

# Surrealism, Post-War Theory and the Avant-Garde



17.15 - 19.00, Friday 27 November  
10.00 - 18.30, Saturday 28 November

Kenneth Clark Lecture Theatre, The Courtauld Institute of Art, Somerset House,  
Strand, London WC2R 0RN

## ABSTRACTS AND BIOGRAPHIES

### Professor Allan Stoekl (Penn State University)

#### *The Drift: Surrealism, Situationism and Postsustainable Strategies of Gleaning*

This talk will focus on the notion of the “drift” (la dérive) put forward by the situationists in the 1950s in France (and various other locales in Europe). Allan Stoekl is particularly interested in, and will discuss, the transformation in the logic of movement in the city, from the urban wandering of Breton and Aragon to the psychogeographical drift of Debord, Wolman, Michèle Bernstein, and Gilles Ivain. Stoekl is interested in both the strengths and weaknesses of the surrealist and situationist approaches to the city; for example, what Situationism adds to and modifies in Surrealism, and the weaknesses in turn of situationist ‘détournement’.

In the later section of the talk Stoekl will be concerned with recent American thinking of what could be called the postsustainable city, by writers such as the (paradoxically) anarchist criminologist Jeff Ferrell, who explicitly discusses the situationists. Stoekl will also discuss Michel de Certeau’s distinction between strategy and tactics, and consider how Ferrell’s analyses of such urban events as dumpster diving and Critical Mass rides help us to rethink the situationist project and understand the interrelation of strategies and tactics (an opposition already implicit in works of the situationists) in urban transformation.

Above all Stoekl will be concerned with the power of what he might call a postsituationist approach in a time of the evident failure of grand strategies (urban planning, ‘renewal’, automotive empowerment) and (under the Obama administration) the apparent trivialisation of sustainable tactics.

## **Michael Richardson (independent scholar)**

### *Events Around The Collapse Of The French Surrealist Group In 1969*

The reasons for the abrupt collapse of the French Surrealist Group in the early months of 1969 have never been adequately explained either by the surrealists themselves or by researchers who have delved into the history of surrealism. In this paper Michael Richardson will attempt to unravel some of the issues involved in the decision made by the surrealists to dissolve the group and the consequences that followed from it, taking into account the context of the period and the position of the surrealists in relation to the intellectual currents of the time.

## **Lucy Bradnock (Getty Research Institute)**

### *After Artaud: Surrealism and the California Avant-Garde*

In 1966, there appeared in the pages of the French journal *Tel Quel* a scathing attack on the poets of the so-called 'beat generation'. Its author, Paule Th evenin, based her disparaging critique on their treatment of the dissident Surrealist writer Antonin Artaud. He was fetishised, she claimed, for his madness and his drug addiction by American poets who did not understand the complexity of his oeuvre, subjecting his work to fragmentation, misrepresentation, and bad translation. It is a model that has long dogged discussions of Artaud and the West Coast, and of 1950s funk artists whose work is still too often characterised in these reductive terms. Through an examination of the work of Los Angeles artist Wallace Berman, this paper seeks to re-evaluate the processes by which his work was received on the West Coast; it finds in the spaces opened up by the processes of translation and mediation the kind of linguistic slippage that chimes more closely with Jacques Derrida's essay *La Parole Souffl e*, published in a special issue of *Tel Quel* devoted to Artaud in 1965. Derrida's writing on Artaud figures him as always already misquoted, his speech stolen even at the moment of its conception; thus to defend Artaud against translation becomes an act of impossible treachery. In the flickering repetition of Berman's verifax photo-collages, and the loose-leaf cards of the alternative publication *Semina*, Berman's Artaud appears, as Derrida's had in the pages of *Tel Quel*, as an elusive figure that is continually refigured, though always already lost again.

*Lucy Bradnock is a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Getty Research Institute. Her research, conducted under the auspices of the Getty project 'Pacific Standard Time', is devoted to art in post-war Los Angeles and Southern California during the 1950s and 1960s. Lucy submitted her PhD, entitled, After Artaud: Art in America, 1949-1965 to the University of Essex in 2009, following a BA and MA at The Courtauld Institute of Art. Her Article on Nancy Spero, Antonin Artaud and Jacques Derrida appeared in Papers of Surrealism in 2005, and she is a contributing author to the Getty publication Pacific Standard Time: Art in Los Angeles, 1945-1980, forthcoming in 2011.*

## **Steven Harris (University of Alberta, Canada)**

### *How Language Looks: On Asger Jorn and No l Arnaud's La Langue verte et la cuite, 1968*

Asger Jorn and No l Arnaud's *La Langue verte et la cuite*, published by Jean-Jacques Pauvert in the fall of 1968, was a critique of structuralism and more particularly of Claude L vi-Strauss' book *Le Cru et le cuit*, which had appeared in 1964. It is a response that takes the form of another book, of a very different kind, which emphasises visual image over verbal statement, and exuberant wordplay over sober discourse. The focus of the book is on the tongue – the unruly tongue of popular language and drunken excess – in keeping with its critique of the structuralist emphasis on linguistic systems. Jorn and

Arnaud, who first met in the revolutionary surrealist group in 1947, and whose paths crossed again on numerous occasions before their collaboration on *La Langue verte et la cuite*, had overlapping interests and concerns, including a political preference for popular forms of expression evident in the many reproductions of imagery carved by anonymous artists, or drawn by cartoonists, of people or animals showing their tongues. The photographic images constitute the largest part of the book, and the reproductions remain key to a book that criticizes a structural understanding of language by means of images, in which the tongue is shown to be a remarkably versatile organ.

### **Jill Fenton (Queen Mary, University of London)**

#### *Remapping Surrealism: Situationism and the City in the Sixties*

Between the publishing of the first and second editions of his *Critique of Everyday Life*, Henri Lefebvre had reconsidered his assessment of surrealism. Having previously adopted a theoretical position more closely aligned to the experimental projects of the situationists, that made him reproachful of the surrealists' 'poetic' critique of everyday life, he subsequently recalled his night-time wanders with the surrealists in Paris and in his critical thinking returned to formulating a poetic language that would provide glimpses of the limits and potential of situations while embracing the poetic moment. In May 1968 Lefebvre's works had barely entered the consciousness of pupils at the Lycée, yet during this period of revolutionary fervour, a pattern began to evolve in relation to them that was reminiscent of Lefebvre's theoretical journey. During May '68 the Lycée pupils were intent on making situations in the city – of locking up their head teacher and occupying his office, of renaming their classrooms after situationists and surrealist poets, of stealing from bookshops situationist and surrealist texts. As graduates of May '68 they evolved a post-situationist movement critical of current society, and experimental in its 'dérives' and 'détournement'. However, privately, one or two post-situationists continued to be attracted to the poetry of surrealism so that by the early 1990s they sought a place in surrealism that would enable them to express both their poetic spirit and experimental susceptibility. Such youthful energy brought to contemporary surrealism revolutionary poetics embracing of both situationist and surrealist practices, effectively, a remapping of surrealism.

In this paper, Jill Fenton will briefly outline the influence of the situationist movement on Henri Lefebvre's critical writing and his positionality on surrealism. Fenton will then link this with what she argues is a parallel theoretical journey of pupils at the Lycée whose activities in May '68 led them towards the evolving of post-situationism but who in later years sought to express their poetic sensibilities through a coming together of surrealism and situationist strategies.

*Jill Fenton's PhD, entitled Géographie Passionnelle: Contemporary Surrealism in Paris, was completed in July 2005. She has recently moved from teaching at the Department of Geography at Queen Mary University of London to become an honorary fellow while acting as Programme Director of the University of Connecticut in London. Her academic interests concern alternative geographical imaginations, urban utopianism and hope in the everyday life. She has published in leading international geography journals and some contemporary surrealist reviews.*

### **Alyce Mahon (University of Cambridge and Trinity College)**

#### *Poésie Directe: Jean-Jacques Lebel's Festivals of Free Expression*

When the Happenings artist Jean-Jacques Lebel conceived of 'poésie directe' he drew on the anarchistic practice of 'action directe', Antonin Artaud's theatre of cruelty, and the Surrealists' faith in the omnipotence of dream. From 1963 to 1967 he channelled those

influences into international Festivals of Free Expression, involving writers, actors and artists (including Ben, Erró, Dick Higgins, Taylor Mead, Daniel Pommereulle, Carolee Schneemann) which aimed for 'an enlarged understanding of what freedom means' in their collective spirit and assaultive strategies. This paper assesses the translation of Surrealist principles in the Festivals' poetry and politics, in the organic liaison between the artists and spectator, art and life, that they hoped to achieve, and in their unflagging faith in the power of erotic desire to transform the world.

### **Gavin Parkinson (The Courtauld Institute of Art)**

#### *Sex and Narrative in Alain Robbe-Grillet, Surrealism, and Neo-Dada*

Alain Robbe-Grillet's admiration for the Surrealist artists Paul Delavaux and René Magritte is as well-known as Surrealism's favourable reception of Robbe-Grillet's screenplay for the Alain Resnais film *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961). However, the indebtedness of the pioneer of the New Novel to core Surrealist theoretical texts such as the *Manifesto of Surrealism* (1924), key Surrealist ideas like 'objective chance,' and Surrealist games such as the 'exquisite corpse' remains unexplored in the scholarship on both the novelist and Surrealism. This connection is complicated and enriched by Robbe-Grillet's subsequent acknowledgement of his interest in Neo-Dada and Pop Art (the work of Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, and James Rosenquist) and by Surrealism's, at first, own favourable response and exhibition promotion of Neo-Dada and some strands of Pop in the fifties and early sixties. In the context of the intensification of and responses to consumer culture in America and Europe in that period, and the reflection of this in the fiction of other writers associated with the New Novel such as Michel Butor and Claude Simon, this paper considers the controversial sexual content and 'surreality' of Robbe-Grillet's narrative theory and practice alongside an examination of the direction taken by Surrealism and its art in the post-war period with reference to Neo-Dada and Pop.

### **Jonathan Eburne (Penn State University)**

#### *The Future of Irrevolution: Surrealism, Structuralism, and Cultural Studies*

This paper studies the fate of Surrealist intellectual and artistic practices in the post-war decades. It focuses in particular on the disparity between the surrealist movement's reception and the claims made by recent scholars on its behalf. That is, whereas the movement's discursive relations with major intellectual currents throughout the 20th century is broad and heterogeneous (spanning movements such as négritude and anti-colonialism, as well as tel quel, neo-Marxism, and punk), scholars have tended to define surrealism according to notions of liberation and revolution according to which the movement either succeeded only marginally or else failed disastrously. This paper seeks to unmoor Surrealism from the rhetoric of revolution so often marshalled by its advocates, epigones, and detractors alike, and instead to reconsider the terms under which an avant-garde movement might consider its historical impact. In doing so, Jonathan Eburne will focus on the Parisian surrealist journal of the early 1950s, *Médium*, in order to study the movement's post-war interest in the study of mediation, as well as its discursive ties to both phenomenology and the structuralist study of culture.

*Jonathan P. Eburne is Josephine Berry Weiss Early Career Professor in the Humanities and Assistant Professor of Comparative Literature and English at The Pennsylvania State University (USA). He is the author of Surrealism and the Art of Crime (Cornell UP, 2008).*

## Patrick ffrench (King's College London)

### *Morality of Revolt: Bataille, Surrealism, and Tel Quel*

*Tel Quel*, the quarterly journal which was the platform for the theoretical explosion of the 1960s and 1970s, and which championed a radical theory of textuality in which the 'practice of writing' (Heath) was seen as potentially transformative of history, knowledge, and symbolic space, was strategically obliged to distinguish itself through critique and polemic from the legacy of Surrealism. The critique of Surrealism on the part of *Tel Quel* also involved an affirmation of the (then) obscured figure of Georges Bataille, as well as Antonin Artaud, writers whose thought and practice was seen as radically different from those of the Surrealists. *Tel Quel* foregrounded this difference, emphasising Bataille's critique of Surrealism and insisting on the radical separation between Bataille and André Breton, for example. While the proponents of *Tel Quel* may in hindsight acknowledge the rhetorical and strategic value of this position, and adopt a more nuanced view, little light has been shed on Bataille's call, in the late 1940s, for a 'surréalisme plus large,' associated with a 'moralité de révolte,' which he found in pre-war Surrealism. In this instance, Bataille seeks to emphasise what he sees as an intransigent insistence on the sovereignty of literature, as against the demands of action. The discourse against which he seeks to position this 'morality of revolt' is Sartrean existentialism. In this paper Patrick ffrench will draw out the detail of Bataille's account of Surrealism and its potential, in the context of the immediate post-war. Patrick ffrench will also seek to place Bataille's thinking here in relation to Camus and Blanchot, two major figures in this context, and to show how this history can alter the picture we have of the 'time of theory.'