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The foundational essay 'The Automatic Message' written by André Breton in 1933, proposed that automatism allowed access to an interior world that is shielded from the pressures of conscious life. In other words, a sovereign psychic space in which the unconscious can produce images, forms, and language free from the control of reason, habit, or circumstance.[1]

This inner model that derived from Freudian psychoanalysis represented the theoretical foundation of Surrealism, namely that the unconscious, freed by automatic technique, constituted a privileged site for authentic human experience. Yet Breton argues that Surrealism contained a revolutionary political dimension directed at **reconstructing the external world that it transcended.** While being in exile in 1942, he stressed that Surrealism had always functioned 'in relation to' the wars that framed it, and that the movement could only be understood historically in relation to the catastrophes that surrounded it.[2]

In Breton's thought, the sovereignty of the inner self and the necessity of historical engagement were never quite aligned. The Yale lecture of 1942, in fact, enacts this tension, as it was written in the wartime exile and navigated what Surrealism's relationship to global catastrophe could and could not claim openly. With the onset of the Second World War, the German occupation of France in 1940, and the collapse of the surrealist group in Paris, this unresolved contradiction became impossible to sustain. The exile of its members to the United States brought it to a breaking point.[3]

The careers of two surrealist artists, Max Ernst and Yves Tanguy, had both shed light on this tension in a distinctive way. As both were influenced by Giorgio de Chirico's metaphysical landscapes, in particular his depopulated piazzas, the dreamlike spatial voids, and the displaced objects that do not belong there. Both reached the US in the early 1940s as they witnessed Europe’s collapse. The biographical and historical circumstances that shaped both of their lives, were nearly identical. However, the work that they produced diverged in ways that are deeply significant. While Ernst's *Europe After the Rain II* of 1941 marshalled automatism towards explicit historical allegory, Tanguy's *Indefinite Divisibility* of 1942, superficially unchanged in style, quietly encrypted the historical moment within its apparently timeless imagery. This essay contends that this distinction between the two artists, despite

their shared imagery of de Chirico's work and the experience of exile, reveals not a mere fragmentation of Surrealist automatism under wartime pressure, but a splitting of the movement along a line that had always existed within it between a practice of historical exposure and psychological withdrawal.

The fact that Ernst and Tanguy each adhered to the formal practices of automatism yet produced such different works suggests that the psychoanalytical and political aspects of Surrealist practice were never as separable as Breton's inner model implied.

In order to understand what separated Ernst and Tanguy in their American exile, it is essential to examine what they shared in the pre-war period, and how differently they each received it. The Italian artist Giorgio de Chirico offers the most precise common ground. For the Surrealists, de Chirico was not merely a stylistic influence but a theoretical precedent, whose metaphysical paintings demonstrated that the 'spatial unease' can facilitate unconscious revelation. When objects are displaced from their habitual contexts, they produce a sense of psychic revelation that could become a vehicle for unconscious disclosure. De Chirico demonstrated that the painted surface could register states of feeling resistant to rational articulation. As Sandler noted, in the New York exile community, de Chirico was seen as the movement's founding prophet, 'on a par as a pioneer with Freud,' his discoveries elaborated by Ernst, Miró, Masson, Magritte, and others.[4]

Yet, what Ernst and Tanguy each absorbed from de Chirico's work was already different. De Chirico's metaphysical paintings are not historically legible, as his piazzas are emptied of narrative, thus, their atmosphere is of temporal dislocation rather than historical reference. What Ernst borrowed from this vocabulary was its emotional register, the sense of a world that removed all human presence and left its forms behind, redirecting this register toward the debris of specific historical civilisation. Ernst's pre-war works like his forest series of the 1930s, as well as his frottages and decalcomanias, are saturated with biological and historical processes. In other words, forms that grow, decay, and consume. Lomas's observed that Ernst's forest paintings give rise to a landscape of ambiguous scale, 'like a seething microcosm of nature as a whole,' where figures seem reduced to the size of insects by the surrounding organic mass. Such pre-war diminution, in which the human is overwhelmed by forces larger than itself, already anticipates the relationship between the viewer and the

canvas that *Europe After the Rain II* would make historically explicit. The individual is rendered insignificant before a catastrophe on an impersonal scale.[5]

Tanguy's work, by contrast, removes this emotional residue of de Chirico's vocabulary. The works he produced before the war depict a world from which any signs of civilisation, architecture, and history have disappeared, leaving only an atmospheric void inhabited by smooth, biomorphic objects of uncertain origin. In Tanguy, there is no sense of aftermath because his space is not post-historical but pre-historical, anterior to the very possibility of cultural meaning. Within the New York exile circles, he was referred to as 'the first truly automatic painter,' a characterisation which suggests his practice was understood to be the purest manifestation of the Bretonian inner model: the unconscious generating forms unconditioned by any external reference.[6]

Both artists worked within Breton's idea of automatism as a way to tap into the unconscious. However, automatism as a practice was never theoretically stable. [7] Right from the beginning, automatism contained a fundamental tension between what can be described as the 'passivity' of the inner model, a pure discharge of the unconscious, and an active, interpretive engagement with the world.[7]

Ernst was consistently attracted to the active pole of this tension, his technique taking historical and natural material and using both as unconscious imagery. Tanguy gravitated toward the passive pole, where his canvases withdrew into psychic interiority instead. What the war did was not simply create these different orientations but force them into visibility. Therefore, both artists are subjected to the same historical pressure, and their divergent responses reveal a contradiction that had always been latent within automatism itself. It is to the consequences of that pressure in each artist's work that this essay sets to explore.

Ernst first came to the United States in 1941 following a period of acute trauma in his life. After the war outbreak, he was taken into custody by the French as an enemy, released and re-interned. He eventually escaped with the help of Peggy Guggenheim, whom he later married. According to Cone's account in her work Artists' Experiences under Vichy, Ernst was among the most directly persecuted of the Surrealist exiles. His persecution can be seen as the very product of the machinery of European nationalist violence that he had spent his career imaging

obliquely.[8] This experience of watching the Europe he had known collapse into occupation and destruction, was not something that could be separated from his automatist practice. History had invaded his body and his life, which could not be kept outside of his inner world.

Ernst's *Europe After the Rain II* which was painted upon his arrival in the US, exhibits the clearest visual record of this experience. The use of decalcomania, a technique in which paint is pressed between surfaces and then pulled apart, created forms generated by a semi-automatic process in which the artist guides the outcome but does not control it entirely. In this case, the technique of Ernst remained fully Bretonian: the unconscious is left to produce the primary visual material. What is remarkable, and what distinguishes Ernst from Tanguy is what the unconscious produced. The painting is a wide, horizontal canvas of around 148 centimetres which requires a lateral scanning movement from the viewer, as the eye moves across a continuous landscape of devastation. The entire picture plane is occupied by ruined forms that remind of architectural and organic matter, like collapsed arches, encrusted surfaces, and petrified vegetation. The human figures are so absorbed into their surroundings that they are barely distinguished from it. A bird-headed figure on the right side of the canvas, is seen standing in despair as it looks at the destruction — a motif Ernst had used before in his alter-ego Loplop, now transformed by the historical context into something more tragic.[9]

The meaning of the work is closely linked to its dimensions. The framework of the gigantic as a mode that engulfs the spectator's body in Susan Stewart's analysis, produces a sense of historical helplessness. The panoramic width of *Europe After the Rain II* enacts, on the level of bodily experience, the very condition of historical catastrophe it represents.[10]

It is nearly impossible for the spectator to comprehend the entire canvas from a single viewpoint. One must traverse its surface, just as one would move through a landscape of ruins. According to Stewart, the monumental links the public and the historical rather than the intimate and the private. It speaks to the body as a social-historical entity rather than a personal one.[11]

The physical experience of standing in front of the painting is inseparable from its historical meaning, as to view the work is to find oneself positioned as a witness to catastrophe. It diminishes the viewer before a destruction that goes beyond the individual grasp.

The significance of Ernst's response is that it transforms de Chirico's vocabulary of temporal dislocation into a scene of explicit historical ruin to index the impact of war on automatism. De Chirico's atmospheric melancholy and the spatial unease that he showcased to Surrealism, has been filled by Ernst with a specific historical content: collapsing arches, petrified figures,

and the Loplop motif that was deprived of its earlier ambiguity and rendered to witness the self-destruction of a civilisation. The technique of decalcomania generated what the automatist practice could not prevent. The allegorical matter of the war itself returned through the painting's surface. According to Sawin, it was Ernst whose work most directly registered the historical experience of exile and displacement among the Surrealist exiles in New York.[12]

What illuminates this further is Clement Greenberg's critique of 1944. Reviewing Surrealist painting, he criticised precisely this quality, and its dependence on literary and illustrative subject matter rather than on the purely optical and formal qualities. [13]

In this case, Greenberg's critique is beneficial not because it points out the truth but rather it misidentifies the nature of the problem. In Ernst's case, the literariness, the legibility of the devastated landscape as allegory, is not a lapse in painterly ambition but a symptom of historical experience forcing its way into automatist practice. The rational mind and the consciousness were meant to be bypassed by Automatism. Ernst's wartime work is overwhelmed by material that cannot be contained at the level of pure psychic form.

Ernst's relocation to Sedona, Arizona in 1946, is illuminating as biographical evidence that illustrates the same sensibility. The eroded and monumental red rocks of the American Southwest, inhuman in scale, having a geological permanence that dwarfs human time, confirmed and amplified the catastrophic aesthetic already present in *Europe After the Rain II*. Ernst was drawn to a landscape that already resembled his painted unconscious, as if it was a post-apocalyptic world, where nature had taken back what belongs to it. Rather than changing his imagery, The American West offered a real-word connection to the imagery he had consistently been creating. Where Ernst saw a reflection of a historical catastrophe in the American landscape, Tanguy's geography offered something entirely different.

Tanguy arrived in the United States in 1939, where he settled with Kay Sage in Woodbury, Connecticut, which remained his residence until his death in 1955. The wooded and coastal landscape of Connecticut, marked by the dissolution of land and water at the horizon, was nothing like the dramatic vastness of the American Southwest. Tanguy's inner world was kept undisturbed by the quiet, enclosed, intimately scaled environment.[14]

His pre-war paintings were filled with an imagery of boundless atmospheric void, the featureless ground planes melting into unknown terrains, and the same smooth painterly surface that had been used throughout his career. The hazy, horizonless nature of the Connecticut coast, which blurs the lines between the inside and the outside, reflects how the painting dilutes the historical context with psychic atmosphere. The geography of Tanguy conspired to keep history at a distance.

The *Indefinite Divisibility*, which was painted in the same year as Breton's Yale lecture, seems at first sight to confirm this continuity. The painting is of a somewhat intimate scale, 102 by 89 centimetres, and occupies a register that Stewart associates with the miniature. According to her framework, the miniature engages the viewer in a close and private, internalised relationship with the object world, unlike the gigantic historical address.[15]

The ground plane remains ambiguous, an indistinct blend of ochre and pale blue that refuses to pin the scene to any geographical location. The biomorphic objects that inhabit this space are painted in a smooth, and defined manner, a similar vocabulary Tanguy developed throughout the 1930s. The elongated masses suggest bone or cartilage, soft protrusions reminiscent of cellular growth, and surfaces worn to a translucent smoothness as though by centuries of erosion. At first glance, it appears to resemble Breton’s psychic environment, intact and sealed off from time and so, from the historical catastrophe taking place on the other side of the Atlantic.

Nonetheless, a prolonged visual examination of the work disrupts this continuity. Concentrated in the upper left of the canvas and spread across the middle ground, certain painted objects assert a character that sits uneasily alongside the biomorphic vocabulary surrounding them. The organic matter has been curved and blurred with the atmospheric ground, yet it remains angular and geometrically precise. The edges of these objects are clean and smooth, while their silhouettes suggest fabrication rather than growth. Some of them recall the sectioned blade of a propeller or the counterweighted arm of an industrial component, while others appear to have the rectilinear rigidity of machine components. All are painted in the same meticulous manner as the biomorphic objects around them, which are absorbed into the atmospheric haze. What distinguishes them from Tanguy’s pre-war iconography is not the brushwork but their morphology. Whereas Tanguy's earlier work filled its void with solely organic, erosion-worn forms, here the objects carry a geometry that belongs to a whole other order of making. These are objects that do not belong to the world that the painting envisions, thus, their presence remains inexplicable.

The dynamic that Freud identifies in 'The Uncanny' of 1919 is the return of repressed material in a form recognisable by its effect, yet unnameable in its appearance.[16]

For Freud, the uncanny is not necessarily strange or frightening, but rather it is a kind of terrifying that 'leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar.' What one has repressed does not disappear, and instead, it returns in a different form caused by the very act of repression. The returned will have the same force as the original act of repression but will not be identifiable by the conscious mind. [17]

This is the logic essentially followed by the quasi-mechanical objects of Indefinite Divisibility. The traumatic memories of wartime violence, of the machinery of the conflict that had dismantled Tanguy's home, which forced him into exile, enter the unconscious and return not as allegory, but as a shape. The form of violence without a referent, absorbed into a timeless void that was built precisely to exclude all that.

To some ways, such a reading expresses a more genuine psychoanalysis than that of Ernst. Ernst’s automatism projects outwards towards a historical depiction, producing imagery that reads like allegory, and which can be read as Greenberg saw it, as literary in its relation to external events. Nonetheless, the dreamwork that Freud indicates, the unconscious working through trauma by means of condensation and displacement, do not result in a decipherable allegory. It creates imagery that is charged with latent content, yet it resists the conscious mind's attempt to identify it. The viewer, in Tanguy's case, is faced with painted objects whose angular geometry is structurally at odds with the atmospheric dissolution of everything around them. It is impossible to articulate their origin or simply understand what they are. The refusal of readability is not a painting's failure but precisely its psychic achievement, a mark of a process that has done its work too well to be read directly.

The logic of containment that exists within the imagery operates at the level of the canvas itself. According to Rothman, the intimacy of scale in Surrealist practices performs not simply as an aesthetic preference but a mode of containing within a surface the content that might otherwise exceed it.[18] Tanguy’s *Indefinite Divisibility* enacts precisely the dynamic of a catastrophe of the war that is kept within a canvas small enough to be grasped with a single glance. The objects are absorbed into a surface of atmospheric calm and not allowed to expand into the panoramic register of historical address that Ernst's painting occupies. Tanguy's painting, on the other hand, reveals its time not because of its separation from history, but the effort of exclusion itself reveals what it cannot fully exclude.

Breton concludes his 1942 Yale lecture by affirming that 'a persistent faith in automatic expression as a sounding device' for the exploration of the unconscious, a formulation that maintained the inner model even as the historical conditions surrounding it had made that model untenable.[19]

The Surrealist automatism had taken precisely this turn during the war period, functioning as a practice that maintained the theoretical commitments even as the conditions it operated within modified, sometimes beyond recognition, what the unconscious generated when it finally revealed itself. The comparison of Ernst and Tanguy, against their shared inheritance from de Chirico and the common experience of exile, reveals this transformation with remarkable clarity.

Through this lens, their divergence maps onto the contradiction at the heart of Breton's own thought, between the sovereignty of the inner self and the imperative of historical engagement. Each inherited one side of this contradiction. As Ernst's automatism opened outward, to absorb the catastrophe of war into its visual language, it resulted in an allegory of European destruction that is as historically legible as it is psychically generated. Tanguy's automatism, on the other hand, turned inwards, preserving the sealed psychic space of the Bretonian inner model while registering, in the mechanical objects that quietly populate his void, a signature of encrypted history it would not name. In Jenny's analysis of the theoretical instability of automatism as a practice, he wrote that it is 'open to all the slags of speech,' or 'impurities' and 'the external materials' that inevitably get between the conscious and the unconscious.[20]

In the wartime work of Ernst and Tanguy, those 'impurities' are the impurities of the war, the exile, and the collapse of their previous world. Despite Breton's theoretical insistence, automatism was never a fully autonomous practice, their divergence indicates it was never sovereign. The historical circumstances marked their works, sometimes openly, as in the collapsed arches and petrified figures of Europe After the Rain II, sometimes covertly, as in the anomalous geometries that breach the atmospheric calm of Indefinite Divisibility. In both cases, the unconscious could not maintain the boundary between the psychic and the historical that Breton placed as fundamental to Surrealism. It is in the nature of that failure, differently enacted by each artist, that the wartime history of automatism is most precisely recorded.

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