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"Wonderful Things": Surrealism and Egypt

Editors' Preface

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Far away in the forest, a scarab glistens.

—Joyce Mansour

Jacques-André Boiffard, *Le Sphinx Hôtel* (ca 1928) © Mme Denise Boiffard. Photo © Centre Pompidou, MNAM-CCI, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais / Georges Meguerditchian.

The elucidation of surrealist activities and influences in Egypt is a fairly recent development within surrealist scholarship, most notably advanced by Martine Antle, Katharine Conley, Franklin Rosemont, and the late Don LaCoss. This special issue of *Dada/Surrealism* augments their pioneering work with essays on some of the leading and less well-known voices from within Egyptian surrealism, as well as essays that explore the surrealists' engagement in the seemingly perennial fascination with Egypt, marking the ninetieth anniversary of Howard Carter's discovery and opening of Tutankhamun's (Tutankhamen) tomb and its "wonderful things" in 1922/23 as well as, in 2012, a significant point within Egypt's own history.

The essays here thus range from biographical and historical explorations and contextualizations to theoretical analyses within the subject of surrealism and Egypt, which presents two obvious faces: first, references to ancient Egypt in the art and writing of surrealists, and second, the development and influence of surrealist activities in Egypt and by those of Egyptian descent.

The surrealists' involvement in political issues relating to the Near and Middle East dates back to their anti-colonialist statements of the mid-1920s, when, for example, the Orient is first defended from Occidental war-mongering and the concomitant barbarity of its reductive rationalism, expressed in the collectively signed statement "The Revolution First and Always!" published in *L'Humanité*, 21 September 1925 with the still poignant lines: "Wherever Western civilization reigns, all human attachment but that motivated by self-interest has ceased, 'money is the bottom line'" (Fijalkowski and Richardson 95).

As David Bate and Martine Antle have discussed, Breton and Artaud wrote strong statements in the early years of the surrealist movement that condemned Western political oppression in the East and outlined a symbolic mapping of these geographical entities into two distinct modalities of thought: the West, representing the ultimately limited advancements of rationalism, and the East, representing all the marvelous potentials of the imagination. The poets of the Grand Jeu group followed the surrealist position, further developing a poetic rejection of the principle of non-contradiction that they equated with the Apollonian traditions of Mediterranean thought. "The Orient," wrote Roger Gilbert-Lecomte, "on the contrary, has always proclaimed the identity of the physical and the subjective world" (Gilbert-Lecomte 11–12). This principle of connecting the objective and the subjective realms can ultimately be seen as one of the most significant ambitions of surrealism, one which connects the movement to a latent and 'accursed' current of thought within Western civilization with which the surrealists (albeit simplistically) identify non-Western thinking.

Although certainly not nearly as pernicious as the colonialist position they sought to challenge in the 1920s, the surrealists' idealizations of the Orient are self-evident, and reflect an obvious simplification of the issues at

stake. However, they do represent a clear identification with a cultural and political otherness that would become increasingly important for surrealism in its broad-based critique of Occidental logocentrism and its adoption of Marxism in opposing the reduction of life to alienating utilitarian individualism.

The surrealist division between Orient and Occident / imagination and rationalism was later echoed in a text by a surrealist collaborator and friend of André Breton, René Alleau, a scholar of alchemy and the occult sciences. In his essay 'La Sortie d'Egypte,' Alleau re-articulates the surrealists' identification with the Orient and Egyptian mythology, and he reiterates the surrealist attack on the rationalist hubris of the West, declaring "the first true civilization will be neither magical nor scientific, but necessarily *poetic*" ("Exit from Egypt"). Here Alleau criticizes dominant forms of historical discourse for relegating antique modalities of thought to an inferior position, just as modern Western thought denigrates the dream in favor of the waking state: "Thus, a history which would like to be 'positive' and accord interest only in the events of the waking state is unaware of all of those of dream and the duration of a human experience longer than that of ancient and modern civilisations, from the time of Sumer and the intervention of writing up to our own age."

With a rather Marcusean tone, Alleau distinguishes between forms of civilization that differ in the relative value they place on nocturnal or diurnal experience, thereby constructing an economics of diurnal-nocturnal relations on which "a given type of civilization, its production and its values, but also its conflicts and its neuroses, depends." In light of Alleau's critique, we can see how the surrealists' identifications with ancient Egypt relate not only to interests in magic and esotericism, but also to one of the first cornerstones of surrealism, the dream. Breton's question in the first *Manifesto of Surrealism*, "When will we have sleeping logicians, sleeping philosophers?" (*Manifestoes* 12), affirms the radical anti-utilitarian *nocturnalism* of surrealism, from which stems its core identification with the dominant values of cultures very different to those of the modern West. Ancient Egypt thus becomes one of the various pre-Modern cultures, along with those of the Americas, Oceanic, and British Columbian cultures for example, that are seen to appreciate more fully the aspects of the human experience neglected in the modern Occident, including the integration of the mythical, the oneiric, and the magical into the very economics of the everyday.

Egypt is present in surrealism, then, as representative of a civilization that prioritized nocturnal values that are seen to be absent in Modern times. This identification with ancient Egypt is found throughout the visual and poetic output of surrealism. Echoes of Egyptian influence are evident in the bird-headed figures of Max Ernst, Alberto Giacometti's elongated sculptures, the hieroglyphic-like figures of Victor Brauner, and, as Alyce Mahon discusses in

this issue, Leonor Fini's sphinxes. It is also generally present in the surrealist interest in the occult, in alchemy and the Hermetic arts, widely understood to be Egyptian in origin; an interest that is found in the works of Leonora Carrington, Kurt Seligmann, and Remedios Varo, and which was central to the life of the British surrealist painter Ithell Colquhoun, who became a member of various occult societies.

While there are numerous examples of specific references to Egyptian themes throughout the history of surrealism, there is a connection that is more generally significant, found in the importance placed in the *sign* as the mediator that connects the external and the internal worlds. Breton's *Nadja* is replete with references to signs which tantalize the surrealist protagonist with their latent meanings: encounters, objects, and texts, as well as signs in the most literal sense. There are shop signs, café signs, and the signs of hotels, including the Sphinx Hotel, which is one of numerous references to the Egyptian riddle-making creature of which Nadja is a curious incarnation: "I remember having appeared black and cold to her, like a man struck by lightening, lying at the feet of the Sphinx" (*Nadja* 111). *L'Amour fou* is similarly a meditation on the poet's submission to the call of cryptic, yet apparently vital, solicitations that offer to the lyrical subject the possibility of solving the riddle of the self: what Walter Benjamin called the "profane illumination" of surrealist enlightenment.

Breton's suggestion in *Nadja* that, perhaps, "life needs to be deciphered like a cryptogram" (112) and his extended discussion in *L'Amour fou* of a cultivation of receptivity to "the forest of symbols" (*Mad Love* 15) outline a surrealist hermeneutics that draws heavily on an occult and pre-scientific logic of interpretation. This logic is also part of the legacy of German Romanticism within surrealism, such as that found in the opening lines of Novalis' *The Novices of Sais*: "Various are the roads of man. He who follows and compares them will see strange figures emerge, figures which seem to belong to that great cipher which we discern written everywhere." In these figures, adds Novalis, "we suspect a key to the magic writing, even a grammar, but our surmise takes on no definite forms and seems unwilling to become a higher key" (3). *The Novices of Sais*, published in 1802 and, notably, first translated into French in 1925, reflects Novalis' meditations on nature and the Romantic search for harmony between the self and the world, and could well represent a significant reference point in the development of Breton's thought. Sais was a city in ancient Egypt important for its temples of learning, and the site of much mythology relating to the origins of Western civilization. The Greeks believed Sais to be the resting place of the Egyptian god Osiris, as well as the city where the myth of Athena originated. It is also mentioned by Plato in *Timeaus* as the seat of an ancient wisdom from which younger civilizations have departed with disastrous consequences.

The roads that lead back to Egypt, then, are manifold, and it is perhaps those more latent connections that provide the deepest routes that take Breton's thinking back to the origins of 'accursed' thought. In the 1920s and 30s, such routes enable Breton to build his hermeneutics, a system of interpretation that is idiosyncratically surrealist, drawing on occult modalities of thought, romantic poetics, and psychoanalysis. By the 1940s, however, Breton's identification with Egypt took a particular turn, which makes more conspicuous the appeal of the notion of a lost harmonizing wisdom, when, in the midst of the devastation of war, he made an appeal to the revitalizing powers of myth in his *Arcane 17*, written in Québec in 1944.

As Anna Balakian observes in her introduction to the English translation, the title of the book reflects Breton's interest in Egyptian mythology and esotericism, and "refers to the lore of the Hebraic-Bohemian-Egyptian tarot" (9). The tarot card to which the title refers, generally referred to as "The Star," succeeds the fifteenth and sixteenth Arcana that represent war and destruction, and depicts the morning star, under which kneels a female figure collecting water at a pool, behind whom sits an ibis. This bird symbolized the Egyptian god Thoth, of manifold significance in Egypt, being the god of writing and magic and an agent of resurrection. *Arcane 17* thus reflects Breton's deepening identification with the richness of antique mythology, and its potentials for offering an internationally significant healing foundation for contemporary havoc. "How much richer," writes Breton, "more ambitious and also more favorable for the mind it seems to me in that respect than the Christian myth! It's painful to observe how, under the latter's influence, the lofty interpretations that directed ancient myths have been continuously repressed" (115).

The aim of developing a strong internationalism before the war further confirmed that the rejection of nationalist interest was a vital ethical principle for surrealism in the 1940s. The deepening of Breton's interest in esotericism, therefore, must be seen in the context of his belief that global conflict, nationalist, ideological, or religious, could only be healed by the acknowledgement of the universalizing profundity of myth and the realization of the magical effectiveness of art. From the appeal to the creation of a new myth in *Prolegomena to a Third Manifesto of Surrealism or Else* (1942), to the heavily esoteric International Exhibition of Surrealism (1947) at the Galerie Maeght in Paris, to the publication of *On Magic Art* (1957), Breton's work from the outset of the 1940s was highly determined by the question of re-integrating into life repressed and neglected modalities of thought as part of the re-construction of first principles proposed by the surrealists, particularly in light of the abject destruction and alienation of the war and cold-war conflict.

By the time Breton published *Arcane 17*, however, an Egyptian surrealist group had been active for several years in Cairo. The contributions to this issue by Sam Bardaouil, Marc Kober, Michael Richardson, and Alexandra Dika

Seggerman all discuss the development and the decline of surrealist activity and influence in Egypt from the late 1930s to the early 1950s. Following Don LaCoss' scholarship in this area, our contributors discuss various aspects of the group *Art et Liberté*, which LaCoss has described as the "greatest and most lasting impact of the Egyptian surrealists' projects" (LaCoss "Art and Liberty"). *Art et Liberté* was founded in January 1939 as a response to the formation of the FIARI (International Federation of Independent Revolutionary Artists) in agreement with the founding statement, produced in Mexico in a collaboration between Breton, Diego Rivera and Leon Trotsky, *Manifesto for an Independent Revolutionary Art*, which protested against the degradation of artistic freedom. "True art," it declared, "which is not content to play variations on ready-made models but rather insists on expressing the inner needs of man and of mankind in its time – true art is unable not to be revolutionary, not to aspire to a complete and radical reconstruction of society" (Breton and Rivera "Manifesto").

For a number of years, the surrealist group in Egypt, headed by poets Georges Henein and Ramses Younan, artist and writer Kamil el-Telmissany, and brothers Anwar and Fouad Kamil, were highly engaged in publishing periodicals and organizing exhibitions until a political clampdown ended in the arrest of Ramses Younan in 1947 and his ensuing exile to Paris. Don LaCoss has written of the reasons for the decline in activities as due to a political and cultural climate that was fundamentally hostile to surrealism: "Other Egyptian surrealists were driven underground, into exile, or into retreat from participation in the spheres of political, social, and cultural activity. Nasser's nationalist military coup in 1952 signaled the start of increasing hostility towards surrealism" (LaCoss).

A former member of the Egyptian surrealist group in exile in Paris, Abdul Kader el-Janabi, argued in 1987 that the surrealist adventure in Cairo was destined for failure, owing to the problems inherent in transposing a European artistic and political agenda into terms relevant to an Egyptian context. El-Janabi stated that despite real advancements enabled by the surrealist influence in Egypt, not only through the French language, but also in the development of a radical Arabic voice, the ground in Egypt was not fertile for the kinds of revolt proposed by surrealism, as, basically, the country had not undergone the same stages of political and artistic development as its European counterparts. "What seems to have happened," argued el-Janabi, "was a settling of accounts in favour of surrealist creation as part of the French presence in Egypt, rather than a communication with the native that would take account of the emancipatory message of surrealism." The failures, he believes, were to be blamed "on the inherently closed character of Arabic society in the face of occidental innovation," and on "the inherent failure of Occidental modernity in so far as it dreams of playing a significant role in an alien context" (El-Janabi "Nile of Surrealism").

Despite the relatively short-lived activities of surrealism in Egypt, it is now understood, as Sam Bardaouil asserts, that one of the biggest influences of surrealism here was the creation of a radical platform from which artists could develop an Egyptian modern art. Victoria Carruthers' essay on Joyce Mansour discusses how central Mansour's multi-cultural background was to the development of her poetic voice, through which "Mansour is able to invoke her connection with the mythology and poetic traditions of (ancient and classical) Egypt and the mysticism of the ancient Near East." However, while Mansour is generally associated with Breton, Carruthers presents a fresh reading of her poetry in relation to Georges Bataille, revealing how Mansour's is a seriously *black* art, a kind of *evil* Song of Songs, in which dismemberment, corruption, putrefaction, dissolution, and mixing take on a dangerous role, not sublimated by the Bretonian-Egyptian bird fixation, but expressed with a good dose of base materialism, far more in keeping, perhaps, with the *real* workings of magic.

Central to the development of surrealism in Egypt was Georges Henein, who became the personal link between Breton and surrealist activity in Cairo. Henein's work remains more or less untranslated into English, and yet Michael Richardson's contribution to this issue reveals the extent to which this is a real shortcoming within anglophone surrealist scholarship. Not only does Richardson present Henein as one of the most astute and perspicacious of critics within the history of surrealism, but his writings also take on an uncanny significance within today's political climate. Henein's "esprit frappeur" (translated in Marc Kober's article by Georgiana Colvile as "striking spirit"), strikes forcefully in Henein's call for vigilance against what he terms "the prestige of terror," and its sickly defence of "just" wars. Richardson notes how Henein's warning, written in the immediate aftermath of the Allied atom bomb attacks on Japan in 1945, is a poignant reminder that the surrealists' critique is still highly relevant: "Everything is taking place as if man were looking into this long series of unhappy ambitions for a certain form of security in the terror." The contributors to this special issue thus introduce some fresh relations between surrealist activity and Egypt. Patricia Allmer reads Lee Miller's famous photograph, *Portrait of Space* (1937), as an image that reflects a nomadic and liminal subject which can be seen to represent the "in-betweenness" of Egyptian surrealism defined by Michael Richardson; Fariba Bogzaran presents new material on the impact of war-time service in Cairo on the evolution of Gordon Onslow Ford's artistic philosophy; Terri Geis presents a new reading of Maya Deren's films through the Egyptian-influenced ideas of fragmentation and regeneration; Marc Kober relates the work of Horus Schenouda to Henein and Breton's identification between poetry and magic; and Dennis Maher maps the connections between the 'magic architecture' of Frederick Kiesler and Egyptian spatial symbolics.

Alexandra Dika Seggerman contributes an informative timeline of activities that enables a quick navigation of historical events relating to the surrealist group in Egypt.

This issue is the first collection of essays focused on surrealism and Egypt; far from trying to present a complete overview of this topic, it aims to offer glimpses, pointing towards the extent of the significance of Egypt as both motive and location of surrealism, often overlooked in scholarship on the movement. With this collection the editors hope to initiate a new wave of scholarly interest in surrealism in Egypt by demonstrating that this neglected issue is more central to key surrealist concerns than has been generally recognized.

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