

# Dadaism, Surrealism, and the Unconscious<sup>1</sup>

**Louis Laganà**

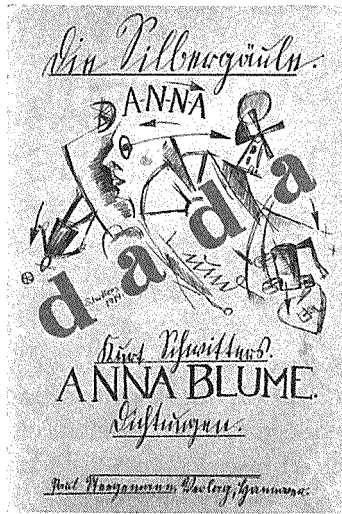
louis.lagana@um.edu.mt

**Abstract:** This paper explores two important, twentieth-century art movements, Dadaism and Surrealism and the use of primitivist representations and their relation to the art emerging from the unconscious. By giving some examples, it is argued that the influence of 'Primitive' art is strongly felt in the art of many artists of these movements. One must also include the growing interest of psychoanalytic studies, especially in the works of the period of Freud and Jung. The Dadaist artists created their art through the irrational approach towards nature and a 'primitive' attitude to the environment, the art of children and of the insane. On the other hand, the Surrealists approached the unconscious through automatism and dreams. These artists also explored the ancient human past and what is termed as the 'primitive' unconscious.

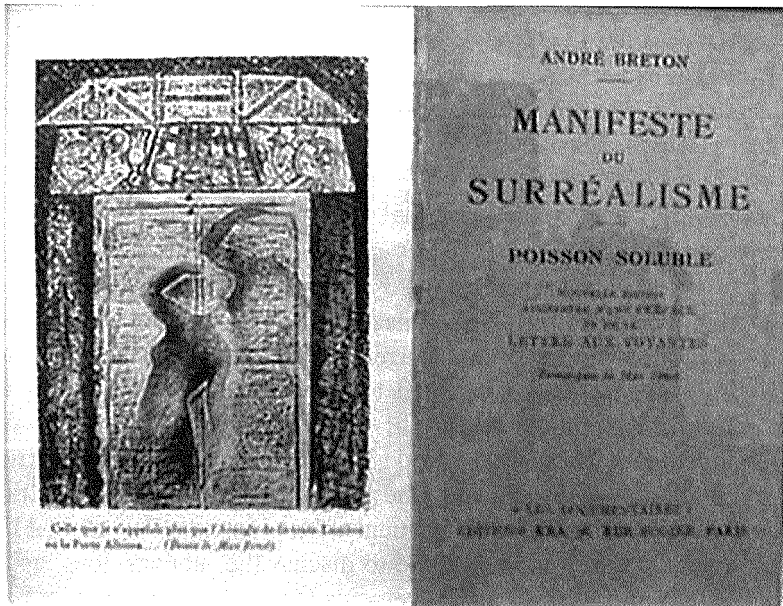
**Keywords:** Dadaism, Surrealism, the Unconscious, Primitivism, Twentieth-Century Art, Freud, Jung

This paper does not intend to make a historical critique of the various attitudes that Dada and Surrealist artists took in the important movements that dominated the arts and literature during the first half of the twentieth century. It seeks a coherent explanation why such movements are central to modern art through the use of primitivist representations and the appeal to the psychological interests of the time which were fundamental to subsequent art movements. The general line of argument is that it is impossible to discuss the 'unconscious' as the main feature of these two art movements (as well as other movements

<sup>1</sup> This is the text of a paper read during the Twenty-Eight International Conference on Psychology and the Arts, Roskilde University, Denmark, 22–26 June 2011.



Hugo Ball, Dadaist Journal, 1



Surrealist Manifesto

in art history) without referring to the 'primitive' unconscious. It is the opinion of the present writer that artists had to look to their 'roots' by exploring the unconscious realms of the ancient human past, the tribal, as well as the psychologies of children, peasants, and the insane. This will put the readers in a better position to understand better the role of the modern artist and to find meaning in contemporary artwork.

Traditional values and morals, along with any basic hope for the future, were really shattered by World War I. That event was so catastrophic that man lost his faith in the progress that had developed in nineteenth-century Europe. There seemed no hope that Western society would survive and many questioned whether a reliance on traditional values would enable it to do so. A modern movement that emerged out of the horrors of World War I was the Dada movement. This western European artistic and literary movement (1916–23) sought the discovery of authentic reality through the abolition of traditional culture and aesthetic forms. Dada (French 'hobby-horse') primarily flourished in Zurich and other northern European countries like Berlin, Cologne, and Paris. It also left its imprint in New York. The origin of the name is still unclear and it is disputed how the word 'Dada' originated. Many identify Hugo Ball as the actual originator who is said to have accidentally found the name while flipping through a French-German dictionary ... 'Let's take the word "dada" ... The child's first sound expresses the primitiveness, the beginning at zero, the new in our art.'<sup>2</sup>

At first, many Dadaists declared themselves as Expressionists and Futurists but this died out by 1917. The early group namely, Tristan Tzara and Marcel Janco from Rumania; Jean Arp from France; and Hugo Ball, Hans Richter, and Richard Huelsenbeck from Germany took refuge in the neutral city of Zurich and organized the first meetings in cafes. Tristan Tzara, the leader of the movement, wanted to attack society through artistic absurdities. Artists who joined this movement believed that a society that is always engaged in wars does not deserve art, so Dadaism was considered as an anti-art movement – creating ugliness not beauty. Dawn Ades, in her essay on Dadaism, comments that:

The Dadaists believed that the artist was the product, and, traditionally, the prop, of bourgeois society, itself anachronistic and doomed. The war finally

2 Dawn Ades, 'Dada and Surrealism', in *Concepts of Modern Art*, Nikos Stangos (ed.), (enlarged edition, London, 1981), 110.

demonstrated its rottenness, but instead of being able to join in the construction of something new, the artist was still trapped in that society's death throes. He was thus an anachronism whose work was totally irrelevant, and the Dadaists wanted to prove its irrelevance in public.<sup>3</sup>

Although the Dadaists were showing a kind of discontent with society through their 'absurdities', the public seemed to accept their work. The bourgeoisie acknowledged this 'rebellious' new art and from anti-art it became art. This was an art that expressed the confusion that was brought about by the war. Artists were not attempting to find meaning in disorder but to accept disorder as the 'nature' of the world. By rejecting the traditional values, artists were in a continuous search to understand the nature of the world. The first meeting place for the Dadaists was the *Cabaret Voltaire* on the Spiegelgasse, in Zurich. These artists transformed a tavern into a place where all sorts of literary and artistic activities and performances were held. Under the same name, *Cabaret Voltaire*, Hugo Ball launched a journal where artists and writers included their work. In these manifestos Dadaists started to use illustrations of non-figurative forms, particularly influenced by the abstract work of Kandinsky.

Another facet of Dadaism is 'its more active involvement with primitivism and Primitive art'.<sup>4</sup> This seemed to arise from pursuing an art that reflected the inner feeling of the artist rather than to express the external aspect of the world and its society, which these artists were against. Evan Maurer remarked that:

The Dadaists rejection of the inevitable linked aesthetics and social values of the established order led them to Primitive art as well as to related areas such as folk art, naïve art, and children's art. All these were considered to be expressions of elemental feelings and ideas unspoiled by traditional Western values and utilizing alternative artistic means.<sup>5</sup>

Artists like the Swiss artist Jean Arp were already exploiting the elementary feeling of the characteristics of Primitivism in art. Arp's love for directness in art led the artist to develop new approaches in

3 Id., 'Dada and Surrealism', in *Modern Art*, David Britt (ed.), (London, 1974), 204.

4 Evan Maurer, 'Dada and Surrealism', in *'Primitivism' in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Art*, William Rubin (ed.), (New York, 1984), 535 (see footnote 3, p. 592).

5 Ibid., 526.

his work.<sup>6</sup> He created images from various materials, such as cloth, paper, and wood instead of paint and employed different techniques such as tearing, gluing, and cutting up. In these experiments, he discovered what is called the 'Laws of Chance'. Artists 'rejected everything that was to copy or description, and allowed the Elementary and Spontaneous to react in full freedom'.<sup>7</sup> Arp used 'chance' also in his poetry in a more radical way, by choosing words and phrases at random from newspapers.<sup>8</sup>

The concept of nature was also of fundamental importance for the Dadaists. They had a different opinion of 'Nature' than the Expressionists. While Expressionists strove to become part of nature, Dadaists believed that 'matter and spirit were one' and that 'humankind was an integral part of an organic universe'.<sup>9</sup> This philosophy is reflected greatly in the works of Jean Arp, like his found objects and collages as well as his organic abstractions. Colin Rhodes describes well the unifying factor of art and nature as seen by the Zurich Dadaists:

Arp and his Zurich contemporaries believed that a true work of art does not exist above nature, but that it takes its place within the natural order, as a concrete manifestation of the primal organic process of becoming.<sup>10</sup>

So we see that Dadaism 'signifies the most primitive relation to the reality of the environment'<sup>11</sup> and nature. Artists were experiencing and expressing the closest possible homogeneity with nature.

Another early work which describes the influence of primitive and tribal art is Marcel Janco's 1916 painting *Invitation to a Dada Evening*. This work is the sole example that shows the involvement of the Zurich Dadaists with Primitivism.<sup>12</sup> It also captures the excitement and action of the performances held at the *Cabaret Voltaire*. Later this young Rumanian artist worked on a number of masks made out of crude materials to publicize and be used in Dadaist happenings. 'For Janico, Primitive art was one of the several inspirational influences from non-traditional sources that were direct and free in the forms and manner they utilized

6 Ades, 'Dada and Surrealism', in Britt (ed.), 216.

7 Ibid., 214, 215.

8 Ibid. 215.

9 Colin Rhodes, *Primitivism and Modern Art* (London, 1994), 150.

10 Ibid.

11 Robert Hughes, *The Shock of the New* (New York, 1981), 71.

12 Evan Maurer, 'Dada and Surrealism', in Rubin (ed.), 536.

to represent the world',<sup>13</sup> Evan Maurer commented. Not only Primitive art had influenced this artist but also the art of children and the insane that later became 'a major aspect of the literature and art of Surrealism'.<sup>14</sup>

Interest in psychoanalytic studies increased and the works of Freud, Jung, and other psychologists of the period became popular. Freud's discovery of the unconscious and his exploration to answer man's psychological complexities through the analysis of dreams as an expression of the subconscious brought with it conclusions that influenced artists to reject the primacy of reason. Poets and artists believed that they could bypass the rational process and depend more on the expression of the unconscious through automatic writing and drawing.

In the history of art, the search for meaning beyond mere appearances found a powerful support in the Surrealist movement. Surrealism grew directly from Dadaism. Like Dadaism, Surrealism emphasized the role of the unconscious in creative activity, but it employed the psychic unconscious in a more ordered manner. Historically it all started in Paris in 1922 when André Breton, a poet and critic, gathered a group of artists, poets, and writers who wanted to free their creativity from the constraints of reason and thus embarked on the exploration of the unconscious mind.

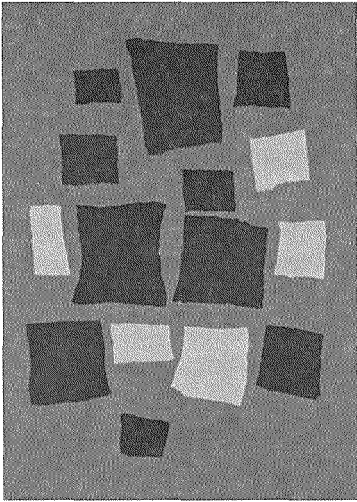
The discovery of primitive man through his art determined a new perspective of investigation, which was linked more closely to the spirit of primordial man. The surrealists attempted to find the hidden nature of the artist, that is, the 'primitive unconscious'.<sup>15</sup> In recorded history primitive man is not only encountered in his natural habitat, but the 'primitive' is also found in modern man. The unconscious is part of the nature in man, the basic stuff behind human consciousness. This applies not only to the primitive ancestor but also to any human in any civilization. Hal Foster gives an intriguing definition and explanation how and why the 'primitive' became part of the unconscious Western civilization:

Historically, the primitive is articulated by the West in deprivative or supplemental terms: as a spectacle of savagery or a state of grace, as a socius without writing or the Word, without history or cultural complexity; or a state of originary unity, symbolic plenitude, natural vitality. There is nothing

13 Ibid. 538.

14 Ibid.

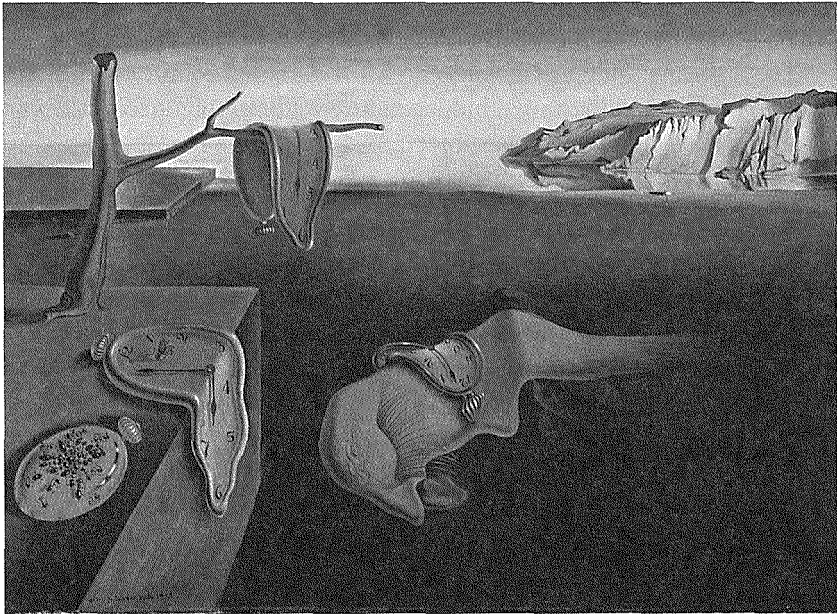
15 Hal Foster, 'The 'Primitive' Unconscious in Modern Art', 1985 in *Art in Modern Culture: an anthology of critical texts*, eds., Francis Frascina and Jonathan Harris, (London, 1992).



Arp, collage with squares arranged according to laws of chance, 1916



Marcel Janco, /Invitation to a Dada Evening/, 1916.



Salvador Dali, The Persistence of Memory, 1931

odd about this Eurocentric construction: the primitive has served as a coded other at least since the Enlightenment, usually as a subordinate term in its imaginary set of oppositions (light/dark, rational/irrational, civilized/savage). This domesticated primitive is thus constructive, not disruptive, of the binary *ratio* of the West; fixed as a structural opposite or a dialectical other to be incorporated, it assists in the establishment of Western identity, centre, norm, and name. In its modernist version the primitive may appear transgressive, it is true, but it still serves as a limit: projected within and without, the primitive becomes a figure of our unconscious and outside (a figure constructed in modern art as well as in psychoanalysis and anthropology in privileged triad of the primitive, the child, and the insane).<sup>16</sup>

Although the construct of the 'primitive' in a Western sense gives a deprived approach and contrary ideas, one cannot leave out the effect it left on our consciousness. Accepting the fact that 'artistic creativity originates deep within the psyche of the artist',<sup>17</sup> it is also acknowledged that the art of the primitives was without any form of repression. Therefore it 'emerges directly and spontaneously from psychological drives'.<sup>18</sup> Unconsciously the 'civilized' artist was always attracted to the art of the 'primitive' and sought to find the missing qualities in Western art that are only manifested in Primitive Art.

The Surrealists pursued their research in the arts and culture of primitive man, to understand their own hidden nature – 'their' unconscious. Evan Maurer writes clearly on this subject:

Primitive society found the answers to the questions of life in the spirit world and the realm of dream. The Surrealists, in studying Primitive arts and cultures, followed a similar path. It has been recognized that in Primitive societies the relationship between art and the creative process is closely influenced by magic, a subject that provides another affinity between the Surrealists and the Primitive. For the latter, the magical qualities of the object depend on its role as an embodiment and power.<sup>19</sup>

Because dreams reveal the nature of the unconscious, the Surrealists showed that the unconscious was an escape from the rational convictions of the 'civilized' world.

16 Ibid., 206.

17 Sally Price, *Primitive Art in Civilized Places* (London 1991), 32.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid., 546.



For the Surrealist, dreams played an important role. They believed that the primitive state could only be reached through the thoughts and images that arise from the unconscious through dreams. Also, in the early days of this movement, artists made use of drugs and hypnotism to enter into the dream-like state and a state of the unconscious and be able to extract images and ideas. Surrealists 'dreams were valuable simply for poetic content, as documents from a marvellous world'.<sup>20</sup> It was not necessary to record dreams and then translate them into paintings. They are rather explorations into an interior landscape. Although Freudian psychology played an important role in the development of Surrealist thinking, the Surrealists borrowed only what was appropriate for them. Their aim was to change the view of mankind, not to offer an objective scientific contribution to psychology. So it was natural for the Surrealists to create dream-like scenes and images that are impossible to find in the natural world. Surrealist painting shows a great variety of content and technique. Salvador Dalí for example, painted with a photographic-like accuracy and made his images look bright, intense, and alive. His paintings expressed a kind of 'theatrical illusion' to the spectators. He was perhaps one of the Surrealists who provoked 'the most difficult questions about the possible realization of dreams on canvas, and hence about the symbolic function of the imagery'.<sup>21</sup> In fact, Freudian psychology was the most appealing to Dalí. Freud himself explains this when he met Dalí in 1938 in London. Freud argues:

It is not the unconscious I seek in your pictures, but the conscious. While in the pictures of the masters – Leonardo or Ingres – that which interests me, that which seems mysterious and troubling to me, is precisely the search for unconscious ideas, of an enigmatic order, hidden in the picture. Your mystery is manifested outright. The picture is but a mechanism to reveal itself.<sup>22</sup>

Dalí's work shows undoubtedly the great influence that Freud had on him especially when he read about the theory of the unconscious in Freud's seminal book, *The Interpretation of Dreams* written in 1900. Freud's general theme in this major work is that dreams are disguised wish-fulfilment, manifestations of repressed sexual desires and energy.

20 Ades, 'Dada and Surrealism', in Britt (ed.), 242.

21 Ibid., 241.

22 Ibid., 243.

Surrealistic works can have a realistic though irrational style describing dream-like fantasies like the works of René Magritte, Salvador Dalí, and Yves Tanguy. The symbolist artists and the metaphysical paintings of Giorgio de Chirico also inspired these artists. The so-called 'Veristic' Surrealists did not interpret the idea of automatism as abstraction. Instead they believed that they should let the images of the unconscious surface undisturbed. This perhaps could be attributed to the writings of Karl Jung. For them, academic discipline and form was a means to create images and freeze them as they emerged from the unconscious. On the other hand, Surrealism could have a more abstract approach like the works of Joan Miró, Max Ernst, and André Masson who invented the spontaneous technique known as 'Automatism', modelled on the psychotherapeutic procedures of Freud's 'free association'. Abstractionism was for them the only way to bring out images from the unconscious to consciousness without loading them with 'meaning'.

Although artists who used Automatism and Veristic Surrealism held different ideas and ways of expression, both are inherently searching for the same purity of thought, that is, the exploration of the unconscious mind.

At first painting was only mentioned in a footnote of the *Surrealist Manifesto* that announced Surrealism as a literary movement.<sup>23</sup> Later on, 'it claimed, however, to take in the whole spectrum of human activity'.<sup>24</sup> Artists who formed part of the ex-Dada movement, like Max Ernst and Jean Arp, abandoned Dada's nihilism and embraced the new freedom found in the unconscious nature of man. 'Breton's claims that the original source of interest in 'automatism' was Freud.'<sup>25</sup> The Surrealists were attempting to express the unconscious through primitivism. Colin Rhodes argues that:

The Surrealist appeal to the unconscious can be regarded as Primitivist in so far as psychological reliance upon the operations was considered at the time, not least via their reading of Freud, to belong to a much earlier period in human development, that is prior to the growth of conscious, rational thought, as with children and tribal people.<sup>26</sup>

The psychology of tribal people, children, and the insane also plays an important part in the way that Surrealism was developing. Dawn Ades also confirms this in her writing:

23 Ades, 'Dada and Surrealism', in Stangos (ed.), 124.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

26 Colin Rhodes, *Primitivism and Modern Art* (London, 1994), 162.

Within the visual arts Surrealism was one of the most voracious of all modern movements, drawing into range the art of mediums, children, lunatics, the naïve painters, together with primitive art, which reflected their belief in their own 'integral primitivism'.<sup>27</sup>

The Surrealists believed in the innocent eye and therefore they found that the art produced by children was more real than that produced by adults. The art of adults was seen to be repressed and contaminated. Joan Miró was one of the first Surrealists to be inspired by the art of children. His strange images, remnants of various parts of the imagined human body, derived from children's games, became the basis for his early works. Miró took advantage of any form and used all sorts of materials to bring out the desired shapes. He used sponges, rags or burlap. His process in painting had two stages. He stated: 'I begin painting, and as I paint the picture begins to assert itself, or suggest itself, under my brush. The form becomes a sign for a woman or a bird as I work ... The first stage is free, unconscious.' But, he added 'the second stage is carefully calculated'.<sup>28</sup> Actually Miró was not a product of Surrealism but was important for the Surrealists. He turned away from a representational style and made use of *automatism*. Breton commented that 'by his "pure psychic automatism" Miró might "pass as the most surrealist of us all"'.<sup>29</sup>

During the early years of Surrealism, Max Ernst, who later became well known for his automatic techniques known as frottage and grattage, 'was the artist most involved with primitivism and the imagery of Primitive art'.<sup>30</sup> He was one of the most prolific contributors of Surrealism using a vast choice of materials in his work. In the late twenties, his interest in sculpture was becoming more evident and he derived his inspiration from the art of Primitive American Indians. Ernst produced a series of sculpture with a totemic nature. Even his masks had a symbolic, magical quality and a personal sacredness. 'Like the Primitive shaman, Ernst sought to utilize hallucinations and visions to become seer, one capable of penetrating beyond the appearances to give form to surreal visions of his creative imagination.'<sup>31</sup> Ernst's interest was to create images that

27 Ades, *Dada and Surrealism*, in Stangos (ed.), 127.

28 Ibid., 130.

29 Ibid.

30 Evan Maurer, 'Dada and Surrealism', in Rubin (ed.), 575.

31 Ibid.

emerge from the 'primitive unconscious' of man. Primitive art also interested artists like Joan Miró and André Masson.

Women were important for the Surrealists not as artists but as sexual creatures and lovers. They inspired the creativity of artists both in a positive and negative way. Women were an attraction but they were also feared as is found in the works of Max Ernst, Decamp, and Dalí. The visionary and symbolic imagery of women was usually incorporated in dreamscapes and architectural interiors. Such imagery expressed strong dominant figures which controlled their environment. The egg, water, and the tree are all symbolic images that represent rebirth and regeneration. Therefore Surrealists placed women at their centre, as the focus of their dreams. Colin Rhodes writes:

Masson believed that women, in general, remained in closer contact with the unconscious than men, and in his work the female has a dual function of being an object of desire and a symbol of humanity's primitive bonds with the creative forces of nature.<sup>32</sup>

In Masson's work the idea is expressed in some of his female figures, the relation between the woman and the earth, sexuality, and natural creation.<sup>33</sup> Here one cannot leave out the monumental work by Sir James Fraser, *The Golden Bough* (1890) and also his later publication *The Worship of Nature* (1926) which were of great inspiration for Surrealists like Max Ernst, André Masson, and others. The exploration of Primitive mythology and magico-religious images served also as a stimulus for the Surrealists of this period.

This short analysis is limited to just a few ideas on how Dadaism and Surrealism supported Primitivism and their relation to the art emerging from the unconscious. It is worth examining how artists, through nostalgia, remained attracted and attached to the ideas of Primitivism in the later years of the twentieth century. They were discontented with society and searched continuously for an ideal past. This phenomena still persists today in the work of some contemporary artists who try to use art as a tool of social transformation.

32 Rhodes, 164, 165.

33 Ibid., 165.