



RUTGERS
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Genius, Spontaneous Freedom, and the Avant-Garde

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Spontaneous Freedom

- A sort of freedom that is often sought out and experienced
- A sort of freedom that is enacted in / depicted (formally or otherwise) by (avant-garde) art
- *Spontaneous freedom*
 - the feeling captured by phrases like ‘the freedom of the open road’ and ‘free spirits’, and ‘free bloody birds’ going ‘down the long slide / To happiness, endlessly’ (Phillip Larkin)

Peter Walsh in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*

And just because nobody yet knew he was in London, except Clarissa [Dalloway], and the earth, after the voyage, still seemed an island to him, the strangeness of standing alone, alive, unknown, at half-past eleven in Trafalgar Square overcame him. What is it? Where am I? And why, after all, does one do it? he thought, the divorce seeming all moonshine. And down his mind went flat as a marsh, and three great emotions bowled over him; understanding; a vast philanthropy; and finally, as if the result of the others, an irrepressible, exquisite delight; as if inside his brain by another hand strings were pulled, shutters moved, and he, having nothing to do with it, yet stood at the opening of endless avenues, down which if he chose he might wander. He had not felt so young for years.

He had escaped! was utterly free — as happens in the downfall of habit when the mind, like an unguarded flame, bows and bends and seems about to blow from its holding. I haven't felt so young for years! thought Peter, escaping (only of course for an hour or so) from being precisely what he was, and feeling like a child who runs out of doors, and sees, as he runs, his old nurse waving at the wrong window.

Features of spontaneous freedom

- a sort of freedom that is accessed by experiencing it
- involves some degree of uncertainty about what the future holds and involves feeling that one's own activity is unplanned and unscripted
- involves an unalienated experience of one's activity
- has veridicality conditions
- characteristically (but not necessarily) pleasurable
- a non-binary phenomenon
- contrastive (and distinct from habit)
- depends on appropriate material and social conditions being in place

Why would we want spontaneous freedom?

- Spontaneous freedom allows for the distinctive pleasure of feeling that one's life is unforetold and that one is among the sources of novelty in the world: what Hannah Arendt calls 'the capacity of beginning something anew'.
- Spontaneous freedom can provide a valuable feeling of relief at finding ourselves not to be exhausted by our rational, deliberative natures. When we experience spontaneous freedom, we tend to identify the source of our activities with deep and unstructured commitments. This can help us to see ourselves as more continuous with nature and other people, affording at least fleeting relief from the pain of individuation and the existential anxiety that can come from seeing ourselves as atoms in an indifferent universe (Nietzsche 1999, § 8).

Kant on artistic genius

- The concept of beautiful art ... does not allow the judgment concerning the beauty of its product to be derived from any sort of rule that has a concept for its determining ground, and thus has as its ground a concept of how it is possible. Thus beautiful art cannot itself think up the rule in accordance with which it is to bring its product into being. Yet since without a preceding rule a product can never be called art, nature in the subject (and by means of the disposition of its faculties) must give the rule to art, i.e., beautiful art is possible only as a product of genius (Kant 2000, 5:307).
- An ideal of creativity that works its way through Romanticism and post-Romanticism into modernism's characteristic concern with novelty

Automatism

André Masson.
Automatic Drawing.
(1924).



Surrealist automatism

- Decalcomania
- Unconscious creation as a technique for freeing the artist's mind from conscious, rational control

Untitled, Oscar
Domínguez, 1936



André Breton: 'a
real feeling of
liberty: the essence
of surrealism'

'Waterfall', Arshile
Gorky, 1943



André Breton on surrealist objects

I suggested that objects seen in dreams should be manufactured and put into circulation, I envisaged the assumption of concrete form by such objects—however unusual their appearance might turn out to be—far more as a means than an end. I certainly hoped that the multiplication of such objects would entail the depreciation of those objects of often dubiously accepted usefulness which clutter up the so-called real world; such a depreciation seemed to me a prerequisite for the unleashing of the powers of invention which, within the limits of our present understanding of the dream process, must surely be vitalized by contact with dream-engendered objects representing pure desire in concrete form. But the aim I was pursuing went far beyond the mere creation of such objects: it entailed nothing less than the objectification of the very act of dreaming, its transformation into reality.

André Breton, “Crisis of the Object,” in *Surrealism and Painting*, trans. Simon Watson Taylor (London: Macdonald, 1964), 277.



'Lobster Telephone',
Salvador Dalí, 1938



'My Nurse Maid',
Meret Oppenheim,
1936



Untitled (Objet
méchant) (Nasty
Object), Joyce
Mansour, 1965-69



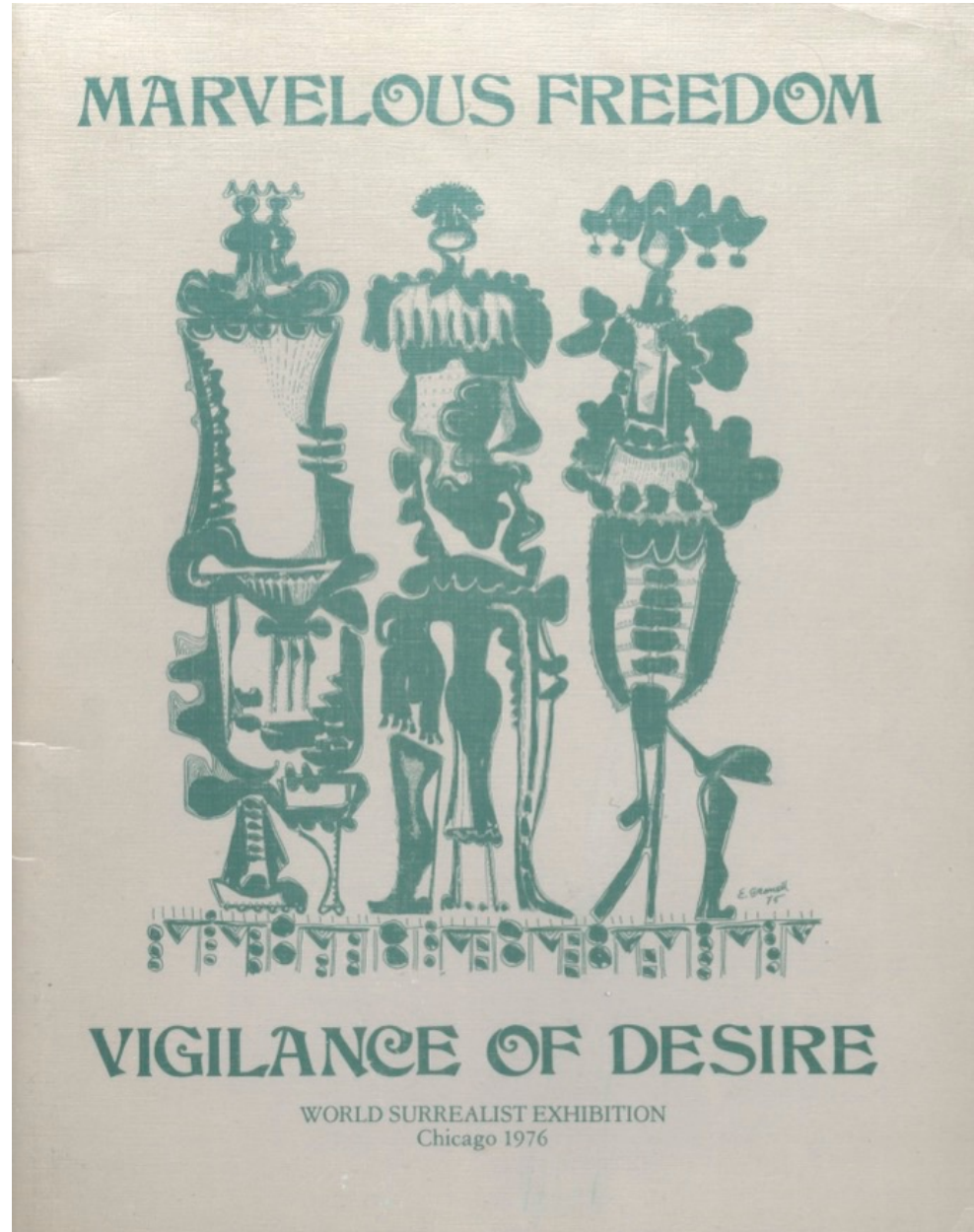
'Fur Gloves with Wooden Fingers',
Meret Oppenheim, 1936

Surrealist objects and freedom

- Objects as provoking indistinct cognition: thinking without concepts
- Thinking that doesn't follow a habit or pattern*
- Can art enact/instantiate spontaneous freedom?

* For more on this, see Francey Russell, 'Kant's Fantasy', *Mind* (2024)

Surrealist Freedom



Surrealist Freedom

‘Stand for twenty minutes on any street corner of any large city, and note the expressions in the eyes of the multitude of far from perfect strangers who pass by with nothing better to do, it seems, than to perfect their estrangement ... It is nonetheless true that this discomfort, this despair that gnaws through the darkness in everyone's heart, endlessly opens loopholes in the wall of logic used to justify the universal immobilization of the human spirit. Through these loopholes, while they last, the flame of freedom faintly glimmers, illuminating the promise that something else exists or could exist. For most people this flame flickers its last, or almost its last, in a protracted form of death known as "maturation."

Imagination, dream, fantasy, play, adventure-everything that gives life a hint of magic and exaltation is relegated to an increasingly depreciated childhood. ...

There remain, for most people, only a few rare "unconnected" and "inexplicable" moments: fleeting eruptions of inspiration, sudden passions, dazzling encounters "by chance." Such moments, true glimpses of the Marvelous, secure themselves permanently in each person's psychic life, in the depths of each person's inner mythology. Shunned by repressive reason, persecuted by routine, these magic moments nonetheless remain secret signposts for the wandering mind—for the shadow in search of its substance.’ Franklin Rosemont, ‘Freedom of the Marvelous.’ In *Marvelous Freedom Vigilance of Desire*. Exhibition Catalog, World Surrealist Exhibition, Chicago, 1976. 5-10.

Play/performance/spontaneous freedom

One day in 1947 William Cimillo, a bus driver who had driven the same route through the Bronx for the Surface Transportation System of New York for seventeen years, got into his bus and, instead of driving north to the Bronx as usual, turned south, switching the destination sign on his bus from 'Subway' to 'Special.' Cimillo kept driving south through Washington, where he saw the White House for the first time in his life, and on to Florida where he took a midnight swim. In a later interview, Cimillo said, 'Just get away from everything. That's what I wanted to do'. Cimillo was ultimately arrested in Florida and charged with grand larceny, but there was a tremendous outpouring of public support for him. One Michigan newspaper wrote, 'Across the nation today, thousands of office workers and laborers went to their humdrum jobs with hearts a little lighter, because of what William L. Cimillo did to escape the same kind of boredom that fills their ordered lives'. Other New York City bus drivers organized a fund-raiser to pay for Cimillo's legal fees, the charges against him were dropped, and the New York City bus system gave him back his job. On his first day back on his route, hundreds of people lined up to try to board his bus (This American Life 2014).