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Hans Bellmer.
La poupée (The Doll)
detail. Paris: Editions
G.L.M., 1936.

Hans Bellmer in The Art Institute of Chicago: The Wandering Libido and the Hysterical Body

SUE TAYLOR

Department of Art History, The University of Chicago

In December 1934, there appeared in the Surrealist journal *Minotaure* a two-page spread introducing French readers to the erotic imagination of the German artist Hans Bellmer. Eighteen photographs Bellmer had taken of a life-size, female mannequin are grouped symmetrically around the title "Doll: Variations on the Montage of an Articulated Minor."

The images show Bellmer's assemblage, made of wood, flax fiber, plaster, and glue, under construction in his studio or arrayed on a bare mattress or lacy cloth. Seductive props sometimes accompany the doll—a black veil, eyelet undergarments, an artificial rose. Naked or, in one case, wearing only a cotton undershirt, the armless doll is variously presented as a skeletal automaton, a coy adolescent, or an abject pile of discombobulated parts. In one unusual image, the artist himself poses next to his standing sculpture, his human presence rendered ghostly through double exposure. Here Bellmer's own body seems to dematerialize as his mechanical girl, wigged, with glass eyes, wool beret, sagging hose, and a single shoe, takes on a disturbing reality.



Hans Bellmer. "Poupée, variations sur le montage d'une mineure articulée," *Minotaure* 6 (Winter, 1934–35), pp. 30–31.

The Surrealist fascination with automata, especially the uncanny dread produced by their dubious animate/inanimate status, prepared the way for the enthusiastic reception in France of Bellmer's doll. His stated



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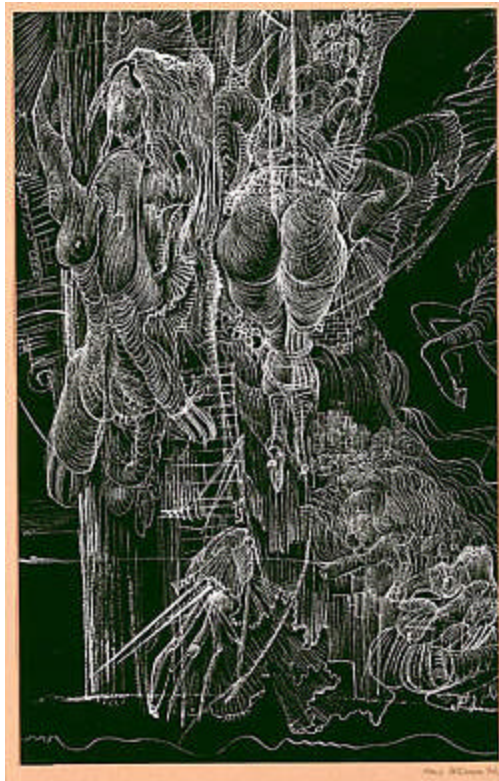
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934): "It was worth all my obsessive efforts," he wrote, "when, amid the smell of glue and wet plaster, the essence of all that is impressive would would take shape and become a real object to be possessed." [2] In their

preoccupation with little girls as subjects for his art, moreover, coincided with the Surrealist idealization of the *femme-enfant*, a muse whose association with dual realms of alterity, femininity and childhood, inspired male artists in their self-styled revolt against the forces of the rational. But these dovetailing concerns—of the artist-intellectuals grouped around André Breton in Paris, and of the isolated Bellmer, working in virtual seclusion in a suburb of Berlin—were arrived at separately. Bellmer's doll, the first sculptural construction of an erstwhile graphic designer, developed out of a series of three now legendary events in his personal life: the reappearance in his family of a beautiful teenage cousin, Ursula Naguschewski, who moved to Berlin from Kassel in 1932; his attendance at a performance of Jacques Offenbach's *Tales of Hoffmann*, in which the protagonist falls tragically in love with the lifelike automaton Olympia; and a shipment from his mother of a box of old toys which had belonged to him as a boy. Overwhelmed with nostalgia and impossible longing, Bellmer acquired from these incidents a need, in his words, "to construct an artificial girl with anatomical possibilities...capable of re-creating the heights of passion even to inventing new desires." [1]

Bellmer celebrated his invention of the doll in a delirious essay, "Memories of the Doll Theme" (1934): "It was worth all my obsessive efforts," he wrote, "when, amid the smell of glue and wet plaster, the essence of all that is impressive would take shape and become a real object to be possessed." [2] In their explicit sexual implications, the images of "young maidens" he put forth in this essay depart dramatically from the ideal of the innocent *femme-enfant*. Bellmer imagined little girls engaged in perverse games, playing doctor in the attic; he meditated lasciviously on "their bowed and knock-kneed legs" and "the casual quiver of their pink pleats"; and he despaired "that this pink region," like the pleasures of childhood itself enjoyed in the maternal plenitude of a "miraculous garden," was forever beyond him. In closing his essay, Bellmer took revenge on little girls for their unavailability, envisioning the manufacture of the doll in their image, which he probed "with aggressive fingers" and "captured rapaciously by [his] conscious gaze."

The pink pleats, Bellmer's poetic metaphor for female genitals, would become a recurring motif in his drawings and prints, and the female body itself, with the exception of a small number of portraits of friends, [3] remained Bellmer's sole artistic subject—to the point of obsession. A fantastic drawing in the Art Institute's collection, executed in white gouache on black paper in 1936, is an early indication of the fetishistic metamorphoses of the female body Bellmer produced throughout his career.

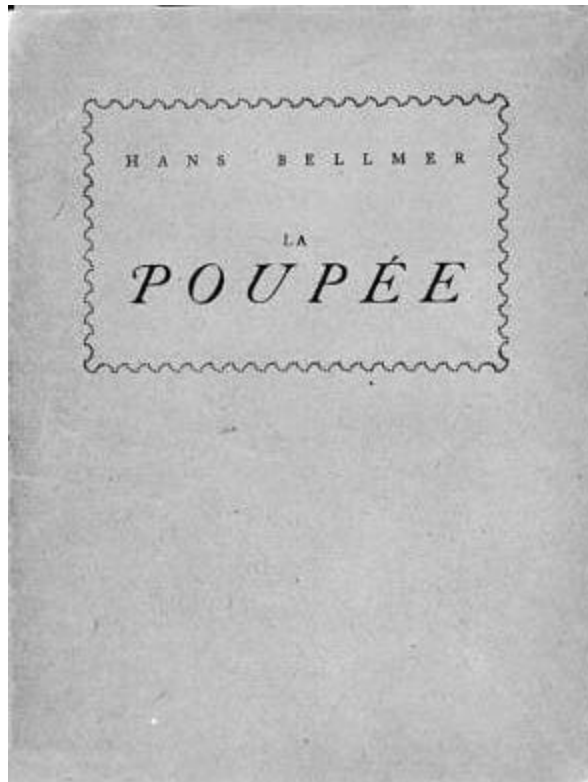


Hans Bellmer. *Untitled*, 1936. Pen and white gouache on black wove paper; 24.9 x 15.9 cm. The Art Institute of Chicago, Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Randall Shapiro Collection (1991.197).

Here pleated skirts swirl around a confusion of anatomical fragments: two or more bodies seem to be suspended from columns or to float in air; a breast, buttocks, legs in striped hose, and high-heeled boots all blend with phallic forms in a grotesque turmoil. At the lower left, a girl's face emerges in profile from a deluge of flowing lines, which double as hair and as a watery cascade emanating from a mountainous landscape in the distant background. This cursory landscape and the curious detail of a rearing horse at the right of Bellmer's drawing suggest his close study of Italian and Northern Renaissance graphics in Berlin's Kaiser Friedrich Berlin Museum;[\[4\]](#) but, even if this image originated in some figure of Saint George rescuing his princess, Bellmer's fascination with sexual themes, as always, renders the subject marginal.

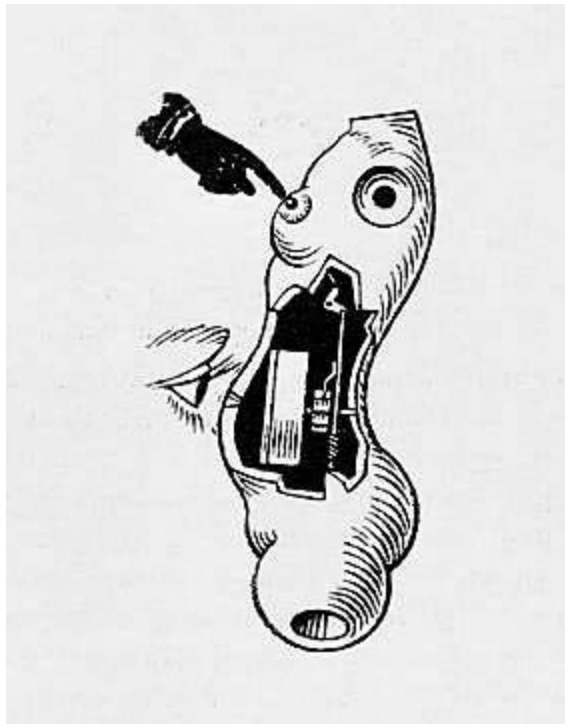
He presented his essay "Memories of the Doll Theme" in *Die Puppe* (*The Doll*), a booklet printed in a very small edition at the artist's expense by his friend Thomas Eckstein in Karlsruhe, with ten photographs of the doll tipped in by hand, as in a family album.[\[5\]](#) The photographs Bellmer selected for inclusion in this precious *livre d'artiste* were among those later published as "Variations on an Articulated Minor", beginning with the gaunt framework of the doll in its initial stages of construction and ending with a still-life arrangement of detached plaster legs surrounded by white undergarments, a rose, and a single high-heeled pump. The tiny size of the edition and of the object itself lends a secretive quality to Bellmer's project, which was

possibly a function of necessity in Germany, where the Nazis had assumed power and were increasingly suspicious of modern artists. Not long after his *Minotaure* debut, Bellmer visited Paris, gaining an introduction to Breton; on his return to Berlin, he began to collaborate through the mail with the Surrealist writer Robert Valençay on an exacting French translation of "Memories of the Doll Theme." In 1936 a limited French edition of *Die Puppe*, *La Poupée*, was issued by Guy Lévis-Mano in Paris; a copy of this book is preserved in the Art Institute's Mary Reynolds Collection.



Hans Bellmer. *La Poupée* (*The Doll*). Paris, Editions GLM, 1936. Translated from the German by Robert Valençay. Printed on pink paper, with ten original photographs tipped in on tan paper, ed. 36/100; 16.7 x 12.8 x .5 cm.

As in the German edition, Bellmer reproduced his essay on delicate pink pages, with a linocut of the doll's torso illustrating a rotating "peep-show" mechanism he planned to incorporate in the belly of the actual doll, operated by pressing the figure's left nipple.



Hans Bellmer. *La Poupée (The Doll)*, detail. Paris, Editions GLM, 1936. Linocut on pink paper; 16.7 x 12.8 cm.

Although this plan was never realized, the voyeuristic drive that propelled it survives in the linocut, where an inquisitive, disembodied eye peers through the doll's navel, and a dark hand pokes the doll's breast. This image of male sexual curiosity and domination is in a sense emblematic of Bellmer's entire oeuvre: the hapless female body, deprived of head and limbs, is scrutinized and manipulated, and its inner workings exposed in a cut-away view. "Lay bare suppressed girlish thoughts," the artist instructed himself, "ideally through the navel, visible as a colorful panorama electrically illuminated deep in the stomach." [6] And just as Bellmer revisited an infantile world in "Memories of the Doll Theme"—one of magic kits, Easter eggs, puppets, and cat's-eye marbles—tinged with sexuality, in this linocut he seems to have posed quintessential childish questions: "How are girls different?" and "Where do I come from?" [7]

In order better to manipulate the doll, Bellmer developed a second version which he organized around the principle of the ball joint. Inspired by a pair of sixteenth-century articulated wooden dolls in the Kaiser Friedrich Museum, [8] he produced a spherical belly for the new doll, around which could be arranged a number of parts in various combinations: four legs, four round stylized breasts, an upper torso, three pelvises, a pair of arms, and the recycled head and hand from the first doll. From 1935 through 1938, this second figure, in its numerous permutations, appeared in over one hundred photographs, many hand-colored to heighten their emotive impact. Unlike the photographs of the first doll, which documented the construction of the object or treated it

as still life, Bellmer's photographs of the ball-jointed doll establish sinister, narrative tableaux, with new emphasis on the doll's environment: outside the studio, the doll becomes a dramatic character, often the victim of an unseen tormentor, in domestic interiors, basement, hayloft, or forest.

In one image, for example, the doll is a tragic amputee, armless and tied on a shadowy stairway with frayed twine.



Hans Bellmer. Plate 12 of *Les Jeux de la poupée* (*The Games of the Doll*). Paris, Les Editions premières, 1949. Hand-colored black-and-white photograph.

With a second (reversed) pelvis substituting for its chest, the doll is given buttocks for breasts, and these seem incongruously large, considering the undeveloped pudenda and the juvenile hair-bow. The doll's left leg is bound at the knee, while the right thigh ends abruptly in midair, exposing a hollow core. All is passive, inert: one hand lies limply against the banister, and a blank, unseeing eye suggests a loss of consciousness. Who, one wonders, is responsible for the naked and abject condition of the doll?[[9](#)] While the brutality implicit in such images is often elided in the literature, Bellmer's biographer, Peter Webb, detected "intimations of rape" in another, singularly bizarre photograph of the doll, partly lying, partly seated, on a rumpled bed, and half dressed in a man's trousers with the belt and fly provocatively open.[[10](#)]



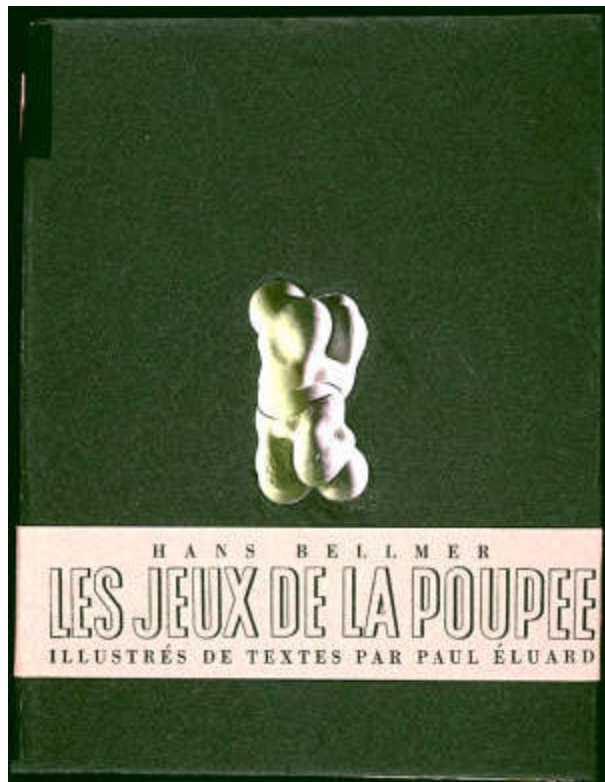
Hans Bellmer. Plate 9 of *Les Jeux de la poupée* (*The Games of the Doll*). Paris, Les Editions premières, 1949. Hand-colored black-and-white photograph.

Here the doll is composed of two sets of hips and legs—with feet shod in shiny Mary Janes—around the central ball joint of the exposed abdomen. Some kind of sexual struggle seems underway, yet the remains of a meal on a table next to the bed give a sense of satiation, and perhaps the pants have been loosened merely to ease the pressure on a bulging stomach.

Such ambiguous readings are not easily resolved, and in fact the power of these photographs often resides in the coexistence and confusion of the perverse and the banal. The peculiar combination of male and female in the postprandial image has prompted speculations about hermaphroditism, while Bellmer scholar Therese Lichtenstein noticed "a highly complex, contradictory dynamic in which issues of individuation, separation, and symbiotic union are played out in terms of a kind of identity crisis." [\[11\]](#) The scene has the quality of nightmare: with its eerie shadows, disheveled bed linens, vague domesticity, and aura of voyeurism, it could be said to stage a troubled fantasy of the primal scene. Indeed, the uncertainty of the child about the possibly violent "struggle" of his parents in bed is echoed in the confusion aroused by this photograph. The elevated point of view has a destabilizing effect, tipping the floor toward the picture plane so that food, figure, and mattress seem about to slide off to the lower left. The feeling of vertigo is exacerbated by the insistent downward-left direction of the stripes on the bed covers and tablecloth, the knives on the empty plate, and the fringed edges of the carpets.

In late 1935 or early 1936, Bellmer sent a number of the photographs of

the second doll to Paris, where they were received by Breton, Paul Éluard, Henri Parisot, and Valençay, and soon appeared in *Minotaure* and in an issue of *Cahiers d'art* devoted to the Surrealist object.^[12] When the artist moved from Berlin to Paris, following the death of his wife in February 1938, Éluard selected fourteen of the photographs, including the two discussed above, and "illustrated" each of them with a short poem.^[13] These images and their corresponding verses were to be published by Christian Zervos in 1939, but when war with Germany broke out, the project collapsed;^[14] Bellmer managed only to produce, on his own, a tiny edition of the book, *Poupée II*. Ten years passed before the full collaborative work was published, by Editions Premières in Paris, as *Les Jeux de la poupée* (*The Games of the Doll*). The Art Institute owns number 118 in this small edition of 136.^[15]

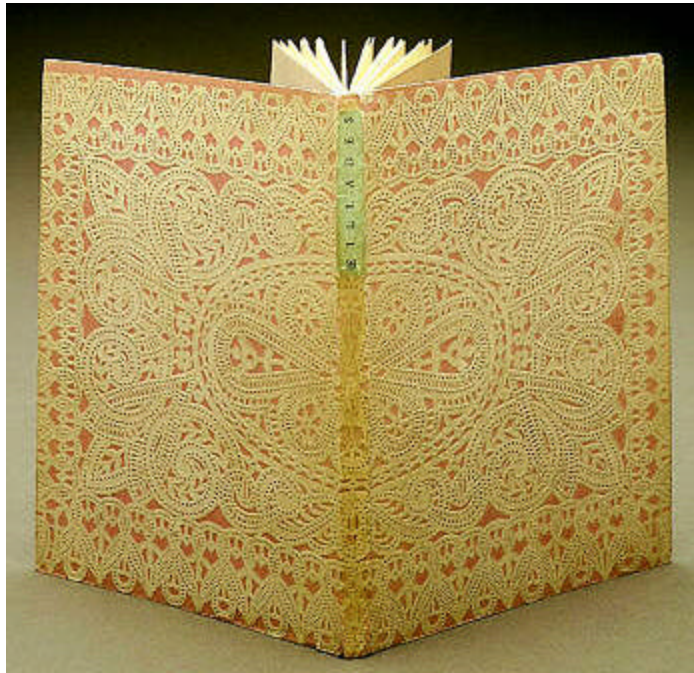


Hans Bellmer and Paul Éluard. *Les Jeux de la poupée* (*The Games of the Doll*). Paris, Les Editions premières, 1949. Fifteen hand-colored black-and-white photographs by Bellmer tipped in, fourteen verses by Éluard. Black construction-paper cover over board with pink construction-paper belly band, ed. 118/136; 25 x 19.5 x 1.5 cm.

On the black construction-paper cover of the book, the artist affixed an image of the second doll, reduced to its spherical belly radiating two pelvises; Bellmer cut the image out of a black-and-white photograph and hand-colored it in yellow and purple. A pink band wraps around the cover, indicating the book's authors and title.

Just as he had included "Memories of the Doll Theme" with photographs of his first doll in both the German and French editions of *The Doll*, Bellmer provided an introductory essay, "Notes on the Subject

of the Ball Joint," for *Les Jeux de la poupée*. He had written the latter essay—bizarre and convoluted, in a pseudoscientific tone—in German in 1938, and revised it slightly while working with Georges Hugnet to translate it into French in 1946.^[16] Hugnet, a Surrealist artist and poet, also had a bookbinding studio in Paris from 1934 to 1940; during that time, he and Bellmer had collaborated on yet another *livre d'artiste* in the Mary Reynolds Collection, the exquisite little *Oeillades ciselées en branche* (*Glances Cut on the Branch*) (Paris, 1939), with its distinctive pink cover wrapped in a white paper doily.



Hans Bellmer and Georges Hugnet. *Oeillades ciselées en branche* (*Glances Cut on the Branch*). Paris: Editions Jeanne Bucher, 1939. Text by Hugnet with twenty-five hand-colored illustrations by Bellmer. Printed in heliogravure and bound with pink paper and a white paper doily, ed. 93/230; 13.5 x 10.8 x .6 cm.

Adding to the object's synaesthetic allure, the first thirty copies of the edition of two hundred and thirty were impregnated with perfume.^[17] To Hugnet's handwritten, poetic text adulating pubescent females, Bellmer juxtaposed twenty-five drawings of little girls at play, reproduced in heliogravure in pink, brown, and olive green.

The very daintiness of this presentation, together with Bellmer's delicate draftsmanship, belies the indecent aspects of the book's content. In certain illustrations, girls are shown innocently engaged, with hoops and diabolos, riding on scooters, in pleated skirts or jumpers; in some instances, however, they are naked, with articulated, doll-like bodies, or are clad in seductive undergarments and high-heeled boots. Projecting his own prurience onto his subjects, Bellmer included one drawing of a girl, legs lifted, examining her genitals in an ornate mirror. There is also something suggestive, moreover, about the book's peculiar title. The original French phrase, *oeillades ciselées en branche*, was borrowed

from a sign in a market offering bunches of grapes still attached to branches from the vine. [18] Bellmer and Hugnet responded to the double meaning of "*oeillades*"—"bunches" and "glances"—especially since an *oeillade* can be an ogling glance, a leer. Embedded in this punning, found phrase are implications of the desiring male gaze and perhaps, too, wishes to "harvest" the budding girlhood sexuality that is the theme of the book.

One of the stranger and more detailed illustrations to *Oeillades ciselées en branche* is key, when brought into association with a related passage in "Notes on the Subject of the Ball Joint" mentioned above, to Bellmer's idiosyncratic conceptions of body image and libidinal experience. On page 28 of the book, an articulated female doll, naked except for a filmy blouse, thigh-high stocking, and lace-up boot, is shown seated at a round table, holding an apple aloft in one hand.

The curvaceous form is hardly that of child, but neither the face nor the large hair bow seem to belong to a mature woman. An arm, leg, and breast are missing from the figure; still-life objects serve as their surrogates: a baguette substitutes for the arm, the table leg wears the matching boot, a milk pitcher doubles as a breast. Bellmer depicted the body as an amalgamation of the organic and inorganic, transgressing its normative limits to incorporate aspects of its environment. He fantasized the body as a series of shifting, interchangeable erogenous zones, subject to the forces of psychic repression in what he termed "the physical unconscious." Introducing this idea in "Notes on the Subject of the Ball Joint," he grouped his speculations around the image of a little girl sitting at a table:

How to describe, one will wonder, the physical consciousness of a seated little girl who, placing all emphasis on her raised shoulder and stretching her arm lazily on the table, hides her chin between the muscle of her upper arm and her chest, in such a way that the pressure of the arm...flows from her armpit in a linear relaxation, slips further, passing the elbow, on to the slightly bent wrist, hardly noticing the slope of the back of the sleeping hand before terminating under the tip of her index finger resting on the table, in the accent of a little grain of sugar. [19]

Bellmer felt he must understand why certain parts of the body were absent from his imaginary girl's awareness. Using terms from psychoanalysis such as "condensation" and "displacement" to develop his theory, he proposed that, in the body's sense of itself, various parts can stand for or symbolize others. He reasoned that, because amputees retain awareness of their missing limbs, the images of the absent parts may be taken over by other areas of the body. The substitution of body

parts one for another was of course the provocative technique underlying the permutations of his second doll, and here Bellmer ascribed the rationale for his method to the female figure itself: "It is in this way," he explained, "that the pose of the little girl must be understood; composing herself around the center 'armpit,' she is obliged "to divert consciousness from the center 'sex,' that is to say, from that which it was painfully forbidden or inopportune to gratify." Determined, as always, to investigate the female body, Bellmer believed himself to be analyzing its psychosexual dimensions. In his attempts to do this, he relied on the writings of Freud, familiar to all the Surrealists, and on the clinical studies of the Austrian psychiatrist Paul Schilder (1886–1940). [20]

Freud's model of the mobility of the libido provided the basis for Bellmer's theorizing about erotic feeling, which he projected onto the image of a "seated little girl." In his twenty-second introductory lecture on psychoanalysis, Freud observed that "sexual impulse-excitations are exceptionally plastic," and continued:

One of them can step in in place of another; if satisfaction of one is denied in reality, satisfaction of another can offer full recompense. They are related to one another like a network of intercommunicating channels filled with fluid, and this in spite of their subordination to the primacy of the genitals—a state of affairs that is not at all easily combined in a single picture. [21]

This capacity for displacement and the acceptance of surrogates, Freud stated, enables individuals to maintain health in the face of frustration. [22] As a creator of surrogates himself, inventor of virtual girls, Bellmer comprehended this capacity but located his own wandering libido in a female other. Schilder, too, remarked on the fluid *Körperschema*, or body image; and Lichtenstein has shown the importance of his book *The Image and Appearance of the Human Body* (1935) for Bellmer's thinking in this regard. [23] Intensely interested in the relationship between body and mind, the artist was attracted to the psychiatrist's stress on the inseparability of the two: early in his career, Schilder had concluded "that the laws of the psyche and the laws of the organism are identical"; he could not, therefore, describe "the symbolic interchange of organs by transposition" in the mental realm without adding that "there is no psychic experience which is not reflected in the motility and in the vasomotor functions of the body." [24]

This emphasis led eventually to Bellmer's presentation of his theory of a "physical unconscious" in his book *Petite Anatomie de l'inconscient physique ou l'anatomie de l'image* (*Little Anatomy of the Physical Unconscious or the Anatomy of the Image*) (Paris, 1957), in which he revived his description of the seated little girl and other portions of

"Notes on the Subject of the Ball Joint." [25] He depended for a number of his insights on Schilder's clinical investigations of his patients' perceptions of their bodies, his work with amputees and their phantom limbs, and with hemiplegics who suffered paralysis of arms or legs due to strokes or brain lesions. [26] Schilder studied how impairment of the brain affects the ability to recognize or control parts of the body, and how, in some cases, inanimate objects, especially clothes and tools, may be incorporated into the body-image—as seen in Bellmer's illustration of the seated little girl whose doll-like body is additionally composed of a loaf of bread, milk jug, and table leg.



Hans Bellmer. Illustration for *Oeillades ciselées en branche* (*Glances Cut on the Branch*). Paris: Editions Jeanne Bucher, 1939. Heliogravure; 13.5 x 10.8 cm.

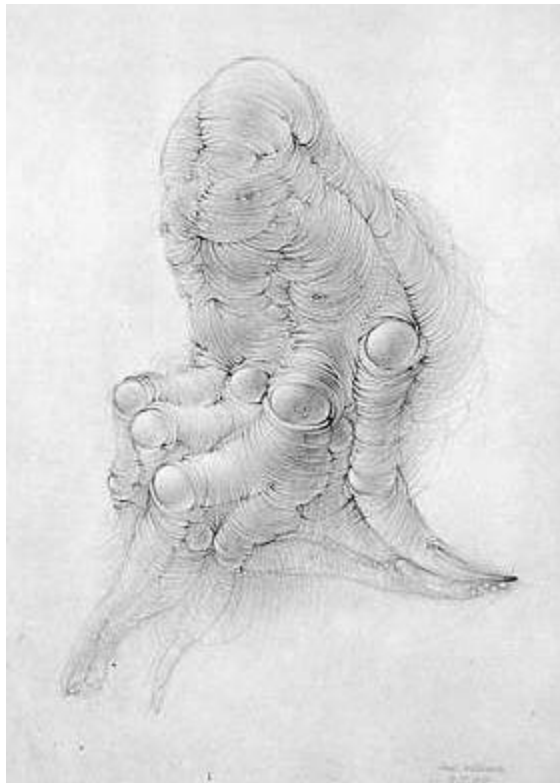
"One of the most important characteristics of psychic life," the psychiatrist asserted, "is the tendency to multiply images and to vary them with every multiplication." He invoked as an example the universal delight in imagining figures like Indian gods and goddesses with their many arms and legs. [27] Bellmer's myriad variations on the body of the doll might be taken as evidence of this psychic tendency expressed in the realm of sculpture; his later graphic work pushes this trend to an even greater extreme with the proliferation of limbs in his cephalopods—female heads with legs, often in stockings and heels—or with the octopuslike creature depicted in the Art Institute's *Articulated Hands* of 1954.



Hans Bellmer. *The Articulated Hands*, 1954. Color lithograph, ed. 32/59; 27.5 x 37.5 cm. Denoël 29. The Art Institute of Chicago, Stanley Field Fund (1972.32).

In this color lithograph, Bellmer conjured a figure made up of no fewer than seven arms and eight hands, the latter assuming affected positions with lifted pinkies and long, pointed nails. Remembering the sixteenth-century wooden dolls that spurred his obsession with the articulated joint (even their wrists and ankles, fingers and toes were adjustable), the artist treated each knuckle as a glowing ball joint. The hands seem thus bejeweled but also bony and strangely skeletal.

In the Art Institute's delicate pencil study of 1951 for another (unpublished) lithograph, *Articulated Hand*, Bellmer presented a hand that, because it also reads as a monstrous seated figure, assumes a gigantic scale.



Hans Bellmer. *Untitled*, 1951. Graphite on cream wove paper; 38.1 x 28.1 cm. The Art Institute of Chicago, Lindy and Edwin A. Bergman Collection (101.1991).

Indeed, the artist's inventive power is such that the hand, with its bent wrist and clawlike thumbnail, becomes on closer inspection a grouping of at least three figures—all headless, wrapped like mummies, with their exposed ball-joint bellies and knees emerging from the great hand's knuckles. Finger-legs extend gracefully en pointe, but a sense of struggle pervades the fused torsos that form the back of the hand and imply a face, with nipples and navel doubling as wary eyes and a tiny pursed mouth. Hands, eroticized and multiplied, appeared early in Bellmer's drawings as a favored motif, where finely rendered fingers touch ripe fruits and vaginal-looking orchids, or are interlaced by a winding snake. [28] Suggestive but ultimately conventional studies, these images gave way in the artist's oeuvre to more troubled and complex treatments of hands growing out of a human head, or altogether stripped of flesh and deathly. [29]

A series of untitled and undated photographs of real hands inextricably intertwined in sensuous embraces points again to Bellmer's interest in Schilder's researches into disturbances of bodily awareness. [30] Describing cases of agnosia and apraxia (inability to recognize and to move, respectively) of the fingers, the psychiatrist referred to the "Japanese illusion" to demonstrate the occurrence of agnosia even in the normally functioning brain and to show that optical stimuli contribute to, but do not fully determine, body image:

I have often mentioned [Schilder explained] the so-called

Japanese illusion. When one crosses one elbow above the other and intertwines the fingers and thumbs around the hands again, one has before the eye another complicated picture of the fingers. If the subject is now ordered by pointing to move a specific finger, he is very often unable to do so. He moves either the next finger or the finger of the opposite hand....Mistakes with the left hand are more common than with the right hand. The difficulties with the third and fourth fingers are greater than with the other fingers. [31]

According to Schilder, "the body-image has to be built up again [in this exercise] when by the double-twisting the optic and tactile sensations have lost their clear structure." Bellmer's graphic and photographic depictions of hands duplicate the kind of confusion produced in Schilder's finger demonstration, with the viewer trying to negotiate the formal boundaries of each hand and its relationship to the image as a whole. As in the drawing and description of the seated little girl, Bellmer's aim here was to illustrate that body image is complexly constructed or experienced—and mutable.

An astonishing pair of hands made of pink bricks hovers like a giant butterfly in a beautiful ink-and-gouache drawing titled *Child and Seeing Hands*, made about 1950.



Hans Bellmer. *Child and Seeing Hands*, c. 1950. Pen and brown ink, gouache, and watercolor on paper; 23.8 x 28.5 cm. The Art Institute of Chicago, Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Randall Shapiro Collection (1992.196).

Surrealist in both iconography and technique, this drawing from the Art Institute's collection is an example of the decalcomania process Bellmer had learned from Oscar Dominguez in 1940. In this technique, the medium (ink, watercolor, or paint) is applied to a sheet of paper; the sheet is covered with another piece of paper, and the two are pressed or rubbed together. When the second sheet is pulled away, a textured surface is revealed, full of chance effects in which the artist can discover and develop serendipitous images, Rorschach-style. Upon the rich, spongy field Bellmer created by these means for *Child and Seeing Hands*, a girl in a pleated white dress, striped hose, and boots appears, running with her pink hoop toward the vision of flying hands and an odd brick chimney spewing white vapors. While the child in her anachronistic costume is by now a familiar motif in Bellmer's repertory, and the sexual symbolism of the smokestack is obvious, what can be the meaning of hands with too many fingers and mysterious brown eyes that gaze out from their palms?

A passage in Bellmer's *Anatomie de l'image* mentioned above provides the answer.^[32] Discussing again the situation of his seated little girl who represses awareness of her sexual parts and transfers it instead to her armpit, the artist asserted the normality of this phenomenon. He wished, however, to introduce extreme, clinical examples of such displacements, and to do this he drew on the dated accounts of the Italian criminologist and physician Cesare Lombroso (1835–1909). Citing the latter's "Transferences of Sensation in Hysteria or Hypnosis,"^[33] Bellmer offered cases of adolescent girls whose body images and behavior were severely disturbed by the onset of puberty: one girl's hysterical symptoms included convulsions, hyperaesthesia, and sleepwalking; she became blind but gained the capacity to see through her nose and left ear. "These phenomena," Bellmer continued, "are not isolated":

Another girl of fourteen, who also had just begun to menstruate, exhibited convulsive coughs, headache, fainting, spasms, facial convulsions accompanied by singing, sleep lasting sometimes three days, and attacks of somnambulism during which she saw distinctly with her hand and read in the dark.

As in the case of the little seated girl, there is an initial conflict between desire and its interdiction, but this time as violent as the crisis of puberty that gave rise to it. Insoluble, this conflict can only lead to the repression of sex, to its projection onto the eye, ear, nose: a projection or displacement that explains to us...the hyperbolic valorization of the sense organs, the dramatization of their functions.

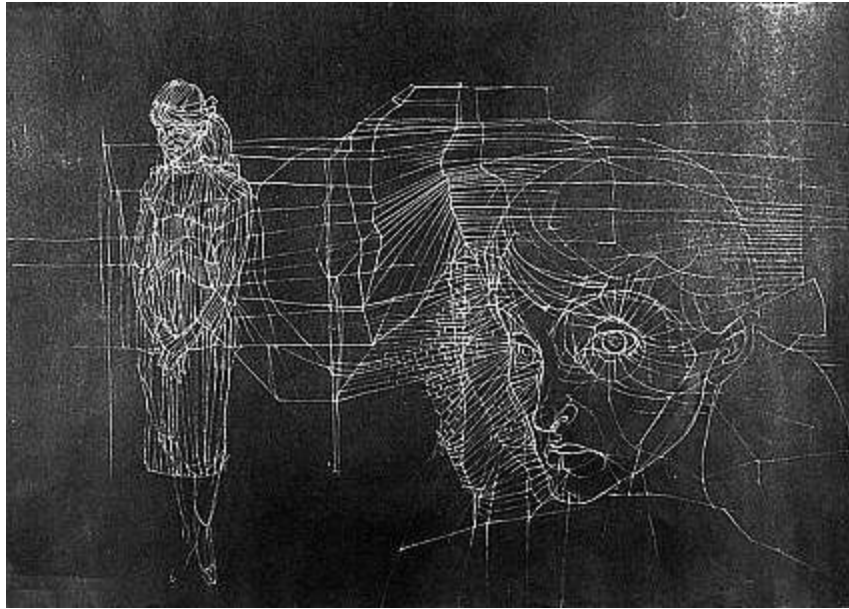
Child and Seeing Hands seems quite directly related to these case studies of female hysteria. Like Breton and Louis Aragon, who had celebrated "The Fiftieth Anniversary of Hysteria" in the pages of *La Révolution surréaliste* in 1928, Bellmer was fascinated by concepts of psychic disorder.^[34] From the point of view of Surrealism, hysterical symptoms constituted the body's form of automatic writing, an involuntary protest against societal restrictions placed on sexuality. Entrenched for centuries in gender stereotypes—as rational males attempted to fathom the "mysteries" of an unruly female sex—hysteria also fueled Bellmer's long-standing interest in another puzzle: the relation of mind and body.^[35]

He drew, as we have seen, from Schilder's studies of brain and body image, but also followed Freud on the sexual etiology of the neuroses and incorporated the vocabulary of psychoanalysis in his work. In *Child and Seeing Hands*, the artist literalized the notion of psychic "defense" with a wall of bricks, and even speculated in *Anatomie de l'image* about the kind of trauma that might have caused Lombroso's girl to develop the specific symptoms referenced in his drawing:

To understand the motif of the second, manifest transference [Bellmer wrote], that of the eye onto the hand for example, one would have to believe that the eye, doubled by the condemned image of the sex, could not entirely conceal the compromising portion of its supplementary content. Let us suppose, without risk of serious error, that some acts of an intimate nature had been seen, heard, perceived—in such a way that, under the influence of shock, repugnance, and a sense of guilt, the transfer or at first simply the loss of vision signifies: "I do not want to see anything, I do not want to see any more.

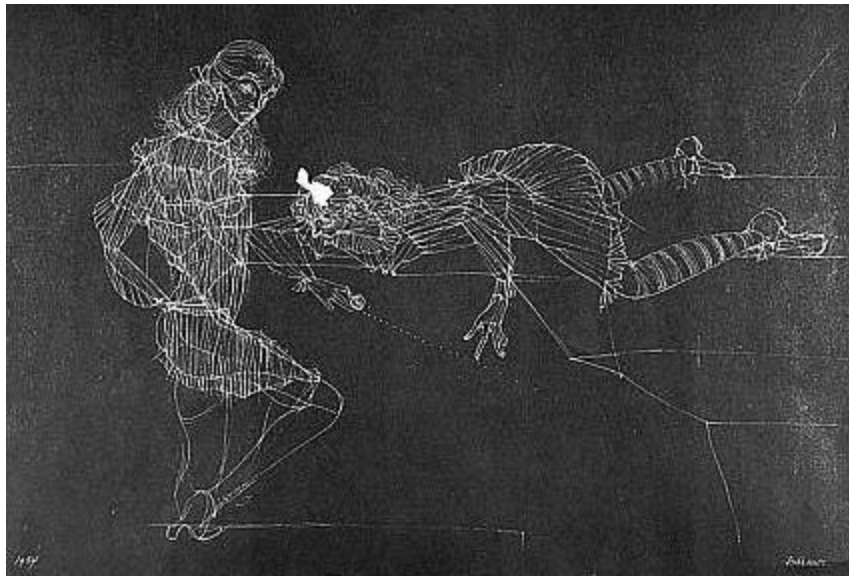
For Lichtenstein, Bellmer's "account of the materialization of hysterical conversion symptoms" also relates "to the distortions to which he subjected the body of the doll."^[36] Indeed, many photographs of the second doll, especially those depicting its four-legged incarnation convulsed on a bare floor or bed or arched over in a kind of back bend,^[37] recall the thrashing bodies of hysterics documented by the famous nineteenth-century neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot at the hospital of the Salpêtrière in Paris. Charcot's records, graphic and photographic, helped him to observe and systematize the different stages of hysterical attacks; among the characteristic postures he identified was the *arc en cercle*, or rainbow pose, with the back arching and both head and feet firmly planted on the ground or (more often) the bed.^[38] In a turn-of-the-century romance about the Salpêtrière, one of Charcot's students, Jules Claretie, described a patient enduring one of these seizures —

adopting an analogy that uncannily predicts Bellmer's doll: "The human being seemed reduced to the state of a machine, to one of those 'maquettes' of wood that sculptors use, bending the joints of these mannequins all around as they please—macabre caricatures of man." [39]



Hans Bellmer. *Untitled* (Double-Sided Portrait of Unica Zürn) (verso), 1954. Pen and white ink on black wove paper; 50 x 70 cm. The Art Institute of Chicago, Gift of George A. Poole (1967.245).

Sadly and ironically, such attacks were witnessed as well, decades later, by someone whom Bellmer knew intimately, the German Surrealist writer Unica Zürn. In 1954, a year after Bellmer met her on a visit to Berlin, Zürn moved to Paris with him, and the artist captured her in a typically somber, pensive mood in a portrait now in the Art Institute's collection. On the verso of the sheet, a large, double-sided white-ink drawing on black paper, Zürn is shown standing, head lowered, eyes downcast, hands folded demurely in front of her, and dressed in a modest suit. A network of lines and bricks animates the background, while to the right, closer to the picture plane but also implicated in the abstract web, Zürn's face emerges in three-quarter view. Inexpressive and wide-eyed, she wears her hair tied back with a bow. Although photographs from the 1950s indicate Bellmer's relative faithfulness to Zürn's appearance in this likeness, his obsessive fantasy subsumes her image on the drawing's recto, the side he chose to sign and date.



Hans Bellmer. *Untitled* (Double-Sided Portrait of Unica Zürn) (recto), 1954. Pen and white ink on black wove paper; 50 x 70 cm. The Art Institute of Chicago, Gift of George A. Poole (1967.245).

Here Bellmer transformed her into a *femme-enfant*, awkwardly displayed in a fanciful, transparent, pleated dress reminiscent of the one worn by the girl in *Child and Seeing Hands*; he also depicted her on all fours in striped stockings and Mary Janes. In the latter pose, the figure plays with a cat's-eye marble—a motif Bellmer introduced twenty years earlier in "Memories of the Doll Theme." Her pink hair-bow is real, the drawing's single collage element and a staple feature in Bellmer's iconography of little girls.

Zürn left Bellmer temporarily in 1960 and returned to Germany. There she was admitted for the first time to a mental institution, diagnosed as schizophrenic. In the decade remaining to her, she was hospitalized intermittently in France, where she continued to live with Bellmer and to produce autobiographical texts, including the important *Der Mann im Jasmin: Eindrücke aus einer Geisteskrankheit* (*The Man in the Jasmine: Impressions from a Mental Illness*) and *Dunkler Frühling* (*Dark Spring*). In her writings, Zürn presented a poignant picture of illness from within the institution, from the point of view of the patient, which stands in contrast to the constructions of female madness in the diverse work of Charcot, Claretie, Breton, Aragon, and Bellmer.^[40] At moments, however, she thought of Bellmer's monstrous inventions in terms of what she saw around her, detecting in the body of a fellow patient "a connection with his celebrated 'Cephalopod,' the woman with head and legs and without arms."^[41] Speaking of herself in the third person, Zürn related:

She saw this monster at [the hospital of] St. Anne: a mentally ill woman, in an erotic seizure, surrendering herself to her imaginary partner....As if Bellmer were a prophet, the sick woman was horrible to see. All was in

upheaval: her legs and back in the shape of an arc, and the terrible tongue; scenes of madness, of torture, and ecstasy: [these] are depicted by him with the sensitivity of a musician, the precision of an engineer, the rawness of a surgeon. [42]

During the course of their difficult relationship, Bellmer and Zürn collaborated in a number of ways, he providing postscripts and frontispieces for her publications, she posing for drawings and at least one painting. [43] In 1958 he made a group of shocking black-and-white photographs of her naked torso bound tightly with string, transforming her body into a series of folds and bulging mounds of flesh. One of these was reproduced on the cover of *Le Surréalisme, m ême* that year: showing Zürn reclining on a bed, seen from behind without head, arms, or legs—leaving only a pale lump of trussed meat—the image bears the necrophilic caption "keep in a cool place." [44] Like all of Bellmer's work, these photographs manipulate and distort the female body for the purposes of a complexly motivated male imaginary. Zürn was not the only model ever to place herself in the service of this compulsive project, but her tragic psychological vulnerability, which culminated in suicide in 1970, renders it especially disturbing. Reflecting on Bellmer's creative endeavors, she pointed to his extraordinary technical facility, "infinite gentleness," and circumspection, and yet admitted that the person "who is sketched by him, or photographed...by his pencil [*sic*] participates with Bellmer in the abomination of herself. Impossible for me," she concluded chillingly, "to render him greater praise." [45]

NOTES

1. Hans Bellmer, quoted in Peter Webb and Robert Short, *Hans Bellmer* (New York, 1985), p. 29. The foregrounding of these three catalyzing incidents by Webb and others ignores two factors that seem most relevant to Bellmer's invention of the doll from a psychological point of view. The 1931 shipment of toys came as his mother broke up housekeeping in Gleiwitz, where Bellmer's father, Hans senior, had suffered a cerebral hemorrhage and retired from his job as an engineer. Although he recovered from this stroke, his right arm was still paralyzed when the family relocated to Berlin. The following year, the artist's young wife, Margarete Schnell Bellmer, was diagnosed with tuberculosis. Threatened with loss, Bellmer fashioned a transitional object in the form of a life-size doll—just as a child during weaning, according to the object-relations theories of D. W. Winnicott, may attach to a favorite object qualities of the comforting relationship he enjoys with the mother he is gradually losing; see Winnicott, "Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena," *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 34 (1953), pp. 89-97. I owe the information about Hans senior's paralysis, his first name, as well as the birth name of the artist's wife to Ursula Naguschewski, who kindly responded to my inquiries in her letters of July 18, 1994, and February 2, 1996, from Ispringen, Germany. (It was Naguschewski, enrolled at the Sorbonne in 1934, who first brought Bellmer's photographs to the attention of André Breton in Paris.) I am also indebted to Thomas Bellmer, the artist's nephew, for information about the Bellmer family, which he has shared with me in correspondence and various telephone and personal interviews in Kearney, N.J., from October 1994 to the present.

2. Hans Bellmer, "Memories of the Doll Theme," trans. Peter Chametzky, Susan Felleman, and Jochen Schindler, *Sulfur* 26 (Spring 1990), pp. 29-30; subsequent quotes in this paragraph are from pp. 31-33. This is the only published English translation of the entire

essay, of which an excerpt can also be found in Lucy R. Lippard, ed., *Surrealists on Art* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1970), pp. 63-66. Both the French and German versions of Bellmer's essay are available in the special 1975 number of *Obliques* devoted to the artist, pp. 58-65.

3. The Art Institute owns three portraits by Bellmer: a small profile head of artist Max Ernst in pencil and white gouache from 1940 (1980.83); a larger, three-quarter-length ink sketch of artist Wifredo Lam on composition board from 1964 (1967.143); and the double-sided portrait of writer Unica Zürn illustrated in this essay.

4. According to Webb and Short (note 1), p. 24, the artist spent many hours poring over works by Albrecht Altdorfer, Niklaus Manuel Deutsch, Urs Graf, and Hans Baldung Grien. Perhaps these northern draftsmen were also represented in his personal collection of prints and drawings as Unica Zürn reported that when the artist left Germany in haste in 1938, he "left his residence in Karlshorst full of books, pictures, and an expensive graphics collection" (see "Die Begegnung mit Hans Bellmer," in *Unica Zürn: Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 5 [Berlin, 1989], p. 138 [Taylor translation]).

5. In 1953, Bellmer's Berlin dealer, Rudolf Springer, reissued *The Doll*, using leftover sheets from the first 1934 edition. Webb and Short (note 1), p. 278, state that "it is not known how many of each [German] edition were made, but the total is less than fifty."

6. Bellmer (note 2), p. 33.

7. "Bellmer manipulates the doll," in Hal Foster's words, "as if to ascertain the signs of difference and the mechanics of birth" (see Foster, *Compulsive Beauty* [Cambridge, Mass., 1993], p. 106). Foster, along with René R. Held, *L'Oeil du psychanalyste: Surréalisme et surréalité* (Paris, 1973), p. 311, compares Bellmer with Freud's famous patient Little Hans, whose curiosity about his mother's pregnancy is the subject of Freud's "Analysis of a Phobia in a Five-Year-Old Boy" (1909), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 10, trans. James Strachey (London, 1955), p. 1-147. Unaware that the elder Bellmer's first name was also Hans, Foster and Held did not fully realize the uncanny aptness of their reference.

8. Bellmer discovered these dolls with his friend Lotte Pritzel, herself a dollmaker as well as a costume designer. These particular specimens are no longer extant but are reproduced in Staatlichen Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz, *Der Mensch um 1500: Werke aus Kirchen und Kunstkammern*, exh. cat. (West Berlin, 1977), p. 171. Webb and Short (note 1), p. 59, include an illustration of a comparable figure.

9. If child abuse seems to be the implied subject of this image and others in Bellmer's oeuvre, additional levels of interpretation have also been put forward. Notably, Therese Lichtenstein, in "The Psychological and Political Implications of Hans Bellmer's Dolls in the Cultural and Social Context of Germany and France in the 1930s" (Ph.D. diss., City University of New York, 1991), saw the mutated bodies of the dolls opposing the whole and healthy Aryan bodies fantasized in Nazi propaganda, while Sidra Stich, in University Art Museum, University of California at Berkeley, *Anxious Visions: Surrealist Art*, exh. cat. (New York, 1990), p. 54, contended that their corporeal fragmentation reflects the social reality of ubiquitous amputees with their prosthetic limbs seen throughout Europe in the wake of World War I. Those amputees, however, as Maria Tatar reminded us in *Lustmord: Sexual Murder in Weimar Germany* (Princeton, N.J., 1995), "testified to the brutalization of men's bodies in the theaters of war" (p. 12; my emphasis), whereas Bellmer's depicted victims are female. Tatar pondered the possibility that the many representations of sex murders in German art, literature, and film between the wars were in part a kind of fantasized revenge on women, who had escaped the damaging carnal effects of the military experience.

10. Webb and Short (note 1), p. 70.

11. Lichtenstein (note 9), p. 74.

12. Webb and Short (note 1), p. 62. See *Cahiers d'art* 11 (1936), unpag., where the photograph of the doll tied on a staircase (fig. 5) is reproduced along with an excerpt from "Memories of the Doll Theme"; and *Minotaure* 8 (1936) and 10 (1937), where works by Bellmer accompany an article by E. Tériade on "La Peinture surréaliste" or are grouped together with works by Surrealists of various nationalities.

13. For the poems, see Paul Éluard, *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 1, ed. Marcelle Dumas and Lucien Scheler (Paris, 1968), pp. 1007-10, or Centre Georges Pompidou, *Paul Éluard et ses amis peintres*, exh. cat. (Paris, 1983), pp. 80-81. For the French verses and German translations juxtaposed with reproductions of Bellmer's photographs, see also *Obliques*

(note 2), pp. 98-104.

14. As a result of the declaration of war on September 3, Bellmer was interned as a foreign national at the Camp des Milles in Aix-en-Provence. Max Ernst arrived at the same camp in October, hence Bellmer's portrait drawing of him mentioned in note 3 above. Pressed into the Service Corps of Foreign Nationals in April 1940, Bellmer was demobilized in June of that year. See Webb and Short (note 1), pp. 113-27, and Jacques Grandjonc, ed., *Les Camps en Provence: Exil, internement, déportation 1933-1944* (Aix-en-Provence, 1984).

15. During the decade that elapsed between the conception of the book and its publication, Bellmer was briefly married to an Alsatian woman from Colmar; the dedication of *Les Jeux de la poupée*, "à Doriane," refers to one of his twin daughters, born in 1943, whom he did not see again until 1967.

16. Both French and German versions of Bellmer's essay can be found in *Obliques* (note 2), pp. 82-91; the original handwritten French text, complete with editorial changes but missing the last few paragraphs of the published essay, is reproduced in *ibid.*, pp. 45-55. Webb and Short (note 1), pp. 62, 66-67, include several brief portions of the text in English, as does Henry Okun, "The Surrealist Object" (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1981), pp. 438-40, 442-43. The full English translation appears in Sue Taylor, "The Anatomy of Anxiety: A Psychoanalytic Approach to the Work of Hans Bellmer" (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, in progress).

17. Webb and Short (note 1), p. 100, and *Obliques* (note 2), p. 187.

18. Webb and Short, p. 102.

19. Bellmer (note 16, Taylor translation). The quotation in the following paragraph is also from this work.

20. Schilder (1886-1940) became a professor of psychiatry at the University of Vienna and, after his emigration to New York, a research professor of clinical psychiatry at New York University College of Medicine and Clinical Director at Bellevue Psychiatric Hospital. His work on body image became widely known even beyond psychiatric circles: Ernst Gombrich invoked Schilder's researches in his famous lecture on "Psychoanalysis and the History of Art" (1953) in *Meditations on a Hobby Horse and Other Essays on the Theory of Art* (New York, 1963), p. 34.

21. Sigmund Freud, *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (1916-17), in *The Standard Edition* (note 7), vol. 16 (1963), p. 345.

22. From a psychobiographical point of view, it is important to note that Bellmer's development of the doll coincided with the diagnosis of his wife's tuberculosis in the early 1930s (see note 1 above). In an interview with Peter Webb (*The Erotic Arts* [Boston, 1975]), Bellmer brought his invention of the dolls into association with his dejection in the 1930s: "Obviously, there was a convulsive flavor to them because they reflected my anxiety and unhappiness" (p. 369). One must look to other factors as well—including of course the menacing political climate in Germany—for the artist's stated unhappiness, but his agonized marital relations should be considered in light of his insistence that the fetishistic dolls "became an erotic liberation for [him]" (*ibid.*).

23. Lichtenstein (note 9), pp. 175, 184-86. See Paul Schilder, *The Image and Appearance of the Human Body: Studies in the Constructive Energies of the Psyche* (New York, 1950).

24. Paul Schilder, "Vita and Bibliography of Paul Schilder," *Journal of Criminal Psychopathology* 2 (1940), p. 222, and *idem*, *Image and Appearance of the Body* (note 23), p. 182.

25. Bellmer in fact derives the organization of his *Anatomie de l'image* from Schilder's *Image and Appearance of the Human Body*: Bellmer's three chapters, "Les Images du moi," "L'Anatomie de l'amour," and "Le Monde extérieur," correspond sequentially and thematically to Schilder's three headings, "The Physiological Basis of the Body-Image," "The Libidinous Structure of the Body-Image," and "The Sociology of the Body-Image," respectively. In terms of sources, one wonders too whether Bellmer's "physical unconscious" was in any way a response to Walter Benjamin's notion of an "optical unconscious," introduced in the latter's "Small History of Photography" in 1931. "It is through photography," wrote Benjamin, "that we first discover the existence of this optical unconscious [of the different stages of a bodily movement, as documented, for example, by Eadweard Muybridge], just as we discover the instinctual unconscious through psychoanalysis" (quoted in Rosalind Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* [Cambridge, Mass., 1993], p. 178).

26. Perhaps Bellmer's fascination with this research was motivated or intensified by his own father's semiparalysis in 1931 (see note 1 above).
27. Schilder (note 23), pp. 67, 206.
28. These drawings, *Untitled* and *Hands of a Budding Minx* (both 1934), and several others are reproduced in Michel Butor, "La Multiplication des mains," *Obliques* (note 2), pp. 13-17.
29. Reproduced in Editions Denoël, *Les Dessins de Hans Bellmer* (Paris, 1966), pp. 49-50.
30. Reproduced in Centre Georges Pompidou, *Hans Bellmer Photographe*, exh. cat. (Paris, 1983), pp. 114-15; and in Corcoran Gallery of Art, *L'Amour fou: Photography and Surrealism* by Rosalind Krauss and Jane Livingston, exh. cat. (Washington, D.C., 1985), pp. 52-53.
31. Schilder (note 23), p. 54 n. 1. The following citation is also from this source. Schilder had published a study on this specific phenomenon with E. Klein in "Japanese Illusion and Postural Model of the Body," *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disorders* 70 (1929), pp. 241-63.
32. Bellmer, *Petite Anatomie de l'inconscient physique ou l'anatomie de l'image* (Paris, 1957). The book is unpaginated, but the relevant passage occurs toward the beginning of the first chapter, "Les Images du moi." The translations that follow are mine.
33. Lichtenstein (note 9), pp. 175-81, analyzes how "Bellmer turns Lombroso's nineteenth-century pseudoscientific theory into a phantastic poetic vision." According to Webb and Short (note 1), p. 275 n. 22, Bellmer owned a copy of Lombroso's *L'Homme criminel* (Paris, 1887) and of Lombroso and G. Ferrero, *La Femme criminelle et la prostituée* (Paris, 1896).
34. Louis Aragon and André Breton, "La Cinquantenaire de l'hystérie (1878-1928)," *La Révolution surréaliste* 11 (March 15, 1928), pp. 20-22. This journal is among the many Surrealist publications preserved in the Mary Reynolds Collection at The Art Institute of Chicago.
35. For a social analysis and modern history of the concept of this elusive disease, which "does not even exist at present in the United States as an officially recognized diagnostic category," see Martha Noel Evans, *Fits and Starts: A Genealogy of Hysteria in Modern France* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1991), (p. 6). A more general account can be found in Ilza Veith, *Hysteria: The History of a Disease* (Chicago, 1965).
36. Lichtenstein (note 9), p. 178.
37. See, for example, Centre Georges Pompidou (note 30), pps. 48, 68, 71.
38. For various illustrations of the *arc en cercle*, see Evans (note 35), p. 25; Georges Didi-Huberman, *Invention de l'hystérie: Charcot et l'iconographie photographique de la Salpêtrière* (Paris, 1982), fig. 106; Evans (note 35), p. 25; and Veith (note 35), fig. 8. Charcot's periodization of attacks -the prodrome, clonic phase, period of "clownism," *grandes attitudes*, and resolution-was well known to the Surrealists. See especially Robert J. Belton, "An Hysterical Interlude," in *The Beribboned Bomb: The Image of Woman in Male Surrealist Art* (Calgary, 1995), pp. 240-49.
39. Jules Claretie, *Les Amours d'un interne* (Paris, 1902), p. 174; quoted in Rodolphe Rapetti, "From Anguish to Ecstasy: Symbolism and the Study of Hysteria," in Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, *Lost Paradise: Symbolist Europe*, exh. cat. (Montreal, 1995), p. 233 (his translation).
40. See Katharina Gerstenberger, "'And This Madness Is My Only Strength': The Lifewriting of Unica Zürn," *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* 6, 1 (Spring 1991), pp. 40-53, for an account of Zürn's work in light of "the complex relationship of women's autobiographical writings and discourses on illness." I am indebted to Dr. Gerstenberger for sharing her work on Zürn with me.
41. Unica Zürn, "Remarques d'un observateur," in *Gesamtausgabe* (note 4), p. 163 (Taylor translation).
42. Ibid. Katharina Gerstenberger cited a similar passage in Zürn's *Notizen zur letzten (?) Krise* (1966), in chap. 4 of "Writing Herself into the Center: Centrality and Marginality in the Autobiographical Writing of Nahida Lazarus, Adelheid Popp, and Unica Zürn" (Ph.D. diss., Cornell University, 1993), p. 163: "Diese Frau," wrote Zürn, "gleicht in der Körperhaltung (im Augenblick der Wollust) einer jener erstaunlichen Cephalopoden, wie sie Bellmer oft gezeichnet hat: die Frau, die aus Kopf und Unterleib besteht. Die Arme

werden durch die Beine ersetzt. Das heisst: sie hat keine Arme. Selbst die herausgestreckte Zunge der Bellmerschen Cephalopoden, die etwas Empörendes hat, fehlt bei dieser Kranken nicht." ("This woman resembles in her posture [in the moment of sensual pleasure] one of those astonishing cephalopods, as Bellmer has often drawn her: the woman composed of head and belly. Legs replace the arms. This means: she has no arms. Even the outstretched tongue, which has something shocking, is not missing in this sick one" [Taylor translation].)

43. See Webb and Short (note 1), pls. xxviii, xxix, and figs. 215, 246-49.

44. A copy of *Le Surréalisme, même 4* (Spring 1958) is preserved in the Mary Reynolds Collection. The French caption to Bellmer's cover photograph reads "Tenir à frais."

45. Zürn, "Remarques d'un observateur" (note 41), p. 163 (Taylor translation).

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