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*Sleep, Idleness, and the Passages between
Surrealism and the Readymade*

The Lining of Sleep

In his “Manifesto of Surrealism,” published in 1924, André Breton posed the question whether the apparent intermittence of the thoughts of dream-consciousness might not be equally true of waking consciousness, or whether, indeed, waking-consciousness should not be considered a “phenomenon of interference” that keeps us from properly apprehending the continuity of thought conducted in the condition of sleep. He writes:

When will we have sleeping logicians, sleeping philosophers? I would like to sleep, in order to surrender myself to the dreamers, the way I surrender myself to those who read me with eyes wide open: in order to stop imposing, in this realm, the conscious rhythm of my thought. Perhaps my dream last night follows that of the night before, and will be continued the next night, with an exemplary strictness. *It's quite possible*, as the saying goes. And since it has not been proved in the slightest that, in doing so, the “reality” with which I am kept busy continues to exist in the state of dream, that it does not sink back down into the immemorial, why should I not grant to dreams what I occasionally refuse reality, that is, this value of certainty in itself which, in its own time, is not open to my repudiation?¹

Breton not only lends sleep and its attendant states of consciousness (including, but not exclusively, that of the dream) a degree of “reality” that might ordinarily be denied it, but also modality. He moves from the “possible” to a “certainty” that would be grounded were he able to grasp thought’s continuity in sleep and dream.

¹ André Breton, “Manifesto of Surrealism,” in *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (University of Michigan Press, 1969), 12.

In turn, Breton would be able to withdraw doubt from the whole reality he experiences in the state of sleep.

In fact, he suggests, sleep, with its accompanying dreams, offers a form of direct, continuous thought, whereas in waking, the faculty of memory comes into play, which offers only a weak outline of the continuous mental world with which we communicate during sleep: “the dream finds itself reduced to a mere parenthesis, as is the night.”² In contrast, he characterizes the waking state as unreliable consciousness:

Not only does the mind display, in this state, a strange tendency to lose its bearings (as evidenced by the slips and mistakes the secrets of which are just beginning to be revealed to us), but, what is more, it does not appear that, when the mind is functioning normally, it really responds to anything but the suggestions which come to it from the depths of that dark night to which I commend it.³

Breton thus reverses the modal aspects typically ascribed to the experiences of waking and sleep. Rather than being an interruption of waking consciousness, sleep is the basis of consciousness in its continuity and power of thought, its ground of certainty. Waking experience is the function of thought’s intermittence; it is an interruption of the mind’s freedom and clarity in sleep. In Breton’s surreationalism, then, with all waking reality placed under the shadow of doubt, the continuity of thought in sleep alone guarantees the existence of the (sleeping) “I” upon which the reality of the world depends: *dormiens cogito ergo sum*.⁴

The argument of this essay turns on a question that only comes fully into view later in surrealism’s reception of Duchamp: how are we to understand the relation between surrealist automatism and the Duchampian readymade? My suggestion is that the surrealist valorization of sleep and unworking helps make legible the readymade as a material or object-based form of automatism, in which agency is

² Breton, “Manifesto,” 11.

³ Breton, “Manifesto,” 12–13.

⁴ I borrow the term *surreationalism*, slightly anachronistically, from Gaston Bachelard’s 1936 essay, “Le surreationalisme,” *Inquisitions* 1 (1936): 1–6.

displaced from artisanal fabrication onto choice, delay, contingency, and reception.

In a poem from his 1932 collection, *The White-Haired Revolver*, “Vigilance,” Breton explored this reversibility between sleep and waking and affirmed the richness of the sleep state as a reconciliation of consciousness with the body’s full range of sensuous and erotic experience of the world of objects. Breton opens the poem by evoking the space around him and the recentering of his consciousness upon and in his sleeping body, which suddenly becomes the space of marvelous perceptions and experiences. Sleep is for Breton a paradoxical form of vigilance in absence, a watchfulness for the poetic transformations that take place in the world of objects, bodies, and space when they are immersed in the night:

In Paris, the Tour Saint-Jacques
 Swaying like a sunflower
 Sometimes against the Seine its shadow moves among the tugboats
 Just then on tiptoe in my sleep
 I go toward the room where I am lying
 And set it afire
 Nothing remains of the consent I had to give
 The furniture then makes way for the beasts looking at me like brothers
 Lions whose manes consume the chairs
 Sharks’ white bellies absorb the sheets’ last quiver
 At the hour of love and blue eyelids[.]⁵

Sleep appears here as both a dissolution of the solid built spaces of the poem’s urban setting and a conflagration in the familiar, domestic space of dwelling. Sleep returns the sleeper to a wild forest of animal danger and instinctive drives. The poet’s body is consumed by the creatures he has conjured up in sleep, which leaves him purified and in deep communion with a being that was inaccessible in his finite waking state:

⁵ André Breton, “Vigilance,” in *Poems of André Breton: A Bilingual Anthology*, trans. and ed. Jean-Pierre Cauvin and Mary Ann Caws (Black Widow, 2006), 123.

I see myself burning now I see the solemn hiding place of nothings
 Which was once my body
 Probed by the patient beaks firebirds
 When all is finished I enter the ark unseen
 [...]
 I hear human linen tearing like a great leaf
 Under the fingernails of absence and presence in collusion
 [...]
 I touch nothing but the heart of things I hold the thread.⁶

In a short essay from the 1950s entitled “Sleep, Night,” Maurice Blanchot captured Breton’s paradoxical “vigilance-in-sleep” in similar terms, in which sleep becomes a kind of second, higher wakefulness of consciousness to the proximate condition of being, an “intimacy” as he puts it, “with the center.” Blanchot writes of sleep’s removal of the body’s separateness from things, which opens up new apprehensions of their essential nature:

Vigilant existence does not dissipate in the sleeping body near which things remain; it withdraws from the remove which is its temptation. It returns there to the primordial affirmation which is the authority of the body when the body is not separated but fully in agreement with the truth of place [...] the meaning of sleep lies precisely in its being vigilant existence concentrating on certitude, linking up all errant possibilities to the fixity of a principle and satiating itself with the certitude, so that the morning’s newness can welcome it and a new day can begin.⁷

As Breton’s “Manifesto of Surrealism” and “Vigilance” suggest, such an understanding of sleep was essential to the definition of poetic creativity at the heart of the surrealist project—a vigilant experience of bodily presence in sleep’s apparent “absence” of activity, an absence of purposeful work that would haunt, among other things, the very production of the surrealist “work” of poetry or art.

⁶ Breton, “Vigilance,” 123.

⁷ Maurice Blanchot, “Sleep, Night,” in *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock (University of Nebraska Press, 1982), 266.

Similarly, Breton's friend and fellow poet Benjamin Péret explored the vigil of sleep in his long poem "Sleep, Sleep in the Stones," published in 1927 with illustrations by Yves Tanguy.⁸ Péret evokes sleep as a state of relation to the surroundings in which miraculous transformations and exchanges of properties between bodies, objects, and spaces become possible:

I exist under the seal of the vines
and the smoking nostrils of the celestial empire prowls around the
faded flowers
because here everything sleeps
and the sleep of the air is conducive to the birth of mountains
The lightest breeze would be enough to make them appear in
the hollow of my hand[.]⁹

Péret's sleep "among the rocks" also becomes the space of encounter with the desired but absent beloved, who rises in the metamorphic landscape within which the sleeping poet has become merely a coordinate point in an erotic geometry:

I am waiting for you in the most hidden circle of stones
and despite the launch of the dramatic ship
you will be near me who am only a black dot
And I await you with the salt of the spectres
in the reflections of the fleeting waters
in the misfortunes of the acacias
in the silence of the cracks
precious among all because they smiled at you
as clouds smile at miracles
as liquids smile at children
as the lines smile at the points[.]¹⁰

⁸ Benjamin Péret, with Yves Tanguy, *Dormir, Dormir, dans les Pierres* (Éditions Surréalistes, 1927).

⁹ Benjamin Péret, "Dormir, Dormir, dans les Pierres," <https://www.melusine-surrealisme.fr/en/peret/dormir-dormir-dans-les-pierres>.

¹⁰ Péret, "Dormir."

Analogously in the visual realm, the Belgian surrealist René Magritte dedicated at least three of his early paintings, from the later 1920s, to the elevated experience of sleeping that Breton had adumbrated in the “Manifesto of Surrealism.” The earliest of these, “The Sleep Test,” painted sometime around the end of 1926, shows the curve of a woman’s bare neck, shoulder, and hair in the foreground, leaned against the scrolled edge of a day-bed, with a shadow-casting white piece of fabric (a robe or blouse, perhaps) hung on the wall—or perhaps a veiled figure beneath it facing the sleeper—and wood grain in the background. While commenters have suggested a possible association of the sheet (or figure veiled by the sheet) with the suicide of Magritte’s mother during his youth, I want rather to underscore a feature in the foreground, indeed on the surface, of the painting. Magritte has overlaid the sleeper’s depicted hair with a combed set of white grooves textured right on the surface of the canvas, suggesting a kind of electrical or spiritual activity coursing from her sleeping head. Emanating from her hair is, if not outright menace, at least a powerful mental force that belies her heedless, supine form, warning that she may be much more alert and dangerous in her dream-ridden sleep than her vulnerable pose might otherwise imply.¹¹

Magritte’s “Reckless Sleeper,” from late 1927 or early 1928, shows in the top third of the canvas a sleeper in a wood-grained, coffin-like box. Below is an irregular tombstone-like shape against a dark, cloudy background; inset into the stone are relief figures of typical Magrittean objects: a top hat, a mirror, a bird, a bow, an apple, and a candle. Magritte suggests that the sleeper’s “recklessness” has to do with sleep’s proximity to death and petrification, and with dreaming, which transforms the repertoire of banal “daytime” objects into enigmatic hieroglyphic signs displayed in the memorial archeology of a mind still active during sleep. Or as Blanchot wrote, “If day survives in the night [in dreaming], if it exceeds its term, if it becomes that which cannot be interrupted, then already it is no longer the day. It is the uninterrupted and the incessant. Notwithstanding events that seem to belong to time, and even though it is peopled with beings that seem to be those

¹¹ Marcel Paquet focuses, as his subtitle indicates, on Magritte’s repertory of ways in which he sought to “rendering thought visible”: Marcel Paquet, *René Magritte, 1898–1967: Thought Rendered Visible* (Taschen, 2021).

of the world, this interminable ‘day’ is the approach of time’s absence, the threat of the outside where the world lacks.”¹²

Magritte’s “The Lining of Sleep,” from 1928, likens the spatiality of the canvas surface to the enigmatic topography of sleep. It is notable for being largely *objectless*, or at least undecidable as to whether it contains any definite objects beyond some shadowy shapes. Magritte conjoins the simulation of wood grain in the right third of the canvas to a blue-black cloudy surface in the left part, with a dark, jagged zone set out below suggesting perhaps two peaks of a landscape, but also perhaps the silhouetted breasts or hips and shoulders of a sleeping body. In the cloudy “sky” are symmetrical cut-out black shapes suggesting the sound-holes of a musical instrument, which imply a hidden depth behind the blue-black surface and render ambiguous whether the black triangular shapes at the bottom of the canvas stand in the foreground against a “sky” behind it or indicate a void in depth below the superficial “sky.” With such reversible spatial cues, Magritte achieves a remarkable metaphorical suggestion of the shadowy, negative space of sleep that provides the surface upon which the dream may be depicted. Again, Blanchot offers a suggestive comment, when he explores the occurrence of a dream within a dream, or awareness in a dream of dreaming. Blanchot suggests that the structure of dream itself becomes the content of the dream: “All this is like a *dream of the night*, a dream where the form of the dream becomes its sole content.”¹³ So too Magritte had made the dim, objectless background of sleep the reflexive content of his painting, representing sleep as pure form, that “lining” of sleep turned against the sleeper’s body and on its reverse side serving as a screen over which the images of the dream may pass.¹⁴

¹² Blanchot, “Sleep, Night,” 267.

¹³ Blanchot, “Sleep, Night,” 267.

¹⁴ Natalya Lusty discusses the typical surrealist analogy of dream and cinema, which likewise depends on the pre-existing support of a screen. Magritte would suggest that sleep is itself such a material support, the innermost layer of a night-consciousness ranging from darkness and absence to the lively play of dream images and events. See Natalya Lusty, “Surrealism and Dreams,” in *Surrealism*, ed. Natalya Lusty (Cambridge University Press, 2021), 94–111.

Sleep and/as Unworking

Also notable in Breton's evocation of sleeping in the "Manifesto," more implicit than its philosophical reference, is that sleep constitutes a reality not only in which work is not performed, but also in which it is negated, unraveled, and undone. The sleeper thus occupies a distinct reality of *un-work*, of unworking. In her recent study *Surrealist Sabotage and the War on Work* (2021), Abigail Susik has persuasively traced out the broad spectrum of ways in which surrealism "developed effective and imaginative strategies of resistance against the wage-labour imperative," sabotaging in their art-making and life practices the dominant form of "work" under capitalism, with significant implications not only for the work processes of the artist but also for the work-objects of writing and image production.¹⁵ Susik elaborates, for example, on the resonances between the transcription of automatic writing and secretarial labour during the period. She gives particular attention to the technology of the typewriter and to the primarily female workers associated with it, discussing Simone Breton's role in well-known photographs of the surrealist group and explicating Oscár Domínguez's painting *Machine à coudre électro-sexuelle* (1934–1935), in which a strange, sexually suggestive liquid is pouring onto the back of a supine, partly nude, partly draped female body, likely asleep and possibly herself producing the surrounding imagery through the auto-erotic agency of her sleeping experience. Susik also discusses Man Ray's suggestive posing of a fashion model, wearing a Vionnet evening gown, asleep in Domínguez's plush-lined sculptural object "Brouette" ("Wheelbarrow"). Although the thematics of sleep as such are secondary to Susik's focus on a wide range of surrealist strategies of subverting work, she nevertheless suggests how the surrealists, among other of their modes of sabotaging labour, also drew sleep into an expansive field of artistic work-avoidance.¹⁶

¹⁵ Abigail Susik, *Surrealist Sabotage and the War on Work* (Manchester University Press, 2021), 1.

¹⁶ I allude here to the pathbreaking essay of Helen Molesworth, "Work Avoidance: The Everyday Life of Marcel Duchamp's Readymades," *Art Journal* 57, no. 4 (1998): 50–61. See, also, her exhibition catalogue essay: Helen Molesworth, "Work Ethic," in *Work Ethic* (The Baltimore Museum of Art, 2003), 25–51.

Sleep's deeper reality, however, is not simply the contrary of work—the necessary interval of rest needed to replenish the stock of potential to work the next day and the next—but is rather a temporal domain radically *different* from work-time, work's undoing and disappearance. This is also clearly visible in Breton's characterization of surrealism in his 1931 book, *Communicating Vessels*, explicitly dedicated to the surrealist understanding of the dream. He insists both on the communication between the dream-world and the world of waking reality and on the refusal of activity structured by the social division of labor. The dream, for Breton, is a model of a holistic space of “unwork” and “unworking”:

Surrealism, as many of us had conceived of it for years, should not be considered as extant except in the a priori nonspecialization of its effort. I hope it will be considered as having tried nothing better than to cast a *conduction wire* between the far too distant worlds of waking and sleep, exterior and interior reality, reason and madness, the assurance of knowledge and of love, of life for life and the revolution, and so on.¹⁷

One dimension of the revolution that surrealism envisioned was the proletarian revolution of communism, which, starting with the revolutionary wave of 1917–1919, was to transform waking time as historically determined by the exploitation of labor and the production of commodities as the repository of alienated dead labor. However, surrealism set itself a crucial parallel role in the Rimbaudian imperative to “transform life,” which Benjamin Buchloh tendentiously describes as “a psychoanalytically informed mobilization of the forces of the unconscious to subvert the atrophied libidinal apparatus of the Western European bourgeoisie.”¹⁸ This mobilization included various forces of chance, desire, fantasy, eroticism, and dream, which, as Breton suggests, unfold and find their unity within a temporality that is other than that of wakeful labor—a temporality that might, in an admittedly expansive sense, be called that of “sleeping.”

¹⁷ André Breton, *Communicating Vessels*, trans. Mary Ann Caws and Geoffrey T. Harris (University of Nebraska Press, 1990), 86.

¹⁸ Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, “Hantäi/Villeglé and the Dialectics of Painting's Dispersal,” in *Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry: Essays on European and American Art from 1955 to 1975* (The MIT Press, 2000), 243.

Writing in 1929, Walter Benjamin drew upon Louis Aragon's image of a "wave of dreams" (the title of Aragon's 1924 volume of poems) to suggest a surrealist interpenetration of sleep and waking that constituted a different sort of autonomous production in which images and words were not representations of an external measure of value (metaphorized by a monetary unit, a coin) but their own immanent, self-valuing expressions:

Life seemed worth living only where the threshold between waking and sleeping was worn away in everyone as by the steps of multitudinous images flooding back and forth; language seemed itself only where sound and image, image and sound, interpenetrated with automatic precision and such felicity that no chink was left for the penny-in-the-slot called "meaning." Image and language take precedence. Saint-Pol-Roux, retiring to bed about daybreak, fixes a notice on his door: "Poet at work." Breton notes: "Quietly. I want to pass where no one has yet passed, quietly!—After you, dearest language." Language take precedence.¹⁹

Benjamin would go on in his *Arcades Project* to recast methodologically the Marxist theory of base and superstructure as a historical dialectic of expressive figuration of the economy in the various images of culture. In one note, Benjamin explicitly allegorizes this conceptual framework with the image of a sleeper dreaming on a full stomach:

It seems, at first sight, that Marx wanted to establish here only a causal relation between superstructure and infrastructure. But already the observation that ideologies of the superstructure reflect conditions falsely and invidiously goes beyond this. [...] The superstructure is the expression of the infrastructure. The economic conditions under which society exists are expressed in the superstructure—precisely as, with the sleeper, an overfull stomach finds not its reflection but its expression in the contents of dreams, which, from a causal point of view, it may be said to "condition." The collective, from the first, expresses the conditions of its

¹⁹ Walter Benjamin, "Surrealism," in *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, 1927–1934, trans. Rodney Livingstone et al., ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 208.

life. These find their expression in the dream and their interpretation in the awakening.²⁰

Benjamin, like Breton, displaces the reality structured by labour—and hence also, by labour-time—to the sleep- and dream-time in which labour is expressively “unfolded,” or put otherwise, is “unworked” into cultural figures and forms. “On the differentials of time,” Benjamin writes, “I base my reckoning.”²¹ Benjamin means here not only the differentials between the rhythms of unfolding of the various cultural forms. He also refers to the necessary gap between the time of economic facts (determined by labour) and their expression in culture (which exists in a time more analogous to sleep than work). For Benjamin, economic facts are actualized as temporally distributed “causes” through their deferred action as cultural forms, which unfold at different speeds and with different rhythms. The cultural forms of capitalist modernity, thus, are like dream-thoughts through which economic facts are made socially efficacious.

The Readymade, or in Praise of Idleness

In his pathbreaking essay on Duchamp from 1934, “Marcel Duchamp: Lighthouse of the Bride,” Breton would underscore Duchamp’s use of *delay*, a temporal mode of unworking, to create art of an unprecedentedly “advanced”—read “avant-garde”—character. “In one of the notes forming part of the *Green Box*,” Breton writes,

Marcel Duchamp gave [the *Large Glass*] a “kind of sub-title,” a *Delay in Glass*: “a ‘delay in glass’ as you would say a ‘poem in prose’ or a spittoon in silver.” But this “delay” will continue to be a yardstick by which one may measure everything that artistic routine may still attempt fraudulently to register as an *advance*. It is wonderful to see how perfectly the *Large Glass* keeps intact its powers of anticipation.²²

²⁰ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 392.

²¹ Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 456.

²² André Breton, “Marcel Duchamp: The Lighthouse of the Bride,” in *Surrealism and Painting*, trans. Simon Watson Taylor (Harper and Row, 1972), 99.

In his major essay on Duchamp, despite his primary attention to the *Large Glass*, Breton notes that

For Duchamp, the use of these readymades more or less supplanted any other form of expression from 1914 onwards. It would be of the greatest interest to attempt, one day, to bring to light the full significance of these always utterly unforeseen productions and to analyse the law of progression as it applies to them.²³

He goes on to dedicate two additional pages simply to enumerating an extraordinary number and range of Duchamp's works in the readymade mode, in what is likely, as he himself notes, the first attempt "to catalogue Duchamp's manifold activities."²⁴ What Breton does not make explicit is that both the readymades and the *Large Glass*, characterized by Duchamp as "a delay in glass," involve a deferral of artistic work into a time of suspension, filled and measured by the patience of living, breathing, sleeping, bodily emission, or unintentional events rather acts of labour. Read from this angle, the readymade is not simply the negation of automatism but one of its displacements. Agency migrates from the productive hand to choice, postponement, contingency, and the belated activation of the object by viewers and institutions. The question is less whether Duchamp automatizes making than how the readymade materializes an automatic process at the level of the object.

Such "delays," folds in time registered in the arrested or deferred experience of an identifiable work-object, can also be seen as the compressed pleats of more intensive or extensive dimensions of time, for example, the creative process wrested away from labour and turned towards a "lazy," non-working artistic procedure (which may, of course, appear almost obsessively meticulous in its progressive deferral/manifestation of the work). In his 1966 interviews with Duchamp, Pierre Cabanne asked what had been important to the artist in 1920 and 1921; Duchamp responded:

²³ Breton, "Marcel Duchamp," 91.

²⁴ Breton, "Marcel Duchamp," 93.

Nothing. Yes, my “Glass.” That held me until 1923, the only thing I was interested in, and I even regret not finishing it, but it became so monotonous, it was a transcription, and toward the end there was no invention. So it just fizzled out. I left for Europe in 1923, and when I came back three years later, the “Glass” was broken...²⁵

Yet Duchamp also exhibited a profound passivity towards this breaking of his “fizzled” work, even affirming its brokenness as a heightening of the work’s manifestation of the antithesis of work for Duchamp, the erotic, becoming a seductive lure for the artist’s “love”:

CABANNE: When one sees the “Large Glass,” one doesn’t imagine it intact at all.

DUCHAMP: No. It’s a lot better with the breaks, a hundred times better. It’s the destiny of things.

CABANNE: The intervention of chance that you count on so often.

DUCHAMP: I respect it; I have ended up loving it.²⁶

Such non-working takes place at the edge of boredom, but also withdraws itself, as the Italian autonomist philosopher Maurizio Lazzarato has noted, from work as such, in order to open up an alternative subjective time as a corollary of the deferred destiny of the object in its creation by the artist and manifestation to a spectator:

Duchamp asks us to hold with the refusal itself, with non-movement and demobilization. He invites us to develop and experiment with all the possibilities that “lazy action” creates in order to carry out a reconversion of subjectivity, to invent new techniques of existence and new ways of living time.²⁷

²⁵ Pierre Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, trans. Ron Padgett (Thames and Hudson, 1971), 65.

²⁶ Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, 75–76.

²⁷ Maurizio Lazzarato, *Marcel Duchamp and the Refusal of Work*, trans. Joshua David Jordan (semiotext(e), 2014), 7. Cf., for a complementary treatment of Duchamp, Boris

In a 1956 television interview with James Johnson Sweeney, Duchamp refers to his semi-abandonment of painting in 1913 as a decision to completely separate his art from the necessity of earning a living. Paradoxically, this involved “taking a job,” as a librarian (the same profession of that other great theorist of inutility, Georges Bataille):

I had to make big decisions then. The hardest was when I told myself “Marcel no more painting, go get a job.” I looked for a job in order to get enough time to paint *for myself*. I got a job as a librarian in Paris at the Bibliothèque St. Geneviève. It was a wonderful job because I had so many hours to myself.²⁸

Duchamp explicitly gets a job to free up time to “paint for myself,” that is, to pursue painting without laboring, to engage in art as a mode of “unworking.” (His actual job seems also to have offered periods of solitary idleness not completely distinguishable from his art-time, which also involved solitude and thought as much as it did activity or fabrication.)

As Thierry de Duve has reminded us, Duchamp’s readymades should not be seen as a turn to a kind of “sculpture” following his apparent abandonment of painting, but as an “unworking” of painting itself—that is, painting as manifested through the suspension of work.²⁹ The readymade poses the question of the name of painting itself, placing itself before the viewer as an undecidable either/or about what painting has been, is, and could be. In interviews and statements looking back on the “passage” from painting to readymade that De Duve traces, a passage opened by delaying and deferring the accomplishment of further “works” of painting, Duchamp himself emphasized the relations between painting and the readymade. On the one hand, painting already involved using industrially prefabricated products such as tubes of paint, catalogued and numbered for sale—

Groys, “Marx After Duchamp, or the Artist’s Two Bodies,” in *Going Public* (Sternberg, 2010), 121–34.

²⁸ Marcel Duchamp with James Johnson Sweeney, “Regions which are not ruled by time and space...,” in *Salt Seller: The Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, ed. Michel Sanouillet and Elmer Peterson (Oxford University Press, 1973), 133.

²⁹ Thierry de Duve, *Pictorial Nominalism: On Marcel Duchamp’s Passage from Painting to the Readymade*, trans. Dana Polan (University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 158–63.

which was, indeed, an insight already implicit in Pablo Picasso's use of Ripolin paint and pasted color papers to reintroduce color after the austerity of analytic cubism. On the other hand, for Duchamp, the essential aspect of creative artistry was *choice*, not making:

Why "do"? What is "doing"? Doing something is choosing a tube of blue, a tube of red, putting a little on your palette, and always choosing the amount of blue, the amount of red, and always choosing the place on the canvas where you will put them. It's always choosing. So, to choose, you can use tubes of colors, you can use brushes, but you can also use something already made, which has been made either mechanically or by the hand of another man, if you will, and make it your own. Since it's you who have chosen it.³⁰

The readymade, he suggested, was a suspension of the work of painting in favor of other jobs, which subsequently can be seen to have always been the means by which painting had supported itself, by a dependency upon the heteronomous labour hidden in its readymade implements and elements. As Duchamp stated in 1961,

Since the tubes of paint used by the artist are manufactured and readymade products we must conclude that all the paintings in the world are "readymades aided" and also works of assemblage.³¹

"The Period of Sleeping-Fits"

Returning to Breton, this exploration of the domain of sleep as a space of "unwork" helps to clarify an apparently rather unlikely conjunction that Breton makes between surrealism and the work of Duchamp, who famously remarked to Pierre Cabanne that "I would have wanted to work, but deep down I'm enormously lazy. I like living, breathing, better than working."³² In *Nadja* (1928), Breton

³⁰ Marcel Duchamp with Georges Charbonnier, "Le Choix des Mots et des Objets," in *Entretiens avec Marcel Duchamp* (André Dimanche, 1994), 61.

³¹ Marcel Duchamp, "Apropos of 'Readymades'," in *Salt Seller*, 142.

³² Marcel Duchamp, "I Like Breathing Better than Working," in Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, 72.

connects Duchamp with the poet Robert Desnos, who was a surrealist legend for his fluent production of poetry in a sleep-like trance. Breton writes:

Once again, now, I see Robert Desnos at the period those of us who knew him call the “Nap Period.” He “dozes” but he writes, he talks. It is evening, in my studio over the Cabaret du Ciel. [...] He borrows the personality of the most singular man alive as well as the most elusive, the most deceptive, the author of *Le Cimetière des Uniformes et Livrées*, Marcel Duchamp. Desnos has never seen him in real life. What in Duchamp seemed the most inimitable through some mysterious “plays on words” (Rose Sélavy) can be found in Desnos in all its purity and suddenly assumes an extraordinary resonance.³³

This very odd assumption that Duchamp’s singular personality could also be “borrowed,” as if it were a readymade, may refer to both men’s conjunction of artistic creation with a kind of studied idleness, or what Desnos characterized in his poem, significantly entitled “Couchée” (“Lying Down”), as “le délire de l’inutile” (“the delirium of uselessness”).³⁴

More specifically, Breton is referring in *Nadja* to a set of early, pre-“Surrealist Manifesto” experiments with “hypnotic sleep,” auto-induced trance-states in which the “sleeper” would produce strings of words akin to other productions of automatic writing, drawings, or even whole verse poems, in the case of the aforementioned Desnos. Breton’s canonical remarks on sleep and automatism in the “Manifesto” and in *Nadja*, however, retrospectively codify a much more experimental and anarchic set of text-productions that appear in various handwritten texts and, in a short published exposé, in an issue of Breton’s dadaist journal *Littérature*, accompanying Breton’s essay “Entrée des médiums” (“Entry of the Mediums”).³⁵ It is in this early, transitional almost proto-surrealist moment that we find the particular hinge between Breton’s thoughts on sleeping and

³³ André Breton, *Nadja*, trans. Richard Howard (Grove Press, 1960), 31.

³⁴ Robert Desnos, “Couchée,” trans. Bill Zavatsky, in *The Random House Book of Twentieth-Century French Poetry*, ed. Paul Auster (Vintage Books, 1982), 292–93.

³⁵ André Breton, “Entrée des Médiums,” with accompanying texts by René Crevel, Robert Desnos, and Benjamin Péret, *Littérature* 6, Nouvelle Série (1 November 1922): 1–16.

various Duchampian practices of not-working, most prominently the readymade, but also a more general, lived non-productivity as an extended practice of art.

In the autumn of 1922, Breton had increasingly turned his attention to Duchamp, in parallel with presentation of early surrealist texts exploring hypnotic trance-states, sleep, and dreams. Over the course of a few months, these two streams of Breton's interests—as building-blocks of the coming surrealist program—increasingly converged. A first landmark can be found in *Littérature* in October 1922, which carried Breton's essay "Marcel Duchamp," along with several Duchampian puns attributed to his cross-dressed avatar "Rose Sélavy" and interspersed throughout the issue, as well as the poetic text "Rêves" ("Dreams") by Desnos, who would be a central protagonist in the hypnotic sleep sessions.³⁶ In addition, in the same issue, following his essay on Duchamp, Breton reproduced Man Ray's 1920 photograph of an especially passive phase of the meticulous construction of Duchamp's *Large Glass* (*The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even*), in which Duchamp laid the glass on his studio floor for a year and allowed it to collect dust, after which he carefully wiped away much of it and cemented the rest to a few of its surface forms. The Ray photograph came to be known subsequently as "Dust Breeding" and even was included in Duchamp's portable collection of his works *The Green Box*. In *Littérature*, however, the work is entitled "Vue en Aéroplane" ("Aerial View"). A year later, in a letter to Francis Picabia, Breton includes a "poem" that draws the full lesson of Duchamp's example of artistic unworking. Within a rectangle-box resembling a calling-card, Breton inscribes the lines:

TO RROSE SÉLAVY

"André Breton will write no more"

Journal du peuple—April 1923

I've left my effects

my beautiful snow effects.³⁷

³⁶ André Breton, "Marcel Duchamp," *Littérature* 5, Nouvelle Série (1 October 1922): 7–10; Robert Desnos, "Rêves," *Littérature* 5, Nouvelle Série (1 October 1922): 16; Man Ray and Marcel Duchamp, "Vue Prise en Aéroplane," *Littérature* 5, Nouvelle Série (1 October 1922): 11.

³⁷ André Breton to Francis Picabia, 19 September 1923, "Document no. 157," in Michel Sanouillet, *Dada in Paris*, revised and expanded edn., ed. Anne Sanouillet, trans. Sharmila Ganguly (The MIT Press, 2009), 456.

In his essay “The Entry of the Mediums,” in the November 1922 issue of *Littérature*, Breton recounts how the writer René Crevel, after meeting an English medium on a beach holiday, learned to self-induce a state of hypnotic sleep in which he could produce poetic strings of words apparently welling up from his unconscious and make them available for recording either by “*écriture spontanée*,” a sort of unwilling inscription by the sleeper himself, or in dictation to others such as, in the case of at least a few of Desnos’s texts published from these sessions, Paul Eluard and Max Ernst. Susik has also pointed to the role of Simone Breton in taking dictations from such surrealist “research.”³⁸ Breton notes that Crevel, Desnos, and Péret took the role of sleeper-producers, while others of the surrealist circle were in the position of witness-recorders, including Eluard, Ernst, Max Morise, Francis Picabia, and Breton himself. (Breton also notes that Aragon, Tristan Tzara, and Philippe Soupault were absent from Paris at the time.)³⁹

Crevel would give his own account of this band of early surrealist activity in a retrospective account entitled “The Period of Sleeping-Fits,” published in September 1932 in the “Surrealist number” of the English-language little magazine *This Quarter*.⁴⁰ Crevel presents the “sleeping fit” sessions as, above all, an escalating competition with Desnos, centered on who could achieve a more extreme hypnagogic derangement in front of their friends and fellow surrealists. Crevel writes:

On waking, I am told what I have said. As my talk has not been so bad, I am delighted to learn what it has been from the lips of those who have listened to me, but only because I thus score over Desnos, my mediumistic competitor. Otherwise I should not care.⁴¹

³⁸ See “Main d’Eluard” and “Main d’Ernst” in the text by Robert Desnos, *Littérature* 6, Nouvelle Série (1 November 1922): 12. For Simone Breton, see Susik, *Surrealist Sabotage*, 50ff.

³⁹ Breton, *Entrée des Médiums*, 1.

⁴⁰ René Crevel, “The Period of Sleeping-Fits,” *This Quarter* (Surrealist Number) 5, no. 1 (1932): 181–88.

⁴¹ Crevel, “The Period,” 186.

Despite his apparent irony towards these sleeping-fit experiences, he notes his regrets at having left them behind:

I have never stopped sighing for that time. As a sign of what I must have said, of what I did not hear myself say, I have more and more hated the sound of my voice. But when last week I was led to write these pages, the reading of an old number of *Littérature* containing the only one of my talks of that time which has been preserved, gave me a discomfort queerly spanning the whole intervening decade.⁴²

Desnos for his part—and justifying Breton’s somewhat mysterious mapping of Desnos onto Duchamp in *Nadja*—began to dictate in these sessions in the name of “Rose Sélavy,” in other words, hypnagogically adopting Duchamp’s arch pun-genetrix as the poetic voice of his own sleeping-fit productions. Breton would publish Desnos’s utterances and spontaneous writings under the title “Rose Sélavy” in the December 1922 issue of *Littérature*, including such passages as:

Rose Sélavy demande si les Fleurs du Mal ont modifié les mœurs du
phalle:
qu’en pense Omphale?
Voyageur, portez des plume de paon aux filles de Pampeleune.
La solution d’un sage est-elle la pollution d’un page?⁴³

—which Timothy Adès bravely translates as:

Rose Sélavy asks if Baudelaire’s “The Wicked Blooms” hath unblocked
wombs: what does Molly Bloom think?
Travellers, pamper the Pamplonese fillies with peafowl feathers.
Is the solution of a sage the pollution of a page?⁴⁴

⁴² Crevel, “The Period,” 186.

⁴³ Robert Desnos, “Rose Sélavy,” *Littérature*, Nouvelle Série 7 (1 December 1922), 14.

⁴⁴ Robert Desnos, “Rose Sélavy,” trans. Timothy Adès, in *The Dada Reader: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Dawn Ades (The University of Chicago Press, 2006), 210.

Desnos claimed, in fact, to be literally channeling Duchamp's Rose in his hypnotic sleeping fits. Thus, in a manuscript from one of Desnos's sleep sessions around 24 October 1922, Desnos is recorded as saying: "Marcel Duchamp, several thousand kilometres are not much for a sleep. What do you think of that? Did Rose Sélavy deceive you if I dreamed about it? No, she didn't, so say what you think, Desnos, my dear friend."⁴⁵ The fantasy of telepathic contact matters here less as occult doctrine than as a model of transferred agency. Desnos does not "make" Duchamp; he receives, relays, and ventriloquizes an already-made persona that seems to arrive from elsewhere. In that sense the sleeping-fit offers a striking analogue to the readymade: in each case the decisive operation is not fabrication but the suspension of labor in favor of selection, displacement, and the emergence of meaning through an already existing object, voice, or sign put into circulation.

But the competitive dynamic between Desnos and Crevel also suggests the plausibility of a comment by an unidentified editor on the Atelier André Breton digital website where the text is posted. "It may be observed that the fiction—or hypothesis—," this editor writes,

that Desnos's "sleeping fits" put him in communication with Marcel Duchamp—Rose Sélavy had already been developed by that time, since his friends questioned him about it. It is striking to note how seriously the question is approached and, from the tone of the few sentences noted here, one gets the impression that the surrealists believe in this telepathic operation. The truth is undoubtedly simpler: the desire of Desnos to take centre-stage, taking pride of place—ahead of Éluard, for example—in the eyes of Breton who, as we know, had an unbounded admiration for Duchamp. Having gradually established himself as the group's sole dreamer, Desnos derived from this supposed contact with Duchamp, from this incarnation of Duchamp in himself, a prestige that would last for a few months, until Breton put an end to the experiments.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ "Sleeping Fit of 24 [?] October 1922," <https://www.andrebretton.fr/en/work/-56600100113510>.

⁴⁶ Editor's description, "Sleeping Fit of 24 [?] October 1922," <https://www.andrebretton.fr/en/work/56600100113510>. See, also, on Desnos's adoption of Duchamp's Rose,

Jonathan Crary's account of sleep in his study of late capitalism's war on rest, published nearly a century after the surrealist experiments, helps clarify the broader stakes of such scenes. For Crary, sleep constitutes one of the last remaining "natural barriers" to the full realization of a regime of continuous productivity and consumption. In its "profound uselessness and intrinsic passivity," sleep resists colonization by the logic of 24/7 markets; nothing of value, Crary insists, can be extracted from it.⁴⁷ Moreover, Crary underscores the fundamentally social character of sleep: a set of assumptions about the cohesion of social relations converge around the sleeper, organized by what he calls "the reciprocity between vulnerability and trust, between exposure and care."⁴⁸ The sleeper depends on the safekeeping of others for what Crary describes as "the revivifying carelessness of sleep," a periodic interval of freedom from fear and a temporary forgetting of evil.⁴⁹ Read retrospectively through this lens, the surrealist sleeping-fits appear not simply as private dream-events but as collective experiments in a suspended, nonproductive social time. The witnesses and recorders—Breton, Eluard, Ernst, Simone Breton—were not passive bystanders but active custodians of the sleeper's vulnerability, sustaining conditions of trust and attentive care under which the automatic productions could emerge. In such a setting, Desnos's fantasy of telepathic contact with Duchamp-Rose acquires both its prestige and its peculiar plausibility: the sleeper's relinquishment of intentional agency becomes the very medium through which an absent, "already-made" persona can be received and relayed, much as the readymade itself depends not on fabrication but on the artist's suspension of productive labor and openness to what arrives from elsewhere.

Thus, by the time of Desnos's appearance in *Nadja*, Breton was already looking back several years, having secured the founding principles of the surrealist movement and enforced his will on the shape of the group. In the "Second

Katharine Conley, "Rose Sélavy's Ghosts: Life, Death, and Desnos," *French Review* 83, no. 5 (2010): 964–75; and Katherine Conley, *Robert Desnos, Surrealism, and the Marvelous in Everyday Life* (University of Nebraska Press, 2003).

⁴⁷ Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (Verso, 2013), 10.

⁴⁸ Crary, *24/7*, 28.

⁴⁹ Crary, *24/7*, 28.

Manifesto of Surrealism,” published in 1930, Breton would jettison Desnos definitively from the movement, albeit not without regrets:

Thus it is that, after having allowed him an incredible amount of time to recover from what we hoped was only a temporary abuse of his critical faculties, I believe that we are now forced to say to Robert Desnos that, as we no longer expect anything whatsoever from him, we have no choice but to free him from any commitments he may have made in the past with us. I must confess that it saddens me to some degree to do this. In contrast to the early traveling companions, whom we have never thought of trying to retain, Desnos played an essential, an unforgettable, role in the evolution of Surrealism.⁵⁰

Desnos was thus essential not only for the surrealists’ hypnagogic exploration of sleep’s poetic potentials, but also for the passage he made visible between psychic automatism and a more material, Duchampian mode of unworking. In his telepathic identification with Rose Sélavy, automatism no longer appears as the spontaneous overflow of an interiority alone; it is redistributed across a relay of sleeper, voice, pun, ready-made persona, and finally object.

Seen from this angle, the readymade does not simply stand outside surrealism as an adjacent or alien practice. It offers a rigorous reformulation of automatism at the level of the object: a procedure in which the artist suspends productive labor, selects rather than fabricates, and allows delay, displacement, and contingent reception to do the work of manifestation. What the surrealist sleeping-fits reveal, especially in Desnos’s channeling of Rose Sélavy, is that this reformulation was already latent in the earliest surrealist experiments with automatic production. The sleeper who receives and relays an already-constituted voice or persona enacts in the register of psychic experience the same logic that the readymade enacts in the register of the object: a transfer of agency from fabrication to selection, from intentional making to the contingencies of encounter, delay, and displacement. Automatism and the readymade thus appear not as opposed terms but as two modalities of a single operation of unworking—one routed through the body’s

⁵⁰ André Breton, “Second Manifesto of Surrealism,” in *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, 164–65.

surrender in sleep, the other through the object's extraction from the circuits of instrumental use.

Moreover, Crary's analysis of sleep as a site of collective vulnerability and mutual care adds a dimension that neither the surrealists nor their commentators have fully articulated. If sleep persists as an affront to 24/7 capitalism precisely because it harbors forms of dependency and trust that resist commodification, then the surrealist sleeping-fits were not merely artistic experiments but rehearsals of a social relation inimical to the regimes of productivity that both Breton and Duchamp, in their different ways, refused. The next step would be to trace more fully how this object-based automatism—this readymade logic of unworking—ramifies through surrealist exhibition practices and object-poetics in the 1930s and beyond: through the *objet trouvé* and *objet à fonctionnement symbolique*, through Duchamp's own portable museum, the *Boîte-en-valise*, and through the immersive exhibition environments of the late 1930s and 1940s, in which the gallery space itself was reimagined as a site of encounter, delay, and suspended agency. In all of these developments, Duchamp's seeming idleness can be understood as one of the conditions under which surrealism recognized the readymade as an art of unworking—and, by extension, as a model for rethinking the relationship between artistic production and the rhythms of nonproductive life that sleep, in its obstinate persistence, continues to protect.