

VISUAL STUDIES RESEARCH INSTITUTE

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SPRING 2023 EVENTS

USC-LACMA History of Photography Seminar



TUESDAY, MARCH 7

6-7:30pm PST

SOS 250

Works in Progress:
Surrealism Writes the News

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In 1931, assessing the field-defining exhibition *Fotomontage*, mounted at Berlin's Kunstgewerbemuseum, critic Curt Glaser observed that in France "the concept [of photomontage] is virtually unknown." While the statement was far too broad to be accurate, certainly surrealism, the most prominent literary, artistic, and philosophical avant-garde operating in Paris at the time, came late to the medium. Yet at around 1930, a sudden and concerted effort to develop an "official" photomontage technique rose within the surrealist movement, and by March of 1931, a set of 33 highly illusionistic, collaborative photomontages appeared at the hands of André Breton, Paul Eluard and Suzanne Muzard. A number of events converged on the moment to prompt such an effort – the Kunstgewerbemuseum snub, of course; the appearance of Max Ernst's first collage-novel, *La Femme cent têtes* and the subsequent publication of Louis Aragon's politically inflected essay on montage technique, *La Peinture au défi* (1930); and significantly, the surrealists' efforts to shoehorn their life-philosophy into the Communist Party of France. But an equally compelling impetus for surrealist experimentation with cut-and-paste photomontage was the emergence of high-quality photographic reproductions in the French illustrated press, and the development of dynamic montage-based layouts that framed the picture news for a public consumption. Plainly put: in order to have photomontage, you have to have something to cut.

That "something," for the surrealists, was the weekly magazine *VU*. The most innovative of the French illustrated press at the time, *VU* was styled after newsreels as a "beautiful film" in magazine form, operating under the premise that the juxtaposition and interaction of images was the most effective way to simultaneously transmit the content, structure, and pace of the international news to its readership. For surrealism, a movement already committed to an aesthetics of juxtaposition in text and image, *VU* functioned as a virtual site of encounter that affirmed the group's central formal model even as it offered a field of historical representation from which they could carve their specialized version of lived reality, writing the world as surrealist experience.

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