

8 Disabling Surrealism

Reconstituting Surrealist tropes in contemporary art

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Disabled and non-disabled artists have explored what happens when the fantastic, non-rational context of Surrealism rubs up against disability aesthetics. The politics that emanate from Surrealism are at times useful for and at other times in conflict with the politics of disability art. The iconography of Surrealist artists Hans Bellmer, Jacques-André Boiffard, Brassai, and André Masson takes on new meaning when juxtaposed with performances, sculptures, and photographs by contemporary artists Lisa Bufano, Chun-Shan (Sandie) Yi, and Artur Żmijewski. The works of the Surrealists and these contemporary artists share some critical characteristics, as they each execute lively imagery exploring human and non-human body parts in various guises, such as the praying mantis, the mannequin, and the doll. Specifically, Bufano's animal-like performances with props and prosthetics have an uncanny physical and metaphorical similarity to the praying mantis depictions in Masson's paintings, and Yi's photographs of her two-fingered toes and feet demand and call for a reconsideration of the infamous, stark depiction of hands, feet, and other body parts in the Surrealist photography of Boiffard and Brassai. The cocktail of Żmijewski's amputee and non-amputee bodies in his photographs evokes Bellmer's *Poupée* sculptural constellations of limbs and flesh, and his work may represent antagonism towards the very disability politics that I seek to promote in this chapter. The work of Bufano, Yi, and Żmijewski simultaneously enhances and destabilizes Surrealism's tropes and iconography, because these contemporary artists grapple with psychoanalysis and ideas of the non-rational in more complex, corporeal forms. While it is the image of disability that interested the Surrealists, the languages of disability and Surrealism have rarely been conflated within both the fields of art history and disability studies. Utilizing Surrealist tropes ultimately empowers disabled people, because they wield agency over how their own bodies are being portrayed, rather than being objectified from a distanced gaze. For this reason, contemporary representations of disability by disabled and non-disabled artists can shake up and destabilize the very radical efforts of Surrealism itself, as this was a period of art history that, to my knowledge, was predominantly composed of non-disabled artists, or artists who did not identify as disabled or have intimate familiarity with disability.

Surrealists embraced Freudian psychoanalytic theories about sexuality, eroticism, perversity, dream interpretation, the uncanny, hysteria, the death drive,

trauma, shock, and castration.¹ The Surrealists' interest in psychoanalysis produced presentations of the marvelous, through convulsive beauty, the game of the exquisite corpse, and more. Given their interest in how the body might be presented as unruly, deviant, and strange, it makes sense that it was also the Surrealists who were responsible for the imaginative constructions in which the inanimate, mechanical human form, such as the magical doll or mannequin, might be conflated with the human body, especially through the work of Bellmer, Breton, Dali, and others.

How might imagery from Surrealism be reconstituted in the contemporary moment, in order to wield a more politicized function, yet simultaneously retaining its erotic, violent edge? The Surrealists frequently conflated images of the unsettling with constructions of the freak, because this most often summoned associations of disability. The mainstream often perceived that a disabled person inhabited the very characteristics of a freak, prompting visceral affective reactions in others, such as fear, curiosity, and wonder. The Surrealists were very attracted to these contradictory and mysterious qualities, and thus they utilized them prolifically. Given this, the rendering of disabled corporeality ended up being extraordinarily limited, biased, and strained. Rather than immediately reject the work of the Surrealists, by pointing out how much their work diverged from the reality of lived experience of disability and was potentially exploitative, I uncover the nuanced vocabulary of Surrealism and demonstrate its productive use in disability art.

British visual studies scholar Marquard Smith feels that despite the Surrealists' anti-bourgeois political radicalism, they never really engaged critically with psychoanalysis, "to challenge it, to transform it, to tear it asunder."² But Surrealist-influenced art by contemporary disabled and non-disabled artists does critically engage with psychoanalysis—the uncanny and the fetish—by virtue of a more confrontational and personal approach to disabled bodies, and through their lived experience. Picking up where the original Surrealists left off, contemporary disability art shows how Surrealism can be simultaneously enhanced and destabilized. Indeed, the works of the contemporary artists discussed in this chapter seem like familiar and yet unfamiliar forms of Surrealism. Art historian Hal Foster states that "the estrangement of the familiar that is essential to the uncanny in the very etymology of the German term: *unheimlich* (uncanny) derives from *heimlich* (homelike) . . ."³ In the context of my chapter, I read "uncanny" to mean a body that is atypical in form and ability, and which is ghettoized within the mainstream, but is no less human than any other ostensible natural or normal corpus. The word "uncanny" has become somewhat of a synonym for "freak" in popular culture, given that both terms emerge from the world of the supernatural, the eerie, or the extraordinary, where it is inhabited by characters like Frankenstein or the Hunchback of Notre Dame. It is no coincidence that these characters share similar physical atypical attributes to the shape and form of real disabled bodies. If disabled bodies have so regularly been portrayed in fictionalized, mysterious, and scary forms in the media, the mainstream immediately assumes that real disabled people share these similar strange attributes. The Surrealists were seeking to illustrate

a strangeness within our everyday lives through their artwork. Thus, if Surrealism attempted to make the familiar strange, or uncanny, I hope to make the familiarity of Surrealism's tropes more strange through the ostensible strangeness of disability itself. Psychoanalysis has also had a long-standing historical and medical interest in the uncanny; thus it was and still is, in many cases, the disabled body that comes under examination and study within this field.

The praying mantis, the exquisite corpse, and Lisa Bufano

The Surrealists turned to particular forms in culture and in nature that had potent qualities that, for them, could be utilized in ways that illustrated their politics and their vision. For instance, the praying mantis was attractive to the Surrealists for its mating ritual, in which the female eats the male during or after coitus. Art historian William L. Pressly states that “the Surrealists found this cannibalistic nuptial a compelling image of the potential for erotic violence.”⁴ The praying mantis embodied the most negative female archetype, the “castrating woman” who represents cannibalism, sex, and death. The mantis, then, became a metaphor for the Surrealists and their alternative, dream-like world, given its ability to embody contradictory qualities, such that it could be simultaneously attractive and repulsive. The Surrealists were also very interested in metamorphosis, as it could challenge reality and reach into an alternative, sensorial world.⁵ The mantis was important here too, because this insect is able to camouflage itself through color, and the Surrealists admired the mantis's need to become one with nature and trick her mates. Because the mantis has anthropomorphic and metaphorical qualities, especially in the sexual unease she creates with her mates, her activities were then easily transferred over to human behavior patterns in the minds of the Surrealist artists. Breton and Dali included the mantis in many of their artworks; Masson depicted the mantis many times. In the drawing *Le génie de l'espèce III* (1939) (fig. 8.1), Masson depicts a mantis as though it is dancing and leaping across a stage. The way that the legs of the mantis are positioned could be mistaken for the dramatic flung-out arms and legs of an energetic ballerina in mid-air glide.

These depictions are in striking contrast to how I believe the mantis appears in the work of contemporary artist Lisa Bufano. The artist uses prosthetics and props in her performance-based practice, such as by strapping Queen Anne table legs to her legs and arms, in *Home Is Not Home* (2011) (fig. 8.2). She became a bilateral, below-the-knee and total finger-thumb amputee, due to a life-threatening staphylococcus bacterial infection at the age of 21, and she sadly committed suicide in 2013 at the age of forty. She had performed all over the world and toured with AXIS Dance Company from 2006 to 2010. In an artist statement, Bufano said that in this work, she manipulates her body as a way to explore alternative locomotion, corporeal difference, her sexual identity, and the alternative use or animation of prosthetic body parts.⁶ At first, Bufano's performances with props and prosthetics have an uncanny similarity to the Surrealists' depictions of the praying mantis. Indeed, Bufano's prosthetics here look very similar in shape and form to the legs of the praying mantis depicted in *Le génie de l'espèce III*.

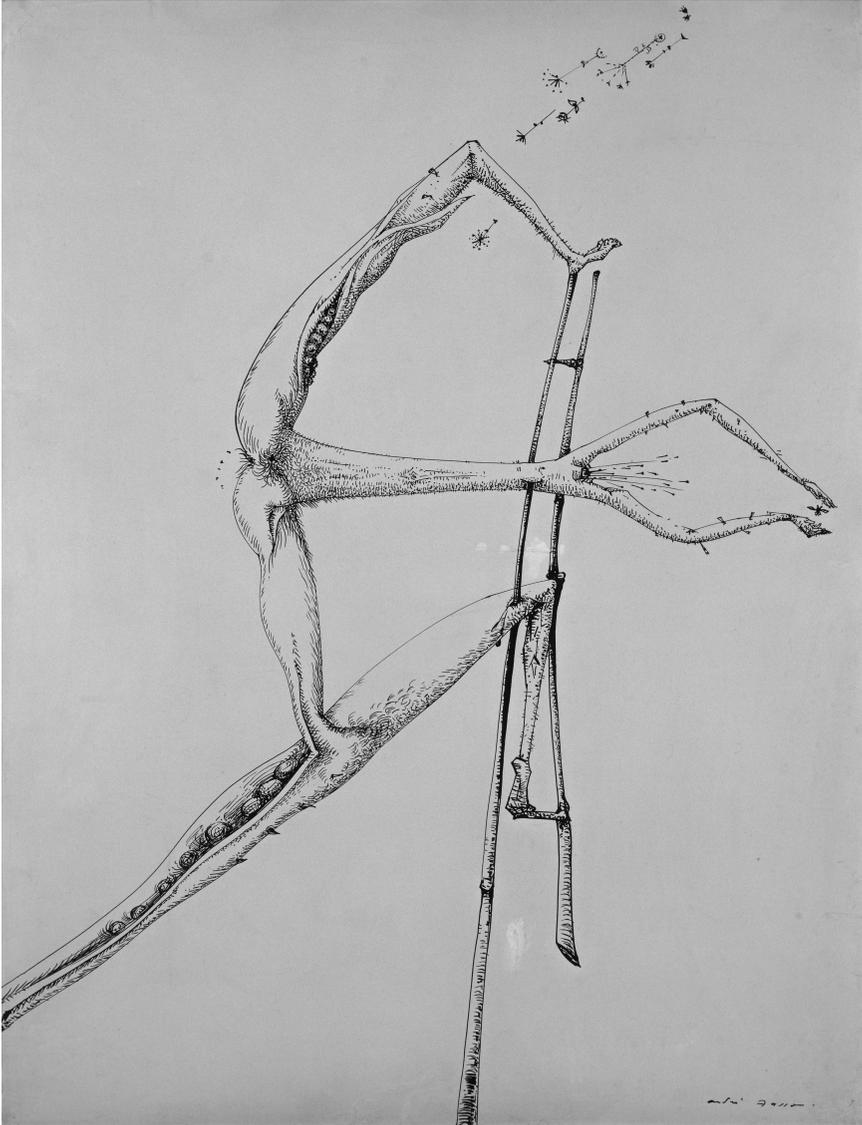


Figure 8.1 André Masson, *Le génie de l'espèce III*, 64.5 × 19.3 cm, India ink, 1939, photo © Centre Pompidou, MNAM-CCI, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais / Philippe Migéat © 2015 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris.

In *Home Is Not Home*, Bufano moves across the bare stage on all fours in insect-like fashion, while a black-and-white graphic illustration of a domestic living space is projected onto a screen in the background. Like a scurrying spider or mantis, when hit by the light of the projector, her captivating form casts shadows



Figure 8.2 Lisa Bufano, *Home Is Not Home*, video still, 2011, courtesy Jason Tshantrè, photo by Jason Tshantrè.

onto the white screen, so that her body moves across the real space of the stage in synchronicity with the fictive domestic interior space in the background. These effects amplify the bizarreness of her form.

How might this literal staging of Bufano's atypical, amputee body shed light on Surrealist imagery? Beginning with the form of the mantis itself, it is important to consider Bufano's transformation and conflation between her body and the inanimate form of the Queen Ann furniture, in which she becomes animal instead of human. Because of the way that Bufano moves on all fours, face and belly-up, in a crawling fashion, it might be easy to make associations between her new form with that of many insects, such as, ants, caterpillars, or praying mantises, or arachnids, such as spiders. In her seminal essay, "Corpus Delecti," art historian Rosalind Krauss discusses Surrealist photographers as masters of disorientations of the body, and she argues that in the case of Man Ray's photographs, the nude body was revealed as beast. She writes, "[T]he body cannot be seen as human, because it has fallen into the condition of the animal."⁷ The title of Bataille's very own magazine, *Minotaure*, references the man/beast. Bufano's mantis-like form falls, then, within these very essential Surrealist tropes. Bufano was also inspired by Hans Bellmer, who will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

Bufano's work may also be seen as the literal, instead of imaginative, embodiment of the Exquisite Corpse (fig. 8.3). This was the Surrealist popular game in which the first participant would compose part of a drawing, and then fold over

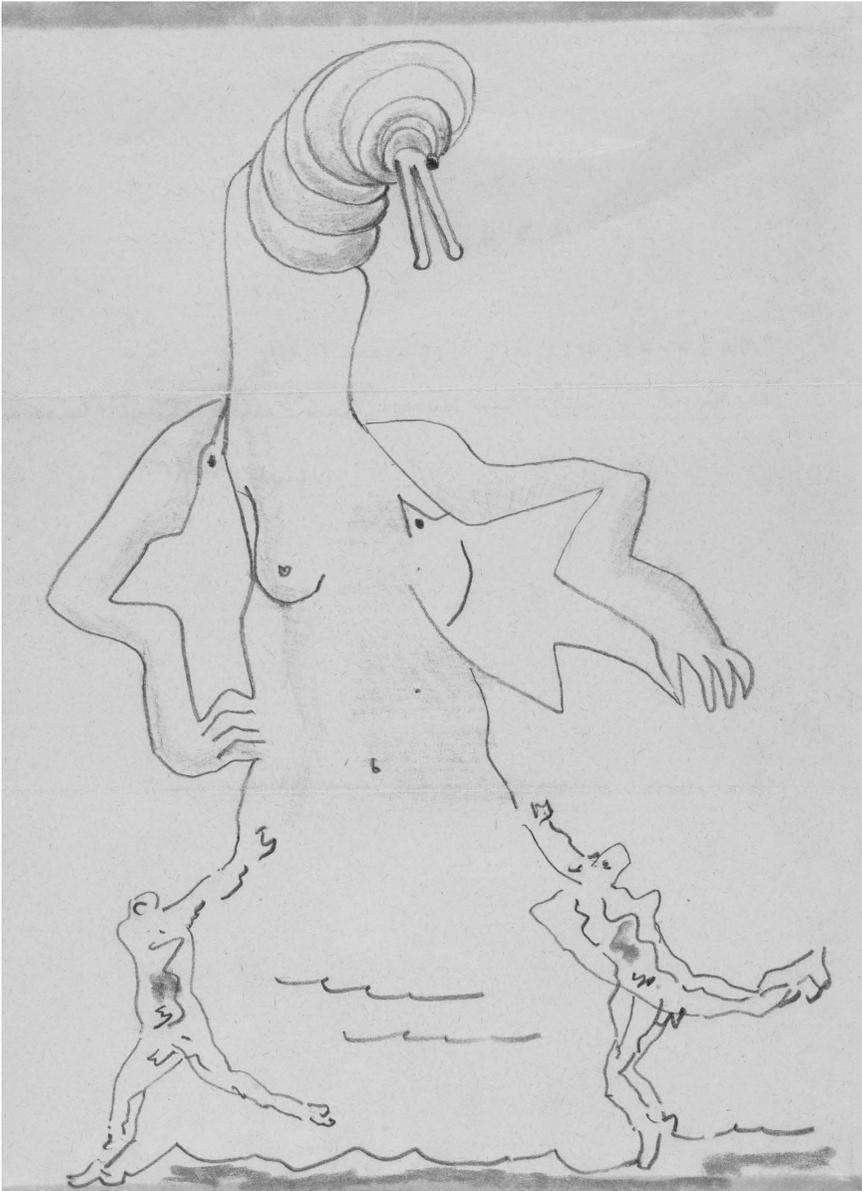


Figure 8.3 André Masson, Max Ernst, Max Morise, *Exquisite Corpse*, 20 × 15.5 cm, graphite and colored crayons on ivory wove paper, March 18, 1927, Lindy and Edwin Bergman Collection, 104.1991, The Art Institute of Chicago. Photography © The Art Institute of Chicago. © 2015 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris.

the paper so that his contribution would be concealed, except for a few lines, from the next participant, who would then add to it. This would continue until all were finished, and the paper would be unfolded to reveal the completed drawing.⁸ Bufano's form inhabits metaphorical Exquisite Corpse folds, as the point in which Bufano's limbs meet the table legs are suggestive of the folds in the paper. This coagulation of forms between flesh and furniture is not smooth, but rather points to an alternative world of bodies that become alive through inanimate forms. Bufano has rendered the furniture anthropomorphic, and her disjointed hybrid is a disabled Exquisite Corpse.

In this sense, Bufano's shape, her movement, and her overall performance provide a complex constellation of meaning. While her form is a creative work of art that is removed from any truth, the reality of Bufano's form as an amputee cannot be denied. Bufano's form is both real and unreal at once, and it is here that her work muddies the waters of Surrealism; while she employs Surrealist tropes in the work, her body type is also a trope and has thus been frequently used in what we understand as the Surrealist aesthetic.

Apart from physical similarities with the aesthetics and phenomenology of the mantis, Bufano also takes on its characteristics. She weaves around the stage as if casting a spell on her audience, drawing its members in through her femme fatale magnetism. Bufano explained her aesthetic and political goals when she claimed that,

Despite my own terror and discomfort in being watched (or, maybe, because of it), I am finding that being in front of viewers as a performer with deformity can produce a magnetic tension that could be developed into strength. I attempt to channel this tension by exaggerating the mode of physical difference (for example, presenting myself on stilts).⁹

I perceive her empowering dance as witch-like, given her form has elements of mystery, wonder, danger, and magic, potentially conjuring curiosity and fear, attraction and repulsion in her audience. Bufano elaborates by saying, “[B]eing a performer with a deformity, I find that there’s a gut response in audiences, an attraction/repulsion aspect to it that can be compelling.”¹⁰ These elements are what the Surrealists found so appealing about the praying mantis and other forms that they fetishized. Bufano encompasses the uncanny itself, as her embodiment might stir up repressed memories from childhood, as well as deep-rooted fears of mutilation, or becoming impaired, or “crippled,” just like her body. In this way, Bufano might then also come to embody Breton's conception of “convulsive beauty,” given her performance is captivating, yet her form is atypical and might embody many contradictory qualities.¹¹ For instance, Breton links convulsive beauty with the trauma of a railway accident, which results in a jolt, shock, or short circuit that happens to derail the rational mind.¹² Convulsive beauty is characterized by contradictory qualities, because it might contain dark desires and passions that are released after being repressed for a period of time. The beauty, then, of Bufano's performance is how she beautifully releases horror and how her

trauma simultaneously makes her beautiful as she finds freedom in expressing her form and her movement.

The ties, fingers, and toes that bind: Surrealist photography and Chun-Shan (Sandie) Yi

Analysis of the work of Chun-Shan (Sandie) Yi furthers the conversation on how a woman's body may be deformed and made strange in the work of Surrealist artists, in particular Hans Bellmer. In 1958, Bellmer took a series of black and white photographs of a female torso that was bound up in string (fig. 8.4). Unica Zürn, Bellmer's collaborator, posed for the images. Binding and bondage were recurring themes of Bellmer and Zürn's partnership, resulting in a tableau of straps,



Figure 8.4 Hans Bellmer, *Untitled (Unica Bound)* 16.2 × 16.2 cm (6 3/8 × 6 3/8 in.), gelatin silver print, 1958, Ubu Gallery, New York. Photo by Joelle Jensen.

ropes, lace, and corsets, with allusions to anal penetration. Of this work, art historian Sue Taylor states,

The bondage photographs . . . are not portraits, as Zürn's face is invariably cut off by the frame or otherwise obscured. Amid the entirely banal setting of an ordinary bedroom or parlor, these pictures render her naked torso or legs bound tightly with string, transforming her body into a series of folds and bulging mounds of flesh.¹³

Taylor believes that Bellmer created these photographs out of some desperate strategy to become closer to the female and also to the figure of the mother.¹⁴

While it is true that these photographs convey how the taut string across the woman's body makes her body strange, what happens when that body is already "strange," or differently bodied? Yi makes wearable art that addresses bodily and social experience and social stigma. According to her artist statement, Yi has been influenced by members of her family, who, including herself, were born with two fingers on each hand and two toes on each foot for generations.¹⁵ Thus, Yi's work often revolves around memories of stressful and confrontational social interactions that were focused on the atypical appearance of her body. The process of making her adornments and objects unleashes much of the artist's hidden and unconscious emotions and distress, similar to the process undertaken by the Surrealists. By using metals, fabrics, and found objects in combination with heavily handcraft-oriented techniques like metalwork, crochet, felt-making, and sewing, the artist re-examines the stereotypes and values placed on physical "deformity" and their impact on a person's well-being.¹⁶ These stereotypes include those that consistently associate and reduce the disabled body to freak, eliciting prejudicial reactions based on fear.

Yi's series of photos, *Can I Be Sexy for Once?* (2005; fig. 8.5) depicts the artist's legs floating across a black background. She created a rock-like stone object and inserted it in the spaces between her two toes on each foot. She attached the object with string, which winds up and around each leg, where it stops halfway up her calf and is tied into a knot. The string secures the rock-like object so that it rests comfortably between the artist's toes as she moves. Juxtaposing Yi's photographs of her disability ornaments with Bellmer's photographs of the binding to which he subjected Zürn's body reveals generative intersections. The first aesthetic connection is obvious—both are using string as a type of binding, or tying up. Yet Bellmer's impulses towards the deformation of the female body may not be shared precisely by Yi, given Yi's body has an ostensible deformity to begin with. The gap between her two toes is her blank slate, and she does not need to mutate the body into something other than what it is. Rather, Yi transforms and even enhances her foot by the addition of inanimate objects, which echoes Bufano and her orange Queen Ann legs. Indeed, it seems that both artists are preoccupied with how objects might enhance or emphasize the irregularity of the body in order to challenge perceptions of beauty and perfection.

Still, this unusual shoe-like fashion piece also firmly ensconces Yi's work in the Surrealist interest in fashion and its inextricable ties to sexuality. While the ties

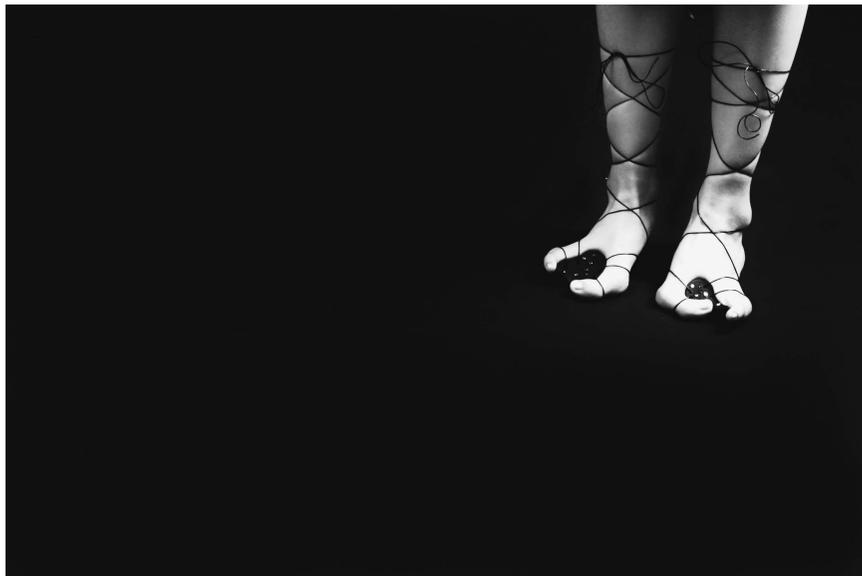


Figure 8.5 Chun-Shan (Sandie) Yi, *Can I Be Sexy for Once?* (no printed size), digital photo, 2005, courtesy the artist, photo by Cheng-Chang Kuo.

around Zürn's breasts and waist look uncomfortable, likely cutting off circulation, thereby hinting at violence and torture, Yi's legs look adorned. Krauss says that Surrealist fashion is "a system for rewriting the sexual organs in the register of a peculiar displacement of sexual identity," citing examples of a hat shaped in the form of female genitalia, for instance, or other ornaments like the bow tie, the garter, and so on.¹⁷ While Yi's work deviates from Bellmer's in his interest in the possession of the female body, it is Yi who takes possession of her own body, by not only creating objects to enhance rather than diminish or hide her body, but that also act as amulets that transmit her sexiness and power as a woman. Yi's desire to look and feel attractive is demonstrated by her liberation and agency, which is channeled through her almost sadomasochistic garments. They ultimately illustrate her authoritative reclamation over both her two-toed feet. It is through Surrealist tropes that Yi finds power, and she simultaneously reconstitutes such tropes to her own politicized ends within a disability arts politics. Rather than reject the notion of physical alteration as demonstrated in Bellmer's photographs, she provides intimate and erotic bodily adornment as a tool for remapping and engaging with a new physical terrain, one imbued with personal standards of physical comfort and self-defined ideals of beauty.

I now want to juxtapose Yi's work with the infamous, stark depiction of hands and feet and other body parts in photography that the Surrealist artists found so uncanny. Krauss describes the Surrealist mechanism of rotating the axis that was

“proper” to man—“his verticality, a station that defines him by separating his upright posture from that of the beasts—onto the opposing, horizontal axis.”¹⁸ The Surrealists therefore sought to reorganize these axes of orientation in order to provide dynamic new body images. They performed revisionist aesthetics, while also coining new conceptual, physiological links between seemingly quite separate parts of the body. Through innovative new arrangements of the body, the Surrealists pointed out that the human form is not always what it seems. A number of iconic photographs demonstrate that the Surrealists attempted to confuse or abstract body parts in order to make them seem strange and unfamiliar, such as Jacques-André Boiffard’s series of images of big toes, like *Gros Orteil* (1929; fig. 8.6), or a close-up of fingers weaving through toes (fig. 8.8), all of which completely isolated these appendages from the rest of body. In Yi’s images, which range from a close-up of the same bound-up foot that displays her disability fashion object resting in the gap between her two toes (fig. 8.7) to a close-up shot of her two-fingered hands against a red background (fig. 8.9), we detect similarities and yet marked differences between her work and that of the Surrealists.

The Surrealists and Yi both create confusion, but while the Surrealists had to search for discordant, disobedient body parts through dynamic and forced corporal commotions of the flesh, so that flesh became abstract and undefined, Yi’s flesh as harbor of so-called deviancy is there to begin with. While the Surrealists searched for the uncanny to promote and fuel unconscious fears, Yi, as a person and artist who identifies as disabled, has a real body that is precisely what activates the unconscious fears of a mainstream society. If what stems from fear is the fear of castration—the idea that the vagina is a castrated version of the penis—then Yi’s “missing” fingers, thumbs, and toes (or Bufano’s missing legs, fingers and thumbs) might represent this very castration. But rather than a vagina suggesting the fear of castration, we see other knob-like forms of flesh on atypical bodies instead to embody what we might traditionally think of as “missing.” Yi’s atypical number of fingers and toes is flesh in the present, rather than conveying any kind of absent penis in the form of vagina. Yet Yi’s form still offers another kind of complex erotic appendage.

Indeed, it is as if the Surrealists knew that the disabled, deformed, and castrated body is what provoked such fear, and while they searched for it and created art that became notorious for such uncanny characteristics, the disabled artist who objectifies his or her own body before a camera lens is doing something that the Surrealists could never quite attain. Surrealists made “normal” bodies into “abnormal” ones, emphasizing the power of having such fears through these bodily transformations and exaggerations. Yet, as far as I know, the Surrealists did not seek out and photograph actual disabled bodies. Yi’s work, like Bufano’s, demonstrates that the disabled artist therefore has the power and agency to borrow from Surrealist tropes, while at the same time providing a certain quality of complicated authenticity through the depiction of the real lived body. This is the disabled body that is absent of any rhetoric around the freak on center stage; rather, Yi shows her audience this otherness through confrontational aesthetics, removed



Figure 8.6 Jacques-André Boiffard, *Gros orteil*, 31 × 23.9 cm, gelatin silver print, 1929, Photo © Centre Pompidou, MNAM-CCI, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais / Philippe Migat © Mme Denise Boiffard, © 2015 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris.

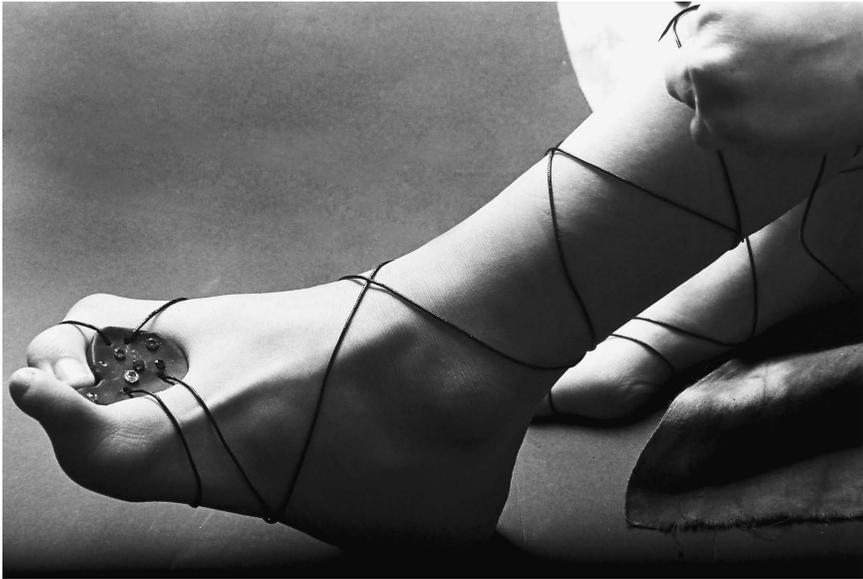


Figure 8.7 Chun-Shan (Sandie) Yi, *Footwear Close-Up* (no printed size), digital photo, 2005, courtesy the artist, photo by Cheng-Chang Kuo.

from any romantic distance that the Surrealists maintained, which kept their audiences safe from the honesty of the disabled corpus. Surrealism was based on the fantastical, evocative, and symbolic, whereas these contemporary artists use their own corporeal and conscious bodies to express real body images and experiences that are unique and personal to them.

Further, Yi's images also explicitly participate in the disorientating axes of the body that the Surrealists sought through imaginative juxtapositions, according to Krauss.¹⁹ And yet, Yi's body is already ostensibly uncanny, according to all the characteristics already described, and made more so by employing Surrealist tropes. For instance, consider Brassai's photograph *Nu, la poitrine* (1931–1932; fig. 8.10), juxtaposed with Yi's *Animal Instinct* (2005; fig. 8.11). Krauss notes that photographers like Brassai and Man Ray aimed to defamiliarize the human body by "redrafting the map of what we would have thought the most familiar of terrains."²⁰ Rather than human and vertical, Brassai's female body is supine and resting horizontally, which is a position that Krauss associates with the animal. Her head is thrown back so that only her elongated neck is visible. Her breasts and nipples protrude as if to suggest animal horns. Yi's position is quite unlike the female in the Brassai photograph, because while Brassai was trying to get the viewer to see familiar forms as sculptural objects, instead, Yi's body comes alive with agency. Yi is crouched like a cheetah, almost on all fours, in *Animal Instinct*



Figure 8.8 Jacques-André Boiffard, *Sans titre*, 23.8 × 17.8 cm, silver gelatine print, 1929, Photo © Centre Pompidou, MNAM-CCI, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais / Bertrand Prévost, © Mme Denise Boiffard © 2015 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris.



Figure 8.9 Chun-Shan (Sandie) Yi, *Untitled* (no printed size), digital photo, 2013, courtesy the artist, digital image edit by Shu-Ching Chou.

(2005), ready to pounce, enforcing the animalistic axis of horizontality instead of the normative standing-up verticality, to which Krauss referred.²¹ Yi is nude from the waist up and proudly reveals her atypically shaped feet juxtaposed against her two-fingered hands, which are placed on her hips. Yi becomes empowered over her marginalized, objectified status, as the artist's real-life embodiment is not typically considered beautiful or attractive. However, Yi flips notions of beauty by presenting her body as attractive and seductive in this pose and under this lighting.

Yi performs as a radical activist by fitting her own corpus with a unique prosthetic toe, which has become the prosthetic claw—sharp, unfurling, and “armed.” The claw sits inserted into the space between her two toes, each animal-like foot resting on tottering platform-wedged heels.



Figure 8.10 Brassai, *Nu, la poitrine* (no known original dimensions), silver gelatin print, 1931–1932 © RMN-Grand Palais / Michèle Bellot, © Estate Brassai—RMN-Grand Palais, © 2015 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris.

Mannequins and limbs in Bellmer and Żmijewski

Another major trope the Surrealists explore is that of the mannequin or doll, and how the inanimate form of the doll becomes eerily and freakishly conjoined with the human corpus. The doll was meant to be the ultimate “emblem of castration anxiety” for the Surrealists, given that the doll was endowed with a manipulated vagina, thereby signifying a missing penis.²² The interfusion of specifically the female mannequin or doll with the human corpus is also inevitably bound up with the commingling of technology and a fabricated sexuality. In this sense, art historian E. L. McCallum suggests that “fetishism can provide an alternative epistemological model for exploring the connections between subjects and objects, desire and knowledge.”²³ Fetishism is the attribution of a special power to an object, and in psychoanalysis, the fetish was steeped within the phenomenon of substitution. In the context, we might also then read that the doll was simultaneously a penis substitute. The doll thus held a special ambiguous power for the Surrealists as a fetishistic icon. What knowledge may be gained about unconscious and repressed memories by coupling these powerful dolls with human bodies? Surrealist Hans Bellmer explored this question, producing numerous distorted, life-size female



Figure 8.11 Chun-Shan (Sandie) Yi, *Animal Instinct*, 78.7 × 55.8 cm (31 × 22 in.), digital chromogenic print, 2005, courtesy the artist, photo by Cheng-Chang Kuo.

dolls called *Poupées* and then photographing them. The dolls were often manipulated and reassembled in various combinations and poses by the artist; art historian Haim Finkelstein comments that they embodied “both total submission and subversion.”²⁴ Indeed, Bellmer desired to have a mastery over the female figure and yet give in to its femme fatale characteristics.

It is very interesting that Bellmer’s dolls end up having multiple limbs of the same kind, or sometimes no limbs at all: in the case of the image seen here (fig. 8.12), the nude mannequin lacks arms. Her genitals are very prominently exposed and her breasts protrude, blocking her head, which appears to have no neck with which to connect to her contorted torso. Bellmer took countless photographs of this same mannequin and many others in different domestic spaces, against lace backgrounds, and sometimes outdoors. Of this work, art historian Allison de Fren writes, “[T]he uncanny doubling of limbs that are often contorted or flailing



Figure 8.12 Hans Bellmer, *The Doll*, 24.1 × 23.7 cm (9 1/2 × 9 5/16 in.), gelatin silver print, 1935–1937, Samuel J. Wagstaff, Jr. Fund © 2015 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris.

conveys both the disarticulation and the convulsive visuality of hysteria, with which Bellmer, like many Surrealists, was fascinated.”²⁵ De Fren emphasizes the seemingly contradictory qualities that continued to fascinate the Surrealists so, which again had/has associations with the disabled corpus that embodies both beauty and repulsion. In the case of Bellmer’s work, most often the mannequin was alone in his compositions, although sometimes Bellmer inserts himself alongside the mannequin as either its loyal companion or a mere voyeuristic observer.

The predominance of mannequins and dolls in the Surrealist imaginary warrants comparison to images of the disabled body in contemporary art practice. This raises the issue of whether there is an automatic or obvious connection between dolls/mannequins and disabled bodies in particular, or with bodies in general. For example, are the mannequins and dolls in Surrealism generally disabled, so to speak? As stated in an earlier passage, the Surrealists did not seek out actual bodies with disabilities to photograph, and instead demonstrated a desire to create these bodies. While artists, or in this case, the Surrealists, have activated their imaginations to execute works of art, the resemblance between the forms and shapes of bodies portrayed by the Surrealists in juxtaposition with real, enflashed disabled bodies is undeniable. Why didn’t the fictional disabled body and the real disabled body have a more substantial dialogic relationship? I’d like to suggest that this goes back to my previous comments around the fear, curiosity, and wonder that the disabled body has typically elicited from a mainstream, non-disabled public for centuries. Imagination is a safer refuge than having to encounter real disabled forms, and indeed, I speculate that fiction is a safe space that allows for permissible exaggeration, but also where an artist can revel in the curiosity and wonder of the “other,” neatly avoiding any possibility for an oppositional gaze or affective reactions by empowered disabled subjects.

Bellmer’s *Poupées* are reconstituted in the contemporary moment by bodies that are also ostensibly disarticulated. Bellmer’s usage of mannequins is an act of displacement, and the mannequin becomes manipulated and appears as a fetish. Given the connection the Surrealists’ work had with psychoanalysis, Bellmer’s use of the mannequin as fetish feeds into the style and subject matter of the movement. Further, Bellmer’s use of the mannequin as fetish ties directly to the disabled body, because the disabled corpus is always already part of a fetish subculture, where there is a subconscious desire by some to be disabled and pretend to be disabled, or to have sex with disabled people because their bodies are unique. While Bellmer may have sought to rupture the normative female form and turn it into other phallic creations as a means to reach back into his unconscious, contemporary work that explores the disorientation of bodies and body fragments may say something else about the body through the lens of a disability rhetoric.

To think about these ideas more deeply, I will look at the work of Polish artist Artur Żmijewski, who has a long-standing interest in bodily difference, but who has never identified as a disabled artist himself, as there is an absence of any mention of this in the literature that accompanies his work. In 1998 he developed the project *Oko za oko* or *An Eye for an Eye* (*An Eye for an Eye [Undressed Ib]* is seen in fig. 8.13) consisting of large-format color photographs and a video. The



Figure 8.13 Artur Żmijewski, *An Eye for an Eye (Undressed Ib)*, 100 × 100 cm (39 3/8 × 39 3/8 in.), color photograph, 1998, courtesy the artist and Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zurich.

photographs and video depict naked men with amputated limbs, accompanied by non-disabled people, who in the staged photographs and in the film “lend” their limbs to the amputees as they stroll, climb stairs, or bathe. The naked bodies of the protagonists were assembled by the artist in complex compositions creating bodily hybrids: the viewer will see two-headed men, men with two pairs of arms, and so on, and the appearance of new non-disabled organisms in which the “healthy” supply the amputee with substitute limbs. The title of Żmijewski’s work recalls the antique rule of dispensing justice, but the artist is concerned not with the question of revenge but with that of possibility.²⁶ In this work, Żmijewski poses challenging questions such as whether it is possible at all for one person to “compensate” another for his or her impairments. Żmijewski’s work also illustrates new ways that bodies move with and in composition with one another. His protagonists become destabilized and restabilized through their physical and emotional encounters with one another. The exchange between legs, skin, hands, arms, penises, and other body parts of the two men create new possibilities that transform concepts of mobility, immobility, pathology, and especially disability. These bodies suggest there is a need for new concepts and language around notions of “support” and insufficiency, and they are evocative of a new construction of prosthesis: where prosthesis becomes the limb of another.

All of this in juxtaposition with the work of Bellmer must be untangled, so to speak. Bellmer’s figures inherently embody the markings or traces of disability, given that their forms are atypical. Indeed, the very cocktail of Żmijewski’s amputee and non-amputee bodies seem viscerally evocative of the *Poupées*’ constellations of limbs and flesh. His *Poupées* also reveal a more abstract quality or characteristic that represents the symbolic burden of things gone awry in the world—that is the disabling conditions of humanity, through, for example, the *Poupées* made up of grotesque features. Does Żmijewski’s work seek to reproduce this quality of the disabled body suggested by Bellmer’s mannequins? Or is Żmijewski’s work more like that of Brassai, where the disabled body is defamiliarized through the mix of axes, as Krauss describes, and body parts are at many non-normative angles and positions?²⁷ Like the Surrealists’ images, Żmijewski’s bodies play optical illusions, for it is hard to determine which leg and which arm belongs to which body. Żmijewski’s work certainly reaches into these Surrealistic tropes most powerfully, but the question remains: Is Żmijewski empowering his disabled subjects through Surrealistic tropes, or is he instead reproducing the reductive exotification and fetishization of their bodies that continues to conjure fear and anxiety in a mainstream society? Żmijewski’s work illustrates how the identity of the artist creates complexity and ambiguity in representations of disabled bodies in contemporary art practices. Given that Żmijewski does not identify as a disabled artist (as opposed to Bufano and Yi), is there a difference if the artist identifies or not, and does this somehow affect the political intent of the work? Is Żmijewski watering down the agency of the disabled body, or in this case, the amputee body? Żmijewski’s work straddles a precarious balance between these various zones, but it also points out how the genealogy of the Surrealists’ work is alive and well in the present context in a very different form,

where the association of the uncanny continues to be perpetuated, and where the disabled body is most certainly instrumentalized towards similar Surrealist tropes and metaphors. In other words, the disabled body is both subject and agent in contemporary disability art practices, and it is important to chart the fits and turns of these developments as the discourse of disability in art history is re-written and continues to evolve. Thus, Źmijewski's use of Surrealist body imagery in comparison with that of Bufano and Yi might be considered closer to a Surrealist desire to promote fear and confusion through ostensibly disabled forms and shapes in the bodies of the amputees, and yet, here, Źmijewski has used real disabled bodies in his photographs, unlike the Surrealists. He seems to be showing a genuine interest in exploring and experimenting with the disabled corpus and the artistic possibilities it can offer, but it is how he uses this interest that remains questionable. Given that Bufano and Yi directly express personal experiences of their disabled forms and shapes, Źmijewski's images can only ever be read knowing that his interpretations are in the second or even third person, which leaves them within an interpretive zone that remains strategically ambiguous. This ambivalence is possibly welcomed by the artist, and indeed, may even be part of the point, given so many contemporary artists enjoy working in this way and dislike didacticism.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have sought to conflate the tropes of Surrealism with disability art in an attempt to complicate and layer a popular period in art history against an art movement that remains marginalized. It is my hope that Surrealism's definitions and usages of terms like eroticism, perversity, the uncanny, hysteria, narcissism, repression, trauma, shock, castration, and more will be expanded and reshaped through the careful juxtaposition of historical work by artists like Masson and Bellmer with the contemporary works of disabled and non-disabled artists, such as Bufano, Yi, and Źmijewski. Artwork about the experience of disability gets to the heart of the business within a Surrealist context; in other words, it confronts Surrealism by getting to the core of what the Surrealist artists were going for, because disability art both represents and embodies the uncanny with a twist. While the Surrealist artists sought to shock and pick at the unconscious in order to release repressed memories and other contents in the id that were often caked in fear and trauma, art that represents disability and that uses the language of disability is a different case in point. The disabled figure and/or form in contemporary art is always already ostensibly surreal in both an ontological and epistemological sense, and does not strive towards the goal of "becoming" or transforming. Rather, through exaggerating Surrealism's tropes, and by employing iconography like the praying mantis or the mannequin and doll in both traditional inanimate and animate form, the disabled artist wields great power. For the disabled body in contemporary art, the two-fingered hand or the two entwined male and female supporting bodies are absolute; they cut to the chase. Bufano's and Yi's works especially stage real corporeal bodies, rather than Surreal, symbolic ones. Their

works also engage their personal experiences in and with these bodies. They have the ability to move quickly into donning these Surrealist tropes creatively, effectively, and viscerally, and then just as quickly, they can choose to shed the Surrealist trope, leg, arm, finger, or toe, so that it falls off, and away.

Notes

- 1 Marquard Smith, *The Erotic Doll: A Modern Fetish* (London and New York: Yale University Press, 2013), 137.
- 2 Smith, "Modernity's Outmodedness," 138.
- 3 Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty* (Massachusetts, Cambridge: 1993), 7. For more information, see Freud's seminal 1919 essay, "The Uncanny," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 17, trans. and ed. James Strachey in collaboration with Anna Freud, assisted by Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson (London: The Hogarth Press, 1955), 219–252, and Ernst Jentsch's 1906 essay, "On the Psychology of the Uncanny," trans. Roy Sellars, *Angelaki* 2, no. 1 (1995): 7–16.
- 4 William L. Pressly, "The Praying Mantis in Surrealist Art," *The Art Bulletin* 55, no. 4 (Dec. 1973): 600.
- 5 Ruth Marks, "Surrealism's Praying Mantis and Castrating Woman," *Woman's Art Journal* 21, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2000): 33.
- 6 <http://www.body-pixel.com/2008/05/24/lisa-bufano—the-spiderwoman/>, accessed June 14, 2014.
- 7 Rosalind Krauss, "Corpus Delecti," *October* 33 (Summer 1985): 33.
- 8 http://www.exquisitecorpse.com/definition/Morgue_%5Bthe_corpses%5D.html, accessed June 14, 2014.
- 9 <http://www.body-pixel.com/2008/05/24/lisa-bufano—the-spiderwoman/>, accessed June 14, 2014.
- 10 Allison de Fren, "Technofetishism and the Uncanny Desires of A.S.F.R. (alt.sex.fetish.robots)," *Science Fiction Studies* 36, no. 3 (Nov. 2009): 404.
- 11 The phrase "convulsive beauty" first appeared in André Breton's novel *Nadja* (1928) as well as in *Mad Love* (1937).
- 12 de Fren, "Technofetishism," 404.
- 13 Sue Taylor, "Transgression, Pornography, Scoptophilia," *Hans Bellmer: The Anatomy of Anxiety* (Massachusetts, Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2000), 186.
- 14 Taylor, "Transgression, Pornography, Scoptophilia," 186.
- 15 <https://www.accessliving.org/375>, accessed June 14, 2014
- 16 Cachia, "What Can a Body Do?" <http://exhibits.haverford.edu/whatcanabodydo/>, accessed June 14, 2014.
- 17 Krauss, "Corpus Delecti," 40.
- 18 Krauss, "Corpus Delecti," 40.
- 19 Krauss, "Corpus Delecti," 40.
- 20 Krauss, "Corpus Delecti," 40.
- 21 Krauss, "Corpus Delecti," 40.
- 22 Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "1924," *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism Volume 1, 1900–1944* (London and New York: Thames and Hudson, 2011), 195.
- 23 de Fren, "Technofetishism," 411.
- 24 Haim Finkelstein, "The Incarnation of Desire: Dali and the Surrealist Object," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 23 (Spring 1993): 116.
- 25 de Fren, "Technofetishism," 412.
- 26 <http://www.polishculture-nyc.org/index.cfm?itemcategory=30817&personDetailId=77>, accessed November 20, 2012.
- 27 Krauss, "Corpus Delecti," 40.