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Janine Mileaf. *Please Touch: Dada and Surrealist Objects After the Readymade*. Lebanon, N.H.: Dartmouth College Press, 2010. 296 pp. figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$85.00 US (cl). ISBN 978-1-58465-882-5.

Review by Allan Antliff, University of Victoria, Canada.

In *Please Touch*, Janine Mileaf focuses on key moments in the history of Dada and Surrealism when “touch” served as the focal point for elevating ordinary objects to the status of art. These “art objects,” in turn, become the springboard for aesthetic experiments that draw us into the realm of the corporeal. Tracing this maneuver from Marcel Duchamp’s World War One era readymades via Surrealism to the sandboxes of the American eccentric Joseph Cornell, Mileaf concludes “(o)bject art was thus imagined as a credible participant in a revolution that would begin with the individual’s mental and psychical disturbance and lead to tangible differences in daily life” (p. 20).

The story begins with Duchamp’s readymade *Bottlerack* (1914), which Mileaf argues evokes qualities of the “tactile” that recur in other readymades as well as his erotically-charged assemblage, *The Bride Stripped Bare By Her Bachelors, Even* (1915-1923). Notwithstanding Duchamp’s own protestations, Mileaf would reclaim Duchamp’s readymades for aesthetic judgment, albeit a judgment attuned to “corporality” as opposed to the Cubists’ and Futurists’ “retinal”-based brand of artistic appreciation. It seems Mileaf has not fully grasped that aesthetic “taste” as codified by the Cubists and Futurists on the basis of their interpretations of Henri Bergson’s metaphysics encompassed all aspects of perception and that Duchamp’s readymades were an ironic rejoinder, rather than a reworking of aesthetics in corporeal, as opposed to retinal terms. I would add that her speculation that Duchamp’s readymades are best understood as a response to Pablo Picasso’s pre-war constructions is also off the mark, given that Duchamp was part of the Cubist circle associated with Albert Gleizes and Jean Metzinger (authors of *Du Cubisme*), and, in the first instance, deployed the readymades to undermine Gleizes’s efforts in America.[1]

From Duchamp we turn to Man Ray and sadomasochistic tactility. Mileaf’s discussion of potential violence in two of Man Ray’s early assemblages—*Object to Be Destroyed* (1921) and *Gift* (1921)—in tandem with her analysis of bondage photos commissioned by the amateur “ethnographer” William Seabrook may belabor the obvious, but it does point toward the real focus of this book, namely Surrealism. Chapters three and four unpack various artistic strategies for “convulsing” the imagination through touch so as to actualize Surrealism’s Freudian-based notions of the unconscious in the social realm. We are assured that the intent of the Surrealists, like Duchamp and Man Ray before them, was to foment (citing a poetic metaphor of Walter Benjamin’s) “revolutionary discharge” (p. 155). But what sort of revolution is Mileaf referring to? The revolutionary politics of Dada, for example, varied markedly as they developed in the context of World War One and its aftermath in Zurich, Berlin, New York, Paris, Tokyo and elsewhere. As for Surrealism, it was codified by Breton in response to the Parisian Dadaists’ resolutely individualist-anarchist stance, which he argued was not up to the task of effecting radical social change.[2] Dismissing the idea of a “Surrealist” theory of revolution while proclaiming allegiance to Marxist-Leninism in an official statement for the November 8, 1925 issue of *L’Humanité*, the Surrealists closed ranks with the French Communist Party. By the mid-1930s, however, criticism in the

international Communist movement compelled Breton to join forces with Lenin's exiled second-in-command, Leon Trotsky.[3] In a co-written manifesto, "Towards a Free Revolutionary Art," Trotsky and Breton reaffirmed that social and economic revolution through the seizure of state power was the purview of the Communist movement, while Surrealism was consigned to "the interior world" of art, allied with and "aspiring" towards the Communist revolution, but certainly not the agent of it.[4] Given that Mileaf never grapples with such complexities, it comes as no surprise that in her final chapter the same transformative import animating Duchamp's readymades, Man Ray's assemblages, and Surrealist art objects is attributed to the "tactile" sandboxes of the reclusive Cornell, though this is such a stretch she is forced to tone down the rhetoric: he seeks to "alter the course of the present," rather than revolutionize it (p. 188).

How do we account for the flawed trajectory of this analysis? In the introduction, Mileaf aligns herself with a group of "scholars of the past few decades who have sought to re-envision modernism against a rigid formalist, specifically optical, model" (p. 3). Here she is referring to followers of American art critic/art historian Rosalind Krauss, who has reconfigured the history of modernism in opposition to the "optical"-based formalism codified by the New York art critic Clement Greenberg. Greenberg interpreted the history of modern art from the mid-nineteenth century forward as the progressive distillation of "optical" qualities specific to the art object as such. Since the 1970s, Krauss and those associated with the flagship journal *October* have marshaled Surrealism, Russian Constructivism and, more recently, Dada, to serve as staging grounds for eschewing the "optical" in favour of alternative categories—in this instance, "touch"—for historicizing the art object. What we have, then, is a variation of crypto-formalism which valorizes aesthetics while pushing extra-artistic cultural, social and political considerations to the periphery.[5] In America this brand of art history has calcified into a "school" and *Please Touch* falls squarely within the tradition.[6]

NOTES

[1] On Cubism, Futurism, Bergson's metaphysics, and Duchamp's readymades, see Mark Antliff and Patricia Leighton, *Cubism and Culture* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2001) and Allan Antliff, "The Making and Mauling of Marcel Duchamp's Readymade," *Canadian Art Magazine* 23(Spring 2006):56-61.

[2] Theresa Papanikolas, *Anarchism and the Advent of Paris Dada: Art and Criticism, 1914-1924* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2010), pp. 146-147.

[3] Jack J. Spector, *Surrealist Art and Writing 1919/39* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 71.

[4] Leon Trotsky and Andre Breton, in Paul N. Sigel (ed.), "Manifesto: Towards a Free Revolutionary Art," *Leon Trotsky on Literature and Art* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1981), pp. 115-121.

[5] Patricia Leighton, "Cubist Anachronisms: Ahistoricity, Cryptoformalism, and Business-as-Usual in New York," *Oxford Art Journal* 17/2(1994):91-102.

[6] Timothy Hyman, "Dogma Days," *Times Literary Supplement* (28 October 2005), <http://www.the-tls.co.uk> (consulted 29 September 2010).

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