage of my research I cannot anchor the fixation on dolls and doll making within a national and cultural context and argue for a Germanic specificity – although I suspect that the obsession with artifacts and infatuation with marble statues may most likely be attributed to the process of *Bildung* at work in the 19th century in the German-speaking world. For the time being, I can only recall the historical fact that the mass production of German toy dolls from the second half of the 19th century dominates the European toy market until World War I, and thus marks the leadership of the powerhouse German doll-making industry.

of fetishism while their respective makers have been diagnosed with unresolved Oedipus complex and castration anxieties (an approach Céline Masson and Sue Taylor undertake in their monographs on Hans Bellmer.)³ Although my investigation of man-made dolls is by no means immune to psychoanalytical theory – I use the theory of castration to unfold the violent images conjured up by McQueen’s design on the runway – I nevertheless made a deliberate effort to distance myself from Freudian theory when possible.

My decision is motivated not only by my reluctance to add a penultimate voice to the long succession of re-readings of Freud’s theory of the Uncanny, but also by my increasing weariness of the gratuitous and reductive application of psychoanalytical theory to literary works and artifacts. Art and literature exist without Freudian theory, and their mere function does not lie in validating the latter; they often challenge psychoanalytical thought, resist the co-optation thereof, and show its limitations. In short, art and literature have the potential to teach something new about psychoanalysis. That is the issue Shoshana Felman addresses in her essay “To Open the Question”. Therein she provides the intellectual tools to reflect upon the intricate relationship between literature and psychoanalysis. Felman distinguishes between application and implication, and argues in favor of the latter when she writes:

The notion of application would be replaced by the radically different notion of implication: bringing analytical questions to bear upon literary questions, involving psychoanalysis in the scene of literary analysis, the interpreter’s role would here be, not to apply to the text an acquired science, a preconceived knowledge, but to act as a go-between, to generate implications between literature and psychoanalysis – to explore, bring to light and articulate the various (indirect) ways in which the two domains do indeed implicate each other, each one finding itself enlightened, informed, but also affected, displaced by the other.⁴

Alas, the kind of implication between literature/art and psychoanalysis Felman advocates has been lacking in the existing scholarship on dolls and doll makers. Too often the simple

³ See Céline Masson, *La fabrique de la poupée chez Hans Bellmer. Le “faire-oeuvre perversif.” Une étude clinique de l’objet* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2000).

See Taylor, Sue. *Hans Bellmer. The Anatomy of Anxieties*. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002).

⁴ Shoshana Felman, ed., “To Open the Question,” in *Literature and Psychoanalysis. The Question of Reading: Otherwise* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 8-9.

and basic application of psychoanalytical discourse to literary works and artifacts, with which I take great issue, is still common practice.

My decision to distance myself from psychoanalysis is also grounded in my misgivings about a theory rooted in heteronormativity that fails, in my opinion, to fully embrace and appreciate other modes of desire without the heterosexual matrix, unless it labels them as perversions and categorizes their pathologies. Psychoanalytical theory is ill equipped to engage with the types and modes of desire that originated the creation of man-made dolls in the first place since the dolls imagined by Hoffmann, Kokoschka, Bellmer, and McQueen are situated outside and even beyond a heteronormative framework. It is worth recalling that the creations by Bellmer and McQueen were regarded as perverse while the works by Hoffmann and Kokoschka were considered as the products of a mentally disordered mind. I choose to take as a serious point of departure each doll maker's creation instead, offering a close reading and a curatorial analysis of their work .

For that reason, my dissertation seeks to move the discussion of doll-like artifacts beyond the psychoanalytical discourse, and offers to read these man-made dolls not as perversion but as subversion of the norm and as an *other* version of perceiving and desiring an anthropomorphous body: through the invention of hybrid bodies, these doll makers explore the development of sensory organs in general, and new modes of looking in particular.

My first chapter examines E.T.A. Hoffmann's short story *Der Sandmann* [The Sandman] under the lens of performance. *Der Sandmann* tells the story of a young student named Nathanael, who falls prey to a lawyer/glass peddler called Coppelius/Coppola, before falling madly in love with the wooden doll Olympia at his own expense and to the detriment of his fiancée Clara. Although it is not a play, a closer look at this romantic story reveals that it is a narrative filled with dramatic moments and characters cast as performers – from Coppelius/Coppola's dramatic appearance to Olympia's music and

dance performance – which certainly explains the various stage adaptations of this infamous German story. I argue that Hoffmann, a composer and a music critic, ultimately raises the issue of the performing body and explores its possibilities and limitations through the presence of a musical automaton in the figure of Olimpia. *Der Sandmann* illustrates the difficulty of reading a performing body: by taking its main protagonist as a counterexample, the text examines the issue of hermeneutics. In this regard, the tragic story of Nathanael functions as an allegory of critical reading and warns of the danger of confusing the real with the imaginary, a danger inherent to the figure of the doll.

The second chapter examines the doll that the Austrian painter Oskar Kokoschka made in collaboration with the German Avant-garde doll maker Hermine Moos. After his break up in 1918 with Alma Mahler, widow of the famous composer, Kokoschka, commissioned a life-size replica of his beloved, which he finally destroyed after taking three photographs and making three paintings of it. The letters exchanged between Kokoschka and Moos during a nine-month period privilege the senses of touch and sight, leading me to investigate the concept of haptic visuality (developed by Laura Marks in her book *Touch*, and Gilles Deleuze in his writings on Francis Bacon). I claim that Kokoschka, who was striving to create on the canvas a three-dimensional image of his beloved around 1920, was exploring new ways of seeing to cope with the loss of his mistress. Because this single episode in Kokoschka's life remains an unfinished story, it has been a constant source of inspiration for writers and artists since. The Canadian writer Hélène Frédérick, while lending her voice to the doll maker in the form of a diary, puts haptic visuality at the center of her 2010 novel *La Poupée de Kokoschka* by focusing on an erotic relationship between Kokoschka and Moos, that plays out in an exchange of letters and the physical making of the Alma doll. And the Swiss artist Denis Savary pursues a similar goal when he invites his audience to engage in a haptic visual experience with Kokoschka's plushy doll that he scrupulously recreated for a gallery show in 2011.

The third chapter focuses on Bellmer's dolls inspired by Kokoschka's Alma-doll and by the opera *Les Contes d'Hoffmann* by Jacques Offenbach. Hans Bellmer started his doll project with the publication of a photography book called *Die Puppe* in 1934, leading to the birth of a second doll, the so-called ball-jointed doll, of which he also took several photographs. Although Bellmer's doll project has been mainly read through the lens of a psychoanalytical discourse, his photomontages challenge Freudian theory. Whereas Kokoschka's obsession with the doll is mainly about its surface and texture, Bellmer casts an intrusive and penetrating look on his doll: in his photographs, sketches, and drawings, the artist attempts to probe the female body, explore its insides, refashion and redesign it. By turning the surface of the female body inside out and upside down, he reveals its reversibility and permutability. Bellmer's violent fetishization of the female body drew a strong response among women artists: both the sculptor Louise Bourgeois and the photographer Cindy Sherman re-appropriated Bellmer's doll project, whose sexual fetishism they radicalize and annihilate in their respective body of work.

The fourth chapter moves to fashion design. In 1996, the late British fashion designer Alexander McQueen presented a spring/summer collection entitled *Bellmer La Poupée* – an overt reference to Bellmer's doll. The fashion show featured models wearing wigs and dresses cut in a way that emphasizes the fragmentation and deformity of the female body. McQueen clearly wanted to examine female anatomy and explore the theme of interiority within fashion in his collection. I read McQueen's collection as the synthesis of Kokoschka and Bellmer's endeavors: he investigates the interiority of the female body while at the same time providing it with a protective outer layer. Because of his investment in surgical cuts made in the flesh of the female body, the designer, who was renowned for his precise cutting technique, evokes the notorious figure of Jack the Ripper. Since the body of the doll is at the intersection of different media, the violence inherent in the relationship between men and dolls takes the form of cuts: McQueen incises the female body through his clothes. The obsession with reconfiguring female anatomy is a theme that Dutch conceptual fashion

designers Viktor & Rolf investigate in their 1999/2000 Haute Couture show *Russian Doll*. Therein, the designers play with the idea of reforming the female body by coating their model in layers, in a manner reminiscent of Russian nesting dolls.

My conclusion focuses on contemporary American photographer Laurie Simmons and her series of photographs, entitled *The Love Doll*. Featuring a life-size sex doll from Japan, the series, which Simmons started in 2009, documents from day one her evolving relationship with a latex doll in the hybrid form of a diary and a photo journal. Because of her insistence on humanizing and contextualizing *The Love Doll* in her photographs as well as her resistance to exposing its nude body, Simmons casts a maternal, loving gaze at her sex doll, a gaze different from other male doll makers hitherto. Far from sexualizing the doll or deconstructing her as a mere product of male sexual fantasy, Simmons pursues with her beautiful doll photographs the exploration of the sensory apparatus initiated by Kokoschka and Bellmer.

CHAPTER I**READING THE DOLL
E.T.A. HOFFMANN'S *DER SANDMANN***

Drawing of E.T.A. Hoffmann, c. 1808

The short story *Der Sandmann* (*The Sandman*) by German Romantic Ernst Theodor Amadeus Hoffmann – written in 1816 and published in 1817 in a volume entitled *Nachtstücke* (*Night pieces*) – is the point of departure of my exploration of man-made dolls in German culture. This romantic text is the primary source of inspiration for Germanic visual artists such as Oskar Kokoschka and Hans Bellmer: their doll-making endeavor points back to the story of a young student falling madly in love with a wooden doll. While there is no biographical evidence of Kokoschka's being familiar with ETA Hoffmann's stories, it is a well-known biographical fact that Bellmer attended a performance of *Les contes d'Hoffmann* in 1933 in Berlin and that this fantasy opera provided decisive input in the making of his doll.

I argue that the study of performance in *Der Sandmann* also helps to understand not only the appeal but also the impact this Romantic text has had on the Austrian painter Kokoschka and the German photographer Hans Bellmer. What these modern visual artists have in common, besides their investment with dolls, is in fact their serious involvement with performance: the accounts of Kokoschka's parading his Alma doll in Dresden already flirts with performance art while Bellmer's highly staged and stylized black and white photographs of his doll look like tableaux vivants. I posit that it is less the Freudian uncanny than the performance at work in *Der Sandmann* that these visual artists feel drawn to and keep returning to.

Although Hoffmann's text is not a play, it is nevertheless a narrative filled with theatrical moments and characters cast as performers, which certainly explains the various stage adaptations of this story in the 19th century. Due to the positive reception of Hoffmann's tales among the French Romantics *Der Sandmann* was first adapted by French musician Léo Delibes for the stage as a comic ballet named *Coppélia ou la fille aux yeux d'émail* in 1870 and then as an opéra fantastique called *Les contes d'Hoffmann* in 1871 by musician Jacques Offenbach. The reception of this text is inscribed within performance from the beginning. The scholarship on *Der Sandmann*, heavily influenced by Freud's reading and examination

of “The Uncanny,” so far has exclusively focused on the motif of repetition and the study of the death drive, leaving the study of performance in this text unexamined. I offer to shed light on this blind spot.

If one believes Hoffmann’s biographer Harvey Hewett-Thayer, “Hoffmann recorded in his diary under the date of October 2, 1802, that he spent the whole evening foolishly enough in reading Wiegand [German chemist] and determined sometime to try his hand at the construction of an automaton.”¹ This entry leads the biographer to posit “that Hoffmann examined automatons whenever opportunity offered is probable. The purely mechanical aspect of their construction, the artful deceptiveness of their accomplishments, fascinated him.”² And if one takes in consideration Hoffmann’s musical training as well as his talents for composition and music criticism, the focus on performance is not only legitimate but also logical. Since Hoffmann composed vocal, instrumental music as well as operas (the most famous one being *Undine* (1816) based on De La Motte Fouqué’s romantic story published in 1811) and wrote music criticism, the study of performance makes perfect sense.

If one takes a closer look at the story *Der Sandmann*, one realizes that it is a narrative about performance. Josette Féral’s definition of performance is of some help since it pertains to some extent to the story *Der Sandmann*:

Performance rejects all illusion, in particular theatrical illusion originating in the repression of the body’s baser elements, and attempts instead to call attention to certain aspects of the body – the face, gestural mimicry, and the voice – that would escape notice. To this end, it turns to the various media – telephoto lenses, still cameras, movie cameras, video screens, television – which are there like so many microscopes to magnify the infinitely small and focus the audience’s attention on the limited spaces arbitrarily carved out by the performer’s desire and transformed into imaginary spaces, constituting a zone where his own emotional flows and fantasies pass through.³

“Performance as a phenomenon worked through by the death drive: this comparison is not incidental. It is based on an extensive, conscious practice, deliberately

1 Harvey Hewett-Thayer, *Hoffmann: Author of the Tales* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 167.

2 Hewett-Thayer, *Hoffmann*, 178.

3 Josette Féral, “Performance and Theatricality: The Subject Demystified” in *Modern Drama*, Vol. 25 N. 1 Spring 1982 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982), 171.

consented to the experience of a body wounded, dismembered, mutilated and cut up [...] a body belonging to a fully accepted lesionism.”⁴

Féral’s understands performance as anti-illusion because anchored in the death-drive, and she reads the performer’s use of visual devices as a means to undo the theatrical illusion. But because *Der Sandmann* stages the performance of a mechanical body passing for human, the narrative is less invested in undoing the theatrical illusion than navigating the tension between performance and illusion.

This unstable story presents a constant shift from spectator to performer position, largely due to the lack of any reliable narratorial agency. While some characters, such as the fearsome lawyer Coppelius and even the narrator, manage the transition from performer to spectator benignly, the reverse shift from spectator to performer is lethal to others, and particularly for the young student Nathanael.

Performance is closely connected to the issue of representation, namely the sense of sight. From the very beginning of the story, the narrator is concerned with giving the reader a faithful and colorful depiction of Nathanael’s tragedy, which he openly confesses: “I could not find any words which seemed fitted to reflect in even the feeblest degree the brightness of the colors of my mental vision.”⁵ Nathanael struggles when it comes to retaining in his memory the mental image of the lawyer Coppelius, the man he holds responsible for his father’s death. Because of this struggle, to poetry as a means to an end, as the narrator explains: “The image of the ugly Coppelius had, as Nathanael was obliged to confess to himself, faded considerably in his fancy, and it often cost him great pains to present him in vivid colors in his literary efforts, in which Coppelius played the part of the ghoul of Destiny.”⁶ The primacy of vision in this text is emphasized throughout the narrative from Nathanael oscillating between the voyeur and spectator position, his terror of losing his eyesight to his acquiring a perspective from Coppola, an Italian merchant of spyglasses

4 Féral, “Performance ad Theatricality,” 172.

5 E.T.A. Hoffmann, *The Sandman* in *The Best Tales of Hoffmann*. Ed. with an Introduction by E.F. Bleiler (New York: Dover Publications, 1967), 196.

6 Hoffmann, *The Sandman*, 199.

and spectacles.⁷ Vision – and the lack thereof – is in fact the driving force of a narrative centered on the main protagonist's disregarding the true nature of the wooden automaton Olympia, misreading his friends' Clara and Lothar's good intentions, and mistaking the lawyer Coppelius for the glass merchant Coppola.

While *Der Sandmann* tells the story of the construction of a gynoid, the narrative introduces the reader to different types of corporeality: animate, inanimate, and hybrid. Towards the end of the narrative, when Nathanael plucks up his courage to propose Professor Spalanzani's daughter, Olympia, the reader discovers together with the distraught lover, that the rigid and taciturn Olympia is in reality an automaton. This wooden doll is the result of a long-term collaboration between professor Spalanzani, who engineered the clockwork, and Coppelius, who crafted the eyes, and the source of the violent fight between both scientists, each claiming ownership over it. As for Nathanael's real nature, he seems to be a hybrid being, based on the distressful letter he sends to his friend Lothar in which he shares the story of his childhood trauma with the "Sandman." Therein, the reader learns that Nathanael, spying on his father and his friend, the lawyer Coppelius, who were conducting an experiment, was caught in the act and, as a punishment, had "the mechanism of his hand and foot examined" by Coppelius who "twisted [his] hands and [his] feet, pulling them now this way, and now that."⁸ Since Coppelius, in the midst of his manipulations of Nathanael's body joints, exclaims "That's not quite right altogether! It's better as it was! – the old fellow knew what he was about," one can infer that the boy's body parts have been reconfigured and reassembled. Nathanael's impulsive behavior paired with a compulsive repetition of the phrase "Spin round, wooden doll," occurring at moments of crisis and sheer madness, suggests the mechanical behavior of a hybrid, half human, half automaton.

At odds with Olympia's mechanical body and Nathanael's hybrid nature, stands another type of corporeality, an abject body that is the constant source of disgust to the main protagonist and his family, i.e. the body of the lawyer Coppelius. In his first letter to Lothar,

⁷ In his 1919 essay entitled "The Uncanny", Freud reads the fear of vision loss as the terror of castration.

⁸ Hoffmann, *The Sandman*, 188.

Nathanael gives the following description of Coppelius' physical appearance:

But the most hideous figure could not have awakened greater trepidation in my heart than this Coppelius did. Picture to yourself a large broad-shouldered man, with an immensely big head, a face the color of yellow ochre, gray bushy eyebrows, from beneath which two piercing, greenish, cat-like eyes glittered, and a prominent Roman nose hanging over his upper lip. His distorted mouth was often screwed up into a malicious sneer; then two dark-red spots appeared on his cheeks, and a strange hissing noise proceeded from between his tightly clenched teeth. [...] Altogether he was a most disagreeable and horribly ugly figure; but what we children detested most of all was his big coarse hairy hands; we could never fancy anything that he had once touched.⁹

A similar description is given of the peddler Coppola who is characterized by “a hoarse voice, a wide mouth screwed up into a hideous smile, and little eyes flashed keenly from beneath his long gray eyelashes.”¹⁰ One can hardly fail to notice the latent anti-Semitism included in this caricatural depiction of Coppelius who fits some of the common stereotypes about the Jews, ranging from the Roman nose to the bushy eyebrows and the coarse hairy hands that soil everything they touch.¹¹ Nathanael is quick to underline the soiling and spoiling qualities of this character before adding: “[...] and we cursed the ugly spiteful man who deliberately and intentionally spoilt all our little pleasures.”¹² In his first letter to Lothair, Nathanael mentions that “[his] Father treated him as if he were a being of some higher race” while the friend in his reply notes that “Coppelius was a German, though no honest German, I fancy” which further racializes and ostracizes this enigmatic character. In his letters Nathanael depicts Coppelius as the villain while the peddler Coppola appears as the epitome of the wandering Jew.

There is without doubt something dramatic about Coppelius' appearance: the make-up (“two dark-red spots appeared on his cheeks”) and the old-fashioned, aristocratic costume he wears (wig, waistcoat, stockings, and buckle shoes) make him look like a stage

⁹ Ibid., 186.

¹⁰ Ibid., 202.

¹¹ See Wolf-Daniel Hartwich, *Romantischer Antisemitismus von Klopstock bis Richard Wagner* (Göttingen Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2005), 134. “Der Advokat wird als Unhold zunächst durch sein Äußeres charakterisiert, das den physischen Ekel der Kinder provoziert. Vor allem, die große “über die Oberlippe gezogene Nase” mag bei dieser Gestalt an Judenkarikaturen denken lassen, wenn auch kein expliziter Bezug hergestellt wird

¹² Hoffmann, *The Sandman*, 187.

actor interpreting a character from a different time and age. In Nathanael's depiction of Coppelius' clothing, the ridicule and the abject go hand in hand:

He always wore an ash-gray coat of an old-fashioned cut, a waistcoat of the same, and nether extremities to match, but black stockings and buckles set with stones on his shoes. His little wig scarcely extended beyond the crown of his head, his hair was curled round high up above his big red ears, and plastered to his temples with cosmetic, and a broad closed hair-bag stood out prominently from his neck, so that you could see the silver buckle that fastened his folded neck-cloth.¹³

While Coppelius' appearance looks dramatic, his arrival at Nathanael's house produces quite a dramatic effect in the family's household. His impending visit always provokes the sadness of Nathanael's mother:

Mother seemed to dislike this hateful Coppelius as much as we did; for as soon as he appeared, her cheerfulness and bright and natural manner were transformed into sad, gloomy seriousness.¹⁴

His arrival also leads to the withdrawal of Nathanael and his siblings from their father's study as Nathanael recalls:

On such evenings mother was very sad; and as soon as it struck nine, she said: 'Come, children! Off to bed! Come! The Sandman is come, I see.'¹⁵

At first, Coppelius' presence in the house is not visual but acoustic since it is merely characterized by sound effects such as "[a] trampling upstairs with slow heavy steps" and "[a] dull trampling and knocking" that the child Nathanael perceives and attributes to the Sand-man.¹⁶ Coppelius' physical presence, both signified by the vision of his large frame ("a large broad-shouldered man, with an immensely big head,") and disproportionate body parts ("his big coarse hairy hands" and his "prominent Roman nose,") as well as the sound of his body ("the hissing noise" of his breathing and "the trampling with [his] slow heavy foot steps") call attention to its corporeality in a conspicuous manner.

I argue that in his romantic text *Der Sandmann*, Hoffmann, who composed performances for the stage and already dealt with theatricality in his essay "Der vollkommene

¹³ Ibid., 186.

¹⁴ Ibid., 187.

¹⁵ Ibid., 184.

¹⁶ Ibid., 184.

Machinist” (“The Perfect Machinist”) in 1814, raises the problem of the performing body and explores its possibilities and limitations through the presence of a musical automaton in the figure of Olimpia. To fully grasp the issue of the performing body, I read the musical automaton Olimpia’s in connection with a seminal essay by a contemporary of Hoffmann, namely “Über das Marionettentheater” (“On the Marionette Theater”) (1810) by Heinrich von Kleist, that also addresses the question of the performing body. Hoffmann’s biographer Hewett-Thayer informs that “Hoffmann was one of the few contemporaries of Heinrich von Kleist who appreciated fully his rare genius. [...] He spoke with enthusiasm of Kleist’s essay “Über das Marionettentheater”.¹⁷ As Timothy Scheie explains in the introduction to his study of Roland Barthes and Theatre called *Performance Degree Zero*, there is always an issue inherent to the performing body. He posits that “the performer’s presence remains a problem, and the worries of Barthes and other critics, past and present, amply reveal all that is at stake in the discussion.”¹⁸ While the scholar situates the origin of this ontological issue in Antiquity with Plato, he fast forwards to the 19th century and focuses on German writer Heinrich von Kleist who “in his 1810 essay on puppet theatre [...] frames the question of presence in a manner that continues to shape discussions nearly two hundreds years later.”¹⁹ Scheie discusses the relationship between the human body and the marionette’s as conceived by Kleist:

Kleist’s dancer effectively reverses the commonsensical notion that the puppet copies the human body when he concludes instead that the living body is the corrupt imitation of the marionette. The live performing body is inferior both physically, subject to the cumbersome laws of gravity, and also metaphysically as the material marker of a soul or interior subject that, having eaten of the tree of knowledge, visibly taints the ideal innocence with, in Kleist’s words, the disorders of consciousness. The performer’s body is animate with all the etymological weight of the term, and bears the indelible stain of a somebody that a flesh-and-blood performer might strive to minimize but can never intentionally remove.²⁰

17 Harvey Hewett-Thayer, *Hoffmann: Author of Tales* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1948), 350.

18 Timothy Scheie, *Performance Degree Zero: Roland Barthes and Theatre* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 13.

19 Scheie, *Performance Degree Zero*, 6.

20 Ibid., 6.

Reading Kleist's essay "Über das Marionettentheater" under the lens of performance theory, Scheie advances the following:

Kleist suffers from an exemplary case of presence anxiety. He is neither the first to endure this affliction – at least since Plato the performing body elicits suspicion and unease – nor is he the last. This condition, endemic among performance theorists, expresses itself in the symptomatic desire either to cleanse the performing body of the disorders of consciousness or else to mute, conceal, deconstruct, or eliminate a living body altogether, even in an ostensible investigation of live performance itself. 'On the Marionette Theater' traces two well-trodden trajectories towards a cure for the anxieties of presence that may have followed: either towards a purified performing body unadulterated by cultural, linguistic, technological, and subjective meditation, or toward an ideal body as representation that in extreme cases entails the disappearance of all that distinguishes a live and present performer from an animate simulacrum."²¹

Scheie's diagnosis of Kleist's anxiety of presence serves a point of departure for my examination of the performing bodies at play in Hoffmann's story *Der Sandmann*. I posit that by staging three different protagonists in his story, namely Coppélius/Coppola, Olympia, and Nathanael, Hoffmann addresses presence anxiety that plagues performance theorists and in doing so, engages with Kleist's essay on puppet theater. While Coppélius/Coppola stands for an abject performing body that can neither be cleansed nor idealized, Olympia and Nathanael each represent the alternative to eliminate presence anxiety. As a musical automaton, Olympia is the epitome of the purified body since she possesses no organs at all. As a hybrid, half human, half automaton, Nathanael, unaware of his own nature, advances as the ideal performing body.

Der Sandmann as a narrative opens on a counter-performance: Nathanael writes to Lothar to share not only his distress about the fortuitous encounter with the glass peddler Coppola but also his intention to avenge his fathers' death. Instead of sending the letter to his friend, he sends it to his fiancée Clara, Lothar's sister. This counter-performance, read under the lens of Freudian theory turns out to be a parapraxes, or "Fehlleistung" in German. The reader learns about Nathanael's parapraxes from Clara herself when she confronts her lover in response to his misaddressed letter:

²¹ Ibid., 7.

It is a proof that you were thinking a good deal about me when you were sending off your last letter to brother Lothar, for instead of directing it to him you directed it to me. With joy I tore open the envelope, and did not perceive the mistake until I read the words, 'O! my dear, dear Lothar.'²²

Another example of a counter-performance is given by the narrator himself at the end of the letter exchange between Nathanael, Clara, and Lothar. Abruptly breaking with the epistolary mode with which the narrative opens, a first-person narrator now directly addresses the reader and confesses his difficulty on how to begin the story of Nathanael, the tragic victim of *Der Sandmann*

Strictly speaking, indulgent reader, I must indeed confess to you, nobody has asked me for the history of young Nathanael; [...]. Hence, I was most powerfully impelled to narrate to you Nathanael's ominous life. I was completely captivated by the elements of marvel and alienness in his life; but, for this very reason, and because it was necessary in the very beginning to dispose you, indulgent reader, to bear with what is fantastic – and that is not a small matter – I racked my brain to find a way of commencing the story in a significant and original manner, calculated to arrest your attention. [...] I could not find any words which seemed fitted to reflect in even the feeblest degree the brightness of the colors of my mental vision. I determined not to begin at all. So, I pray you, gracious reader, accept the three letters which my friend Lothar has been so kind as to communicate to me as the outline of the picture, into which I will endeavor to introduce more and more color as I proceed with my narrative.²³

The narrator's counter-performance, similar to stage fright, arises from anxiety which leads to his presence in the text: he takes the stage of the narration and turns apologetically to his audience confessing the shortcomings of his story telling. The disruptive and obtrusive nature of the narrator's digression performs an alienation effect on the reader, undermining his very attempt at identifying with the characters or relating to their experiences in a pre-Brechtian manner. In his careful analysis of the narrator's excursus and its function within the story in "Interpreting Hoffmann's *Der Sandmann*," John Ellis underlines the narrator's jump from epistolary novel to omniscient narrator mode and distinguishes between two sections in the excursus: the first part deals with the process of story telling and how the story might have been told differently, while the second gives a satirical account of

²² Hoffmann, *The Sandman*, 190.

²³ Ibid., 195.

Clara's appearance and character.²⁴

When it comes to Nathanael, the childhood trauma documented in his opening letter to Lothar also takes on the appearance of a performance, which young Nathanael attended as a spectator. Hidden in a wardrobe behind curtains in his father's study, Nathanael is pricking up his ears and getting an eyeful of the scene as he recalls:

Softly – softly – I opened the door to father's room. He sat as usual, silent and motionless, with his back towards the door; he did not hear me; and in a moment I was in and behind a curtain drawn before my father's open wardrobe, which stood just inside the room.²⁵

I was spellbound on the spot. At the risk of being discovered, and as I well enough knew, of being severely punished, I remained as I was, with my head thrust through the curtains listening.²⁶

The presence of the wardrobe and the curtains, reminiscent of a (puppet) theater alcove, conveys a strong theatricality to the scene where Nathanael looking from a distance occupies the spectator position while Coppelius and the father are the performers. Thrusting his head through the curtains like a newborn coming out of the womb, Nathanael gets a glimpse of something he should not see. And like a newborn experiencing the trauma of birth, young Nathanael, faced with a scene of gruesome visions, is experiencing another trauma. Unable to clearly identify and comprehend the scene he is witnessing – a scene of secret experiments in alchemy as Clara later explains in her response to her fiancé – Nathanael lets his childish imagination and primal fears overwhelm him as he recalls:

Good God! As my father bent down over the fire how different he looked! His gentle features seemed to be drawn up by some dreadful convulsive pain into an ugly, repulsive satanic mask. He looked like Coppelius. Coppelius plied the red-hot tongs and drew bright glowing masses out of the thick smoke and began assiduously to hammer them. I fancied that there were men's faces visible round about, but without eyes, having ghastly deep black holes where the eyes should have been. 'Eyes here! Eyes here!' cried Coppelius, in a hollow sepulchral voice. My blood ran cold with horror; I screamed and tumbled out of my hiding place onto the floor.²⁷

24 See Ellis, John. "Clara, Nathanael and the Narrator: Interpreting Hoffmann's *Der Sandmann*." *The German Quarterly*, Vol. 54 No 1 (Jan. 1981), 2.

25 Hoffmann, *The Sandman*, 186.

26 Ibid., 188.

27 Ibid., 188.

Nathanael, caught in the double act of eavesdropping and peeping, receives a severe corporeal punishment by the lawyer Coppelius who twists and turns the child's limbs. Nathanael endured a trauma in the etymological sense of the word: he was inflicted a wound by Coppelius, a wound that caused him severe pain and illness, as his recollection of this traumatic experience attests: "A sudden convulsive pain shot through all my nerves and bones" followed by "fear and terror brought on a violent fever, of which I lay ill several weeks."²⁸ At the end of the story the reader realizes that Coppelius did much more than reconfiguring and rearranging Nathanael's body parts: the lawyer twisted the boy's arm in order to twist him around his little finger like a puppet.

The most striking feature about Nathanael's character is that the traumatic scene in which he is cast as the spectator of the theater of anxiety keeps being reenacted throughout the narrative.²⁹ Shortly after the scene of corporeal punishment, Nathanael endures another traumatic experience: he witnesses his father's death caused by an explosion resulting from an alchemy experiment gone wrong:

Somewhere about midnight there was a terrific explosion, as if a cannon were being fired off. The whole house shook; something went rustling and clattering past my door; the house door was pulled to with a bang. 'That is Coppelius', I cried, terror-stricken, and leaped out of bed. Then I heard a wild heart-rending scream; I rushed into my father's room; the door stood open, and clouds of suffocating smoke came rolling towards me. The servant maid shouted, 'Oh my master! My master!'³⁰

In Nathanael's recollection of the tragic event, the father's burnt and distorted face, similar to the repulsive satanic mask noticed in the past, stands out:

On the floor, in front of the smoking hearth lay my father, dead, his face burned black and fearfully distorted, my sisters weeping and moaning around him, and my mother lying near them in a swoon.³¹

Once again, it is worth observing the theatricality of the scene depicted by Nathanael with all its dramatic effects, both visual (the heavy smothering smoke, the father's

²⁸ Ibid., 188.

²⁹ See Freud, "The Uncanny". 1919.

³⁰ Hoffmann, *The Sandman*, 189.

³¹ Ibid., 189.

burnt black face) and acoustic (the deafening explosion the sound of a canon alike, Coppelius' rustling and clattering, the slamming of the house door, Nathanael's cry, his mother heart-rendering scream, his sisters' weeping and moaning, the maid's shout), straight from a theater performance.

Following a logic of repetition, the narrative proceeds with another disaster. After the explosion incident occurring at the father's study, a fire burns down to the ground the house in G. in which Nathanael rents a room, thus forcing him to relocate to a new house. His new home is situated right across from Professor Spalanzani's. From this vantage point Nathanael catches a first glimpse at Professor Spalanzani's daughter, Olimpia, before getting an eyeful of her with the help of the perspective sold by the glass peddler Coppola. The first visual encounter between Nathanael and Olimpia, despite its brevity is nevertheless of great significance because it sets an automatism in motion that is being repeated to death in the course of the story. Once again, Nathanael takes on the position of the viewer/voyeur, looking at/spying on his female neighbor from across the street, as if her rigid act seen from his window frame were a performance on a theater stage.³² The narrator comments:

That he lived opposite Professor Spalanzani did not strike him particularly, not did it occur to him as anything more singular that he could, as he observed, by looking out of his window, see straight into the room where Olimpia often sat alone. Her figure he could plainly distinguish, although her features were uncertain and confused. It did at length occur to him, however, that she remained for hours together in the same position in which he had first discovered her through the glass door, sitting at a little table without any occupation whatever, and it was evident that she was constantly gazing across in his direction.³³

Nathanael casts a penetrating gaze into her room that lingers on her fine figure for lack of clear facial features for his look to be fixated upon. The peculiar structure of the gaze at work functions as a *mise-en-abîme*: the reader looking through the narrator's prism at Nathanael looking out of his window at Olimpia through the window of her room. Interestingly, Nathanael's gaze at Olimpia is mediated twice by windows, which not only creates

³² The scene of Nathanael spying on Olimpia with a perspective from his window recalls the film *Rear Window* by Alfred Hitchcock where voyeurism is key. The similarities between Hoffmann's story and Hitchcock's film are certainly worth a more detailed and in-depth comparison and extensive further research.

³³ Hoffmann, *The Sandman*, 202.

distance towards the object of his gaze but also frames the mere image of it. The window as framing device directing the spectator's gaze in a particular direction recalls the theater alcove focusing the viewer's attention onto the stage and hints at Nathanael's watching a theater performance, a fact further emphasized by the purchase of a perspective. Whether Nathanael's gaze is framed by the window in his room or by the curtains of a wardrobe in his father's study, the same position as the viewer/voyeur of a staged performance is repeated/reenacted. And since the vision of Olimpia remains opaque and blurry, mainly due to the distance and the mediation of two sets of glass windows, the glass peddler Coppola, like a *deus ex machina* – or rather a *diable en boîte* (Jack-in-a box) – enters the picture and sells Nathanael a perspective to enhance and sharpen his sight of Olimpia. Once his initial terror at the sight of the Coppola entering his room, Nathanael regains his senses and purchases a perspective from the merchant to make amend for his irrational behavior, as the narrator comments:

[...] so, in order to square accounts with himself, Nathanael now really determined to buy something of the man. He took a small, very beautifully cut pocket perspective and by the way of proving it looked through the window.³⁴

The narrator goes to great lengths to present this series of events as casualty when, in fact, the perspective is the missing link that sets a mechanism in motion after the viewer/voyeur position has been constructed and the new scenery put in place. If Nathanael's view of Olimpia had been obstructed, his vision blurred, and his visual desire frustrated. Now, with the help of Coppola's perspective, he can get an eyeful of Olimpia, i.e. fully embrace his voyeuristic instinct and take great advantage of his vantage point as the narrator points out:

Never before in his life had he had a glass in his hands that brought out things so clearly and sharply and distinctly. Involuntarily he directed the glass upon Spalanzani's room: Olimpia sat at the little table as usual, her arms laid upon it and her hands folded. Now he saw for the first time the regular and exquisite beauty of her features. The eyes, however, seemed to him to have a singular look of fixity and lifelessness. But as he continued to look closer and more carefully through the glass,

34 Ibid., 203.

he fancied a light like humid moonbeams came into them. It seemed as if their power of vision was now being enkindled; their glances shone with ever-increasing vivacity.

Nathanael remained standing at the window as if glued to the spot by a wizard's spell, his gaze riveted unchangeably upon the divinely beautiful Olimpia.³⁵

In many regards, the “small pocket perspective” sold by Coppola to Nathanael is the key that winds the mechanism and sets the tragic plot in motion, ultimately causing the main protagonist's demise. That may well explain the side-glances Coppola cast upon Nathanael and the loud sardonic laughter he produces upon leaving his room as if he were informing the reader that the deed is done, a detail that certainly does not escape the narrator's attention.³⁶

The small pocket perspective is the driving force of the story: it stirs up an irrepressible voyeuristic drive within Nathanael, sets off a series of visual encounters with Olimpia before triggering a death drive within Nathanael as the end of the narrative illustrates. It is thus not surprising that the small pocket perspective resurfaces at the very end to play an instrumental role in Nathanael's fall, activating once more a well-oiled mechanism. Enjoying the panoramic view on the topmost gallery of the city tower, Nathanael, upon Clara's suggestion, looks through Coppola's perspective, which sets a mechanism in motion and turns him into an automaton, rolling his eyes, screaming, and jumping all over the place as the narrator describes:

Mechanically he put his hand into his side pocket; he found Coppola's perspective and looked for the bush; Clara stood in front of the glass.

Then a convulsive thrill shot through his pulse and veins; pale as a corpse, he fixed his staring eyes upon her; but soon they began to roll, and a fiery current flashed and sparkled in them, and he yelled fearfully, like a hunted animal. Leaping up high in the air and laughing horribly at the same time, he began to shout in a piercing voice: “Spin round, wooden doll! Spin round, wooden doll!”³⁷

Visually impaired until the glass peddler's visit, Nathanael regains visual potency

35 Ibid., 203.

36 Ibid., 203: “But Coppola did not leave the room without casting many peculiar side-glances upon Nathanael; and the young student heard him laughing loudly on the stairs”.

37 Ibid., 213-214.

once he acquires the perspective. Paradoxically his new ability to see both close and from afar puts him in a similar position as the narrator even though, unlike the latter, the main protagonist is deprived of critical distance and an ironical stance towards the events, to which he is subjected. It seems that Nathanael, who in the course of the narrative has been constructed as a voyeur, was solely prepped for Olimpia's upcoming musical performance, and, once equipped with a visual device, he reveals himself as the perfect spectator. The main protagonist, who, with the help of the perspective is already transfixed by the mere spectacle of Olimpia, can no longer repress his *Schaulust*:

Urged by an irresistible impulse, he jumped up and seized Coppola's perspective; nor could he tear himself away from the fascinating Olimpia until his friend Siegmund called for him to go to Professor Spalanzani's lecture.³⁸

His obsession with Olimpia as a spectacle reaches its climax in the concert scene at Professor Spalanzani's. The Professor throws a party in the first place to introduce his daughter to high society – which is already a performance in itself – and to have her perform music in front of an audience of notables. The party functions as a stage for Olimpia's triple performance, i.e. playing the piano, singing, and dancing, and in fact, the sole purpose of this concert lies in her performing human virtuosity, i.e. humanness. The musical automaton Olimpia is meant here as a show pony and as a toy for pure entertainment, and as such she recalls some of the famous automata that toured and fascinated the royal courts of Europe in the late 18th century.³⁹ The main difference between those automata and Olimpia's lies in her deceit since her mechanical nature is being concealed as she is introduced as Professor Spalanzani's daughter. The concert scene at Spalanzani's is instrumental in the configuration of the power dynamic between onlooker and performer since it reveals Olimpia's true nature as a performer (of music and dance, of gender, of humanness) and underscores her inherent to-be-looked-at-ness – to borrow Mulvey's neologism.⁴⁰

³⁸ Ibid., 204.

³⁹ See for example the Jacquet-Droz automata, built by the Swiss watchmaker family between 1768 and 1774. The musician, the draughtsman, and the writer are still functional and can be seen at the Musée d'Art et d'Histoire de Neuchâtel in Switzerland: <http://www.mahn.ch/expo-automates>

⁴⁰ See Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" in *Screen* 16.3, Autumn 1975, 6-18

This scene is the only time Olimpia is brought into the spotlight, exposed in public and receiving the spectators' gaze at her performance. Her staged performance takes on the appearance of a burlesque show and the ridiculousness and absurdity of the whole scene depicted by the narrator with tongue-in-cheek humor contribute greatly to that impression. As the following comment illustrates, Olimpia's peculiar anatomy and demeanor alienate most of the concertgoers while conveying a strong sense of parody:

Olimpia was richly and tastefully dressed. One could not but admire her figure and the regular beauty of her features. Yet the striking inward curve of her back, as well as the wasplike smallness of her waist, appeared to be the result of too-tight lacing, and there was something stiff and measured in her gait and bearing that made an unfavorable impression upon many.⁴¹

To some extent Olimpia's performance recalls a striptease: she exhibits her vocal and musical talents without ever laying bare her mechanical nature. By "taking Coppola's glass out of his pocket and directing it upon the beautiful Olimpia", Nathanael turns her performance into a peepshow: once his vision acquires a phallic extension with the help of the perspective, he reduces Olimpia's performing body to a dismembered image while solely focusing on her face, and particularly her eyes, as the narrator observes with a tinge of irony:

Oh! then he perceived how her yearning eyes sought him, how every note only reached its full purity in the loving glance which penetrated to and inflamed his heart.⁴²

Nathanael's narcissism and his illusion that the singing Olimpia has only eyes for the him, becomes increasingly the object of ridicule before taking a tragic turn towards the end of the narrative.

The concert scene in *Der Sandmann* is pivotal: not only does Nathanael's perception of Olimpia, hitherto restricted to vision, become acoustic and haptic, but it also seals the dynamics of his obsession with her. Commenting on Olimpia's musical performance, Katherine Hirt writes in *When Machines Play Chopin*:

⁴¹ Hoffmann, *The Sandman*, 205.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 205.

The relationship between the body and the instrument, the spirit which exists in each element of music, as well as the factor of automation are all present in the female automaton Olympia. As an android, Olympia is a work of art, and the moment she performs music, she is at once an artwork and automated musical instrument. Olympia's performance in *The Sandman* is a central point in which the characters Nathanael and Olympia can be seen as artists and as autonomous works of art. [...] Unlike the androids in *The Automata*, Olympia's identity as an android is not obvious to the audience, least of all to Nathanael. Neither does anyone control her performance through accompaniment or by turning on a switch, as Professor X does to the androids and instruments in his collection [in *The Automata*]. Her musicianship is perfect precisely because she is an android that appears to work in full autonomy.⁴³

Hirt is right to point out that “as an android, Olympia is the perfect musical performer, precisely because she does not interpret” before turning to her voice and skills as a singer of aria di bravura (a piece written to display the singer's agility and range of execution):⁴⁴

[Olimpia] represents the epitome of musical aesthetic present in Hoffmann's music reviews and stories. As a singer, her body is an instrument, and the voice she is able to sing is the sought after ‘glass bell voice’, the sound of nature. [...] It can be argued that the technical skill comes from the fact that her body is not merely the instrument that a living singer's body ought to be, but truly is an instrument.⁴⁵

Olimpia is well versed in performing arts since she can play the piano and sing, but also dance ballroom. Enthralled by her musical and vocal performance, Nathanael is determined to ask her for a dance and very quick to act. Even though the first physical contact with her is rather off-putting, mainly due to her cold-blooded mechanical body, dancing with Olympia turns out to be a rather unsettling experience, which further underlines Hirt's reading of the automaton as a musical instrument. The waltzing Olympia who possesses a perfect sense of rhythm and keeps a steady tempo, comes across as a metronome, as the omniscient narrator observes:

And passion burned more intensively in his own heart also; he threw his arms round her beautiful waist and whirled her round the hall. He had always thought that he kept good and accurate time in dancing, but from the perfectly rhythmical evenness with which Olympia danced, and which frequently put him quite out, he perceived

43 Katherine Hirt, *When Machines Play Chopin: Musical Spirit and Automation in Nineteenth-Century German Literature* (Berlin/New York: De Gruyter Ed., 2010), 54.

44 Hirt, *When Machines Play Chopin*, 57.

45 Ibid., 57-58.

how faulty his own time really was.⁴⁶

If one wants to fully grasp the horrible signification of the ball scene with the dancing automaton and its terrible impact on Nathanael, who in an outburst of rage and madness screams at the end “Spin round, wooden doll! Spin round, wooden doll,” one must turn to *Die Automate*, a Romantic tale published by Hoffmann in 1814 in an elitist journal *Zeitung für die elegante Welt*.⁴⁷ *Die Automate* is a detective story and, as the title indicates, it evolves around musical automatons. Two young friends, the composer Ferdinand and the poet Ludwig, are attempting to solve a double mystery: the enigma behind the functioning of the “talking Turk,” a clairvoyant automaton, and the riddle behind the existence of a beautiful female singer with a crystalline voice. The narrative, constructed as a dialogue between Ferdinand and Ludwig, includes several excursions about the mechanical creation of music, the making of new musical instruments, musical automatons, and man’s relationship to music. It is obvious that *Der Sandmann* (published in 1816-17) is informed by the discourse on music present in *Die Automate*. A reply by Ludwig announces the ball scene with Nathanael and the dancing Olimpia in *Der Sandmann*. After a visit to Professor X’s collection of musical automatons, Ludwig, reacting to his friend’s astonishment, confesses his malaise and expresses his horror at the sight of machines in the following terms:

The fact of any human being’s doing anything in association with those lifeless figures which counterfeit the appearance and movements of humanity has always, to me, something fearful, unnatural, I may say terrible, about it. I suppose it would be possible, by means of certain mechanical arrangements inside them, to construct automata which would dance, and then to set them to dance with human beings, and twist and turn about in all sorts of figures; so that we should have a living man putting his arms about a lifeless partner of wood, and whirling round and round with her, or rather it. Could you look at such a sight, for an instant without horror?⁴⁸

If Ludwig shudders at the thought of “a living man putting his arms about a lifeless partner of wood, and whirling round and round with her,” his terrible vision has since become a horrible reality in *Der Sandmann*. If Nathanael’s involvement with Olimpia was

⁴⁶ Hoffmann, *The Sandman*, 206.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 214.

⁴⁸ E.T.A Hoffmann, *Automata* in *The Best Tales of Hoffmann*. Ed. with an Introduction by E.F. Bleiler (New York: Dover Publications, 1967), 95.

hitherto regarded as ludicrous and ridiculous, Ludwig comment reveals a dreadful aspect of the situation the main protagonist is tragically involved in, inexorably leading to his demise. With the exception of Nathanael, this angst at the sight of Olympia is actually shared by many onlookers. Siegmund, a study friend of Nathanael, who in a heated conversation about Olympia calls her “Miss Wax-face” and regards her as a “wooden doll,” tries in vain to reason with his infatuated friend by invoking his malaise and fear of her illustrates:

She [Olimpia] is strangely measured in her movements, they all seem as if they were dependent upon some wound-up clockwork. Her playing and singing have the disagreeably perfect, but insensitive timing of a singing machine, and her dancing is the same. We felt quite afraid of this Olympia, and did not like to have anything to do with her; she seemed to us to be only acting like a living creature, and as if there was some secret at the bottom of it all.⁴⁹

Without even knowing it, Siegmund, unlike Nathanael, sees Olympia for exactly what she is: a musical automaton or “singing machine,” to quote his own words. And as such, she represents the perfect musical organ because she is both instrument and performer at once, unhindered by corporeality, subjectivity or consciousness, which allude to the claim about the superiority of puppets over humans Kleist’s “Über das Marionettentheater” (“On the Marionette Theater”) makes. It is nevertheless worth examining Siegmund and Nathanael’s opposite reactions to Olympia’s performance since her virtuosity arouses among the spectators strong feelings, ranging from passion to horror. It is as if her skills were calling attention to the performance of music itself as a technical and mechanical act, instead of concealing it. That disharmonious aspect of Olympia’s performance strangely resonates with one of the musical writings by Hoffmann entitled “Der vollkommene Machinist” (“The Complete Machinist,”) published in *Fantasiestücke in Callot’s Manier* (*Fantasy pieces in the Style of Callot*) in 1814-1815. In this text solely addressed to the theater machinist, the narrator named Kreisler declares war on the poet and the musician and warns against their pernicious influence on operagoers as follows:

Gentlemen!

In case you have not already realized it, I would like to point out to you that poets

⁴⁹ Hoffmann, *The Sandman*, 208.

and musicians find themselves in a highly dangerous alliance against the public. They have set themselves no less a task than to wrench the spectator out of the real world, where he feels quite at home, and then, when they have separated him from all the things he knows and loves, to torment him with all the sensations and passions that are most injurious to his health. He is made to laugh, to cry, to be startled, frightened, terrified, just as they wish; in short, as the saying goes, he dances to their tune⁵⁰.

It seems almost impossible not to recognize Nathanael as the epitome of the deceived spectator in the quote above. The spectacle of Olympia has indeed alienated the main protagonist from his loving fiancée Clara, stirred a passion that is detrimental to his physical and mental health, and made him a puppet in the hands of Olympia's makers, i.e. Coppélius/Coppola and Professor Spalanzani. Since the date of publication of Hoffmann's "Der vollkommene Machinist" coincides with that of *Die Automate* and since the latter served as a preliminary to *Der Sandmann* (published 2 years later in 1816-17), these three texts are closely linked and dialogue with one another. Proceeding with his verbal attack on the poet and musician, Kreisler brings up incriminating evidence against them:

All too often their evil intention succeeds, and we regularly see the most pathetic consequences of their pernicious influence. Have not many theatergoers believed the far-fetched nonsense they were witnessing? Have they not failed to notice that the characters do not speak, like other decent people, but sing? [...] Who can ensure that the theater will provide intelligent recreation, that everything will remain calm and quiet, and that no passion detrimental to mental and physical well-being will be aroused?

This quote resonates even further with *Der Sandmann* since the victimized theatergoer described above strongly recalls Nathanael: he "believes the far-fetched nonsense" that Olympia is a human being, notices that she can sing but not speak, only sigh "Ach!" and he experiences a mental breakdown in the course of the story before committing suicide at the end. At first sight, the credulous Nathanael does not fall victim to the harmful league of poets and musicians condemned by the vindictive Kreisler; rather, it seems that the dilettantish poet Nathanael falls for the spectacle of the skillful musician Olympia. However, a

50 E.T.A. Hoffmann, *Musical Writings: Kreisleriana, The Poet and the Composer, Music Criticism*. Edited, annotated, and introduced by David Charlton. Translated by Martyn Clarke (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 116.

closer look at the concert scene reveals that Nathanael falls prey to his own poetry since he poeticizes Olimpia's voice and her aria di bravura, and thus succumbs to the mix of music and poetry, as the narrator observes:

Her [Olimpia's] roulades seemed to him to be the exultant cry towards heaven of the soul refined by love; and when at last, after the cadenza, the long trill rang loudly through the hall, he felt as if he were suddenly grasped by burning arms and could no longer control himself – he could not help shouting aloud in his mingled pain and delight. 'Olimpia!'⁵¹

The pairing of the poet and the musician, whose detrimental influence on the spectator Kreisler is so vocal about in his address to the machinist, is a recurrent motif in *Die Automate* as well as in *Der Sandmann*. The former story features a poet (Ludwig) and a musician (Ferdinand) as main protagonists while the latter repeats the identical lineup of poet (Nathanael) and musician (Olimpia). If one takes into account the biography of E.T.A. Hoffmann, one realizes that he represents, not only as a literary writer, music critique, and musician, but also as a composer of operas, the quintessential union of the poet and the musician. Kreisler's theory about the alliance of poets and musicians to the detriment of the spectator is of great significance because it puts a new spin on the narrative of *Der Sandmann*. For the reader of the story falls prey to the infamous alliance of poets and musicians twice: by surrendering to the spell of both pairs Nathanael-Olimpia and narrator-author, he ends up being manipulated by them like a puppet. He is even deceived into "believing the far-fetched nonsense" of a young student falling madly in love with a wooden doll! In his fervent speech to the machinist, Kreisler lays out the strategic principles of his counter-offensive against poets and musicians, as follows:

The first principle from which all your efforts must proceed, is to declare war on the poet and musician – to destroy their evil intention of surrounding the spectator with illusions and wrenching him from the world of reality."⁵²

Interestingly, Kreisler's admonishment befits the deceitful nature of the story *Der Sandmann* since it is a literary text that displays "the evil intention" of the poet and the musi-

51 Hoffmann, *The Sandman*, 205.

52 Hoffmann, *Musical Writings*, 117.

cian throughout: it confuses the reader/spectator with illusions and plunges him into the world of the irrational and the supernatural.

On many levels, *Der Sandmann* is the realm of illusions: while Nathanael is delusional about the lawyer Coppelius and the glass peddler being one and the same person and Olympia being alive and real, so is the reader delusional about the characters, the plot, and its signification. The reader is under the illusion that Nathanael is human – when in fact he may be mechanical – and a madman suffering from persecutory complex – when he may be sane and responding to serious life threats. Nathanael's fiancée Clara also deludes the reader since her cold and emotionless demeanor paired with a rational and affectless attitude prompts her to act like an automaton, as John Ellis convincingly argues in his article about the function of the narrator in *Der Sandmann*⁵³. The scholar demonstrates that Clara's cold personality prompting her irritated fiancé Nathanael to call her "You lifeless damned automaton" recalls Olympia's ice-cold hand and lips, and that in the end both female are alike.⁵⁴ Reading the series of traumatic events experienced by Nathanael as fortuitous turns out to be as illusory as attributing them to occult forces at work against him. And to top it all off, Nathanael is not a real poet with great talent, just an amateur whose poems bore and exasperate his fiancée Clara, nor is Olympia a real musician, since as a musical automaton she is solely a music box⁵⁵.

Even Kreisler's theory of the alliance of poet and musician against the spectator/reader falls short here and turns out to be an illusion. It is as if the narrative were resisting any attempt at interpretation and leaving the reader with a real epistemological challenge. For *Der Sandmann* presents at the end of its story a deep epistemological crisis, cloaked in social satire. The likelihood of the delusional Nathanael and his rational fiancée Clara being automatons like Olympia destabilizes and prevents any definite reading of the text. Thus, it is not surprising that the scandal stirred up by the automaton Olympia and her

53 See Ellis, "Clara, Nathanael and the Narrator".

54 Ibid., 12.

55 The real poet in the story remains the narrator who confesses his shortcomings in terms of story telling at the beginning of the text.

makers Professor Spalanzani and Coppola deeply shook up the town and profoundly affected its inhabitants as the narrator informs in his typical tongue-in-cheek sense of humor:

[...] the history of this automaton had sunk deeply into their souls and an absurd mistrust of human figures began to prevail. Several lovers, in order to be fully convinced that they were not paying court to a wooden puppet, required that their mistress should sing and dance a little out of time, should embroider or knit or play with her little pug, &c., when being read to, but above all things else that she should do something more than merely listen – that she should frequently speak in such a way as to really show that her words presupposed as a condition some thinking and feeling.⁵⁶

Because he “fraudulently imposed an automaton upon human society,” Professor Spalanzani is banned from high society circles and forced to leave town while the glass peddler Coppola also disappears without trace. Their wrongdoing however plunges the town into a state of crisis and angst and awakens mistrust among the inhabitants since the outrage about Olimpia lies in the mere fact that there is no definite way to distinguish between humans and automatons. The story perfectly illustrates that the thin line separating humans from androids has already been crossed since androids act like humans and vice versa. Commenting on that disturbing aspect which the social satire underlines, Ellis writes:

There is indeed a surface level of the text which makes fun of Nathanael for not being able to distinguish between an automaton and a real person. But there is a deeper and more important level of satire which reverses the direction of the first; here, it is ordinary people that are satirized for being so automaton-like that they might be mistaken for automatons, or an automaton mistaken for a real person.⁵⁷

Olimpia’s function, then, is not to contrast unfavorably with real people, but to dramatize how automaton-like they have become; and this general function is particularly true in the case of Clara.⁵⁸

Der Sandmann, faithful to the tradition of romantic poetry defined by Schlegel as self-reflexive and self-critical, appears as a self-performative text – it tells a confusing story about confusion between humans and automatons, told by a confused narrator to an increasingly confused reader – while its main character advances as the epitome of confusion: into the child Nathanael both the human and the mechanical were fused together.

⁵⁶ Hoffmann, *The Sandman*, 212.

⁵⁷ Ellis, John, p. 11.

⁵⁸ Ellis, John, p. 12.

But the Romantic irony does not stop short here and the narrator proceeds with his social satire by introducing a pedantic scholar, as follows:

The Professor of Poetry and Eloquence took a pinch of snuff, and, slapping the lid to and clearing his throat, said solemnly, ‘My most honorable ladies and gentlemen, don’t you see where the rub is? The whole thing is an allegory, a continuous metaphor. You understand me? Sapienti sat.’⁵⁹

This quote by the Professor of Poetry and Eloquence is of great significance because it gives a key of interpretation to the story and, in so doing, brings an answer to the question of the epistemological crisis going on in *Der Sandmann*. The reader is invited to interpret the text both as an “allegory” and as a “continuous metaphor,” which actually functions as synonyms but implicates the reader on a different level. If the story is to be read as an allegory, its hidden meaning is for the reader to decipher whereas if it is a metaphor, it stands on its own independently of the reader. By closing his monologue with the Latin phrase “Sapienti sat,” commonly translated as “a word to the wise is enough,” the Professor assumes the existence of an esoteric reader who can read between the lines and understand the deeper allegorical/metaphorical meaning of the story without further explanation. And in fact, this esoteric reader represents the second element of the analogy, the vehicle of the metaphor, because the story of Nathanael and Olympia is an allegory of reading, “a continuous metaphor” of critical reading. *Der Sandmann*, taking its main protagonist as a counter-example examines the issue of hermeneutics. Nathanael advances as the epitome of the poor reader and in the course of the story he not only mistakes one character for another (Coppelius for Coppola, Clara for Olympia, automatons for humans) but also repeatedly confuses the imaginary with the real. Because the naïve Nathanael takes what he sees at face value, he often reads too much into some characters’ behavior, such as Coppelius/Coppola or Olympia for example. Unlike his fiancée who is gifted with an over-analytical mind, Nathanael lacks interpretive skills to process and comprehend his various encounters with the lawyer Coppelius, the glass peddler Coppola, and the automaton Olympia. In this

⁵⁹ Hoffmann, *The Sandman*, 212.

regard, his story functions as an allegory of critical reading, as a warning for the reader to not follow his example: because of Coppola's perspective, this character fails to engage in close reading which brings about his downfall.

Interpreting the text of *Der Sandmann* as a metaphor of reading brings immediately to mind Kleist's "Über das Marionettentheater" ("On the Marionette Theater") since the text also deals with the issue of hermeneutics as Paul De Man in his essay "Aesthetic Formalization: Kleist's 'Über das Marionettentheater'" convincingly demonstrates. De Man reads the third anecdote narrated by the ballet dancer C. about an undefeated fencing bear as a metaphor of reading and regards the latter as a super reader, as the following quote illustrates:

The superiority of reading over writing, as represented by the superiority of the reading bear over the fencing author, reflects the shift in the concept of the text from an imitative to a hermeneutic model. From being openly asserted and visible in the first case, meaning is concealed in the second and has to be disclosed by a labor of decoding and interpretation. This labor then becomes the *raison d'être* of a text for which reading is indeed the correct and exhaustive metaphor.⁶⁰

Kleist and Hoffmann share a similar concern for the question of interpretation – a core issue for musicians – and tackle respectively the problem of hermeneutics in their literary texts. Both Kleist's essay and Hoffmann's short story raise the question of the best performing body and the best way to read a text. But while there is with Kleist still a way out of the epistemological crisis through either a higher God-like consciousness or animal-like instinct, for Hoffmann there is no exit from the state of confusion. The author of *Der Sandmann* illustrates the difficulty of reading a performing body, a difficulty rendered even more complex by the mechanical nature of the performer, as is the case with Olympia and Nathanael.

Ironically, the scholarship on *Der Sandmann*, as if it were meant to further allegorize and metaphorize a story about confusion and illustrate the difficulty of critical reading, has been misreading the fate of Olympia towards the end of the narrative for decades. In the

60 Paul De Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 281.

fight scene between Professor Spalanzani and Coppola over the ownership of Olimpia, there is no mention of destruction or dismemberment of the musical automaton. In fact, only once is Olimpia pulled to pieces – figuratively speaking – by some of the guests at Spalanzani’s ball party, as the narrator explains:

Although the Professor had done everything to make the thing a splendid success, yet certain gay spirits related more than one thing that had occurred which was quite irregular and out of order. They were especially keen on pulling Olimpia to pieces for her taciturnity and rigid stiffness; in spite of her beautiful form they alleged that she was hopelessly stupid and in this fact they discerned the reason why Spalanzani had so long kept her concealed from publicity.⁶¹

In the nasty fight between her makers, Olimpia solely loses her eyesight but not a single body part: she is out of order but not out of shape, and certainly not destroyed. As the narrator describes quite plainly, Coppola wins the fight over Spalanzani and leaves with his trophy woman, i.e. the full-bodied automaton Olimpia, across his shoulder:

The professor was grasping a female figure by the shoulders, the Italian Coppola held her by the feet; and they were pulling and dragging each other backwards and forwards, fighting furiously to get possession of her. [...] when Coppola by an extraordinary exertion of strength, twisted the figure out of the Professor’s hands and gave him such a terrible blow with her, that Spalanzani reeled backwards and fell over the table among the phials and retorts [...]. But Coppola threw the figure across his shoulder, and laughing shrilly and horribly, ran hastily down the stairs, the figure’s ugly feet hanging down and banging and rattling like wood against the steps.⁶²

The only character whose hybrid body ends up destroyed and dismembered at the end of the story, is the confused Nathanael, who “lay on the stone pavement with a shattered head,” as the narrator observes.⁶³

E.T.A. Hoffmann’s *Der Sandmann* raises core questions about the representation and interpretation of the performing body. By challenging and confusing his reader, Hoffmann advances as a precursor and opens the way for Kokoschka, Bellmer, and McQueen, who

⁶¹ Hoffmann, *The Sandman*, 207.

⁶² Ibid., 210.

⁶³ Ibid., 214.

all explore the conditions of possibility of their respective medium and seek to sharpen or enhance the sight of the spectator.

CHAPTER II

PAINTING THE DOLL OSKAR KOKOSCHKA AND THE ALMA DOLL



Hugo Erfurth, Oskar Kokoschka, 1919
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On July 22, 1918 the Austrian painter Oskar Kokoschka writes a letter – the first of a series of twelve during a nine month period – to the German doll maker Hermine Moos whom he has commissioned to work on a project of a very particular kind: making a life-size doll of his former female lover, Alma Mahler, the widow of the world-famous music composer and conductor, Gustav Mahler, who died in 1911. From 1911 to 1914, Alma Mahler and Oskar Kokoschka had a tumultuous affair that was ended only by Alma's marriage with Bauhaus founder Walter Gropius in 1915. In the summer of 1918 – i.e. almost three years after his stormy three-year relationship with Alma Mahler – the convalescent Kokoschka, who is still recovering from physical injury (he was seriously wounded in 1915 during World War I) and emotional pain (Alma aborted their child in 1914 and left him to marry another man) initiates his doll project.

Before turning to Moos though, Kokoschka had approached the famous Munich based doll maker Lotte Pritzel but she declined the offer after looking over his initial sketches.¹ Kokoschka most likely knew of the doll maker Hermine Moos through Lotte Pritzel and her husband, Dr Gerhard Pagel, whom Kokoschka mentions in his letters to Moos, and he probably chose her because of her connection to Avant-garde circles². “The fact that Kokoschka wanted a woman connected to avant garde circles to produce his doll”, writes the scholar Lisa Street, “argues for his conception of it as an artistic process, since this type of person would be more understanding of his purposes”³. Hermine Moos is also rumored to have been Alma Mahler's seamstress and this story of her close connection to his beloved as well as her expertise of textiles and dressmaking, although certainly not a crucial factor in Kokoschka's decision, might have been influential nonetheless. That is also the assumption that Withford makes in his biography of Kokoschka when he claims:

1 Pritzel made exquisite wax dolls for the vitrine of department stores and her dolls became so successful and sensational that they inspired the poet Rainer Maria Rilke to an essay “Zu den Wachspuppen von Lotte Pritzel” (“On the Wax Dolls of Lotte Pritzel”), 1913-14.

2 See Kokoschka's third letter to Moos dated August 20, 1918: “Liebes Fräulein Moos, ich sandte Ihnen gestern durch meinen Freund Dr Pagel eine lebensgroße Darstellung meiner Geliebten...” in Oskar Kokoschka, *Briefe I 1905-1919*. Hrsg von Olda Kokoschka und Heinz Spielmann (Düsseldorf: Claassen Verlag, 1984), 293.

3 Lisa J. Street, *Oskar Kokoschka's Doll: Symbol of Culture* (Emory University: PhD Dissertation, 1993), 60-62.

Kokoschka heard, perhaps from Käthe Richter's family, about a seamstress and doll-maker who lived in Stuttgart and, if some reports are to be believed, was better qualified for the job than anyone else alive: she had once been Alma Mahler's dressmaker.⁴

Unfortunately, very little is known about the doll maker since her letters to Kokoschka were neither published nor conserved and were most likely discarded. All we know for sure is that, judging from his first and fourth letters to Moos, Kokoschka valued her craftsmanship and enjoyed her dolls, and that he also attended her exhibition of dolls at the Richter Gallery in Dresden in September 1918.⁵

A close reading of Kokoschka's twelve letters to Hermine Moos reveals a male author in full control: the painter demonstrates an impressive mastery of language and conveys a remarkably clear vision of his doll project to such an extent that one may wonder whether the letters are not already part of the artistic process of doll making. And since, from the start, Kokoschka alternates between the pen and the brush by either including drawings in his letters or joining sketches to them, his letters judging from their form and content – in that regard reminiscent of Michelangelo's – must be regarded as works of art [Fig. 1 & 2]. That is the thesis that Lisa Street advances in her dissertation on Kokoschka's doll when she states:

At first, the letters appear to be non-art. As they are hand-written on normal letterhead and presumably sent by mail to the doll-maker Hermine Moos. (...) Since Kokoschka later used a letter form for his stories, I would like to go one step further and consider the letters themselves as a kind of literary production, and propose they were initially conceived by Kokoschka as a part of an artistic process. As an artist trained in an art historical tradition that always included biographical information as evidence of genius, the artist was quite aware of the importance of his letters. The fact that the letters were collected rather than just sent and discarded is a testimony to this.⁶

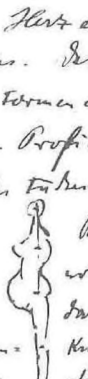
⁴ Frank Whitford, *Oskar Kokoschka. A Life* (New York: Atheneum, 1986), 119

⁵ See Kokoschka's first letter dated July 22, 1918: "Ich (...) legte auch die Puppe bei, die eine reizende Arbeit ist" and his fourth letter dated September 19, 1918: "Heute sehe ich mir Ihre Puppen bei Richter an..." in Kokoschka, *Briefe*, 290, 295.

⁶ Street, *Oskar Kokoschka's Doll*, 60-61

One may assume that Kokoschka, who by 1919 was already a renowned artist, knew that his letters would be sooner or later published and, as a matter of fact, no later than 1925 nine of his letters to Hermine Moos were published by Paul Westheim, the art critic and editor of *Das Kunstblatt*, a Berlin based art journal under the sensational title *Der Fetisch, Künstlerbekenntnisse*.⁷

In order to get a better understanding of Kokoschka's doll project and to grasp a



ich achte auf die Dimensionen des Körpers zu dem des Halses,
 der Rumpfes und der Gliedmaßen. Nach nehmend die Läng
 in Körper ruft zu Hektar. 7. 6. Die Linie des Halses
 die Curve des Bauges. Der zweite schwing gestellte Bein
 in ein, damit die die Formen ebenfalls auf von innen sehen,
 die ganze Figur rein im Profil gedacht, so sind die
 von Kopf bis zum Rist der Füße für die eine genaue Bestimmung
 der Körper ermöglicht. Bitte machen Sie es dem Tastgefühl
 der Stellen zu erfahren, wo die Falt- od. Muskelverläufe plötzlich
 + decke zeigen, am besten dann irgend ein Knopfstück an die stecken.
 B. am Schenkel, die Becken- Knie Knorpel, die Schulterblatt, 5. Hals- ellbogen sind
 die Streifung und Lagerung der Falt- und Muskelbündel versehen die
 der weichen Faltflecken, die in der Natur gewöhnlich anbrachte.
 genau zu treffen sind ist ganz der Ausdruck der Gerichten, das in mir
 1 mia treffe. Die der Baug sind die größte Muskelfläche am Bein

Fig. 1 Oskar Kokoschka, Letter to Hermine Moos # 3, August 20, 1918
 deeper meaning of the Alma doll, I shall offer a close reading of some of his twelve letters
 to Hermine Moos and carefully examine the sketches and the life-size nude oil painting
Standing Female Nude, Alma Mahler (1918) that he did of his former lover during his epistolary
 correspondence with the doll maker. I will also study one of the staged photographs of the
 doll and discuss the two paintings that he made of the life-size doll, namely *Woman in Blue*
 (1919) and *Painter with Doll* (1922). Since Kokoschka's doll episode is an unfinished story

⁷ Although Paul Westheim published an incomplete and faulty version of Kokoschka's letters to Moos, their reduction in number and the removal of Moos's response already betray an agenda on the painter's and the editor's part since the nine letters written during a nine-month period are meant to suggest pregnancy. For further details, see Street, *Oskar Kokoschka's Doll*, 60.

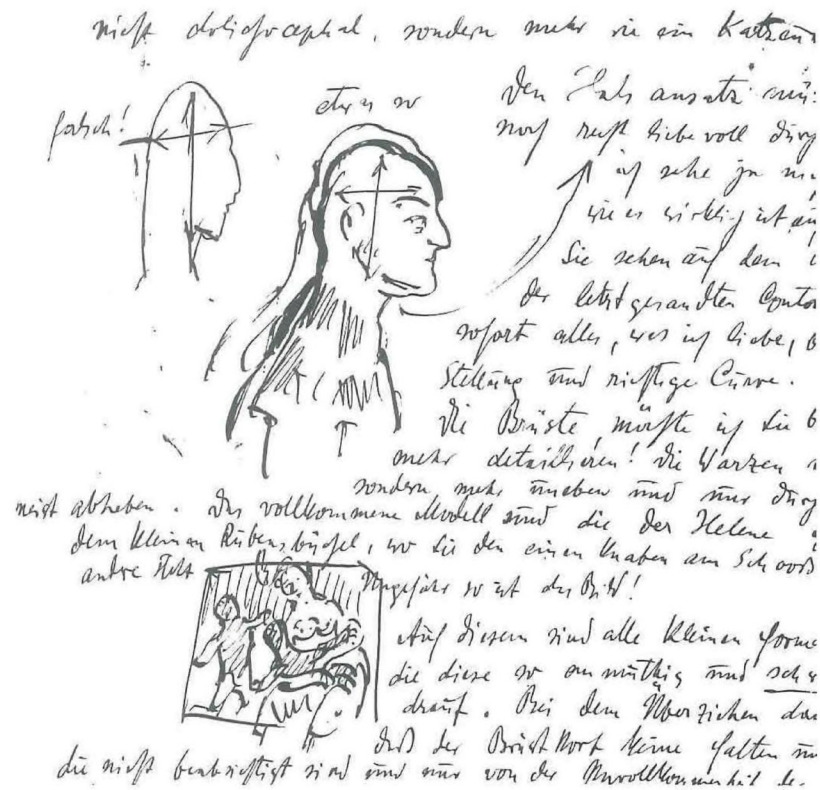


Fig. 2 Oskar Kokoschka, Letter to Hermine Moos # 8, December 10, 1918

(the doll was destroyed at a party in Dresden and the doll maker's letters were discarded) that calls out to be continued, I will also consider contemporary artists who in their works carry out Kokoschka's doll project. For example, I will include in my chapter the novel *La poupée de Kokoschka* by the Canadian writer Hélène Fréderick as well as the remake of *the Alma doll* by the Swiss artist Denis Savary since I regard both works as part of Kokoschka's doll project, to which both artists bring both afterlife and closure.⁸

Art historians first dismissed Kokoschka's doll as the product of a mentally ill, shell shocked artist before turning to Freudian theory: some read the doll as the enactment of a trauma, the result of fetishism, and some even regarded the doll project as a therapeutic endeavor⁹. In the course of the last twenty years though scholars have started to take a dif-

8 Hélène Fréderick, *La poupée de Kokoschka* (Paris: Ed. Verticales, 2010); Denis Savary is represented by *Galerie Xippas*, Paris, France.

9 See for example Mario Praz, "La poupée de Kokoschka" in *Le pacte avec le serpent*, tome III Serpent (Paris: Christian Bourgeois Ed., 1991), Ingrid Brugger, "Larve und 'Stille Frau': Zu Oskar Kokoschkas Vorlage für die Puppe der Alma Mahler" in *Oskar Kokoschka und Alma Mahler. Die Puppe: Epilog einer Passion* (Frankfurt/Main: Städtische Galerie im Städel, 1992), Peter Gorsen, "Pygmalions stille Frau. Oskar Kokoschka und die

ferent, non-pathological approach and cast a new look upon Kokoschka's doll: some considered it as a cultural phenomenon while others investigate the failure of the doll project with a focus on gender.¹⁰ Although these recent types of scholarship offer a valuable insight into the Alma doll project, I would like to venture a different interpretation of Kokoschka's doll. I will argue here that Kokoschka was exploring through the doll new ways of seeing, namely a "haptic visuality" where the eye becomes an organ of touch, which explains the recurrence of the hand in his letters to Moos as well as the significance of the sense of touch therein. Only then can one comprehend not only the painter's obsession with the doll's outer layer as well as his disappointment at the final result, but also the doll maker's choice for a plushy, feathery skin for the doll. A closer look at some of Kokoschka's preliminary sketches and paintings of the doll also reveals that the painter translated his preoccupation with haptic visuality onto the canvas where he attempts to create a three-dimensional image.

I shall demonstrate the significance of Kokoschka's letters for the doll project based on their uncanny performative quality: if the doll is meant as a stand-in, then replacement is not only inscribed in the letters but already at work since in the course of the correspondence the doll progressively replaces its maker. In fact, during Kokoschka's entire doll episode, it will serve as a substitute for many a female (his beloved Alma Mahler, the doll maker Hermine Moos, and his maid Reserl) and manage to turn the participants in the doll project into silent puppets. Judging from the black and white photos of the doll and Kokoschka's self-portraits with doll, the painter is not only concerned with the transformation of living women into dolls but also with their manipulation as life-size puppets.

I will examine the way Kokoschka, after the failure of his doll project, reinscribes

Puppe" in *Sexualästhetik. Grenzformen der Sinnlichkeit im 20. Jahrhundert* (Reinbeck: Rowohlt Taschenbuch Verlag, 1987).

10 See for example Lisa J. Street, *Oskar Kokoschka's Doll: Symbol of Culture* (Emory University: PhD Dissertation, 1993), and Bonnie Roos, "Oskar Kokoschka's Sex Toy: The Women and the Doll who Conceived the Artist" in *Modernism/Modernity*, Vol. 12, Number 2, April 2005 (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2005), 291-309.

himself as the maker of the doll and repositions himself as its painter and author. Because Kokoschka's two paintings of the doll feature a rapid evolution both in terms of technique and subject matter, they speak loudly about the radical shift of its perception in the painter's eyes: once delivered, Kokoschka no longer regards the doll as a substitute for his lover but solely as a model, a lay figure serving as foil for his skills, and while his first picture *Woman in Blue* (1919), is still a portrait of the doll, the following painting *Painter with Doll* (1922) however is a self-portrait with doll. Not only does the painter represent himself on the canvas but he also puts himself at its center while putting the doll aside, whose size and importance shrinks in each painting. I shall demonstrate how Kokoschka in his paintings reappropriates the doll while leaving the doll maker completely out of the picture, and how his positioning as genius, i.e. maker of the doll, already participates in her exclusion and foreshadows her silence.¹¹

What is most striking about the painter's first letter to Hermine Moos dated July 22, 1918 is the fact that he explicitly lays bare his desire to be deceived by his senses:

Wenn Sie diese Aufgabe für mich glücklich lösen, mir eine solche Zauberei vorzutäuschen, dass ich beim Ansehen und Angreifen das Weib meiner Vorstellung lebendig zu machen glaube, liebes Fräulein Moos, dann danke ich Ihrer Erfindung und Ihren weiblichen Nerven [...].¹²

Should you be successful, dear Miss Moss, in projecting such a feat of legerdemain that the woman of my dreams will seem to come alive to my eyes and touch, I shall be deeply indebted to your inventiveness and female sensibility.¹³

From the very beginning, he instructs the doll maker to create a visual and haptic illusion, powerful enough to bring to life the woman of his fantasy. The first major request he makes to Hermine Moos is namely to be deceived to the point where he is unsure whether the Alma-doll will look and feel any different from the real Alma Mahler. The fact that already in his first letter Kokoschka combines sight and touch ("beim Ansehen und Angreifen")

¹¹ Kokoschka's desire to reappropriate the doll and be regarded as its maker may also explain the editorial decision to not publish Moos' letters to the painter.

¹² Kokoschka, *Briefe*, 291.

¹³ Susan Keegan, *The Eye of God: A life of Oskar Kokoschka* (London: Bloomsbury, 1999), 106.

demonstrates how important those senses are in the making of the doll and that they are part of an aesthetic agenda that the painter pursues. In his second letter dated August 8, 1918, Kokoschka reiterates his wish to be deceived: “[...] und bin von Monat zu Monat begieriger auf dieses Wunschgeschöpf, das Sie sicher so allen Sinnen ablisten werden, dass ich mein Ziel erreiche, getäuscht zu werden.”¹⁴ The function that the painter assigns to the female doll maker is namely to deceive his senses and make him believe that the artifact is the woman of his fantasy (“Wunschgeschöpf”). At the core of this doll project lies a self-conscious male artist who commissions a female craftsman to make a life-size doll whose function is merely to trick his senses into believing that he is dealing with the original and not the copy. Thus, from the start, Kokoschka’s project is inscribed in the realm of imagination (“Vorstellung”) and at the end of his first letter, he even enjoins Moos to use her own imagination in the making of the doll: “Ich bitte Sie, [...] daß Sie Ihre ganze weibliche Phantasie andauernd an diese Arbeit wenden wollen [...]”, thus making the doll appear as the product of a collaboration between two creative persons of opposite sex and with different skills: a male artist who visualizes the doll mentally and a female craftsman who realizes it manually.¹⁵

A close reading of Kokoschka’s letters to Moos reveals that the hand recurs with great frequency there – be it in a concrete or abstract sense – and suggests the great significance it has for the painter. Exhorting the doll maker to focus on the skin, he writes in his third letter: “Es handelt sich mir um ein Erlebnis, das ich umarmen muß!” (“For me, it’s about an experience that I need to embrace!”) Combining the concrete verb “umarmen” with the abstract noun “Erlebnis”, the author emphasizes the physical and sensorial nature of the experience he expects from his doll. Encouraging Moos to pursue her work on the doll, he writes at the end of his fifth letter: “Nun wünsche ich Ihnen, [...] daß Sie eine glückliche Hand und immer bleibenden Enthusiasmus haben werden” (“I wish you a lucky hand

¹⁴ Kokoschka, *Briefe*, 293.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 291.

and may your enthusiasm continue.”) Although the idiom “eine glückliche Hand haben” is meant here in a figurative sense, it nevertheless underscores the importance of this body part in the making of the doll and for the artist. For example, in his eighth letter dated December 10, 1918, Kokoschka expresses a hope that the doll maker’s work will go smoothly: “Ich wünsche noch, dass Ihnen alles recht schnell von der Hand geht [...],” emphasizing her dexterity while in the ninth letter he expresses his impatience to take the doll in his own hands: “Wann halte ich dieses alles in Händen?” (“When am I to get my hands on all this?”)¹⁶ The recurrence of the hand in the letters, that one can observe in an abundant use of metaphorical idioms, reveals that this body part is of great concern to the painter, and naturally, the latter turns his focus towards the doll’s and the doll maker’s hands. In his eighth letter dated December 10, 1918, Kokoschka, objecting to the doll’s lack of articulation, asks Moos to pay greater attention to its extremities, i.e., its hands and feet:

Die Hände und Füße müssen noch artikulierter werden Nehmen Sie Ihre Hand z.B. zum Modell. Oder denken Sie an die einer gepflegten Russin, die auch reitet. Und der Fuß z.B. so wie der von einer Tänzerin: Karsavina, sein mag. Auch müssen Sie damit rechnen, daß Hand und Fuß auch noch nackt etwas Anziehendes hat, Lebendiges und nicht klumpig wirkt, sondern nervig.¹⁷

The hands and feet still have to become better articulated. Just take your own hand as a model. Or think of the hand of a cultivated Russian lady, say a horsewoman. And the foot should be something like that of a dancer, say Karsavina. You must also take into account that, even bare, the hands and the feet should exert an element of fascination – they should be alive and sensitive rather than dead lumps.¹⁸

In asking the doll maker to “take her own hand as a model”, the painter reveals his particular interest for the female craftsman’s hands, and especially for their demiurgic power: the physical connection between the maker and the doll, mediated by the working hands, are a constant source of fascination for Kokoschka who attributes to Moos’ hands a great deal of power: the power to give form and to create life. Thus, he writes at the end of his sixth letter dated October 16, 1918: “Glauben Sie weiter, mir den größten Dienst er-

¹⁶ Ibid., 301, 304.

¹⁷ Ibid., 300.

¹⁸ Keegan, *The Eye of God*, 110-111.

wiesen zu haben, von allem Weiblichen, das ich mir denken mag, die verführerichste Form auszubilden mit ihren Händen. Die seien gelobt.” However, far from simply praising Moos’ fashioning hands, able to give shape and breathe life into dead matter, he asks her in his third letter dated August 20, 1918 to touch and feel her own body parts in case his sketches leave the doll maker uncertain:

Wenn Sie nach der Zeichnung hie und da im Unklaren sind, wie ein Muskel, eine Spannung oder ein Knochen sitzt, so ist es besser, nicht in einem Atlas nachzusehen, sondern mit der Hand an ihrem bloßen Körper die Stelle, die Sie bewegen müssen, so lange zu untersuchen, bis Sie das Gefühl davon warm und lebendig klar in sich haben. Oft sehen die Hände und Fingerspitzen mehr wie die Augen.¹⁹

Should any part of the drawing still not be sufficiently clear – the tension of a muscle or the placing of a bone – please don’t look it up in an anatomical atlas, but find the place on your own bare body... Hands and fingertips often see more than the eyes.²⁰

Kokoschka’s recommendation here is crucial because it underlines the sensual and erotic character not only of his doll project but also of his relationship to the doll maker. According to the painter, there is a link between the female body of the maker and the doll, a transition from a living body (“warm und lebendig”) to a lifeless one, and even a resemblance (both have joints and are articulated), which makes the Alma doll appear as a life-size replica of both Alma Mahler and Hermine Moos. By affirming that the hands and fingertips often see more than the eyes, Kokoschka introduces the concept of tactile visuality or “haptic visuality” that is, in my opinion, at the core of the Alma-doll project. In the same letter, he reminds the female craftsman to proceed according to the sense of touch since he expects a sensuous experience from the doll:

Bitte machen Sie es dem Tastgefühl möglich, sich an den Stellen zu erfreuen, wo die Fett- und Muskelschichten plötzlich einer sehnigen Hautdecke weichen, aus denen dann irgendein Knochenstück an die Außenfläche kommt, z.B. am Schienbein, die Becken-Knieknochen, die Schulterblatt-Schlüsselbein- Armknochenenden.²¹

Please make it possible for the sense of touch to revel in those places where layers

¹⁹ Kokoschka, *Briefe*, 294-295.

²⁰ Keegan, *The Eye of God*, 107.

²¹ Kokoschka, *Briefe*, 304.

of fat or muscle suddenly yield to the sinewy integument, through which some bony prominence may be felt – the shins, the pelvis, the shoulder-blade, the collarbone, the arm joints.²²

In the ninth letter dated January 15, 1919 while giving Moos precise instructions regarding the complexion of the doll's skin, he urges her again to take her own body as a model and emphasizes the importance of her own hands and fingers, i.e. her sense of touch:

Die Bemalung darf nur mit Puder. Nußsaft, Obstsäften, Goldstaub, Wachshäutchen geschehen, und so diskret, dass man sie nur ahnt; nehmen Sie ihren eignen Körper zum Modell bitte. Und darf nur mit den Fingern aufgetragen werden, Nicht mit einem Instrument.²³

Color may only be applied by means of powder, fruit juice, gold dust, layers of wax, and so discreetly that you can only imagine them.

In doing so, Kokoschka turns the correspondence into an erotic affair, one in which the doll maker's hand holding the pen and coming into contact with the paper sheet is the same that touches her own body and molds the doll's limbs. Thus, Kokoschka's hand, in its turn writes, sketches and paints the female body. Rubbing against the surface of a piece of paper or a canvas, it too participates in this erotic network. Each of these activities is connected with and related by the others, bringing them together in an erotic network that also touches and implies Kokoschka. And since Moos and Kokoschka throughout the making of the Alma doll not only exchange letters but also send one another samples of the doll's limbs or textile fibers for its filling, the sense of touch that characterizes this relationship and defines the doll project is present from the start.²⁴

As it turns out, the emphasis on the hand, which Kokoschka displays in his letters to

²² Keegan, *The Eye of God*, 106.

²³ Kokoschka, *Briefe*, 294.

²⁴ See Kokoschka's first letter dated July 22, 1918: "Liebes Frä. Moos, Ich sandte Ihnen heute gleich nach Erhalt den Kopf zurück und legte auch die Puppe bei, die eine reizende Arbeit ist [...]." See his second letter to Moos dated August 8, 1918: "[...] Beiliegend eine Probe von Baumwoll-Zellstoff. Wenn Sie diese gebrauchen, vielleicht kombiniert mit echter Watte für die äußeren Partien, so kann ich Ihnen davon eine größere Menge senden [...]." in Kokoschka, *Briefe*, 290-291.

Moos, betrays a real aesthetic concern since this body part plays an essential role not only in the creation of portraits, but in their content. In his essay on Kokoschka's portraits, the German art historian Nils Ohlsen observes the significance of hands in the painter's work:

Ein auffälliges Phänomen in seiner Porträtmalerei ist die Hervorhebung der Hände seiner Modelle. Ihre Position im Bild, ihre sprechende Gestik oder allein ihre Größe zieht die Aufmerksamkeit immer wieder auf sich und lässt sie mitunter zum optischen Zentrum der Komposition werden.²⁵

The hand, Ohlsen adds, is a recurrent motif in Kokoschka's work throughout his life:

Die intensive Auseinandersetzung Oskar Kokoschkas mit der Darstellung von Händen beschränkt sich keineswegs auf die Phase um 1910 [...] sondern durchzieht das Schaffen des Künstlers in allen Jahrzehnten.²⁶

Already as a body part the hand receives a special aesthetic treatment in Kokoschka's paintings, but as an organ of touch and sight, it plays a tremendous role: the hand not only lies at the center of the relationship between the painter and the doll maker, but is also at the core of the doll project.

The third letter dated August 20, 1918 Kokoschka writes to Moos and to which he attaches a life-size nude painting of Alma Mahler is crucial in the sense that it provides a double portrait of Alma Mahler: not only does the painter give a detailed description of her physique in his letter to Moos but he also illustrates his depiction with a life-size standing nude of his beloved [Fig. 3]. While Kokoschka occasionally includes sketches and drawing of the Alma doll in his letters to Moos, the letter of August 20, 1918 is the only one that contains in their nine-month correspondence a life-size portrait of Alma Mahler done in oil. Commenting on this life-size standing nude, the German art historian Peter Gorsen writes:

Kokoschka kommt auf diese stehende Aktfigur wiederholt zu sprechen, um seine Vostellungen zu präzisieren und der Münchner Modistin und Puppenmacherin,

²⁵ Nils Ohlsen, "Forels Hände: Bemerkungen zu den Händen im Werk Oskar Kokoschkas" in *Kokoschka. Werke der Stiftung Oskar Kokoschka*. Musée Jenisch, Vevey (Heidelberg: Ed. Braus im Wachter Verlag, 2001), 97.

²⁶ Nils Ohlsen, "Forels Hände," 99.

die ihm wohl von seinem Freund Dr Pagel und Lotte Pritzel empfohlen, auch vom Bellmer und Rilke geschätzt wurde, alle möglichen Hilfestellungen zu geben.²⁷

Tellingly, the painter's concern about the texture of the doll's skin also arises in this third letter: in contrast to his first missive, which is mainly about the doll's bones and hair color, and the second, which deals with its filling materials, the third focuses for the most part on the texture. As usual, Kokoschka is quite explicit in his instructions to the doll maker requesting in this case delicate and soft materials for the doll's skin, either silk or linen fabrics:

Die Haut wird wohl aus dem dünnsten Stoff, den es gibt, entweder Flauchseide oder ganz dünnster Leinwand bestehen und in kleinen Fleckchen aufmodelliert werden müssen.²⁸

The skin will probably be made from the thinnest material available, either roughish silk or the very thinnest canvas and applied in very small areas.

The opening of Kokoschka's third letter sums up all the complexity and the ambiguity of Moos' task in the making of the Alma doll as well as the peculiarity of the triangular relationship between Alma Mahler, the doll maker, and the painter:

Liebes Frl. Moos,

Ich sandte Ihnen gestern durch meinen Freund Dr Pagel eine lebensgroße Darstellung meiner Geliebten, welche ich Sie bitte recht getreu nachzuahmen und mit dem Aufgebot ihrer ganzen Geduld und Sensualität in Realität umzuschaffen²⁹

Dear Ms Moos,

Yesterday, I sent ... a life-sized drawing of my beloved and I ask you to copy this most carefully and to transform it into reality with the application of all your patience and feeling.

Kokoschka delivers a life-size pictorial representation of his female lover ("eine lebensgroße Darstellung meiner Geliebten") and expects from Moos not only a faithful imitation but also an adaptation and transformation of a two-dimensional image into a three-dimensional object ("recht getreu nachzuahmen und [...] in Realität umzuschaffen.") He also asks that

²⁷ Peter Gorsen, *Sexualästhetik. Grenzformen der Sinnlichkeit im 20. Jahrhundert* (Reinbeck: Rowohlt Taschenbuchverlag, 1987), 250.

²⁸ Kokoschka, *Briefe*, 294.

²⁹ Ibid., 293-95.

she applies her own female sensuality (“ mit dem Aufgebot [...] ihrer Sensualität”). Needless to say the doll maker, already overwhelmed by the painter’s sketches, instructions and descriptions, must have been confused, if not disoriented, by the letter and the oil painting she received, as Ingrid Brugger points out:

Mit einer lebensgroßen Aktdarstellung Alma Mahlers, die Kokoschka am 18. August 1918 an die Kunstgewerblerin nach München schicken ließ, hat der Künstler seinem Wunschbild malerisch Gestalt gegeben. Es scheint, als hätte damit Kokoschka Hermine Moos erst recht desorientiert.³⁰

Paradoxically, as Brugger observes, Kokoschka sends to Moos his standing nude of Alma Mahler as a master on which the doll should be based, while at the same time considering the life-size painting to be a completely autonomous work of art that follows its own aesthetic agenda.³¹

Der intendierte Zweck der monumentalen Ölskizze, der Puppenmacherin als Gestaltvorlage zu dienen, täuscht darüber hinweg, dass das Gemälde einer autonomen künstlerischen Ästhetik verpflichtet ist; es ist nicht illustratives Mittel zum Zweck der Herstellung eines Androiden.³²

Kokoschka’s rejection of the doll Moos made is often interpreted as a misunderstanding between the painter and the doll maker while some go as far as accusing Moos of misreading of Kokoschka’s letters and nude painting. Indeed, if there is any miscommunication between the two artists and a misinterpretation of one by the other – argument that I will refute – then its root, or rather its point of divergence lies within the 1918 life-size portrait of Alma Mahler by Kokoschka. Kokoschka paints most of his portraits from memory and the nude painting of Alma is no exception (Alma Mahler, separated from Kokoschka and since 1915 married to Bauhaus founder Walter Gropius obviously did not pose naked

³⁰ Ingrid Brugger, “Larve und ‘Stille Frau,’” 69.

³¹ See Kokoschka, *Briefe*, 293-94: “Das zweite schräg gestellte Bein zeichnete ich nur ein, damit Sie die Formen desselben auch von innen sehen, sonst aber ist die ganze Figur rein im Profil gedacht, so dass die Schwergewichtslinie vom Kopf bis zum Rist des Fußes für Sie eine genaue Bestimmung der Profilierung des Körpers ermöglicht.” (“I only drew in the second, bent leg so that you could see its form from the inside, otherwise the entire figure is conceived entirely in profile so that the major line from the head to the instep of the foot enables you precisely to determine the shape of the body”).

³² Brugger, “Larve und ‘Stille Frau,’” 69.

for the artist in 1918). Ohlsen observes:

Im Gegensatz zur Malerei ‘sur le motif’ (vor dem Motiv) entstanden viele von Kokoschkas Portraits ‘par coeur’, d.h. aus dem Gedächtnis. Auf diese Weise ließ er während der Arbeit bewusst seine Erinnerung als Kraft künstlerischen Schaffens in den Entstehungsprozess seiner Porträts einfließen.³³

Memory thus plays a significant role in the making of this portrait, fostering the painter’s imagination (i.e. the mental faculty to form images), enabling him to conjure up images from the past in order to create new ones in the present. Ohlsen further notes:

Das, was schließlich auf der Leinwand entsteht, ist kein Abbild des gesehenen Modells, sondern eine Imagination von verschiedenen Eindrücken, Emotionen und Erinnerungen. Imagination meint dabei die aktive Fähigkeit, die mittels Erinnerungen gelieferten Elemente zu kombinieren und mit ihnen eigenmächtig neue Bilder zusammenzustellen. Diese Fähigkeit spielt in den Künsten eine entscheidende Rolle, durch sie wird der Künstler zum wahren Schöpfer.³⁴

Oddly enough, by emphasizing the importance of memory and imagination in Kokoschka’s portraits, Ohlsen sheds light on the inherent paradox of the Alma doll project and particularly on the contradictions of the painter’s wants and desires: Kokoschka delivers a highly subjective imagination of his female lover, mainly based on his recollection, and demands of Moos an objective realization. No wonder that the undertaking is doomed to failure as something is clearly lost in translation here. And the paradox also characterizes the standing nude of Alma Mahler [Fig. 3]. A closer look shows the ambivalence of Kokoschka’s imagination and the complexity of his depiction of his former female lover. The female nude, standing against a reddish brown background, is at once profile, frontal and three-quarter view: Alma’s upper body is shown in profile while her face and lower body – pelvis and legs – are shown in three-quarter view; only one of her feet and joined hands offer a frontal view. The fleshy woman, with long, unrestrained fiery red hair turns her head slightly, looking at the viewer. The standing nude of Alma Mahler displaying her voluptuous body is reminiscent of representations of the goddess Venus while her body language,

³³ Ohlsen, “Forels Hænde,” 103.

³⁴ Ohlsen, “Forels Hænde,” 103.

i.e. her long unrestrained hair and her joined hands, recalls the iconography of the sinner and penitent Maria Magdalena.³⁵ That is what Brugger observes when she writes:

Der [...] hellfarbig vor braunrotem Grund gebaute Körper Alma Mahlers erinnert in mehr als nur einer Hinsicht an gotische Skulpturen. [...] Anregung zur isolierten Stellung Almas mag [...] von gotischen Venus- oder Magdalenendarstellungen ausgegangen sein, wie sie auch in den kaiserlichen Sammlungen in Wien reichhaltig vertreten waren.³⁶

Kokoschka's imagination of Alma Mahler results in a complex painting in which his former lover is both Venus and Maria Magdalena.³⁷ Commenting on the ambivalence of the depiction of Alma as Maria Magdalena, Brugger notes:

Kokoschkas Darstellung der Alma Mahler im Typus der Maria Magdalena deutet die verlorene Geliebte ambivalent als Sünderin aus verbotener Liebe wie als Büsserin für die gebrochene Treue.³⁸



Fig. 3 Oskar Kokoschka,
Life size nude of Alma Mahler, 1918

35 See the paintings of Venus by Lucas Cranach, Hans Baldung, Peter Paul Rubens, and the sculpture of Maria Magdalena by Gregor Erhart.

36 Brugger, "Larve und 'Stille Frau'," 70.

37 As the Roman goddess of love, the seductress exhibits her curvaceous body and makes eye contact with the painter/viewer whereas as the Christian Saint, she joins her hands in an act of contrition and looks at the painter/viewer begging for forgiveness for her sins.

38 Brugger, "Larve und 'Stille Frau'," 71.

Beside the female body's posture, its shape and full nudity, what is most striking about this painting is its texture: the flesh seems to radiate from the reddish brown background as foreground and background are blending into each other. The formless painting technique and the sharp contrast between the darker background and her light-colored body parts make her look luminescent while the various shades of white, ocher, yellow, red, orange, and brown, that cover the body and constitute the flesh, give her an incandescent appearance. After a careful examination of the light effect in the portrait, Brugger concludes that the luminosity arises from Alma's body itself:

Der Hell-Dunkel Kontrast selbst ist Träger eines bestimmten Ausdrucks. Nicht im Licht werden der Körper und seine Schwellungen sichtbar sondern als Licht erscheint Almas transparenter Leib.³⁹

Alma Mahler looks eerie, supernatural, almost like a divine apparition, which further links her portrait to religious iconography. In fact, Alma's radiant body evokes the glorious body of a resurrected Christ: she is depicted with a body of light, i.e. a body of resurrection. The life-size standing nude of Alma Mahler is a milestone in the making of the doll because it represents Kokoschka's first pictorial attempt to resurrect his former lover and to bring her back to life. Kokoschka's painting technique participates in this resurrection through the thickness and compactness of the many layers of paint applied to the canvas, giving it relief and a three-dimensional surface. And yet, the painting has an uncanny, even freakish feel: the nervous brush strokes and thick layers of paint make the fleshy Alma look pretty solid and vivid while at the same time the flesh for her body seems to dissolve and decay on the canvas. In her description of Kokoschka's technique, Brugger also explains its effects on the viewer:

Die [...] amorphe Malweise in schnell geführten, relativ kurzen, rhythmischen Schlägen läßt die dargestellten Körper gleichsam zerfallen. [...] Die Gesichtsstruktur ist lediglich an der Oberfläche angelegt; das Fleisch wirkt, als würde es sich vor den Augen des Betrachters zersetzen, die darunter liegenden Schichten sind bloßgelegt. [...] Diese Auffassung der Transparenz der Körperhülle führt zu einer

³⁹ Ibid., 70.

Verunheimlichung der Person.⁴⁰

By literally putting flesh on his image of Alma Mahler, Kokoschka brings her back from the dead, and that explains his interest in decay, death, and destruction since they represent the flipside of the act of creation.⁴¹ In many regards, the standing nude of Alma Mahler is an uncanny painting: it is an omen that announces the different episodes of the making of the doll as well as its afterlife. These images of Alma's resurrecting and decomposing body are mainly the result of Kokoschka's skillful use of the impasto technique that enables him not only to play with light effects but also to push the painting into a three-dimensional sculptural rendering, thus turning it into a haptic image.

In the last chapter "The Eye and the Hand" of his essay on Francis Bacon's paintings entitled *The Logic of Sensation*, Gilles Deleuze investigates the relationship between the organs of sight and touch as well as their interplay in the making of a painting, and distinguishes four aspects, namely the digital, the tactile, the manual, and the haptic:

There are several aspects in the values of the hand that must be distinguished from each other: the *digital*, the tactile, the manual proper, and the haptic. The digital seems to mark the maximum subordination of the hand to the eye: vision is internalized, and the hand is reduced to the finger; that is, it intervenes only in order to choose the units that correspond to pure visual forms. The more the hand is subordinated in this way, the more sight develops an "ideal" optical space, and tends to grasp its forms through an optical code. But this optical space, at least in its early stages, still presents manual referents with which it is connected. We will call these virtual referents (such as depth, contour, relief, and so on) *tactile* referents. This relaxed subordination of the hand to the eye, in turn, can give way to a veritable insubordination of the hand: the painting remains a visual reality, but what is imposed on sight is a space without form and a movement without rest, which the eye can barely follow and which dismantles the optical. We will call this reversed relationship the *manual*. Finally, we will speak of the *haptic* whenever there is no longer a strict subordination in either direction. Either a relaxed subordination or a virtual connection, but when sight discovers in itself a specific function of touch that is uniquely its own, distinct from its optical function. One might say that painters paint with their eyes, but only insofar as they touch with their eyes. And no

40 Ibid., 72.

41 The portrait is also reminiscent of the statue of Frau Welt, a medieval allegorical figure, that ornates the south portal of Worms Cathedral. Seen from the front she is beautiful; when she turns round, her back is a mass of decay, maggots, and noisome creatures.

doubt this haptic function was able to reach its fullness, directly and immediately, in ancient forms whose secret we have lost (Egyptian art). But it can also be re-created in the “modern” eye, through violence and manual insubordination.⁴²

Even though these distinctions are meant for an in-depth study of Bacon’s paintings, they nonetheless also pertain to Kokoschka’s nude of Alma Mahler insofar as the four aspects described by Deleuze can be clearly seen on the canvas. The distinct representation of Alma’s fleshy body parts is characteristic of the digital while the contour of her body outlined both by black lines and color strokes marks the tactile. And yet, the dissolving effect of her flesh that renders her body amorphous and considerably disrupts vision is a conspicuous sign of the manual whereas the impasto technique used here illustrates the haptic. What makes this portrait so magnetic are the ongoing tensions between the hand and the eye that the painter captures and displays on the canvas: to paraphrase Deleuze’s terms, the subordination of the hand to the eye (i.e. the digital) together with its insubordination (i.e. the manual) give way to the haptic. Because of the thickness of the paint applied to the canvas throwing the female body into relief, the standing nude of Alma Mahler invites a caressing gaze and a tactile way of looking, encouraging a bodily relationship between the image and the viewer. In her essay on touch, Laura Marks gives the following definition of “haptic looking:”

Haptic looking tends to rest on the surface of its object rather than to plunge into depth, not to distinguish form so much as to discern texture. It is a labile, plastic sort of look, more inclined to move than to focus.⁴³

While the uneven and thick-layered surface of Alma’s amorphous body depicted by Kokoschka makes any clear-cut visual perception almost impossible, it invites the gaze to wander and linger on the canvas. Here Kokoschka seeks to engage the viewer in a different type of sensuous experience, one that Marks describes as “haptic visuality.” Developing this notion, she writes:

42 Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*. Translated from the French by Daniel W. Smith (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 124-125.

43 Laura U. Marks, *Touch. Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 8.

In haptic visuality, the eyes themselves function like organs of touch. Haptic visuality, a term contrasted to optical visuality, draws from other forms of sense experience, primarily touch and kinesthetics. Because haptic visuality draws on other senses, the viewer's body is more obviously involved in the process of seeing than in the case of optical visuality.⁴⁴

It should be recalled that the primary viewer is Kokoschka himself, who upon executing a standing nude of his former mistress strives to capture her image and to possess her through it. The involvement of the painter's body in the making of this nude is such that the image establishes a haptic relationship with the viewer. The visual perception of Alma Mahler's nude becomes a tactile experience since the viewer's eyes wander, linger and caress the bulky surface of her shapeless body, thus turning the visual act into an erotic one. Describing the sensuous nature of a haptic relationship, Marks observes:

In a haptic relationship our self rushes to the surface to interact with another surface. When this happens there is a concomitant loss of depth – we become amoeba-like, lacking a center, changing as the surface to which we cling changes. We cannot help but be changed in the process of interacting.⁴⁵

This physical interaction, this rubbing of the viewer's eyes against the texture of the naked female body was certainly experienced by Hermine Moos upon reception of the oil painting by Kokoschka. Indeed, she engaged in a haptic relationship with the Alma Mahler nude as soon as she cast her gaze upon it and that may be the reason why she opted for swanskin for the doll's outer layer. Her use of a feathery outer covering suggests that she understood Kokoschka's investment in the sense of touch as well as his attempt to create a haptic image of his beloved [Fig. 4 & 5]. As Brugger points out, Moos' use of the feather material as the outer layer of the doll must be regarded as her artistic response to Kokoschka's impastoed paint:

Vielmehr erscheint die von der Kunstgewerblerin verwendete Plüschhaut der Puppe als ein der in der Skizze vorgegebenen amorphen Körperauffassung adäquates Mittel. [...] Kokoschkas Erwartungen auf eine realistische Puppe wurden zwar nicht erfüllt, in gewissem Sinne aber hat er von Hermine Moos genau das erhalten,

⁴⁴ Marks, *Touch*, 2.

⁴⁵ Ibid., xvi.

was er in der Skizze an Ungegenständlichem, Summarischem ausgeführt hat. Die Puppe muss in den Augen von Hermine Moos eine der Malerei Kokoschkas analoge Übersetzung in Materialien gewesen sein.⁴⁶

Marks' concept of "haptic visuality" sheds light on Kokoschka's investment in the sense of touch as well as his pictorial attempt to put flesh on his lover's image. Rather than having been a misunderstanding between the painter and the doll maker, as is often assumed, it seems on the contrary that Hermine Moos fully grasped Kokoschka's artistic intentions and tried to realize them to the best of her ability as a doll maker through her choice of swanskin for the doll's outer layer.

The painter translates his concern with the doll's surface both into the photographs and the paintings of the doll, and particularly in the black and white picture that served as a study for his 1919 oil painting *Woman in Blue*. The photograph features Hermine Moos' feathery doll reclining stark naked on a bed, the right arm supporting her head held up by a pillow while the left one is aligned along her torso and lies on her thigh [Fig. 4 & 5]. This photograph is in fact a humorous tableau vivant insofar it is a pastiche of two famous paintings, namely Titian's *Venus of Urbino* (1538) and Edouard Manet's *Olympia* (1863), where an alluring, young female in the nude reclines on a bed in an indoor setting and engages with the viewer.

Many a comment could be made about this staged photograph of the doll as it speaks loudly about Kokoschka's ambivalent perception of the Alma doll – it oscillates between Venus, the Goddess of love, depicted by Titian and the courtesan painted by Manet – as well as his ego insofar as he puts himself, not without a trace of irony though, in the same lineage as Renaissance masters and Impressionist painters. However, the haptic elements of this black and white image will retain our full attention since the dark background and the geometric motives of the bedspread on which the doll lies contribute to render the soft and plushy furry skin of the latter. The Austrian art historian Alois Riegl, who origina-

⁴⁶ Brugger, "Larve und 'Stille Frau'," 72.



Fig. 4 Photograph of the Alma-Doll



Fig. 5 Photograph of the Alma-Doll

ted the term “haptic”, Marks recalls, “was initially a curator of textiles. One can imagine how the hours spent inches away from the weave of a carpet might have stimulated the art historian’s ideas about a close-up and tactile way of looking.”⁴⁷ I will advance that the wo-

⁴⁷ Marks, *Touch*, 4.

ven fabric chosen by the painter as a prop in the two photographs of the doll fulfills a haptic function: the bedspread's non-figurative lozenge motifs, the dark background, and the lack of perspective accentuate the physical tactility of the image, and thus, invite the viewer to cast a caressing gaze upon the surface of the doll [Fig. 4 & 5]. Kokoschka was without a doubt exploring a new way of looking, what I would call “haptic visuality”, and this attempt to turn the eye into an organ of touch can be observed in *Woman in Blue*, the half-length portrait he executes of his doll in 1919 [Fig. 6]. *Woman in Blue* features a female figure wearing a navy blue bustier dress with white lace whose clivage reveals bulging breasts. The portrayed female sits reclining, her left arm supported by cushions, her head leaning on one hand while the other, open palmed, is aligned along her torso, in an outdoor setting as the blue and green shapes in the background suggest. The black and white photograph served as a basis for the painting since the female strikes the exact same pose, and in doing so she alludes to *Olympia* by Manet – with the difference though that Kokoschka's *Woman in Blue* is placed in a nature setting and fully dressed.

In comparison with Manet's scandalous depiction of a nude courtesan with a defy-



Fig. 6 *Woman in Blue* by Oskar Kokoschka (1919)

ing gaze, Kokoschka's painting possesses very little shock value: his full-breasted *Woman in Blue* looks absent-minded and self-absorbed and does not even pay attention to the viewer. In my opinion, it is beyond doubt that the woman depicted is indeed the doll Moos delivered to Kokoschka, and in that regard, I strongly disagree with Bonnie Roos when she claims that "little in the final painting *Woman in Blue* suggests that this woman is the doll Kokoschka commissioned"⁴⁸. In the oil painting of 1919, Kokoschka conveys the primitive crudeness of the hairy texture of the doll with his very thick application of paint on broad overlapping strokes that are in many ways reminiscent of the 1918 life-size nude of Alma Mahler he executed for the doll maker [Fig. 3]. Besides, among the hundred and twenty preparatory sketches he did for the painting, the following drawings leave very little doubt about the resonance with the 1918 nude of Alma Mahler: the display of thick and large ink strokes rendering the contours of the female body as well as its posture conveying abandon in the first sketch, or the seated position of the woman looking up to heaven for repentance while grasping her exposed breast in the second one, strongly echo not only the impasto technique, but also the composition as well as the iconography of the eery nude painting of Alma Mahler [Fig. 7 & 8].

For only then can one comprehend the provocation of Kokoschka's image that lies



Fig. 7 Sketch by Oskar Kokoschka



Fig. 8 Sketch by Oskar Kokoschka

⁴⁸ Ross, "Oskar Kokoschka's Sex Toy," 301.

both in its content and in the genre of the painting itself: while still life is the genre destined for the representation of inanimate objects, portrait is normally reserved for the representation of animate subjects. By making the portrait of a doll, i.e. an inanimate object, Kokoschka challenges art historical conventions since he regards his doll as a model and real woman, whose portrait he paints. “What might make Kokoschka’s painting outrageous”, notes Ross, “is that it portrays not a prostitute, but rather a sex doll – one step more illicit than Manet’s courtesan, and tacit confirmation that all the rumors of Kokoschka’s behavior with the doll were all true.”⁴⁹ As Brugger observes, “In *Woman in Blue* of 1919, Kokoschka had transformed the doll into a hybrid entity between puppet and person” and that is precisely what makes the image uncanny [Fig. 6]. The painter, while giving his *Woman in Blue* the appearance of a female reclining and day dreaming, makes her nonetheless look like a puppet: although her facial expression seem to indicate a slip into reverie, her face looks wrought, her eyes are dark and unseeing, and her body appears stiffly angled in unnatural positions [Fig. 6]. Agreeing with Brugger on the hybrid character of the depicted woman, Gorsen goes a step further by pointing out the tension between head and trunk:

Das Gemälde zeigt eine zwitterhafte Groteske aus Gliederpuppe und Menschenleib. Eine Bruchlinie rund um den Hals der Puppe läßt den weiß-bleichen Kopf vom blau leuchtenden Körper wie abgetrennt und nachträglich aufgesetzt erscheinen, als wollte der Künstler den Kunst-Körper der Frau als Flickwerk seiner fetischistischen Perversion dekuivrieren. Doch während Rumpf und Extremitäten noch marionettenhaft aufgefaßt sind, kündigt sich im Gesicht und in der Beseelung des Blicks eine Rückkehr zum Menschenbild an.

One must recall that among the two paintings featuring the Alma doll, *Woman in Blue* is the only one that is a portrait of the doll alone, without the company of the painter. Interestingly, not only the doll’s appearance and position on the canvas evolves as much as the technique used to depict it. In a second doll painting, entitled *Maler mit Puppe* (*Painter with Doll*) (1922), Kokoschka still depicts the doll but this time, he adds his own portrait to the picture. And this emergence of the figure of the painter must be read as a first attempt

⁴⁹ Ross, “Oskar Kokoschka’s Sex Toy,” 301.



Fig. 9 Oskar Kokoschka, *Painter with Doll*, 1922

to re-assert his demiurgic power as male artist and genius [Fig. 9]. The oil painting represents Kokoschka himself seated behind his doll, both on a red bed in an interior setting. The painter is fully dressed, while the doll is completely naked – this configuration recalls another scandalous painting by Manet *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe* (1863) – and he rests his one hand on the doll's knee and points to her womb and genitals with the other. Commenting on this gesture, Roos observes: “The work suggests Kokoschka's god-like control over the inanimate object even to the hint of ventriloquism.”⁵⁰ The doll occupies the center of the picture and Kokoschka renders its skin with large, blockish patches of warm flesh tones, ocher, red, and white that bring the doll to the foreground while recalling the furry skin of the actual doll delivered by Moos [Fig. 9]. These thick strokes of paint are reminiscent of the by now familiar impasto technique that Kokoschka used both in the life-size nude of Alma Mahler and in the first doll painting *Woman in Blue* [Fig. 6]. The physical proximity of the two protagonists, the doll's nudity, the painter's touch on its knee, as well as his (almost) sexual gesture towards the doll's womb and genitals leave little doubt about the couple's intimate relationship. Addressing the painter's pointing gesture towards doll's genitals, Roos

⁵⁰ Ibid., 303.

observes:

But Kokoschka's pointing to its genitals tends also to accentuate the procreative abilities a doll lacks. After all, in the case of Kokoschka's doll, a close-up of its body's function can only desexualize and dehumanize it. Kokoschka's pointing is ambiguous because the doll serves neither as nurturer nor as procreator in any usual sense; it indicates less the doll's (prop)creative abilities than Kokoschka's, as artist, with his modern source of inspiration. Its womb is empty while Kokoschka remains able to create, inspired by its artificiality and unthreatening passivity.⁵¹

Although the artist caricatures neither his own nor the doll's features, he nonetheless delivers a grotesque representation of the latter. That is also the conclusion Street comes to when she writes: "The ambiguous sweetness of the first painting of the doll [Woman in Blue] is now gone. This doll is much more grotesque with its flat crooked nose, thickened torso, and cross-eyed glare."⁵² Gorsen's interpretation of the painting also goes along these lines and I agree with his reading of the picture as "eine ironische Paraphrase zum Thema Maler mit Puppe" because he underlines the irony present on the canvas. One must recall that Kokoschka's doll project is from the start embedded in tragic irony: the making of a life-size replica of his female lover is an impossible task to achieve and the painter's last letter to the doll maker, in which he expresses both his discontent and disappointment, is the perfect case in point of irony. In that regard, *Painter with Doll* can almost be read as the illustration of that twelfth letter, the letter of disillusion that puts an end to the correspondence and the collaboration with Hermine Moos, and seals the failure of the doll project. Gorsen has a point when he emphasizes the disenchantment conveyed by the crude representation of the doll, now reduced to a vulgar object by the painter:

Der Witz des Bildes beruht auf dem Gestus des hinter dem Fetisch stehenden und auf ihn zeigenden Künstlers. Der Unterschied zwischen zweierlei Körpern, Lebendigem und Totem, ist deutlich herausgearbeitet. Der Puppenkörper erscheint wie gebleicht, mumienartig, mit leerem Blick und verdrehten Gelenken. Er wird dem Betrachter nicht mehr als magische Sexualreliquie, sondern wie ein lehrhaftes Demonstrationsobjekt dargeboten. Der fetischistische Bann ist gebrochen.⁵³

⁵¹ Ibid., 303.

⁵² Street, *Oskar Kokoschka's Doll*, 285-286.

⁵³ Gorsen, *Sexualästhetik*, 255.

It is true that the depiction of the doll indicates that it has lost its magic both in the eyes of the painter and the viewer. But Kokoschka's painting is much more ambiguous than what Gorsen's analysis suggests as the distinction between living and dead body is everything but clear-cut. In fact, Kokoschka is deliberately blurring the line between living and lifeless body in his picture where the painter figures as the doll's mirror image: both feature the same neckless, rounded, dull face and distorted hands [Fig.9]. Oddly enough, both pairs of hands seem to be interchangeable insofar as the doll's hands placed upon its blossom could also be the painter's. This is also what Roos observes in her detailed study of the painting when she writes:

(...) his [Kokoschka's] position is contorted even more impossibly than his doll's: both of his arms are awkwardly occupied in posing and exposing his doll. In fact, in some sense, the doll's body parts and Kokoschka's are transposable. This virtual process of transforming subject into object is advanced through Kokoschka's hands, which serve as interchangeable parts in *Painter with Doll*. (...) These hands, when compared with the position of the non-naturalistic hands on the doll appear almost interchangeable. (...) And in this seemingly detachability of limbs, Kokoschka's self image begins to be associated with the mutilated mannequin, the very doll he objectifies. Painted as if he is her clothed mirror image and alter ego, Kokoschka too portrays himself neckless with an oversized head, disjointed and contorted, possessing awkward limbs and interchangeable, prosthetic parts that anticipate Hans Bellmer's dolls."⁵⁴

Although the painter figures as the doll's doppelgänger, his gaze, his pointing gesture, and position of the body in the image suggest that he is the one in charge and in full control of this process of doll making. The artist stares vividly outside of the picture, presumably into a mirror since it is a self-portrait, which underscores the self-reflexivity of the painting, and repositions the painter at its center. His pointing finger, reminiscent of the religious iconography of Leonardo DaVinci's *John the Baptist* or Michel Angelo's *Creation of Adam*, signifies the power of resurrection bestowed upon the artist as creator. And because *Painter with Doll*, mainly due to the configuration of the couple, recalls a Pietà painting, it immediately places the painter at the center of the canvas and at the origin of the act of

⁵⁴ Ross, "Oskar Kokoschka's Sex Toy," 304.

creation: as a simulacrum of a mater dolorosa holding her dead son in her arms, Kokoschka portrays himself as the genitor of the doll, the one and only who gave birth to a stillborn creature. That is also the analysis that Street gives of the painting:

Not only does *Selfportrait with Doll* draw its composition from a tradition of reclining nudes, but it is also related to the tradition of Pietà paintings. (...) Kokoschka constructs a different kind of reversed Pietà in *Selfportrait with Doll*. Here it is the life-giving male artist supporting his lifeless creation. Instead of an emotion of tragic sorrow from the mother, we get lust and numbness from the artist. (...) Only the pointing of the finger towards the lifeless doll's genitals suggests a possibility of being reborn through the creative powers of female sexuality (...).⁵⁵

By presenting himself as the procreator of the doll, Kokoschka leaves the doll maker out of the equation and literally out of the picture while putting himself at the center of the process of dollmaking.

The exclusion of the doll maker by the artist, already visually at work in the picture *Painter with Doll*, is repeated in the 1925 edition of Kokoschka's letters by Paul Westheim, which fails to include even a single letter by Hermine Moos. The elimination of the doll maker from this exchange has left us not only with a very one-sided version of the story but also with a need to fill it out. This is exactly the task Hélène Frédérick undertakes in *La poupée de Kokoschka*, her 2010 diary-novel based on the historical correspondence between Kokoschka and Moos. Since from this letters' exchange only the letters by Kokoschka were preserved for posterity – neither in Paul Westheim's 1925 edition nor in his 1971 autobiography called *Mein Leben* did the painter publish a single letter by the doll maker and thus silenced her for eternity – the originality of Frédérick's novel lies in her attempt to break the silence and to restore the doll maker's voice. In her first novel, Hélène Frédérick, a Canadian writer from Québec living in Paris who writes radiophonic fictions for the public radio France Culture, demonstrates not only a great knowledge of the story behind the making

⁵⁵ Street, *Oskar Kokoschka's Doll*, 287.

of the Alma doll but also a subtle reading of Kokoschka's letters. By lending her voice to Hermine Moos, she gives the doll maker her female subjectivity back and re-establishes the missing link within the written dialogue between the male artist and the female craftsman [Fig. 10]. Read side by side, her novel represents the pendant of Kokoschka's letters and as such gives new insight into the making of the doll, the relationship between Kokoschka and Moos, as well as a glimpse into her psyche. Frédérick explores the erotic network that the doll constitutes and shows that the latter is the fruit of a triangular relationship between Oskar Kokoschka, Alma Mahler, and Hermine Moos. What makes Frédérick's novel compelling and enlightening is both her close reading of Kokoschka letters conveyed through Hermine Moos' visceral reactions to them as well as her reading of their relation under the lens of desire and power. Frédérick stresses the motif of the hand and its significance in the power relations between Moos and Kokoschka that alternates between manipulation and emancipation. Behind the making of a doll lies a story of not only submission and rebellion, but also perversion and subversion. What makes the reading of Frédérick's novel exciting is that, by simply retelling the story of Kokoschka's doll from the doll maker's perspective and putting Hermine Moos (back) in the picture, she successfully manages to give a new twist to this notorious episode in the life of Oskar Kokoschka while scholars and art historians heavily embedded in Freudian theory have failed to do so.

Frédérick's fiction sheds light on the significance of Hermine Moos in the making of the Alma doll, but above all it stresses the importance of her role in the triangular relationship that she enters as soon as she accepts to participate – or rather play a part – in Kokoschka's doll project. Echoing the letters written by Kokoschka, the fiction by Frédérick takes the form of a journal that Hermine Moos writes about the making of the doll, or rather 'l'étrange entreprise' as she calls the peculiar commission received from the painter Kokoschka: "Je prends la décision d'entamer ce cahier alors que débute ce que j'ai choisi de nommer 'l'étrange entreprise': la confection de la poupée que m'a commandée le peintre

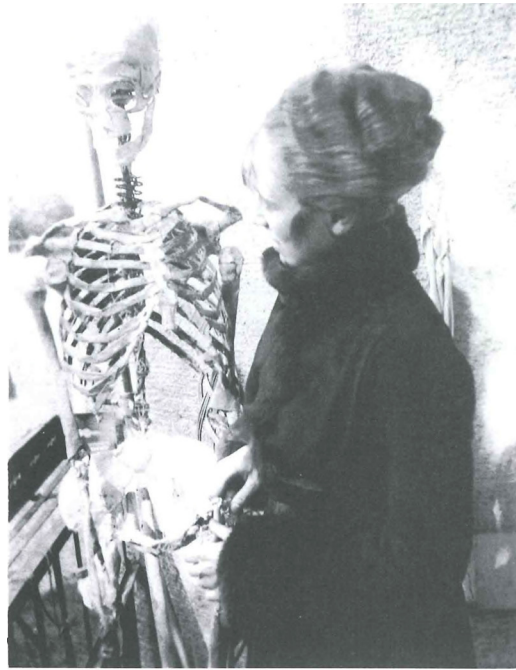


Fig. 10 Photograph of Hermine Moos, Kokoschka's Estate, the Central Library in Zürich

K.”⁵⁶ This peculiar commission fully deserves the appellation coined by the first-person narrator insofar as it is in many regards a “strange undertaking”: requesting an anatomical life-size replica of a beloved human being is indeed an unusual wish but it is also a strange move in the etymological sense (the adjective “étrange” comes from the Latin “externus”: external). Kokoschka turns to an outsider and a stranger (an unknown Munich based doll maker) for the making of his Alma doll and asks her to pay particular attention to its outer surface. And if one considers the painter’s disappointment in the doll because of the outer layer chosen by Moos, the making of the doll reveals itself as a “strange undertaking.”⁵⁷ Yet, by writing this journal, she also undertakes a “strange undertaking” since she subverts a workbook whose function is to inventory tools and materials and turns it into a diary in which she confides her most intimate thoughts and writes down the abstract and the un-

56 Hélène Frédérick, *La poupée de Kokoschka*, (Paris: Ed. Verticales, 2010), 11.

57 Far more than being a “strange enterprise” Kokoschka’s doll project is for sure a perverse one (the Latin etymology of “perverse” means “turn around”) insofar as both the painter and the doll maker take turns in perverting the harmless function traditionally attributed to objects such as a doll and a work journal. He turns his former lover into a fetish object while she turns a work journal into a diary. And above all, they both turn a professional commitment around and turn it into an erotic relationship and a power struggle.

nameable:

Je m'appelle Hermine Moos et il me faut le rappeler. La vocation technique de ce cahier est détournée pour cet ouvrage. C'est étonnant bien qu'il s'agisse d'une direction prise par mon unique volonté. Voilà que je fais la liste non pas de mes instruments et outils, mais de matériaux plus abstraits pour ne pas dire innommables. L'entreprise me paraît exiger ces conditions.⁵⁸

This strange undertaking was handed over to her not only because she is a perfect stranger to Kokoschka, but also because she is a strange character to begin with, i.e. an outsider. Moos is an unconventional young female, independent, unmarried, and solitary, who smokes a pipe and wears men's clothes: "Fumer la cigarette ou la pipe, pantalon et chemisier non assortis, devant le poêle encore tiède (...)." ⁵⁹ While refusing to open the door to her lover Heinrich, she describes in her journal her unconventional outfits as a cross dresser: "J'ai préféré ne pas ouvrir, et puis je ne voulais pas qu'il (Heinrich) me voie accoutrée comme je le suis, pantalon, chemise d'homme volés près de la Peterskirche. (...) Je me moque avec beaucoup de sérieux des conventions." ⁶⁰

Through this fictional journal Moos signs her first act of rebellion: struggling with the impossibility and the absurdity of the task, she vents her anger at the patronizing painter and her revolt against his delirious demands in her diary. From the beginning, she refuses to submit to the painter's wants and desires as she confesses in her journal: "Même mon ombre ne saura pas obéir." ⁶¹ She also decides to deceive the painter by asking for further sketches and drawings, not to receive further aesthetic guidance on his part, but simply to put him to work and through hardship as she writes:

Puisqu'il m'y invite, le lui réclamerai, doucement, d'autres esquisses. Je saurai le tromper : ces croquis ne serviront pas à m'indiquer plus précisément le chemin à suivre. Je veux seulement lui arracher quelque chose... « Ce sera pour vous arracher quelque chose, mon maître. » Afin que la douleur soit un peu équitable. ⁶²

Determined to inflict the pain on him that he inflicts on her, she intends to twist the knife in the painter's wound, thus twisting their relationship that shapes up as sadomasochistic.

⁵⁸ Frédéric, *La poupée de Kokoschka*, 18.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 145.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 95.

⁶¹ Ibid., 29.

⁶² Ibid., 31.

Characteristic of this “strange undertaking” are not only mutual pain and suffering but also violence that the French verb “arracher” (to tear off) used and repeated twice by the first-person narrator betrays. In that regard, the name that the doll maker uses to address the painter in her diary is relevant to the ambivalence and complexity of their relationship. She calls him “mon maître” which expresses her admiration and devotion to the painter but also emphasizes the hierarchy between a renowned artist and an unknown craftsman, thus shedding light on the power dynamics between a teacher and his pupil. But the name “mon maître” is not thinkable without his counterpart “the slave” that carries along a history of abuse and exploitation. By calling Kokoschka her master, Moos automatically turns herself into his slave and due to the nature of their erotic relationship, the appellation “mon maître” carries sadomasochistic undertones. This name-calling and role-playing enacted by the narrator herself illustrates that the painter and the doll maker both participate in a relationship of dominance and submission characterized by pain and violence, where desire for the upper hand plays a central part. In a revealing scene toward the end of the novel Moos wears white fur over her naked body and while conjuring up the empowering image of Wanda, the domineering female protagonist in Masoch’s *Venus in Fur*, she attempts to assert her power over Kokoschka.

Eager to even out their abusive relationship, the rebellious Moos is intent on hurting Kokoschka and fighting back against him by undermining his wish and subverting his authority. For example, upon reception of his fifth letter that infuriates the doll maker, she vents her anger in her journal entry. Therein she targets the painter’s insanity and insensitivity and mocks his stupidity with a tinge of sarcasm by calling the male genius an imbecile: “Mon maître, mon Oskar, vous m’impressionnez. On dit que le génie peut approcher de très près la folie, j’ignorais cependant qu’il pouvait aussi frôler l’imbécilité.”⁶³ Despite the painter’s order to devote herself exclusively to the making of his doll, an order that she transgresses, the doll maker nevertheless takes on other commissioned works: she creates

⁶³ Ibid., 119.

puppets and costumes for a puppet theater and she also works on a play for puppets that she is co-writing with her lover Heinrich. These activities, closely related to her craft as a puppeteer, can also be read as a way to resist her own alienation as well as the painter's tyrannical control. Commenting on her own disobedience in her journal at night, she is suddenly overcome by a loud, insolent, and liberating laughter that defies the painter's authority and ridicules his absurd demands, and momentarily frees her from his overwhelming influence:

Vous me demandiez de suspendre mes autres activités qui me donnent normalement de quoi vivre, pour mieux créer votre maîtresse de coton, d'un seul trait passionnée. Cette nuit, j'en ris aux éclats. Je ris gorge ouverte. Me voyez-vous coudre les vêtements de mes petites marionnettes ? Petites marionnettes, petites compagnes fidèles de mes nuits. Non, si vous pouviez me voir, voir votre demoiselle Moos, maître K, vous seriez en colère.⁶⁴

The decision to accept these professional commitments on the side is motivated by her sense of protest and revolt against the painter's tyranny, and yet, these commissions also represent a means of survival for the doll maker – since the painter never mentions any sort of payment in his letters: they enable her not only to support herself in post-WWI Germany at a time of penury and crisis, but paradoxically also to find the materials necessary for the fabrication of Kokoschka's doll.

No matter how virulent her rebellion against the painter's demands is and how vehement her revolt against his tyranny, Moos' resistance remains nonetheless silent because placed under the sign of muteness and contained within the space of her journal. Although fairly outspoken in her journal, the first-person narrator describes herself as a speechless and silent woman in everyday life as her entry illustrates:

Parfois je ne prononce aucune parole de toute la journée tant je suis absorbée et tant les heures sont précieuses. En allant à la recherche de brioches (devenue rareté) j'ai voulu dire bonsoir et pas un son n'est sorti de ma gorge. Qu'un soufflé. Raucue.⁶⁵

In many regards, Moos' fictional diary is reminiscent of Arthur Schnitzler's *Fräulein Else* (1924), a novella in the form of an inner monologue, since both female protagonists share many a similarity: both first-person narrators are conflicted about their peculiar assign-

⁶⁴ Ibid., 65.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 18.

ments, abused by a male counterpart, and forced into muteness and speechlessness. It is not surprising that Moos confesses in her journal reading Schnitzler's plays and how troubled she is by them: "Il faut lui (Heinrich) parler de Schnitzler, combien je suis troublée par ces lectures" and further "la lecture des pièces de Schnitzler me hante."⁶⁶ Curiously, Moos' silent nature foreshadows the Alma-doll itself that Kokoschka will later baptize "die stille Frau" (the silent woman), already blurring the line between the doll maker and the doll, between Alma and Hermine. In fact, silence is more than just a recurrent motif in Moos' journal since the silencing of the doll maker's voice by the painter is at the center of Frédéric's novel: the absence of Moos' letters responding to Kokoschka originated the diary-novel and the very form of this fictional diary is already the expression of a silenced voice, i.e. a voice that engages in a mute and fictive dialogue with other characters (mostly the painter) only through the mediation of her journal as if the notebook were the only appropriate medium to record her frail voice. By remaining silent on the doll maker's difficulty to get supplies in the after-WWI period and completely oblivious to her struggle throughout the fabrication process of his doll, the painter's egotism negates her subjectivity and thus silences her voice. Commenting on Kokoschka's indifference in her diary, Moos depicts herself as a submissive character with a gagged mouth:

Je vous donne le droit de m'oublier à travers elle, d'oublier celle qui l'aura fabriquée pour vous. De toute façon, je suis une autre dont vous choisissez de ne pas apercevoir la libre condition. Il vous faut m'imaginer bâillonnée eh bien soit. Je me montrerai bâillonnée juste pour vous.⁶⁷

While the image of a gagged mouth, that the first-person narrator uses to describe how the painter prevents her from speaking and ultimately turns her into a speechless object such as a doll, emphasizes violence and abuse inflicted upon her body by the painter himself, it also alludes to the sexual practice of bondage, thus shedding light on their sadomasochistic relationship and master/slave game, a game in which the muzzled Moos accepts to participate and in which she plays the submissive part.⁶⁸ The image of the obstructed mouth comes

⁶⁶ Ibid., 71, 130.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 61.

⁶⁸ Interestingly, the German Surrealist Hans Bellmer explores the themes of bondage and sadomasochism

up again in a following scene where Moos, who also moonlights as a prostitute, writes in her diary the memory of a client, who was paying her sexual favors with flour, and who, during an act of oral sex, abused and severely mistreated her mouth: “Je ne lui ai offert que ma bouche. Il l’a tant malmenée que Heinrich a dû me soigner pendant plusieurs jours.”⁶⁹ Intent on distancing herself emotionally from the overwhelming influence of Kokoschka and his doll, Moos follows her sister Martha’s advice and decides to rename the painter. Thus, instead of the respectful appellation “mon maître” used until then, she now opts for the more aloof “mon client” as she notes in her journal: “Je n’appellerai plus le peintre mon maître, j’utiliserai désormais cette formule glacée mon client.”⁷⁰ Meant as a reminder of the contractual nature of their relationship since she received a commission from him, the new term “mon client” happens to be as ambiguous as the former one insofar as it makes her appear as a prostitute and the painter as her john, while turning their intercourse into one of sexual nature. In Moos’ journal Kokoschka advances as an abusive client, and like her previous john, he also mistreats her mouth by gagging it and silencing her voice. And the painter goes even further by entering another cavity of her body and obstructing it completely: he thrusts his hands into her like into the glove of a puppet as she describes in two diary entries:

Mon maître, si c’est ainsi que je me prête au jeu aussi, je vous laisse glisser vos mains dans la gaine de la marionnette que je suis, parce que je n’ai pas peur d’échapper à moi-même, ou de me perdre, et parce que je demeure au moins libre de fuir.⁷¹
 (...) je peux sentir ses mains froides et moites dans la gaine de la marionnette que je suis devenue. Il faudra résister, tant bien que mal, aux grandes manipulations du maître, à ses couleurs, à ses détresses.⁷²

The penetration of the painter’s hands inside her body is reminiscent of the sexual act of fist fucking and this interpretation is validated by the ambiguous French word “gaine” (girdle or sheath in English depending on the context) whose etymology is derived from the Latin ‘vagina’, that the narrator uses. Either in the shape of an elasticized corset or a close-

in the staged photographs of his doll.

69 Frédéric, *La poupée de Kokoschka*, 65.

70 Ibid., 81.

71 Ibid., 156.

72 Ibid., 164.

fitting cover, the term “gaine” alludes indubitably to the mucous membrane of the vagina that the painter is metaphorically entering with both hands. By doing so, Kokoschka exerts control over Moos: he takes control of her whole body, directs her move, and ultimately turns her into a puppet as she observes:

Par ces formules troublantes, vous vous appropriiez mes mains, ce qui signifie que vous cherchez à évacuer de mes gestes les pensées qui sont les miennes pour savamment les substituer aux vôtres. Je deviens ainsi votre marionnette, la seule « vraie » poupée de l'histoire, celle que l'on manipule pour créer l'illusion, pour combler un vide, ou du moins temporairement l'oublier. Temporairement. Voilà toute la valeur que vous m'accordez.⁷³

The painter advances here as the puppeteer, he is the one who pulls the strings and manipulates her at whim. And yet, Moos in the course of the diary-novel never appears as a victim or a fool since from the beginning, she is fully aware of Kokoschka's maneuver and she does not fall for his tricks. She deliberately plays the game, or rather participates – i.e. plays her part – in Kokoschka's game by acting like a puppet/doll when in fact she retains her agency and subjectivity. These are the very same acting skills that she recognized in Reserl, Kokoschka's maid, whom she encountered during a short visit to the painter in Dresden, and for whom she has great admiration and strong desire since, as she notes in her diary:⁷⁴

Je revois Reserl, petite femme de chambre, nous apporter le goûter et de quoi soigner le peintre. Elle semble déborder d'imagination et encourager K à en déborder avec elle. Elle paraît savoir tirer profit d'une résignation apparente, par sa personnalité forte et une intelligence aigüe. Elle sortira indemne de cette situation ou le manipulateur présumé est en fait, encore une fois, le manipulé⁷⁵.

Her depiction of Reserl's character, resigned on the surface but strong and ingenious in reality, reveals the frailty of power relationship where tables are ultimately turned and the manipulator ends up being the one manipulated. Oddly enough, Hermine and Reserl mirror each other in their respective relationship with the painter insofar as Kokoschka plays with both Reserl and Hermine Moos as if both women were his dolls/puppets with the conviction that he manipulates them when in the end they are the ones who manipulate

⁷³ Ibid., 156.

⁷⁴ She confides in her diary her infatuation with Reserl by reporting a conversation with her lover Heinrich who realizes that Kokoschka's maid has bewitched her: “Tu es ensorcelé par cette femme de chambre, Hermine m'a dit Heinrich sur un drôle de ton” in Frédéric, *La poupée de Kokoschka*, 102.

⁷⁵ Frédéric, *La poupée de Kokoschka*, 158.

him.

The mirror is a recurrent motif in the diary-novel and it plays a central part in the fabrication process of Kokoschka's doll. Moos' journal in which she reflects upon her ambivalent emotions about Kokoschka and his doll, offers a mirroring surface in which the first-person narrator contemplates her own reflection. Thus, it may not come as a surprise that the doll maker in parallel works on her self-portrait. Posing in front of a mirror, she sculpts her bust in clay as she narrates in her journal:

N'en déplaise à qui que ce soit de Dresde ou d'ailleurs, je prépare cet autoportrait en fragments. Modeler le buste devant le miroir sur pied. Je ne sais pas si le socle est suffisamment solide. Je devrai bientôt me procurer d'autre argile.⁷⁶

This self-portrait in fragments ("autoportrait en fragments") as she calls her clay sculpture, stands as a metaphor for her journal insofar as every single entry represents a fragment of her life and her diary therefore constitutes a fragmented self-portrait. This idea of a fragmented self-image occurs in Moos' depiction of the making of the Alma-doll that she equates with the act of gluing together again the shattered pieces of a broken mirror, a mirror in which the painter like Narcissus uses to contemplate his own reflection:

L'absente n'est pas Alma Mahler. Il n'y a pas d'Alma Mahler. K me demande de recoller les morceaux d'un miroir brisé, la glace dans laquelle il se mirait et qui lui promettait tant de choses, glace du rêve, tenue dans les mains trompeuses d'une femme du monde.⁷⁷

The doll, in the sense that it represents a desperate attempt to retain an idealized image of the other as a reflection of the self, serves as the mirror of the painter's narcissistic fantasies. And yet, only as a whole mirror, i.e. a mirror in which Kokoschka can contemplate his own reflection, can the doll heal the narcissistic wound inflicted by the separation from his beloved Alma. Moos' depiction of Alma Mahler as "femme du monde" – read as a worldly woman or "Frau Welt," a medieval allegory of sensuality and vanity – holding a mirror in her hands like the goddess Venus further underlines the idea of narcissism that characterizes Kokoschka's doll project.⁷⁸ And yet, if the life-size doll functions as the standing mir-

⁷⁶ Ibid., 99.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 46-47.

⁷⁸ See the painting by Titian *Venus with a mirror* (also known as *Venus in Furs*) circa 1555, Paul Rubens' *Venus at a mirror* 1615, and Diego Velazquez' *Rokeby Venus* (also known as *Venus at her mirror*) circa 1650. In these

ror of the painter's narcissistic fantasies, then her mirror-like surface produces the Venus effect: when the doll maker looks into the doll, she does not see her own reflection but the painter's. And oddly enough, Moos gradually becomes the mirror image of Kokoschka as she reveals herself as his double: she emerges as an artist (a diarist and a sculptor) like the painter and writer Kokoschka and as such she becomes his rival. The mimesis of the painter and his doll goes a step further when the doll maker decides to make in parallel a puppet that bears a resemblance to Kokoschka and that she names Arkos (anagram of Oskar) as she confesses in her journal:

Cette idée qui me vient, là, est diabolique. Je fabriquerai simultanément, en marge de ce travail, une poupée à l'image de K lui-même. Et je lui confectionnerai de petits vêtements de corps comme ceux que l'on trouve pour les dames à Paris.⁷⁹

This mimetic gesture echoes in many aspects the very purpose of Kokoschka's doll project that is to animate the inanimate and make the absent one present. By creating a replica of the painter as a substitute for his physical absence, by turning him into a fetish, a voodoo doll alike, and by engaging and playing with the Arkos-doll, she re-enacts Kokoschka's doll project. And she even designs underwear for her doll, imitating the painter's wish to dress up his Alma-doll in Paris lingerie. In reality, Moos' mimetic gesture has its origin in a strong mimetic desire for Kokoschka himself as René Girard explains in his 1961 essay *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque* (*Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*).⁸⁰ According to him, the desire for an object, far from being autonomous, is triggered by the desire for another person – the so-called 'model' – for the same object. Thus, the relationship to the object is never linear but triangular, never direct but mediated by a third: there is a triangular relationship between subject, model or mediator, and object. Through the object, it is in fact the model or mediator who is sought. Girard's theory has the advantage of outlining the triangular relationship in which all actors involved with the doll are ultimately caught up. At the beginning, Moos as the doll maker, although instrumental in the making of the doll, is external to the trian-

three old masters a putto holds a mirror in which Venus contemplates her own reflection and/or the reflection of the painter, thus enacting the so-called "Venus-effect".

79 Frédéric, *La poupée de Kokoschka*, 78.

80 See René Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1976).

gular relationship between Kokoschka, Alma Mahler, and it. And yet, in the course of the fabrication process conveyed by the correspondence with the painter, she quickly becomes part of another symmetrical triangular relationship between the painter and the doll, thus standing in for his beloved Alma Mahler. And by imitating the painter's project and by making a male doll out of him, she duplicates this triangular relationship and creates a symmetrical third one (Moos – the Arkos-doll – Kokoschka), reproducing the figure of the triangle endlessly like a mirror-effect. Since Girard's concept of mimetic desire highlights the erotic network at play, it lays bare the strong, yet diffuse desire between the painter and the doll maker channeled through the doll. That explains why Moos' mimetic desire evolves in the course of the diary-novel insofar as her desire for an Oskar-like doll of her own rapidly shifts to a desire for Kokoschka's doll itself that culminates in a love embrace on her bed at the very end. As a key actor in the triangular relationship with Kokoschka and the Alma-doll and as an essential link in the chain of desire, Moos logically becomes the object of the painter's desire. Commenting on his erotically loaded advice to take her own body as a model and to touch her parts throughout the making of the doll, she becomes aware of her objectification by the latter and her role as Alma Mahler's double as she writes in her diary:

A plusieurs reprises vous témoignez de ce désir de me voir prendre moi-même pour modèle (pour les mains articulées, pour les yeux, le toucher de la peau). Maître, comprenez-vous la lourdeur de ce message ? Vous me demandez d'engendrer une femme à l'image d'Alma Mahler doublée de mon image qui pourra satisfaire vos envies inavouables (bien que facile à imaginer). Je deviens l'autre objet de vos désirs.⁸¹

And yet, desire here is far from being one-sided as Moos has also a vivid desire for Kokoschka himself. In her first diary entry opening the novel, she describes her first physical contact with the painter that takes place in the form of a handshake. Impressed by his large and strong hand, she imagines it caressing nonetheless: "Dans la sienne il m'a semblé que ma main aurait pu se briser. Pourtant, je pouvais aussi bien l'imaginer caressante"⁸². In the course of the novel, she also imagines feeling his hands entering her body and turning her

81 Frédéric, *La poupée de Kokoschka*, 175.

82 Ibid., 11.

into a puppet. Towards the end of the narrative though, Moos goes as far as having sexual fantasies about Kokoschka as she confides in her journal. Expecting his visit in her atelier to pick up his doll, she imagines his reaction if he were to walk in and catch sight of her in the nude, covered in the fur that will serve as the doll's outer skin:

Je ne serais pas étonnée de vous voir apparaître, cependant j'ignore ce que vous feriez. Qui choisiriez-vous d'elle ou de moi ? Nous sommes en train de nous fondre l'une dans l'autre. Je fonds en elle, elle fond en je. Dans le froid et la faim, elle devient nerveuse et je deviens arrondie.⁸³

In this scene, the depiction of the naked Moos wearing the doll's outer skin and posing as the doll's double, offering herself to the painter and wondering which one he might choose to satisfy his lust, shows that the doll maker and her creation have become one. She describes the transformation of her two bodies (she becomes curvy while the doll becomes bony) as well as their metamorphosis into one body ("Je fonds en elle, elle fond en je") by using the metaphor of melt that emphasizes the melting away of boundaries between subject and object as well as the mirror-like symmetry between both. Her language here suggests that Kokoschka's project has come to completion: the doll maker has turned into a doll and the doll has come to life. On the one hand, the craftsman's dollification does not come as a surprise since from the start, Moos has been manipulated, or rather mishandled by Kokoschka who constantly pulls the strings and ultimately turns her into his puppet. On the other, the doll maker brings the Alma-doll into being and to life by sharing her bodily fluids with it. At various occasions, Moos narrates in her journal how the doll in the course of its making pierces her skin, or how her own sweat drops onto the latter, a process through which the doll maker's bodily fluids are able to penetrate the doll:

Ce matin, une aiguille à coudre m'a piqué le doigt pendant que je travaillais au visage du fétiche. Voilà un secret : j'ai imprimé un peu de mon sang derrière une oreille. Une forme de signature, quasi invisible : vous ne pourrez pas m'en vouloir.⁸⁴

By imprinting her blood and sweat on the doll, Moos not only signs her creation with her body but also claims its ownership. And far from signing her name with the fluids of her body, she also signs it by writing tiny paper rolls that she has secretly inserted into one of

⁸³ Ibid., 190.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 132.

the doll's ears as she confides in her diary:

J'ai transmis, je pense, suffisamment de ma sueur au mannequin. Certains endroits secrets camouflent des traces de mon passage. J'ai caché des mots, en minuscules rouleaux de papier, dans une oreille.⁸⁵

The inscription of words into the doll alludes to the Golem-legend (the Golem of Prague and Chelm in particular), according to which the inscription of the Hebrew word “emet” (truth) could animate the mud figure while the removal of the first letter would deactivate it, turning “emet” into “met” (death).⁸⁶ Interestingly, the doll's awakening is not characterized by her movements but by her speech: the doll has a voice of her own, a soft voice in the form of a murmur that the doll maker is able to discern for the first time as she notes in her journal: “Pour la première fois, j'entends ta voix, tu murmures à mon oreille. Tu me demandes mon nom, je le prononce pour toi, tout bas : je suis Hermine Moos.”⁸⁷ In the course of the narrative though, the doll's voice becomes more distinct when it speaks to Moos to warn her against the painter as the following entry demonstrates:

J'ai décroché la femme-murmure de son socle et je l'ai pressé contre moi : les aiguilles fixées sur elle m'ont percé la peau. Mon maître, la femme-murmure, imprégnée de ma chaleur, entrée dans ma chair, ouvre la bouche pour me dire de vous craindre.⁸⁸

And as the voice of the doll changes in the course of the narrative – it evolves from being silent to a murmur before turning into a scream towards the end), so do the nicknames given to it by Moos: paradoxically, the doll from the beginning is never called Alma but Eva and it receives successively the following appellations: first “la femme leurre ou femme mensonge,” then “la femme silencieuse,” and at last “la femme murmure.” While the first two names may be linked to Kokoscha himself – “la femme leurre” refers to the deceit that the doll is supposed to achieve for him while “la femme silencieuse” alludes to the painter's naming of the Alma doll – the third term “la femme murmure” however is intimately connected to the doll maker since she is the only one who hears the doll's whispers

⁸⁵ Ibid., 213.

⁸⁶ It is worth observing that the diary-novel ends on the word “mensonge” (lie), the contrary of truth, which alludes to the artificiality of the doll's project and the painter's dishonesty. “Cependant, c'est promis, nous en resterons à la beauté de votre mensonge” in Frédéric, *La poupée de Kokoschka*, 220.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 155.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 171.

and engages in a dialogue with the latter. Strangely enough, these three names also apply to Moos herself – “la femme mensonge” alludes to her unspeakable escorting activities as well as her secret desire for the painter, “la femme silencieuse” describes her muteness and speechlessness, while “la femme murmure” characterizes her finding her own voice and making it heard through the writing of a diary. The evolution of the names coined for the doll reflects the psychological evolution of the first-person narrator who paradoxically acquires a voice while transforming into a doll. In the course of the story, the doll maker and the doll mirror each other to such an extent that one almost confuses one with the other, and therefore it is not surprising that the narrative ends with their physical embrace, thus performing the very fusion already contained in the title: *La poupée de Kokoschka* alluding both to the doll and its maker Hermine Moos. The scene of love’s embrace between Moos and the doll on her bed represents the climax of the novel insofar as the merging of the two female bodies reaches its peak in a moment of sexual orgasm before the act of love-making and diary-writing ends for good. In her last entry, Moos narrates how after painting the doll’s face with makeup according to the painter’s instructions, she is suddenly overcome by a strong feeling of tenderness and a irrepressible urge to take the doll in her arms:

Ainsi, hier, dans la nuit, j’ai barbouillé le visage de la femme-murmure, votre catin. Vous en serez heureux : le rouge à lèvres et le noir profond, sous les yeux, cachent les traces de broderies. Je l’ai barbouillée et gâchée sans relâche. Et s’est ensuivie cette étonnante réaction : une infinie tendresse a soudainement jailli, et de façon inattendue cette tendresse a projeté votre Idole vers moi, tant et si bien que je l’ai prise, mon maître, je l’ai prise. Et nous nous sommes toutes les deux endormies épuisées, enlacées au milieu de mon étang. J’ai trouvé là, dans cette étreinte, plus d’humanité qu’en vos manières, mon maître, et j’ai soudainement compris votre volonté de vous isoler loin des humains avec elle. J’espère que vous ne m’en voudrez pas : vous la recevrez échevelée, sans doute et monstrueuse. Il ne s’agira pas de ma maladresse, mais de votre effarante cruauté. Cependant, c’est promis, nous en resterons à la beauté de votre mensonge.⁸⁹

And this affectionate hug rapidly transforms into a passionate sex scene as the French sentence “Je l’ai prise” (I took her) repeated twice suggests. The image of their two bodies, entwined in each other’s arms, fatigued, and asleep on her bed speaks loudly for

⁸⁹ Ibid., 219-220.

the intensity of the sexual act. It is noteworthy that this erotic embrace is preceded by a makeup session: by caking the doll's face in make up (heavy mascara and red lipstick) she gives it the appearance of a hooker ("une catin") which further emphasizes their resemblance as female prostitutes. If Moos' dollification reaches its climax in the erotic embrace with the doll at the end of the novel and therefore come to completion, then this last scene featuring an act of female-to-female sex must be regarded as a scene of onanism: locked in an physical embrace with the doll as her double, the doll maker engages in an erotic act with her mirror image and since their bodies are fused into one, touching the doll equals touching herself. And interestingly, this masturbatory act is in fact a highly subversive one insofar as Moos' sexual pleasure completely undermines Kokoschka's doll project. Not only does the doll maker deliver to the painter a doll maculated with her own bodily fluids (sweat and blood), but she also hands over a used sex toy. During the fabrication process, she also re-appropriates the painter's project since the Alma-doll, far from becoming the life-size replica of Kokoschka's beloved, advances as her own double. And at last, she re-inscribes her own female agenda onto Kokoschka's project since the doll no longer serves as the mirror of the male genius' narcissistic fantasies, but merely casts the reflection of female narcissism. By ending her journal on a powerful scene of female narcissism and pleasure, the first-person narrator indicates a major change in her own voice: her silenced voice has made itself heard in the form of a murmur, before fading away in a moan of pleasure.

Kokoschka's historical *Letters to Hermine Moos* and Hélène Frédérick's fictional novel *La poupée de Kokoschka*, as different in form and content as they may seem at first glance, share in fact many a similarity. Not only do both texts read side-by-side complement one another, but they also mirror each other to such an extent that it seems appropriate to regard them as one corpus. However, the resemblance of both texts is not strictly limited to their content but it is also intent-based. By presenting Hermine Moos as subject and reinstating her as Kokoschka's interlocutor, Frédérick resumes the correspondence between the painter

and the doll maker and restarts the dialogue between the two of them – a dialogue aborted by the loss of her letters and their omission in Kokoschka's autobiography. Frédérick lends her voice to Hermine Moos in the form of a diary novel, Moos' fictional diary is an indirect response to Kokoschka's letters, while the latter, although featuring an addressee, lack a respondent. Frédérick's diary novel does represent the pendant to Kokoschka's letters not only because she supplies a written response – even though indirect – to Kokoschka's letters but also because both works share the same intention, or put differently, both authors fulfill the same artistic agenda, although at crossed purposes. As Philippe Lejeune, the French specialist in autobiography and diary recalls in his essay collection *On Diary*, the ultimate purpose of journal writing is to fight transience, and defeat death and oblivion since the diary has the power to outlive the diarist:

(...) death can prevent me from continuing my diary, but it can't undo the diary. Paper has its own biological rhythm. It will long outlive me. It will end up yellowing and crumbling, but the text that it bears will have its own reincarnation: it can change bodies, be recopied, published. I will be incinerated, my body reduced from one to zero. I will be preserved, my diary will stay on a shelf in the archives. They will publish me, multiplying my text from one to one thousand.⁹⁰

As this quote by Lejeune demonstrates, Frédérick's choice for the genre of the diary-novel is neither gratuitous nor fortuitous, but motivated by an intention to defeat the death and fight the oblivion of Hermine Moos.⁹¹ Her novel represents less a survival's than a revival's endeavor as she brings the doll maker back to life not only by lending her own authorial voice to her but also by making the reader bring her back to life through the lecture of Moos' fictional diary. And this attempt to resuscitate the dead was the main purpose of Kokoschka's doll project to begin with: the Alma-doll stands for a desperate artistic attempt to bring back to life his lost beloved Alma Mahler. In that regard, Kokoschka's letters to

90 Philippe Lejeune, *On Diary*. Ed. by Jeremy Popkin and Julie Rak, translated by Katherine Durnin (Manoa: University of Hawaii Press, 2009), 198.

91 Lejeune is extremely critical of the genre of diary-novel particularly in his analysis of imaginary diaries. According to him, "they are a clear failure, compounded by a kind of tactlessness. Anyone who tries to invent a diary that a real person could have written (or perhaps did write, but lost) takes the risk to make a public display of his lack of imagination and talent, as well as lack of respect". And yet, when it comes to Frédérick's diary-novel, Lejeune's judgment falls short. Since very little is known about the doll maker Hermine Moos who fell into oblivion, her imaginary diary displays on the contrary imagination, talent, and respect on the novelist's part and can be regarded as a tour de force.

Moos, although they feature an addressee and were originally part of an exchange, also participate in that revival's endeavor insofar as the detailed description of his beloved's body in the letters represents a literary means to retain her image and keep it alive. Besides, Kokoschka's self-centered obsession with Alma Mahler's physique and the doll's body – not to mention his self-involvement – that shows up in most of his letters, makes one wonder whether he was not also writing to himself while writing to Moos, thus linking the correspondence to a fictive journal. For Kokoschka's one-sided correspondence borrows the form of a diary and as such bears resemblance with Frédéric's diary-novel which further emphasizes the interconnection of both texts on the level of content, intent, and form. Although at odds with one another – Frédéric's intention is to bring Hermine Moos back to life and back into the equation of triangular desire while Kokoschka's wish is to resuscitate his former lover Alma Mahler – the two projects share many a similarity: both put at their center a sensual and sensuous female whose image they try to animate and whose physical presence they strive to conjure up. And by doing so, both Kokoschka and Frédéric engage the viewer/reader in a haptic experience of Alma and Hermine through the creation of a visual and tactile image of them.

While the motive of Frédéric's novel *La poupée de Kokoschka* is to make the doll maker's mute voice heard and to bring her participation in the making of Kokoschka's doll in the foreground, Swiss visual artist Denis Savary recreates the Alma-doll Kokoschka decapitated and destroyed at a party in Dresden in 1919. Savary, a maker of films, sculptures, drawings, and dance performances, questions in his 2008 art installation in Bern's Kunsthalle entitled *Alma (after Kokoschka)* the meaning of auteurship and examines the process of re-appropriation and re-interpretation of an artwork by bringing back to life Kokoschka's Alma-doll [Fig. 10 & 11]. *Alma (after Kokoschka)* is the exact reproduction of four life-size replica of the Alma doll based on the instructions Kokoschka gave in his writings to Hermine Moos as well as in his photographs. In Kunsthalle Bern's vestibule, all four dolls are gathered as a pack of idle hairy Amazons with oversized extremities: one is standing with

her back against a white wall, another is sitting on a ramp, while two are sitting on top of a marble receptacle. Savary renders the doll as a monstrous and incongruous creature at odds with her surroundings, a hybrid object between a sex toy and a transitional object.



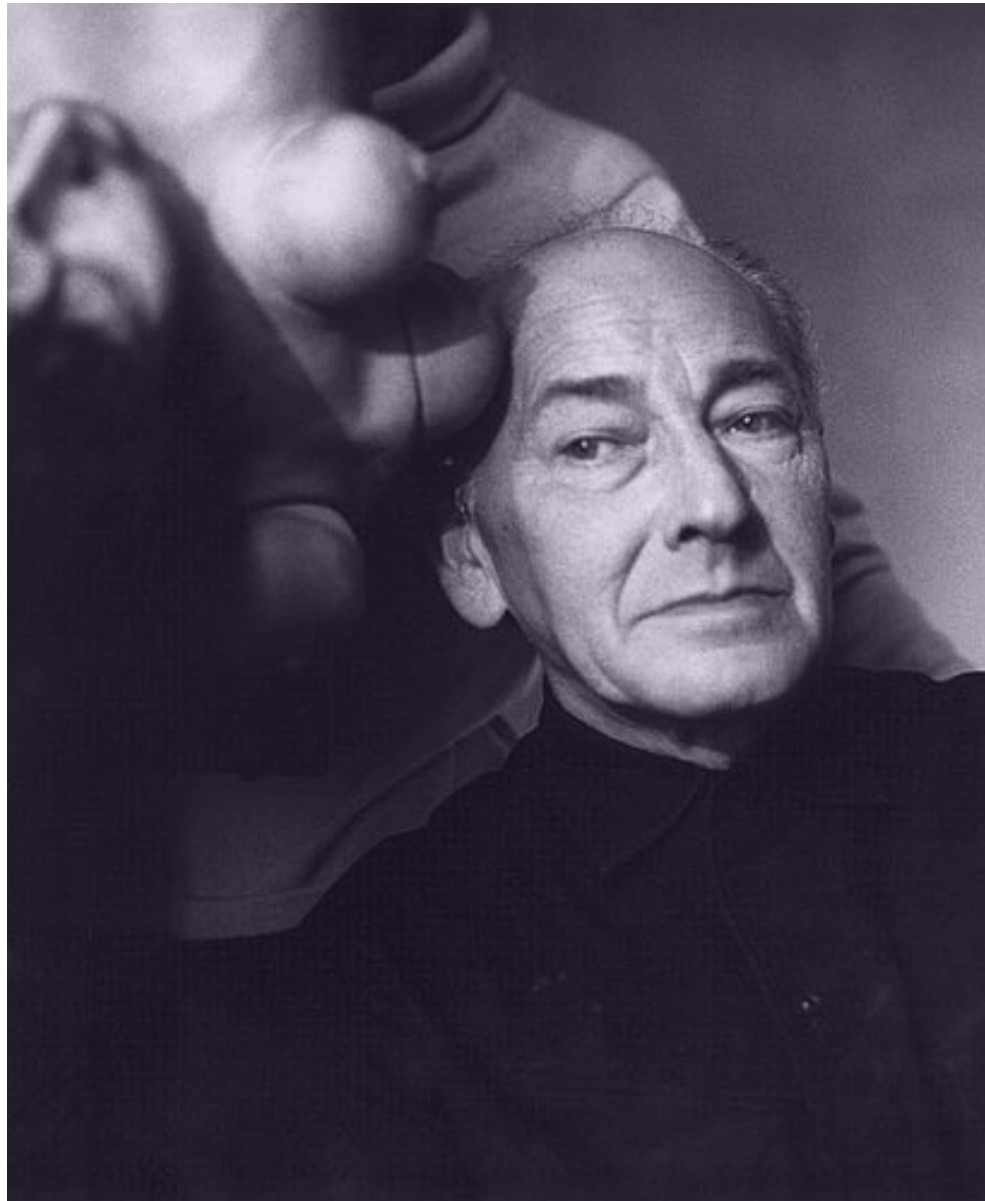
Fig. 10 Denis Savary, *Alma (After Kokoschka)*, 2008



Fig. 11 Denis Savary, *Alma (After Kokoschka)*, 2008

CHAPTER III

PHOTOGRAPHING THE DOLL HANS BELLMER AND HIS DOLLS



Karin Székessy, *Portrait of Hans Bellmer with his Surrealistic Doll*, 1960.

German visual artist Hans Bellmer explores the motif of the doppelgänger through the making of his first doll; through its staging in various photographs, he creates a double image, obtained mainly by the camera, of the doll as double. Intrigued by the possibilities of this double vision, Bellmer constructs a second doll, whose ball-jointed limbs enable him to duplicate body parts and reconfigure anatomy ad infinitum. In the course of his experimentation with the rearticulation of the body and the rewriting of its syntax, he discovers the connection between body and language and reveals what he coins the “physical unconscious.”

Recent scholarship, while showing an increasing interest in Hans Bellmer’s work, has either emphasized the tremendous impact that the political events occurring in Germany in the 1930’s had on the making of his doll or focused on the biographical and read his work through the lens of Freudian theory. In her study entitled *Behind Closed Doors: The Art of Hans Bellmer*, Therese Lichtenstein claims, “Bellmer’s works are a violent attack on the stereotypes of normalcy evident in Nazi art and culture. They rebel against images of the ideal female Aryan body found in high art and mass culture.”¹ On the other side of the spectrum, Sue Taylor in her book called *Hans Bellmer: The Anatomy of Anxiety* turns to a psychoanalytical discourse because “psychoanalysis, with its focus on identity formation and sexual subjectivity, offers a theory and a method to begin to explain Bellmer’s lifelong obsessions, the anxieties that haunted him, and the violence and perversions he fantasizes in his art.”² Although both scholars offer remarkable and valuable insight into Bellmer’s doll, that were instrumental in shaping my own reading, I nonetheless wish to distance myself from their interpretation. Because both interpretations, the socio-historical as well as the psychoanalytical, raise critical issues about their methodological approaches: Bellmer lived like a recluse in Germany until 1938 and his work, avoiding social and political commentary, remained unnoticed by the Nazis in power; both as a German native speaker

¹Therese Lichtenstein, *Behind Closed Doors: The Art of Hans Bellmer* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 1.

² Sue Taylor, *Hans Bellmer: The Anatomy of Anxiety* (Cambridge: MIT Press 2002), 4.

and a Surrealist, Bellmer was an avid reader of Sigmund Freud and obviously very familiar with the theory of the latter. In their tendency to either situate Bellmer and his doll within a particular historical context or to interpret him through the lens of psychoanalytical theory, both scholars, in my opinion, considerably reduce the meaning of his artistic work, and thus, fail to render the richness, complexity, and polysemy of Bellmer's doll. French art historian Agnès de la Beaumelle in her essay on Hans Bellmer convincingly argues for a different reading of the doll, that ultimately pushes the limits of the body, questions its representation, and redefines the canon of contemporary erotic art.

En réalité, l'enjeu n'est plus, pour lui [Hans Bellmer], de se livrer avec *La Poupée* à une quelconque critique sociale mais, derrière le masque d'une concession à un genre en vogue et bien allemand, de délivrer un propos autrement insurrectionnel et scandaleux. Si elle constitue, au départ, un dispositif de rébellion contre toute autorité (politique, paternelle), sa très singulière et provocante Poupée devient l'instrument d'une autre ambition et d'une autre investigation : une réflexion sur l'image du corps y est engagée, qui va faire de l'œuvre fétiche de Bellmer une création princeps de l'expression érotique contemporaine.³

Bellmer had initially devised his doll for some kind of social critique but rapidly turned to another type of scandal and revolt. If at first he was rebelling against authority (whether political or paternal), his singular and provocative *Die Puppe* subsequently became a tool for an altogether different purpose and he embarked on a reflection of the image of the body, that transformed his fetish work into a supreme example of erotic contemporary expression.⁴

Both in an effort to liberate Bellmer's doll from socio-historical and psychoanalytical discourses, and in an attempt to clear the view of the doll obstructed by the application and projection onto its surface of such reductive theories, as well as out of respect for Bellmer, who "wanted to open people's eyes to new realities," I offer a close reading of the numerous photographs of the doll as well as the essays, published successively in *Die Puppe* (1934) and *Les Jeux de la poupée* (1949), focused on the figure of the double. Following chronologically the leitmotif of the double, I hope to shed new light on Bellmer's doll project.

³ Agnès De la Beaumelle, "Hans Bellmer: Les jeux de la Poupée, les enjeux du dessin," in *Hans Bellmer: Anatomie du désir* (Paris: Ed. Gallimard/Centre Pompidou, 2006), 26.

⁴ Agnès De la Beaumelle, "The Stakes at Play in Drawing Les Jeux de la Poupée in Hans Bellmer," in *Hans Bellmer*, Ed. by Michael Semff and Anthony Spira (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2006), 34.

Striking similarities exist between Bellmer's and Kokoschka's doll projects not solely on a psychological, but also on a cultural and social level: the doll functions in both cases as a stand-in; Bellmer was fascinated by "Kokoschka's letters to Moos" that he had read, and both contemporary artists within an interval of fifteen years moved in similar Avant-garde circles or had acquaintances in common. These are the arguments that Taylor brings forward when establishing the connection between Bellmer's and Kokoschka's dolls:

On the most obvious level, Bellmer's doll was a substitute for his cousin, the proscribed object of his desires, in the literal way that Oskar Kokoschka's doll had been intended as a simulacrum of his erstwhile mistress. [...] His letters to Moos, which document each anatomical detail and tactile quality the artist wanted perfected in the doll, were in fact published in 1925 in *Künstlerbekenntnisse* under the title "Der Fetisch". Bellmer read these letters, and Webb states [...] that the younger artist was fascinated to hear about Kokoschka's close relationship to his doll. Coincidentally, the doll maker Lotte Pritzel, who had turned down Kokoschka's commission before he approached Moos, became a friend of Bellmer; Pritzel's husband, Gerhard Pagel, was Kokoschka's physician and later treated Margarete Bellmer.⁵

Kokoschka and Bellmer have in common their relationship to the German doll maker and costume designer Lotte Pritzel: as previously noted in Chapter 2, she is the person whom Kokoschka initially approached with his doll project in 1919 and it is in her company that Bellmer in 1934 got the inspiration for his second doll, the so-called ball-jointed doll. Another characteristic common to both artists is their isolation and seclusion: From Dresden, a convalescing and solitary Kokoschka directs the making of his Alma doll, confessing in a letter to his doll maker that he cannot bear the presence of the livings.⁶ As for Bellmer, Taylor points out that "because of the strict censorship of modern art and artists in Nazi Germany, [he] worked on his doll guardedly, in the virtual seclusion of his Berlin apartment."⁷ Major differences distinguish both doll projects nonetheless: Kokoschka turned to a female doll maker and participated in its making indirectly through written instructions whereas Bellmer constructed his doll himself together with his brother Fritz while receiving the support of his whole family. "Every member of his immediate

⁵ Ibid., 58.

⁶ See Oskar Kokoschka's eighth letter to Hermine Moos, dated December 10, 1918.

⁷ Taylor, *Hans Bellmer*, 33.

family participated in some way in the construction of the doll,” writes Taylor, emphasizing “this rather unusual phenomenon of the work of art as a family affair.”⁸ However, the major distinction between both artists’ dolls lies in its sheer appearance and a closer look at both reveals differences when it comes to the structure and the texture of their bodies. Where Kokoschka strives for a verisimilar body, a complete and organic type of body with a soft feel he wants to play with, Bellmer aims for an artificial body, a mechanical, inorganic, incomplete body whose (de)construction and permutation he experiments with.

Die Puppe (1934)

In Berlin in 1933, the German artist Hans Bellmer starts with the construction of a doll, made of flax fiber, plaster, wood, and glue, broomsticks, metal rods, nuts, and bolts. Sue Taylor gives a detailed description of the first doll:

Bellmer produced the first doll in Berlin in 1933. Long since lost, the assemblage can nevertheless be precisely described thanks to approximately two-dozen photographs Bellmer took at the time of its construction. Standing about fifty-six inches tall, the doll consisted of a molded torso made of flax fiber, glue, and plaster; a masklike head of the same material with glass eyes and a long, unkempt wig; and a pair of legs made from broomsticks or dowel rods. One of these limbs terminated in a wooden, club like foot; the other was encased in a more naturalistic plaster shell, jointed at the knee and ankle. As the project progressed, Bellmer made a second set of hollow plaster legs, with wooden ball joints for the doll hips and knees. There were no arms to the first sculpture, but Bellmer did fashion or find a single wooden hand [...].⁹

This creation marks the start of an ongoing doll project that will give birth to a second doll, numerous photographs, a few doll-like sculptures, and several drawings. When it comes to the direct influences that prompted Bellmer’s interest in dolls and inspired him to the making of a life-size doll, Taylor lists five major incidents occurring in Bellmer’s life:

The three principal events that led to Bellmer’s invention of the doll have by now assumed the character of an originary myth. First was the advent of a box of long-forgotten toys from Bellmer’s mother, who was breaking up the household to move the family to Berlin from Gleiwitz; then the appearance of [his teenaged

⁸ Taylor, *Hans Bellmer*, 33.

⁹ Taylor, *Hans Bellmer*, 24.

cousin Ursula] Naguschewski; and finally, Bellmer's attendance at a performance of Jacques Offenbach's *Tales of Hoffmann*. These experiences, which took place over a two-year period (1931-32), aroused the artist's interest in childhood things and ultimately in the idea of a life-size girl doll. Two other factors, although omitted from often-repeated accounts of the genesis of the doll, were also significant for Bellmer's mental and emotional state at the time: the sudden illness of his father in 1931 and the diagnosis of his wife's tuberculosis at about the same time"¹⁰.

For almost two years, Bellmer devotes his time and energy to the construction of an artificial girl made of wood and plaster he called "Puppe" (doll), while securing the involvement of his family, i.e. the help of his engineer brother Fritz, the financial support of his mother, the emotional support of both his wife Margarete and his younger cousin Ursula (only allowed to witness the progress through the studio door). In addition to the family's support, Bellmer was encouraged by the renowned doll maker Lotte Pritzel. At last, in October of 1934, Bellmer publishes *Die Puppe* ("The Doll"), a pink booklet divided in two parts: it contains first an essay entitled "Erinnerungen zum Thema Puppe" ("Memories of the Doll Theme") printed on pink paper, and a linocut followed by ten black-and-white photographs of a doll under the title "Die Entstehung der Puppe" ("The Genesis of the Doll") [Fig. 1].

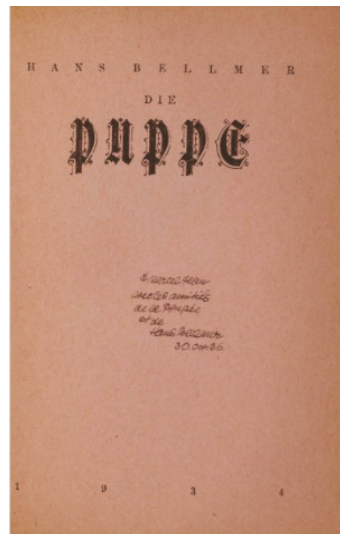


Fig. 1 Hans Bellmer, *Die Puppe*, 1934

The prose poem "Erinnerungen zum Thema Puppe" ("Memories of the Doll

¹⁰Ibid., 34.

Theme”) that opens Bellmer’s *Die Puppe* and serves as an introduction to the ten black and white photographs that make up the booklet. The text contains an entire artistic agenda: it introduces the theme of childhood, a topic triggered by the unexpected delivery of a box of long forgotten toys from Bellmer’s mother that had a great influence on the artist. Taylor writes:

The toys anticipated the family’s move to Berlin; they established a mood of nostalgia in the artist to be sure, but most important, they carried associations with a mother’s generosity and the threat of paternal demise. Their uncanny impact on the mature artist was thus in reminding him of once-cherished oedipal wishes and in reintroducing to him the possibility of the omnipotence of thoughts.¹¹

This toy box brought back memories of childhood games and unleashed fantasies about girls’ plays that are articulated in the 1934 essay “Erinnerungen zum Thema Puppe” (“Memories of the Doll Theme.”) Therein, Bellmer gives voice to his rediscovered interest in toys such as dolls and marbles, his obsession with prepubescent girls, and his fascination with body parts and joints, which, in many regards, sums up his aesthetic endeavor. Embedded in childhood memories and sexual fantasies, Bellmer’s poetic introduction reveals that his interest in photography contains elements of a transgressive desire: namely, a desire for forbidden images of young girls. These forbidden objects of desire turn a risky artistic experiment into a titillating experience:

Echtere Gefahr war vielleicht bei den verbotenen Fotografien – warum sollte man keine herstellen können? Doch zog uns der neue Eifer am Ende einigen Ärger zu, und es genügt, wenn ich mich erinnere, daß eben in dieser Art die jungen Mädchen in meine Gedanken kamen.¹²

Perhaps there was more authentic danger in the photography that was banned – why shouldn’t one be able to produce it? But this new enthusiasm finally caused us some trouble, and it suffices to say, if I remember correctly, that it was in this way that my thoughts turned to young maidens.¹³

Surveying the box of childhood toys, a colorful glass marble catches the author’s eye and its

¹¹ Taylor, *Hans Bellmer*, 34.

¹² Hans Bellmer, “Erinnerung zum Thema Puppe” (Karlsruhe: Thomas Eckstein Verlag, 1934), 7.

¹³ Hans Bellmer, “Memories of the Doll Theme,” translated from the German by Peter Chametzky, Susan Felleman, and Jochen Schindler, in Lichtenstein, *Behind Closed Doors* “Appendix,” 171.

shape and trajectory fire his imagination:

Doch war eine farbige Glasmurmel – sah man vom Barock der Zuckerbäckereien ab – allein imstande, die Vorstellungen nach einer offenbar beunruhigenden Seite zu erweitern. Sie war weniger vertraulich, obgleich sie dem Blick ihr Inneres anbot, das in erstarrter Ektase seine Spiralen betrachten ließ. Sie fesselte einen, an ihrer Spannung belebten sich die Gedanken und verliehen der Kugel übernatürliche Kraft, bis sie glasig im Raum schwebte. – Herbeigelockt von diesem Wunder schmiegte sich faltiger Spitzensaum an ihre Rundung, das verlorene Bein einer kleinen Puppe bog sich darüber hin, Zigarettenkistenholz neigte zu bedrohlicher Vertikale und sein Aufdruck verschwand oben beim Zelluloidball und den gewickelten Locken, die ihn umspielten.¹⁴

But in fact, turning away from baroque confections, one saw that a single colored glass marble sufficed to stretch the imagination towards something clearly unsettling. The marble was less intimate, though it offered a view of its interior that allowed one to observe the frozen ecstasy of its spirals. It was riveting. Thoughts were enlivened by its tensions. The sphere took on supernatural powers until it floated transparently through the room. Enticed by this miracle, the gathered-lace ribbon wrapped itself around the marble's curves, the lost leg of a little puppet bent over it, cigar box wood tilted at its menacing vertical, and its imprint faded up above by the celluloid ball and the corkscrew curls that wound around it.¹⁵

In his depiction of the scene where the rolling marble gathers lace, the leg of the doll, a hair lock, and stumbles upon a cigar box and a ball, Bellmer uses a covertly sexual language to describe a scene of intercourse. Taylor notices that Bellmer “substitutes for body parts inanimate objects that embrace, encircle, and wind around each other, bend over, stick sharply, and disappear; (...) a detached limb or ‘the lost leg of a little puppet’ and the cigar-box wood, whose tilt ‘at a menacing vertical’ suggests an erection just before it vanishes by the ball and the corkscrew curls – read pudenda and pubic hair.”¹⁶

And as if the wordy description were not graphic enough, Bellmer went as far as to make a black and white photograph that renders the scene very faithfully [Fig. 2]. Therein the artist arranges a number of objects such as candies, a candy cane, two pairs of legs of porcelain dolls, ribbons tied into a bow and rose, a crumpled paper sheet, and paper lace

¹⁴ Bellmer, “Erinnerung zum Thema Puppe,” 8.

¹⁵ Bellmer “Memories of the Doll Theme,” 171.

¹⁶ Taylor, *Hans Bellmer*, 42.

doilies, some of which echo the passage from the prose poem. Taylor observes that “these items seem dainty and precious; some are broken, and in their arrangement is a subtle hint of accident or violence. His photographs demonstrate the artist’s preoccupations with the scenario recounted in ‘Memories’, although the relationship between images and text has managed to escape notice to date.”¹⁷ And yet, the photograph taken in 1934, itself part of a group of still-lives, was not included in the album of *Die Puppe* even though its image composition and elements are very reminiscent of the last photograph of the series featuring a pair of legs and a rose.



Fig. 2 Hans Bellmer, *Die Puppe*, 1934

Bellmer’s fascination with the child’s marble mainly comes from the trouble felt when he looks through it: the marble is regarded here as a metaphor of female genitalia and its description as an object “less intimate, though it offered a view of its interior that allowed one to observe the frozen ecstasy of its spirals” (“weniger vertraulich, obgleich sie dem Blick ihr Inneres anbot, das in erstarrter Ektase seine Spiralen betrachten ließ”) leaves little doubt as to the sexual overtones. The marble functions both as a sexual organ and an

¹⁷ Taylor, *Hans Bellmer*, 41.

organ of sight. In this regard, the “Memories of the Doll Theme” essay is key insofar as it emphasizes the significance of the marble as a visual and sexual metaphor and announces the ball-jointed doll to come as well as its sphere ball of the stomach. It is also worth noting that the marble is featured in the fourth black and white photograph of *Die Puppe*.

Since the marble stands both as a visual and sexual metaphor, it is not surprising that it is associated with bodily fluids. What is most striking about this passage is the fluidity of the marble, rolling down the stairs and entering through door cracks, tracking the girls’ moves and games, but also its similarity to a camera – which the narrator holds in his fingers – insofar as it records the images, the sounds (“giggles”) and odors (“raspberry schnapps enema”) characteristic of the girls’ games Bellmer evokes in his childhood memories.

Die Murmel blieb anrücklich in den Fingern zurück, als hätte sie viel von kichernden Mädchen hinter den Zäunen. Überhaupt gelang es nicht mehr recht, dergleichen Mädchenheimlichkeiten belanglos zu finden. Was von oben von den Bodentreppen her, auch bei den Türspalten vom Arztspielen und von so etwas wie Himbeerwasserklistieren durchsickerte, dem fehlte es nicht an anscheinend Verlockendem, ja an Beneidenswertem.¹⁸

The marble lingered in the fingers of the disrepute, as if it held many giggling girls behind the fences. There was simply no more point in regarding as inconsequential such girlish secrecy. What trickled down from the attic stairs, through the cracks in the door, from playing doctor – something like a raspberry schnapps enema – was not without appeal, even enviableness.¹⁹

Bodily fluids play a significant part not only in the depiction of the narrator’s memories but also in their production: the scene with the marble is the result of a dream, “a fantasy produced while defecating” as Taylor observes. The dream ends “wiped away with the real rustle of paper” and he imagines it drifting out of the water closet, along with the flies through a heart-shaped hole.²⁰

¹⁸ Bellmer, “Erinnerung zum Thema Puppe,” 9.

¹⁹ Bellmer, “Memories of the Doll Theme,” 171-172.

²⁰ Taylor, *Hans Bellmer*, 42-43.

See Bellmer, “Erinnerung zum Thema Puppe,” 8: “Zu nichts wurde der Traum, wenn ein wirkliches Papierrascheln ihn fortwischte, und wie sonstwelcher Dunst, wie die Fliegen, zog er durch Herz der Abortür ins Freie ab.”

Bodily fluids are also present in the making of Bellmer's first doll as he sought to include inside its stomach a panorama disc featuring several images, one of which being a handkerchief sullied with little girls' saliva. Toward the end of his poetic essay, Bellmer evokes this fixation on girls' legs and his fascination with them:

Und wie ich wäre keiner ohne Mißtrauen geblieben angesichts der Beine allein von ähnlichen Bälgern.

Standen sie nur so herum, dann war dem einwärts Geknickten, besonders bei den Knien, nicht viel mehr als das Umherstaksen junger Ziegen zuzumuten. Von vorne oder seitlich gesehen waren die Kurven weniger zum Lachen, denn die zerbrechliche Wade verstieg sich, nachdem sie in den Polstern des Knies sich ermuntert hatte, immerhin zu neugieriger Wölbung. Aber die Verblüffung war ohne Ende, wenn sie unversehens sich strafften und anmaßend spielend ihre Federung an davonrennendem Reifen erprobten, schließlich nackt aus Lochstickerei und schlaffen Spalten heraushingen, um den Nachgeschmack ihres Spieles lässig aneinander zu kosten.²¹

And like me, in view of just the legs of such little brats, no one would have remained without suspicion.

When they just stood there, one couldn't expect anything more from their bowed and especially knock-kneed legs than the stumbling about of young goats. Seen from the front or the back, the curves were less amusing, because the fragile calf, emboldened by the padding of the knees, dared an inquisitive curvature. But amazement was endless when they unexpectedly pulled themselves up and in impudent play tried out their suspension with runaway hoops, finally hanging naked from open embroidery and loose folds, in order to savor idly together the aftertaste of their game.²²

What is particularly striking in this paragraph is the detailed description of the girls' legs that are clearly the main focus of Bellmer's gaze. The artist scrutinizes their legs, knees, and calves before directing his eyes to the knee joints and their "inquisitive arching" ("neugierige Wölbung.") By singling out a particular body part, such as legs, in his prose poem, Bellmer already dismembers the girls' bodies, a process that he will further investigate and illustrate in the various series of doll photographs. While Taylor reads Bellmer's obsession with legs primarily through the lens of Freudian theory and regards

²¹ Bellmer, "Erinnerung zum Thema Puppe," 9.

²² Bellmer, "Memories of the Doll Theme," 172.

legs as little more than “penis substitutes” or “phallic emblems,” I will focus instead on the artist’s erotic investment in leg articulations and joints and the role they play later in the making of his second doll, the so-called ball-jointed doll.²³ By exploring the contours of the young girls’ body, Bellmer sketches a new geography of the female body, presenting a new anatomy that is a constant source of erotic pleasure, as the closing paragraph of his essay suggests:

Gelenk an Gelenk fügen, den Kugeln ihren größten Drehbereich für kindliche Pose abprobieren, den Mulden sacht folgen, das Vergnügen der Wölbungen kosten, sich in die Muschel des Ohres verirren, Hübsches machen, und ein wenig rachsüchtig auch das Salz der Deformationen verteilen. Obendrein vor dem Innern beileibe nicht stehen bleiben, die verhaltenen Mädchengedanken entblättern, damit ihre Untergründe sichtbar werden, durch den Nabel am besten, tief im Bauch als Panorama bunt elektrisch beleuchtet. –

Sollte nicht das die Lösung sein?²⁴

Fit joint to joint, testing the ball-joints by turning them to their maximum position in a childish pose; gingerly follow the hollows, sampling the pleasure of curves, losing oneself in the clamshell of the ear, creating beauty and also distributing the salt of deformation a bit vengefully. Furthermore, don’t stop short of the interior: lay bare suppressed girlish thoughts, so that the ground on which they stand is revealed, ideally through the navel, visible as a colorful panorama electrically illuminated deep in the stomach.

Should not that be the solution?²⁵

In his description of the making of his first doll, the erotic, almost sexual pleasure the narrator feels in exploring his doll both inside and out, can be hardly overlooked. The haptic look he casts onto and into the doll’s body whose “hollows he gingerly follows” (“den Mulden sacht folgen”) is significant as his gaze probes the inside and penetrates new orifices such as the outer ear and the navel. The pleasurable erring in the ear (“sich in die Muschel des Ohres verirren”) as well as the sexual overtones of the German term “Muschel” – a metaphor for female genitalia – leave very little doubt as to the nature of the sexual play. What Bellmer presents at the end of his essay as *the* solution (“die Lösung”) is in fact the

²³ See Taylor, *Hans Bellmer*, 45.

²⁴ Bellmer, “Erinnerung zum Thema Puppe,” 13.

²⁵ Bellmer, “Memories of the Doll Theme,” 174.

artistic undertaking he embarks on with his doll: he designs a new anatomy while distorting the female body (“das Salz der Deformationen verteilen,”) turns it inside out (“damit ihre Untergründe sichtbar werden,”) casts a voyeuristic gaze into the doll’s body, and creates new orifices while providing new sensual experiences for the onlooker. The artist literally describes the making of his doll “fit joint to joint, testing the ball-joints by turning them to their maximum position in a childish pose” (“Gelenk an Gelenk fügen, den Kugeln ihren größten Drehbereich für kindliche pose abprobieren”) before visually documenting the construction of the doll with ten black and white photographs to which the essay serves as an introduction.

The small-format handcrafted book, produced at the artist’s expense and dedicated to his younger cousin Ursula Naguschewski, was published in a limited edition. Judging from the book’s miniature format and the pink color of the paper, the book inscribes itself within the realm of childhood, a theme reinforced not only by Bellmer’s personal connection with the publisher (Thomas Eckstein was a childhood friend) but also by the title of the opening essay “Erinnerung zum Thema Puppe” (“Memories of the Doll Theme” and its content, mainly about the artist’s childhood memories of young girls and their games. As Lichtenstein notices, “the miniature format of *Die Puppe* deliberately induces a personal, private engagement, much as a prayer book does; the precious book can be viewed and handled only by one person at a time.”²⁶ The book format also played a fundamental role in animating the doll: by turning each page in the anxious discovery of the next image, the viewer witnesses the animation and the transformation of the doll before his eyes, in a technique reminiscent of a panorama or a series of film stills, as Lichtenstein observes:

As the viewer turns each page, moving from one image to the next, an atmosphere of apprehension arises; the restrained yet flexible doll, bathed in dramatic light and photographed from different angles, is transformed in successive shifting images to create a sense of temporality and ephemerality, not unlike that produced by a series of film stills.²⁷

²⁶ Lichtenstein, *Behind Closed Doors*, 25.

²⁷ Ibid., 25.

And yet, the mobility and portability of the book is at odds with the content of the photographs exhibiting spatial confinement: the doll's body parts, both versatile in their combination and rigid in their position, are kept within the space of domesticity as well as within the small format of the photographs. The tension between form and content inherent to the ten photographs of *Die Puppe* echoes the stretches, strains, and fractures that the artist imposes on the body of his doll. As Lichtenstein is right to point out, "despite the progressive evolution of the figure in these photographs, the images in *Die Puppe* are not organized in terms of linear narrative. Rather, they document an elaborate tinkering with arrangements of body parts in interior settings."²⁸

The first series of photographs are mainly concerned with the inner workings of the doll and its construction. The opening image depicts the doll as a wooden and metal skeleton seated on a chair, legs spread in the open doorway of a room [Fig. 3]. At this early stage of its genesis, the doll consists of a hollow framework for the torso and the head, one jointed handless arm, and two jointed legs with one foot carved out of wood.

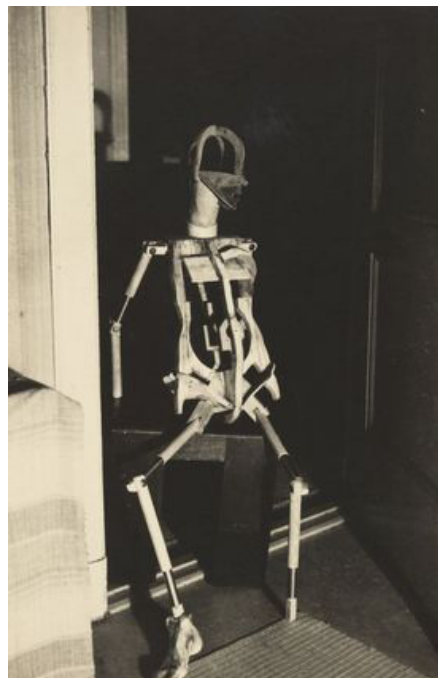


Fig 3. Hans Bellmer, *Die Puppe*, 1934

²⁸ Ibid., 25.

From the diagonals produced by the position of the chair within the doorway and the doll's outstretched legs, to the shadow cast by the doll's head on the wall and its leg on the floor, not to mention the direction in which the doll's head is turned, all speaks volumes for an elaborate image composition that creates both an ominous and sexually provocative atmosphere. The second photograph shows the doll bathed in dramatic light and standing against a wallpapered background [Fig. 4]. The doll now features a constructed plaster torso fixed onto the armature with parts of the breasts and stomach completed, but it remains armless. The shadow of the doll's bust cast onto the wall is very reminiscent of 18th century silhouette: the head's partially solid shape, the edges matching the doll's outline and the white background all refer to the technique of the "Scherenschnitt," or the silhouetted cut-out.



Fig. 4 Hans Bellmer, *Die Puppe*, 1934

The third photograph, among the ten of *Die Puppe*, stands out not only because it includes the artist himself in the company of his doll but also because the doll takes on the appearance of a girl [Fig. 6]. A panorama disc has been fitted into the doll's stomach, its face has been modeled as well as one foot, it wears a wig and black beret on its head, a black stocking pulled down around the ankle, and a leather shoe. This photograph of

the doll with the artist, features a double exposure of Bellmer's image: dressed in overalls, looking at the camera, and bending his torso forward while resting his hands on his knees, as if he were leaning his head against the doll's, the artist appears like a transparent, ghostly figure, both present and absent. This double-exposed image of the artist must be read together with the previous photograph featuring also a double image of the doll's bust with its shadow cast on the wall [Fig. 5]. Both images underscore the significance of the double,



Fig. 5 Hans Bellmer, *Die Puppe*, 1934



Fig. 6 Hans Bellmer, *Die Puppe*, 1934

a key concept in Bellmer's doll project. If the doll stands as a *Doppelgänger* – a replica of Bellmer's young cousin Ursula and the artist himself – then photography is the appropriate apparatus and the perfect medium to replicate the doll's image. This intimate connection between the doll and photography, mostly neglected in the scholarship on Bellmer, is what the German scholar Birgit Käufer emphasizes in her article "True Bodies" while adding the notion of gender to the discussion. Thus, she argues:

Fokussiert wird die Frage, inwiefern die Puppe, die wir als unsere Doppelgängerin erkennen, in der Fotografie, die wir als Spur bzw. als Verdoppelung des „Wirklichen“

wahrnehmen, ihr kongeniales Medium gefunden hat und warum die Fotografie der Puppe in besonderem Maße zur Subversion von Geschlechtercodierungen sowie der Vorstellung von Identität und Wirklichkeit geeignet ist.²⁹

Once one comprehends the intimate relationship between the doll and photography, one can understand why a trained engineer and graphic artist like Bellmer would turn to photography in order to capture the image of his doll. His double interest in the pair doll/photography primarily concerns the exponential qualities of both since the camera has the power to duplicate the image of the doll as *Doppelgänger* ad infinitum. This endless replication remains at the stage of the first doll an abstraction with which Bellmer experiments before taking the concept of exponential multiplication to a completely different level with his second. As several photographs of the first doll demonstrate – many of which were not included in the publications of *Die Puppe* – the artist experiments with the camera and particularly the possibilities of the photographic apparatus. Bellmer includes in his 1934 publication only a negative image – the eighth photograph in a series of ten – depicting



Fig. 7 Hans Bellmer, *Die Puppe*, 1934

29 Birgit Käufer, “True Bodies? Von der Suche nach dem wahren Körper und dem Finden der Kunstfigur” in: Gisela Febel, Cerstin Bauer-Funke (Hg.), *Querelles: Jahrbuch für Frauen- und Geschlechterforschung*, “Menschenkonstruktionen: Künstliche Menschen in Literatur, Film, Theater und Kunst des 19. Und 20. Jahrhunderts” (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2004), 128-147.

the doll's full bust and bald head posed against Victorian lace-patterned wallpaper [Fig. 7]. A long-stemmed rose is placed on its side and the doll leans its head slightly forward and to the side as if to sniff it. The presence of the rose as a prop in this photograph as both a metaphor of the female genitalia and a symbol of transience emphasizes the complexity of the image, oscillating between Eros and Thanatos since it can be read both as erotica (the rose delicately outlines the doll's breasts while the arabesque pattern of the wallpaper recalls the circular form of the bosoms) and Baroque Memento Mori (the doll's bald head as well as the X-ray appearance of the photograph conjure up death and disease). Another negative photograph – that was included neither in the 1934 German publication nor in the 1937 French one – shows the doll halfway constructed, with parts of the upper torso, her face, and a leg completed, while the lower torso showcases a wooden skeleton with a



Fig. 8 Hans Bellmer, *Die Puppe*, 1934

panorama mechanism fitted inside and a prosthetic wooden and metallic leg [Fig. 8].

The doll leans its weight on the right leg, covered with a stocking, and turns its head to the left, as if it were looking away from the picture of a marble hanging on the wall. What stands out in that photograph is the halo of light surrounding the doll's body: the

inner part of the right leg, the left foot, the left side of the torso and the face glow giving the doll an eerie aspect, as if it were coming to life and moving.³⁰ Both negative photographs of the doll, by conjuring up life and death, sum up the tension or rather the contradiction inherent in photography.³¹

Although the photographs Bellmer took of the doll were originally meant to record the different stages of its construction, they soon fulfilled the function of creating an atmosphere of mystery and eroticism. Webb notes:

The ten photographs are a record of successive stages in the progress of the Doll's construction. They are thus an early example of conceptual art insofar as the pictorial account of the making of the artifact eventually takes the place of that artifact itself. The emphasis on the process of making is strengthened by the presence in some of the photographs of a full-scale drawn blueprint of the doll



Fig. 9 Hans Bellmer, *Die Puppe*, 1934

30 Oddly enough, Kokoschka achieved exactly the same effect with impasto technique in his 1919 standing nude of Alma Mahler.

31 See Katharina Sykora, *Unheimliche Paarungen. Androidenfaszination und Geschlecht in der Fotografie* (Köln: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 1999), 9: So spiegelt sich gerade in der Ikonografie der Kuntsmenschen das doppelte Vermögen der Fotografie, die Grenze zwischen der Darstellung des physischen Körpers und der medialen Körperkonstruktion zu akzentuieren, aber auch zu negieren. Gleichzeitig wird der Fotografie seit ihrer Entstehung in unterschiedlicher Weise die Fähigkeit der Verlebendigung und Mortifizierung zugesprochen: Eigenschaften, die sich auf verblüffende Weise mit denen der Androiden verschränken.

which is pinned to the wall behind her and forms the background.³²

Since all the photographs included in *Die Puppe* show a fragmented doll in a constant state of construction – an idea with which Bellmer will toy in his second doll – it emphasizes its artificial character. This artificiality is put on display in the fourth photograph which depicts the doll broken down into body parts ready to be assembled like a tool kit [Fig. 9]. A plastered open torso, together with a full plastered leg, a wooden and metallic prosthetic leg with a wooden foot, a wooden hand, a plastered face lacking a skull, two wooden and metallic prosthetic arms, two glass eyes, a disc with three panoramas, and a wig have been layed out on the blueprint, framed by two marbles at the lower and upper corner of the image.



Fig. 10 Hans Bellmer, *Die Puppe*, 1934



Fig. 11 Hans Bellmer, *Die Puppe*, 1934

The fifth photograph of *Die Puppe* can almost be regarded as a portrait since it is the only image that features the doll with a facial expression [Fig. 10 & 11]. The doll, supported on legs stripped back to their armatures, is leaning its armless body against the wall. It

³²Peter Webb, *Death, Desire, and The Doll: The Life and Art of Hans Bellmer* (London: Solar Books, 2006), 24.

wears a slip slipping off its body and its hair down in the back. The doll, whose eyes peer out of the papier-mâché mask-like head, looks teasingly over the shoulder in the direction of the viewer, half coquette, half victim, in “a complex expression of demure coyness and abused martyrdom” as Lichtenstein observes in her description before adding:

This corpselike victim beckons the viewer to look at her haunting body, which seems to be disintegrating, like a Pompeian effigy. By seemingly glancing toward the viewer and raising her slip seductively to expose crumbling buttocks, the doll appears to be a violated vamp, passive and vulnerable, yet flirtatious and active.³³

This portrait of the doll is on many levels a complex image in which Bellmer reflects upon the viewer's position and deconstructs the female body. By teasingly looking over its shoulder at the viewer, as if it knew that it was being looked at, the doll momentarily leaves its passive position as an object of the gaze and assumes an active position as a viewing subject. That is the conclusion to which Käufer comes when she writes:

So kann die Puppe, die sich im fotografischen Porträt zu einem Wesen zwischen Kunst und Natur verwandelt, und zudem unseren Blick zu erwidern scheint, polare Zuschreibungen von blickendem, männlich konnotiertem Subjekt und erblicktem, weiblich konnotiertem Objekt aufkündigen.³⁴

The doll's oscillation between object of the gaze and viewing subject and the resulting instability of the viewing position are what makes this image so haunting and so troubling. By exposing a bumpy, truncated, plastered body to the camera, the doll presents femininity reduced to a wig and a pair of buttocks as a simulacrum, or rather an artifact, as Käufer observes:

Puppe, Fotografie und Geschlecht sind daher ideale Partner. Die Puppe, die im fotografischen Bild ihre Geschlechtercodes zur Schau stellt, scheint den authentischen Körper bzw. das Geschlecht zu präsentieren und führt beide gleichzeitig als Artefakt vor.³⁵

Although the last four photographs of *Die Puppe* attest to the substantial progress made in the construction of the doll – its body is now smothered in white smooth plaster

³³ Lichtenstein, *Behind Closed Doors*, 29.

³⁴ Käufer, “True Bodies?”, 10.

³⁵ Käufer, “True Bodies?”, 10.

no longer displaying the wooden and metallic skeleton – they paradoxically showcase a completed and yet dismembered doll in various elaborate and delicate settings [Fig. 12-15]. Here the doll is mostly depicted lying on a bed or a table, accessorized with veils, lace tablecloths, linens, panties, roses, marbles, and pearls.

Both the aesthetic quality of the images and their intricate composition recall tableaux vivants while conveying a sense of macabre Eros, oscillating between 19th century erotica and Baroque Memento Mori. For example, photograph six showcasing a tangle of body parts such as a torso, a head, part of a leg, and two ball joints, wrapped in black chiffon and white lace, can be read as an allegory of death and mourning [Fig. 12]. Photograph seven depicts a miscellany of white gauze, crumpled bed-clothes, cast-off lace panties, and



Fig. 12 Hans Bellmer, *Die Puppe*, 1934



Fig. 13 Hans Bellmer, *Die Puppe*, 1934

body parts such as a torso with the ball joints in position at the thighs, two leg parts, two other limbs, two ball joints, and a glass eye, all of which are placed on a stripped mattress and seen from a greater distance [Fig. 13]. Photograph nine features again a jumble of a full plastered torso, a full head, wig, fragmented limbs, ball joints, a glass eye, and a marble,



Fig. 14 Hans Bellmer, *Die Puppe*, 1934



Fig. 15 Hans Bellmer, *Die Puppe*, 1934

set on top of white laced panties against the background of a stripped mattress and seen from above [Fig. 14].

At last, the final photograph, the most fragmented one, with which *Die Puppe* closes, depicts the lower portions of a pair of legs, one of which is wearing a black high-heeled shoe, wrapped in lacy panties – as if they had been pulled down to the ankles – with a rose between them, placed on a lace background and next to a pearl [Fig. 15]. In his analysis of Bellmer's *Die Puppe* Webb regards the last photograph as “perhaps the only image in the series to verge on the cliché with its very obvious reference to the female sex.”³⁶ However correct his judgment may be, Webb fails to understand Bellmer's overall intention, namely to end his photography book on an iconic and fetishistic image. Lichtenstein observes:

The arrangement provides a sort of closure to Bellmer's book and at the same time summarizes his interests in fetishism, nostalgia, sexuality, disjuncture, and death. The doll appears vulnerable, unprotected, and exposed, while the viewer is placed in unsafe – perhaps embarrassingly close – proximity to the doll, a nearness that challenges any voyeuristic distance or repressive puritanism.³⁷

³⁶ Webb, *Death, Desire, and The Doll*, 27.

³⁷ Lichtenstein, *Behind Closed Doors*, 30.

As the ten black and white stylized photographs of *Die Puppe* demonstrate, the doll for Bellmer is a toy insofar it is both an object of viewing pleasure and a visual experiment. In her essay on Hans Bellmer, Agnès de la Beaumelle emphasizes this double potential of the doll in which Bellmer's male creativity revels, when she writes:

Déjà l'ébauche grandeur nature de la première poupée, troublante encore de réalisme, mais raide et imparfaite, répondait à la double injonction d'être objet de plaisir et objet expérimental : un objet de plaisir froid et brûlant, familier et inquiétant, repoussant et attirant ; un objet expérimental qu'on démonte et remonte à volonté, qu'on mutile et démembre, et qui oppose au toucher une carapace opaque tout en livrant au voyeur son intérieur (dans le fameux mécanisme tournant du 'panorama' à actionner soi même.)³⁸

Though stiff and imperfect, *Die Puppe*'s life-size skeleton was disturbingly realistic. It responded to the dual objective of being both a pleasurable and an experimental object. It was pleasurable cool and fiery, familiar and worrying, attractive and repulsive, and could be assembled and disassembled, mutilated and dismembered at will, protected by an opaque skin while revealing its interior by way of its revolving interactive 'panorama.'³⁹

And while playing with his doll, Bellmer also plays games with the viewer, challenging the position of the latter, and going so far to push the boundaries between viewing subject and visual object in photograph five [Fig. 10 & 11]. In doing so, he redefines not only the borders of vision but the contours of the eye itself; this, he does by means of his panorama disc. Indeed, the doll's open abdomen with a central wooden brace and shims to support a housing for a panorama disc catches the viewer's eye in some of Bellmer's pictures of *Die Puppe*, such as photographs one, three, and four [Fig. 16 & 17]. Commenting on this panorama disc, Taylor explains:

Although never carried out, [Bellmer's] plan was to make this rotating disc observable through the doll's navel. Lit by tiny colored bulbs and operated by a button in the doll's left nipple, the wheel was to contain six wedge-shaped scenes: a boat sinking into polar ice, sweetmeats, a handkerchief sullied with little girls' saliva, and several diminutive pictures in bad taste.⁴⁰

38 Agnès De la Beaumelle, "Hans Bellmer: Les jeux de la Poupée, les enjeux du dessin" in *Hans Bellmer, Anatomie du désir*. Ed. Gallimard/Centre Pompidou: Paris 2006. p. 26.

39 De la Beaumelle, Agnès. Hans Bellmer : "The Stakes at Play in Drawing Les Jeux de la Poupée in Hans Bellmer", Edited by Michael Semff and Anthony Spira. Hatje Cantz Verlag : Ostfildern 2006. p. 34.

40 Taylor, *Hans Bellmer*, 24.



Fig. 16 Hans Bellmer, *Die Puppe*, 1934



Fig. 17 Hans Bellmer, *Die Puppe*, 1934

Bellmer even gives a detailed description of the panorama disc in his essay “Erinnerungen zum Thema Puppe” (“Memories of the Doll Theme”) that opens the booklet *Die Puppe* and closes with a linocut of the mechanism to be fitted into the doll’s stomach [Fig.18]. Taylor notes that “the diagram presents the headless, limbless doll as peep show, with a viewer’s eye positioned before a distinctly pregnant-looking belly and peering into an artificial womb while a schematic, pointing hand pokes the breast.”⁴¹ What is peculiar in this diagram is the seemingly pregnant body of the doll carrying inside its abdomen a mechanism in the form of a panorama disc.

Webb gives a very detailed description of the system imagined by Bellmer and his brother Fritz:

The panorama itself was composed of a hollow disc of wood nineteen centimeters in diameter to which were attached six little boxes shaped like segments of the circle, each opening on to the center. The boxes were to contain miniature panoramas consisting of little objects, diverse materials and colored images of bad taste, representing the thoughts and dreams of a young girl, and each panorama was to be lit by a torch bulb. A small mirror was placed opposite the navel at an angle of forty-five degrees, and the device was operated by a button on the left nipple, which

⁴¹ Ibid., 24.

turned the mirror one sixth of the circumference of the disk.⁴²



Fig. 18 Hans Bellmer, *Die Puppe*, 1934

In her provocative analysis of the linocut, Sykora makes a connection between the panorama disc of Bellmer's doll and the Imperial Panorama, a stereoscope featuring a circular viewing screen in vogue at the beginning of the 20th century in European cities.⁴³ What the disc mechanism designed by Bellmer has in common with a panorama apparatus is that both devices enable the outside viewer to look inside and around, as Sykora explains:

Bellmer reflektiert hier eine Betrachterposition, die auch für seine fotografischen Aufnahmen der ersten Puppe signifikant ist. [...] Vielmehr inszeniert Bellmer in der ersten Puppe deutlich ein Innen und Außen, das der räumlichen Perspektive aus der Mode gekommener Landschafts- und Kaiserpanoramen zu entsprechen scheint. [...] Dem entsprach die Position des Auges im Zentrum der kreisenden Bildertrommel von Bellmers Puppe. [...] Bellmer kombinierte in seiner ersten Puppe die beiden panoramatischen Positionen: die des Einblicks und die der Umsicht.⁴⁴

⁴² Webb, *Death, Desire, and The Doll*, 23-24.

⁴³ See the description of the Imperial Panorama that Walter Benjamin gives in his autobiography entitled *Berlin Childhood around 1900*.

⁴⁴ Sykora, *Unheimliche Paarungen*, 221.

The German scholar goes a step further and compares the mechanism sketched by Bellmer in his diagram with that of a camera: the peephole at the navel recalls the viewfinder while the button situated on the left nipple reminds of the release. With his panorama disc mechanism mirroring the mechanism of a camera, Bellmer reflects on the photographic eye, as Sykora concludes:

Für die Betrachterposition entscheidend scheint mir daher, daß Bellmer mit dem panoramatischen Blick das fotografische Sehen reflektiert: In der Nahsicht, die den Einblick in die Puppe gewährt, wird das Auge entkörperlicht. Das Sehen überbrückt eine materielle Schranke und schlüpft gleichsam durch den Bauchnabel in das Innere der Puppe, um sich dort in der Allschau inszenierter Jungmädchenphantasien zu entgrenzen. In der Fixierung auf das Guckloch als einzigem Ort des Durchblicks wird jedoch die körperlich determinierte Betrachterposition außerhalb der Puppe markiert. Stellen wir in Rechnung, daß uns Bellmer diesen optischen Umgang mit der Puppe nicht unmittelbar erlaubt, sondern nur vermittelt über die Fotografien, so liegt die Analogie zum fotografischen Sehen nahe.⁴⁵

Sykora's analysis convincingly argues that from the early stage of its genesis, Bellmer's doll was made for the camera. That explains why, on the one hand, the artist conceives a doll without organs and instead inserts a mechanism reminiscent of a photographic apparatus, and why, on the other, a trained engineer and illustrator turns to photography and becomes his own doll's photographer. The doll with its panorama disc mechanism mirrors the photographic device used by Bellmer himself while the panoramic view, imagined by the artist at the early stage of the doll's genesis, is replicated in the composition and layout of the ten black and white photographs featured in *Die Puppe*. This is the point Sykora makes when she observes:

Auch der Betrachter der Puppenfotos überwindet optisch die Grenze zum Raum der Puppe. Sein Auge bewegt sich körperlos in den Einzelfotos der Bildserie wie in den Kompartimenten des Panoramas. Die Puppe wird in der Fotografie nicht mehr zum Behälter der Panoramen, sondern zur Bewohnerin einer Vielzahl einzelner Szenarien, die in der Summe erst das eigentliche, fotografische Panorama ergeben. Andererseits erlaubt die Fotografie dem Betrachterblick nur eine individuelle Perspektive auf jedes Bild bzw. lediglich deren summarische Erschließung in der zeitlichen Sukzession. Der Wechsel von einem Abzug zum anderen wiederholt dabei strukturell den Knopfdruck an der Puppenbrust, aber auch das Bestätigen

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 222.

des Auslösers, mit dem Bellmer die Fotos herstellte.⁴⁶

Although the panorama disc mechanism was never completed because Bellmer quickly abandoned the project, his desire for a panoramic view nevertheless persists and to a great extent characterizes the making of his first doll. This interest in ‘seeing all’ (according to the Greek etymology of ‘panorama’) of the inside of the female body explains why the German artist sketches out a *new anatomy* of the female body and creates new orifices giving visual access to anatomy. This explains the presence of images and photographs of a fragmented doll’s body, severed at the joints and lacking limbs, as well as negatives recalling X-rays, meant to show the viewer the depth and hollowness of the doll’s body [Fig. 19 & 20].



Fig. 19 Hans Bellmer, *Die Puppe*, 1934



Fig. 20 Hans Bellmer, *Die Puppe*, 1934

The drawing entitled “Rose ouverte la nuit” is the pendant to the linocut insofar as it illustrates both the exhibitionistic desire of the little girl as well as the voyeuristic desire of the viewer [Fig. 21]. The image depicts a child opening the skin of her torso to reveal a rib

⁴⁶ Sykora, *Unheimliche Paarungen*, 222.

cage and digestive organs. Taylor points out that “if the linocut of the doll’s panorama is an abstracted, depersonalized, reified representation of the female body, this drawing in pencil and gouache relocates the artist’s inquisitive drive in a sensuous, literally visceral realm.”⁴⁷ The main difference between the two sketches lies in the fact that one depicts organs while the other a mechanism. It is also interesting to notice that both the girl and the viewer cast an intrusive gaze into the interior of her body as they get a glimpse of the organs lying hidden beneath the skin, namely that what one normally cannot see with the naked eye or without the help of a machine (x-ray or echography). The title of the drawing is also revealing insofar as the rose is a metaphor of the female genitalia and, in this context, the open rose alludes to an act of defloration. The displacement occurring here from the vulva to the stomach or womb provides evidence of Bellmer’s eagerness to create new orifices and his obsession with the female abdomen as the locus of gestation.⁴⁸



Fig. 21 Hans Bellmer,
Rose ouverte la nuit, 1935/36

⁴⁷ Taylor, *Hans Bellmer*, 28.

⁴⁸ See Susanne Baackmann, “Symptomatic Bodies: Fascism, Gender and Hans Bellmer’s Dolls:” “Yet because the production of the doll is described as emphatically nonsensical and opposed to normalcy, the explanation of the panorama project, namely, the need to utilize the stomach, seems little more than ironic rhetoric, especially when read against the utilitarian concept of the (racially selected) female womb in German fascism.” Barbara Kosta and Helga Kraft, (Ed.), *Writing against Boundaries. Nationality, Ethnicity and Gender in the German-speaking Context* (Amsterdam-New York: Ed. Rodopi 2003), 67.

The lack of narrative and linear progression from skeleton to finished doll that characterizes the ten black and white photographs of *Die Puppe*, follows an artistic agenda that displays the endless possibilities of the doll. In the course of the ten photographs, the doll is being assembled/disassembled and constructed/dismantled under the viewer's eyes, as Sykora observes:

Das heißt, wir haben nur über kurze Bildsequenzen das Angebot einer sukzessiven Einkleidung der Puppe vor uns, um dann in überraschenden Bildwechseln wieder mit deren Entschälung, Zerteilung und Neukombination konfrontiert zu werden. Die brüskten Übergänge von Einblicken in die Mechanik der Puppe zu pygmalionischen Verlebendigungsstrategien, die sie mit Muskulatur, Epidermis, Haar und verführerischem Blick ausstatten, und wieder zurück zur Demontage in Einzelteile, die wie anatomische Präparate auf dem Reißbrett ausgebreitet werden, bestimmen eine fotografische Strategie, die die Konstruktion der Puppe zu keinem Ende kommen läßt.⁴⁹

Bellmer's interest in photography for the medium's exponential prospects, his desire for a panoramic view of the doll's internal body, his obsession with dis/assembling the doll's body paired with a fascination for its endless permutations, forecast the genesis of the second doll, the so-called ball jointed doll of 1935. Thus, the idea of multiplication and permutation is in gestation and the first doll is pregnant with the concept of the anagram, a key to Bellmer's doll project.

Eighteen photographs of Bellmer's doll were printed in the 6th issue, dated December 5, 1934, of the international Surrealist Magazine *Minotaure*, published by Albert Skira and André Tiriade, under the title: *Variations sur le montage d'une mineure articulée* (*Variations on the Assemblage of an Articulated Minor*) [Fig. 22]. Judging from the title, the Surrealists stress the transformation as well as the mechanical qualities and possibilities of Bellmer's doll as the terms "variation," "montage" and "articulée" suggest. The publication of these photographs – largely thanks to Ursula Naguschewski, Bellmer's cousin, who approached Paul Eluard and André Breton with a doll's photograph – not only gave Bellmer's doll

⁴⁹ Sykora, *Unheimliche Paarungen*, 223-224.

exposure, but made possible his entry into the Surrealist movement.

Pointing out the similarities between the doll and the Minotaur, the Surrealist magazine's title and emblem – both figures are hybrid – Lichtenstein explains the enthusiastic reception of Bellmer's work in the Surrealist publication through the fact that “the unsettling mixture of human, animal, and automatic qualities in Bellmer's photographs and their psychological charge worked well in the context of the magazine.”⁵⁰ Webb offers another type of explanation for the celebration of Bellmer's doll among the Surrealists when he claims that “Bellmer's doll is [...] the ideal Surrealist object: the child's plaything is indeed repossessed, but the childhood world of subterranean wonders and amoral forces is seen in relation to decidedly adult forms of desire and revolt.”⁵¹



Fig. 22 Hans Bellmer, *La poupée*, in *Minotaure*, 1934

⁵⁰Lichtenstein, *Behind Closed Doors*, 44.

⁵¹Webb, *Death, Desire, and The Doll*, 32.

Les Jeux de la poupée (1938/1949)

Both stimulated by his encounter with French Surrealists writers such as Paul Eluard and André Breton during his trip to Paris early in 1935, and dissatisfied by the anatomical limitations of his first doll, Bellmer started working on his second doll with this assistance of his brother Fritz. Webb recalls:

Bellmer's contact with the Surrealists gave him the necessary confidence to continue the work he has begun with *Die Puppe*. The more he considered the photographs, the less satisfied he became with what he had achieved. The immobility of the Doll's waist in particular had severely limited the opportunities of metamorphosis, which she embodied. The inflexibility prevented the full realization of the dreams and fantasies for which she was meant to be 'the solution.'⁵²

The epiphany in the making of the second doll is related to a visit to the Kaiser Friedrich Museum in Berlin in the company of his friend, the renowned doll-maker Lotte Pritzel. There, Bellmer discovered a pair of sixteenth-century articulated wooden adult doll from the circle of Albrecht Dürer in the museum's collection [Fig. 23 & 24]. These Renaissance dolls, whose body was articulated around a sphere formed by the stomach, "could be manipulated into various poses by means of moveable ball joints at the waist,



Fig. 23 Gliederpuppe, 1525



Fig. 24 Gliedermann, 1525

⁵² Ibid., 47.

hips, knees, ankles, shoulders, elbows, wrists, even the knuckles of the fingers and toes” explains Taylor.⁵³ According to Webb, “Bellmer had already experimented with wooden ball joints for the thighs of his [first] doll, but here in the Kaiser Friedrich Museum, he realized that the stomach sphere was the solution to his problem.”⁵⁴

The doll’s abdomen remains at the epicenter of Bellmer’s concern even though there is a notable shift in perspective: henceforth, the desire for a panoramic view is no longer located within the doll’s body nor is it sustained by its mechanized belly. Instead, the doll’s ball-jointed stomach sphere is now the pivot of this desire for a panoramic view directed at the doll’s limbs, as Sykora points out:

An die Stelle des Panoramas der ersten Puppe, jenem Punkt des Einblicks von außen nach innen und der phantastischen Allschau, tritt nun die zentrale Kugel des Kardangelenks, um das die Gliedmaßen der zweiten Puppe in unendlicher Variationsbreite zu kreisen vermögen.⁵⁵

Since the first doll was pregnant with the second, already carrying the ball-jointed one in its mechanized belly, Bellmer logically used the body of the former to construct the latter. Taylor explains:

Recycling the head and hand from the first doll, Bellmer produced arms, four legs, four round stylized breasts, three pelvises, an upper torso, and a spherical belly. Accessories for this doll included a large hair bow, velvet choker, two wigs (one blonde, one brunette) and a scrappy black toupee, long hose, white anklets, and two pairs of Mary Janes.⁵⁶

However, a different technique was used this time for the construction of the second doll, as Bellmer was more concerned with a naturalistic resemblance of the doll’s body [Fig. 25 & 26]. “Bellmer would make a mixture of tissue paper and strong glue which hardened when dry so that it could be worked with tools and then painted to resemble flesh” explains Webb before adding that “what became of the torso with its panorama is

⁵³ Taylor, *Hans Bellmer*, 71.

⁵⁴ Webb, *Death, Desire, and The Doll*, 47.

⁵⁵ Sykora, *Unheimliche Paarungen*, 226.

⁵⁶ Taylor, *Hans Bellmer*, 73.

not known.”⁵⁷ Like for the first doll, Bellmer makes use of the camera but with a major difference: this time around, his intention is less to document the various stages of the de/construction of his doll than to stage the games he plays with his doll. Commenting on his own doll project, Bellmer states his intentions: “I am going to construct an artificial girl with anatomical possibilities which are capable of re-creating the heights of passion even to inventing new desires.”⁵⁸ Thus, the second ball-jointed doll came into being to fulfill the artist’s expectations, i.e. to display “anatomical possibilities” and sustain “new desires.” Webb writes that “the new construction enabled Bellmer to make good the deficiencies of the old: the central ball-joint enabled the Doll to go far beyond the barrow limits of naturalistic representations.”⁵⁹ Aside from the doll’s anatomical enhancement obtained through the use of ball joints, the novelty of the second doll lies in the shift in paradigm: the double vision is no longer achieved through the lens of the camera but through the body of the doll itself. The doll is no longer regarded as a metaphor of the double – as this was the case with the first doll ; it now embodies the double, with its double symmetrical pair of legs and pelvis. Through the making of the second doll, the so-called ball-jointed doll, Bellmer continues and expands his exploration of a double vision of the body.



Fig. 25 Hans Bellmer, *La poupée*, 1935



Fig. 26 Hans Bellmer, *La poupée*, 1935

⁵⁷ Webb, *Death, Desire, and The Doll*, 47-48.

⁵⁸ Webb, *Death, Desire, and The Doll*, 7.

⁵⁹ Webb, *Death, Desire, and The Doll*, 48.

Encouraged by the positive response he received from the Paris-based Surrealists on his first series of photographs of the first doll, Bellmer published the series of photographs of the second doll in the 1936 eighth and 1937 tenth issues of *Minotaure* as well as in a 1936 issue of *Cahiers d'Art* entirely devoted to the Surrealist Object.⁶⁰ Shortly after moving from Berlin to Paris in the aftermath of his wife's death from tuberculosis in February 1938, Bellmer started a collaboration with Surrealist poet Paul Eluard on a book project dedicated to the doll: Eluard selected fourteen photographs of Bellmer's second doll and for each wrote a corresponding prose poem. Bellmer wrote an introductory text in German entitled "Das Kugelgelenk." Gallery owner and art critic Christian Zervos planned to publish Bellmer's fourteen photographs and essay together with Eluard's fourteen poems under the title *Jeux vagues de la poupée* ("Vague Games of the Doll") but with the outbreak of war with Germany publication plans were aborted.⁶¹ Bellmer managed nevertheless to publish privately a little book including his photographs and Eluard's poems under the title *Poupée II (Doll II)* in 1939. The similarities with the 1934 publication of *Die Puppe* are striking: from the small and limited edition's format, to its title booklet *Poupée II*, and the introductory essay by Bellmer, the new publication sounds like a rehashing of the previous one. Yet, this this duplication, is precisely what Bellmer explores in the photographs of his doll. By using Eluard's poems as "illustrations" for his photographs, not only does he invert the relation between text and image – since the text illustrates the image and not the other way around – but he also creates a double image of his doll, rendered by both the poems and the photographs. The book was finally published in November 1949 in Paris under the title *Les jeux de la poupée* ("The Games of The Doll") with Bellmer's introduction, "Notes au sujet de la jointure à boule" ("Notes on the Subject of the Ball Joint") illustrated with six drawings and diagrams plus fifteen hand-colored photographs of the second doll and Paul Eluard's fourteen prose poems, and with a title-page whose letters Bellmer designed himself.⁶² "The

60 For more detailed information, see Webb, *Death, Desire, and The Doll*, 50.

61 Ibid., 143.

62 Ibid., 143.

title of the publication is significant the doll is a link with the games Bellmer played as a child, and is now the pivot around which he will play his adult games” recalls Webb.⁶³ Originally, Bellmer had written his essay in German under the title “Das Kugelgelenk” in 1938 before revising and translating it into French in 1946 for the publication of the book. Bellmer’s “Notes on the Subject of the Ball Joint”, despite their pseudoscientific claim are far from being logical, let alone rational, and as such must be considered as a Surrealist poetic introduction to the photographs of *Les jeux de la poupée*. That is the point that art historian Henry Okun makes in his reading of Bellmer’s essay, when he states that “a complete and absolute correlation between Bellmer’s ideas about the joint, the anatomy, and the Doll is impossible,” before coming to the conclusion that “if Bellmer’s ideas do not explain the Doll nor at times even fit her, it is because the doll is not a scientific creation but a poetic one.”⁶⁴

Describing both the content and the structure of Bellmer’s poetic introduction, Taylor writes:

“Notes on the Subject of the Ball Joint” is a perplexingly byzantine inquiry into the provocative nature of the ‘provocative object’ with no discussion of the formal elements or iconography of the doll photographs or of the technical means by which the artist had constructed the ball joint, so literally central to the permutations of the second doll. Included in the essay are a lengthy, pseudoscientific discussion of mechanical forces and minor feats of engineering, from Biblical time to Renaissance to the present; a panoply of heterogeneous examples from Hellenistic sculpture, children toys (the top and diabolos), optical devices, and mathematical equations.⁶⁵

Since the Surrealists valued games for both their recreational and creative potential, it is not surprising that Bellmer’s essay opens with the notion of the game as “experimental poetry” and the toy as a “provocative object.” “the game belongs to the category “experimental poetry”. If one remembers essentially the game’s method of provocation,

⁶³ Ibid., 50.

⁶⁴ Henry Okun, *The Surrealist Object*. Ph.D dissertation, New York University, 1981. Cited by Taylor, *Hans Bellmer*, 111.

⁶⁵ Taylor, *Hans Bellmer*, 99.

the toy will present itself in the form of a provocative object.”⁶⁶

Bellmer's wording is of particular interest here since both phrases “experimental poetry” and “provocative object” implicitly allude to the doll: the doll is “experimental poetry” in the etymological sense (the noun derives from the Greek verb “poiein” to make, create). The making of the doll originates as an experiment that quickly turns into a game as illustrated in both publications *Die Puppe* and *Les jeux de la poupée*. Bellmer proceeds with his introduction and after laying out the characteristics of the so-called “best toy,” he explains why he regards the doll as such:

The best toy will consequently be the one that knows nothing of the support of predetermined functions, the one that, rich in applications and accidental probabilities like the most worthless of rag dolls, will confront the outside world to provoke in it, here and there, passionately, those responses to any anticipation: the sudden images of the You.

For such a doll, full of affective contents but suspected of only being a representation and a fictitious reality, to seek out in the external world, in the shock of encounters the unquestionable proofs of its existence, it is necessary, besides, that this external world, the tree, the staircase, or the chair, suspected of being only perception, demonstrate what the I has gathered there of the You. In a word, it is necessary that an amalgam be formed of the objective reality that is the chair and the subjective reality that is the doll, an amalgam endowed with a superior reality since it is objective and subjective at once.⁶⁷

The objects mentioned here, which are representative of the “external world,” such as “the tree, the staircase, and the chair” are all to be found in his photographs from the series *Les jeux de la poupée* where they are mainly used as supporting props or settings [Fig. 27]. The notion of “amalgam” Bellmer introduces here fits the doll for its double characterization as “best toy” and “provocative object” insofar as it conjoins the objective and subjective reality described by the author in the essay. Bellmer pursues his explanation of why he views the amalgamating doll as the “provocative object” par excellence:

Thus the role of the provocative object becomes clear. Whether it occupies any place at all on the nearest or farthest see-saws of the confusion between the animate

⁶⁶ Hans Bellmer, “Notes on the Subject of the Ball Joint”, 1938. In Taylor, *Hans Bellmer*, “Appendix C,” 212.

⁶⁷ Bellmer, “Notes on the Subject of the Ball Joint,” 212.

and the inanimate, it will be a matter of the personified thing, mobile, passive, adaptable, and incomplete; it will be a matter in the end – within the quite broad limits where the principle of the doll or the articulated object seems to fit these requirements – of the mechanical factor of its mobility, of the JOINT.⁶⁸

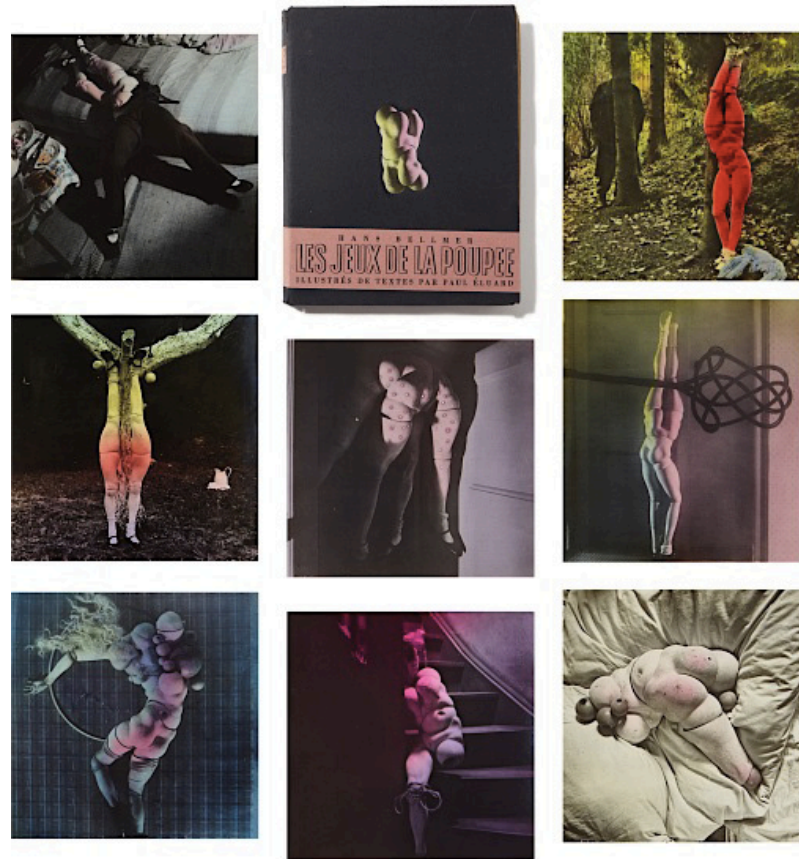


Fig. 27 Hans Bellmer, *Les jeux de la poupée*, 1949

Bellmer establishes a link between the toy doll and the structure of the joint since both are capable of joining together what is by nature disjointed, namely “the animate and the inanimate.” And since the doll is situated at the juncture between the object and the subject, the “I” and the “You,” only the structure of the joint can render the flexibility and mobility of the latter, and convey the conjunction of the I and the You. In short, the joint must be understood as the metaphor of the doll in its conjoining of the disjointed. This explains the great significance of the ball-jointed doll for Bellmer insofar as it is the hinge of his artistic work and the sole object with which his essays, photographs, sculptures,

⁶⁸ Ibid., 212.

drawings, and sketches are connected.

The most striking part about Bellmer's poetic essay is that he expresses an obsession with the double by introducing the motif of the mirror. He describes an experiment with a mirror in which he explores the symmetry between the image of a naked body and its reflection in the mirror:

In order to judge, one has only to place an unframed mirror at right angles to the photograph of a nude body and move it slowly, keeping it in a perpendicular position. The visible part of the image and its reflection in the mirror form a whole. [...] the mirror simultaneously cuts and divides into halves, it creates antagonism but its movement resolves the contradiction, as the whip does to the top, and surmounts it in favor of a third reality.⁶⁹

Bellmer recognizes the double-edged nature of the mirror since it splits and fuses the body at the same time, and as a result creates a distorted, anamorphic image of the body. That anamorphosis of the body is namely what the artist examines in the various configurations and permutations of the doll's body parts he captures in the photographs of *Les jeux de la poupée*. One of the photographs of the series does replicate the experiment with the mirror narrated by Bellmer in his essay, underscoring the doubling mirror-like effect at work here between image and text [Fig. 28].



Fig. 28 Hans Bellmer, *La poupée*, 1935

⁶⁹ Bellmer, "Notes on the Subject of the Ball Joint," 216.

The black and white photograph features the four-legged doll laying on a wooden floor indoors and placed in front a mirror. With two pairs of legs centered around the sphere of the stomach, the unclothed ball-jointed doll splays its lower limbs, equipped with white socks and black Mary-Jane shoes, and leans the left foot against the wall and the right one on the mirror. In the mere act of touching the surface of the mirror with its right foot, the doll connects, i.e. unites with its reflection, extending the shape of its body through symmetry and creates a new body image as a result. What makes this photograph so gripping, though, is the position of the doll's naked body combined with the presence of a mirror: the exhibitionistic pose of the doll spreading its two pairs of legs, one in front of the mirror and the other in front of the viewer/voyeur, causes a double take since he is confronted with the double image of female genitalia from a duplicated body.

As one might expect, Bellmer pursues his exploration of the idea of duplication and combines it with the notion of re/displacement since “for Bellmer, the replacement of one body part by another constitutes a doubling” observes Lichtenstein.⁷⁰ Toward the end of the “Notes on the Ball Joint,” Bellmer develops his theory of the reversibility of the body and the displacement of its center of gravity from one body part to another:

[...] the body, like the dream, can capriciously displace the center of gravity of its images. Inspired by a curious spirit of contradiction, it superimposes on some what it has taken from others, the image of the leg, for example, on that of the arm, that of the sex onto the armpit, in order to make “condensations,” “proofs of analogies,” “ambiguities,” “word games,” strange anatomical “calculations of probability.”⁷¹

“The theory underpins for Bellmer the multiplication and interchangeability of body parts in the freakish female anatomies seen in his sculptural assemblages, photographs of the second doll, and much of his later graphic work” writes Taylor.⁷² At this early stage, Bellmer toys with the idea of an articulation between body and language. Indeed, the notion of “word games,” and especially anagrams is already taking shape in his mind and

⁷⁰ Lichtenstein, *Behind Closed Doors*, 54.

⁷¹ Bellmer, “Notes on the Subject of the Ball Joint,” 217.

⁷² Taylor, *Hans Bellmer*, 99.

is soon about to be realized.⁷³

The fifteen photographs featured in *Les jeux de la poupée* were all hand-tinted with a small flat brush and aniline dyes, making the doll appear very artificial and giving the photos the look of turn-of-the-century postcards” Lichtenstein recalls.⁷⁴ Elaborating on the idea of violence and abuse, Taylor emphasizes the fact that “these settings present a clandestine, malevolent world in which the doll is variously bound, beaten, tied to a tree, hanged on a hook, or taken apart and strewn on a stairway.”⁷⁵ One must acknowledge that Bellmer was particularly inventive in his orchestration of light and shadow in this series and the stark chiaroscuro greatly contributed to the highly dramatic effect of the photographs. Taylor stresses the artist’s creativity when she observes that “[he] arranged the doll in domestic interiors that include a bedroom, kitchen, and stairway, as well as a basement; he photographed the object both in and out of doors at his parents’ country house in Gleiwitz.”⁷⁶ In these photographs, the ball-jointed doll advances as the “provocative object” par excellence: constantly thrown in the way of familiar domestic settings indoors and out, the doll nevertheless disrupts this familiarity, conjuring up the Freudian uncanny, and provokes the malaise of the viewer.⁷⁷ That is also the point French psychoanalyst Célia Masson makes in her case study of Bellmer’s doll when she stresses the collision of two disjointed images and realities in her analysis of the photographs of *Les jeux de la poupée*:

L’objet est dispose dans des espaces souvent familiers, tels que les chambres, la cuisine, l’escalier, le hall d’entrée ou encore le bois et crée ainsi une image qui mêle habilement l’ordinaire à l’insolite; la poupée ainsi mise en espace brise la scène quotidienne que le regard connaît trop bien, et impose cette ‘tâche’ qui sollicite à

⁷³ Bellmer develops his theory of the reversibility of the body and its analogy with language in a major study entitled “Petite anatomie de l’image” (“Anatomy of the Image”), published in 1957.

⁷⁴ Lichtenstein, *Behind Closed Doors*, 53.

For a more detailed description and analysis of the photographs, see Webb, *Death, Desire, and the Doll*, 54: “The colors are mostly pale and delicate – purples and mauves, blues and greens, oranges and yellows – and applied so as to create an artificial rather than a natural effect. The result intensifies the atmosphere of each image, so that the doll can appear more vulnerable, the setting more threatening. The addition of the color heightens the pathos of the image, so that the doll excites genuine pity, and the sadistic overtones, though certainly still present, are considerably muted.”

⁷⁵ Taylor, *Hans Bellmer*, 74.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 74.

⁷⁷ See Sigmund Freud, “Das Unheimliche” (“The Uncanny”), 1919.

repenser l'image.⁷⁸

One black and white, uncolored photograph, clearly from the series *Les jeux de la poupée* (although it was not included in the 1949 publication) illustrates the collision between disconnected images Masson discusses, as well as the encounter with the Freudian uncanny [Fig. 29]. The photograph represents a scene of familiar domesticity and showcases an imposing, massive wooden kitchen buffet with drawers and open doors that reveal kitchen- and tableware placed on upper shelves, that takes the whole picture frame. Amid these kitchen articles, arched over the buffet, stands the four-legged doll, wearing white socks and black Mary-Jane shoes. The whiteness of its two pairs of legs echoes the white tableware, more generally the doll blends into the picture of the kitchen cabinet while completely disrupting the image of domesticity. With the ball-jointed doll, Bellmer connects two disconnected images, namely a banal and familiar piece of furniture and an anarmorphic, unusual body shape.



Fig. 30 Hans Bellmer, *La poupée*, 1935

⁷⁸ Céline Masson, *La fabrique de la poupée chez Hans Bellmer. Le "faire-oeuvre perversif", une étude clinique de l'objet* (Paris: Ed. L'Harmattan, 2000), 170.

The fifteen photographs of *Les jeux de la poupée* must be regarded as an application in images of the theory of the body's reversibility and the displacement of its center of gravity from one body part to another. While the images showcase Bellmer's obsessive investigation of the duplication and permutation of body parts as well as the reconfiguration of his ball-jointed doll, they also present different variations on the motif of the double: the autoerotic double, the viewer/voyeur as double, the hysterical double, the Christ-like double, and at last, the hermaphrodite double.

The first two photographs opening the 1949 edition of *Les jeux de la poupée* – the first one is the frontispiece and the other is the third – place an autoerotic body at their center. Both images display the doll in an almost identical pose and setting: its bare body is crouching in a wicker-backed chair and leaning its back against a wall [Fig. 30 & 31]. In both images, the doll, wearing a bow in its hair, is hiding half of its face behind its enormous breasts



Fig. 30 Hans Bellmer, *La poupée*, 1935



Fig. 31 Hans Bellmer, *La poupée*, 1935

Placed at the center of the image lies the sphere of the stomach in alignment with the oval of the face is surrounded by the two pelvises, the upper one, twisted upside down to represent breasts while the lower one shows upper thighs. The main difference between the images lies in the color and shadow effect displayed. In the black and white photograph, the doll, wearing a brunette wig with bangs and a large white bow on top, leans with its back against wallpaper with a flower motif, bathed in a dramatic light-and-shadow effect. In the sepia tone photograph, the doll's uncombed blond hair is adorned with a ribbon in the shape of a bow and it leans with its back against a plain, blank wall. In both images, the doll, while hiding parts of its face, displays its curvaceous, deformed, and amputated body: lacking arms and legs, the doll's body consists of round, ball-like breasts and hips, framing a round, globe-shaped, pregnant belly. Upon closer inspection, the pregnant belly looks like an eyeball (the navel is reminiscent of an iris), and it echoes the doll's only eye discernable on its face. Bellmer here duplicates and rearranges body parts such as breasts, buttocks, and hips while reordering organs of sight as the belly becomes an eyeball.

This photograph is in fact another variation of the diagram of the first doll Bellmer executed and in whose stomach he had placed a panorama disc that could be viewed through the doll's navel. The artist pursues his exploration of female anatomy and continues to locate organs of sight in the region of the stomach, both as an orifice granting access into the interior of the body as well as an eyeball staring at the viewer. Thus, Bellmer provides his doll with a hybrid at its center, both abdomen and eyeball, half organ and half body part, capable of penetrating and being penetrated, ingesting the viewer's gaze while looking him straight in the eye. Crouching on a chair, offering its voluptuous naked body to the viewer, and exhibiting its genitals, the doll, with a blank eye and reversed pupil, hides its face behind an enormous breast. Bellmer stages here a scene of exhibitionism – the primacy of the organs of sight underlined by the navel/eye socket as orifice – and onanism as if the flexibility, plasticity, and reversibility of the doll's ball-jointed body were the key to the making of an autoerotic body. An autoerotic body is by definition a body that objectifies

parts of itself, and, in doing so, duplicates itself: the ball-jointed doll, at the very juncture between desiring subject and desired object, gives pleasure to and receives pleasure from its own body. Through the doll's ball-jointed body, Bellmer creates a link between automatism and autoerotism and reveals the doll as the ultimate desiring machine: a mechanical body created out of desire, that arouses and produces desire on autopilot.⁷⁹

The seventh hand-colored photograph of *Les Jeux de la poupée*, while being one of the few representing a scene outdoors in the woods, stages the viewer/voyeur as a double [Fig. 32]. The four-legged doll, stripped of its clothes and wearing only white socks and black

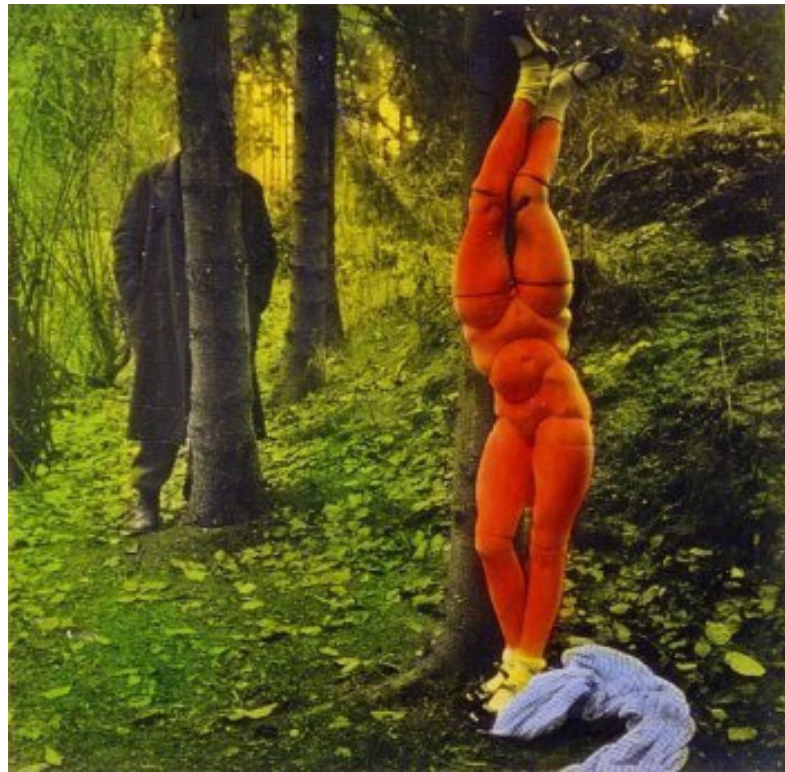


Fig. 32 Hans Bellmer, *La poupée*, 1935

Mary Janes, is aligned against a tree, with a garment lying at its feet, while a man hiding behind a tree is spying on the doll. The black and white photograph has been hand-colored: the foliage has been rendered green while the doll's body has been colored reddish pink, its

⁷⁹ See Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983).

socks painted yellow, and the garment light blue. The contrast between the man dressed in a black coat and hiding from the gaze and the reddish pink colored doll exhibiting its bare body to the gaze is quite striking. The contrast is unmistakable, yet a closer look reveals a symmetry upon which the image is constructed. The man behind a tree is symmetrical to the doll behind/in front of another one, his truncated body echoing hers, and the tree trunk repeated twice. What most scholars fail to notice in this photograph is that the body of the voyeur also undergoes transformations similar to that of the doll: that is, he has a headless torso, two arms along the waist, and two legs, and his dark, amorphous shape is reminiscent of the double-legged doll. The presence of three trees creates a triangle in the woods, or rather a triangular structure of which the viewer is an integral part. The third tree is in fact intended for the viewer since it is situated in the middle of the image, about as far back as the viewer is in the front. Whether the viewer is the unwilling witness of the hide-and-seek game the man and the doll play, both hiding behind/in front of the tree, or whether he is a player participating in this game – the doll is caught between two gazes, hides from the man in dark to fully disclose itself to the viewer – he nevertheless takes on a voyeuristic position.⁸⁰

The photograph is on many levels a complex image that displays the doubling of the double while at the same time problematizing the act of looking: on the one hand, the viewer looks both at the doll's bare body and the man dressed in black and he is being looked at in return by both of them, which sketches out a symmetrical structure of the gaze; on the other, the viewer watches a man who is hiding his gaze from the doll and him as well as a doll deprived of organs of sight. Thus, it is not surprising that the bare body of the doll, placed in front of a tree trunk in the foreground, hand-colored in red, and consisting of two Siamese twin-like pairs of legs with pelvis and buttocks, fixed around the central ball of the abdomen, epitomizes this doubling of the double since these four legs

⁸⁰ The way Bellmer constructs the image and stages the exchange of gazes between onlookers reminds us of an episode in the Old Testament, "Susanna at her bath" also known as "Susanna and the elders," in which a fair Hebrew wife was falsely accused by elderly lecherous voyeurs. See for example the painting *Susann and the Elders* by Tintoretto (1555), by Rubens (1608), Artemisia Gentileschi (1610), Rembrandt (1647), and Tiepolo (1722) just to name a few old masters.

and buttocks are symmetrical. “One of Bellmer’s favorite permutations of the doll was the Siamese twinlike arrangements of the four legs, sporting their little girls’ shoes and socks, and two of the pelvises around the central ball of the stomach, eliminating altogether the upper torso, arms, and head” recalls Taylor.⁸¹

Photograph fourteen, which closes *Les Jeux de la poupée*, showcases the hysterical double in the shape of a four-legged doll, sporting white socks and black Mary Janes, suspended from the ceiling and attached to a door angle indoors [Fig. 33]. Bellmer retouched and



Fig. 33 Hans Bellmer, *La poupée*, 1935

hand-colored the image to make the surface of his doll look as though it were covered with pink dots. These colored spots make the doll appear as a dangling octopus with tentacles featuring suckers, as Webb observes: “Perhaps, the most disturbing transformation shows her suspended from the stomach in a shadowy doorway, her four legs dropping like the tentacles of a monstrous octopus and adorned with dozens of pink painted nipples.”⁸² As this quote suggests, the polymorphous body of the doll leaves room for a myriad of

⁸¹ Taylor, *Hans Bellmer*, 73.

⁸² Webb, *Death, Desire, and the Doll*, 48.

interpretations and projections on the viewer's end: according to Webb, the doll's legs have turned into tentacles and its open sores have become erogenous protuberances. As a side note, it is worth noting that the specificity of the octopus' tentacles lies in their ability to grow back if cut off. Thus, the dangling legs as tentacles already include the idea of proliferation and multiplication of body parts, an idea that Bellmer toys with in the various configurations of his doll. The arched position of this erogenous double-legged body brings to mind another type of image, namely the staged photographs of female hysterics recorded by French psychologist Jean-Martin Charcot at the Paris Salpêtrière hospital between 1875-1880 [Fig. 34].



Fig. 34 Illustration of Hysteria, 1885

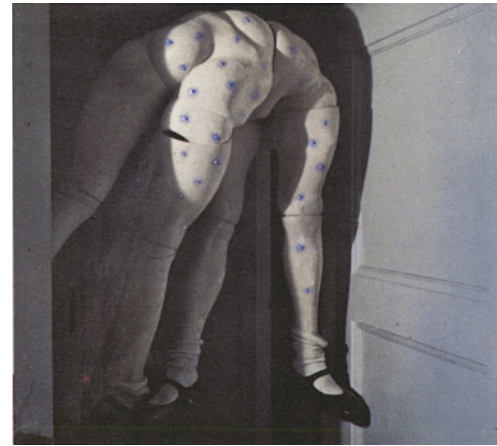


Fig. 35 Hans Bellmer, *La poupée*, 1935

In many regards, Bellmer's image of the four-legged doll and Charcot's image of the hysterical arched back bear many similarities [Fig. 34 & 35]. Lichtenstein points out that "Bellmer's fascination with hysteria was shared by other Surrealists and may have also been influenced by them," but I argue that his fascination stems from an artistic agenda of which the ball-jointed doll is the focus. As many have observed, Lichtenstein reports that "the word hysteria derives from the Greek *hyster* (womb) and was used in ancient Greece to designate a pathology presumed to result from a displaced or 'wandering' womb."⁸³ It goes without saying that the mere idea of bodily displacement strongly resonates with Bellmer's

⁸³ Lichtenstein, *Behind Closed Doors*, 108.

exploration of the body's interchangeability and reversibility in his essay "Notes on the Ball Joint" and photographs of *Les Jeux de la poupée*. Writing on the topic of hysteria in his booklet on artist Louise Bourgeois, French art historian Jean Clair notes: "L'hystérique défie les lois de l'anatomie. Elle crée un corps inoui qui semble pure manifestation du langage, pur effet de la parole, et qui pourtant, produit des effets physiques."⁸⁴ Clair's comment is significant in the link it provides between the hysterical body the ball-jointed doll. Indeed, Bellmer intends to push the limits of human anatomy in order to reveal what he coined the "physical unconscious," namely "a kind of kinesthetic revelation of the relationship between bodily sensations and psychological states" according to Lichtenstein who adds that "like the outward symptoms of hysteria, the physical unconscious expresses a coded body language that must be deciphered."⁸⁵

Photograph eleven, which represents two pairs of legs, wearing white socks and black Mary Janes, attached vertically on either side of a tree in the woods, suggests the figure of a Christ-like double [Fig. 36]. Eyeballs, hanging from both sides of the tree trunk



Fig. 34 Hans Bellmer, *La poupée*, 1935

⁸⁴Jean Clair, *Cinq notes sur l'oeuvre de Louise Bourgeois* (Paris: Ed. Jean Clair et l'Échoppe, 1999), 20.

⁸⁵Lichtenstein, *Behind Closed Doors*, 120.

and placed at ankle height, can be spotted on both ends as well as a white pitcher in the background in the far right.

This photograph, staging a scene of physical abuse and bodily mutilation, is one of the most sadistic and violent images in the series. There is no question that it depicts a scene of sacrifice, even martyrdom. One can hardly fail to notice the intimate connection between Bellmers' photographs from *Les jeux de la poupée* and religious iconography with which the artist was more than familiar. For example, the photographs numbered I to XIV conjure up the fourteen Stations of the Cross depicting Christ's suffering and dying on the cross. Significantly, Station XI represents a scene of crucifixion in which Jesus is nailed to the cross. But among the numerous religious images depicting a crucifixion, one in particular had a long-lasting effect on Bellmer, namely the Isenheim altarpiece (1506-1515) by Matthias Grünewald. In 1932 Bellmer and his tubercular wife Margarethe went on a pilgrimage to Colmar to admire the Isenheim altarpiece. Years later, Bellmer would write in a letter to the art historian Patrick Waldberg:

Think of the Magdalene in tears, kneeling at the feet of the pale figure on the cross: in her grief, she wrings not only her hands but also her head, her hair, the rags that cover her body and even her toes. When the reaction or gesture of a person does not find expression in the whole of their body, whether in a contemporary photograph or a masterpiece of art, I am no longer interested.⁸⁶

There are many striking similarities between Grünewald's central panel and photograph eleven of *Les Jeux de la poupée* [Fig 37 & 38]. Reading Bellmer's four-legged doll in connection with the Isenheim altarpiece, Taylor observes:

The 1935 photographs (of which there are several versions) of the four-legged doll against an isolated tree appear to be a kind of reprise of this favorite icon by Bellmer, with its dark background, dramatic chiaroscuro, emphatic frontality, and symmetry. The arcing tree branches in the photograph echo the bowed arms of Grünewald's Christ, while the detached, dangling breasts of the doll double for disembodied eyeballs, and a chopped-off limb at the crotch of the tree, looking very much like an outstretched neck from which the head has been severed, underscores

⁸⁶ Ibid., 85.

the mutilated condition of the body itself.⁸⁷



Fig. 37 Hans Bellmer, *La poupée*, 1935

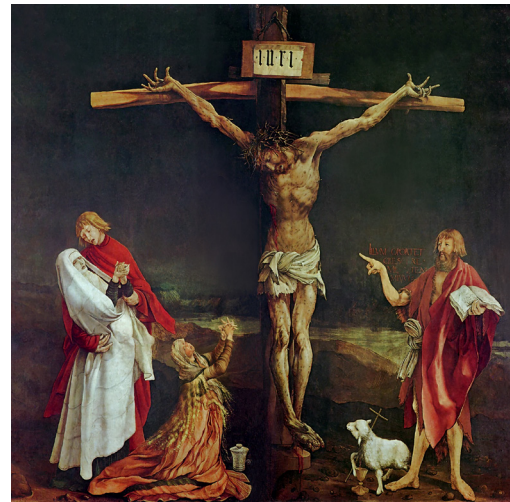


Fig. 38 Matthias Grünewald,
Isenheim Altar Piece, 1512 - 1516

Read side-by-side, Grünewald's central panel and Bellmer's photograph bear a striking resemblance. For example, the disproportionate body of Christ with his elongated bowed arms echoes the branches of the tree against which a doll is attached in one photograph. In Bellmer, the white pitcher of water, located in the background on the right hand side, has now replaced the figure of John the Baptist who is pointing at the open wound of Christ. Far from solely representing a surreal irruption of domesticity within an exterior nature setting, the pitcher of water, which stands in the place of the Baptist, takes on both the silhouette and the function of the prophet. Although the pitcher directs the viewer's attention to the four-legged doll, it no longer points at a whole but a fragmented, not a human but an artificial, not a male but a female body. Indeed, the contour of these two pairs of elongated legs, positioned in parallel in front of a tree, sketch out the shape of a vulva. Not only has the open wound in Grünewald's painting become female genitalia in Bellmer's photograph but also the bleeding wound has been healed with the vulva featuring a scab in the form of the tree bark.

⁸⁷ Taylor, *Hans Bellmer*, 92-93.

One can also read photograph fourteen in connection with Grünewald's center panel: the blisters and sores covering the four-legged doll make an explicit reference to Grünewald's Christ, whose torso and limbs are also covered with pockmarks [Fig. 39 & 40]. The opening



Fig. 40 Hans Bellmer, *La poupée*, 1935



Fig. 41 Matthias Grünewald, Isenheim Altarpiece (Detail) 1512-1516

at the joint of the upper thigh of the front leg also evokes the bleeding wound of Christ. Taylor makes a similar observation when she writes: “In one instance Bellmer applied hand-colored pink or purple spots to the buttocks and thighs of the creature, giving the appearance of measles or boils.”⁸⁸ The marks of illness covering the doll's body in these photographs strongly resonate with Bellmer's biography whose wife Margarethe suffered from tuberculosis to which she succumbed in 1938.

And yet, I argue that Bellmer's investment in the Isenheim altarpiece goes beyond mere art historical erudition, as there is a strong connection between the altar and the ball-jointed doll [Fig. 39]. The Isenheim altarpiece is in reality a complex structure, consisting of two sets of movable wings with four layers of painted surfaces and a shrine of three

⁸⁸ Taylor, *Hans Bellmer*, 84.

carved wood statues of saints. Among the six wings painted by Grünewald and attached to the altarpiece, four are hinged and painted on both sides while the other two are static and painted solely on one side. This folding structure makes it possible to change the display of the image according to the calendar of religious holidays since the altar offers three different views: a Crucifixion, a Nativity, and the carved statues of patron saints.⁸⁹ The Isenheim altarpiece was executed for the hospital chapel of Saint Anthony's Monastery in Isenheim, in Alsace, France, which was noted for their care of plague sufferers as well as their treatment of skin diseases, such as ergotism. That explains why the depiction of the crucified Christ is pitted with plague-type sores as a means to provide solace to hospital patients and exemplify the suffering of the Savior.

A closer look into the structure of the Isenheim altarpiece suggests that the paintings by Grünewald were far more than simply an aesthetic influence on Bellmer, a fact overlooked by the current scholarship on the German Surrealist artist so far. In fact, the movable, folding structure of the altarpiece offering various combinations and enabling the display of three different views, is already reminiscent of the panorama disc fitted inside the stomach of the first doll, but above all recalls the anatomical possibilities of the ball-jointed doll and the constant rearrangement of its body parts. The history of the altarpiece as “dissecta membra” ultimately reassembled – “the altar was carelessly dismembered [during the French Revolution] in order to save it from destruction” notes Burkhard – must have fascinated the German artist who joins and disjoins his ball-jointed doll *ad infinitum*.⁹⁰ Clearly, Bellmer learned from Grünewald's altarpiece about disproportionate and distorted bodies. A closer look at the central panel reveals bodies deformed by suffering, be it physical

89 The first view with closed wings depicts a gloomy Crucifixion scene, flanked by Saint Sebastian on the right and Saint Anthony on the left. The second view displays a joyous spectacle with a Nativity scene in the center panel, an Annunciation on the right and a Resurrection on the left. The third view features the wood-carved statues of Saint Anthony, Saint Jerome, and Saint Augustine, flanked by a picture of Saint Anthony in company of Saint Paul the Hermit on the left panel and another of the Temptation of Saint Anthony on the right.

90 Arthur Burkhard, *Matthias Grünewald: Personality and Accomplishment* (New York: Hacker Art Books, 1976), 25.

(the dislocated shoulders and convulsed hands of Christ) or moral (the overarched back of both Maria and Maria Magdalena stretching their joined hands out). The artist further expanded on dismemberment and rearrangement of body parts. What Bellmer sees in the movable structure of the altarpiece is a jointed body, that is a body of images that can be disassembled, resassembled, and rearranged in a manner similar to his ball-jointed doll. The central panel featuring a body out of joints, around which other parts are articulated, recalls the stomach sphere of the ball-jointed doll that connects various body parts.

Photograph twelve shot from an overhead camera angle stages a hermaphrodite double in a bedroom setting [Fig. 41]. The image features the four-legged doll, sporting its usual white socks and black Mary-Janes, partly lying, partly seated on a rumpled bed with legs splayed, wearing open trousers with an open fly and a belt at one end of its body while the other half remains unclothed. Next to the bed, a round table with the large remains of a half-eaten meal can be seen, giving the sexually charged scene a touch of familiar domesticity, immediately undermined by the strange configuration of the doll's body.



Fig. 42 Hans Bellmer, *La poupée*, 1935

“But the remains of a large meal on a round table next to the bed give a sense of satiation, and one can imagine the pants having been loosened merely to ease the pressure on a bulging stomach” Taylor observes.⁹¹ In her brilliant analysis of the photograph in which she stresses the ambiguous, polysemic nature of Bellmer’s image, Lichtenstein identifies in the half-dressed, half naked four-legged ball-jointed doll the figure of the hermaphrodite among others:

The image is ambiguous, suggesting an autoerotic hermaphrodite, a pair of twins, or a couple trying to merge or copulate. The doubled body parts are joined at the waist, like Siamese twins. The body (or is there more than one?) stretches across an unmade bed, with the half closest to the viewer dressed in pants with an open belt while the naked upper half lies inert. Remnants of a meal on a table next to the bed create an implied narrative involving sexual foreplay. The atmosphere is one of orgiastic impotence and frustrated desire. The visual ambiguity of the image produces a highly complex, contradictory dynamic in which issues of individuation, separation and symbiotic union are played out in terms of an identity crisis. On the one hand, autoeroticism turns against the unification of two separate beings, while on the other hand, erotic activity between these twin halves might suggest incest⁹².

The hermaphrodite ball-jointed doll, featuring a double gender as well as a double pair of legs, is a perfect illustration of Bellmer’s theory of the interchangeability of the body, and particularly the reversibility of sexual organs. In addition, the hermaphrodite strongly resonates with Bellmer’s biography as he explored crossdressing and wearing female attire throughout his life, as Lichtenstein recalls:

Throughout his life Bellmer enjoyed dressing as a woman or a girl. As a young man traveling to Berlin with his father to attend engineering school in 1921, he dressed like a young girl as a prank. After the overnight trip, he emerged from the train wearing a dress, makeup, and a wig, much to his father’s embarrassment and annoyance. [...] He retained a rebellious attitude throughout his life: he often wore nylon stockings under his trousers, and he dressed as a transvestite to entertain exiles who were interned with him in southern France during the occupation.⁹³

Elaborating on Bellmer’s crossdressing habit, Lichtenstein not only underlines the facial resemblance between Bellmer and his doll, but also points out the narcissistic

⁹¹ Taylor, *Hans Bellmer*, 79.

⁹² Lichtenstein, *Behind Closed Doors*, 75

⁹³ Ibid., 48.

identification process the artist engages with in the creation, manipulation, and reconfiguration of his ball-jointed doll:

Bellmer's obsession with young girls, dolls, and the activity of plays betrays a deep narcissistic identification with them. The face of the doll even resembles his own. This identification with young girls was played out in various forms throughout his life.⁹⁴

The exploration of the interchangeability of body parts and reversibility of sexual organs Bellmer pursues with and through the ball-jointed doll, led him naturally to the investigation of language and particularly of anagrams. *Les Jeux de la poupée* led him to word plays and the ball-jointed doll was, once again, the connection, as Sykora underlines:

Nicht die Tiefdimension eines Innen und Außen wird an der zweiten Puppe exerziert, sondern eine horizontale Dimension der Metamorphose, die sich in arithmetischen Formen der Verdoppelung, der Multiplikation, der Permutation einzelner Körperteile fassen läßt, die aber auch mit organischen Erscheinungen der Wucherung und sich selbst generierender Körperpartien spielt und die schließlich von Bellmer und vielen Interpreten mit den sprachlichen Formen von Anagramm und Palindrom in Verbindung gebracht wurde.⁹⁵

It is within the apparent rigidity of the human body and language that Bellmer discovers their actual flexibility: by imposing the form of the anagram on a sentence and framing his doll within a constrained space, he uncovers the limitless possibilities of both. Far from being firm and stiff, words and body parts are pliable and flexible, as Bellmer describes:

Der Körper, er gleicht einem Satz, der uns einzuladen scheint, ihn bis in seine Buchstaben zu zergliedern, damit sich in einer endlosen Reihe von Anagrammen aufs Neue fügt, was er in Wahrheit enthält.⁹⁶

The body can be compared to a sentence that invites you to dismantle it, so that in the course of an endless series of anagrams. Its true content may take shape.

Semff points out that “this investigation was developed with his companions, namely

⁹⁴ Ibid., 47.

⁹⁵ Sykora, *Unheimliche Paarungen*, 225.

⁹⁶ Hans Bellmer, “Kleine Anatomie des körperlichen Unbewußten oder die Anatomie des Bildes” in *Die Puppe* (Berlin: Gerhard Verlag, 1962), 158.

the Bulgarian poet Nora Mitrani and the artist Unica Zürn. Mitrani and Zürn were among a number of women who were crucial to Bellmer's art, in some cases to the point of being collaborators."⁹⁷ The importance of collaboration in Bellmer's creative process must be emphasized here, as it is a fact generally overlooked by scholarship: the construction of both dolls is the result of a family collaboration (involving mostly wife, brother, and cousin) while the creation of anagrams is the product of a collaboration between lovers. Recollecting the Post-war period of 1947-48 when he lived in Toulouse together with Nora Mitrani, Bellmer describes the activity of making anagrams the following way: "Anagrams work better with two people, a man and a woman. A sort of competition, or rather a liveliness which each encourages in the other."⁹⁸ The definition of anagram, as a game best played with a man and a woman, is of great significance because it presents a word play as a sexual game where sex and gender are inverted and perverted and lays bare the hermaphrodite nature of anagrams. Linking the manipulation of letters and body parts, Masson equates the twisting of letters with the reversing of sexual organs, and in doing so she lays bare the hermaphrodite, double-sexed nature of language and body:

Il [Bellmer] se passionnait pour ces jeux de langage car pratiquer l'inversion verbale, c'est détourner le corps des mots pour faire surgir d'autres sens. Retourner une phrase et découvrir dans son envers un autre sens composé des mêmes éléments, c'est accéder à une phrase androgyne, en trouver l'intimité, son être bisexué. Ainsi, manipuler les lettres d'une phrase, c'est une manière de mettre ensemble des morceaux de corps et de tenter de faire nouage.⁹⁹

In a 1954 postscript to *Oracle and Spectacle*, a book of anagrammatic poems and drawings by Unica Zürn, the German poet and visual artist, and Bellmer's companion in Paris, the latter introduces the idea of anagram, equating the human body with a sentence and rewriting the syntax of desire by re-assembling the female body like the letters of an anagram:¹⁰⁰

97 Michael Semff and Anthony Spira (Ed.), "Introduction" in *Hans Bellmer* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2006), 1

98 Webb, *Death, Desire and the Doll*, 138.

99 Céline Masson, *La fabrique de la poupée chez Hans Bellmer*, 323.

100 Bellmer was struck by the facial resemblance between Unica and his ball-jointed doll the first time he

Anagrams are words or sentences obtained by the permutation of letters that a given word or sentence are made of. [...] Truly, the human being knows his language even less than he knows his body: the sentence may be compared to a body, which invites us to disarticulate it, in order that its true contents may be recomposed through an endless series of anagrams. If one examines it closely, the anagram is born from a violent and paradoxical conflict. It presupposes a maximal tension of imaginative will and at the same time, of the technical limitations of the means at hand – only the given letters may be used, none other – this feeling leads to an overpowering scent and feverish readiness for discovery. Everything tends to a certain automatism.¹⁰¹

As this quote illustrates, the anagram is key to understanding Bellmer's body of work insofar as the anagram contains an entire artistic agenda. The artist acknowledges the violence that underlies the process of re-arranging the letters of a word, but also recognizes the endless possibility of creating new word combinations, and consequently he translates the double-edged idea of anagram into/onto his doll. While anagrammatizing the doll body, i.e. by permuting and twisting body parts like the letters of a word, Bellmer reveals its endless possible configurations. Further in his essay, Bellmer elaborates on the anagram:

It is a question here of a totally new unity of form, meaning, and emotional climate from verbal images, which cannot be invented or laboriously built up. They enter in their correspondences without warning, and carrying a specific reality, reach out toward many interpretations, tying up knots with meanings and juxtaposed echoes, facetious as a mirrored polyhedron, or a new object. Beil (ax) becomes Lieb (love) or Leib (body) when the diligent hand of stones glides over it; the prodigy seizes us and carries us off, riding a broomstick. The process remains enigmatic.¹⁰²

Bellmer equates the reconfiguration of body parts with the rearrangement of letters of the German word "Leib." In doing so, one obtains three terms at once, namely "Beil, Lieb, and Blei". The German word "Leib" (body) becomes "Beil" (ax), "Leib" becomes "Lieb" (darling, love). Only the anagrammatic rearrangement of the subject "Leib" lays bare the intrinsic connection between body, love, ax, and lead. Or, put differently, only a word play can reveal the tension inherent in "Leib:" a tension mediated by a desire ("Lieb") to dismember the body with the help of a chopping ax ("Beil"). And the tension

met her in Paris.

101 Lichtenstein, *Behind Closed Doors*, 174-175.

102 Ibid., 175.

inherent in the body is palpable at the joints, a point where disjointed parts are joined and fitted together, a 'non body part' that is a constant source of artistic inspiration and erotic stimulation for Bellmer. In a 1972 interview with Webb – one of the last before his death in 1975 – Bellmer, looking back upon his artistic work, states again his intentions that lie behind the constant reconfiguring of the ball-jointed doll's body: creating a new type of body while at the same time inviting the viewer to a new way of looking:

I was aware of what I called the physical unconscious, the body underlying awareness of itself. I tried to rearrange the sexual elements of a girl's body like a sort of plastic anagram. I remember describing it thus: the body is like a sentence that invites us to rearrange it, so that its real meaning becomes clear through a series of endless anagrams. I wanted to reveal what is usually kept hidden – it was no game – I tried to open people's eyes to new realities.¹⁰³

Bellmer's desire to open people's eyes to new realities, that is to the endless anatomical possibilities of his doll (and to a greater extent the human body), and particularly his investment in the displacement and rearrangement of body parts are both shared by the French-American visual artist and sculptor Louise Bourgeois and the American conceptual photographer Cindy Sherman. Both female artists take issue with Bellmer's doll and push the exploration of human body and sexuality to the next level in their respective artwork. What still hitherto remains at the pupal stage in Bellmer's dolls, namely the figure of the hermaphrodite and the sexual fetishization of the female body, emerges and takes shape in the sculptures of Louise Bourgeois and the photographs by Cindy Sherman.

Hans Bellmer and Louise Bourgeois bear striking biographical parallels: they both left their home countries – Bellmer fled to Paris in 1938, the same year Bourgeois moved to New York – and worked in reclusion before enjoying artistic recognition in their later years. Above all, their sexually charged body of work displays a common interest in the creation of a new anthropomorphic body type, amorphous and anamorphic, autoerotic and hermaphrodite.

¹⁰³ Webb, Peter. p. 29.

In her 1968 bronze sculpture, entitled *Janus Fleuri*, Bourgeois represents a partial object hanging from the ceiling. The title of the work makes reference to the bi-cephalous Roman God Janus, gifted with the power to look back into the past and the future. The sculpture depicts two glandes penis with a vulva at the center whose labia's florid form contrasts with the smooth polished surface on the sides. *Janus Fleuri* represents the merging of male and female genitals into a new anthropomorphic, hermaphrodite form. Bourgeois' bronze sculpture, with its pelvis-like convex structure flanked by two glandes, echoes Bellmer's ball-jointed doll, and particularly the cast aluminum version he made the 1960's featuring two pelvic structures with vulva and balls, centered around the sphere of the stomach [Fig 43 & 44]. This anthropomorphous sculpture by Bourgeois illustrates how the displacement of body parts and the reassembling of male and female genitals form a new hermaphrodite body, polymorphous and polysemic, in which a ballooning form can feature a glans penis, a breast, or a testicle.



Fig. 43. Louise Bourgeois, *Janus Fleuri*, 1968



Fig. 44. Hans Bellmer, *La Poupée*, 1965

In another sculpture, entitled *Fragile Goddess* (2002), Bourgeois alludes to a primitive goddess of fertility by representing a pink fluffy female torso gifted with a pregnant belly and curvaceous forms [Fig. 45]. It goes without saying that the headless female torso

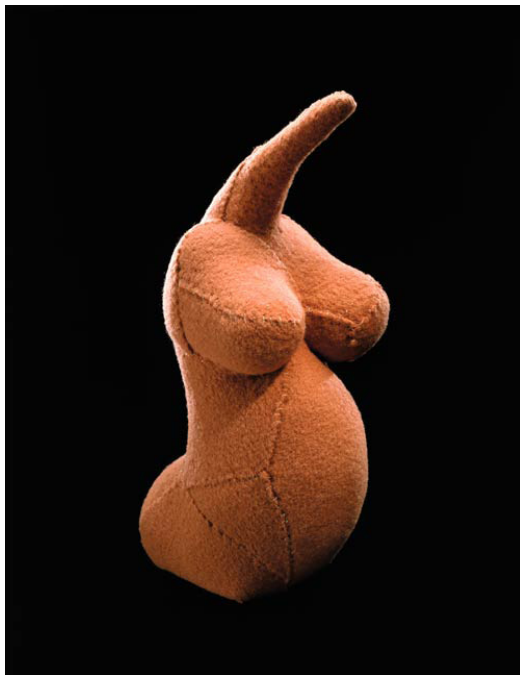


Fig. 45. Louise Bourgeois, *Fragile Goddess*, 2002



Fig. 46. Hans Bellmer, *La Poupée*, 1965

deprived of arms and legs, strongly resonates with Bellmer's doll: the bulging breasts and buttocks centered around the sphere of a protruding belly are reminiscent of the structure of the ball-jointed doll [Fig. 46]. By placing an erected phallus in the place of the head of her Fragile Goddess, Bourgeois goes a step further in her exploration of androgyny by giving birth to an ambiguous body fragment.

As is the case for Louise Bourgeois, Bellmer's doll photographs had a great impact on American photographer Cindy Sherman as well and his influence can be felt particularly in her 1992 *Sex Pictures*. Like Bourgeois, Sherman pushes the envelope of experimentation with dolls, although with a more critical agenda. That is the argument curator Eva Respini makes in her discussion of Sherman's photographic work: "As a female author of her works, however, Sherman creates photographs that suggest a critique of the fetishes of male artists such as Bellmer and other Surrealists who engaged in similar fantastical dismemberments of the female body."

In her 1992 *Sex Pictures* series, Sherman uses prosthetic limbs and mannequins bought from medical supply catalogues and arranges them in sexualized positions to mimic hard-core pornography. This series marks a major shift in Sherman's work: the artist, who hitherto used her own body as a model and was at the center of her *Film Still* and *Centerfold* series, is now missing from the picture, replaced by various prosthetic body parts. While Sherman's *Sex Pictures* showcasing the dismantling and re-arrangement of mannequin's body parts, make an obvious reference to Bellmer's doll photographs, they, however greatly differ from their source of inspiration. For example *Untitled #263* from the 1992 series offers a perfect example of the way Sherman engages critically with Bellmer's images. The photograph features two mutilated and dislocated lower body parts – one male and one female – girdled by a bow, coalescing into one hermaphroditic body form, flanked by two decapitated heads [Fig. 47]. Sherman's image recalls photograph twelve from Bellmer's *Les Jeux de la poupée*, the one depicting the four-legged doll, partly lying and partly seated on a bed, wearing open trousers at the one end of her body while the

other remains unclothed [Fig. 48]. And yet, Sherman's crude depiction of sexual organs and body parts could not be more at odds with Bellmer's dark erotic universe: the female photographer, eager to render her images more realistic, uses makeup, glues pubic hair to the hairless dolls, and goes as far as inserting a tampon into the prosthetic vagina! Although Sherman's image to some extent recalls Gustave Courbet's painting *L'Origine du monde* (1866), her unerotic and grotesque representation of a truncated hermaphrodite body calls into question the sexual fetishization of body parts and female anatomy.



Fig. 47. Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #263*, 1992



Fig. 48. Hans Bellmer, *La Poupée*, 1935

CHAPTER IV

FASHIONING THE DOLL ALEXANDER MCQUEN'S *BELLMER LA POUPÉE*



Portrait by Tim Walker, *Vogue Magazine*, 1997

In September 1996, the young designer Alexander McQueen presented his 1997 Spring/Summer collection entitled *Bellmer La Poupée* at the Royal Horticultural Society in London's Victoria. The much anticipated 8th collection of the 27 year old British designer also known as fashion "enfant terrible," received mixed reviews: while some journalists praised McQueen's creativity, the beauty and quality of his couture collection, others took offense at his provocative fashion show, accusing him of sadism, racism, and misogyny. However, the 1997 Spring/Summer collection "that the designer called a retrospective of all the concepts he's been developing since he started in fashion," was of great significance for the British designer, and in many regards pivotal, since he was appointed shortly afterwards chief designer at French couture house Givenchy.

Along the lines of Barthes' semiotic approach laid out in *The Fashion System* (1967), I regard the British designer Alexander McQueen as a de-sign-er, a semiotic tactician, whose work is by definition to produce signs, or rather to stitch meaning to garments, and here I unveil the meaning of McQueen's image clothing in his collection *Bellmer la poupée*. I will first explain Bellmer's appeal to the British designer before pointing out the elective affinities between both artists and their striking aesthetic similarities. I will explore the dialectical relationship between 1990's avant-garde fashion design and 1930's Surrealism and uncover historical and cultural references hidden in McQueen's collection. By focusing on the designer's cut, particularly the cleavage and splits recurring in his collection, I will examine his desire to reshape female anatomy and display the interiority of the female body.

Bellmer's dolls, to begin with, already have fashion potential as some of the black and white photographs of the doll attest to Bellmer's interest in clothing his doll [Fig. 1-8]. Some of the images from his first album *Die Puppe*, illustrate an attempt on the artist's part to experiment with clothes: The photographs depict the doll's body either wrapped in black chiffon and lace, or placed next a miscellany of white gauze, crumpled bed clothes, and cast

off lace panties, when it is not wearing real women's lingerie such as a slip or panties [Fig. 1-4].



Fig. 1 Hans Bellmer, *Die Puppe*, 1933



Fig. 2 Hans Bellmer, *Die Puppe*, 1933

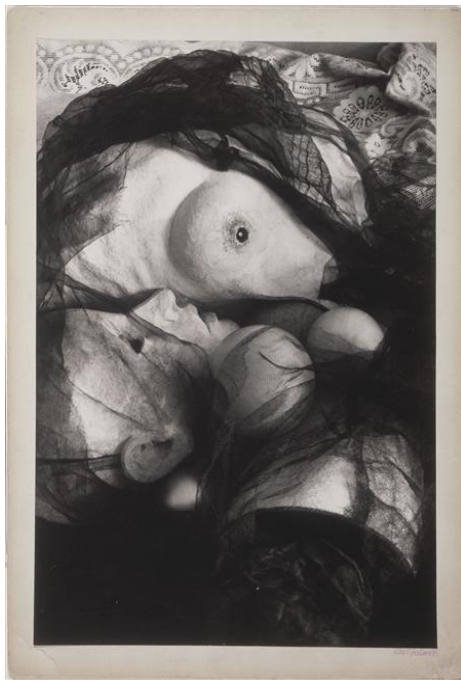


Fig. 3 Hans Bellmer, *Die Puppe*, 1933



Fig. 4 Hans Bellmer, *Die Puppe*, 1933

However, when it comes to the second, so-called ball-jointed doll, Bellmer becomes more fashion conscious as the hand colored black and white photographs of his second album *Les jeux de la poupée* demonstrate. He accessorizes his doll with white ankle socks and black Mary-Jane –they will soon become its trademarks – and uses real women’s clothes such as stocking, white lace panties, a white men’s button down shirt and a pair of dark brown men’s trousers to (un)dress its doll [Fig. 5-8].



Fig. 5 Hans Bellmer, *La poupée*, 1935



Fig. 6 Hans Bellmer, *La poupée*, 1935

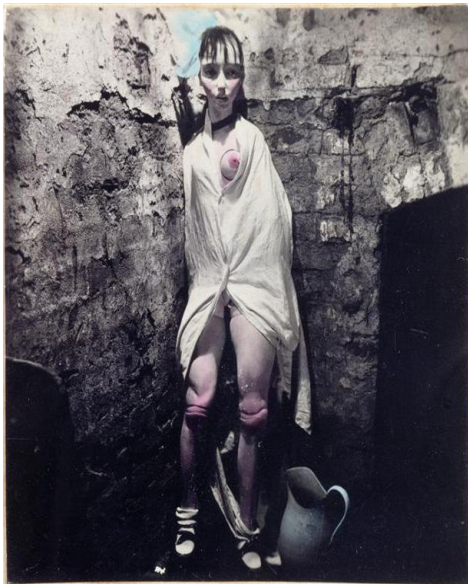


Fig. 7 Hans Bellmer, *La poupée*, 1935



Fig. 8 Hans Bellmer, *La poupée*, 1935

Unlike some of his Surrealist counterparts, fascinated by mannequins, like Man Ray and Salvatore Dali, Bellmer's doll is neither a window dummy nor a fashion doll since the mundane clothes worn in his photographs, far from distracting from the peculiarity of the doll, reinforce their uncanny character while conveying an atmosphere of forbidden eroticism. Although Bellmer's use of clothes in his photographs is fairly limited and gender-binaried (the slip, the panties, the stockings emblematic of women's clothes versus the button down shirt and pants for the menswear) [Fig. 5-8], there is nevertheless plenty in the series of photographs for a fashion designer such as McQueen to seize for inspiration: from the making of a polymorphous body, the reconfiguration of human anatomy, the voyeuristic objectification of the doll's body, to the macabre eroticism at play in Bellmer's images of his doll. In fact, a closer look at McQueen 1997 Spring/Summer collection reveals that Bellmer's photographs of his doll from the series *Die Puppe* and *Les jeux de la poupée* were a fruitful source of inspiration for the designer as the influence of the German Surrealist can be tracked down in many looks and ensembles presented by the models on the runway.

The blonde and brunette wigs worn by the models, for example are reminiscent of the two wigs that Bellmer made for his second, ball-jointed doll [Fig. 9-12].



Fig. 9 Alexander McQueen,
Bellmer la poupée, 1996

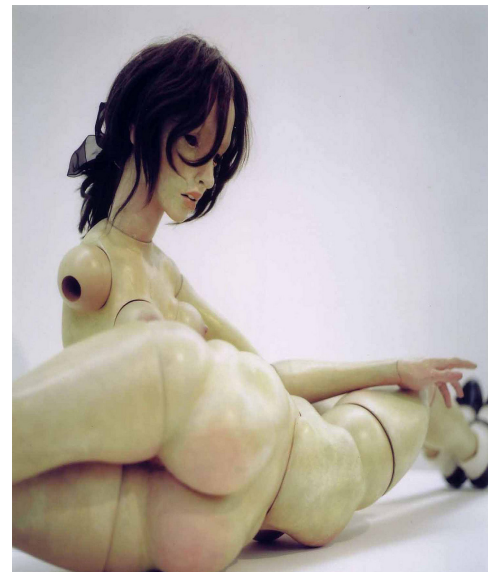


Fig. 10. Hans Bellmer, *La poupée* 1935



Fig. 11 Alexander McQueen,
Bellmer la poupée, 1996

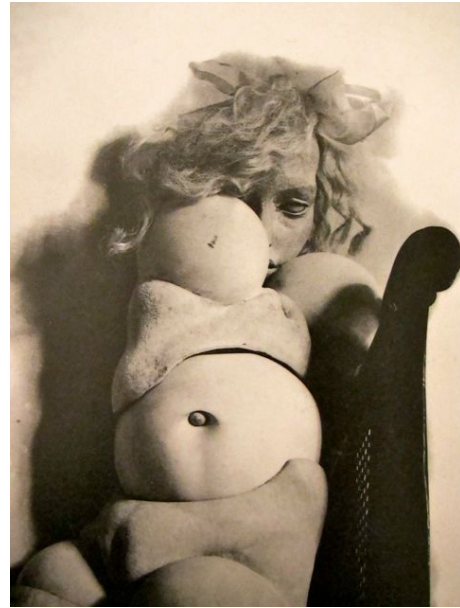


Fig. 12 Hans Bellmer, *La poupée*, 1935

The metallic frames encircling the models' head, masking their face or restricting their body movements also allude to the brace and the wooden mechanism inside the first doll's abdomen [Fig. 13-16]. The color palette McQueen chose for his collection evoke the colors Bellmer used to hand-dye the black and white photographs of his album *Les jeux de la poupée*: blue, green, yellow, red, and orange [Fig. 17].



Fig. 13 Alexander McQueen,
Bellmer la poupée, 1996



Fig. 14 Alexander McQueen,
Bellmer la poupée, 1996

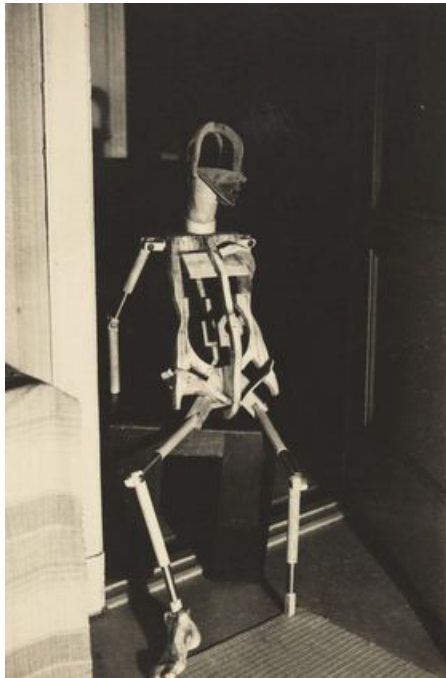


Fig. 15 Hans Bellmer, *Die Puppe*, 1933



Fig. 16 Hans Bellmer, *Die Puppe*, 1933

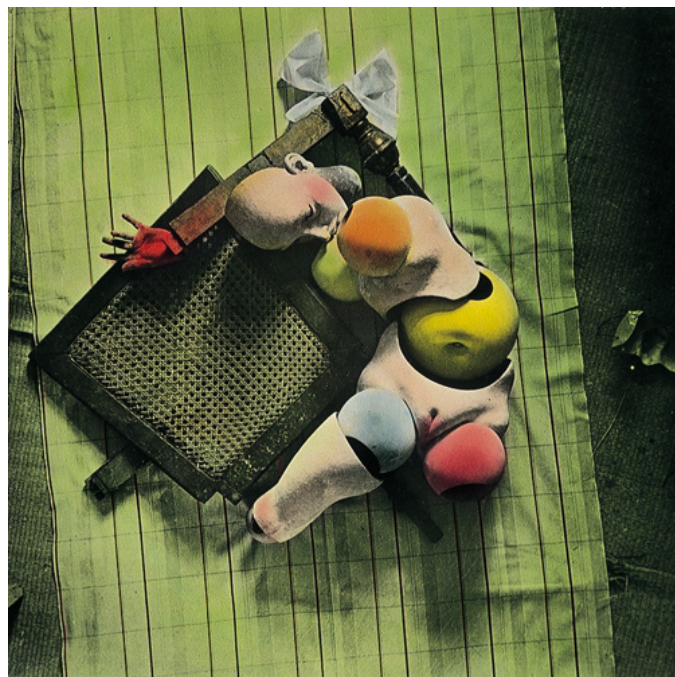


Fig. 17 Hans Bellmer, *La poupée*, 1935

Significantly, the color pink, traditionally associated with little girls and their toy-dolls, is the palette that the designer selected for his collection in which he offers various tones and textures of pink: sheer fleshy materials, shimmery silk textiles embroidered with oriental motifs, and cotton candy pink fabrics. Pink is also the color chosen by Bellmer for

his books *Les jeux de la poupée* and *Die Puppe*, whose pages are pink-dyed [Fig. 18].



Fig. 18 Hans Bellmer, *Die Puppe*, 1933

The sharply tailored pants suits in cotton candy pink with their pleats can also be read as a quotation straight from Bellmer's essay "Memories of the Doll Theme" accompanying his first photo album, in which he evokes his fascination with little girls and "the quiver of their pink pleats," a metaphor that stands for their genitals [Fig. 19-20].¹



Fig. 19 Alexander McQueen, *Bellmer la poupée*, 1996



Fig. 20 Hans Bellmer, *La poupée*, 1935

The fashion shows opens with a model, walking down the stairs and across a flooded catwalk, wearing a blonde wig and a sheer white sequin dress, exposing her breast [Fig. 21-22]. By twisting her hair and coyly covering with both arms her breasts and her

¹ Hans Bellmer, "Memories of The Doll Theme" in Therese Lichtenstein, *Behind Closed Doors: The Art of Hans Bellmer* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 172.

genitals at once, she acts like a little girl or rather a baby woman, a demeanor recalling the biographical fact that Bellmer's teenage cousin, Ursula Naguschewski, was the source of inspiration for his doll. The white shimmery dress resembling a 1920's flapper, features a top whose layers have been torn and stripped off, thus laying bare its wearer's breasts. Interestingly, in covering her trunk with both arms, the gowned model acts as if she were walking naked on the runway, made vulnerable by the wear (and tear) of her dress and therefore exposed to the voyeuristic gaze of the audience – her gesture ultimately revealing the fashion show as a strip tease and a peep show. And yet, the model's brace around her mouth, reminiscent of a muzzle, and her head coif – two sharp needles fixed along her temples – remind the viewer that this vulnerable woman is also dangerous: equipped with daggers in her eyes, she is dressed to kill [Fig. 21]. By presenting this ensemble as the first piece of his collection, McQueen makes a statement and introduces the main themes of *Bellmer La Poupée*: the designer redefines the function of fashion since his dress both protects and exposes the wearer's body while at the same time playing with the silhouette of a dress: the blatant display of the woman's breasts is an integral part of the design. McQueen also blurs the line between the natural and the artificial with a tight top's sheer flesh-toned fabric



Fig. 21 Alexander McQueen,
Bellmer la poupée, 1996

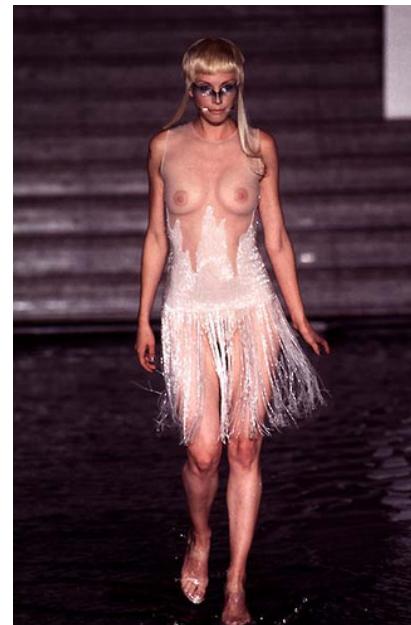


Fig. 22 Alexander McQueen,
Bellmer la poupée, 1996

suggesting that the garment has become a second skin. And at last, he creates with this dress a hybrid body with the shimmery sequins recalling the scales of a fish tail [Fig. 22].

McQueen's dress that lays bare the model's breasts while incorporating them in its design, not only singles out body parts but also turns them into commodities: the fetishized pair of breasts, covered by sheer fabric takes then the appearance of edible raw meat in plastic wrap, suggesting that the female body dressed in ready-to-wear has become ready to be consumed. The fashion show becomes a carnival, i.e. a spectacle where the flesh is exhibited and consumed and where the clothes are triggering carnal desires. Interestingly, McQueen closes his fashion show with a model walking the runway wearing latex rubber cotton pink pants with a leather harness exposing her breasts, and a giant pentagonal-shaped cage filled with butterflies, reminiscent of a glass house [Fig. 23-25].



Fig. 23 Alexander McQueen,
Bellmer la poupée, 1996

While the cage's metallic structure recalls the metallic frame attached to the limbs of a model walking like a puppet on the runway, it serves as a veil covering the female upper body, filtering the gazes casted upon her exposed body and protecting her. Or maybe it is the other way around: the cage around this dominatrix, dressed in rubber latex and leather harness, is meant to protect the spectator and serves as a reminder to beware of the look of this woman. By putting his model in a cage as a butterfly among butterflies, McQueen

uses the insect both as a metaphor of woman in a constant state of transformation and as an allegory of fashion as an ephemeral undertaking. By choosing to end his show with a cage full of butterflies, the designer makes a reference to the title of his collection since the French word “poupée” derives both from “pupa” and “pupil” [Fig. 24-25].



Fig. 24 Alexander McQueen,
Bellmer la poupée, 1996



Fig. 25 Alexander McQueen,
Bellmer la poupée, 1996

The tight tops and pants both featuring cuts made of zippers reveal the woman's body as wounded: the zipper running across the torso and along the knee look like open wounds or gaping orifices [Fig. 26-27]. By displaying clothes with openings reminiscent of surgical cuts and stitches, McQueen explores the anatomical interiority of the woman's body and its anatomical possibilities. Commenting on the collection, Caroline Evans notes: “Going beneath the skin of conventional fashion, McQueen's first collections explored the taboo area of interiority, breaching the boundaries between inside and out. The fantasy of exploring and probing the interior of the body, although commonplace in contemporary art, is habitually disavowed in fashion by its emphasis on surface, perfection and polish.”² Cutting the flesh, opening the body, turning it inside out and exhibiting its interiority is

² Caroline Evans, *Fashion at the Edge: Spectacle, Modernity and Deathliness* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 144.



Fig. 26 Alexander McQueen,
Bellmer la poupée, 1996



Fig. 27 Alexander McQueen,
Bellmer la poupée, 1996

what McQueen's 1997 Spring/Summer collection was all about. The designer, renowned for his sharp and precise cut, becomes here a surgeon who incises both clothes and bodies.

In her essay on the dress, French psychoanalyst Eugénie Lemoine-Luccioni recalls that a garment, in order to be put on, must feature at least one opening and therefore cannot be closed hermetically. According to her analysis, the garment's opening, reminiscent of orifices, contains the possibility of nudity and sexual interplay:

Le vêtement n'est jamais hermétiquement clos. Il est toujours conçu de façon à ménager une ouverture pour un possible jeu sexuel. Ce jeu peut rester un jeu érotique, dispensateur de plaisirs. Il peut être aussi le premier acte de la mise à nu qui prélude à la dénudation complète [...].³

Pursuing her dialectical study of garment - cloth simultaneously covers and uncovers the naked body - Lemoine-Luccioni turns her focus to men's trousers, and particularly to the fly, i.e. the opening at the crotch closed with a zipper. She identifies the fly as the hot spot in menswear and does the same with the cleavage in womenswear when she writes:

Le pantalon masculin est fermé. Mais il l'est par la braguette qui reste le point

³ Eugénie Lemoine-Luccioni, *La Robe: Essai psychanalytique sur le vêtement* (Paris: Éd. du Seuil, 1983), 65.

chaud du vêtement masculin [...]. Chez les femmes, le sexe est caché (certains disent qu'il n'y a rien à montrer): mais la poitrine s'exhibe. Ce qui a été dit de la braguette peut être dit du décolleté féminin: c'est le point chaud du vêtement.⁴

Although Lemoine-Luccioni's essay on the dress seems now dated, her previous comments, however, are very helpful because they shed light on the subversive character of McQueen's use of zippers in his collection.

By moving the fly down from the crotch to the knees or up to the chest, the designer relocates the hot spot of menswear and re-appropriates the latter. The combination of zipper and cleavage featured in some of the ensembles indicates that McQueen reshapes the female silhouette. The models, clad in tops with zippers ajar on the chest and pants with unzipped flies at the knees, project the image of a provocative woman, dressed to undress, and open to the possibility of sexual interplay with the onlooker [Fig. 26-29].



Fig. 28 Alexander McQueen,
Bellmer la poupée, 1996



Fig. 29 Alexander McQueen,
Bellmer la poupée, 1996

⁴ Lemoine-Luccioni, *La Robe*, 70.



Fig. 30 Elsa Schiaparelli, “Zipper Dress”, 1936

But the zippers uncover another hidden layer of meaning, a cultural reference to an influential fashion designer of the interwar period, namely the Italian born Elsa Schiaparelli. While other designers used zippers strictly for their function and often tried to hide them, Schiaparelli incorporated them into her designs, drawing attention to the line of the body. They soon became an iconic indication of her artistic design sensibility [Fig. 30].

As Dilys Blum observes:

Schiaparelli shocked the buyers attending the August opening of her collection for winter 1935-36 by using colorful plastic zippers in the most unexpected places. They zipped pockets, necklines, side seams, sleeves, and shoulder seams, and even served double duty on an evening gown that could be worn with the back zipped up for dinner or unzipped for a more formal occasion.⁵

It is striking to notice how McQueen in his collection engages with Schiaparelli's design through Bellmer's doll photographs, thus bringing together distinct time periods and aesthetics. The tears and zippers that adorn the clothes and give them the look of fetish tops and bondage pants, lay bare another layer of reference to punk fashion, a 1970s youth

⁵ Dilys Blum, *Shocking! The Art and Fashion of Elsa Schiaparelli* (New Haven: Philadelphia Museum of Art/ Yale University Press, 2004), 88.

subculture in New York City and London, centered around punk music. Oddly enough, Schiaparelli's influence on Punk with her use of zipper and torn clothing should also be credited as she can be regarded as one of its precursor.⁶ Together with the safety pin and the dog collar, the zipper is one of the trademarks of punk fashion, interpreted as a process of rejection of the mainstream and an act of resistance against the Establishment. As a British designer born in 1969, McQueen was obviously familiar with punk fashion and he certainly shared the creative and innovative spirit of punk, not to mention their rebellious attitude. For sure, the designer integrated and reinterpreted some elements of punk dress code in his women's wear collection as the photograph below, featuring body piercing with a safety pin, illustrates [Fig. 31]. The image, taken by British photographer Nick Knight for fashion magazine *Visionnaire* in 1997 is of particular interest for two reasons: first, the model, Devon Aoki, wears one of the dresses from the *Bellmer La Poupée* collection; second, McQueen was the guest art director of the magazine's issue and oversaw the fashion spread [Fig. 31].



Fig. 31 Nick Knight, Alexander McQueen, *Bellmer la poupée*, 1996

⁶ Victoria Pass, "Schiaparelli's Dark Circus" in *Fashion, Style and Popular*. Volume 1, Number 1, 2014. p. 38.

Fashion historian Rebecca Arnold gives the following description of the image:

The model, Devon, is shown against a stark white backdrop. Her dark hair, tinged blue by the lighting, is knotted into a geisha style. Her dress echoes this in palest pink oriental silk, decorated with glistening flowers. Her face is surrounded by the halo of her collar, which is reinforced to stand up in a circle, framing her head. [...] Devon's forehead appears to have been sliced open, tiny pink blossoms push out from the incision, which is held together by a large silver safety pin. The punk aggression of the pin, the obvious artificiality of the image is at odds with the organic purity of the flowers and the fragile femininity of the model.⁷

Read side by side with some of the stills from the *Bellmer la Poupée* show, the photograph by Nick Knight does reveal its punk inspiration but also takes on another meaning, a Surrealist aesthetic, present in McQueen's show.

The gaping wound on the model's forehead recalls the zipper running across the pink top and indicates a shift from one surface to another, from the textile to the skin, from fabric to organ [Fig. 32-33]. The photoshopped image blurs the line between the natural and the artificial to the extent of confusing the inanimate with the animate: the extra large



Fig. 32 Nick Knight, Alexander McQueen, *Bellmer la poupée*, 1996



Fig. 33 Alexander McQueen, *Bellmer la poupée*, 1996

⁷ Arnold, Rebecca. *Fashion, Desire and Anxiety: Image and Morality in the Twentieth Century* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 92.



Fig. 34 Alexander McQueen,
Bellmer la poupée, 1996



Fig. 35 Alexander McQueen,
Bellmer la poupée, 1996

hole for the dress' collar recalls the open wound on the model's forehead and her head, like the pink flowers springing from the wound, seems to stem from the dress. One cannot help but noticing that the flowery silk dress in the photograph is the living organism. Judging from its shape and protective function, the collar, as a double-layered, retractable, and stretchable surface, from which the model's head pops up, is reminiscent of a foreskin and as such the garment becomes an organ [Fig. 34-35]. The image from the fashion editorial directed by McQueen and photographed by Knight and centered around one piece from the *Bellmer la poupée* collection displays a blurring between animate and inanimate, or to be more precise a meshing between organic and inorganic, that is characteristic of Surrealism. Underscoring the kinship between fashion and Surrealism, Richard Martin writes in his introduction to the catalogue of the exhibition "Fashion and Surrealism" he curated at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York:

As the initial incendiary eruptions of Surrealism reified into an artistic style in 1930s and thereafter, the fashion arts came to serve as a statement of the Surrealist vision and of the Surrealist faith in the connection between the everyday life and the exceptional. Fashion became Surrealism's most compelling friction between the ordinary and extraordinary, between disfigurement and embellishment, body and

concept, artifice and the real. Fashion's persistent preoccupation with Surrealism and Surrealism's fascination with fashion serve to identify the insurrection art offers to daily life and the accommodations style can make to the commanding vision of art.⁸

This blurring between body and garment and between subject and object is precisely what characterizes Schiaparelli's playful fashion design. In return, her familiarity with Surrealism and adherence to its manifesto, as well as her friendship with Surrealist artist Salvador Dali mark the fusion between art and fashion, as Blum points out:

Schiaparelli's famous collaborations with artists Salvador Dali and Jean Cocteau during the late 1930s changed the face of fashion. No longer was a dress merely a dress or a hat just a hat. [...] These garments became Surrealist objects themselves, a natural development given the innovations that regularly appeared in Schiaparelli's designs. With her daring originality and understanding of the Surrealist ethos, Schiaparelli epitomized the artist-couturier.⁹

Wilson uncovers not only the blurring of boundary between body and clothing but also the dark forces underlying Schiaparelli's whimsical fashion design, an aspect often overlooked by fashion scholars:

Elsa Schiaparelli's designs in the 1930s exemplify this surrealist vision. Friendly with some of the surrealists and consciously influenced by them, her garments often derive their power and beauty from her exploration of the ambiguous, blurred boundary between body and garment, which hints at something darker and more uncanny beneath the playful surface.¹⁰

Examining the designer's dark side in "Schiaparelli's Dark Circus", Victoria Pass recalls: "it is Schiaparelli's dark side that has made her such a critical influence on contemporary fashion designers."¹¹ In that regard, Schiaparelli's engagement with death, the deathly, and the uncanny, particularly visible in her 1938 *Circus* collection, explains her appeal and influence on contemporary designers such as McQueen. Pointing out the

8 Richard Martin, *Fashion and Surrealism*. Ed. Jane Fluegel (New York: The Fashion Institute of Technology/Ed. Rizzoli, 1987), 9.

9 Blum, *Shocking!*, 121.

10 Wilson, "Magic Fashion" in *Fashion Theory*. Ed. Valerie Steele. Volume 8, Issue 4 (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2004), 382.

11 Pass, "Schiaparelli's Dark Circus," 30.

striking similarities between both designers, Pass notes:

While the dark, morbid sensibility of McQueen's aesthetic would seem to be at odds with the whimsical Surrealist tendencies of Schiaparelli, both designers thought of clothes as arming women for the penetrating gaze of viewers as they went out into the world.¹²

Two evening dresses by Schiaparelli, the so-called "Tear-Illusion" dress and the "Skeleton" one from the 1938 Circus collection, will retain my attention as they strongly resonate both with Bellmer's doll and McQueen's 1996 collection [Fig. 36 & 37].¹³



Fig. 36 Elsa Schiaparelli, "Skeleton Dress," 1938



Fig. 37 Elsa Schiaparelli, "Tear Illusion Dress," 1938

Commenting on the stir that Schiaparelli's dark and playful collection (and first themed fashion show in the history of Parisian couture) caused in 1938 in Paris, Blum notes:

On January 17, 1938, the sensational Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme opened in Paris, coinciding with the presentation of Schiaparelli's riotous Circus collection. This celebrated collection featured further collaboration between the couturière and Dali – a dress printed with the illusion of torn animal flesh and accompanied by a veil with tears simulated by a layer of appliquéd fabric, a dress with the padded silhouette of a skeleton, and a hat in the shape of an inkpot.¹⁴

¹² Ibid., 32.

¹³ McQueen's Fall/Winter 2002-2002 collection was entitled: *What a Marry-Go-Round*, another reference to Elsa Schiaparelli's 1938 *Circus* collection.

¹⁴ Blum, *Shocking!*, 124.

According to fashion historian Ghislaine Wood, the fruitful artistic collaboration between Dali and Schiaparelli dating from late 1936 radically transformed the face of fashion: under their influence the body was literally refashioned by Surrealism as both the designer and the artist were invested in exploring the theme of corporeality in their respective work.¹⁵ Regarding the “Tear-Illusion” and the “Skeleton” dresses as the pinnacle of the collaboration between Schiaparelli and Dali, Wood gives a detailed description of the making, the structure, and the fabric of both pieces:

Dali’s fascination with the theme of corporeality, often realized through the use of bone-shaped soft structures, informed the Skeleton dress. [...] Schiaparelli’s realization of this corporeal imagery in skin tight black silk jersey provided the illusion of a second skin, with the faux anatomy sitting proud in the fine matt silk surface. The bones were created using the technique of trapunto quilting, which produces a subtle and sensual effect. Almost more alien than human, the Skeleton dress is one of the most surreal works of 1930s. It was worn with a long black veil and miniature gold snail.¹⁶



Fig. 38 Elsa Schiaparelli, “Skeleton Dress,” 1938

The black silk crepe evening gown, “favored for decades as a fabric appropriate for mourning due to its matte finish” as Pass recalls, conjures up the image of death, reinforced

¹⁵ Ghislaine Wood, *The Surreal Body: Fetish and Fashion* (London: V& A Publications/Victor and Albert Museum, 2007), 64-65.

¹⁶ Wood, *The Surreal Body*, 65.

by the padded ribs, spine, and leg bones [Fig. 38]. Schiaparelli explores the idea of turning the body inside out while displacing the inside of the body onto the outside of a dress. In doing so, she reasserts the corporeality of the female body and displays its mortality. Commenting on the “Tear-Illusion” evening dress, Wood writes:

Continuing the corporeal theme, the Tear dress presented an imagery of torn and desecrated flesh. The puce blue ground, now sadly faded in the surviving examples, must have added to the sense of morbidity. The motif of the torn dress/flesh appeared first in Dali’s painting of 1936 *Three Young Surrealist Women Holding in Their Arms the Skins of an Orchestra*, in which the surface of a rose-headed woman is ripped and torn. Schiaparelli’s interpretation of the painting combined the illusory and the real. The fabric of the dress was printed with a *trompe l’oeil* pattern of torn flesh, while for the mantle the tears were actually appliquéd. The pale stripes of fabric peeled back to reveal a livid pink beneath.¹⁷

The tears in the dress, printed with *trompe l’oeil* pattern, are very ambiguous insofar they may suggest torn patches of fur, torn flesh and bruises, or simply torn fabric, and it is unclear whether they may have been caused by poverty or may be the result of a physical aggression [Fig. 39-40]. By fashioning this ambiguity and this instability into the design



Fig. 39 Elsa Schiaparelli,
“Tear Illusion Dress,” 1938



Fig. 40 Elsa Schiaparelli,
“Tear Illusion Dress,” 1938

¹⁷ Wood, *The Surreal Body*, 65.

of her dress, “Schiaparelli here,” observes Evans, “plays with ideas antithetical to fashion, countering poise and tranquility with violence and anxiety.”¹⁸ Elaborating on the idea of violence and shock effect embodied by Schiaparelli’s evening dress, Pass notes:

Instead, she combines elegance with violence. She renders the tears with exacting precision, whether in the print or the cut panels of the veil. The violence enacted on this gown is the result of careful calculation.¹⁹

Emphasizing the modernity of Schiaparelli, and her tremendous influence on contemporary fashion designers, and her peculiar resonance with 1990s fashion, Pass observes:

In comparing Schiaparelli’s Tear-Illusion and Skeleton dress with the work of contemporary designers, it is evident that she was dealing with concepts that have preoccupied fashion designers for over half a century: decay, death, and the corporeal body. The Skeleton dress represents the quality of death inherent in fashion. It also reflects the mortality of its wearer as it fuses with her body. Both the Skeleton dress and the Tear-Illusion dress reassert the corporality and mortality of the clothed body and emphasize the vulnerability of that body. At the same time, they shield the wearer from an Other’s voyeuristic gaze [...].

Oddly enough, her remarks on Schiaparelli’s exploration of death and decay befit McQueen’s fascination with the macabre, a fascination he displays in his 1997 Spring/Summer collection, inspired by Bellmer’s doll. Schiaparelli’s influence on McQueen’s *Bellmer la poupée* can be easily tracked down in some of the pieces of the collection: besides the zipper running across tops and pants, a two-toned chiffon dress with floral appliqués, giving the impression that the model’s skin has been peeled in layers, is reminiscent of the “Tear-Illusion” dress [Fig. 41 & 42], while a pink oriental silk with floral motifs and an extra-large collar, reinforced to stand up evokes the quilting technique of the “Skeleton” dress [Fig. 43 & 44].

Since McQueen and Schiaparelli shared similar interests in exploring corporal materiality and mortality in their design, it makes sense for McQueen to engage in a dialogue

¹⁸ Caroline Evans, “Masks, Mirrors and Mannequins: Elsa Schiaparelli and the Decentered Subject” in *Fashion Theory*. Ed. Valerie Steele. Volume 3, Issue 1 (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1999), 11.

¹⁹ Pass, “Schiaparelli’s Dark Circus,” 38.



Fig. 41 Alexander McQueen,
Bellmer la poupée, 1996



Fig. 42 Elsa Schiaparelli,
"Tear Illusion Dress," 1938



Fig. 43 Alexander McQueen,
Bellmer la poupée, 1996



Fig. 44 Elsa Schiaparelli,
"Skeleton Dress," 1938

with the first Surrealist fashion designer of the interwar period, although he turned to a German Surrealist artist for inspiration in a first place. As obvious the connection between McQueen and Schiaparelli on the one hand, and the connection between McQueen and

Bellmer on the other may be, the connection between Bellmer and Schiaparelli must be explored to complete the equation. In fact, Bellmer and Schiaparelli were not only contemporary, but they both lived in the same city, Paris, the capital of Surrealism, and also frequented the same Avant-garde milieu evolving around André Breton, the founder of the Surrealist movement. Bellmer moved to Paris in February 1938 exactly at the same time when Schiaparelli launched her summer collection with the title *Circus*. Bellmer's biographer, Peter Webb, underlines the influence of the freshly moved German artist on the Parisian Surrealists at first and notes: "As an artist Bellmer's reputation among this [Surrealist] circle rested upon his doll and [...] her influence had been strongly felt at the International Exhibition of Surrealism held in Paris in January and February 1938 with its Surrealist Street peopled with wax dummies costumed by various members of the group. At this exhibition, Bellmer had exhibited photographs and drawings of the doll [...]." ²⁰

Bellmer follows an artistic agenda very similar to Schiaparelli's: in his photographs, he explores the interiority of the body of his doll, investigates its morphology and plasticity, and in a designer-like manner refashions the anatomy of his doll. In his fascination with corporeality, Bellmer, like Schiaparelli, also makes the invisible visible by revealing not the bones, but the joints on the surface of his doll's body. His ball-jointed doll is by definition always at the juncture between subject and object as the staged photographs of which she is both subject and object, often blur the distinction between animate and inanimate. Commenting on this tension inherent of Surrealism, Wilson observes: "In the world of the surrealists the relationship between organic and inorganic, natural and artificial is a gap, a tear in the fabric of our experience through which we may glimpse a different version of the world."²¹ And I shall argue that this intention to "open people's eyes to new realities" to quote Bellmer, is precisely what drew McQueen to Bellmer and Schiaparelli in the first place as the three of them share the same artistic agenda. By engaging in a dialogue with a

²⁰ Peter Webb, *Death, Desire, and the Doll: The Life and Art of Hans Bellmer* (London: Solaris Books, 2006), 67. The shop mannequin dressed by Dali was wearing a Schiaparelli's Shocking pink knitted ski helmet.

²¹ Wilson, "Magic Fashion," 383.

Surrealist artist and a Surrealist designer, McQueen exemplifies in his collection the fusion of art and fashion, which was back then characteristic of Surrealism and now typical of contemporary fashion, and as a result displays a Surrealist sensibility.

As Ginger Gregg Duggan, curator of contemporary art, observes, “at many points throughout history, art and fashion have shared a symbiotic relationship in which each discipline simultaneously inspires, encourages and competes with the other.”²² And his statement about the symbiosis between fashion and art is particularly relevant when it comes to the 1930’s and the 1990’s as McQueen’s collection, inspired by Surrealism, perfectly illustrates. Duggan further remarks, “the late 1990 mark a significant point in this development of a heightened art/fashion phenomenon that is more far-reaching in its effect, as it results in fashion show productions that communicate through the medium of performance art.”²³ If at first sight, the late 1930’s and the late 1990’s seem to be light-years apart, even at odds with one another, a closer look though informs that there are in fact striking similarities between both: these are periods at the juncture and on the edge, periods of increasing instability and insecurity. Commenting on these periods of cultural distress, societal shift, and economic transition, fashion historian Caroline Evans argues that fashion plays a significant role insofar as it crystallizes the ideals and anxieties of a time period:

Yet, although it is the business of cultural practitioners to speculate about questions of identity and community in a changing world, such concerns have not been the traditional domain of the fashion designer. Despite this, in periods in which ideas about the self seem to be unstable, or rapidly shifting, fashion itself can shift to center stage and play a leading role in constructing images and meanings, as well as articulating anxieties and ideals. The time and place could be fin-de siècle Vienna, Paris of the 1930s, or 1990s London: each has a relationship to modernity and to technological change and its impact on sensibilities. These sensibilities may be described as the decentered subjects of the inter-war years or the emergent identities of 1990s cyberculture. What is significant in each case is the role which fashion plays in articulating contemporary concerns about the self and the world.²⁴

22 Ginger Gregg Duggan, “The Greatest Show on Earth: A Look at Contemporary Fashion Shows and Their Relationship to Performance Art” in *Fashion Theory*, Volume 5, Issue 3 (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2000), 243.

23 Duggan, “The Greatest Show on Earth,” 244.

24 Evans, *Fashion at the Edge*, 5.

The fascination with the abject and with a body wearing the signs of trauma and wounds as clothes is the thread that runs through McQueen's *Bellmer la poupée*. The designer's collection, avant-garde fashion design looking back at a Surrealist artist and a designer, illustrates Evans theory of fashion images as metaphors, i.e. complex images dense with signs and meaning, as she explains:

Benjamin's text [*Arcades Project*] implicitly recognizes the pictorial and, particularly, emblematic nature of fashion. If the fetishized commodity became image in the late twentieth century, it began to function more like a Renaissance emblem than a commodity per se, as the image became flooded with meaning. Like Renaissance and Baroque emblem books, modern fashion gives us a collection of dislocated images in which many narratives, histories and images are condensed. Fashion images, like emblems or metaphors, are by their very nature densely packed with meanings which may be both complex and contradictory. Their interpretation is inevitably marked by the author's subjectivity. Yet, because they also function in the modern period as a 'semiotic consolidation of capitalism', one can begin to trace connections, re-seeing the past through the filter of present concerns, allowing fragments from the past to illuminate the present.²⁵

Borrowing from German philosopher Walter Benjamin his theory of dialectical images, Evans elaborates on her concept of fashion images as dialectical images, whose meaning is in a constant flow of transformation, when she writes:

These dialectical images were not based on simple comparisons between past and present; rather they created a more complex historical relay of themes. For Benjamin, the relationship between images of the past and the present worked like the montage technique of cinema. The principle of montage is that a third meaning is created by the juxtaposition of two images, rather than any immutable meaning inhering in each image. Benjamin conceived of this relationship as a dialectical one: the motifs of the past and the present functioned as thesis and antithesis. The flash of recognition of the historical object within a charged force field of past and present was the dialectical image that transformed both.²⁶

Evans is of great significance for my analysis of McQueen's collection because she is one of the few scholars who notice the shift of the role of image in fashion occurring in the late 1990's. Commenting on the dematerialization of the fashion image, she writes:

²⁵ Caroline Evans, "Yesterday's Emblems and Tomorrow's Commodities" in *Fashion Cultures. Theories, Explorations and Analysis*. Ed. by Stella Bruzzi and Pamela Church Gibson (New York: Routledge, 2000), 100.

²⁶ Evans, "Yesterday's Emblems and Tomorrow's Commodities," 102.

Thus, in the technological and information revolution of the late twentieth century, the role of image in fashion shifted. No longer mere representation, the image frequently became the commodity itself, in the form of exclusive fashion shows, internet websites, television programs and a new kind of fashion magazine [...] New media and increased fashion coverage made previously elite fashion accessible to mass audience, but only as image, never as object. Throughout the 1990s the fashion show as a genre became increasingly spectacular, sometimes seeming to have evolved into pure performance in the extravagant shows of designers like Alexander McQueen and John Galliano, evoking Susan Sontag's claim that "a society becomes modern when one of its chief activities is producing and consuming images."²⁷

And since from the 1990s on the object of desire in fashion is no longer commodity as phantasmagoria but its fetishized image, one understands the increasing need for spectacular fashion shows. Thus, what other venue is more suited to produce a spectacle, project dialectical images, and produce shock effects on its spectators than a fashion show? A fashion show by definition is a utopia: it is a non-space where for a fairly short period of time (usually around fifteen minutes for a ready-to-wear collection) time is suspended. Thus, the shock effect of these dialectical images on the viewer, who is detached from time and space and enthralled by the spectacle of fashion, is even more forceful. Comparing fashion shows with theater performances, Duggan notices that McQueen "earned a reputation for fashion shows that read like sequences of dream images or fantastical visions."²⁸ The fashion show carefully designed and staged by McQueen, I argue, is precisely the place where these dialectical images happen, where images of the past collide with those of the present and create new associations and new meanings, often in an aggressive, violent manner. If McQueen's show *Bellmer la poupée* does read like a dream sequence, as Duggan suggests, then I would posit that the designer confronts his audience with nightmarish visions and traumatic images of the macabre. McQueen's shows were carefully designed to shock their audience and provoke visceral reactions – after all fashion implies the body – as Andrew Bolton, the curator of the Alexander McQueen: "Savage Beauty" exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, points out:

²⁷ Ibid., 97.

²⁸ Duggan, "The Greatest Show on Earth," 244.

McQueen's runway shows, which suggested avant-garde installations and performance art, provoked powerful, visceral emotions. His friend and mentor Isabella Blow [...] believed McQueen to be 'the only designer to make his audiences react emotionally to a show, be it happy, sad, repelled, or disgusted. McQueen himself once remarked, 'I don't want to do a cocktail party, I'd rather people left my shows and vomited. I prefer extreme reactions'. To a large extent, the emotional responses to McQueen's presentations were a consequence of their dramatic scenarios, which often hinged on subjects that tapped into our cultural anxieties and uncertainties. Indeed, McQueen viewed his collections as journalistic, commenting, 'I'm making points about my time, about the times we live in. My work is a social document about the world today'.²⁹

Mainly relying on the shock effect of his fashion shows for publicity – the label was not launching any advertising campaign until the tragic death of the designer in 2010 – McQueen's collections often stroke a nerve, stirred controversy, and were the target of numerous attacks by the press. Obviously, *Bellmer la poupée* was no exception to the rule and the image of a black model limping on the runway because of a metal frame attached to her limbs caused an outrage in the press [Fig. 45 & 46].

The simplicity and solemnity of the *Bellmer la poupée* runway, consisting on white panels reminiscent of projection screens, clash with the colorful fashion collection and maintain the spectator's focus on the models and their clothes. The presence of the water element with a 150-yard pool of water 2 inches deep, through which the models splash their way, that is traditionally associated with femininity, alludes to fluidity as an allegory of inconstancy and transience: a memento mori as reminder of the ephemeral condition of fashion and the human body. Simon Costin, jewelry and set designer on the *Bellmer la Poupée* collection, remembers from his collaboration with McQueen in particular their common wish to challenge the audience:

Bellmer La Poupée was the first time I designed a proper set for Lee [Alexander McQueen]. [...] We asked ourselves, 'what can we do to challenge the audience?' Lee wanted the models walking through water, and I had wanted to use it for ages. My aim was to make the surface of the runway look like a sheet of glass. We built a frame of about 2 feet high and 150 feet long, like a giant shallow pool. To achieve

²⁹ Andrew Bolton, Preface to *Alexander McQueen: Savage Beauty* (New Haven: The Metropolitan Museum of Art/Yale University Press, 2011), 12.

the powerful reflection I wanted, the lining had to be black. It was about creating a reflection, but given the amount of water, we needed it to be held at a venue with a concrete floor so if there were leakage, it wouldn't cause any damage.³⁰

McQueen's intent to turn the runway into a giant mirror in which each model's image is being reflected and immediately blurred after each one's passage, not only confronts fashion with its inherent narcissism, vanity, and (ultimately) mortality, but it also delivers a critique of the blurred, distorted body image triggered by the fashion industry with its circulation of unrealistic images. By forcing the audience to look into the mirror, McQueen confronts them with macabre images they are reluctant to look at and reveals fashion as the realm of lethal appearances: after all, as we know from the myth of Narcissus, mirroring surfaces are deceitful. With his use of Baroque allegories (mirror as memento mori), Romantic motifs (models as uncanny doppelgängers) and Surrealist sensibility (shock value), McQueen's show do assault the audience with violent dialectical images that not only connect the past with the present but also critique the present through the past, as Evans explains: "Contemporary fashion images are bearers of meaning, and, as such stretch simultaneously back to the past and forward into the future."³¹



Fig. 45 Alexander McQueen,
Bellmer la poupée, 1996



Fig. 46 Alexander McQueen,
Bellmer la poupée, 1996

30 Judith Watt, *Alexander McQueen: The Life and the Legacy* (New York: Harper Collins Books, 2012), 100.

31 Evans, "Yesterday's Emblems and Tomorrow's Commodities," 107.

One of the most provocative images from *Bellmer la poupée* – one burnt in the collective memory of the late 1990’s – is the sight of black model Debra Shaw walking contorted in a metal frame fixed to her elbows and knees by manacles. The image of the only black model cast for the show in shackles with its overt allusion to slavery caused quite a stir in the media [Fig. 45 & 46]. Commenting on the designer’s reaction to the attacks, Evans writes, “Disavowing the obvious connotation of slavery, just as he disavowed the accusations of misogyny in [his 1995 collection] *Highland Rape*, McQueen claimed he wanted the restricting body jewelry to produce the jerky and mechanical movement of a doll or puppet.”³² Since the source of inspiration for McQueen’s 1996 collection is German Surrealist Hans Bellmer and his dolls, the artistic reference seems logical. However, I argue that there is more to this image than obvious historical and cultural references, and that may explain the malaise and discomfort it generated back then. A closer look at the black, see-through fishnet dress, embedded with sequins, that leaves the model’s arms and legs uncovered and reveals her breasts and torso, recalls another dress from the collection, namely the white sheer sequin dress with which McQueen opened his show [Fig. 47 & 48].



Fig. 47 Alexander McQueen,
Bellmer la poupée, 1996

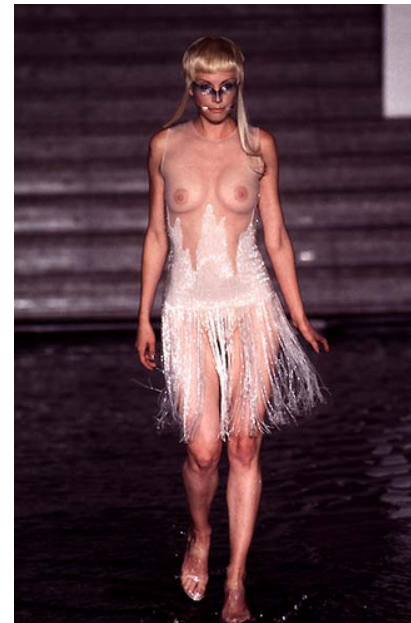


Fig. 48 Alexander McQueen,
Bellmer la poupée, 1996

³² Evans Caroline. 032c. Issue #7 – Summer 2004: At War With the Obvious. (<http://032c.com/archive/magazine/no7/>)

Read side by side, the similarities of their design are striking: both gowns are fringed and embedded with sequins, and both cover the body as much as they uncover it. Both dresses display physical and sexual violence inflicted upon the body of their female wearer since the fabric seems to have been torn and ripped off. Each one of the two images completes the other as mirror each other: the black model in the black fishnet dress is the doppelgänger of the white model in the white sheer sequin dress. The metallic frame attached to the limbs of one model and restraining her movements strangely echoes the metallic brace encircling the mouth of the other and preventing her from speaking [Fig. 47 & 48].

Although it certainly does restrict movements, the metallic frame, designed by McQueen for his collection, does also maintain the woman's legs apart and spread open, as the following editorial shot for a fashion magazine shows [Fig. 49 & 50]. The frame attached to the body of the naked model, retouched to look like a plastic doll – another reference to the title of the collection where this fashion piece is from – suggests a body lying on a gynecological exam table and ready to be examined.



Fig. 49 Alexander McQueen,
Bellmer la poupée, 1996

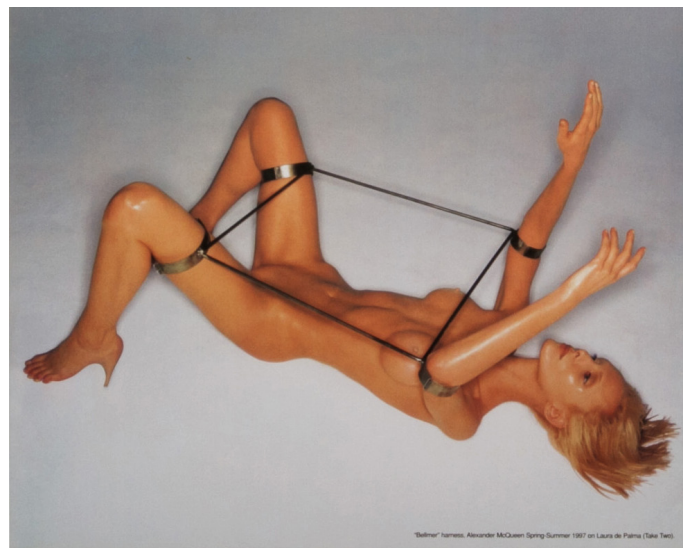


Fig. 50 Alexander McQueen,
Bellmer la poupée, 1996

One could as well associate the plain white color of the runway with the sterility of a hospital or a laboratory where surgical operations are being performed and tests conducted. Besides, the metallic structures worn by some of the models as head coifs do remind of surgical instruments and prosthesis [Fig. 51 & 52]. The desire to probe female anatomy and look inside the woman's body is a thread that runs through McQueen's collection and the designer shares this voyeuristic drive with German Surrealist Hans Bellmer, who obsessively explores the female body in his doll photographs and erotic drawings.



Fig. 51 Alexander McQueen,
Bellmer la poupée, 1996



Fig. 52 Alexander McQueen,
Bellmer la poupée, 1996

By inserting openings and cuts into women's clothes with the help of zippers, the designer uses fashion to probe female anatomy while giving the viewer a glimpse into the interiority of the body. The display of skin and flesh obtained through the use of sheer, see-through fabrics challenges the primary function of fashion, insofar as the clothes no longer fulfill their protective, concealing function, and uncovers the body in its raw materiality [Fig. 53-54].

McQueen's fashion design in *Bellmer la poupée* cuts and opens the body to reveal it in its sheer flesh and blood materiality. And in doing so, McQueen eroticizes the violence inflicted upon the female body: the metal frame attached to Debra Shaw's body as well as



Fig. 53 Alexander McQueen,
Bellmer la poupée, 1996



Fig. 54 Alexander McQueen,
Bellmer la poupée, 1996

the leather and metallic head coifs worn by some of the models also recall accessories used in bondage and sadomasochistic practices, in order to single out body parts and orifices [Fig. 49-52]. But the designer also eroticizes (and aestheticizes) the wounded, mutilated body itself, as a still from the fashion show illustrates [Fig. 55].



Fig. 55 Alexander McQueen,
Bellmer la poupée, 1996

An Asian female model, whose upper body has been immobilized in a sort of couture straitjacket, walks on the runway, bringing to mind an image of violence and suffering. Her oversized pink, silk jacket with flower motifs makes her torso look stiff and gives her the appearance of a doll ready to be manipulated [Fig. 55]. Obviously, the jacket restricting the arms' movements echoes another model's metal frame restraining her from walking and it goes without saying that both images quote one another [Fig. 49]. Immobilized in the distorted rigid jacket, her arms appear to be dislocated and their sight conjures up an image of physical pain. McQueen confronts the audience with the image of a severely wounded, distorted, maybe even handicapped body, a body type traditionally at odds with the fashion aesthetics of a perfectly shaped body. By designing clothes whose mere function is to reshape the female body and reconfigure human anatomy, the designer displays a fashion aesthetics that is very similar to the one underlying Bellmer's doll project.

The handwritten inscription "McQueen was ere 96" in scarlet letters, marked on the back of a sleeveless top, must also be read along the lines of physical violence and corporeal pain: carved on a sheer, flesh toned tank top, the designer imprints his bloody signature onto the model's back in a way similar to the torture and execution device described in Kafka's Penal Colony [Fig. 56]. And he also signifies his presence on/in this female body



Fig. 56 Alexander McQueen,
Bellmer la poupée, 1996

by this inscription of his signature cut in the flesh of his victim, like the perpetrator of a Lustmord (sexual murder).

McQueen's cut was his signature as he developed a distinctive style of tailoring for which he became famous: razor sharp, its seams traced the body's contours like surgical incisions, skimming it to produce pointed lapels and sharp shoulders.³³ Commenting on McQueen's cutting technique, Vogue stylist Isabelle Blow, who happened to be the designer's very first patron before becoming his friend and muse, said in an interview:

What attracted me to Alexander was the way he takes ideas from the past and sabotages them with his cut to make them thoroughly new and in the context of today. It is the complexity and severity of his approach to cut that makes him so modern. He is like a Peeping Tom in the way he slits and stabs at the fabric to explore all the erogenous zones of the body.³⁴

Interestingly, Blow's description of the fashion designer as a surgeon and butcher as well as her association of violence and eroticism evoke the mythical figure of Jack the Ripper, the notorious White Chapel serial killer of prostitutes of East London during the Victorian Age. Because Jack the Ripper was famous for the precision of his cuts on his victims' body (he was cutting their throat, before removing their bodily organs), the comparison with McQueen, who was also famous for the perfect cut of his clothes – he was coined “the best tailor of the world” – makes perfect sense. The fact that the designer entitled his graduation collection at Central Saint Martins “Jack the Ripper Stalks His Victims” strengthens the connection to and identification with this killer figure. Like Jack the Ripper, McQueen cuts fabric as if it were flesh and the cleavage of dresses and split in the jumpsuits look like open wounds [Fig. 57 & 58].

It is worth observing that the head coifs designed by milliner Dai Rees throw into relief the gaping orifices created by McQueen's fashion design [Fig. 26 & 59]. “Le sexe se cache pour laisser à découvert le visage,” (“sex hides itself to lay bare the face”) writes

³³ Caroline Evans, “Fashion: Alexander McQueen.”

³⁴ Isabella Blow in Sarajane Hoare, “God Save McQueen”, *Harpers Bazar*, June 1996. Cited in Bancroft, *Fashion and Psychoanalysis*, 97.

psychoanalyst Lemoine-Luccioni about the concealing function of clothes. In the case of McQueen's collection, the viewer's gaze cannot rest onto the model's face, either masked or hidden by Rees' elaborated hat design, and thus he is forced to look at and into these female wounds. i.e. he is forced to cast a penetrating gaze into the vulva [Fig. 58-60].³⁵



Fig. 57 Alexander McQueen, *Bellmer la poupée*, 1996

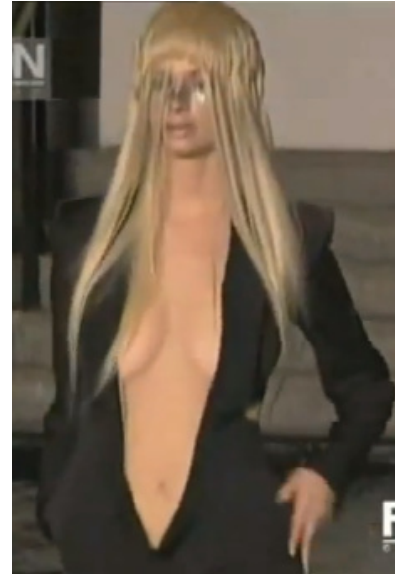


Fig. 58 Alexander McQueen, *Bellmer la poupée*, 1996

The most recurrent pattern of McQueen's collection *Bellmer la poupée* is the uncovering of the female body, the showing of openings and gaps achieved through cuts. It seems that the mere function attributed to his fashion design is not only to create these gaps, but also to frame them in order to throw them into relief. McQueen's design intentionally tears off the veil that traditionally covers and conceals the female body, displays in the open woman's gaping wound, and reveals Woman as a lack. That is the point Bancroft makes when she argues:

McQueen here is staging a brutality of feminine experience, one in which the usual constitution of woman as object a by couture is in fact framed by a violent corporeality that threatens the very structure of this constitutions. Here the violence of castration is writ large, and on the body too, by clothing that more usually veils, covers, screens off. The gap between the body and clothing, and the body and the self, is usually denied by couture, with its taxonomy of completeness, but it is exploited in creative terms by the avant-garde.³⁶

³⁵ Lemoine-Luccioni, *La Robe*, 69.

³⁶ Alison Bancroft, *Fashion and Psychoanalysis: Styling the Self* (New York: I.B. Tauris Ed., 2012), 100.



Fig. 59 Alexander McQueen,
Bellmer la poupée, 1996



Fig. 60 Alexander McQueen,
Bellmer la poupée, 1996

McQueen blatantly conjures up the terrifying image of castration on the runway, and paradoxically, in designing fashion that exhibits women as castrated, he empowers them with the phallus: armored in McQueen's design, women convey fear, which protects them from a voyeuristic, objectifying male gaze. "McQueen wants a woman in his design to provoke fear," recalls Bancroft, "to be so fabulous that you wouldn't dare lay hand on her."³⁷ McQueen's desire to design a fashion that presents women both as castrated and phallic, strangely resonates with Bellmer's artistic agenda exploring the permutability of body parts and reversibility of sexual organs.

The obsession with reconfiguring the human body and reshaping female anatomy in particular, which McQueen takes over from Bellmer's dolls, is also a theme the Dutch conceptual fashion designers Victor & Rolf investigate in their 1999/2000 Haute Couture show *Russian Doll*. While McQueen's interest is geared toward the interiority of the female body, Victor & Rolf explore its exteriority in their Haute Couture collection. In fact, the

³⁷ Bancroft, *Fashion and Psychoanalysis*, 96.

Dutch designers play with the idea of reforming the female figure by coating it in layers, in a manner reminiscent of Russian nesting dolls. Since graduating from the Arnhem Academy of Art and Design in the Netherlands, Viktor Horsting and Rolf Snoeren have been committed to blurring the line between art and fashion – an approach that is readily apparent in their *Russian Doll* show.

Viktor & Rolf's fashion show begins with a small dark stage, the only illuminated object being a low revolving turntable with a pair of golden shoes on top. A female model, who looks particularly doll-like, is brought out in a burlap dress, walked out onto a platform and strapped into these shiny shoes by the designers themselves. Henceforth, the model stands motionless on the turntable and is swiveled around so that viewers can see her from all angles. Stripped of her agency and ability to control her own movement, she has been reduced to a mere spectacle. Instead of laying bare the female body, the Dutch designers dress the female model layer by layer – there are ten items of clothing in total – one over the other. Hints of eroticism come in the designers' manipulation of her body since they are the ones who fasten the clasps and do up the zippers. Viktor & Rolf do not simply place the garments on the model's body, but rather they primp and preen the clothing when they put it on her, adjusting it as they see fit.

With each layer she is dressed in, the model deviates farther and farther from her original human form to the extent that she bears no resemblance to her original figure. As the show continues, Viktor & Rolf dress the model in increasingly large and elaborate layers of clothing – a beautiful bejeweled dress with lace flowers and a ribbon on it, a dress embroidered with shimmering glass fibers, and several other dresses and coatdresses that culminate with a massive bell-shaped jute cape covering the model's entire body and completely concealing her arms and legs, leaving only her head visible. As fashion historian Ingrid Loschek observes, “after the model had been over-dressed with ten items of clothing and little more than her face was still visible, she was transformed into a textile object of

applied art.” As each successive layer of clothing is added to the model, her shoulders become increasingly built-up, her waist increases in size, and her arms and legs become more and more covered [Fig 61].



Fig. 61 Victor & Rolf,
Russian Doll, 1999-2000

This has the effect of reducing the humanness of the model, rendering her more like a mannequin – whose Middle Dutch etymology “mannekijn,” means “little man” or “little doll”. The model in *Russian Doll* is completely overformed, even deformed by the many layers of clothing that adorn her body. As Loscheck points out, “the emphasis is not on the action of dressing up; the important thing is its objectifying and sculpturalising impact. Ultimately, this is a visualization of an overforming or deforming process incorporated into the everyday action of dressing.” By piling so many layers of luxurious clothing on the model, Viktor & Rolf allude to the Spanish stiff fashion from the second half of the sixteenth century and introduce the theme of inapproachability and immobility. In their attempt at reshaping the female body through the overwhelming amount of clothing placed thereupon, the designers contain and control the latter since as Loscheck states, the model is “made incapable of action, including an inability to continue dressing or undressing.”

After each garment is put on, the designers back away and the model's platform is rotated to display her new figure to the audience [Fig 62].



Fig. 62 Victor & Rolf,
Russian Doll, 1999-2000

Like the McQueen's manacled black model, forced to walk like a puppet due to the metallic structure restraining her movements, so is Viktor & Rolf's white model shackled to her turntable by the weight of clothing forced upon her: on the one hand, both are subjected to manipulation and objectification by the male designers, while on the other, they are equipped with an armor that makes them appear phallic and inapproachable.

CONCLUSION

LAURIE SIMMONS AND *THE LOVE DOLL*



Portrait by Tim Walker, *Vogue Magazine*, 1997

The Love Doll, a series of photographs by American photographer Laurie Simmons will conclude my study of “Man-made Dolls in Modern German Culture and Their Afterlife in Postmodern Visual Culture.” After looking at dolls crafted by male artists in various media, such as a short story by E.T.A. Hoffmann, paintings by Oskar Kokoschka, photographs by Hans Bellmer, and fashion by Alexander McQueen, it is about time to end my discussion of dolls with a female artist. As a female photographer who has been interested in dolls throughout her career, Simmons reappropriates the various doll projects undertaken successively by a writer, a painter, a photographer, and a fashion designer, which makes her body of work fascinating.

In 2009, Simmons started with a new series entitled *The Love Doll*, featuring a life-size sex doll, which documents from day one her evolving relationship with a latex doll in the hybrid form of a diary and photo journal. On a family trip to Japan, Simmons discovered love dolls and was immediately fascinated as she relates herself:

It was on the second trip to Japan that [my daughter] Grace saw a poster for a love doll and they ended up at the showroom full of love dolls in many shapes and sizes. We realized it was a super high-end sex doll. But the thing that struck me was that it really was a life-size doll. It was beautifully crafted, unlike the sex dolls that they sell in the US, which have a crass appeal. This was like looking at a beautiful sculpture. For me, finding a life-size doll after working with small figurines was like a dream come true because it meant that I could work in human scale for the first time.¹

First, Simmons decided to order one of these life size sex dolls from Japan (of Asian race) before opting for a second one (of Caucasian race) a month later. As he recollects, these high-end customized latex dolls “could be bought and arrived packaged in a box, a woman/girl entering your home as a commodity ready to be used and fetishized. The love doll is originally produced to be a muted surrogate body, a substitute for a human being manufactured solely for pleasure and desire.” A few weeks later, the surrogate arrived at

¹ Charlotte Cripps, “Look out Lena Dunham, here comes mom! Laurie Simmons is set to direct a movie with a ‘small role’ for the creator of *Girls*” in *The Independent*. Wednesday October 14, 2014. <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/features/look-out-lena-dunham-here-comes-mom-laurie-simmons-is-set-to-direct-a-movie-with-a-small-role-for-the-creator-of-girls-9372470.html>

her place in a crate, dressed in a see-through slip, and accompanied by a separate box containing an engagement ring and her genitalia. Her doll's photographs bear some similarities with the works by Hoffmann, Bellmer, and McQueen and she makes an overt reference to Kokoschka's influence on her work. The major difference being that Simmons is a female artist and that she was far less involved in the process of doll making than her male counterparts.

Another striking singularity about Simmons' photographs lies in her female gaze at the doll: among the forty-three photographs that make up the catalogue of her exhibit, there is solely one depicting the doll in the nude with a dog and one showing the doll topless in her bubble bath as most of the other images show the doll dressed in contemporary fashion and mimicking every day situations such as working, eating desserts and sweets, sleeping and day dreaming, swimming and bathing...etc. What makes her photographs of a latex sex doll stand out is her discomfort and her resistance to showcasing the doll's nudity – a malaise not in the least shared by her male counterparts (Kokoschka, Bellmer, McQueen) who all take great pleasure in disrobing their dolls and laying bare its nudity. In the diary entry dated Day 12 with the caption "Bathtub," introducing the photograph of the love doll taking a bath, Simmons writes [Fig. 1]:

Saw her pubic hair for the first time. I don't particularly like seeing her naked, dressing or undressing her, particularly dislike seeing her with her wig off. Today's discovery: I can't change her wig and make her into other people. She's becoming more of a real person; she's one person. She has good days and bad days, like all of us [...].²

A later entry, dated Day 29, preceding the photograph entitled "Nude with a Dog," reads as follows [Fig. 2]:

I resist photographing the doll naked. A nude. Okay I will try. We set the doll up on her knees in my dining room. And I start. Uncomfortable with what I am getting, until my mother's dog walks by and stops at the doll's side. Suddenly, the girl has a reason to be on the floor – naked or not, she is playing with her dog. I've always

² Laurie Simmons, *The Love Doll. Days 1-36* (New York: Published by Baldwin Gallery/Salon 94 Gallery/Tomio Koyama Gallery/Wilkinson Gallery, 2012), 33.

loved the paintings by Fragonard, Gainsborough, Joshua Reynolds of girls and their dogs.³



Fig. Laurie Simmons, *The Love Doll*,
Day 12 (Bathtub 2), 2010



Fig. 2 Laurie Simmons, *The Love Doll*,
Day 29 (Nude with Dog), 2011

Because of her insistence on humanizing and contextualizing *The Love Doll* in her photographs as well as her resistance to exposing its nude body, the games Simmons plays

³ Simmons, *The Love Doll*, 79.

with her sex doll are poles apart from the erotic games Bellmer and Kokoschka play with their respective dolls. In fact, Simmons' gaze appears to be more protective than sexual: although the love doll was made in Japan, Simmons' photographs do not engage with lolicon manga in any way.⁴ It is quite the opposite since in many of her photographs the doll takes the appearance and the stance of a regular teenage high school girl in the prime of her youth, beauty, and purity. Simmons is by far more invested in documenting, in the span of thirty-six days, the transformation of the doll from object to subject, a metamorphosis culminating in the dressing up of the sex doll as a geisha [Fig. 3 & 4]. The last nine photographs depict the doll in a geisha costume, wearing make up, a silk kimono and sitting elegantly on her knees on the floor with her hands folded on her lap.



Fig. 3 Laurie Simmons, *The Love Doll*,
Day 31 (Geisha), 2011

Closing her exhibit catalogue with the traditional image of a geisha is certainly a means for Simmons to come full circle since it was in Japan that the photographer stumbled upon a latex sex doll for the first time. But it also represents a successful attempt at blurring

⁴ The Japanese term “Lolicon” stands for Lolita complex and describes the attraction to prepubescent girls. Lolicon manga blend childlike characteristics with erotic undertones.

the line between a human and an artifact since the photographs show how difficult it has become to distinguish between the real geisha and the doll [Fig. 4].



Fig. 4 Laurie Simmons, *The Love Doll*,
Day 36 (Geisha Tattoo), 2011

By displaying the confusion between doll and woman, animating the doll through the process of image-making, and reflecting upon the construction of the viewer's position as voyeur, Simmons already treads on familiar territory. Indeed, one can easily link her artistic endeavor to Hofmann's story of Nathanael and Kokoschka's making and painting of his Alma-doll, as well as to Bellmer's photographs of his ball-jointed doll and McQueen's dressing his models as living dolls.

While most of the forty-three photographs by Simmons have a loose connection to the doll makers I have so far examined in my work, a few nevertheless resonate strongly with Kokoschka and his Alma doll. For example, the photograph below dated Day 27/Day I and bearing the title "New in Box" reads like an illustration of a letter by Kokoschka to his doll maker Hermine Moos [Fig. 5]. The image representing Simmons' second white Caucasian love doll wearing a lacy slip and posed sitting in a brown cardboard box, is introduced by the following entry:

I never intended to shoot the second Love Doll the way she arrived, packaged in a cardboard box inside a wooden crate. But seeing the colors, her hair, eyes, and the color of the cardboard – it makes so much sense as a picture. She appears newly

hatched in her box, excited to be here.⁵



Fig. 5 Laurie Simmons, *The Love Doll*,
Day 27/Day 1 (New in Box), 2010

Looking straight ahead with a blank stare, the doll resembles an unwrapped present. Both her long brown hair and her slip bring to mind the sensual image of the beloved Alma Mahler Kokoschka captured in a life-size nude painting as well as the haptic vision he had for his Alma-doll - a vision he strives to materialize on the canvas after the failure of his doll project. The painter, already anticipating the dress-up games he would play with his new sex toy, had ordered lingerie from Paris. In his letter to Moos dated February 22, 1919 a convalescing Kokoschka asks the doll maker to pack the doll and to ship it to him:

I now ask you for the final favor, dear Miss Moss to have the doll shipped to me by express at the highest level of insurance, packed with the utmost care to protect her against damp and damage and theft.⁶

The Love doll arrives in a cardboard box carrying her female genitalia in a box, thus staging a *mise-en-abîme*. And since the term “box” is slang for vagina, Simmons shows that opening a box is already engaging in a sexual and voyeuristic activity.

⁵ Simmons, *The Love Doll*, 73.

⁶ Susan Keegan, *The Eye of God. A life of Kokoschka* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1999), 114.

Another photograph, dated Day 4 and entitled “The Red Dog and the Gold Dress” shows the love doll wearing a grey flannel bustier gown with a gold skirt and white socks, comfortably seated in an armchair by a wooden table and petting a red plush dog [Fig. 6].



Fig. 6 Laurie Simmons, *The Love Doll*,
Day 4 (Red Dog), 2009

Once again, Simmons’ shot of a latex doll gently stroking a soft stuffed toy dog brings to mind Kokoschka since she shares a similar interest for the sense of touch and, like the painter, she investigates haptic visuality: the hard cover and the photographs of the exhibit catalogue of her work are printed on a special paper to evoke the soft touch of her silicon-made love doll’s skin.

The second of the two “New in Box” photographs dated Day 27/Day 1, depicting a close-up of the doll’s face surrounded by bubble wrap, resonates strongly with Kokoschka once more [Fig. 7]. Commonly used for packing fragile items and for providing cushioning to sensitive objects, the bubble wrap encircling the doll’s head points not only to its frailty as

a toy but also to its entertaining quality since bubble wrap is often used as amusement due to its popping sound when burst.



Fig 7 Laurie Simmons, *The Love Doll*,
Day 27/Day 1 (New in Box, Head), 2010

This close up of the Love Doll's truncated head triggers off the gruesome image of a beheading and the bubble wrap uncovers the violent and sadistic treatment inflicted upon the doll's female body. This narrative brings to mind the story of the demise of Kokoschka's doll that ended up decapitated in a garbage bin although the motives for its execution differ. In the painter's account, the doll was showered with red wine and decapitated during a summer party in Dresden in 1920 while his biographer Keegan claims that "the strain of [the doll's] being passed from one drunken hand to the next took its toll: her head fell off and lay, symbolically, in a pool of red wine. The next day the dust men came in the grey light of dawn and carried her away."⁷

As much as this photograph prefigures the doll's end, it may as well signify its beginning, i.e. its birth, with the Love Doll's head popping out of the bubble wrap and cardboard box as if emerging from a womb. The doll's truncated head as a symbol of death and birth obviously stands for its immortality, which explains its eternal return in the artistic production of human artifacts since the Enlightenment. But foremost it illustrates the impossibility to put an end to the doll since its dismemberment is the very condition of

⁷ Keegan, *The Eye of God*.121.

its recreation and rebirth, as Bellmer so forcefully demonstrates with his doll.

The mise-en scene of Simmons' photographs and her staging of the Love Doll in tableaux vivants in indoor and outdoor settings strongly recall Bellmer's photographs. The following image representing the second *Love Doll* lying in the nude on her bed, wearing her long brown waved hair on the side, and looking down meditatively at her turquoise pumps, that are lying on the floor, while grabbing one shoe with her extended right arm [Fig. 8].



Fig. 8 Laurie Simmons, *The Love Doll*,
(Turquoise Pumps) 2010

The chiaroscuro effect of the photograph, achieved through dramatic lighting, and the positioning of the viewer as voyeur, who is intruding into an intimate bedroom scene while getting an eyeful of a naked body, immediately brings to mind Bellmer's series *Les Jeux de la poupée*. The focus on the doll's nude right arm, and her joints in particular, recalls Bellmer's ball-jointed doll as well as his essay "Notes on the Subject of the Ball Joint." [Fig. 9]



Fig. 9 Hans Bellmer, *La demi-poupée*, 1971

The presence next to the latex doll of a marionette with its strings hanging down from the mattress paralleling the doll's hair, offers an interesting twist on Kleist's essay "Über das Marionettentheater" since the doll's inert body position as well as its soft and rosy complexion appear here to be by far more gracious than the puppet's.

Because Simmons through her lens regards the latex doll as a teenage girl and investigates the sense of touch in her photographs, her *Love Doll* series illustrates how germane the body of work by Germanic artists such as Kokoschka and Bellmer is. Their mute dolls still speak loudly about our narcissistic need for anthropomorphic artifacts and our yearning for an ideal human substitute. In fact, these man-made dolls and their narratives have never resonated so strongly with today's post-modern, capitalistic society in which the fragmentation of the human body, its commodification and instant consumption through technology has become common.

Simmons' photographs of the *Love Doll* dolls represent another seminal moment in the creative process of "doll making." The female photographer casts a different type of look at her sex doll since she does not sexualize nor deconstruct her as a mere product of male sexual fantasy. Unlike Louise Bourgeois experimenting with hermaphrodite body types or Cindy Sherman, who denounces the sexual fetishization of the female body in her *Sex Pictures*, Simmons seems to side with Kokoschka and Bellmer: she manages to pursue with her beautiful doll photographs the exploration of the sensory apparatus initiated by these male artists. By casting a maternal, loving gaze on her *Love Doll*, Simmons illustrates a novel game to play with the doll and, in doing so, illustrates the infinite creative possibilities this anthropomorphous toy offers for both men and women.

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