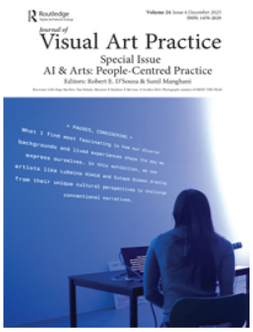

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The web of perception: reinterpreting Duchamp's 'Mile of String' in *First Papers of Surrealism*

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ABSTRACT

In 1942, a group of Surrealist artists led by André Breton—then living in exile following the Nazi occupation of Western Europe—organised the first Surrealist exhibition in the United States. Entitled *First Papers of Surrealism,* the exhibition presented works by more than thirty artists, including objects then categorised as 'primitive art'. Marcel Duchamp's installation was one of the most daring exhibitions of the early 20th century, installing the entire gallery space with his so-called 'Mile of String'. This web-like structure by Duchamp not only gave Breton and the Surrealists a scandalous success that exceeded their expectations but also almost completely wiped out the visibility of some of their works that should have attracted attention. The string in this exhibition has often been discussed as a barrier, as T.J. Demo called it 'the greatest obstacle between the painting and the viewing space'. This essay aims to reassess prevailing interpretations by examining 'Mile of String' as a transparent medium that reconfigured the dynamics of spectatorship. In this light, the discussion situates Duchamp's installation within broader Surrealist exhibition strategies, demonstrating how it invited spectators to engage critically and imaginatively with art beyond conventional dualisms.

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Introduction

In 1942, a group of Surrealist artists led by André Breton – then living in exile following the Nazi occupation of Western Europe – organised the first Surrealist exhibition in the United States. The venue was a grand Italianate mansion in central Manhattan. Entitled *First Papers of Surrealism*, the exhibition presented works by more than thirty artists, including objects then categorised as 'primitive art' (Breton et al. 1942). Marcel Duchamp's installation was one of the most daring exhibitions of the early twentieth century, installing the entire gallery space with his so-called 'Mile of String' (Kachur 2001, 179–181; Figure 1). This web-like structure by Duchamp not only gave Breton and the Surrealists a scandalous success that exceeded their expectations, but also almost completely wiped out the visibility of some of their works that should have

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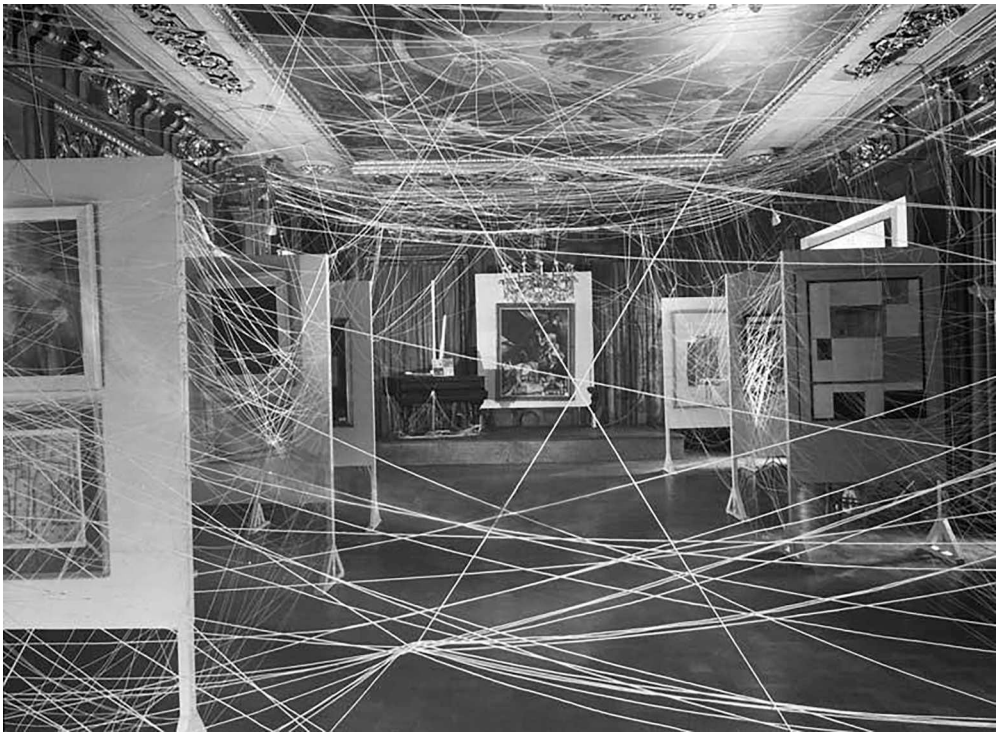

Figure 1. John D. Schiff, Installation view of *First Papers of Surrealism* exhibition, showing Marcel Duchamp's 'Mile of String' (view North), gelatine silver print, 1942. © Leo Baeck Institute.

attracted attention (Hopkins 2014). The string in this exhibition has often been discussed as a barrier, as T.J. Demo called it 'the greatest obstacle between the painting and the viewing space' (Demos 2001, 94).

This paper critically examines the audience reception of Marcel Duchamp's 'Mile of String' at *First Papers of Surrealism*, the first large-scale Surrealist exhibition in the United States. It investigates the extent to which the installation operated as a psychological or physical barrier between viewer and artwork. Although critics have frequently interpreted the string as an act of artistic rejection linked to Duchamp's exile – leaving viewers disoriented or frustrated (94) – this study challenges such readings. It argues that the string did not constitute as significant an obstacle as has often been assumed. Instead, this essay aims to reassess prevailing interpretations by examining 'Mile of String' not as a symbol of obstruction or alienation, but as a transparent medium that reconfigured the dynamics of spectatorship. In this light, the discussion situates Duchamp's installation within broader Surrealist exhibition strategies, demonstrating how it invited spectators to engage critically and imaginatively with art beyond conventional dualisms.

Dadaist foundations and Surrealist innovation

Before delving into Duchamp's installation 'Mile of String' in 1942, it is crucial to understand the historical context of subjective treatment in art exhibitions, particularly during

the 1920s to the 1940s. The early trend of the 1920s was marked by Dadaist exhibits that blended avant-garde art with political protest. The Berlin Dada 'Trade Fair' is a notable example, where placards, wall posters, collages, and paintings converged to proclaim Dada paradoxes and political slogans (Adkins 1988, 157–169). The use of mannequins and unconventional spatial activations in these exhibits foreshadowed Surrealist practices observed later in the 1938 Exposition (Kachur 2001, 6).

El Lissitzky's *Proun Room* in 1923 serves as an early example of extending the architecture of painting into interiors, foreshadowing the development of later constructivist installations (Kachur 2001, 7). While Dadaist exhibition spaces were ephemeral, the concept of 'constructivist installation' gained widespread popularity, becoming a notable trend (see Staniszewski 1998, 61–68). The influence of Surrealism began to manifest itself early through avant-garde group exhibitions at the Pierre Gallery in November 1925 (Gee 2018, 11; "L'EXPOSITION SURRÉALISTE, Galerie Pierre Colle, Paris, 1925", no date). However, the Surrealist movement did not venture into organising its exhibitions until after the collapse of the entente with the Communists (Kachur 2001, 7). The notion of an exhibition serving both as a spectacle and an ideological platform has a shared history in both commercial and fine arts realms. Exhibition spaces, therefore, have often acted as venues where these dual aspects intermingle and compete, reflecting the dynamic interplay between art, ideology, and public engagement (7).

In the summer of 1936, the London Surrealists organised a significant *International Surrealist Exhibition* in collaboration with the Paris group. One participant in the London show noted that 'Breton envisaged England as the stepping stone for World Surrealism' (Agar and Lambirth 1988, 117). In 1938, Marcel Duchamp's installation concept became a focal point at *The Exposition Internationale du Surrealisme* in Paris. Strikingly, he obscured the overhead lighting, covering the ceiling with 1,200 coal sacks, creating a darkened environment that compelled viewers to use the provided electric torches and approach the artworks closely (Cros 2006, 99–100). The floor was covered with 'six inches of sand' and dead leaves, simulating an 'outdoor' setting (Flanner 1938, 56; Marcel 1968, 17). This anti-aesthetic installation was deliberately uncomfortable and disagreeable to many spectators, yet some reviewers saw it as a representation of the interior of the mind, a 'space/cavern of dream' (Kachur 2001, 73).

In October 1942, Duchamp wrote to Man Ray, 'I am taking care of the Surrealist Show which will be nothing like the Paris one' (Duchamp et al. 2000, 231). Nine artists from the 1938 Exposition Internationale, finding themselves in exile around New York, formed the core group of the exhibition titled *First Papers of Surrealism* (Kachur 2001, 166). Duchamp, entrusted with creating a provocative installation, played a similar role to the '1,200 coal sacks', which he had in the first big Surrealist show in Paris four years earlier (Tomkins 2014, 328). The exhibition's name, *First Papers of Surrealism*, echoed the legal papers filed in a citizenship application, emphasising the artists' *émigré* status while leaving room for a potential sequel (Kachur 2001, 166).

For *First Papers of Surrealism*, Duchamp was given the directive to minimise costs and secured sixteen miles of string by reaching out to someone in the cordage business (Tomkins 2014, 328). As Breton's 'twine' (Breton et al. 1942), or better yet, his 'ambience maker', he made an original and inexpensive suggestion (Cros 2006, 102). With assistance from André and Jacqueline Breton, Max Ernst, Alexander Calder, and the young American sculptor David Hare, Duchamp created a large spider's web throughout the

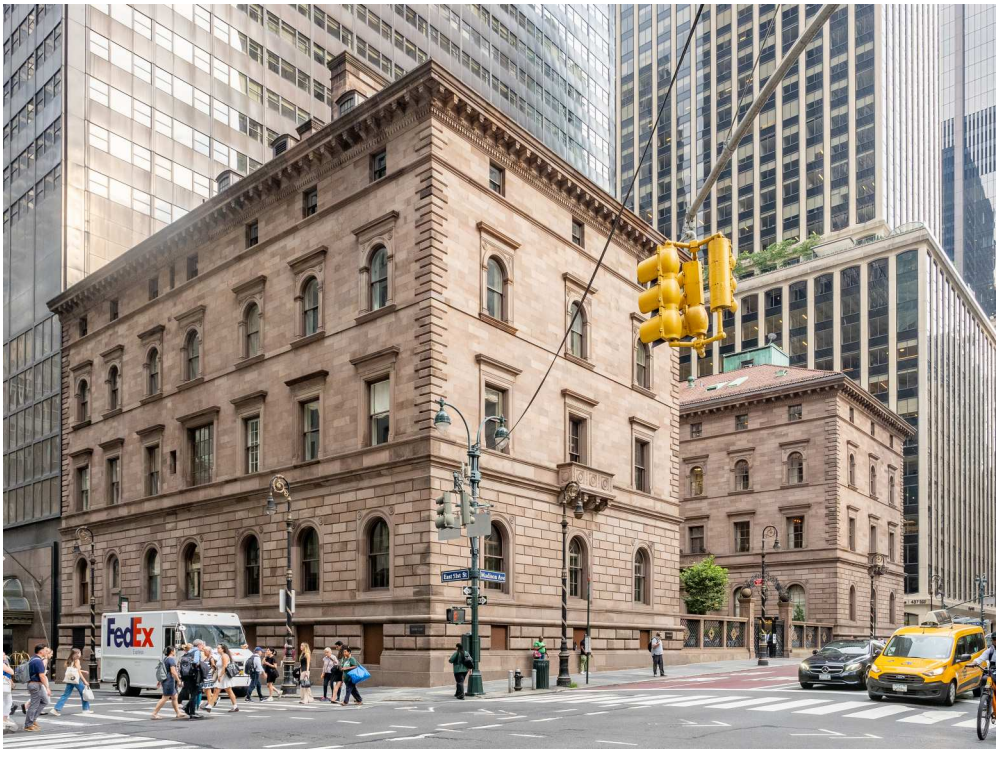

Figure 2. Ajay Suresh, *Manhattan, NYC* (formerly the Whitelaw Reid Mansion), 2024, New York. CC BY 2.0.

rooms of the Reid mansion (Tomkins 2014, 328). The string was wound from chandeliers, mantels, and pillars in crisscrossing patterns, making it challenging to see some of the displayed works. According to Caroline Cros, a curator at the *Musée d'Art Moderne de la ville de Paris*, the dusty atmosphere created by the spider's web installation evoked a sense of death, and the art pieces were partially concealed behind the dense labyrinth of string (Cros 2006, 102). An American art critic for *The New Yorker* magazine, Calvin Tomkins, indicates that 'this intricate installation served as a metaphor, possibly reflecting the often-cited obscurity of modern art' (102).

The Reid mansion's transformation

First Papers of Surrealism was held in the south wing of the mansion, in a second-floor room measuring approximately 54 feet by 25 feet (Vick 2008; Figure 2).[1] All of the windows – two on each end wall and three along the west façade facing Madison Avenue – were covered for the duration of the exhibition (Kachur 2001, 168). Temporary partitions, positioned perpendicular to the nearest wall, reconfigured the gallery space; according to John Vick, there were ten in total (Vick 2008). Into this environment, Duchamp introduced approximately eight kilometres of string, which he extended across the floor, ceiling, chandeliers, mouldings, and partitions (Cros 2006, 102). The string was primarily confined to the ceiling and the gaps between adjacent partitions,

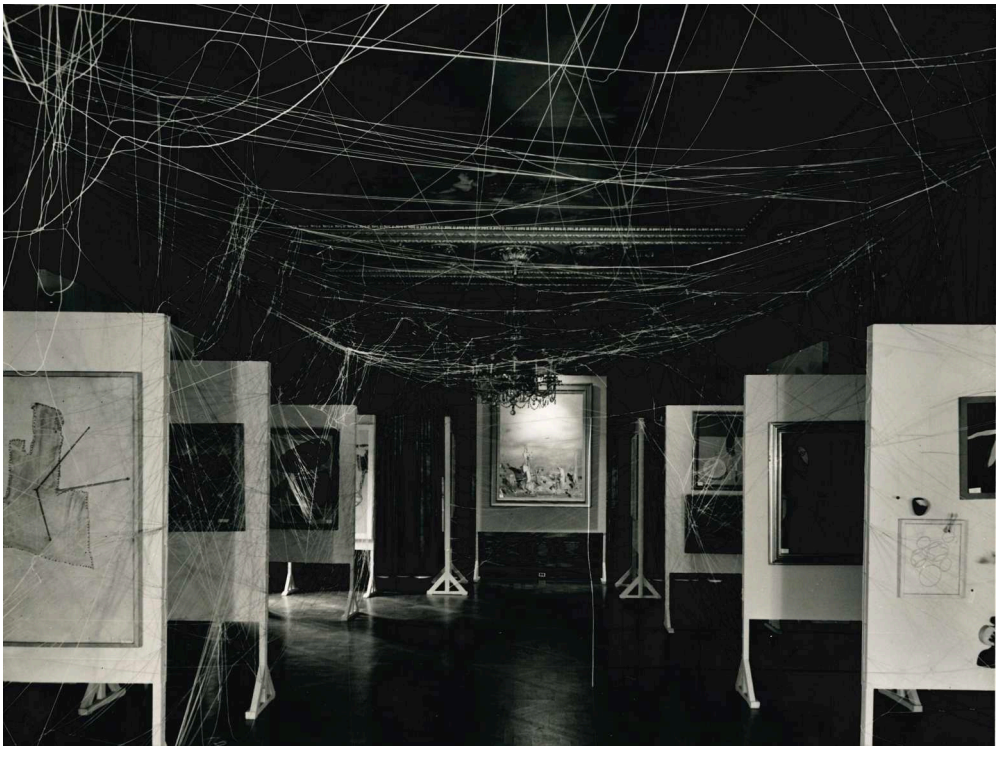

Figure 3. John D. Schiff, Installation view of *First Papers of Surrealism* exhibition, showing Marcel Duchamp's 'Mile of String' (view South), gelatine silver print, 1942. © Leo Baeck Institute.

with one notable exception: the entrance, where the space between two partitions remained free of twine, allowing visitors to pass through. The central gallery space likewise remained unobstructed, enabling free movement within the exhibition (102).

Carroll Janis, the son of Harriet and Sidney Janis and one of the participant children at the opening party, indicated that 'there was free access down the centre of the large room, with "partitioned niches" on either side' (Vick 2008). An analysis of John D. Schiff's photographs of the exhibition shows that there are far fewer obstacles to the paintings in the photographs taken from the south (Figure 3) than from the north (Figure 1). It is highly unlikely that Duchamp made significant use of string on this side. The photo of the north side is revealed to have probably been intentionally exaggerated as a closed space by the photographer. These facts seem to suggest that the spectators were viewing the works through the medium of string while walking willingly, rather than the string limiting the spectator's field of view.

Additionally, the choice of string as the material for the installation was influenced by limited funds. Duchamp mentioned that he received no money from the organisers and obtained the strings through a commercial exchange facilitated by a contact of an almost relative friend (Kachur 2001, 182). Duchamp denied any further intentions, stating that 'it was the just cheapest form of attracting the attention of the public to Surrealistic surroundings. See that is all wanted to do, nothing special' (Janis and Janis 1953, 7–15, 7–17). Although smaller than the 1938 Exposition, Duchamp's installation was not without

significance. Its lightness and simplicity effectively contrasted with the heavy structures and ornate decorations of the Reid House (Kachur 2001, 182).

The exhibition was organised by the Coordinating Council of French Relief Societies. The organisation also declared itself a 'centre for all that French culture has contributed to our civilisation' (Kachur 2001, 171). In addition, the Coordinating Council also avoided overt political posturing (171). The proposal for the exhibition was mediated to the exiled Surrealists by the couturier Elsa Schiaparelli, who was already well known to them for her 1930s fashion connections, particularly as a collaborator with Dali.

Schiaparelli, a fashion designer, launched her first themed collections around the same time as the Surrealists were presenting their image through large international shows (Kachur 2001, 8). Fashion designers closely followed the Surrealists, attending their exhibitions, reporting on the shows in top couture magazines, and incorporating aspects of Surrealism into their designs (see Martin 1987). By the mid-1930s, a major Surrealist exhibition in Paris or New York could set a theme for the fashion season, influencing the displays in department store windows and garnering press coverage. This integration of innovative style and stylishness transcended geographical boundaries and became a significant part of the cultural influence brought by the *émigré* Surrealists to the new world (Kachur 2001, 8). Schiaparelli financed the exhibition but allowed Breton to choose the works.

According to Schiaparelli's recollections, Duchamp was the first person approached by her for something 'completely modern and avant-garde' (Schiaparelli 1954, 168), intending to centralise French culture and art as represented in the United States (166). In other words, Breton was not consulted first, despite his leadership of the Surrealists. Having previously opposed the movement's association with the capitalist fashion industry (Taminiaux 2006, 52–66), Breton may have been considered less approachable, making Duchamp a more likely point of contact. Moreover, during this period in the United States, Duchamp had established a reliable reputation, already surpassing Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse in prominence (Tomkins 1998, 154). Breton, meanwhile, was compelled to compromise his philosophical stance due to his exile and recent internal disagreements within the group.

The venue was not a traditional art space; it was an empty event space operated by a charity. In contrast to the Galerie Beaux-Arts in 1938, the Reid mansion was originally designed as a private residence and not intended for art exhibitions (Kachur 2001, 166). It held historical significance as one of six houses commissioned by Henry Villard in April 1882 for a large lot on Madison Avenue between 50th and 51st streets (166). The mansion, built in Italianate style, was the largest of the Villard houses and was sold to Mrs Mills Reid in November 1886 (166). The Reid mansion completed various interior enhancements, including commissioning artists like John LaFarge for wall paintings (166). The mansion featured coffered ceilings, intricate panelling, and gilding, earning the music room the nickname the 'Gold Room' (166).

The Coordinating Council of French Relief Societies, founded in 1941, established its headquarters at 4 West 58th Street (Kachur 2001, 167). In the spring of 1942, the council arranged to relocate to the vacant Reid residence, made available through the generosity of Mr Ogden Reid. The mansion, located at the corner of Madison Avenue and 50th Street, occupied a strategically convenient site in proximity to major cultural institutions,

including the Museum of Modern Art, the Museum of Non-Objective Painting, and the commercial galleries of 57th Street (168). This context suggests that visitors would have felt little hesitation in entering the exhibition. Moreover, the atmosphere likely differed markedly from that of earlier Surrealist exhibitions in Europe, which were typically more formal, traditional, or politically charged. Within the domestic yet grand setting of the mansion, spectators encountered Duchamp's installation in a way that encouraged a return to childlike wonder, resonating with the original aims of Surrealism (Breton 2010, 3).[2] In this view, the installation could be perceived less as a political statement than as a game-like experience, through which Duchamp redefined 'play' as an authentically avant-garde gesture.

From strings to dreams and playground

In *Le Message Automatique*, published in 1933, Breton wrote that perception and mental representation, or imagination, were once part of an undivided faculty of knowledge and perception, but nowadays it is only seen in primitive people and children; this transcendence of the dualistic theory such as the objective and the subjective, or the active and the passive, he described as a state of grace aspired to by the Surrealists (Mundy 1987, 492–508). From this perspective, Duchamp's 'Mile of String' and his dialogue with Max Ernst in *First Papers of Surrealism* – described at the time as 'a huge new Freudian nightmare' – are particularly significant (Kachur 2001, 186). Ernst created 'Surrealism and Painting' (Figure 4), specifically for the exhibition (186). The canvas depicted a bird's nest spread across a multi-coloured chest, with half-human arms emerging from the naked body, perhaps depicting the concept of a chaotic universe (*Time* 1942, 47). This painting within Ernst's painting is an abstract linear composition that loops and arcs within a given space, similar to Duchamp's physical strings.

Art historian Louis Kachur, in his study *Displaying the Marvellous* (2001, 186–187), implies that Duchamp – having recently relocated to the United States and living with Peggy Guggenheim and her then-husband Ernst – may have encountered and drawn inspiration from Ernst's experimental work. The inclusion of Duchamp's *Network of Stoppages* (1914) in the exhibition, however, complicates this suggestion (Breton et al. 1942). A more complex variation of *3 Standard Stoppages* (The Museum of Modern Art, no date), *Network of Stoppages* replicates the three strings from the earlier work three times and arranges them diagrammatically, overlaying them with colours that alternately reveal and obscure an underlying canvas image. While *3 Standard Stoppages* preserved the chance-determined forms of three one-metre lengths of string dropped from a height of one metre and affixed to canvas, *Network of Stoppages* extends this experiment by embedding contingency within a layered visual system. This practice underscores Duchamp's exploration of thread as a medium for articulating 'the dominant state of a given moment' during the years 1913–1914 (Noland 2013, 93). The approach also resonates with his installation 'Mile of String', which may be regarded as a three-dimensional elaboration of the principles explored in *Network of Stoppages*. Taken together, these connections suggest that, rather than Duchamp adopting Ernst's innovations, Ernst may have been attuned to Duchamp's string-based strategies and developed works that engaged with their conceptual framework.

As a result, in the *Newsweek* article, the critic cited Ernst as the 'central canvas', enhancing the connection by recreating it on the spot 'as seen through the actual strings'

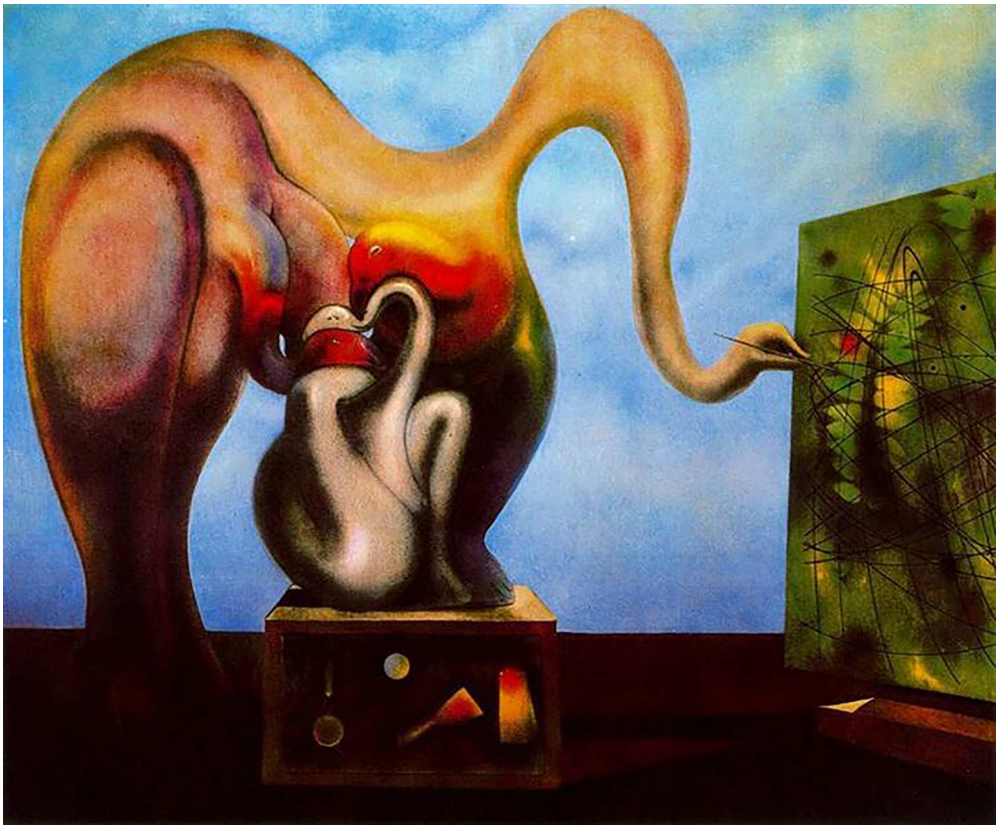

Figure 4. Max Ernst, *Surrealism and Painting (Le Surréalisme et la peinture)*, oil on canvas, 1942. © Max Ernst.

(*Newsweek* 1942, 76; Figure 5). This recorded spectator's experience review suggests that Duchamp's strings have fused with the world within Ernst's paintings, becoming something like an alter ego. Although the installation was site-specific and destined to vanish once the exhibition concluded, this transient moment of convergence created a uniquely conducive environment for spectators of *Surrealism and Painting*. The convergence of Duchamp's strings with Ernst's painted forms thus generated a dialogue that transcended the aura and dualism of the individual works (Peim 2007, 363–380), offering spectators a vivid enactment of Surrealism's quest for new modes of perception beyond the opposition of subject and object.

On the other hand, the opening party entitled *Vernissage consacré aux enfants jouant, à l'odeur du cèdre* (Opening consecrated to the play of children accompanied by the odour of cedar) (Breton et al. 1942) was exceptionally unusual and took on a slightly different interpretation compared to the normal exhibition period. Duchamp requested a group of children, including the dealer Sidney Janis's son Carroll Janis, to gather around at the Reid mansion at 8 pm and play during the opening reception (Cros 2006, 103). Wealthy art patrons and New York's cultural elite milled about, trying to peer through the spider-web in which they were caught, while throngs of children wandered in and out. This group of children included six boys dressed in baseball, basketball, and football

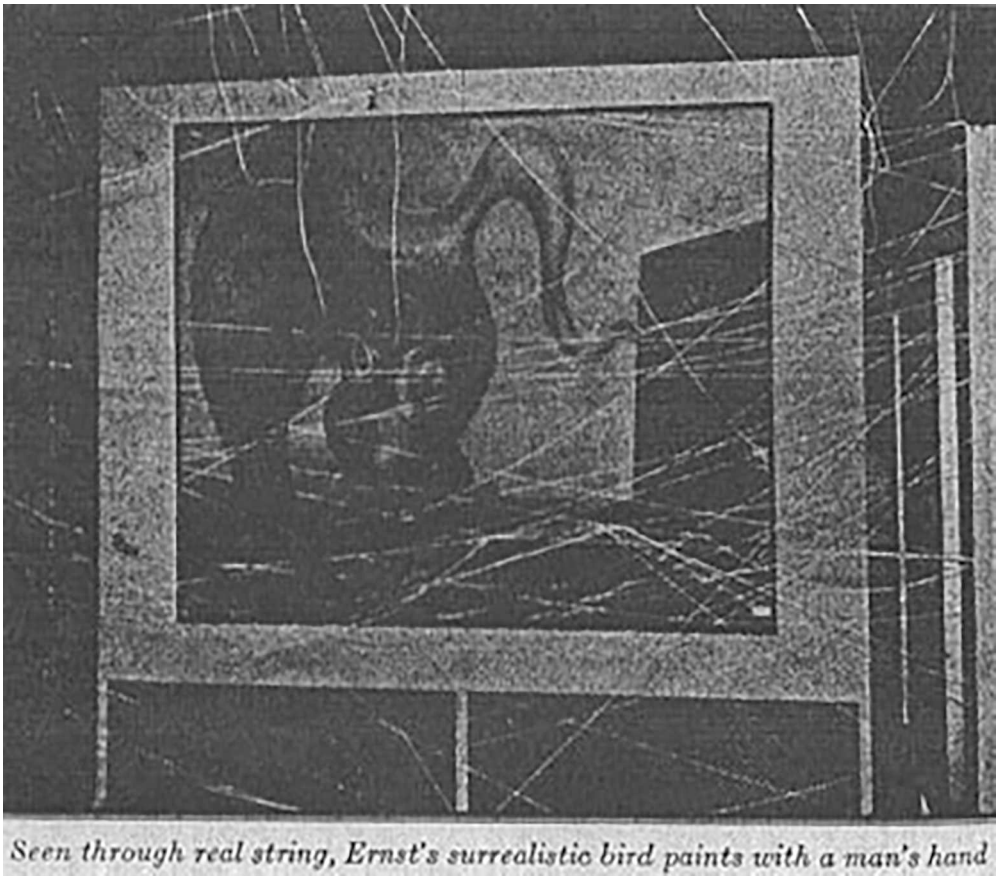

Figure 5. Max Ernst, *Surrealism and Painting behind twine* at *First Papers of Surrealism*, *Newsweek*, 26 October 1942. © *Newsweek*.

costumes and throwing balls at each other, and six girls playing skip games, jacks, and hopscotch (Hopkins 2014). Duchamp was absent from the opening as usual (Cros 2006, 103).

One of the children recalled this enjoyable game: 'we were encouraged to run about, and I remember feeling somewhat uncomfortable, both because I didn't think it was proper behaviour and also because I sensed that some of the guests were of the same opinion' (Cros 2006, 103). They were under strict orders from Duchamp to continue playing throughout the event (Hopkins 2014). In addition, he also instructed the children that if they were chastised for their playful behaviour, they should explain that they were playing on behalf of Duchamp himself (Cros 2006, 103). The play continued throughout the evening, from the youth's early arrival: 'we had all the huge rooms to ourselves and we started throwing balls. Just kept on through the whole evening, and it got so crowded and we kept playing. Our instructions were to ignore everybody and just play to our heart's content. We just loved it' (Kachur 2001, 196). By one account, eventually, quite a few of the adult guests participated in the play (Blesh 1956, 201).

The game played at this opening became subversive as children invaded the orderly world of adults, especially the well-educated and wealthy, creating an atmosphere of

chaos despite the rules. 'Destructive' behaviour often recalls the Dadaists of the 1920s, but the direction is likely to be slightly different. Early Dadaist action linked the reification of the body with a grotesque regression to an animalistic order, portraying the military subjects of World War I as enslaved to base impulses and devoid of higher rationality, parodied as a beast (Demos 2012, 178). Nevertheless, Duchamp had no involvement in the formative live performances of the Dada era (Kachur 2001, 88).

The tendency of Duchamp's installations to date has often been to involve disfiguring a mass of objects, rendering them indistinguishable or transforming them into a series of unconventional items (Demos 2012, 178). As an instance from the International Surrealist Exhibition of 1938, dance was incorporated into the opening event, with Hélène Vanel[3] providing a performance in the room filled with 1,200 coal sacks (Kachur 2001, 86). Her performance, described as a 'more sincere than talented potpourri of mime and dance', involved dramatic movements, including splashing in a small pool surrounded by reeds and leaping on an adjacent bed (86). This unconventional presentation resulted in the wetting and muddying of the fancy evening clothes of the audience (88). Such events can be connected to a Surrealist 'happening', blurring the boundaries between art and life (88).

Duchamp regarded play as an inherently rule-bound activity, a perspective consistent with his lifelong passion for chess (Naumann, Bailey, and Shahade 2009). An illustrative example of this concept of 'play' is found in the unfinished 1943 film *The Witch's Cradle*, directed by the emerging filmmaker Maya Deren and inspired by Duchamp's 'Mile of String' (Keller 2013, 89). Within the film, string functions as a recurring and distinctly dominant and playful motif, most notably in the scene where Duchamp is strangled and in the sequence where he manipulates a cat's cradle (Cimmino 2011). Much like the taut strings in 'Mile of String', which both constrain and guide the viewer's movements, Deren's deployment of string oscillates between evoking the innocence of childhood play and intimating the latent threat of violent strangulation. Similarly, the interplay of innocence and tension in the children playing at the exhibition's opening mirrors this dynamic, suggesting that Duchamp's understanding of play – as simultaneously structured and potentially unsettling – shapes both artistic practice and spectator experience.

Matthew Gale, an independent art historian and curator, suggests that dreams offer an accessible and relatively safe avenue into alternative modes of perception, providing glimpses of a world beyond the ordinary (Gale 1997, 219). The Surrealists, in particular, valued the undifferentiated imagination of childhood as a counterbalance to the constraints of rational adulthood (219). They were pioneers in recognising the creative worth of writings and drawings produced outside conventional societal norms, frequently featuring such works in their periodicals (219). Although often associated with Dadaism, Duchamp played a significant role within Surrealism during this period. He collaborated closely with the Surrealist group, was the sole artist on the editorial board of their publication *Minotaure* and held a similarly influential position in their exhibitions (Kachur 2001, 8). By transforming the gallery into a temporary playground and engaging viewers in playful interactions, Duchamp exemplified a central Surrealist strategy: rendering the familiar unfamiliar, thereby revealing the latent poetic and perceptual possibilities inherent in everyday objects and experiences.

Duchamp's critique of glory and materialism

Regarding the war, Duchamp remarked in *The Literary Digest* article 'The European Art Invasion' issued 27 November 1915: 'From a psychological standpoint I find the spectacle of war very impressive. The instinct which sends men marching out to cut down other men is an instinct worthy of careful scrutiny. What an absurd thing such a conception of patriotism is! … Personally I must say I admire the attitude of combatting invasion with folded arms' (*The Literary Digest* 1915, 3). His statement had a confident and sarcastic tone, and it was made in American English, not his native language.

Duchamp's experience in New York was marked by a sense of freedom and a fondness for the city. He appreciated the open friendliness of the women he encountered and felt a natural sympathy for the women's suffrage movement, which was gaining momentum at the time (Tomkins 1998, 153). Duchamp admired the uninhibited behaviour and the clean, athletic look of the 'new women' advocating for the right to vote (153). Notably, he held a perspective uncommon for many of his contemporaries, as he did not subscribe to the belief in the natural superiority of men (153). Duchamp perceived America as a place where the cultural past or historical legacy did not hold the same weight as in Europe. He noted that in Europe, young men often acted as if they were the grandsons of some great figure from the past, such as Victor Hugo in France or Shakespeare in England (153). This sense of cultural heritage and tradition likely influenced their creative endeavours. However, Duchamp observed that in the United States, this type of historical burden or traditionalism was less prevalent (153). As a result, he saw this country as a fertile ground for new and innovative developments, free from the constraints of deep-rooted cultural expectations.

Duchamp also harboured a strong conviction that the formal doctrines constructed by certain artists, like Albert Gleizes and the principles surrounding Cubism, were stifling and restrictive (153). He found these doctrines to be as limiting as the regulations imposed by traditional institutions like the *Académie des Beaux-Arts*. Since his time in Munich, Duchamp's overarching ambition had been to create a new form of artistic expression completely detached from 'retinal' painting, Cubist theories, or any other established artistic methodologies (153–154). He sought to discover something entirely unprecedented, and he believed that New York, with its vibrant and unconventional spirit, provided the ideal environment for such creative exploration. However, Duchamp refrained from discussing his work extensively. He maintained a steadfast commitment to avoiding 'an artist's life in search of glory and money' (154). When Duchamp first arrived in the United States in 1915, he chose not to produce new paintings but instead supported himself by giving French lessons (*The New Yorker* 1996).

Duchamp's view on the role of the spectator in interpreting art is evident in his statement during the interview with Pierre Cabanne, towards the end of his life in his studio at Neuilly (near Paris), where he and his wife lived during the six months they spent in France each year (Cabanne 2009, 7). He believed that the artist might be unaware of the real significance of their work, and it is the spectator's participation that completes the creation through interpretation (69). Duchamp emphasised the importance of acknowledgement and visibility, suggesting that even a genius creating extraordinary works in isolation would not truly exist without someone witnessing and

acknowledging their creations. In other words, he placed strong emphasis on the notion of the artist as a 'medium' (70). The recognition granted by the spectator completes the cycle of artistic creation, ultimately shaping the artist's position in posterity. This perspective underscores the interactive and evolving character of art, in which observation and interpretation constitute essential components of the artistic experience.

The final analysis

Duchamp's installations consistently repeat the concept of allowing the viewing experience to be mediated in some way, as in the Guggenheim's gallery exhibitions of the same period, which were exhibited through the peephole of a spider-web-like device (Kachur 2001, 200–202). *First Papers of Surrealism* is no exception. As spectators become accustomed to 'Mile of String's environment, they realise that the relationship between the three elements: gallery space, works, and installations is not a one-sided competition, but a fluid partnership. Returning to the basics of surrealism, Duchamp showed that play and gaming are the authenticity of the avant-garde. In fact, Duchamp could be regarded as the 'inventor' of the disorienting and obstructionist staging that characterises late Surrealist exhibition design (8). Additionally, his collaboration with Breton showcased his usefulness to the Surrealists. Duchamp's diplomatic approach in working with Breton helped manage the latter's inclination to control the artists (8), resulting in a curatorial partnership that remained active, albeit sporadically, until their respective deaths in the 1960s.

Duchamp's approach to exhibition design involves seemingly simple gestures that unfold into complex associations and thorny issues. One notable aspect is the resistance to perambulation, creating frustration for the spectator and a reinterpretation of the basic function of an exhibition space (Kachur 2001, 182–183). Although the dense web of strings covering partitions, Duchamp allows the optical function of the eye to persist. Even within the intricate webbing, spectators can still clearly peer through to view the pictures in the aisle. Duchamp's intention appears to be a deliberate separation of the bodily experience of the spectator from the optical one.

Duchamp's use of string in his installations was a deliberate artistic choice that extended beyond mere financial considerations. String is one of the few materials that can physically intervene in the viewer's space while remaining optically transparent, allowing simultaneous obstruction and visibility. Its symbolic resonance is equally significant: the allusion to Ariadne's thread, which guided Theseus through the labyrinth of the Minotaur, imbues Duchamp's work with metaphorical and potentially metaphysical dimensions (Sawin 1995, 227). The Surrealists, attuned to such mythic references, may have recognised in this web of lines profound conceptual implications. Breton's explicit rejection of Alexander Calder's paper birds introduced into the web further underscores the importance of maintaining the thread's symbolic and structural integrity (227). Duchamp's collaboration with others in the stringing process can similarly be read as a deliberate subversion of conventional authorship: like Ariadne's thread, 'Mile of String' functions as a guide, yet it relies on the active engagement of multiple participants, thereby destabilising the notion of solitary artistic control (Kachur 2001, 183). In doing

so, Duchamp foregrounds the roles of both artist and audience in the creative process. As he contends in *The Creative Act* (Duchamp, Peterson, and Sanouillet 1975, 138–140), the artist is not a medium who unilaterally directs the viewer through a metaphysical labyrinth; rather, creation is completed in the interplay between artwork and audience, as the latter interprets and engages with the work's internal structures, bringing it into contact with the broader world.

Duchamp experienced some of the most extreme and turbulent conditions of his life between 1940 and 1942. Yet it is unlikely that his use of divisions arose from desperation due to war or exile, as he himself noted his lack of patriotism (Cabanne 2009, 85). By selecting a material that permitted light to pass through rather than obstructing view, Duchamp's installation served to unify otherwise disparate works while simultaneously eliciting a range of associations in the spectator. Duchamp underlined his string installations in an interview in 1953: 'It was nothing. You can always see through a window, through a curtain, thick or not thick, you can always see through if you want to, same thing there' (Janis 2022). Through his creative act, Duchamp did not want to impose a new revolutionary theory or personal emotion but rather suggested an attitude of mind (Cabanne 2009, 7). Therefore, 'Mile of String' was not a closed obstacle but a transparent medium that allowed the spectators to freely appreciate the artistic space on an equal footing with the works, and became an entry point for imagination that transcended dualism.

Notes

1. The floor plan was drafted by Vick John, according to measurements taken at the gallery. The placement of the partitions and the stage has been determined as accurately as possible, based on the photographs by Schiff and Newman.
2. André Breton stated in the First Manifesto of Surrealism, 'Each morning, children set off without concern. Everything is near, the worst material circumstances are fine. The woods are black or white, one will never need to sleep again.'
3. Hélène Vanel was a dancer, sculptor, and painter affiliated with the Surrealist movement of the twentieth century.

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