

# What is This Nonsense?

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on the political in visual art with basis in surrealism  
and pataphysics

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# Table of Content

1. Introduction	9
1.2 Method	13
1.3 Concepts	14
2. NONSENSE	17
2.1 How nonsense works	20
2.1.1 The use versus the function of nonsense	23
2.1.2 Interpreting nonsense	25
2.1.3 The exaggeration and the paradox	27
2.2 Surrealism and nonsensical strategies	29
2.2.1 Surrealist philosophy	30
2.2.2 Nonsensical surrealism	32
2.3 'Pataphysics, visual art and nonsense	35
2.3.1 Pataphysical art	37
2.3.2 Duchamp and pataphysics	42
2.3.3 A pataphysical life	45
2.3.4 The pataphor	47
3. SEEING THE WORLD ANEW	49
3.1 The political in surrealism	51
3.1.1 The revolution of the mind	54
3.1.2 Surrealist anti-capitalism	56
3.1.3 Surrealist difficulties of engagement	57
3.2 Pataphysics as political nonsense	60
3.2.1 The antimony and the anomaly	63
3.2.2 Clinamen and syzygy	64
3.2.3 The absolute and the principle of equivalence	67
3.3 Contemporary political nonsense	70
3.3.1 Fundamentals of the national economy	71
3.3.2 Island within an island	73
3.3.3 Fruitplay	75
3.3.4 Suomen paviljonki/Finnish pavilion	76

4. DISORIENTATION	81
4.1 Strategies for disorientation	83
4.2 Learning as a puzzle	85
4.3 The subjective in research and learning	89
4.4 Learning in the liminality of nonsense	93
4.5 Intellectual emancipation	94
5. Conclusion	97
Sources	105







# 1. Introduction



Outside the Serpentine Gallery in Hyde Park, London, there are two stones on top of each other. It looks like the stone on top could fall over and crush someone at any moment. The stones are in fact the artwork *A Rock on Top of Another Rock* (2010/13) by Peter Fischli (1952) and David Weiss (1946-2012). A rather nonsensical artwork don't you think? The title is redundant; it is obviously a rock on top of another rock. There is no evidence of artistic talent, or implication of anything else than the rocks. This kind of artwork has perhaps caused phrases such as "I don't understand contemporary art" or "Contemporary art doesn't make sense" that I kept running into as a student of art history. Such questions were a reason I first got interested in mediating art.

While studying curating and mediating art I came to understand that apolitical art is not my cup of tea; For art to be interesting to me, it needs a strong connection to society and a deeper meaning than just being pretty to look at. Where is then the political in art people do not seem to understand? How is it possible to convey something political in visual art, that is not propaganda? On a broader scale, is everything political, and is all contemporary art nonsense? To research this, I came up with my main research question: "Where is the political in nonsensical art?", followed by "How can I mediate the political in the nonsensical?".

The avant-garde movements from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century are excellent bases for the political in nonsensical art. Of all the avant-garde movements, the surrealists, with André Breton (1896-1966) in the lead, were the ones in Europe to combine a social struggle with poetry and visual art in a nonsensical way. The idea of combining the conscious and the unconscious to one surreality,

and the importance of chance in their work, gave it that nonsensical feature of elements that do not fit together in any conventional way.

During my studies I was introduced to a rather obscure philosophy, or conception of life, called 'pataphysics'.<sup>1</sup> Pataphysics seemed nonsensical at first, but the more I learned about it, the more I recognised this attitude to life in myself and my surroundings. 'Pataphysics defines itself as a science, but there really is no one true definition, but at least as many as there is practitioners. The most common definition however, is that written by the person who coined the concept, Alfred Jarry (1883-1907). In short, he defined 'pataphysics as the science of imaginary solutions'.<sup>2</sup>

In order to find an answer to my question I have to define nonsense, and particularly nonsense in visual arts. I realize that an artist might be offended if one were to call their art nonsensical. However, nonsense is not something to be thoughtlessly dismissed. Nonsense is a grey area where invisible structures and hierarchies loom; It is allowed to transcend social conventions, turning them on their head, making suspect that which we take for granted. Nonsense is a loose concept, dependent on its context, that is nevertheless present both in surrealism and pataphysics.

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1 The observant notices the apostrophe before the word pataphysics, you will notice that it is sometimes used and sometimes not. According to the official statement of the College of Pataphysics the apostrophe is only to be used when referring "substantially and in conformity with the texts of Jarry" (Sandomir, 1965, quoted in Hugill, 2012, p. 8) I will use it according to the College's convention.

2 Hugill, 2012, p. 3 & Jarry, 1965 [1911], p. 193.

## 1.2 Method

In the research I apply theory of concepts to analyse and discuss nonsense, pataphysics and surrealism. Classical theory of concepts suggests that concepts have logical constitutions, which are compilations of concepts that are related to the analysed concept through deduction. For example, the concept of art belongs to a logical constitution of the concept of a painting, in part because the concept of a painting implies it is art. Evidently, also other things can be art than paintings, and paintings are not necessarily art. Classical analysis of concepts is a suggestion that determines such a logical constitution, by determining necessary and sufficient conditions.<sup>3</sup> I define the concept of nonsense, in relation to surrealism and pataphysics, to find functions and strategies of nonsense.

Further, the concepts of nonsense and pataphysics are examined as strategies for expressing the political in visual art. I compare nonsensical and pataphysical strategies, with surrealism as a historical basis, in order to recognise these strategies in political contemporary art.

As examples I will discuss Esa Meltaus' (1961) installation *Fundamentals of the National Economy* (2012), Kimmo Modig's (1981) and Jaakko Pallasvuo's (1987) *Suomen Paviljonki/Finnish Pavilion* (2013), Tuuli Mukka's (1966) *Hedelmäpeli* (2013) and Gabriel Orozco's (1962) *Island within an Island* (1993). The artworks are chosen because of their apparent nonsensical features, instead of any connection to surrealism or pataphysics. Except for *Suomen Paviljonki/Finnish Pavilion* which I recognised as pataphysical art the moment I saw it. Neither do I analyse the artworks by any art histor-

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.iep.utm.edu/concepts/> and <http://www.iep.utm.edu/conc-cl/> accessed on 27.10.2014.

ical standards, rather I present them as examples of artworks where nonsensical strategies have been used in political contemporary art.

### 1.3 Concepts

The concepts of nonsense and pataphysics that I am using are concepts normally used in written language. Nonsense is a literal term, and pataphysics is a science first described in fiction, but found and practised in most areas of life. The College of Pataphysics was founded in 1948 and have since then published journals and scientific articles on all important and serious problems, except during the occultation lasting between the years 1975 and 2000 the publications circulated among members alone.<sup>4</sup>

The surrealists where largely occupied with poetry and writing as well, though there are several famous visual artists. Nevertheless, I am researching the nonsensical and pataphysical features in visual art. Semiotics is an other concept used in comparative literature that has been applied to art. The concepts of nonsense and pataphysics are equally applicable. Further we need words in order to talk about art; nonsensical and pataphysical are words I find relevant for visual art.

There are still active surrealists all over the world. Surrealism is in no way a dead movement. However, my understanding of surrealism is based in the francophone world, mostly on Breton's own writings, Helena Lewis' *Dada Turns Red: the politics of surrealism* (1990), Ferdinand Alquié's *Philosophy of Surrealism* originally printed in French in 1955 and translated to English in 1965, as well as the

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<sup>4</sup> [http://www.college-de-pataphysique.fr/presentation\\_en.html](http://www.college-de-pataphysique.fr/presentation_en.html) accessed on 21.10.2012.

Finnish Timo Kaitaro's *Runo, Raivo Rakkaus: johdatus surrealismin* (2001).

'Pataphysics also has its roots in France, but has since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century spread worldwide. I discuss pataphysics with basis in Andrew Hugill's *'Pataphysics, a useless guide* (2012), and Jarry's own writings.

In art there really is no nonsense genre, luckily, since nonsense or nonsensical art is not a genre and should not be considered one. Nonsense is in constant flux and changes according to contexts and parameters, which means that nonsense in a certain situation might not be nonsensical at all in an other. Nevertheless, nonsense is definable, and my definition of nonsense is based on Susan Stewart's *Nonsense, aspects of intertextuality in folklore and literature* (1978) and Marlene Dolitsky's *Under The Tumtum Tree : From Nonsense To Sense, A Study In Non-Automatic Comprehension* (1984).

In the first chapter I shall first define nonsense, and discuss how nonsense works in a social context and in visual arts, as well as nonsense in surrealism and pataphysics. The second chapter discusses the political in nonsensical art, with basis in surrealism and 'pataphysics, and draws parallels to contemporary artistic practices. Where the third chapter seeks out surrealist and pataphysical strategies to create disorientation, and then disorientation and nonsense as educational, as well as emancipating strategies, in relation to mediating art.





## 2. NONSENSE



The abstraction of visual arts that started with the modern art movements in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century has taken art in many different directions. Art has never been as diverse as it is today. This has spawned general questions such as “What is art?” and “Is it art?”, as well as more particular questions about the essence of art: “What makes art art?”, “What is the role of art?”. Exclaims like “Anything can be art today!” or “My three-year-old daughter could have done that!” have echoed throughout the exhibition halls. It has become increasingly difficult to translate works of art into spoken or written language. Which has been frustrating for some art researchers, and intriguing for others.

I think that too many regard most of the contemporary art as nonsense. Many would perhaps see contemporary art as nonsensical where I would not. Some might say that all abstract paintings are nonsensical, because there are no forms or anything else that makes sense in the paintings, others would say that a performance is nonsensical, because they did not understand what was going on.

To me, it is important that a nonsensical artwork has elements in it that make sense on their own in another context. It is only when elements are combined with other elements, or placed in such

### **Nonsensical**

Nonsense is combining objects, words, visual elements, that make complete sense on their own, with other unassociated objects, so that together they make no sense. *Nonsensical* is the adjective of nonsense, something that is lacking intelligible meaning, not seldom with strikes of absurdity and humour; The nonsensical becomes funny because of its absurdity, but it can also be unsettling and uncomfortable.

a way, that they no longer make sense as they originally did, that they become nonsense. Therefore an abstract painting cannot be nonsensical, as it has no recognisable forms. Performances however can be very nonsensical in their presentation. There is a difference here between a nonsensical work of art, and an artwork that does not make sense. Surely, one can dismiss art as nonsense, but is that not an act of haste? A refusal to encounter the artwork? If that is the case, it is only nonsense because one does not even try to make sense of it, to understand it.

Susan Stewart writes “...nonsense depends upon an assumption of sense. Without sense, there is no nonsense.”<sup>5</sup> That is, sense and nonsense are interdependent. Of course, as most things, nonsense and common sense are not two sides of one coin, the world is not black and white, but the bounds between the two concepts are fluid. According to Maria Dolitsky there is sense in nonsense, but it is of a different structure than common sense.<sup>6</sup> It is this structure and how it appears in visual art, that I am going to examine further.

This chapter describes how nonsense works and what makes an artwork nonsensical. However, I am more concerned with what nonsense *does* rather than what it *is*. Further it examines nonsensical strategies in surrealism and pataphysics, drawing parallels between the three concepts.

## 2.1 How nonsense works

Nonsense is originally a literary term used in comparative literature. Similarly to semiotics it can be applied on art, in an attempt to describe and talk about it. All works of art are inevitably objects of

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<sup>5</sup> Stewart, 1978, p. 4.

<sup>6</sup> Dolitsky, 1984, p. 8.

interpretation. In order to explain our interpretation, and discuss what we see and/or hear, we need a vocabulary. Nonsense is a term that comes in handy when talking about art; Not in the sense of disregarding art as nonsense, but when thinking about how artworks are put together and how they work in a social context. Stewart writes that she is “interested in social events as texts and texts as social events”.<sup>7</sup> For me, the word *texts* is interchangeable with the word *art* in this sentence – social events as art and art as social events.

Most uses of nonsense in art, as in the discourse of everyday life, have to do with classifications. Nonsense is that which does not fit into these classifications. It should not be there, and there is no reason for it to be there. It is irrelevant to context, and vice versa. The use of nonsense is therefore appropriate in discourse only for those who are socially deviant or limited: the mad, the senile, the infant, the incessantly childish.<sup>8</sup> Children’s rhymes are often play with words, syllables or sounds; Asking the same thing over and over again, becomes otiose; A dialogue where two people talk about two different topics is nonsensical. In visual art, however, the use of nonsense is not limited only to the mad or incessantly childish, rather it is available to all artists.

In literature, that what is called nonsense does not necessarily lack sense nor is it absurd. It just does not work by any conventionally coded sense, which makes it harder to understand than common sense writings. Still it differs from confused rambling, because nonsense is highly structured. Furthermore there are different kinds of nonsense, that all present their own interpretive problem.<sup>9</sup> Also

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<sup>7</sup> Stewart, 1978, p. 13.

<sup>8</sup> Stewart, 1978, p. 5.

<sup>9</sup> Dolitsky, 1984, p. 5.

in visual art there are different kinds of nonsense, not least because visual art takes a variety of forms. Sometimes the formate of an artwork is nonsensical in itself, but more often the immediate impression becomes nonsense. Nonsensical artworks demand a more thorough interpretation than the immediate impression, but not all are receptive to or capable of that interpretation.

According to Stewart nonsense exists as a counterpoint to common sense, and common sense is based on an assumption of consensus by members of a social context.<sup>10</sup> This consensus has partly been reached by a kind of metacommunication, the implicit in communication. Metacommunication bears a message about the nature of communication, and simultaneously works as framing. Even though metacommunication is implicit, it cannot be quiet; it must always speak.<sup>11</sup> The implicit in social interaction sets the frame for common sense, but if the frame for common sense is different between people they are nonsensical to each other. Nonsense is thus a social process, produced between people. In art nonsense can be used as a strategy for metacommunication, but whether the implicit in an artwork is understood or not remains unknown.

Dolitsky approaches nonsense differently, she does not see sense and nonsense as counterpoints, rather they are parallels with different structures and conditions for understanding. According to her, nonsense is strictly rule-governed, and most often follows the rules of the language it is in.<sup>12</sup> Visual art has a language of its own, that is different in different parts of the world, and also in visual language there are strategies and rules for creating nonsense. The metacommunication of visual language is different from that

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10 Stewart, 1978, p. 49.

11 Stewart, 1978, p. 20-22.

12 Dolitsky, 1984, p. 8.

of written or spoken language, and varies between techniques, the artists context, and all sorts of variables, which makes it even harder to understand the structures.

### 2.1.1 The use versus the function of nonsense

Since nonsense exists only in a social context, and occurs between sentient beings, we need to understand the difference between the *use* and the *function* of nonsense, in order to understand how nonsense works. In a social context, *use* refers to situations where a phenomenon is utilized in human action. While *function* concerns the reason for the utilisation of a phenomenon, and especially the broader purpose or purposes it serves. The function of nonsense provides a place where any mysterious gaps in our systems of order can be stored. That is, it provides a category where we can discard things we cannot explain with common sense. A category similar to those of *Fate*, *Chance*, *Accident* or *Miscellaneous*. “By providing such a place, nonsense can be seen to function as an aid to sense making.”<sup>13</sup> Again, sense depends upon nonsense, just as nonsense depends upon sense.

When examined closer these gaps can be made suspect, as they lack explanation. An artist who is interested in nonsense as a strategy for creating art, is utilizing the function of nonsense. That is, she is interested in using nonsense for a broader purpose. One way of doing that is to make those gaps visible in all their fishiness.

Let us take a classic art historical example, *The Fountain* (1917) by Marcel Duchamp (1887-1986). Duchamp took an ordinary industrially made urinal, placed it lying down in a gallery, signed it, and called it art. The object in itself was nonsensical, as it was

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<sup>13</sup> Stewart, 1978, p. 5.

decontextualized and mounted in a non-functional manner. Also, the display of an industrially produced object as art was nonsensical in a context where unique hand-made objects were the only objects considered as art. Not only did the urinal lose its function as an appliance, it also mocked the idea of an art work as a unique object.

An artist, utilizing the function of nonsense this way, can make sense of a social or political situation, but she can also make social constructs visible that have become norm and therefore are implicit, invisible and accepted. Duchamp was criticizing his contemporary art world, the kind of objects that were considered artworks at the time, as well as the context art was presented in.

Stewart writes that "It would indeed be nonsensical for us to make explicit what can remain implicit."<sup>14</sup> This contradicts the general idea of communication. There is always an intention with what is said; That which is considered to be general knowledge is left unsaid, because it is redundant to say it out loud.<sup>15</sup> To me this pinpoints what political nonsensical art does, it makes explicit what normally remains implicit; Just as Duchamp's *The Fountain* made explicit what kind of objects were considered art. Often nonsense makes something explicit that has been implicit in our society for so long, that it has become almost invisible or has been forgotten. In order to do this, framing is necessary. *The Fountain* would not have worked as critique towards the art world without the framing, the context, of the gallery.

Framing implies metacommunication, because the frame does not only put focus on the content, but also on the organization of

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<sup>14</sup> Stewart, 1978, p. 8.

<sup>15</sup> Dolitsky, 1984, p. 7.



content and the relationship between content and its surroundings. The ability to determine what is and is not content and context respectively, is dependent on interpretation.<sup>16</sup> So even though one strategy for making nonsense is to make the implicit explicit, removing one layer or part of metacommunication, there is always another layer of metacommunication, another structure for understanding.

### 2.1.2 Interpreting nonsense

When it comes to understanding visual art, understanding is based on interpretation (unless there is a text that explains the meaning and idea behind the work of art in detail, which usually is not the case). The viewer interprets the artwork based on her stock of knowledge, that in turn is based on her biographical situation, tradition, culture and experience. This interpretation is not a process that reveals some underlying meaning or ideas behind the work of art. It is a process where meaning is manufactured based on the knowledge at hand.<sup>17</sup>

In nonsense, the interpreter, the reader, the spectator, must find the purposes, goals and motives of the text, or the art work, without the usual givens they are accustomed to. Accordingly, nonsense presupposes the ability to do so from the reader or spectator. The interpretive problem is to find a schema, a pattern. All real world knowledge must be discarded, and there can be no assumption beyond the immediate. Now, nothing is implicit.<sup>18</sup> The spectator's interpretation is therefore dependent on social structures and constructions. Hence, the viewer can only see something in a work of art that she can associate to through the same.

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<sup>16</sup> Stewart, 1978 p. 21-22.

<sup>17</sup> Stewart, 1978, p. 14.

<sup>18</sup> Dolitsky, 1984, p. 9.

The interpretation is not revealing some concealed or implicit message the artist intended. It can only reveal something to the viewer that she already knows, consciously or not. This does not out-rule that the artist has embedded a certain idea, message or hidden meaning in the work of art.

What all nonsense has in common is the evocation of a world that is different from the world we normally operate in. Ordinarily, words, just as elements in an image, take their meaning from established relations between them, and from things and experiences in the apparent world. In this, by nonsense evoked world, the meaning of words, or visual elements, emerge from their internal relations within the current setting. In order to understand the meaning of nonsense, the spectator has to let go of all presumptions and that which is taken for granted about relations among words, as well as their relations to the common world.<sup>19</sup>

Stewart compares this to the realm of play. In play, context and hierarchies work in the play-specific setting where they can be rearranged, differently from the structures of everyday-life, but the primary features for making common-sense, context and hierarchy, are preserved. While all fictions may do the same, nonsense does not only rearrange hierarchies of common-sense, but transcends them.<sup>20</sup> This makes the function of nonsense more extreme than the function of play and fiction. Nonsense becomes both familiar and foreign at the same time. It works in such a way that a viewer might become aware of something in their culture, context or society that they have not been aware of before.

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19 Dolitsky, 1984, p. 8.

20 Stewart, 1978, p. 37.

This is somewhat esoteric, as I do not think everyone is receptive to nonsensical strategies. In a more globalized world we are equipped with similar knowledge and understanding of different cultures. Even though a viewer comes from a different part of the world she can have a similar social ground to stand on, or at least an understanding of the artist's situation. This way the viewer can react upon the nonsense in an artwork, but it is never guaranteed.

Dolitsky calls this a phenomenon of reception. It is presumed that nonsense has meaning to its author, and the problem for the interpreter is to associate meaning to something opaque. Since nonsense makes it harder to understand the material at hand, people must comply various personal strategies for understanding.<sup>21</sup>

### 2.1.3 The exaggeration and the paradox

Operations for producing nonsense are contingent upon a marker of "play". Repetition seem to be a marker for play whenever its threat of infinity becomes conspicuous. An exaggeration of a nonsense feature in metaphors, rhymes and lullabies separates them from the realm of reality to that of play.<sup>22</sup>

Metaphors make common sense as long as they are presented as metaphors. As soon as they are removed from that context, the shift from metaphorical to literal, as things are in every-day life, becomes impossible, and the metaphor turns into nonsense.<sup>23</sup> As an example, the metaphor "The subject was a giant elephant in the room" refers to a subject of such proportions and importance, it cannot be avoided, but people still choose not to raise it. Thinking about it, a live elephant in some common room is quite nonsensical.

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<sup>21</sup> Dolitsky, 1984, p. 11.

<sup>22</sup> Stewart, 1978, p. 199.

<sup>23</sup> Stewart, 1978, p. 35.

Elephants belong in the wild (although some people seem think it is okay to keep them in zoos).

The street artist Banksy took this metaphor literally when he placed a living painted elephant in his exhibition *Barely Legal* in Los Angeles, in 2006. The elephant then became the physical incarnation of poverty in the world as a subject, that in Banksy's opinion needed to be addressed. Instead the elephant provoked a more evident discussion on animal rights.<sup>24</sup> Still, this is an example of a metaphor taken literally, making it nonsensical, and further, failing to raise the political discussion it intended.

Dolitsky suggests that propositions made through nonsense can be regarded neither as false nor true. Nonsense can be both at the same time, and it does not represent facts that are founded in apparent reality. It gives us a world where nothing is defined in advance. Nonsense is a language that tries to communicate without the framing of predetermined structure.<sup>25</sup> Nonsense thus creates a paradox within itself. Something can be both true and false at the same time, two distinctly disparate things can represent the same thing. Without a predetermined structure, any direction, association, representation is the most accessible.

I would like to think that the nonsensical intrigues the viewer, and encourages them to find out more, or think a bit longer about what they are seeing. That nonsensical art would annoy the viewer, make them uneasy or embarrassed. Such art can be funny, but it can also be quite unsettling. Unfortunately, the nonsensical does not always intrigue the viewer. Instead it is up to me, as a mediator of art, to raise their interest.

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<sup>24</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2006/sep/18/arts.artsnews> accessed on 27.10.2014.

<sup>25</sup> Dolitsky, 1984, p. 8.

## 2.2 Surrealism and nonsensical strategies

There are a few modern movements I see as vanguards for contemporary nonsensical art. These are Dada, Surrealism, the Situationist International and 'Pataphysics, the last not being as much a movement, as a science, philosophy or attitude to life.

Nonsense as a strategy has been used in art throughout the modern history, though not always explicitly for political art. The

surrealist movement was expressly political, and used both chance and nonsensical elements for their art. It is hard to separate the political from the philosophical in surrealist theory, as it is based on the thought of changing society, and the way people behave in and approach their society. Their philosophy became a lifestyle for the surrealists, something I see as a very political action.

In a social system there is an assumption of consensus, that creates common sense and hierarchies. As long as common

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• **Surrealism**

• Surrealism is an art movement  
• founded by André Breton. It is partly  
• based on the Dada movement; When  
• members of Dada became more and  
• more involved in political struggle,  
• the group ultimately split. The first  
• surrealist manifesto was published in  
• 1924 by Breton. According to the first  
• manifesto the practitioners of surre-  
• alism were Aragon, Baron, Boiffard,  
• Breton, Carrive, Crevel, Delteil,  
• Desnons, Éluard, Gérard. Limbour,  
• Malkine, Morise, Naville, Noll, Péret,  
• Picon, Soupault and Vitrac. No first  
• names were provided, but they were  
• all men. The surrealists sought to  
• combine the conscious and the un-  
• conscious realm into one - surreality.  
• They were also involved in political  
• and social struggles. Chance and  
• games were important for the creation  
• of surrealist poetry and visual art.

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sense remains uninterrupted it has the force of a world view, an ideology even.<sup>26</sup> During André Breton's time, common sense had resulted in class-society, capitalism and nationalism, amongst other social structures, but these were the most problematic and urgent to him.

The surrealists sought to interrupt the apparent consensus of common sense in society with their exploits, even though they had a strong consensus of their own, within in the group. Surrealism, as well as the movement's predecessor Dada, sought to invert both written and visual language. They "celebrated a poetics of contradiction on the levels of "form" and "content", "<sup>27</sup> and often used word-play and games for creating their art.<sup>28</sup> Chance was significant as a strategy when creating both texts and images.

### 2.2.1 Surrealist philosophy

Breton's theoretical, ideological and philosophical writings are extensive, and in Ferdinand Alquié's opinion Breton denies the dualism of both Kant and Descartes. Kant's duality being the divergence between the scientifically knowable object and the thing-in-itself, and Descartes that of God and nature; the Cartesian God being superior to nature, while it is also his truthfulness that enables the basis for science. Therefore, Breton had to find the way of being he was aiming for in this very world. That it is, from within the knowable and the given he must bring forth the marvellous of surreality.<sup>29</sup>

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26 Stewart, 1978, p. 49.

27 Stewart, 1978, p. 77.

28 Kaitaro, 2001, p. 99-107.

29 Alquié, 1965, p. 71.

But Breton did not believe in another realm, God or a Platonist world of forms.<sup>30</sup> Do not mistake his interest towards dreams, or the realm of the unconscious, to be an interest in an other world. Breton saw dreams as part of reality, as the reality in between the awoken state. He thought them to be equally important as the life we experience when awake.<sup>31</sup> Therefore he would indeed bring forth the marvellous of surreality from within the knowable and the given, but what Breton saw as knowable and given was much more than Alquié understands.

Nonetheless, Breton did see a dualism, a dualism between interior and exterior reality. He thought them to be in contradiction to each other, and stated that the surrealists had taken upon themselves to confront the two realities with one another, to refuse one superiority over the other. Still he realised that acting on both realities at the same time was a problem, and it would give the impression that they are less apart than they are. Instead he favoured to act upon both, one after the other, in a systematic manner, allowing for interaction between the two. This he thought was the method to finding a solution to combining the two realities.<sup>32</sup>

According to Stewart acting on both the conscious and unconscious would be disastrous to common discourse, as attention would constantly be diverted from the subject at hand, and the impossibility to continue the discourse would undermine the usefulness of the given social construction of reality. Finally consciousness is made completely manifest, and the unconscious is no longer a resource. Metacommunication, the unspoken, occurs within the realm of consciousness, and is assumed to be apparent

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<sup>30</sup> See also Alquié, 1965, p. 155.

<sup>31</sup> Breton, 1924, p. 8.

<sup>32</sup> Breton, 1978, p. 116.

to members of a given social context. What everybody supposedly know is arranged hierarchically according to the possibilities of the current situation. To make apparent what is otherwise assumed to be known by everyone, is to break down this hierarchy and the given boundaries.<sup>33</sup> When these boundaries and hierarchies are turned on their head in nonsensical art, they are no longer set so much by the situation at hand, as by the spectator.

### 2.2.2 Nonsensical surrealism

Those aspects of common sense that can be changed through nonsense often converge with those that can be made suspect. That which cannot be made suspect, remains untouchable by nonsense, it remains as world view beyond consciousness and reflexivity. The reflexivity of nonsense irrupts the pervasiveness of common sense. “Nonsense operates by means of a split in consciousness, a split characterizing any act of meta-communication”<sup>34</sup> as Stewart puts it.

Throughout everyday life, common sense is assumed to be something natural, something universal. When juxtaposed through nonsense, common sense becomes an only partial reality, an ideology. Nonsense shares the ideological nature with common sense, and they are both rooted in culture, not nature.<sup>35</sup> In surrealism this takes the form of the combination of the conscious and the unconscious. Surreality challenges the conforming to common sense as the hegemonic ideology.

The surrealists had several strategies to create art and poetry that break down the hierarchies of the unspoken. The two most important creative strategies for the surrealists were chance and

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33 Stewart, 1978, p. 86.

34 Stewart, 1978, p. 49.

35 Stewart, 1978, p. 50.



### **Cadavre Exquis**

For a minimum of three players. The players sit around a table and each writes, in secret, a definite or indefinite article and an adjective, on a sheet of paper. The paper is then folded so that the words are concealed, and passed round to the next player. Each player then writes a noun, conceals it, and the process is repeated with a verb, another definite or indefinite article and adjective, and finally another noun. The paper is unfolded and the sentences read out. Players may agree on small changes to ensure grammatical consistency.

play. In play, as in art, hierarchies can be turned on their head. Like art, play presents alternative contextualizations, different from other levels of living.<sup>36</sup>

The Surrealist game *Cadavre Exquis* (The exquisite corpse) creates the kind of nonsense where the relation between words and the relation between worlds and apparent reality, is skewed. In *Cadavre Exquis* the participants added words to a sentence without knowing what the previous word was, creating a sentence by chance with no initial communicative meaning that nobody knew the outcome of in advance. Meaning was found in the sentence when purposeful relations were postulated.<sup>37</sup>

Another strategy was that of simultaneity, where the art work can be seen as a space and a time all at once. Within the boundaries of a text, a film or canvas, multiple temporal forms can be maintained. Further they made the simultaneous convergence of disparity into a conscious principle. This way any object is interchangeable with any other.<sup>38</sup> Again, the relations between words, or visual objects,

<sup>36</sup> Stewart, 1978, p. 37.

<sup>37</sup> Dolitsky, 1984, p. 10.

<sup>38</sup> Stewart, 1978, p. 154,159.

are played with. The relation between a car and a road is different than that of a car and a cloud.

The poet Pierre Réverdy (1889-1960) wrote that “the image is a pure creation of the mind. It cannot be born from a comparison but from a juxtaposition of two more or less distant realities. The more the relationship between the two juxtaposed realities is distant and true, the stronger the image will be – the greater its emotional power and poetic reality.”<sup>39</sup> This text by Réverdy had a deep impact on Breton, and characterizes the method of interchangeability and chance that was common for the surrealist games.

Even though Breton saw a dualism between realities, he wanted to erase it. This state of being, without the dualism of interior and exterior realities, is the (non-logical) way of being *Alquié* was referring to. Breton did not look for the marvellous of surrealism only in this world, because he saw the world as larger, or wider, than the immediate and the conscious. Surrealism “seeks to calculate the quotient of the unconscious by the conscious.”<sup>40</sup> This quotient was to give a clearer and more passionate consciousness of the world perceived by the senses, what he called the revolution of the mind. Breton was looking for a way to combine the conscious and the unconscious to one reality, an absolute reality – surreality.

Louis Aragon (1897-1982) and Breton also wanted to combine art and every-day life. They, and the surrealists with them, were interested in the subject experiencing life, in extending the possibilities for fulfilment for that subject, as well as discussing the meaning of human existence.<sup>41</sup> Yet, surrealism never was strictly philosophical,

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39 Nord-Sud, March 1918, quoted in Breton, 1924, p. 15, and in Stewart, 1978, p. 159.

40 Breton, 1978, p. 128.

41 Vihanta, 2007, p. 143.

it was never interested in relating to professional philosophy.<sup>42</sup> The surrealists were against art for art's sake and took part in social struggles,<sup>43</sup> and thus one cannot strip surrealist philosophy and theory of its relation to society and Breton's surreality.

### 2.3 'Pataphysics, visual art and nonsense

For some, pataphysics is a joke, a cosmic fart, blatant nonsense, nothing to pay attention to; for others it is an attitude to life, a state of mind, a discipline, a doctrine. It is greatly useless, but still manages to swerve and inform the world.<sup>44</sup> The pataphysical in visual arts have not really been examined, even though pataphysics always have had a strong representational dimension.<sup>45</sup> There are many parallels between pataphysics and nonsense, as well as between surrealism and pataphysics, that is to be presented here. Pataphysics and nonsense together form a space for subversive and political art, that is not straightforward or propagandist.

When encountered, pataphysics might not demand any kind of attention. In fact, it does not. Pataphysics has always existed, and will continue to do so, regardless of humans.<sup>46</sup> Contrary to nonsense, pataphysics is not a social phenomena. Still, pataphysics offers a place, or a state of mind, similar to that of nonsense, which is both more serious and unserious than nonsense. Pataphysics provides a possibility for deeper analysis of relations between things, people, understandings, aspects in the world.

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<sup>42</sup> <http://icecrawler.blogspot.fi/2012/02/surrealism-and-philosophy.html>  
accessed on 16.10.2014.

<sup>43</sup> Lewis, 1990, p. 110.

<sup>44</sup> Hugill, 2012, p. 2.

<sup>45</sup> Hugill, 2012, p. 155.

<sup>46</sup> Sandomir, quoted in Hugill, 2012, p. 45.

What distinguishes pataphysics from other artistic and philosophical movements from the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century up until the mid-twentieth century, is that it is rather a collection of ideas than a movement. These ideas stand in counterpoint to science, more than art, and they have been able to establish themselves effectively, resonating in any mind which find that the objective truth of empiricism demands at least a little bit of playful teasing, if not a full revaluation. This is not to say that pataphysics is antiscientific or antirational,<sup>47</sup> as Dada was anti-art.

Nevertheless, any definition of pataphysics is in itself suspicious, as the very idea of a definition, a set of words that gives a sense of a term that is true in every situation, is unpataphysical in itself. To define pataphysics is to suggest a possible meaning, which will always be the contrary to another equally possible meaning. Some useful attempts to explain pataphysics have been made, especially by Jarry himself.<sup>48</sup>

In the novel *Exploits of Doctor Faustroll*, *'Pataphysician*, (hereafter referred to as *Doctor Faustroll*) first published in 1911, he concentrated the definition of pataphysics into one sentence: "Pataphysics is the science of imaginary solutions, which symbolically attributes the properties of objects, described by their virtuality, to their lineaments."<sup>49</sup> The definition is in itself an imaginary solution, contradicting, and ungraspable.

Jarry writes that pataphysics is an epiphenomenon, an epiphenomenon being that which is superinduced upon a phenomenon, and pataphysics is "the science of that which is superinduced upon metaphysics, whether within or beyond the latter's limitations,

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47 Hugill, 2012, p. 2.

48 Hugill, 2012, p. 1-3.

49 Jarry, 1965 [1911], p. 4.

extending as far beyond metaphysics as the latter extends beyond physics.”<sup>50</sup>

With this Jarry wants said that pataphysics is the science of the particular, it examines the rules directing the exceptional, further it describes a universe supplementary to the current one, a universe that could be imagined in place of the traditional one. In his opinion the laws found in the traditional universe are exceptions occurring frequently, and these exceptions have been reduced to unexceptional exceptions that are no longer unique.<sup>51</sup>

How I understand this is that the conditions for our way of living, including the planet and universe we find ourselves in, seem accidental to Jarry. We, humans, are an exception, and so is the universe we live in. This makes pataphysics a science that studies every little thing in extreme detail, or rather it examines what is between every little thing. Which, in fact, makes pataphysics a great science to use for examining nonsense and the political, that take place in between people.

### 2.3.1 Pataphysical art

Jarry was a visual artist, writer and playwright. His most famous play is *Ubu Roi* (King Ubu). A story about a relentless, cruel dictator, whose reign is terrible. But in the end he leaves the world unchanged.<sup>52</sup> When first played it caused an upheaval because of the language used, the way it was played<sup>53</sup> and frankly, it made little sense.

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50 Jarry, 1965 [1911], p. 192.

51 Jarry, 1965 [1911], p. 3-4.

52 Hugill, 2012, p. 13.

53 Hugill, 2013.

For some time there was a danger of *Ubu Roi* being the only of Jarry's works to survive, characterizing all of 'pataphysics, but there was a handful of people who aimed to balance the rest of pataphysics with the mass of Ubu.<sup>54</sup> The idea of 'pataphysics would indeed have been thoroughly different if it would have been based on *Ubu Roi* alone. *Doctor Faustroll* is a more important literary work for any kind of insight in 'pataphysics. My own understanding of pataphysics is rather based on *Doctor Faustroll* than *Ubu Roi*, and this whole section on pataphysics is very much Jarry centred, as he still is the first to write about pataphysics.

Jarry's involvement with other visual artists did much to elaborate pataphysical ideas.<sup>55</sup> Andrew Hugill mentions Joan Miró (1893-1983) and Max Ernst (1891-1976) as painters influenced by *Ubu Roi*. Miró, though considered a surrealist artist, rejected any membership in artistic movements. To him Ubu was the very incarnation of General Franco, and he made several works of Ubu throughout his career. Ernst however, was a member of the surrealist group and also he adopted Ubu as a symbol for dictatorship. Further, his techniques of frottage, grattage, decalomania and collage, conjure the pataphysical spirit the most, in their syzygies<sup>56</sup> of images and materials.<sup>57</sup>

The most influential pataphysical artist to this day is Marcel Duchamp. The pervasiveness of his art throughout the last century is extensive. It is detected throughout conceptual art, an art form

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54 Hugill, 2012, p. 138.

55 Hugill, 2012, p. 155.

56 The alignment of meaning, see further explanation on p. 66.

57 Hugill, 2012, p. 156-157.

which in Hugill's opinion could be accused of being an imaginary solution in itself, as it relies on the subjectivity of the viewer.<sup>58</sup>

Pataphysics is by all accounts subjective, "privileging the particular above the the general, the imaginary above the real, the exceptional above the ordinary, the contradictory above the axiomatic."<sup>59</sup> The surrealists were interested in the subject experiencing life, and so is pataphysics. Both the artistic movement and the science play with structures in social interaction and context, to nudge hierarchies of thought in favour of a contrasting view on things, structures, situations.

Other examples Hugill gives of pataphysical art are the useless machines of Jean Tinguely (1925-1991) and Niki de Saint Phalle (1930-2002), echoing the useless mechanics Jarry wrote about; Louise Bourgeois (1911-2010) was recognised by the College of Pataphysics in 2009; Barry Flanagan (1941-2009) found pataphysics in 1963, the pataphysical spiral can be found as a symbol for freedom in his early works and evolved into his famous hares. Thomas Chimes (1921-2009) was deeply influenced by issue 13 of the Evergreen Review with the title *What is Pataphysics?*.<sup>60</sup>

In fact many of the leading personalities in pataphysics during the postwar years were visual artist. For them pataphysics offered a way out of the surrealist standstill. Many of them had been drawn to surrealism in the 1920's and 1930's; The scurrilous, antibourgeois nature of Ubu became a converging point for the surrealist revolution. Ubu seemed to reaffirm the fundamental truth of the events that took place during World War II; a preposterous irrationality at whose whim many European citizens lived and died. This was

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58 Hugill, 2012, p. 55.

59 Hugill, 2012, p. 2.

60 Hugill, 2012, p. 55.

something artists such as Duchamp, Ernst and Miró had experienced first handedly.

Further, a new generation of artists in Paris, not necessarily French, took interest in the pataphysical spirit. Hugill mentions Ellsworth Kelly (1923), Enrico Baj (1924-2003), Roberto Matta (1911-2002) and Franciszka Themerson (1907-1988).<sup>61</sup> Themerson has, amongst other things, illustrated Lewis Carroll's (1832-1898) *Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There* in 1946, and made a comic strip called UBU in 1970.<sup>62</sup> Carroll is an author considered a producer of nonsense. Matta was a painter, whose canvases show influences of surrealism,<sup>63</sup> while Baj's various forms of art show an obsession with nuclear war.<sup>64</sup> Ellsworth Kelly's art is of a more graphical and minimalist sort.<sup>65</sup>

André Breton put Jarry on the surrealists list of approved authors, recognising all of Jarry's work, not only Ubu. Breton saw a parallel between the pataphysical clinamen<sup>66</sup> and the surrealist chance. He was eager to reveal the latent surrealism in Jarry's writings, but the importance of the oneiric and the irrational in surrealism does not go well with pataphysics as a science.<sup>67</sup>

Breton thought of Jarry as a forerunner of Salvador Dalí's (1904-1989) paranoiac-critical method.<sup>68</sup> The paranoiac-critical method is based on the paranoid person's ability to ground their illusions in

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61 Hugill, 2012, p. 128.

62 <http://www.themersonarchive.com/index.htm> accessed on 26.10.2014.

63 <http://www.matta-art.com/> accessed on 26.10.2014.

64 see for example <http://libcom.org/history/baj-enrico-1924-2003> accessed on 26.10.2014.

65 see for example [http://www.moma.org/collection/artist.php?artist\\_id=3048](http://www.moma.org/collection/artist.php?artist_id=3048) accessed on 26.10.2014.

66 The swerve of atoms, see further explanation on p. 64.

67 Hugill, 2012, p. 138.

68 Hugill, 2012, p. 139.



reality. Dalí described the method as representing an object, that, without any figurative or anatomical change, represent another completely different object at the same time. This other object would be free from any distortion or abnormality that would reveal some kind of arrangement. The paranoid process is continuous, a double image can stimulate the revelation of a third image, which in turn can bring forth a fourth image, and so on.<sup>69</sup> Breton thought this method to have risen from a fundamental crisis of the object, while Dalí thought of it as an irrational method of associations and interpretations.<sup>70</sup>

Indeed there is a similarity to Dalí's paranoiac-critical method and clinamen. The pataphysical clinamen is anyhow reliant on the laws of pataphysics, where the paranoiac-critical method relies on random chance, with the possibility of staging a situation, or still life, that manages to represent two mutually disparate objects. Thus the result is no longer a result of random chance, but clinamen.

The ability to see two pictures in one is characterizing for Jarry's prose. He planned on making a series of pictorial albums where he examined the complete works of Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528). The method of examination was seeing another picture in the images, almost fully disregarding the manifest content. Instead Jarry focused on the "eternal picture" through wordplay, where the eternal picture emerged from the knife cuts in the wood. The series was not completed, only the first two volumes appeared, but Breton was strongly influenced by them. Breton's reading was, unsurprisingly, virtually Freudian. In fact, he identified an "objective humour" in Jarry's writings that set the parameters for understand-

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<sup>69</sup> Kaitaro, 2001, 97-98.

<sup>70</sup> Hugill, 2012, p. 139.

ing pataphysics for some time. By locating pataphysics in the typical terrain of psychoanalysis and left-wing politics, Breton was partly responsible for slandering pataphysics status as the science of the laws governing exceptions.<sup>71</sup>

Jarry's exercises in analysing Dürer's pictures are indeed an example of implementing pataphysics. Instead of looking at the picture as a whole, he looked at what was in between the lines that made out the picture, the relation between the woodcuts, the exceptions, rather than the uniqueness of the woodcuts.

### 2.3.2 Duchamp and pataphysics

Marcel Duchamp has himself referred to Jarry as an influence for his work. The addition of the letter *r*, in his pseudonyms R. Mutt and Rose Sélavy for example, was a Jarry-originated formula that Duchamp returned to often, as was the bicycle. Both Jarry and Duchamp reference contemporary scientific and less scientific developments, such as electromagnetism, the fourth dimension and non-Euclidian geometry. Still, the pataphysics of Jarry and Duchamp are completely different. The difference is subtle and hard to distinguish, the main point being that Jarry wanted to make life as beautiful as literature, while Duchamp wanted to make art universal, a part of anyone's life. A very surrealist idea, however, Duchamp also wanted to remove the concept of "Art", in order to make it universal.<sup>72</sup>

Duchamp's strategies for creating art are not perhaps directly applicable to those of contemporary art. Yet, there is seed for artistic research, as it is presented today, in his works. For example *La Mariée*

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<sup>71</sup> Hugill, 2012, p. 139-140.

<sup>72</sup> Hugill, 2012, p. 158-159.

*mise à nu par ses célibataires, même* (The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even, 1915-1923), more commonly known as *The Large Glass*, comes with an extensive explanation on Duchamp's research that it is based on, and really it cannot be understood in the way he intended without the explanation.<sup>73</sup>

Today, we have come to a point where artistic research itself can be shown as a work of art. This was emphasized both at Documenta 13, 2012, and the 55<sup>th</sup> Venice biennial 2013, where vast research materials and collections of different sorts were presented as artworks.

Another essential difference between Jarry and Duchamp was their attitude towards religion. Both responded with humour to horrific contemporary events, such as World War I, but Duchamp's was of a distinctly more secular character than Jarry's. In *Doctor Faustroll* Jarry answers the question "Are you Christian?" with "I am God", while the question is impossible for Duchamp who saw the concept of God as a human invention.<sup>74</sup> Answering the question "Do you believe in God?" with a simple "No" is the same as admitting that there is a God to believe in. Therefore the question is absurd, it cannot exist.

Duchamp called his humour meta-irony, which implies a step even further away from straight-forward joking than irony already is. This brings his humour to a pataphysical level, that has something both brutal and elegant about it.<sup>75</sup> Irony and parody are strategies of nonsense, nonsense that exaggerates metacommunication.<sup>76</sup> Meta-irony then, takes a step further away, or perhaps sideways,

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<sup>73</sup> Hugill, 2012, p. 161-164.

<sup>74</sup> Hugill, 2012, p. 160.

<sup>75</sup> Hugill, 2012, p. 161.

<sup>76</sup> Stewart, 1978, p. 20.

from the ironised subject. *The Fountain* and other ready-mades are examples of his meta-irony, as well as internally contradicting statements, what Dolitsky calls auto-contradiction.<sup>77</sup>

Nonsensical parody or irony exaggerate metacommunication, and breaks the contiguity of realism and myth to every-day life.<sup>78</sup> Whereas the parodistic aspects of pataphysics in relation to what it parodies is complex, ironic, or meta-ironic.<sup>79</sup>

Pataphysics takes a step further away from reality than irony typically does; exaggerating even the nonsensical, which in turn creates a paradox where the irony is deeply embedded, almost unrecognisable in apparent reality. Where the paradoxes of pataphysics are fundamental principles, the paradoxes in nonsense reveals paradoxes in common sense. The implicit in pataphysical parody is no longer the immediate unspoken, which it normally is, because that which is normally unspoken is no longer implicit. The implicit becomes something else.

Many of Duchamp's works, such as the adjusted readymades, echo the swerve of clinamen. Small, seemingly insignificant, alterations change the virtuality of the object,<sup>80</sup> giving them a nonsensical feature that question their context.

This kind of pataphysics is also present in Duchamp's concept of the infra-thin; that which is infinitely thin, in between things, that nevertheless create something, something invisible and ethereal. According to Duchamp the infra-thin cannot be defined, but one can give examples of it. Such examples would be "The warmth of a seat (which has just been left) is infra-thin." or "Velvet trousers

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<sup>77</sup> Dolitsky, 1984, p. 6.

<sup>78</sup> Stewart, 1978, p. 206.

<sup>79</sup> Hugill, 2012, p. 2.

<sup>80</sup> Hugill, 2012, .p 162.

– their whistling sound (in walking) by brushing of the 2 legs is an infra-thin separation signalled by sound.”<sup>81</sup>

Duchamp examines the exceptional and the particular. In Hugill’s opinion, Duchamp’s œuvre “is an archeology which provides evidence of a pataphysical life”, and he did indeed join The College of Pataphysics in 1952.<sup>82</sup>

### 2.3.3 A pataphysical life

Even though Duchamp was not a member of the Dada or surrealist group, his art is often perceived connected to Dada, and conceptual art. Jacques Vaché (1895-1919), was not a member of the movement either, as he died before it was founded, but he became the utmost important anti-hero for Breton. He was the sheer embodiment of Dada. Breton met him in 1916, while serving in a military mental hospital where Vaché was a patient.<sup>83</sup>

As an art student he had come across Ubu Roi and other writings by Jarry, and modelled himself on these. He became known for stunts and exploits in public, and thus also got a reputation as the progenitor of Dada. Yet, it was his indifference towards the world and carelessness for himself that demonstrate that his public stunts were not merely stunts, but a way of life.<sup>84</sup> He performed his own, one-man, intellectual carnivalism every day.

While serving in World War I Vaché wrote about *‘umor*, an ironic concept of humour the soldiers maintained, more or less consciously used to remain sane at the front line. He recognized the irrelevance of his own existence, faced with the gambling of lives in

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81 Hugill, 2102, .p 163.

82 Hugill, 2012, p. 161, 164.

83 Lewis, 1990, p. 14.

84 Hugill, 2012, p. 167.

### **Intellectual Carnivalism**

When intellectuals, such as the surrealists or the pataphysicians, make their ideology their lifestyle, it becomes a sort of intellectual carnivalism. Intellectual carnivalism plays out thoughts or theories in real life. The surrealist ideology was so important to the group members, that they lived it out in their every day life. They might play their games or have automatism seances every day. Pataphysics, though a science, is also an attitude towards life, and therefore becomes a practice of intellectual carnivalism.

war, and thought of 'umor as strategy for coping. Vaché committed suicide in January 1919,<sup>85</sup> but Breton still admired him, and said he owed him the most.

Suicide was, largely through Vaché's example, a doctrine of Dada and Surrealism; several did commit suicide. It seems they had two options in their negativism, to follow nihilism to its extreme of death, or to express the futility of life through endless, trivial and absurd activities.<sup>86</sup>

Vaché's 'umor and the activities Lewis calls trivial and absurd, crystallizes the pataphysical attitude towards life. It is an approach to resort to when the structures are clear, one finds oneself in the same treadmill as everyone else, and there really is nothing subversive to do about it. It is accepting the situation, while simultaneously continuing to critique the very same from within.

Ever since Jarry, there has been consciously practising pataphysicians. Seeing that the science was founded by him, there was only unconsciously practising pataphysicians up until then.<sup>87</sup> Vaché was surely an unconsciously practising pataphysician, as are many today

<sup>85</sup> Hugill, 2012, p. 168.

<sup>86</sup> Lewis, 1990, p. 14.

<sup>87</sup> Hugill, 2012, p. 138.

who are unfamiliar with the science. However, in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the term was scarcely used even by conscious practitioners. The pataphysics that made itself present in the artistic world and society at a larger scale was the one described in Jarry's writings other than *Ubu Roi*, and these writings were little known beyond the Parisian literary circles.<sup>88</sup>

### 2.3.4 The pataphor

To further connect pataphysics with nonsense, let us return to the exaggerated metaphor as a strategy for nonsense. The exaggerated metaphor becomes a pataphor; It is so far beyond the relations between the represented in a metaphor, and the metaphor, that it becomes utter nonsense. "The elephant in the room" became real in Banksy's artwork, which removes it from the context of metaphor, and the relation between metaphor and apparent reality dismantles. Simultaneously, the relation between what is actually said in the metaphor and what exists in apparent reality is brought together, pushing the metaphor aside to the realm of nonsense.

The most common example of a pataphor is as follows:

Non-figurative: *Tom and Alice stood side by side in the lunch line.*

Metaphor: *Tom and Alice stood side by side in the lunch line, two pieces on a chessboard.*

Pataphor: *Tom took a step closer to Alice and made a date for Friday night, checkmating. Rudy was furious at losing to Margret so easily and dumped the board on the rose-coloured quilt, stomping downstairs.*<sup>89</sup>

Also here, metaphor is brought into apparent reality, removing the metaphor from its context, creating a context of its own.

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<sup>88</sup> Hugill, 2102, p. 138-139.

<sup>89</sup> <http://www.pataphor.com/whatisapataphor.html> accessed on 26.10.2014.

Here there is reason to explain the concept of *apparent reality* that I continuously use. In pataphysics apparent reality is reality as it presents itself, the immediate reality everyone face everyday, that is also different in everyone's experience. This has to do with the pataphysical perception of time, where time, much in the same way as space, extends in three dimensions rather than "going forward".<sup>90</sup>

An example of apparent reality is that of the apparent death; Pataphysicians do not die, they make the gesture of dying,<sup>91</sup> they go into occultation, where they are somewhere else than in apparent reality. The idea of apparent reality disagrees with the surrealist notion of surreality, the merging of the conscious and unconscious, as it accepts that there is more to reality than that which is apparent, but it makes no further effort in revealing that which is beyond the apparent. There is a sense of patience to pataphysics, waiting for the non-apparent to show itself in the exceptions it is studying, where surrealism wants to force the fusion of two realms.

In conclusion, pataphysics, both conscious and unconscious, is a science with similar interests as nonsense making. Where nonsense provides a place that stores the gaps in our systems of order, pataphysics examines those gaps. Both nonsense and pataphysics make anything that fall into those gaps suspect, and utilize humour as means to raise those subjects. Pataphysics is aware of all the structures it is supposed to follow, and do follow them, while simultaneously criticizing them.

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90 Hugill, 2012, p. 20.

91 Hugill, 2012, p. 20.



### 3. SEEING THE WORLD ANEW



Everyday we live our lives according to unwritten rules, we obey a system taught since childhood. What happens when we break the rules, just a little bit. Walking in a straight line on the pavement, suddenly taking a step to the side for no apparent reason. Planting your own flowers in the park, because you have no garden of your own. Dancing on the street to music only you can hear.

This thesis concerns the political in visual art. To make it clear, there is a difference between *politics* and *the political*. Claude Lefort (1924-2010) provides a useful distinction; Politics refers to the institutional forms of political organisation in a society, that is political parties, legal institutions etc., while the political refers to the establishing moment that forms the social space in that society.<sup>92</sup> In Europe, the politics are then the political parties in the parliaments, in the EU, in city councils and so on. While the political is going on in the streets, cafés and peoples homes, for example the Pride Parade, demonstrations, art projects and discussions.

This chapter is about the political in surrealism and pataphysics. I focus on the political in the surrealist movement historically, discussing the political actions and ideologies of the surrealist movement with André Breton in its fore. In pataphysics, being as it is, I discuss the political potential of it in connection to nonsense, and the political in pataphysical activities, rather than pinpointing ideologies or such, as it is impossible to pinpoint pataphysics itself.

### 3.1 The political in surrealism

The social context Breton found himself in as a young man was as complex as always. As a backdrop to his early years, the Third Republic had been founded in France after the Franco-Prussian war

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<sup>92</sup> Spiteri, 2006, p. 186.

(1870-1871) and the economic development was stagnant and slow up until World War I. France was also a surprisingly agricultural nation, in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, compared to many other European countries.<sup>93</sup>

There was, however to be a change in the mental climate in France, during the trial against the Jewish officer Alfred Dreyfus. The trial lasted from 1894 to 1906, and it divided the French into two camps, the nationalist-conservative who defended the judges, and people who advocated basic human rights and equality wanted Dreyfus set free.<sup>94</sup> This was going on while Breton was growing up, and he was surely influenced by the changing social and intellectual climate. He also came into contact with pacifist anarchistic and socialist movements, that affected his attitude towards war and involved him in the social struggle.<sup>95</sup>

There came to be a new intellectual force after the Dreyfus trial, that questioned the traditional national elite; They were in no way united as their ideology stretched from left to right, including avant-garde artists and writers, university teachers and students, journalists, politicians, republicans and socialists, as well as anarchists and pacifists. This intellectual force was important for the early surrealists such as Breton, Aragon and Philippe Soupault (1897-1990), whose dreams and illusions had been shattered by the first world war.<sup>96</sup> Growing up with this intellectual climate gave them the insight and strength to fight themselves. They new there was an other way to go about things, and that there was a way to protest against authorities.

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93 Vihanta, 2007, p. 129.

94 Vihanta, 2007, p.130.

95 Vihanta, 2007, p. 135.

96 Vihanta, 2007, p. 134.

Like some anarchists, the surrealists wanted to liberate man, the artist and art, but the works of French philosopher Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1809-1865), who is considered to be the father of anarchism, is not mentioned in surrealist references. Max Stirner (1806-1856) however is. Stirner introduced aspects of anarchistic theory even earlier than Proudhon. Breton explored his ideas already in 1913, as did Max Ernst later. Stirner's ideas mainly concerned the freedom of the individual, limiting the self, as well as the absolute power of nations.<sup>97</sup> This perhaps explains his involvement in Dada, and the concept of *liberté*, liberty or freedom, that he kept on writing about throughout his life.

Dada had swept like an anarchistic wave from Zürich to Berlin, Köln and Paris, and even to New York. The movement mocked the importance, value and content of art. They preferred straight forward action that confused their audience and induced chaos. With irony and cynicism they fought against authority, defending individuals who had become targets for the whims of society. They sought to free art, both from the norms within and outside of it.<sup>98</sup>

It was in Dada Breton first found a way to live out and express his social engagement. He called dada an *état d'esprit*, a state of mind, which, to him, was a symptom of the crisis European thinking found itself in (*crise de l'esprit*).<sup>99</sup>

The Dadaists, being anti-everything, also anti-political, did not want a revolution for everyone. They thought of their public actions as intellectual rebellion – I would call it intellectual carnivalism – and they were thoroughly upset and disappointed when the audience

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97 Vihanta, 2007, p. 140.

98 Vihanta, 2007, p. 136.

99 Vihanta, 2007, p. 137-138.

actually started to enjoy their spectacles.<sup>100</sup> Breton, however, wanted this revolution for everyone, which in the end was one of the reasons the dadaist group split, and he founded the surrealist movement.<sup>101</sup> Dada was too loose and had no clear goal for Breton.<sup>102</sup>

### 3.1.1 The revolution of the mind

In the first Surrealist Manifesto from 1924, Breton writes about the revolution of the mind. It was originally intended as an intellectual revolution, with basis in the Dadaist anti-everything-ideology. The surrealist claimed to be subjects of the *surrealist voice*, a voice found in everyone's unconscious, that is, accessible to all. This idea, that made the unconscious superior to the rational, was the original meaning of the Surrealist revolution or the revolution of the mind;<sup>103</sup> The revolution that would change the way people see and approach the world.

An other aspect of the revolution was that everyone had the potential to become an artist. Being talented was irrelevant, as everyone has an unconscious they have the potential to become a poet or an artist.<sup>104</sup> This was important, since Breton saw art partly as a field of liberty, *liberté*, without social or economic constraints, and partly as a gateway to surreality, the ultimate combination of the conscious and unconscious.

The surrealist revolution became more and more politicized. The movement was involved in a social struggle that opposed the class society, capitalism, nationalism, fascism, war and the power

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100 Lewis, 1990, p. 15.

101 Lewis, 1990, p. 16.

102 Vihanta, 2007, p. 138.

103 Lewis, 1990, p. 22.

104 Lewis, 1990, p. 23.

of the church. As members of an emergent avant-garde movement, the surrealists saw their oppositional position in the field of artistic production as confirmation of their solidarity with the proletariat.<sup>105</sup> But not everyone wants to become an artist, and most people were probably not interested in their unconscious or in connecting to it, in order to see the world differently. In the 1920's people were most likely more worried about getting food on the table, than widening their perspective on the world. (Sadly, that is often the order of things still today.)

It became obvious that Breton's contemporary bourgeois world was not at all threatened, and the proletariat was not interested. Even though verbal and symbolic violence caused a momentary shock, surrealism had to resort to other means if "the revolution in men's minds" were to take place. Surrealism ran the risk of stagnation, what had also happened to Dada, and Breton realised that surrealism needed Marxism for its own creativity.<sup>106</sup>

The surrealists were, and wanted to be, their own autonomous group, but they never ceased looking for another movement to collaborate with, in order to start the revolution. In the mid 1920's the communist party was the natural choice, as they were Marxist – anti-capitalist, anti-nationalist, anti-fascist – and advocated a proletarian revolution. The surrealists were clearly more interested in wider social structures. Similar to the anarchists they criticized the government on a political level, capitalism on an economical level and religion on a moral one. They researched Rimbaud's call to "Change life" and Marx's demand to "Change the world". Their

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<sup>105</sup> Spiteri, 2006, p. 184-185.

<sup>106</sup> Lewis, 1990, p. 33.

political demands became more outspoken and precise; They were no longer revolting just for the sake of it.<sup>107</sup>

### 3.1.2 Surrealist anti-capitalism

In the First Manifesto of Surrealism Breton expresses anti-capitalist thoughts. He was frustrated with the commercialism of contemporary novels. To him they were too glazed, like images from a catalogue, and scenic like postcards.<sup>108</sup> He also writes that the rational research in fashion was for the so called progress of civilisation, it is limited by our experience, and it is justified only for immediate utility. By extension, the accepted research is done on false grounds, and for immediate utility – the utility of the bourgeois. He saw the need for a paradigm change that would allow for non-positivist research, as he saw a need for researching also the immeasurable experiences that are not immediately utilitarian.<sup>109</sup> Today, perhaps even more so than almost a century ago, it is still demanded that all sorts of results are measurable.

In capitalist society we are to be able to measure the outcome of a cultural event, often by counting the amount of visitors. We are to present research results in numbers, statistics, and as profit, preferably as economical profit rather than social benefit. Even though there is a neoliberal notion of social benefit as economical profit in the long run. While in reality there is no way of measuring the emotional experience of art, music, or a social/cultural event.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Vihanta, 2007, p. 145.

<sup>108</sup> Breton, 1924, p. 5.

<sup>109</sup> Breton, 1924, p. 7.

<sup>110</sup> There has been attempts to do this, see for example Boikum Benson Konlaan, *Cultural Experience and Health: the coherence of health and leisure time activities*, 2001.



In 1926 Louis Aragon wrote an article in the journal *Clarté* about how the intellectuals role in capitalist society is to uphold and strengthen the bourgeoisie.<sup>111</sup> The capitalist society of the 1920's was of course different from the one we have today. Capitalism is plastic to its essence, changing an shaping itself alongside society. Aragon argued that under capitalism, thought becomes a kind of merchandise, and that this merchandise is the servant of capitalism. He further calls on all the intellectuals to see their proper role – to prepare for the proletarian revolution.<sup>112</sup> This is something that applies to the current capitalist society as well. At the time when the article was written, Breton and Aragon where close friends and central individuals for the surrealist movement, which means that these were values and thoughts they both shared.

Breton, Aragon, Paul Éluard (1895-1952), Benjamin Péret (1899-1959) and Pierre Unik (1909-1945) joined the French communist party, PCF, in January 1927.<sup>113</sup> Unfortunately the communists thought the surrealist pursuit was irrelevant at best, and counter-revolutionary at worst.<sup>114</sup> This made their collaboration difficult and short-lived.

### 3.1.3 Surrealist difficulties of engagement

Alquié writes that "Breton could never consent to make action into a properly political conception ... each time that difficulties made him choose between practical efficacy and poetry he chose poetry."<sup>115</sup> He knew that Breton was convinced that art could be

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<sup>111</sup> Lewis, 1990, p. 48-49.

<sup>112</sup> Lewis, 1990, p. 48-49.

<sup>113</sup> Spiteri, 2006, p. 184.

<sup>114</sup> Lewis, 1990, p. 138.

<sup>115</sup> Alquié, 1965, p. 73.

used as a weapon, a weapon that in the decline of bourgeois society inevitably turns against it. He asks why it then is that the bourgeoisie often receive artistic innovation, when the officials of communism appreciates traditional art and literature.<sup>116</sup>

The impossibility for Breton to engage in political action is embodied in his novel *Nadja*, where he mentions the Sacco-Vanzetti riots.<sup>117</sup> The context of the riot-mentioning, in relation to the story of Nadja and the original illustrations in it, exposes a major contradiction in surrealism. The contradiction of the cultural significance of art when it is balancing on the brink of political agitation. The distance between culture and politics is minimal. Even so, these riots also illustrate his own distance from political action, as he was absent from Paris writing *Nadja* when they occurred.<sup>118</sup>

Even though the surrealists refused to make categorically “communist” art, their work was in no way apolitical. In fact, their work was often such that it should be taken hypothetically rather than literally, it was often violent, suggesting criminal activities such as mutilation and child abuse, and even accused of inciting to murder.<sup>119</sup> These works are to be considered as political provocations depicting reality, and not literal endorsements or incitements.

In spring 1932 the friendship between Breton and Aragon ended abruptly. Aragon was excluded from the surrealist group, because he had abandoned surrealism in favour of social realism and the

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116 Alquié, 1965, p. 65.

117 Nicola Sacco (1891-1927) and Bartolomeo Vanzetti (1888-1927) were committed anarchists found guilty of murdering two men in Massachusetts, U.S.A., during an armed robbery in 1920. In response to their execution in August 1927, there were protests all across the Americas and Europe.

118 Spiteri, 2006, p. 194.

119 Strom, 2006, p. 37-42.

dictatorship of the proletariat. Which made him a hypocrite and traitor to surrealism in Breton's and Éluard's opinion.<sup>120</sup>

Furthermore, the surrealists refused to disagree with the communist party in silence, and was therefore considered a possibly harmful and disruptive element. The collaboration between the surrealist movement and the communist party came to an end in 1933, when Breton and Éluard were expelled from the communist party. Despite this failure Breton kept on searching for other collaborators.<sup>121</sup>

Evidently, the socio-political situation was contradictory in the surrealist group in the 1930's. Breton was both the dreamy idealist and the practical coordinator,<sup>122</sup> and did himself have dictatorial characteristics. For example after Aragon's "treachery", he demanded that the members of the surrealist group would sign a text forcing them to refuse all other disciplines than that of surrealism. When some of them refused, he harshly replied that they would no longer be welcome in the group.<sup>123</sup>

There was to be no individuality in the surrealist group, a remnant from Breton's anarchistic ideals. Still, subjectivity was always important, since surrealism is about entering surreality, the combined realm of consciousness and unconsciousness. That world can only stem from oneself. It is also connected to Breton's criticism of positivist science. He wanted to, not perhaps create, but encourage the value of the subjective experience. And this is not value in an economical manner, rather value as an intellectual process.

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120 Lewis, 1990, p. 113 and Vihanta, 2007, p. 149.

121 Lewis, 1990, p. 138-139 and Vihanta, 2007, p. 148.

122 Vihanta, 2007, p. 149.

123 Lewis, 1990, p. 113.

The Third Republic, a system of parliamentary democracy, sought to repress the transgressive political actions, such as revolutionary activities, by symbolically expressing political antagonisms in public. The surrealists strived to form a new political space that would open up for revolutionary political opportunities excluded by the Third Republic.<sup>124</sup> The political in surrealism is thus an attitude to life, a social movement, as well as an intellectual discourse that seep through most, if not all, aspects of everyday life, brought about through nonsensical strategies, chance and games.

Surrealism wanted to change the world around with both subtle quirks and chocking exploits. What Breton found in art and poetry was the intersection where artists and intellectuals could revolt against the bourgeoisie and capitalist society, where they could refuse art and thought to be the supporting merchandise of class and capitalism. If the intellectuals would no longer think, and the artists no longer produce, for money, capitalism would lose some of its supportive merchandise and the bourgeoisie would get upset. Surrealism has by no means disappeared as an artistic or social movement today. There are many surrealist groups all over the world continuing writing manifests and producing various forms of art.<sup>125</sup>

### 3.2 Pataphysics as political nonsense

Since pataphysics is a science, it is not political in itself, though it does not even try to be an objective or positivist science. Pataphysics is a highly subjective science, that when practised can become

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<sup>124</sup> Spiteri, 2006, p. 186.

<sup>125</sup> Find links to surrealist groups here <http://surrealistgruppen.org/links.html> for instance.

political. That is something political can be expressed through pataphysics, nonetheless, this expression is likely to be regarded as nonsense.

‘Pataphysics, as surrealism, becomes a lifestyle for the practitioners. It is said that a pataphysician is recognised by using an umbrella when it rains, or because she talks about the weather. That is, it is not so easy to recognize a pataphysician. To practice ‘pataphysics is a kind of intellectual carnivalism, similar to that of the surrealists, dadaists and situationists, but on a different level. Where these other movements were explicit and sometimes spectacular, pataphysicians are implicit to the nth degree.

There are also unconscious pataphysicians, that is, people who practice pataphysics without knowing it. Hugill thinks that pataphysics will become more and more conscious, as metaphysics is absorbed by physics.<sup>126</sup> In this chapter I will further examine the political aspects of ‘pataphysics, and the relation between nonsense, the political and pataphysics.

Alfred Jarry’s very definition of ‘pataphysics, “the science of imaginary solutions”, seem political to me. When one hears the word *science* does one not think about hard science, science that confirm a hypothesis, science that show results and make discoveries? The political in the imaginary is to challenge the rational, so called hard, sciences that the surrealists and Jarry had an ambivalent relationship to.

In a lecture, with the title *The Pataphysics of the Future*, on the 13<sup>th</sup> of May 2013, Andrew Hugill says that one of the founding principles of pataphysics is that general science is founded on a mistaken principle – the idea of the repeated experiment. In pat-

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<sup>126</sup> Hugill, 2013.

aphysics, every repetition would be a unique event in its own way and thus is not a repetition. This because pataphysics governs the laws of exceptions, and in pataphysics everything is an exception.<sup>127</sup> The notion of everything as exceptions is discussed throughout this chapter.

In *Doctor Faustroll* Jarry writes about the shape of a watch, as an example of uselessness, which is a core notion in pataphysics:

“Why should anyone claim that the shape of a watch is round – a manifestly false proposition – since it appears in profile as a narrow rectangular construction, elliptic on three sides; and why the devil should one only have noticed the shape at the moment of looking at it? Perhaps under the pretext of utility.”<sup>128</sup>

The pretext of utility is that you only look directly at the watch, where it looks round, because when you look at the watch from any other direction it loses its utility.<sup>129</sup> Here is a connection to what Breton writes about in his first manifesto of surrealism, that the rational science in fashion in the 1920's is justified only for its immediate utility. Even though their critique is somewhat similar, they are not interested the same thing. Breton saw a need to raise the intellectual value of the subjective experience, while Jarry is concerned with the useless imaginary solution and the laws of exceptions.

Hugill gives an example of a contemporary useless imaginary solution; a cat with duster slippers. Cats climb just about everywhere, and one would think that utilising the cat for dusting is a great idea. Yet, the trouble of even dressing the cat in slippers is probably more time-consuming than to actually dust oneself. It is a

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127 Hugill, 2013.

128 Jarry, 1965 [1911], p. 247.

129 Hugill, 2013.

solution to a problem that does not really exist.<sup>130</sup> This is something you see in art pretty often. A solution to a “what if” problem, that is virtually useless. For example the fictional Bonk Business’ machines by Alvar Gullichsen. The machines have useless functions, or no function at all, besides operating as a machine. Bonk Business also made advertisements for machines, such as the one that makes charcoal out of unwanted emotions, that are impossible to realise, at least as of now.<sup>131</sup>

Just as nonsense, pataphysics is that which is in between, but it is even further, or deeper in between. It is in between that which is in between. This might seem redundant, and in a way it is. Pataphysics loves tautology, and spiralling away from a starting point, only to land a little bit to the side of the starting point; Like with the pataphor.

Since apparent reality is a result of subjective experience, pataphysics is in constant flux, just as nonsense. It can easily be transformed from one state of apparent definition to another. There are a few themes, or terms that are fundamental for pataphysics that I am going to present in the following chapters: the antinomy, the anomaly, syzygy, clinamen, the absolute and the doctrine of equality.

### 3.2.1 The antinomy and the anomaly

The antinomy contains the same kind of paradox as nonsense. In pataphysics, mutually excluding elements can co-exist, as they can in nonsense. An antinomy that recurs throughout pataphysics, is that of a simultaneous opposition of seriousness and humour enclosed

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<sup>130</sup> Hugill, 2013.

<sup>131</sup> see [http://www.alvargullichsen.org/WEB/BONK\\_Works.html#grid](http://www.alvargullichsen.org/WEB/BONK_Works.html#grid) accessed 16.10.2014.

within in one individual. The idea is to become the opposites, embodying the them as equivalents.<sup>132</sup>

In this way, the body and the subject is part of the science. One is, and is not, at the same time. In fact, this is everyone's everyday condition. A person is not merely one thing, humans can be several seemingly excluding things at once. One is a mother, a student, a dancer, an entrepreneur and an employee. Most people show only part of themselves in any given situation, because it is too hard to be all of oneself simultaneously. It also becomes nonsensical being all of oneself at once, just as acting upon the conscious and unconscious becomes nonsensical.

In the world of pataphysics, everything is an exception. How can there then be any anomalies? Well, Doctor Faustroll, i.e. Jarry, defines the universe as "that which is the exception to oneself".<sup>133</sup> Therefore, the anomaly in pataphysics exists within the laws it evidently contradicts.<sup>134</sup> This creates a kind of disruption, or disruptive element, that is nonsensical in itself. Let me provide you with an example: If physics proposes: "You have a dog, it is brown", then metaphysics suggests: "If you have a dog, it is brown", but pataphysics says "You don't have a dog, and it is brown." The pataphysical suggestion implies that there is a dog that is yours, it just is not in the same time-space as you are. It is a contradiction, totally plausible in pataphysics, but utterly nonsensical in apparent reality.

### 3.2.2 Clinamen and syzygy

Clinamen is originally an imaginary solution by Epicurus. He had no evidence that would support his theory, but it is surprisingly close

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<sup>132</sup> Hugill, 2012, p. 10.

<sup>133</sup> Jarry, 1965 [1911], p. 245.

<sup>134</sup> Hugill, 2012, p. 13.



to contemporary descriptions of how atoms behave. He thought that the universe consists of atoms in constant descent. During their descent they make random swerves, for unknown reasons, that causes them to collide with other atoms, which in turn causes a chain reaction. These collisions are in fact the reason that all matter exists, the collisions create matter. Without any basis in apparent reality, he continued this theory, rejected the idea of a purposeful universe, and set chance and human happiness centre of existence.<sup>135</sup>

The idea of clinamen can be compared to the surrealist notion of chance; There is a similar idea of the unpredictable being significant for the creation of something. However, I find the clinamen of pataphysics directed in a different sense than the surrealist chance. It is more closely related to the situationists *détournement*, where the original meaning of something is altered or recontextualized in order to oppose the original meaning.<sup>136</sup>

### Situationists International

The Situationist International (SI) was an international group of intellectuals, active from 1957-1972. They stated that capitalism had changed since Marx's writings, and that social alienation, as well as commodity fetishism, had spread throughout all aspects of life and culture. Guy Debord and Asger Jørn were two key figures in the movement, both theorists, writers and artists of various disciplines. The concept of *the spectacle* was essential to situationist theory, where the spectacle is mass media fuelling the commodity fetishism.

<sup>135</sup> Hugill, 2012, p. 15-16.

<sup>136</sup> see also Hugill, 2012, p. 16.

The third concept of pataphysics to be introduced is that of syzygy. It has its origin in astronomy, where it indicates the alignment of three or more celestial bodies, an eclipse is such an alignment. A feature of syzygy is an element of surprise or unexpectedness, but it differs from the notion of serendipity in that it implies a scientific exactitude. Again here is a difference between surrealism and pataphysics. Where surrealist chance is, in a sense, irrational and most certainly subconscious, the pataphysical chance is governed by the laws of pataphysics, by contradictions and exceptions, and so on.<sup>137</sup>

In pataphysics, syzygy refers mostly to the alignment of words, for example the pun is a syzygy. Syzygy is the alignment of meaning, and you come to see things differently.<sup>138</sup> Duchamp, when making art as Rrose Sélavy, preferred the pun to meta-irony as humour.<sup>139</sup> The most famous pun is likely that of *L.H.O.O.Q.* (1919); A common reproduction of Leonardo da Vinci's (1452-1519) *Mona Lisa*, onto which Duchamp has painted a moustache and a goatee, and under the picture written "L.H.O.O.Q."

The pun lays in that *L.H.O.O.Q.*, when pronounced in French, sounds like "she's got a hot arse". A syzygy of letters, sound and a reproduction of classical art, that is still contradicted by the classical prank of drawing facial hair on someones face. Such alignments of meaning can be both nonsensical and political. If one does not know French, the pun in *L.H.O.O.Q.*, is lost, but if one does understand the pun there is an alignment of meaning with the moustache and beard, resulting in a critique of classical art. Of course, the facial hair on *Mona Lisa* can in itself be understood as critique on

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137 Hugill, 2012, p. 14.

138 Hugill, 2013.

139 Hugill, 2012, p. 161.

classical art or history of art, but the syzygy with the pun underlines it further, as it can otherwise be interpreted as a simple prank.

### 3.2.3 The absolute and the principle of equivalence

The absolute is a notion in ‘pataphysics that has not lived on as strongly as the ones mentioned before. The concept of the absolute was reintroduced to philosophy by Hegel. What Jarry found in the absolute is connected to his idea of the antinomy. In the absolute, the mind and the body, the subject and object, synthesize into one. The contradictions are unified into a higher knowledge. As such, the absolute is significant for the spiritually oriented in pataphysics.<sup>140</sup>

I find the absolute to be a parallel to Breton’s surreality. Though Jarry’s dualism is between the spirit and the body<sup>141</sup> and not between the conscious and the unconscious. There is a queer idea behind the thought of erasing the boundaries between the body and the spirit. An idea about identity, and how one identifies oneself. The spirit and the body do not always go hand in hand.

An even greater difference between the theories of Jarry and Breton, is how Jarry repurposed epiphenomenalism; a mind-body philosophy where mental events are completely dependent on physical functions. He thought of consciousness as an accidental side effect of the state of the brain.<sup>142</sup> That is, just as *Doctor Faustroll* explained the universe as the exception of itself, the human consciousness is an exception all the same. No human is unique, despite being exceptions; All humans are equal exceptions.

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<sup>140</sup> Hugill, 2012, p. 16-19.

<sup>141</sup> Hugill, 2012, p. 18.

<sup>142</sup> Hugill, 2012, p. 17.

Which brings me to the most political principle of pataphysics – the doctrine of equivalence. In pataphysics everything is of equal value. All the understandings of the world, all theories and philosophies, are the same to pataphysics – imaginary solutions – and they are all equivalent. “A universe comprised of exceptions implies an *equivalence* between imaginary solutions” as Hugill puts it.<sup>143</sup> This also pertains people, animals, objects, everything. The principle of universal equivalence implies a structure free from hierarchies, concerning all aspects of life, social, spiritual, scientific.

In the *Testament of I.L. Sandomir* from 1956, the first Vice-Curator of the Collège de ‘Pataphysique, Dr. Irénée-Louis Sandomir (1864-1957), writes:

“There is [...] no difference whatsoever, either of nature and degree, between different minds, any more than there is any difference between their products, or indeed between one thing and another. For the Complete Pataphysician the most banal graffito equals in value the most consummate book, [...] and the humblest mass-produced saucepan equals the Nativity of Altdorfer [a renaissance painting]. Who among us would dare to consider himself as having reached such a point of extralucidity? Such is nevertheless the postulate of Pataphysical Equivalence [...] Thus, although democracy or demophily are for him only one fiction among others, the pataphysician is without doubt the undisputed holder of the absolute record of democracy [...] he exsuperates. In this as in everything. He is not there to do away with things but to subsume them.”<sup>144</sup>

To me, this shows a will to dismantle hierarchies also on a broader scale in society. It also hints at a certain secularity; Pataphysicians do not recognise a messiah even in the founder of their own science, philosophy, or conception of life.

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<sup>143</sup> Hugill, 212, p. 9.

<sup>144</sup> Sandomir quoted in Hugill, 2012, p. 126-127.

Be that as it may, Alastair Brotchie, who edited *A True History of the College of 'Pataphysics* (1995), claims that the college never could have been a polemic organisation, because of the contradiction between the principles of exceptions, equivalence and imaginary solutions, and the the concept of progress.<sup>145</sup> Even so, I see these principles as highly political, keeping in mind the definition of the political by Lefort. Pataphysics does create a moment in society, which forms the social space of that society.

Raymond Spiteri wrote about surrealism, that it practices the kind of “political that operates in the interval between event, image, and text.”<sup>146</sup> Pataphysics does the same, but it permeates society on a whole different level than surrealism ever could. Pataphysics has a more Dada-attitude, that does not accept any final scientific answer to the existence of the universe. It rejects all values, moral, aesthetic and otherwise. The doctrine of universal equivalence and the reorganization of opposites clarifies the pataphysical reality into singular cases only.<sup>147</sup>

The pataphysical makes that which is right in front of us painfully clear, while it is still hidden from plain sight. It is like when you think you see something, but when you focus on it, it is gone. It is almost there, you can almost grasp it, and then it escapes you. It is this annoyance I have only been able to find in nonsensical art. An annoyance that intervenes with, and inverts the rules and structures we live our lives by.

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145 Brotchie, 1995, p. 7.

146 Spiteri, 2006, p. 195.

147 Roger Shattuck quoted in Hugill, 2012, p. 105.

### 3.3 Contemporary political nonsense

I shall here present some examples of contemporary nonsensical art, that, in my opinion, are political. They are artworks I have encountered during the production of this thesis, that I have found striking,

#### ••••• • **The Political**

• The political is that which has to do with the  
• structures of society, that which is pertaining  
• to people, and it is motivated by subjective  
• interests. Claude LeFort (1924-2010) defines  
• the political as the founding moment that  
• defines the social space in a society. To me,  
• this has to do with feelings – feelings of  
• anger, oppression, despair, urgency, but also  
• hope, love and solidarity.  
•••••

and pinpointing  
how nonsense as  
a strategy for the  
political works in  
visual art.

In order to  
define operations of  
producing nonsense,  
we have to consider  
common sense as  
a production of  
culture, the assump-

tion of consensus by members of a social context, and culture as  
ways to organize experience.<sup>148</sup> In art, this implies a certain format.  
To be able to organize experience, classifications, hierarchies and  
structures are needed. Nonsense operations challenge these: Fruit  
does not always represent fruit, the economic value of materials can  
be questioned, assumed structures and hierarchies are turned on  
their head. Context is essential – the depicted might not represent  
the evident.

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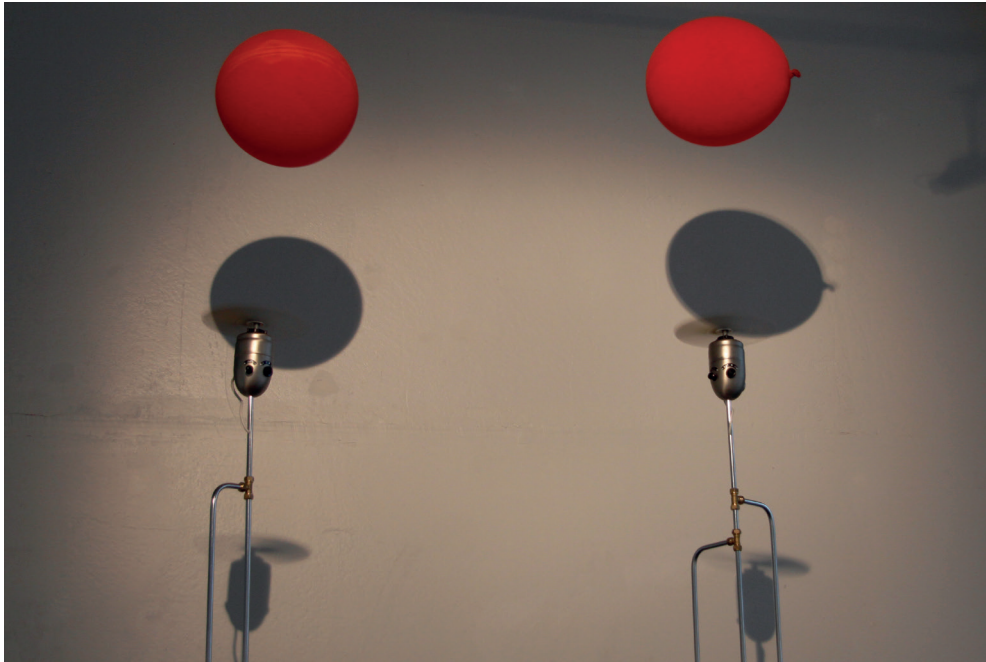
148 Stewart, 1978, p. 57.

### 3.3.1 Fundamentals of the national economy

Esa Meltaus' *Fundamentals of the national economy* (Kansantalouden perusteet, 2012) shows two red balloons hovering above two fans, respectively. It looks like something from a scientific amusement park. You know, the beach ball hovering above a pipe blowing air. It is meant for examining how the air stream and the laws of gravity works. You can poke the ball with varying strength, trying out how much strength you need in order to disrupt its balance on the air stream, making it fall down, only to try putting it back again; normally with great success. One can also ponder on how much pressure the air needs in order to keep the ball afloat at a suitable distance, without pushing the ball too far so that it flies away outside the air stream, or falling to the ground because of too low pressure.

The nonsensical here is to exhibit this kind of scientific exercise, or experiment as an object of art. It is a bit funny; I associate it with play. Balloons and fans do not generally have any connection to each other, other than the one mentioned above. The fans do look a little bit like the propellers on a boat, not making it any more relevant for the balloons. The balloons are red. Does that make any difference? And why are there two of them? I cannot answer these questions. The artwork is seemingly a nonsensical experiment of physics.

Without reading the artworks title, it could easily be discarded as a nonsensical child's play or that exercise in physics. The political in this work of art does not become evident before reading the title: *Fundamentals of the national economy*. With the title, Meltaus suggests that the national economy is fragile. Its balance is as fragile as the balance of a balloon caught in an air stream. Its fundamentals are



*Fundamentals of the National Economy, Esa Meltaus, installation, 2012. Photograph by Emilia Ewa Kwiatkowska*

based on, nothing, really. The basis the national economy is built on is non-existent. National economy exists as a balloon, floating on air, with no strings whatsoever to anything else. It is an isolated bubble with no contact to or relevance for its surroundings. The bubble can further be easily destroyed, by a sharp object or pin, bursting into non-existence.

Here we have an artwork, nonsensical at first glance, but non the less political. I would say that the political in this artwork arise when the title of the artwork is set in contrast to the artwork. The political emerge between the title and the installation on a pataphysical level. A syzygy of meaning is created when contradicting the



vague understanding of national economics as something stable and immutable, with the unstable and vulnerable balloon.

### 3.3.2 Island within an island

Gabriel Orozco's work *Island within an Island* from 1993, is a political artwork both nonsensical and pataphysical. He uses litter to represent the Manhattan skyline, that is simultaneously seen in the background. Trash has become an increasingly common material in art making. As an example, the Finnish young artists of the year in 2014, Janne Nabb and Maria Teeri, use waste as the main source for their art. Nevertheless junk has been used for art making for decades. Therefore, I don't think that the material in itself is nonsensical, but the relation between the litter and the skyline is.

It is not a direct copy of the skyline – it is more of a generic skyline that could represent any major city. Yet its setting indicates that it represents that very skyline you can see in the background. Does Orozco then imply that Manhattan is an island of junk, a district full of litter, or is it just a simple landscape? This is an example of nonsense operations of reversals and inversions.<sup>149</sup> The disparity between the two islands are simultaneously enormous and minimal.

Seeing this installation on the spot, would not necessarily trigger the idea of an art work. Walking past, one could disregard the composition as a pile of debris, simply not notice it. One has to look more closely, making the connection to the city skyline in the background, to see that this is a consciously assembled pile of junk.

In my interpretation, the title, *Island within an Island*, refers to the fact that Orozco has built a mini-Manhattan on Manhattan,

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<sup>149</sup> Stewart, 1978, p. 59.



Island within an Island, *Gabriel Orozco, photography, 1993.*

that is an island. A somewhat tautological title, that nonetheless confirms that the skyline of junk represents or mirrors the skyline of Manhattan in the background. This is where the pataphysical in the work of art comes in. The trash is assembled to represent the skyline of the same island it is assembled on. To clarify, the setting for the artwork is nonsensical, as the virtually invisible, surgical intervention it is, while the relation between the represented skyline and the litter remains nonsensical it is also pataphysical.

Here, the political is not only in the pataphysical relation between the two skylines. With the very gesture to place an installation in the public like this, he seem to want to include art in everyday life, and raise questions and thought in those who do notice the art work. Still, he has chosen to document the work in the form of a pho-

tography, to preserve it in a way it wont be preserved in the urban setting.

The suggestions and questions that emerge from Orozco's art work seem to mock the cities acquired status as a centre for art and global politics. Manhattan purports to be a glamorous place, full of life and light. Depicted in such a dreary way, with litter as main materials, suggests that the city is not what it sets out to be.

### 3.3.3 Fruitplay

Tuuli Mukka's *Hedelmäpeli* (Fruitplay, 2013) is a pair of digitally compiled collages, depicting two human-like figures. One is made out of various fruits, with human legs. It is quite ubuesque<sup>150</sup> with a large belly and a small head. The other one is skinny, and seem to wear some kind of brown dress that covers everything except for the legs. The figure is carrying a fruit bag and has a camera lens where the face should be. Both figures are set in urban milieus that look computer generated.

The nonsensical in these images is apparent. Human legs are combined with something strictly non-human. Alien looking figures are placed in a familiar setting, seemingly without purpose or relevance. Everything about these images is nonsensical.

Here the nonsense itself appears political. Still, I would argue that the political is on a pataphysical level, as it is one step deeper into the image, than the immediate nonsense. There is the contradiction of the fruits and the lineaments of a human-like figure. The figure is fat and immobile. To me, it comments on the obsession with health that permeate society today, while morbid obesity never was more common in the western world.

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150 King Ubu-like.



Hedelmäpeli, *Tuuli Mukka, collage, mixed media, 2013.*

The other one, slim and brown, with the camera lens, comments an other aspect of the same obsession. One is to look and be healthy, but the most important is to appear healthy and beautiful, which is done through the lenses of our cameras and mobile phones: further distancing oneself from the body and social interaction.

### 3.3.4 Suomen paviljonki/Finnish pavilion

The last work of art I am going to write about here, is *Suomen Paviljonki / Finnish Pavilion* (24:38 min, 2013)<sup>151</sup> by Jaakko Pallasvuo

<sup>151</sup> Watch here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XcoUFHL-7x0>, accessed on 29.10.2014.

and Kimmo Modig. It is perhaps the hardest one to grasp of these examples, as it is highly pataphysical and not so much nonsensical as the other ones.

*Suomen Paviljonki / Finnish Pavilion* is a video about the depressed Finnish art, at the same time it tells the story of three Finnish artists that are chosen to take part in the Finnish Pavilion at the Venice Biennial in 2015. The artists are a woman, and a duo with two men. The narrative is unconsecutive, and though it is clear when things take place chronologically, it is unclear what has happened in between, and exactly what role who played in the events. The soundtrack is both in Swedish and Finnish, with English subtitles. When the voice of Finnish art talks in the beginning, there are ironic smileys, or smileys for emphasis, in the subtitles. The characters in the video have clear models from reality, but it is unclear what they represent, and if they represent something more than themselves.

The video describes Finnish art as introspective, pretentious and arrogant despite its insecurity. It wants to keep its distance; It does not want to mingle with art of other countries. It cannot decide whether it wants to stay in Finland and Europe or go further, or if it even has the potential to do so.

At the same time as the video is a great depiction of the art world in Finland, it is also ever so slightly exaggerated, which makes you unsure if it is a parody or not. Every little move, every little facial expression, or the absence of facial expressions, are thoroughly thought through, to resemble the Finnish art world as Modig and Pallasvuo perceives it.

The pataphysical in this video, is to me, the ambiguous way it is a critique simultaneously as it is a near perfect representation. It is that pataphysical, exaggerated irony that bounces back, but





*Still from Suomen Paviljonki/Finnish Pavilion, Kimmo Modig and Jaakko Pallasvuo, video, 24:38 min, 2013.*

still manages to sever the contiguity of realism to every-day-life. It spirals back towards itself and ends up a little bit to the side of its point of departure. By reproducing the structures and the attitude of the Finnish art world, distorting them insignificantly, they make the preposterousness and pretentiousness of it all crystal clear. The critique of the atmosphere in their own work context hits right on target. Yet, possible suggestions for a change in the Finnish art world remain hidden.

Nonsense is indeed a field where it is possible to critique the procedures that make up the world of “common sense”, it is also a safe place to formulate that critique.<sup>152</sup> Hierarchies are flattened, inverted and manipulated in nonsense. It questions the very idea of hierarchies, and celebrates arbitrary and impermanent hierarchies.

<sup>152</sup> Stewart, 1978, p. 206.

Nonsense is thus in danger of being a valueless activity, as well as an activity without values. Purpose becomes a movement continuing away from itself, reflexively spiralling away from any significance or direction. All nonsense divides, and rearranges any idea of society as coherent. Author and audience are constantly repositioned and fragmented.<sup>153</sup> The works of art I have presented here are merely examples of nonsensical strategies for the political in visual art. Next time something strikes you as nonsense – take a closer look.

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<sup>153</sup> Stewart, 1978, p. 209.





## 4. DISORIENTATION



Interested as I am in the political aspects of nonsense, and how the nonsensical can bring about the educative disorientation that teach us by chance, I would like to think about how we can emancipate the viewer and lay the ground for chance to play its part in the encounter with contemporary art.

How is it that the nonsensical can make us see the world anew? How can I, as art educator, mediator or curator, encourage the viewer to truly encounter the nonsensical art, without dismissing it as irrelevant? This chapter discusses surrealist strategies for disorientation and learning as confusion in the liminality of nonsense.

#### 4.1 Strategies for disorientation

We have already accounted for the surrealist revolution. The revolution was not initially intended as a political revolution out in the streets, as the situationist's revolution, but rather "a revolution of the mind".<sup>154</sup> An intellectual revolution on an individual level, that by extension would affect all of society. What is interesting with this revolution is, that, in a way, it would be an educational revolution. Not educational as in changing the educational system, but as in challenging the people to unlearn and approach their surroundings differently.

The surrealists wanted to create *dépaysement*, disorientation, in the viewer. This confusion would lead the viewer to look upon the world with new eyes, like having been placed in a totally foreign reality where the familiar systems no longer work. It is like seeing things separated from their normal context, and the usual unreflecting interpretation of everyday situations no longer apply. This sensation would be what is often referred to as "like seeing

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<sup>154</sup> Lewis, 1990, p. 33.

something for the first time”.<sup>155</sup> It is about unlearning set rules and values to be able to defy them, to make the absurdity in power structures visible, and about unlearning in order to emancipate oneself; To reach that liberty Breton was so fond of.

An other way to achieve educational disorientation is by putting aside reason. If hypotheses are lost when giving up reason, there is no way of knowing where you are headed. There is no order of reason to lead you to a certain point where you have “learned” something, where you “know” something.

In nonsense activities the only way to reach a goal or closure is to include an arbitrary stop-rule, something that proclaims the end of the activity. Such nonsense strategies show the arbitrariness and absence of all beginnings and endings, and therefore the arbitrariness and absence of all middles as well. With nonsense methods the centre – the hypotheses, the research question, the structure, the focus – drops out, leaving only an infinite spiral tracing itself.<sup>156</sup>

When such a design is introduced to learning, it becomes irrelevant to introduce a stop-rule (learning ends with death). Even so, there are always goals to be reached, achievements to accomplish, in most curricula today. It is forgotten that learning is a constantly ongoing process, that occurs outside the class room as well, and that learning is not straight forward. Learning is rather a state of confusion, where many stimulations and experiences are to be sorted, categorized and linked to previous stimulations and experiences.

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155 Kaitaro, 2001, p. 136.

156 Stewart, 1978, p. 143.

## 4.2 Learning as a puzzle

To think about education as displacement is in no way something new. Already in the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the teacher Joseph Jacotot (1770-1840), came across, and started to think about, the idea of education as disoriented. Funnily enough, it happened by chance. He were to teach some Flemish students, but they did not have any language in common. What he found was a bilingual version of the book *Télémaque*, and he asked the students to learn French by comparing the Flemish and the French texts. To his surprise, he really did not believe they would manage to learn French this way, they learned to write and read French as good as any French person.<sup>157</sup>

This was a disoriented way for the students to learn French. Trying to find out which words correspond to each other, finding out that the order of words are not necessarily the same in the two languages, and so on. It is like a puzzle; you can see that the pieces are part of the same picture, but you need more and more pieces to see the full image. In traditional education you would be given one piece at a time, in such an order that it would always fit together with a piece you already have. To my mind, that is in no way less confusing, and it could even take longer before you can see the whole picture. Even more important, there is no possibility for the student to figure out the relation between the pieces of the puzzle, because he or she is never given the opportunity to do so.

Often, we are led to believe that learning is a clear path, where one step follows the other, or like building blocks, where you need to put one block on the other, and if you miss one block your learning

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<sup>157</sup> Rancière, 1991, p. 2.

tower will fall. This is a metaphor my own teacher in elementary school used, when explaining how we were to learn the Finnish language. But how often do not people say that they cannot learn languages in a classroom, that they need to use it to learn it.

The puzzle-metaphor for learning is much more fitting; you find one piece here and one piece there. As with nonsense, there is no beginning, no end, and no middle in learning. Teachers that fail to understand this, who sees only one path for learning, fails to see the intelligence of their pupils and the diversity of their minds.

To explain something to someone is to imply that he cannot understand it by himself. This pedagogical idea divides intelligence into two, the superior and the inferior intelligence. For Jacotot this became the principle of *enforced stultification*.<sup>158</sup>

The importance of treating his students as equal intelligences became clear to Jacotot. He had thought his students something they did not know, without communicating anything to them. So, he did not teach them something he already knew, instead he left his own intelligence out of the picture, and allowed the students to grapple with *Télémaque* them selves, using their own intelligence. Still, it was his will that the students would learn French with the help of this book. Jacques Rancière (1940) calls this *emancipation*. He explains it as “the act of an intelligence obeying only itself even while the will obeys another will”.<sup>159</sup> This resembles the swerve of clinamen, only it is not a random swerve, but the will of one person that influences another person to move in a certain direction. A notion I would like to bring further when it comes to mediating contemporary art, not the least nonsensical contemporary art.

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158 Rancière, 1991, p. 4.

159 Rancière, 1991, p. 13.

The surrealist way of learning, the revolution of the mind, is to unlearn the conventions of society, through an experience of disorientation or confusion where the structures and systems become apparent. In surrealist opinion one of the many roles of art is to invent new feelings,<sup>160</sup> but the role of art is also to make it possible to invent new ways of being in, and relating to, the world. Yet, I must stress, that surrealism does not give an answer to *how* to be or relate, rather it lays the ground for unlearning, dismantling, and for the unexpected. Further, this was all to emerge from the spectators themselves, in the combined realm of the conscious and unconscious, only provoked by the art to do so.

The way his students learned French fascinated Jacotot so much, that he went on to develop new theories about learning. Traditionally, and still the most common idea today, the idea is that a teacher is to transmit his knowledge to the students. Yet, it is not about making the students learn by heart and repeat like parrots; it is about saving them from detours, by leading them to understand according to an ordered progression. Therefore, the main task of the teacher is to explain, the content of a book or in what order words should be in a sentence. However, Jacotot had explained nothing to these Flemish speaking students. He had only given them the means to learn another language.<sup>161</sup> He had given them a jigsaw puzzle to solve, but no further instructions on how to go about it.

Breton saw automatism as a method both for learning and for creating art. He made it concrete with the sentence "L'illumination vient ensuite", a wordplay in French roughly translated as "The illumination comes later", where the word *illumination* stands both

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160 Kaitaro, 2001, p. 115.

161 Rancière, 1991, p. 3.

for images and enlightenment.<sup>162</sup> With this he crystallizes that you do not need to understand the intention of something, like art, in order to learn or, rather, unlearn. First you experience, and then you might create, learn, unlearn or see something new.

Jacotot thought about children, and how children learn a language. Parents and teachers usually do not instruct or explain children's mother tongue to them in any way, still most of them learn to speak it fluently.<sup>163</sup> Which means that children are able to understand when they make mistakes, and correct themselves. They learn new words and what words mean through context, because there is no other way to translate a word to a child. It does not help to translate it into an other language, because the child probably does not know any other language. So, a child's understanding for a word must happen without the explication of a teacher.<sup>164</sup>

There is a parallel here to the translation of visual art into written or spoken language. The language of visual art is located in a different universe than the written and spoken language, which often presents a problem when it comes to mediating art. There is no direct translation as there can be between Flemish and French. Instead, we have to create a language, or transmit meanings to words, that describe visual art in a sensible, understandable manner. If the mediator chooses to mediate art through text, that is. There is also the possibility to mediate art through other, wordless, mediums, that bring up other senses than that of sight, such as smell, hearing and touch. This is a strategy that sets a series of associations in motion, a chain reaction, pushed in a certain direction, impossible to predict.

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162 Kaitaro, 2001, p. 129.

163 Rancière, 1991, p. 3.

164 Rancière, 1991, p. 4.



### 4.3 The subjective in research and learning

Breton characterized surrealism as a lyric movement, implying that it denies the consecutive logical, temporal and causal order. A movement that struts a juxtaposition of contradictory worlds, that are both unpredictable and repetitive, and thus escape the temporal dimension in favour of a spatial order. Simultaneously denying the orderliness of that order, by celebrating anomalies such as fate, chance, accident and hazard.<sup>165</sup> Thus, Breton criticized the logics of rational research. Moving away from a temporal dimension, is also moving away from a rational order of things. Time is a flat circle, where everything exists simultaneously and nothing moves in a certain direction. The spatial order gives room for anomalies, for clinamen, syzygy, antinomy, the absolute and equivalence.

The criticism against rational research, expressed in the first manifesto of surrealism, is also a criticism against positivist science. As Breton understood that absolute rationalism allows only for consideration of facts directly related to measurable experience, he also understood that there is a need for different methods. Accepting only absolute rationalism, positivist research, there is no possibility for research of the immeasurable.<sup>166</sup> Implicitly, he writes about situated knowledge. He is not afraid of taking a position and acknowledging the, or being part of the, subjective.<sup>167</sup>

Donna Haraway writes that “Situated knowledges require that the object of knowledge be pictured as an actor and agent”.<sup>168</sup> Though Breton in no way was a feminist, he would have agreed

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<sup>165</sup> Stewart, 1978, p. 156.

<sup>166</sup> Breton, 1924, p. 7.

<sup>167</sup> Breton, 1924, p. 14.

<sup>168</sup> Haraway, 1988, p. 592.

with Haraway. There is no such thing as complete objectivity, as the object of knowledge, that is the actor or agent, is a subject. Objectivity is thus about unequal structuring,<sup>169</sup> structuring made in the intersections of science, technology, philosophy, social interaction and so on.

Here some might argue that the surrealist methods, automatism and relying on chance, is giving up the subjective. Nevertheless, it is not giving up the subjective, but giving up reason, an order of reason, and a conscious rationality. It is, in fact, a sort of enhancement of the subjective. Giving up rational thought is giving up what we are taught, giving up conscious aesthetics and moral that are culturally determined, leaving room for that which is truly subjective. The subjective here is not to be confused with the individual, as the members of surrealism gave up their individuality to merge completely with the group. There was to be no artistic individuality in the French surrealist movement.

The Belgian surrealist Paul Nougé (1895-1967) criticised positivist research for *finding* results, as if reality is something organized in advance ready to be described theoretically. Instead he talk about inventing, for example inventing the human mind. He asserted that Freud had invented the Oedipus complex rather than found it, and that it is possible to invent feelings equally strong as love or hate. Nougé was uncertain of when something is invented and when it is found, for example something that exists independently of man can be found, while something experienced would rather be invented.<sup>170</sup>

This kind of inventing would not be possible in positivist research, as you have to have a hypothesis and research your subject

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169 Haraway, 1988, p. 595.

170 Kaitaro, 2001, p. 115.

with a certain goal in mind, and you have to be able to measure what you research. Something you cannot do with feelings or the mind. Instead research as inventing is situating yourself within your research and inventing something new there, something you are part of and something you experience. The only way to measure an experience is to invent a way to explain it. Language, poetry and art is not even sufficient enough sometimes. Nougé's idea of inventing things, is similar to the imaginary solutions of pataphysics. Instead of finding a solution to a problem, one invents the solution to an imaginary problem.

Both Timo Kaitaro and the surrealist Mattias Forshage agree that surrealist thought or procedure, needs an element of analogical thought.<sup>171</sup> That is, there is a need to combine different, even disparate, notions, to advance in one's thought. For example to use the solution for one problem to solve a seemingly disparate problem.

The artist's task is to render the value of analogical thinking, and by extension the value of the subjective. There is relevance in the quotient of the external and internal reality, but absolute rationalism gives no room for subjective interpretations. Instead man tries to research the world objectively. Following absolute rationalism, man hides herself when asking "Where do I come from? Why do I exist?"<sup>172</sup> So, the artist's task is to observe the world and share her findings, or inventions if we agree with Nougé, with the audience, and it does not matter what the artist's intention with her work is. What is of most importance is what the artwork becomes to the spectator when it is shown, regardless of the viewer's mental mechanisms or subjective associations that created it. In surrealism

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171 <http://icecrawler.blogspot.fi/2012/02/surrealism-and-philosophy.html>  
accessed on 27.10.2014 & Kaitaro, 2001, p. 133.

172 Kaitaro, 2001, p. 133.

the artwork should become something that makes us see the world anew.<sup>173</sup>

Though not a surrealist, Duchamp agreed with the essential role of the spectator. In a lecture called “The Creative Act” in 1957 he stated that “The creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualifications and thus adds his own contribution to the creative act.”<sup>174</sup> This brings the notion of the subjective further. It is not only the subjective of the artist that is important. There is no need to know the artist's intention to experience a work of art, because without the viewer's subjective associations in relation to an artwork, there is only the artwork the artist intended.

To the surrealists, to understand differently is always the fruit of an experience.<sup>175</sup> In the case above, the experience of the encounter with art. Surrealist art refuses an order of reasons. It combines things in an absurd and unexpected way to reveal structures and systems, otherwise invisible. It is like diving into a heavy set of theories – everything is confusing at first, but after a while you see the logic.

Most people that attend a guided tour or a workshop in a(n art) museum expect to be taught something. On a guided tour they do not want to play the active role, but follow a guide, listen and passively receive information. The participant in a workshop already expects to be more active, but still wants to be taught something starting at point A proceeding to point B, until finally reaching the goal of having learned something. How can we brake this pattern? Instead

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173 Kaitaro, 2011, p. 80-81.

174 Duchamp, 1975, p. 140 quoted in Hugill, 2012, p.55.

175 Alquié, 1965, p. 71.

of saying “Listen to me, I have something to teach you”, we could ask “What do you know?” Obviously the guide has somewhat more knowledge of the subject at hand, otherwise he or she would not be there. Still, what she ought to teach them is that she has nothing to teach them. All an art exhibition visitor needs in order to understand or fully enjoy the exhibition, is their own intelligence.

#### 4.4 Learning in the liminality of nonsense

The liminality of nonsense is a place to stand in the middle of change. It is an impossible context for getting from one state of things to another, a motion characteristic not only for change but also for learning.<sup>176</sup> It is a faze where things are and are not, just as the antimony in ‘pataphysics. Nonsense is a threat to common sense, but sometimes it is common sense. Through nonsense we can both learn and change. A nonsensical happenstance that might seem irrelevant at the time, might later prove to have been educative. Nonsense can be that place where you learn about the world – and the world surely does not make sense!

Learning is the ability to take in information around us, add that to the information we already have, and put them together. (Hence the saying “put one and one together”.) The traditional idea of learning as a staircase, or a building where you begin with the first step or the foundation and build upwards, is distorted. Actually, learning takes place all the time, and you can find a piece of the puzzle where-ever, not only in the classroom. The assumption about teaching where there is a master, a teacher, that passes on her knowledge to the students is a foolish assumption in my opinion.

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176 Stewart, 1978, p. 202-203.

The students can learn as much from each other as the teacher can learn from them and vice versa.

Learning is about being able to respond to stimulus, repeating words, imitating movements. Once the “student” can respond to the context of the stimulus as well, learning about learning becomes possible. When the infinite repetition of imitation becomes apparent, and one can differentiate oneself from the task at hand, the shift away from a simple response happens towards the ability to recognize and organize the conditions of response.<sup>177</sup> The student sees the markers for a context where learning is possible. To be able to respond to nonsense, learning about learning is crucial. If learning remains reflexive, nonsense remains nonsensical.

I now come back to the subject of hypotheses; Why the absence of hypotheses is reasonable. The surrealist and nonsensical way, where the intention of the artist and any order of reasons is unimportant, where chance plays a great part, lays the ground for something unexpected to happen. Leaving learning to nonsense is giving way for the unexpected. There is no way of knowing what the spectator, the student, the participant is going to extract.

#### 4.5 Intellectual emancipation

Emancipation is the principle of equal intelligences. Jacotot brought his ideas further by stating that the ignorant can teach the ignorant.<sup>178</sup> Rancière calls this method of teaching oneself universal teaching, and conveys that it is really an ancient way of learning things. There is no one who has not learned something by himself, without a teacher or someone to explain. Jacotot stressed that the

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<sup>177</sup> Stewart, 1978, p. 203.

<sup>178</sup> Rancière, 1991, p. 14-15.

circle of emancipation need only be begun.<sup>179</sup> Emancipation as the principle of equal intelligences leads me instinctively to the pataphysical principle of equivalence. In pataphysics all intelligences are equivalent. Are they therefore capable of the same things? Evidently not.

Emancipation is really about making someone else trust in their ability to learn and understand on their own. Rancière brought his own thoughts on emancipation further in the composition *The Emancipated Spectator*, 2009. However, I am interested in Jacotot's idea about emancipated learning as a teaching method of chance.<sup>180</sup>

Since there is no ordered progression when you teach yourself, there is no direction, but everything you learn is learned by chance. If your mother watched a lot of cooking shows when you were a child, you might have learned words such as *pot* and *pan*, whereas a child who lives on a farm might learn *heifer* and *bull*. All by chance, depending on what you parents do or where you grew up, and, of course, on how much certain words were used around you. Though all intelligences are exceptional, but not unique, they are capable of different things, different thoughts, triggered by the same stimulus. This is not the chance of surrealism, but the clinamen and syzygy of pataphysics.

To learn through nonsense, is learning by chance, clinamen or syzygy, but to be able to engage in nonsense, one must already have the ability to learn about learning, seeing that nonsense is the exploration of the parameters of settings for learning. Making nonsense is often about the removal of possibilities to recognize such settings, as well as advertising an incompetence that depends upon a con-

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179 Rancière, 1991, p. 16.

180 Rancière, 1991, p. 12.

sciousness of the borders between incompetence and competence.<sup>181</sup> As such, incompetence becomes purposeful and a talent. In every-day-life however, incompetence is useless and unwanted, while in nonsense, learning or pataphysical endeavours, incompetence is undeterred by every-day-life's common sense. Incompetence as accomplished can thus be a pathway towards emancipation.

Both surrealism and pataphysics are driven by a disruptive energy. In surrealism it is about creating a political moment with disruptive images,<sup>182</sup> and in pataphysics it is the disruptiveness of the anomaly, the thing that does not fit.<sup>183</sup> Now this disruptiveness is exactly the liminal state of nonsense that is educational. Freeing the message from the situation at hand, creates a decontextualization that leads towards intellectual growth, "a revolution of the mind".

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181 Stewart, 1978, p. 205-206.

182 Spiteri, 2006, p. 186.

183 Hugill, 2012, p. 13.



## 5. Conclusion



The answer to the research question "Where is the political in nonsensical art?" became apparent in the analysis of contemporary nonsensical artworks. The political is semi-hidden on a deeper level than the apparent nonsense, on a pataphysical level.

When I set out to research the political in nonsensical art, I had a vague idea of 'pataphysics and nonsense as something funny, where pataphysics described the structures of society as I experience them, and nonsense was the apparently irrelevant. Now, it is clear that nonsense and the pataphysical reside on different levels in art. The nonsensical lies on an immediate level, that is nonetheless metaphysical, and the pataphysical hides on a level deeper than nonsense.

This raises the question "Do all works of art have a pataphysical level?". Let us think about an artwork, a painting for example, to keep it simple. The physical in the artwork is the object itself – the canvas, the paint, the frame. The metaphysical in the painting is the motif, and all the elements and forms the motif consists of. The pataphysical then, lies in the space between the elements that constitutes the motif, and in that which happens in between those elements. So, as the nonsensical is constructed by combining things that make sense on their own, this is created on a metaphysical level, while the political is found on a pataphysical level.

Let us concretize the example in a landscape painting. It is a representation of a landscape, imaginary or real. It can be realised in many different ways, and in the previous centuries the choice of technique or motif itself might have been a political statement, but still it is just a landscape. If there is something going on in the landscape, there might be a pataphysical level.

In Édouard Manet's (1832-1883) *The Luncheon on the Grass* (1862-1863), for example, there are two men, a lightly dressed woman,

a naked woman, and a basket with food. They sit by a stream or pond in a park. This is by no means a nonsensical painting, the only thing nonsensical about it is the naked and lightly dressed women in contrast to the fully dressed men. Why is one woman naked, and the other almost naked when the men are fully dressed? Has she been swimming? If one knows that the painting originally was named *The Bath*, there is a quick answer to those questions, and there clearly is nothing more going on in this painting. I would draw the conclusion that there is not a pataphysical level to this work of art. It could however have had one, considering the context it was first exhibited in, as naked women were not to be portrayed as Manet had in this painting.

The pataphysical level is then not so much in the painting, but the between the painting and the context it was shown in. Similar to Duchamp's *The Fountain*, where the both nonsensical and the political lie in the contradiction of the object and its context. That level is withal lost in contemporary society when it comes to *Luncheon in the Grass*, as the female body is sexualized and exploited from every angle. Whereas *The Fountain* still raises discussion on the topic "What is art?".

My research process was very intuitive at first, there were parallels between nonsense, surrealism and pataphysics everywhere. Yet, they are, most often, nothing more than parallels. Pataphysics can be seen as a science that forms the moment where a social space in society is formed, that is a science that enables the political, and surrealism is an art movement that operates in that social space, with nonsense as a strategy for creating art. Thus, pataphysics and surrealism go hand in hand, but operate on different levels, again. Nonsense can be a strategy for both, for the same purpose,

conveying the political, but the function of nonsense are used in different ways. The pataphysical nonsense is governed by the laws of pataphysics, and is thus not the product of random events as the nonsense of surrealism.

There are many aspects of this research that could be taken further, especially with pataphysics that have not been examined that much in relation to visual arts or education. I agree with Hugill that pataphysics is becoming increasingly conscious, and when it comes to mediating and the emancipated spectator, pataphysics could be applied in the educational work of institutions, as surrealist methods have been used in educational work for decades.

During spring 2014 I made some experiments in combining strategies from surrealism and pataphysics for educational work in the Tartu Art Museum. With interventions in the exhibitions that appealed to the sense of touch, I sought to trigger a clinamen of associations. The associations would be triggered by touching the interventions in combination with the artworks. The interventions were popular, but unfortunately the experiments were not extensive enough to use in the thesis. However, this is making conscious the pataphysics of educational work in institutions.

Another interesting subject for further research is the queer aspect of pataphysics in the absolute, where the mind and the body synthesize into one. The contradiction in such a synthesis presents new angles when it comes to identity and sexuality, as does pataphysics as a science governing the laws of exceptions with a doctrine of equivalence. The absolute questions contemporary gender structures and norms for sexuality. It resists the otherness of the sexual dichotomy, racialization, and apparent disparity.

When it comes to surrealism and nonsense, the former has been researched extensively and the latter could be interesting to examine closer in relation to visual art. Are there artists that would classify their art as nonsense themselves? What happens when nonsense becomes a genre? These are some questions that might be interesting to research in order to update the language we use for describing and talking about art.

Intellectual carnivalism, that I have only briefly mentioned here, is a concept that could be further examined in relation to pataphysical artistic practices. Generally, it has not been researched extensively at all.

With theory of concepts it is crucial to examine concepts thoroughly, and not skip to conclusions because of similarities in concepts. There are many rabbit holes to fall into, and I hope I have been able to avoid most of them. Sometimes art itself has felt distant from this research, as it has operated on such a theoretical level. Still, it is based on theories of surrealism and 'pataphysics, as well as artworks I have encountered. It is easy to get lost in the intricacy of 'pataphysics, but I have done my best to highlight the pataphysical aspects of modern and contemporary art.

This whole process has been like a spiral. Starting with nonsense, going to surrealism and pataphysics, continuing outwards to education, and mediating the nonsensical. Even though pataphysics is a useless science, it provides the means to examine the details of a social context. The space between the line that constitutes a spiral. I only got an answer to my first research question, "Where is the political in nonsensical art?". The answer to how the political in nonsensical art can be mediated, is still open, but this research process has opened up for new aspects of mediating.







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