

On Ethnographic Surrealism

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The coupling of two realities, reconcilable in appearance, upon a plane which apparently does not suit them. . . .

———Max Ernst, “What is the Mechanism of Collage?” 1936¹

André Breton often insisted that surrealism was not a body of doctrines, or a definable idea, but an activity. The present essay is an exploration of ethnographic activity, set, as it must always be, in specific cultural and historical circumstances. I will be concentrating on ethnography and surrealism in France between the two world wars. To discuss these activities together—at times, indeed, to permit them to merge—is to question a number of common distinctions and unities. I am concerned less with charting intellectual or artistic traditions than with following some of the byways of what I take to be a crucial modern orientation toward cultural order. If in what follows I sometimes use familiar terms against the grain, my aim is to cut across retrospectively established definitions and to recapture, if possible, a situation in which ethnography is again something unfamiliar and surrealism not a bounded province of modern art and literature.

The orientation toward cultural order I am evoking cannot be neatly defined. It is more properly called “modernist” than modern, taking as its problem—and opportunity—the fragmentation and juxtaposition of cultural values. From its disenchanted viewpoint, stable orders of collective meaning appear to be constructed, artificial, and indeed often ideological or repressive. The sort of normality or common sense that can amass empires in its fits of absentmindedness or wander routinely into world wars is seen as a contested reality, to be subverted, parodied, and transgressed. In what follows I will suggest reasons for linking ethnographic activity to this set of critical attitudes, dispositions usually associated with the artistic avant-garde. In France particularly, the modern human sciences have not lost contact with the world of literature and art. And in the hothouse milieu of Parisian cultural life, no field of social or artistic research can long remain indifferent to influences or provocations from beyond its disciplinary boundaries. In the twenties and

My thanks to Richard Sieburth for his indispensable advice during the conception of this essay, and to George Stocking for a very helpful critical reading of the first draft.

¹ Max Ernst, *Beyond Painting*, Dorothea Tanning, trans. (New York: Wittenborn, Schultz, 1948), 13.

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thirties, as we shall see, ethnography and surrealism developed in close proximity.

I am using the term *surrealism* in an obviously expanded sense, to circumscribe an esthetic that values fragments, curious collections, unexpected juxtapositions—that works to provoke the manifestation of extraordinary realities drawn from the domains of the erotic, the exotic, and the unconscious. This set of attitudes cannot, of course, be limited to Breton's group; and the Surrealist Movement narrowly defined—with its manifestos, schisms, and excommunications—is not the concern here. Indeed, the figures I will be discussing were at best fellow travellers, or dissidents who broke with Breton. They partook, nonetheless, of the general disposition I am calling surrealist,² a tangled disposition foreshortened here in an attempt to disengage its ethnographic dimension. "Ethnography" and "surrealism" are not stable unities; and my subject is not, therefore, an overlapping of two clearly distinguishable traditions.³ Moreover, I have tried not to think of my topic as a conjuncture restricted to French culture of the twenties and thirties. The boundaries of art and science (especially the human sciences) are ideological and shifting, and intellectual history is itself enmeshed in these shifts—its genres do not remain firmly anchored. Changing definitions of art or science must provoke new retrospective unities, new ideal types for historical description. In this sense, "ethnographic surrealism" is a utopian construct, a statement at once about past and future possibilities for cultural analysis.

I THE ETHNOGRAPHIC SURREAL

In "The Storyteller," Walter Benjamin describes the transition from a traditional mode of communication based on continuous oral narrative and shared experience to a cultural style characterized by bursts of "information"—the photograph, the newspaper clip, the perceptual shocks of a modern city. Benjamin begins his essay with World War I:

A generation that had gone to school on a horse-drawn streetcar now stood under the open sky in a countryside in which nothing remained unchanged but the clouds, and

² My broad use of the term roughly coincides with Susan Sontag's view of surrealism as a pervasive—perhaps dominant—modern sensibility. See her *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), 51–84. For a treatment that distinguishes the specific tradition I am discussing from the surrealism of Breton's movement, see Jean Jamin, "Un sacré collège ou les apprentis sorciers de la sociologie," *Cahiers internationaux de sociologie*, no. 68 (1980), 5–30.

³ Research on the common ground of twentieth-century social science and the avant-garde is still undeveloped. Thus my discussion is very preliminary. On the French context: James Boon, *From Symbolism to Structuralism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1972); Jean Duvignaud, "Roger Cailliois et l'imaginaire," *Cahiers internationaux de sociologie*, no. 66 (1979), 91–97; Denis Hollier, ed., *Le collège de sociologie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1979); Jamin, "Un sacré collège"; *idem*, "Une initiation au réel: a propos de Segalen," *Cahiers internationaux de sociologie*, no. 66 (1979), 125–39; R. Lourau, *Le gai savoir des sociologues* (Paris: Union Générale des Editions, 1974); E. A. Tiryakian, "L'école durkheimienne et la recherche de la société perdue: la sociologie naissante et son milieu culturel," *Cahiers internationaux de sociologie*, no. 66 (1979), 97–114.

beneath the clouds, in a field of force of destructive torrents and explosions, was the tiny, fragile human body.⁴

Reality is no longer a given, a natural, familiar environment. The self, cut loose from its attachments, must discover meaning where it may—a predicament, evoked at its most nihilistic, that underlies both surrealism and modern ethnography. Earlier literary and artistic refractions of Benjamin's modern world are well known—the experience of Baudelaire's urban *flâneur*, Rimbaud's systematic sensual derangements, the analytic decomposition of reality begun by Cézanne and completed by the cubists, and especially Lautréamont's famous definition of beauty, "the chance encounter on a dissecting table of a sewing machine and an umbrella." "To see culture and its norms—beauty, truth, reality—as artificial arrangements, susceptible to detached analysis and comparison with other possible dispositions, is crucial to an ethnographic attitude."

In his classic *History of Surrealism*, Maurice Nadeau has stressed the formative impact of wartime experiences on the founders of the Surrealist Movement—Breton, Éluard, Aragon, Péret, Soupault.⁵ After Europe's collapse into barbarism and the manifest bankruptcy of the ideology of progress, after a deep fissure had opened between the experience of the trenches and the official language of heroism and victory, after the romantic rhetorical conventions of the nineteenth century had proved themselves incapable of representing the reality of the war, the world was permanently surrealist. Fresh from the trenches, Guillaume Apollinaire coined the term in a letter of 1917. His *Calligrammes*, with their fractured form and heightened attention to the perceived world, announced the postwar esthetic:⁶

The Victory above all will be
To see clearly at a distance
To see everything
Near at hand
And may all things bear a new name.

While for Fernand Leger:

The war had thrust me, as a soldier, into the heart of a mechanical atmosphere. Here I discovered the beauty of the fragment. I sensed a new reality in the detail of a machine, in the common object. I tried to find the plastic value of these fragments of our modern life.⁷

⁴ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 84.

⁵ Maurice Nadeau, *The History of Surrealism*, Richard Howard, trans. (New York: Macmillan, 1965): 1–3.

⁶ Guillaume Apollinaire, *Calligrammes*, Anne Hyde Greet, trans. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 341.

⁷ As quoted by Sontag, *On Photography*, 204. Paul Fussell's incisive study also stresses the initiation by World War I of a generation into a fragmented, "modernist" world: *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1975).

Before the war, Apollinaire had decorated his study with African “fetishes,” and in his long poem “Zone” these objects would be invoked as “des Christ d’une autre forme et d’une autre croyance.” For the Paris avant-garde, Africa (and to a lesser degree, Oceania and America) provided a reservoir of other forms and other beliefs. This suggests a second element of the ethnographic surrealist attitude, a belief that the Other (whether accessible in dreams, fetishes, or Lévy-Bruhl’s *mentalité primitive*) was a crucial object of modern research. Unlike the exoticism of the nineteenth century, which departed from a more or less confident cultural order in search of a temporary *frisson*, a circumscribed experience of the bizarre, modern surrealism and ethnography began with a reality deeply in question. Others appeared now as serious human alternatives; modern cultural relativism became possible. As artists and writers set about after World War I putting the pieces of culture together in new ways, their field of possible selection had drastically expanded. The “primitive” societies of the planet were increasingly available as aesthetic, cosmological, and scientific resources. This presupposed something more than an older Orientalism; it required modern ethnography. The postwar context was structured by a basically ironic experience of culture. For every local custom or truth, there was always an exotic alternative, a possible juxtaposition or incongruity. Below (psychologically) and beyond (geographically) any ordinary reality there existed another reality. Surrealism shared this ironic situation with relativist ethnography.

The term *ethnography* as I am using it here is evidently something different from the empirical research technique of a human science that in France was called “ethnology,” in England “social” and in America “cultural” anthropology. I am referring to a more general cultural predisposition which cuts through modern anthropological science and which it shares with modern art and writing. The ethnographic label suggests here a characteristic attitude of participant observation among the artifacts of a defamiliarized cultural reality. The surrealists were intensely interested by exotic worlds, among which they included a certain Paris. Their attitude, while comparable to that of the fieldworker who strives to render the unfamiliar comprehensible, tended to act in the reverse sense, by making the familiar strange. The contrast is, in fact, generated by a continuous play of the familiar and the strange, of which ethnography and surrealism are two elements. This play is constitutive of the modern cultural situation I am assuming as the ground for my account.

The world of the city for Aragon’s *Paysan de Paris*, or for Breton in *Nadja*, was a source of the unexpected and the significant—significant in ways that suggested beneath the dull veneer of the real the possibility of another, more miraculous world based on radically different principles of classification and order. The surrealists frequented the Marché aux Puces, the vast flea market of Paris, where one could rediscover the artifacts of culture, scrambled and rearranged. With luck one could bring home some bizarre or unexpected object, a work of Art with nowhere to go—“readymades” like

Marcel Duchamps's bottle rack, and *objets sauvages*, African or Oceanian sculptures. Such objects—stripped of their functional context—were necessary furnishings of the avant-garde studio.

It is well to suspend disbelief in considering the practices, and the excesses, of surrealist "ethnographers." And it is important to understand their way of taking culture seriously, as a contested reality—a way which included the ridiculing and reshuffling of its orders. This much is needed if one is to penetrate the milieu which spawned, and oriented, the emerging French scholarly tradition. More generally, it is advisable not to dismiss surrealism too quickly as frivolous, in contrast with the *sérieux* of ethnographic science. The connections between anthropological research and research in literature and the arts, always strong in this century, need to be more fully explored. Surrealism is ethnography's secret sharer—for better or worse—in the description, analysis, and extension of the grounds of twentieth-century expression and meaning.

II MAUSS, BATAILLE, MÉTRAUX

Paris 1925: The *Revue nègre* enjoys a smash season at the Théâtre des Champs Elysées, following on the heels of W. H. Wellmon's Southern Synopated Orchestra. Spirituals and *le jazz* sweep the avant-garde bourgeoisie, which haunts negro bars, sways to new rhythms in search of something primitive, *sauvage* . . . and completely modern. Stylish Paris is transported by the pulsing strum of banjos, and by the sensuous Josephine Baker "abandoning herself to the rhythm of the Charleston."⁸

1925: A nucleus of University scholars—Paul Rivet, Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, and Marcel Mauss—establishes the Paris Institut d'Ethnologie. For the first time in France there exists an organization whose primary concern is the training of professional field workers and the publication of ethnographic scholarship.

1925: In the wake of the First Surrealist Manifesto, the movement begins to make itself notorious. France is engaged in a minor war with anticolonial rebels in Morocco; Breton and Company sympathize with the insurgents. At a banquet in honor of the symbolist poet Saint-Pol-Roux, a melee erupts between the surrealists and conservative patriots. Epithets fly; *Vive l'Allemagne!* rings out; Philippe Soupault swings from a chandelier, kicking over bottles and glasses. Michel Leiris is soon at an open window, denouncing France to the growing crowd. A riot ensues; Leiris, nearly lynched, is arrested and manhandled by the police.⁹

The three events were connected by more than a coincidence of date. For example, when Leiris, whose evocation of Josephine Baker is quoted above,

⁸ Michel Leiris, "The Discovery of African Art in the West," in M. Leiris and J. Delange, *African Art* (New York: Golden Press, 1968), 33.

⁹ Nadeau, *History*, 112–14.

defected from the Surrealist Movement in the late twenties seeking a more concrete application for his subversive literary talents, it would seem natural for him to study with Marcel Mauss at the Institut d'Ethnologie and to become an ethnographer of Africa—a participant in France's first major field work expedition, the Mission Dakar-Djibouti of 1931–33. Scientific—or, at least, academic—ethnography had not yet come of age. Its development in the early thirties, through successes like the much publicized Dakar-Djibouti expedition, was continuous with the surrealism of the twenties. The organizational energies of Paul Rivet and the teaching of Marcel Mauss were dominant factors. We will discuss Rivet's institutional accomplishments later, notably his creation of the Musée de l'Homme. Mauss's pervasive influence is harder to pin down since it took the form of oral inspiration in his teaching at the École Pratique des Hautes Études and the Institut d'Ethnologie.

Nearly every major French ethnographer before the mid-fifties—with the notable exception of Lévi-Strauss—was the beneficiary of Mauss's direct stimulation. From the perspective of today's intellectual regime, where publication is at a premium and where any idea of value tends to be guarded for the next article or monograph, it is astonishing, indeed moving, to note the tremendous energies that Mauss poured into his teaching at Hautes Études. A glance through the school's *Annuaire*, where course summaries are recorded, reveals the extraordinary wealth of learning and analysis made available to a few students, year in and year out, without repetition, much of which never saw print. Mauss gave courses on topics from Siberian shamanism to Australian "oral poetry," to Polynesian and West Coast Indian ritual, bringing to bear his profound knowledge of Oriental religions and of classical antiquity. Readers of Mauss's essays—the pages half devoured by footnotes—will recognize the breadth of reference; they will miss, however, the wit and verve, the give and take of his oral performances.

Mauss was a research scholar. He taught a select group. Germaine Dieterlen recalls,¹⁰ in the thirties, a band of devotees, some of them amateurs of the fashionable exotic, others ethnographers preparing to leave for the field (some were the former in the process of becoming the latter). These same auditors would follow Mauss from hall to hall—at Hautes Études, the Institut d'Ethnologie, and later the Collège de France—revelling in his erudite, loquacious, always provoking tours through the world's cultural diversities. Mauss's lectures were not theoretical demonstrations. They stressed, in their divagatory way, concrete ethnographic fact; he had a sharp eye for the significant detail. Though he never did field work himself, Mauss was effective in inspiring his students to firsthand research.¹¹

¹⁰ Personal communication.

¹¹ On Mauss and field work, see Georges Condominas, "Marcel Mauss et l'homme de terrain," *L'Arc*, no. 48 (n.d.), 3–6; *idem*, "Marcel Mauss, père de l'ethnographie française," *Critique*, no. 279 (1972), 118–39; no. 301 (1972), 487–504. And for a sense of Mauss's concrete advice to students, see his own *Manuel d'ethnographie* (Paris: Payot, 1947).

An example of how Mauss's peculiar brand of intellectual stimulation got around is provided by the great field worker Alfred Métraux, who was his student during the mid-twenties prior to departing to study the Tupinamba Indians of Amazonia. Métraux has traced the origin of his vocation to the Paris exoticism of the early twenties.¹² Being of a careful, empirical temperament, however, he soon distrusted the fast and loose way that ethnographic fact was used by the early surrealists. He devoted his life to firsthand research, becoming, in the words of Sidney Mintz, the "fieldworker's fieldworker."¹³ But he remained in touch with the avant-garde. While a student at the École des Chartes, Métraux had established a lasting friendship with Georges Bataille, the idiosyncratic scholar, essayist, and pornographer whose influence has been so pervasive on the present generation of radical critics and writers in Paris. The work of the two friends could not be more different: the one restrained, almost puritanical in tone, though with a flair for isolating the telling detail; the other provocative, far flung, Nietzschean. Yet in a curious, compelling way the two are complementary—while Bataille was steadiest by Métraux's erudition, Métraux found his passion for ethnography confirmed by his friend's willingness to express what, according to Michel Leiris, they had in common, "a violent ardor for life combined with a pitiless awareness of its absurdity."¹⁴ The lifelong association of Bataille and Métraux may be seen as emblematic of that enduring contiguity, if not always similarity, which has kept French ethnography and the avant-garde on speaking terms.

Bataille's most influential book was his late treatise, *L'Érotisme* (1957). Its orientation—and that of Bataille's work generally—can be traced to Mauss, by way of Métraux's report of a lecture around 1925. In *L'Érotisme* Bataille introduces the book's key chapter, on transgression, with the phrase, "Transgression does not negate an interdiction, it transcends and completes it." Métraux specifies that this characteristic formula is only a paraphrase of "one of those profound aphorisms, often obscure, that Marcel Mauss would throw out without worrying about the confusion of his students." Métraux had heard Mauss say in a lecture: "Taboos are made to be violated." This theme, which Bataille would often repeat, became a key to his thinking. Culture is ambivalent in structure. One may refrain from murder, or one may go to war; both acts are, for Bataille, generated by the interdiction on killing. Cultural order includes both the rule and the transgression. This logic applies to all manner of rules and freedoms, for example, to the sexually normal and its partner, the perversions. In Métraux's words, "Mauss's proposition, in the apparent ab-

¹² Fernande Bing, "Entretiens avec Alfred Métraux," *L'Homme*, 4:2 (1964), 20–23.

¹³ Sidney W. Mintz, "Introduction to the Second English Edition," Alfred Métraux, *Voodoo in Haiti*, 2d ed., Hugo Charteris, trans. (New York: Schocken Books, 1972), 2.

¹⁴ Michael Leiris, "Regard vers Alfred Métraux," in his *Brisées* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1966), 252. On the friendship, see also George Bataille, *L'Érotisme* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1957), 14; Alfred Métraux, "Rencontre avec les ethnologues," *Critique*, no. 195–96 (1963), 677–84.

surdity of its form, manifests the inevitable connection of conflicting emotions: [and quoting Bataille] ‘under the impact of negative emotion, we must obey the interdiction. We violate it if the emotion is positive.’”¹⁵

Bataille’s lifelong project was to demystify and valorize this “positive emotion” of transgression in all its various forms—and in this he was true to his surrealist beginnings. (In the twenties Bataille was first an associate, then a critic, of the Breton group.) One of his first published texts was part of a collection on pre-Columbian art, in which he collaborated with Métraux and Paul Rivet. His appreciation of human sacrifice—“For the Aztecs death was nothing”—juxtaposes in surrealist fashion the beautiful and the ugly, the normal and the repugnant. Thus Tenochtitlan is, simultaneously, a “human slaughterhouse” and a gorgeous “Venice” of canals and flowers. The victims dance in perfumed garlands; the swarms of flies that gather on the running blood are beautiful.¹⁶ “All writing is garbage,” said Artaud, another **renegade surrealist**, who would flee France to his own dream of Mexico—courting madness among the Tarahumara Indians.¹⁷ The exotic was a prime court of appeal against the rational, the beautiful, the normal of the West. But Bataille’s interest in the world’s cultural systems went, finally, well beyond mere delectation or escapism. Unlike most surrealists, he would work toward a more rigorous theory of collective order based on the double logic of interdiction. Always *au courant* of ethnographic scholarship, he would continue to draw heavily on Mauss (*La part maudite* (1949) is an elaborate extrapolation of Mauss’s *The Gift*) and later, on Lévi-Strauss. The logic developed by Bataille, which I cannot pursue here, has provided an important continuity in the ongoing relation of cultural analysis and surrealism in France. It links the twenties context of surrealism proper to a later generation of radical critics, including Michel Foucault (editor of Bataille’s *Complete Works*), Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, and the Tel Quel group.¹⁸

It is worth noting that the collection of essays in which Métraux, Rivet, and Bataille collaborated was part of the first popular exhibition of pre-Columbian art in France. The exhibit had been organized by Georges-Henri Rivière, a music student and amateur of jazz who would become France’s most energetic

¹⁵ Métraux, “Rencontre,” 682–83; Bataille, *L’Erotisme*, 72–73, where the debt to Mauss is acknowledged.

¹⁶ Georges Bataille, “L’Amérique disparue,” in Jean Babelon *et al.*, *L’Art précolombien* (Paris: Les Beaux Arts, 1930), 5–14.

¹⁷ Antonin Artaud, *The Peyote Dance*, Helen Weaver, trans. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976).

¹⁸ The tradition is visible in the “Hommage à Georges Bataille,” published by *Critique*, no. 195–96 (1963), in which essays appear by Métraux, Leiris, Queneau, Masson, and Wahl of the prewar generation, and by Foucault, Barthes, and Sollers of the emerging critical tradition. (Another crucial outgrowth of ethnographic surrealism that cannot be pursued here is its connection with third world modernism and nascent anticolonial discourse. It is enough to mention a few prominent names: Aimé Césaire (a long-term friend of Leiris), Octavio Paz, and Alejo Carpentier, who was a collaborator on the journal, *Documents*, discussed in the next section.)

ethnographic museologist. Rivière was well connected socially, Rivet politically. The latter understood perfectly that the creation of anthropological research institutions required a fashionable enthusiasm for things exotic. Such a vogue could be exploited financially, and channelled in the interests of science and public instruction. Rivet, impressed by Rivière's successful pre-Columbian show, hired him on the spot to reorganize the Trocadero museum, whose collections were in a state of disorganization and disrepair. This was the beginning of a productive collaboration between the two chief *animateurs* of French ethnographic institutions, one which would result in the Musée de l'Homme, and in Rivière's Musée des Arts et Traditions Populaires.¹⁹

But before the full deployment of these institutions, in the early years of the Institut d'Ethnologie, Mauss's courses remained the crucial forum for an emerging ethnography. And this teaching was a curious scholarly instrument, not fundamentally at odds with surrealism and capable of stimulating the likes of both Métraux and Bataille. It is revealing to consider in this light a well-known evocation of Mauss:

In his work, and still more in his teaching, unthought-of comparisons flourish. While he is often obscure by the constant use of antitheses, shortcuts and apparent paradoxes which, later on, prove to be the result of a deeper insight, he gratifies his listener, suddenly, with fulgurating intuitions, providing the substance for months of fruitful thinking. In such cases, one feels that one has reached the bottom of the social phenomenon and has, as he says somewhere, "hit the bedrock." This constant striving toward the fundamental, this willingness to sift, over and over again, a huge mass of data until the purest material only remains, explains Mauss's preference for the essay over the book, and the limited size of his published work.²⁰

This account, from the pen of Lévi-Strauss, obviously suffers from a tendency, in its final sentences, to portray Mauss as a protostructuralist.²¹ The drive to reach bedrock, to grasp only the purest underlying material, is an aspiration more characteristic of Lévi-Strauss than of Mauss, who published relatively little not because he had distilled elemental truths, but because he was preoccupied with teaching and politics and because, knowing so much, the truth had become too complex. As Louis Dumont recalls, "He had too many ideas to be able to give complete expression to any of them."²² However, the description here of the great teacher's provocative use of antithesis

¹⁹ Georges-Henri Rivière, "My Experience at the Musée d'Ethnologie," *Proceedings of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (1968), 17-22; *idem*, "Un Rencontre avec Georges-Henri Rivière," *Le Monde*, 8-9 July 1979; see also "Du Trocadéro à Chaillot," *Le Monde*, 5 July 1979, 13-15, a series of articles by diverse hands.

²⁰ Claude Lévi-Strauss, "French Sociology," in *Twentieth Century Sociology*, Georges Gurwitsch and Wilbert Moore, eds. (New York: Philosophical Library, 1945), 527.

²¹ Lévi-Strauss's most elaborate attempt in this vein is his brilliant "Introduction à l'oeuvre de Marcel Mauss," in Marcel Mauss, *Sociologie et anthropologie* (Paris: Presse Universitaires de France, 1950), ix-lit. For a good corrective, see Maurice Leenhardt, "Marcel Mauss," *Annuaire de l'École Pratique des Hautes Études*, section des sciences religieuses (1950), 19-23.

²² Louis Dumont, "Une science en devenir," *L'Arc*, no. 48 (n.d.), 12.

and paradox in the presentation of ethnographic knowledge rings true in the context we have been discussing. Ethnographic truth, for Mauss, was restlessly subversive of surface realities. Its principal task was to discover—in a famous phrase—the many “*lunes mortes*,” pale moons in the “firmament of reason.”²³ There is no better summary of the task of ethnographic surrealism, for the “reason” referred to is not a parochial Western rationality but the full human potential for cultural expression.

III TAXONOMIES

In an avant-garde periodical’s “Homage to Picasso,” we are not surprised to find a short text from Mauss.²⁴ The journal in question, *Documents*, was a glossy review edited in 1929 by Georges Bataille. It offers a revealing case of ethnographic surrealist collaboration, and is worth examining in detail. Bataille had left Breton’s Surrealist Movement along with Robert Desnos, Leiris, Artaud, Raymond Queneau, and various others during the schisms of 1929,²⁵ and his journal functioned as a forum for dissident views. It had, moreover, a distinctly ethnographic bent which would attract the collaboration of future field workers like Marcel Griaule, André Schaeffner, and Leiris, as well as Rivière and Rivet. Griaule, Schaeffner, and Leiris would depart for Africa on the Mission Dakar-Djibouti soon after the demise of *Documents* in 1930. If *Documents* appears today as a rather strange context for the purveying of ethnographic knowledge, in the late twenties it was a perfectly appropriate, that is, *outré*, forum.

Indeed, it requires an effort of imagination to recapture the sense, or senses, of the word *ethnography* as it was used in the surrealist twenties. A defined social science, with a discernible method, a set of classic texts, and university chairs was not yet fully formed. Examining the word’s uses in a publication like *Documents*, we see how ethnographic evidence and an ethnographic attitude could function in the service of a subversive cultural criticism. In the subtitle of *Documents*—“Archéologie, Beaux Arts, Ethnographie, Variétés”—the wild card was “Ethnographie.” It denoted a radical questioning of norms and an appeal to the exotic, the paradoxical, the *insolite* (unusual, odd). It implied, too, a levelling and a reclassification of familiar categories. “Art,” spelled with a capital *A*, had already succumbed to Dada’s heavy artillery. “Culture,” having barely survived this postwar barrage, was now resolutely lower case, a principle of relative order in which the sublime and the vulgar were treated as symbols of equal significance. Since culture was perceived by the collaborators of *Documents* as a system of moral and aesthetic hierarchies, the radical critic’s task was one of semiotic decoding,

²³ Mauss, *Sociologie et Anthropologie*, 309.

²⁴ *Documents*, 2:3 (1930), 177.

²⁵ Nadeau, *History*, ch. 12.

with the aim of deauthenticating, and then expanding or displacing, the common categories. The cubists' break with the canons of realism had set the pace for a general assault on the normal. **Ethnography, which shares with surrealism an abandonment of the distinction between high and low culture, provided both a fund of non-Western alternatives and a prevailing attitude of ironic participant-observation among the hierarchies and meanings of collective life.**

It is instructive to attempt an inventory of ethnographic perspectives, as revealed by their use in *Documents*. Before one has caught the drift, one is surprised, for example, to come upon the title of an article by Carl Einstein (author of *Negerplastik* (1915), a pioneering account of African sculpture viewed in the light of cubism), "André Masson, étude ethnologique." What did it mean, in 1929, to study an avant-garde painter "ethnologically"? From the outset Einstein sounds the cubist-surrealist battle cry:

One thing is important: to shake [*ébranler*] what is called reality by means of non-adapted hallucinations so as to alter the value hierarchies of the real. Hallucinatory forces create a breach in the order of mechanistic processes; they introduce blocs of "a-causality" in this reality which had been absurdly given as such. The uninterrupted fabric of this reality is torn, and one inhabits the tension of dualisms.²⁶

The "hallucinatory forces" of Masson's painting represent, according to Einstein, "the return of mythological creation, the return of a psychological archaism as opposed to a purely imitative archaism of forms." Einstein describes this mythic psychology as "totemic." To grasp the significance of Masson's metamorphoses, unexpected animal-human combinations, "it is enough to recall the primitive mask-costumes that incite identifications with animals, ancestors, etc."²⁷ Einstein's casual allusion, *en passant*, to masks—African? Oceanian? Alaskan? his audience will know what he means—suggests a context in which exotic or archaic possibilities are never far from the surface of consciousness, ever ready to offer confirmation for any and all breaks opened in the Western order of things. In Einstein's essay two key elements of ethnographic surrealism are noticeable: first, the corrosive analysis of a reality now identified as local and artificial; second, the supplying of exotic alternatives.

There is a third aspect of this attitude which springs to one's attention when leafing through the pages of *Documents*. Marcel Griaule provides a clear statement in an essay ridiculing the aesthetic assumptions of primitive art amateurs who doubt the purity of a Baoulé drum because the figure carved on it is holding a rifle. **The ethnographic surrealist, unlike either the typical art critic or anthropologist of the period, delights in cultural impurities and disturbing syncretisms.** Griaule equates the European's delectation of African art

²⁶ *Documents*, 1:2 (1929), 95.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 100, 102.

with the African's taste for textiles, gas cans, alcohol, and firearms. If Africans do not choose to imitate our high cultural products . . . *tant pis!* He concludes:

Ethnography—it is quite tiresome to have to keep repeating this—is interested in the *beautiful* and the *ugly*, in the European sense of these absurd words. It has, however, a tendency to be suspicious of the beautiful, which is rather often a rare—that is monstrous—occurrence in a civilization. Ethnography is suspicious, too, of itself—for it is a white science, i.e., stained with prejudices—and it will not refuse aesthetic value to an object because it is up to date or mass produced.²⁸

André Schaeffner urges a similar point in a scholarly survey of “*Les instruments de musique dans un musée d’ethnographie*.” His strictures are now an anthropological commonplace. Read, however, in the surrealist context of *Documents*, they recover their full subversive effect.

Whoever says ethnography admits necessarily that no object designed to produce sound or music, however “primitive” or formless it may seem, no musical instrument—whether its existence is accidental or essential—shall be excluded from a methodical classification. For this purpose, any percussive procedure, on a wooden box or on the earth itself, is of equal importance with the melodic or polyphonic means available to a violin or a guitar.²⁹

Schaeffner, an early authority on Stravinsky, would come, by way of jazz, to study the music of the Dogon.

The “ethnographic” attitude provided a style of scientifically validated cultural levelling, the redistribution of value-charged categories like “music,” “art,” “beauty,” “sophistication,” “cleanliness,” and so forth. The extreme relativism, even nihilism, latent in the ethnographic approach did not go unexploited by the more extreme collaborators of *Documents*. Their view of culture did not feature conceptions of organic structure, functional integration, wholeness, or historical continuity. This conception of culture can be called, without undue anachronism, semiotic. Cultural reality was composed of artificial codes, ideological identities and objects susceptible to inventive recombination and juxtaposition: Lautréamont’s umbrella and sewing machine, a violin and a pair of hands slapping the African dirt.

The conception, highlighted in Schaeffner’s title, of an “ethnographic museum” is of more than passing importance here. The fragmentation of modern culture perceived by Benjamin, the dissociation of cultural knowledge into juxtaposed “citations,” is presupposed by *Documents*. The journal’s title, of course, is indicative. Culture becomes something to be collected, and *Documents* itself is a kind of ethnographic display of images, texts, objects,

²⁸ *Documents*, 2:1 (1930), 46.

²⁹ *Documents*, 1:5 (1929), 248. Schaeffner, who died in 1980, pursued a distinguished career as musicologist, ethnographer, essayist, and critic. See, particularly, volume I of his *Essais de musicologie et autres fantaisies* (Paris: Le Sycomore, 1980). Volume II is forthcoming.

labels, a playful museum which simultaneously collects and reclassifies its specimens.

The journal's basic method is juxtaposition—fortuitous or ironic collage. The proper arrangement of cultural symbols and artifacts is constantly placed in doubt: High art is combined with hideously enlarged photographs of big toes; folk crafts; *Fantômas* (a popular mystery magazine) covers; Hollywood sets; African, Melanesian, pre-Columbian, and French carnival masks; accounts of music hall performances; descriptions of the Paris slaughterhouses, and so forth. *Documents* poses, for the culture of the modern city, the problem facing any organizer of an ethnographic museum. What belongs with what? Shall masterpieces of sculpture be isolated as such or displayed in proximity with cooking pots and axe blades?³⁰ The ethnographic attitude must continually pose these sorts of questions, composing and decomposing culture's "natural" hierarchies and relationships. Once, in principle, everything in a culture is deemed worthy of collection and display, fundamental issues of classification and value are raised.

In *Documents*, we observe the use of ethnographic juxtaposition for the purpose of perturbing commonplace symbols. A regular section of the journal is a so-called dictionary of unexpected definitions. The entry for the word *homme* is characteristic. It recites a researcher's breakdown of the chemical composition of the average human body: enough iron to make a nail, sugar for one cup of coffee, magnesium sufficient to take a photograph, and so on. Market value, 25 francs. The body, a privileged image of order, is a favorite target. Together with a variety of other "natural" entities, it is recoded, and in the process thrown in doubt. Robert Desnos contributes a disconcerting inventory of rhetorical forms concerning the eye, and Carl Einstein's entry for the mobile symbol "nightingale" begins, "except in special cases, this does not have to do with a bird."³¹

Crachat, spittle, is redefined by Griaule using black African and Islamic evidence with the result that spit becomes associated with the soul, and with both good and evil spirits. In Europe, naturally, to spit on someone's face is an absolute dishonor; in West Africa it can be a mode of blessing. "Spittle acts like the soul: balm or garbage."³² The ethnographer, like the surrealist, is licensed to shock. Leiris takes up Griaule's definition and goes further: Spittle is the permanent, spermlike sully of the noble mouth, an organ associated in the West with intelligence and language. Spit thus resymbolized denotes a condition of inescapable sacrilege.³³ In this newly recomposed definition, to talk or to think is also to ejaculate.

³⁰ On this museological dilemma, see an interview with Michel Leiris: "The Musée de l'Homme, Where Art and Anthropology Meet," *Réalités*, no. 182 (1966), 57–63.

³¹ *Documents*, 1:4 (1929), 215; and 1:2 (1929), 117.

³² *Documents*, 1:7 (1929), 381.

³³ *Ibid.*, 381–82.

An approach to representation by means of juxtaposition or collage was a familiar surrealist tack.³⁴ Its intent was to break down the conventional "bodies"—objects, identities—that combine to produce what Barthes would later call "the effect of the real."³⁵ In *Documents*, the juxtaposition of the contributions, and especially of their photographic illustrations, was designed to provoke this defamiliarization. An issue begins, for example, with an article by Leiris, "Picasso's Recent Canvasses," profusely illustrated with photographs. (These were years when Picasso seemed to be breaking and bending, almost savagely, the normal shape of the human frame.) These deformed images are followed by Bataille's "The Outcasts of Nature," a characteristic appreciation of freaks, illustrated by full-page eighteenth-century engravings of Siamese twins. Next an illustrated review of a current exhibition of African sculpture provides further visual dislocation of the "natural" body as realistically conceived in the West. The body, like a culture semiotically conceived, is not a continuous whole but an assemblage of conventional symbols and codes.³⁶

Documents, particularly in its use of photographs, creates the order of an unfinished collage rather than that of a unified organism. Its images, in their equalizing gloss and distancing effect, present in the same plane a Châtelet show advertisement, a Hollywood movie clip, a Picasso, a Giacometti, a documentary photo from colonial New Caledonia, a newspaper clip, an Eskimo mask, an old master, a musical instrument—the world's iconography and cultural forms presented as evidence, or data. Evidence of what? Evidence, one can only say, of surprising, declassified cultural orders and of an expanded range of human artistic invention. This odd museum merely documents, juxtaposes, relativizes—a perverse collection.

The museum of ethnographic surrealism was to be improved, and channelled into more stable, continuous institutions. In 1930, *Documents*, which had become less and less recognizably a review of art, was abandoned by its chief financial backer. Three years later a reconstituted category, easily recognizable today as modern art, would be incarnated in the legendary *Minotaure*, under the direction of Skira and Teriade. A thing of beauty, *Minotaure* interspersed no photographs of slaughterhouses, Movietone Follies, or big toes among its lavishly reproduced Picassos, Dalis, or Massons. And after turning over its second issue to the Dakar-Djibouti team for a handsomely illustrated report on their African research,³⁷ *Minotaure* did not subsequently reserve any significant place for ethnographic evidence. The artifacts of otherness were replaced, generally, by Breton's category of the surreal—located in the psychoanalytic unconscious and all too easily co-opted by romantic

³⁴ See J. H. Matthews, *The Imagery of Surrealism* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1977), 65–116.

³⁵ Roland Barthes, "L'effet de réel," *Communications*, no. 11 (1968), 84–89.

³⁶ See *Documents*, 2:1 (1929).

³⁷ "Mission Dakar-Djibouti," special issue of *Minotaure*, no. 2 (1934).

notions of artistic genius or inspiration. The concrete cultural artifact was no longer called upon to play a disruptive, illuminatory role. Modern Art and Ethnology had emerged as fully distinct positions, in communication to be sure, but from a distance.

I have dwelt on *Documents* because it exemplifies with unusual clarity the chief areas of convergence between ethnography and surrealism during the twenties, and because a number of its contributors went on to become influential field workers and museologists. *Documents* reveals, too, in its subversive, nearly anarchic, documentary attitude, an epistemological horizon for twentieth-century cultural studies. If *Documents* was, as Leiris recalls, "impossible," it would be hasty to dismiss it as an aberration, a personal creation of the "impossible" Georges Bataille.³⁸ It attracted the participation of too many serious scholars and artists to be written off as merely self-indulgent or nihilistic. It exemplified, rather, an extreme sensitivity (more characteristic of the French ethnographic tradition than is often recognized) to the overdetermined character of what Mauss had called "total social facts."³⁹ Reality, after the surrealist twenties, could never again be seen as simple or continuous, describable empirically or through induction. It was Mauss who best exemplified the underlying attitude when he remarked, as he liked to, "Ethnology is like the ocean. All you need is a net, any kind of net; and then if you step into the sea and swing your net about, you're sure to catch some kind of fish."⁴⁰ If French ethnology has often seemed, to its Anglo-American critics, preoccupied with its nets to the exclusion of the fish, this attitude should not be attributed simplistically to some essential, Cartesian intellectuality or *esprit de système*. Rather this assumption, that reality is never directly accessible, but exists only in the codes (always plural) which represent it, was an immediate legacy of the surrealist moment.

IV IN THE MUSEUM OF MAN

The history of French ethnography between the world wars can be told as a tale of two museums. The old Trocadero museum and the new Musée de l'Homme exerted significant influences, both practical and ideological, on the course of research and the comprehension of its results. For, if the "Troca" of the twenties, with its mislabelled, misclassified *objets d'art*, corresponded to the esthetics of ethnographic surrealism, the completely modern Palais de Chaillot incarnated the emerging scholarly paradigm of ethnographic humanism. The scientific gains represented by the Musée de l'Homme were considerable. It provided both needed technical facilities and the equally necessary delineation of a field for study—the "human," in all its physical,

³⁸ Michel Leiris, "De Bataille l'impossible à l'impossible *Documents*," in *Brisées*, 256–66.

³⁹ Marcel Mauss, *The Gift*, Ian Gunnison, trans. (New York: Norton, 1967), 76–77.

⁴⁰ As quoted by Meyer Fortes, "On the Concept of the Person among the Tallensi," in *Colloques internationaux du C.N.R.S.*, no. 544, *La notion de personne en Afrique Noire* (Paris: C.N.R.S., 1973), 284.

archaeological, and ethnographic manifestations. The coalescence of a research paradigm creates the possibility of an accumulation of knowledge, and thus the phenomenon of scholarly progress. What is less often recognized, for the human sciences at least, is that any consolidation of a paradigm depends on the exclusion, or relegation to the status of “art,” of those elements of the changing discipline which call the credentials of the discipline itself into question, those research practices which, like *Documents*, work at the edges of disorder.

Before 1930 the Trocadero was an unscientific jumble of exotica, a place one went to encounter curiosities, isolated esthetic objects. This was Picasso’s attitude when, sometime around 1908, he began to make a serious study of *l’art nègre*.

When I went for the first time, at Derain’s urging to the Trocadero Museum, the smell of dampness and rot there stuck in my throat. It depressed me so much I wanted to get out fast, but I stayed and studied.⁴¹

The Trocadero was a curious Byzanto–Moorish structure, unheated, unlit, its dusty display cases filled with capriciously labelled artifacts. As the enthusiasm for things primitive blossomed after World War I, the museum was considered more and more of a scandal, for it had changed, in effect, into a museum of “art.”

As Rivière’s improvements of the early thirties progressed, the museum featured a number of art exhibitions—African, Oceanian, and Eskimo. The display of objects collected by the Dakar–Djibouti expedition would, to a large degree, fall into this category. A devoted group of volunteers helped with the renovations—prospective ethnographers like Denise Paulme, and fashionable sixteenth arrondissement ladies, amateurs of the exotic. The museum was becoming chic. At the opening of a new Oceanian exhibition hall, models from the great Parisian fashion houses went on parade, exotically and alluringly attired. The Mission Dakar–Djibouti drew its funds, beyond government and Rockefeller Foundation subventions, from private patrons of the arts (among them the wealthy protosurrealist author of *Impressions d’Afrique*, Raymond Roussel). Before the departure of Griaule’s team for its twenty-month reconnaissance, a gala fund-raiser was organized by Rivière at the Cirque d’Hiver, a boxing event featuring the “African” featherweight champ Al Brown and attended by *le tout Paris* in evening attire. According to legend, the champion shadowboxed with Marcel Mauss, a legend not entirely improbable (the great scholar was a good athlete and a practitioner of *savate*).⁴²

⁴¹ Francois Gilot, *Life with Picasso* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1964), 266.

⁴² My account is based largely on personal communications from Georges-Henri Rivière and on his two memoirs cited in note 19. See also Denise Paulme, “Sanga 1935,” *Cahiers d’Études Africaines*, no. 65 (1977), 7–12. See also *Al Brown boxt für die Ethnologen* (Frankfurt am Main: Qumran Verlag, 1980), a reprint of the Cirque d’Hiver gala program.

These anecdotes will give a sense of the Trocadero's extrascientific ambience around 1930. The museum was riding the crest of the wave of enthusiasm for *l'art nègre*.⁴³ During the twenties the term *nègre* could embrace modern American jazz, African tribal masks, voodoo ritual, Oceanian sculpture, and even pre-Columbian artifacts. It had attained the proportions of what Edward Said has called an "orientalism"—a knitted-together collective representation figuring a geographically and historically vague, but symbolically sharp, exotic world.⁴⁴ If the notion of the African "fetish" had any sense in the twenties, it described not a mode of African belief, but rather the way in which exotic artifacts were consumed by European aficionados. A mask or statue or any shred of black culture could effectively summon a complete world of dreams and possibilities—passionate, rhythmic, concrete, mystical, unchained . . . an "Africa."

By the time of the Mission Dakar-Djibouti Africa had become a fully developed *exotisme*. The public and the museums were eager for more of an estheticized commodity, and it was in this climate that the French legislature was prevailed upon to enact a special law underwriting an expedition whose chief official task was to enrich the nation's collections. The Mission Dakar-Djibouti satisfied the demand; it brought back data which could be counted and displayed.⁴⁵

The ethnographers departed for Africa in 1931 with a structured esthetic in mind, and a certain (essentially fetishist) conception of how "it" should be collected and represented. They did not, in the manner of English and American field workers of the time, set out to experience and interpret discrete cultural wholes. Field work rapport, in Leiris's account, emerges as little more than a romantic phantasy; and in Griaule's, ethnography is portrayed as a process where power is centrally at stake, fraught with role playing and manipulation.⁴⁶ Even in the later work of Griaule and his collaborators, which

⁴³ On this *nègrophilie*, see Jean Laude, *La peinture française (1905-1914) et l'art nègre* (Paris: Klincksieck Editions, 1968), esp. 528-39; also Leiris, "Discovery of African Art." For a particularly revealing example, see Philippe Soupault's *Le nègre* (1927; rpt. Paris: Seghers, 1975). Soupault's *nègre* is a kind of destructive-regenerative force, more Nietzschean than Afro-American.

⁴⁴ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978), an account which underplays the positive valuations of the exotic frequently associated with such projections.

⁴⁵ See the excellent short account of the mission by J. Jamin included in *Voyages et découvertes* (Paris: Musée National d'Histoire Naturelle, 1981). According to Rivet and Rivière's proud calculations (*Minotaure*, no. 2 (1933)) 3,500 "ethnographic objects" were collected, along with 6,000 photographs, a large collection of Abyssinian paintings, 300 manuscripts and amulets, notations of 30 languages and dialects, and hundreds of recordings, "ethnographic observations," botanical specimens, etc., etc. This, the mission's "booty," in Rivet and Rivière's words, was the public measure of a successful mission. (Roland Barthes, in *Mythologies* (Paris: Seuil, 1957), 140, has dissected this word, *mission*. An imperial "mana term," he calls it which can be applied to any and all colonial undertakings, giving them as required a heroic, redemptive aura.)

⁴⁶ Michel Leiris, *L'Afrique fantôme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1934; 2d ed., 1951); Marcel Griaule, "Introduction méthodologique," *Minotaure*, no. 2 (1933), 7-12.

looks far beyond the museum-collecting that dominated the early mission, there is little attempt to present a unified version of an African reality (Griaule strongly emphasized multiperspectival group research) free of the gaps and discontinuities of a documentary presentation.⁴⁷

The research process which began with the Mission Dakar-Djibouti has produced one of the most complete descriptions of a tribal group (the Dogon and their neighbors) on record anywhere. Yet, as Mary Douglas has complained, the picture is curiously skewed. We can never grasp, for instance, just how daily life is conducted, how the circumstantial political decisions are actually made.⁴⁸ There is an overemphasis on elaborately cross-referenced native theories of the way things are, or should be—a mythic conception of cosmic order that aspires to embrace every gesture and detail of the profane world. The extraordinary beauty and conceptual power of Dogon wisdom, known in its fullness to only a small group of elders, never satisfies the nagging question: what are the Dogon really like? The Griaule tradition gives us a scrupulously explicated ensemble of documents, with the most important, like the cosmogonic myth, manifestly authored by Dogon. Little effort is expended on a naturalistic account in the manner, say, of Malinowski's *Argonauts*. Realist effects are seldom attempted; indeed, in the wake of sur-realist fragmentation, what would be the point?

If the *Mission Dakar-Djibouti* brought back considerable quantities of "art" for display at the Trocadero, its objects found their permanent home in a rather different museum. No sooner had Rivière completed his restorations in 1934 than Rivet announced the approval of a grandiose new plan. The old Byzantine structure was to be razed to make way for a dream building which would sublimate the anarchic cosmopolitanism of the twenties into a monumental unity, "humanity." The Musée de l'Homme, a name which has

⁴⁷ A crucial nuance is missed in Donald Bender's account (*Early French Ethnography in Africa and the Development of Ethnology in France* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Department of Anthropology, 1964), 90–95) which attributes to Griaule and his school a quixotic search for "complete description." The operative, and not fully translatable, term in this form of empiricism is *documentation* (see Marcel Griaule and Germaine Dieterlen, cited by Bender, p. 93). The Dogon world is recorded from various perspectives, and the data are not necessarily expected to add up to what Bender calls "a balanced picture." In particular, there is no attempt to build up a version of reality based primarily on the experience of a participant-observing subject, who hermeneutically constitutes a native world. If something like a complete textualization of Dogon reality emerges from Griaule's work, it is based on an already formulated initiatory wisdom, and is largely a product of documentary transcription and exegesis. See Marcel Griaule, *Conversations with Ogotemmêli* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965).

⁴⁸ See Mary Douglas, "If the Dogon . . .," *Cahiers d'Études Africaines*, 7:28 (1967), 659–72. The present account should serve as a corrective to Douglas's tendency to portray Griaule and the French tradition generally as formalistic and enamored of abstract systems. And it will reinforce her suggestive rapprochement of Dogon culture and surrealism. On this correspondence, see also Guy Davenport's imaginative placement of the Dogon, along with Fourier, in the Paris twenties, "Au tombeau de Charles Fourier," *DaVinci's Bicycle* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979).

only recently become multiply ironic, was in the mid-thirties an admirable ideal, at once scientific and political in significance. The new institution combined under a single roof the Trocadero's ethnographic collections, skeletal materials and technical laboratories from the Musée d'Histoire Naturelle, and the Institut d'Ethnologie, formerly housed at the Sorbonne. The museum brought together a liberal, synthetic image of "man," a vision conceived by Paul Rivet, which wove together in a powerful symbolic ensemble a number of the ideological threads we have been tracing. Rivet had gathered together a talented group of ethnologists including Métraux, André Leroi-Gourhan, Jacques Soustelle, Griaule, Leiris, Schaeffner, Germaine Dieterlen, Denise Paulme, Louis Dumont, and Maurice Leenhardt. He provided the institutional support which, along with Mauss's teaching, formed a center for an emerging field work tradition. **For most of these scholars, the connection between art and ethnography was crucial.**

Mauss and Rivet's brand of humanism envisaged an expansion and opening out of local conceptions of human nature. No one time or culture could claim to incarnate the mankind on display at the Musée de l'Homme. The species in its totality would be represented there, beginning with biological evolution, moving through the archaeological remains of early civilizations, and ending with a full panoply of actual cultural alternatives. The different races and cultures of the planet were to be successively displayed, arranged in galleries organized synthetically on one side, analytically on the other. Mauss's *homme total* would be brought together for the first time for the edification of the public. Also for the instruction of the scientist: the Musée de l'Homme contained extensive research laboratories, and less than 10 percent of its total collection was on display at a given moment.⁴⁹

The wedding of science and public education within a progressivist humanism suited Rivet's world view perfectly. He was a socialist with a vision, and with the political and social connections necessary to realize it. The Musée de l'Homme was conceived as part of the International Exhibition of 1937, a symbol of Popular Front ideals. Rivet, whose speciality was American archaeology and prehistory, tended to see mankind in an evolutionary, diffusionist frame, stressing long-term biocultural development and the reconstruction of historical sequences through the extensive collection and comparison of traits. In an early article on method, which appeared in *Documents*, he announces the underlying themes of his dream museum.⁵⁰ In the study of man, he writes, the boundaries between ethnography, archaeology, and prehistory are "absolutely artificial." (In a later version he would add physical anthropology to the mixture.) Equally artificial are classifications of

⁴⁹ On the Musée de l'Homme, see the works of Rivière cited in note 19, and Paul Rivet, "Organisation of an Ethnological Museum," *Museum* (UNESCO), vol. 1 (1948).

⁵⁰ *Documents*, 1:3 (1929), 130-34.

human realities according to the divisions of political geography. "Humanity is an indivisible whole, in space and time." "The science of man" no longer need be subdivided arbitrarily. "It [is] high time to break down the barriers. And that is what the Musée de l'Homme has tried to do."⁵¹ The political message, for 1937, was clear.

The Musée de l'Homme provided a liberal, productive environment for the growth of French ethnographic science. Its reigning values were cosmopolitan, progressive, and democratic (one of the first cells of the Resistance formed within its walls in 1940).⁵² The museum encouraged international understanding and global values, an orientation which would continue after World War II in the involvement of Rivière, Rivet, Griaule, Leiris, Métraux, and other ethnologists in UNESCO.⁵³ There was a cosmopolitan tradition that had remained congruent, in important ways, with the ethnographic surrealism of the twenties. It should be remembered that surrealism has been a genuinely international phenomenon, with branches on every continent. It has sought the articulation less of cultural differences than of human differences. The same can be said, over-all, of French ethnography.⁵⁴ But though it shared surrealism's scope, the ethnographic humanism of the Musée de l'Homme did not adopt a corrosive, defamiliarizing attitude to cultural reality. The aim of science was, rather, to collect ethnographic artifacts and data, and to display them in reconstituted, easily interpretable contexts. This entailed losses as well as gains. Indeed, it is possible to imagine an ethnographic surrealist critique of the Museum of Man, pointing tentatively at the shape—or rather, in Breton's sense, at the activity—of a more supple and less authoritative humanism.

The Musée de l'Homme's African sculptures were displayed regionally, along with related ritual objects, their significance functionally interpreted. They did not find a place beside the Picassos of the Musée d'Art Moderne, located a few streets away. As we have seen, the emerging domains of modern art and ethnology were more distinct in 1937 than a decade before. It is not merely whimsical to question these apparently natural classifications. At issue is the loss of a disruptive and creative play of human categories and differences, an activity which does not simply display and comprehend the diversity of cultural orders but which openly expects, allows, indeed desires

⁵¹ Rivet, "Organisation," 113.

⁵² See Martin Blumenson's account of the Musée de l'Homme cell, *The Vildé Affair: Beginnings of the French Resistance* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977).

⁵³ Two characteristic UNESCO publications: *Interrelations of Cultures* (1953; rpt. Westport, Conn.: UNESCO, 1971) with contributions by Griaule and Leiris; Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Race and History* (Paris: UNESCO, 1952).

⁵⁴ An implicitly surrealist conception of mind as a creative source capable of generating the entire panoply of human expressions—both existing and potential, both mythic and rational—finds its most programmatic expression, perhaps, in Lévi-Strauss's *esprit humain*.

its own disorientation. Such an activity is lost in the consolidation and display of a stable ethnographic knowledge. In the twenties, the knowledge branched by a younger ethnography allied with surrealism was more eccentric, unformed, and willing to dislocate the orders of its own culture—the culture that built great museums of ethnographic science and modern art.

The Musée de l'Homme opened its doors to the public in June of 1938. During the previous summer, a curious alternative had been created by Bataille, Leiris, Roger Caillois, and a loose collection of avant-garde intellectuals (some of them students of Mauss) who called themselves the “Collège de Sociologie.” The name suggests the tradition of Durkheim; however, the group’s renewed interest in the *Année Sociologique* involved a considerable degree of reinvention. **Their turn toward sociology (in France not sharply distinguished from ethnology) signalled a rejection of what they saw as surrealism’s overidentification with literature and art, its excessive subjectivism and concern with automatic writing, individual dream experience, and depth psychology.** The Collège de Sociologie—which met for two years in the dining room of a Latin Quarter café, and folded because of internal dissension and the outbreak of war—represented an attempt to reintegrate scientific rigor with personal experience in the study of cultural processes. Like the author of *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, the founders of the Collège were preoccupied with those ritual moments where experiences outside the normal flow of existence could find collective expression, moments when cultural order was both transgressed and rejuvenated. They adopted the Durkheimian concept of the “sacred” to circumscribe this recreative domain.

If Durkheim discovered the roots of social solidarity in displaced ethnographic examples like the “collective effervescence” of aboriginal rites, Bataille envisaged collective expressions of transgression and excess in contemporary Paris. He was obsessed with the power of sacrifice and with the Place de la Concorde, which he hoped to reclaim as a site for ritual acts organized by the Collège. Caillois, more temperate, was engaged in the research that would result in *L'Homme et le sacré*.⁵⁵ He would lecture to the Collège on “La Fête”—a tour of the world’s cultures, drawing on his teachers Mauss, Georges Dumézil, and Marcel Granet, as well as on the ethnographers A. P. Elkin, Daryll Forde, and Maurice Leenhardt. Caillois’s diverse *sacré* included ritual expressions of “primordial chaos,” “excess,” cosmogony, fertility, debauchery, incest, sacrilege, and parodies of all sorts. While they shared Durkheim’s interest in the constitution of collective order, the members of the Collège de Sociologie tended to focus on the regenerative processes of disorder and the necessary irruptions of the sacred in everyday

⁵⁵ (Paris: Librairie E. Leroux, 1939). The English version is *Man and the Sacred*, Meyer Barash, trans. (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1959). The fourth chapter was delivered at the Collège.

life. From this standpoint, the subversive, critical activities of the avant-garde could be seen as essential for the life of society; the circumscribed position of "art" in modern culture could be transcended, at least programmatically.

It is hard to generalize about the Collège, a body so short-lived and idiosyncratic in its membership. Leiris, for example, was preoccupied not with collective rites, but rather with those autobiographical moments in which the articulation of self and society could be brought to consciousness. To this end he cultivated a kind of methodical clumsiness, a permanent inability to fit. In Leiris's work generally the exception would be made to illuminate the rule, without confirming it. Building on the work of Robert Hertz, Leiris and his colleagues cultivated a *gauche*, or left-handed sense of the sacred. In Leiris's case this attitude generated an endless lifework of autobiography, an awkward and forever-imperfect process of socialization whose title, *La règle de jeu*, would express the ambiguous, two-sidedness of order the Collège was concerned to investigate. From the late thirties on, however, Leiris held his literary and ethnographic work rigorously apart. And his provocative field journal, *L'Afrique fantôme* (1934), remains an isolated example of "surrealist ethnography."⁵⁶

The Collège de Sociologie was frequented by a diverse public which included Jean Wahl, Pierre Klossowski, Alexandre Kojève, Jean Paulhan, Jules Monnerot, and Walter Benjamin. Long a subject of legend and misinformation, the Collège can now be discussed with some degree of confidence thanks to the labors of Denis Hollier who has brought together virtually every surviving documentary trace of its existence.⁵⁷ The picture is complex and in many ways still mysterious; it is enough, here, to enumerate those concerns of the Collège that resonate with what I have been calling ethnographic surrealism—concerns which still occupy the margins of the human sciences.

The members of the Collège struggled in an exemplary way against the opposition of individual and social knowledge.⁵⁸ And although they never successfully resolved a tension between scientific rigor and the claims of activism, they nevertheless resisted any easy compromise with one side or the other. The Collège envisaged a critical "ethnology of the quotidian," as Jean Jamin puts it, which could react simultaneously on society and on a group of activist researchers constituted as a kind of vanguard or initiatory body. In Jamin's summary:

⁵⁶ (1934; rpt. (with new introduction) Paris: Gallimard, 1950).

⁵⁷ Hollier, *Le collège de sociologie*. The collection includes texts by Bataille, Caillois, Guattari, Klossowski, Kojève, Leiris, Lewitzky, Mayer, Paulhan, and Wahl, with extensive commentaries by the editor. On the Collège, see also Lourau, *Le gai savoir des sociologues*, and the excellent account of Jamin, "Un sacré collège."

⁵⁸ Duvignaud, "Roger Caillois et l'imaginaire," 91.

The notions of distanciation, exoticism, representation of the other, and difference are inflected, reworked, readjusted as a function of criteria no longer geographical or cultural but methodological and even epistemological in nature: to make foreign what appears familiar; to study the rituals and sacred sites of contemporary institutions with the minute attention of an "exotic" ethnographer, and using his methods; to become observers observing those others who are ourselves—and at the limit, this other who is oneself. . . . The irruption of the sociologist in the field of his research, the interest devoted to his experience, probably constitutes the most original aspect of the Collège.⁵⁹

The Collège de Sociologie, in its conception of an avant-garde, activist science, in its dedication to breaking through the veneer of the profane, in its gaucherie, and in its sometimes grandiose ambitions, was a late emanation of the surrealist twenties. It offers a particularly striking example of that dimension of surrealism which, against the grain of both modern art and science, struggled to deploy a fully ethnographic cultural criticism.

If the Collège was unstable, ad hoc and amateurish, the Musée de l'Homme bore all the marks of an officially sanctioned, scientific, monumental *savoir*. In an ambivalent report on the opening of the institution where he would be employed for the next three decades, Leiris dwelt on the paradox of a museum devoted to the arts of life. The danger, he wrote, was that "in the service of those two abstractions called Art and Science, everything that is living fermentation" would be "systematically excluded." While praising the humanist, progressive aims of the new ethnographic museology, Leiris allowed himself a regretful glance backwards to the old Trocadero Museum with its "certain familiar air (lacking didactic rigidity)."⁶⁰

On the high parapet of the Musée de l'Homme, in gold letters, are engraved words by Paul Valéry (while below, stands the statue of a muscular man subduing a Buffalo):

Every man creates without knowing it, as he breathes. But the artist is aware of himself creating. His act engages his entire being. He is fortified by his well-loved pain.

Art, now a universal essence, is displayed and approved by an idealistic, confident good sense. A particular version of human authenticity, featuring personal interiority and the romantic agony, is projected onto the rest of the planet. All people create, love, work, worship, etc. A stable, complete "humanity" is confirmed.⁶¹ Such a whole presupposes an omission, the excluded source of the projection. What was not displayed in the Musée de l'Homme

⁵⁹ Jamin, "Un sacré collège," 16.

⁶⁰ Michel Leiris, "Du musée d'ethnographie au Musée de l'Homme," *Nouvelle Revue Française*, no. 299 (August 1938), 344–45.

⁶¹ For a stinging critique of these assumptions, see Barthes, "La grande famille des hommes," in *Mythologies*, 173–76.

was the modern West, its art, institutions, and techniques. Thus the orders of the West were everywhere present in the Musée de l'Homme, except on display. An important impact was lost in the well-classified halls, for the museum encouraged the contemplation of mankind as a whole, seen, as it were, from a distance, coolly, tolerantly. The identity of the West and its "humanism" was never exhibited or analyzed, never openly at issue.

To speak of "man" and the "human" is to run the risk of reducing contingent differences to a system of universal essences. Moreover, the authority arrogated by the humanist too often goes unquestioned. As Merleau-Ponty would point out:

In its own eyes, Western humanism is the love of humanity, but to others it is merely the custom and institution of a group of men, their password and sometimes their battle-cry.⁶²

The problems associated with a humanist vision have lately become all too apparent. Third world voices now call into question the right of any local intellectual tradition to construct a museum of mankind.⁶³ And in France, radical cultural critics have announced with equanimity the death of man.⁶⁴ I cannot dwell here on the ambiguities of such analyses of the humanist West and its global discourses.⁶⁵ But one should be wary, in any event, of abandoning too quickly the vision of a Mauss or a Rivet—a humanism that still offers grounds for resistance to oppression and a necessary counsel of tolerance, comprehension, and mercy.

To stress, as I have, the paradoxical nature of ethnographic knowledge is not necessarily to abandon the assumption of human connectedness, although it does mean questioning any stable or essential grounds of human similarity. Humanism and surrealism need not be seen as mutually exclusive, and are best understood, perhaps, as antinomies set within a transient historical and cultural predicament. To state the contrast schematically, ethnographic humanism begins with the different and renders it (through naming, classifying, describing, interpreting) comprehensible. It familiarizes. A surrealist practice, on the other hand, attacks the familiar, provoking the irruption of otherness—the unexpected. The two attitudes presuppose one another; both are elements within a complex process that generates cultural meanings, definitions of self and other. This process—a permanent, ironic play of similarity

⁶² Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Humanisme et terreur* (Paris: Gallimard, 1947), 182.

⁶³ See, for example, Stanislas Adotevi, "Le musée, inversion de la vie," *L'Art Vivant* (special issue, "Le musée en question"), no. 36 (1972-73), 10-11.

⁶⁴ Notably Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York: Random House, 1970), preface and chs. 9, 10.

⁶⁵ I have pursued these matters further in a review essay of Edward Said's *Orientalism*, published in *History and Theory*, 19:2 (1980), 204-23.

and difference, the familiar and the strange, the here and the elsewhere—is, I have argued, characteristic of global modernity.

In exploring this predicament I have dwelt on the practice of “ethnographic surrealism,” paying less attention to its converse, “surrealist ethnography.” By way of conclusion, then, let me offer a few hypotheses concerning the latter activity. There are no pure examples, except perhaps Leiris’s *L’Afrique fantôme*; but I would like to suggest that surrealist procedures are always present in ethnographic works, though seldom explicitly acknowledged. We have noted some of them in Griaule’s documentary approach. More generally, the mechanism of collage can serve as a helpful paradigm.⁶⁶ In every Introduction to Anthropology course, and in most ethnographies, moments are produced in which distinct cultural realities are cut from their contexts and forced into jarring proximity. For example, in Malinowski’s Trobriand Islands, behavior we label as economics or trade is identified with canoe magic and myth. Ritual exchange valuables, *vaygu’a* (shell necklaces), are juxtaposed with the English crown jewels. Even to bring an alien kinship system into the conceptual domain of Western marriage is to provoke a defamiliarizing effect. But it is essential to distinguish this moment of metonymic juxtaposition from its normal sequel, a movement of metaphorical comparison in which consistent grounds for similarity and difference are elaborated.

The surrealist moment in ethnography is that moment in which the possibility of comparison exists in unmediated tension with sheer incongruity. This moment is repeatedly produced, and smoothed over, in the process of ethnographic comprehension. But to see this activity in terms of collage is to hold the surrealist moment in view—the startling copresence on Lautréamont’s dissecting table. Collage brings to the work (here the ethnographic text) elements that continually proclaim their foreignness to the context of presentation. These elements—like a newspaper clip or a feather—are marked as real, as collected not invented by the artist-writer. The procedures of (a) cutting out and (b) assemblage are, of course, basic to any semiotic message; here they are the message. The cuts and sutures of the research process are left visible; there is no smoothing over or blending of the work’s raw “data” into a homogeneous representation. To write ethnographies on the model of collage would be to avoid the portrayal of cultures as organic wholes, or as unified, realistic worlds subject to a continuous explanatory discourse. (Gregory Bateson’s *Naven* is an early, and in the genre, unclassifiable, example of what I am suggesting here.)⁶⁷ The ethnography as collage would leave manifest the

⁶⁶ In the discussion that follows I have been stimulated by ideas in *Revue d’esthétique* (special issue, “Collages”), no. 3–4 (1978).

⁶⁷ On Bateson’s *Naven* as an experiment in ethnographic writing, see George Marcus, “Rhetoric and the Ethnographic Genre in Anthropological Research,” *Current Anthropology*, 21:4 (1980), 509.

constructivist procedures of ethnographic knowledge; it would be an assemblage containing voices other than the ethnographer's, as well as examples of "found" evidence, data not fully integrated within the work's governing interpretation. Finally it would not explain away those elements in the foreign culture which render the investigator's own culture newly incomprehensible.

The surrealist elements of modern ethnography tend to go unacknowledged by a science that sees itself engaged in the reduction of incongruities rather than, simultaneously, in their production. But is not every ethnographer something of a surrealist, a reinventor and reshuffler of realities? Ethnography, the science of cultural jeopardy, presupposes a constant willingness to be surprised, to unmake interpretive syntheses, and to value—when it comes—the unclassified, unsought Other.