

**DORA MAAR IN 1936:  
BETWEEN SURREALISM AND DOCUMENTARY**

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In June 1936, the New Burlington Galleries in London's Mayfair hosted the International Surrealist Exhibition, comprising 392 paintings, drawings, sculptures, objects and a few photographs. Among the latter were three pictures by Dora Maar, listed in the catalogue by English titles only; no.166 was *Portrait of Ubu*, 167 was *The Pretender* and 168 was *Dawn*.

Each of these small photographs had to assert itself amidst the panoply of the exhibition as a whole, for they were not hung together.<sup>1</sup> The three photographs were anyhow quite different from one other; as well as being significant works in themselves, they can also help us understand the relationship in Maar's photography between surrealism and documentary. Here these pictures were, enfolded within this major manifestation of surrealist art, yet each connected in a different way back to the external world in which it had been made.



Fig 1: Installation photograph of the International Surrealist Exhibition, London, 1936

*The Pretender*, better known by its French title *Le Simulateur*, is one of several photo-collages that Maar made in the mid-1930s (Fig 2).<sup>2</sup> Some of these contained elements from her own documentary photographs, but what is particularly interesting with *Le Simulateur* is that there are only two source images and we have both of them, so we can assess how Maar transformed them in the resulting collage.

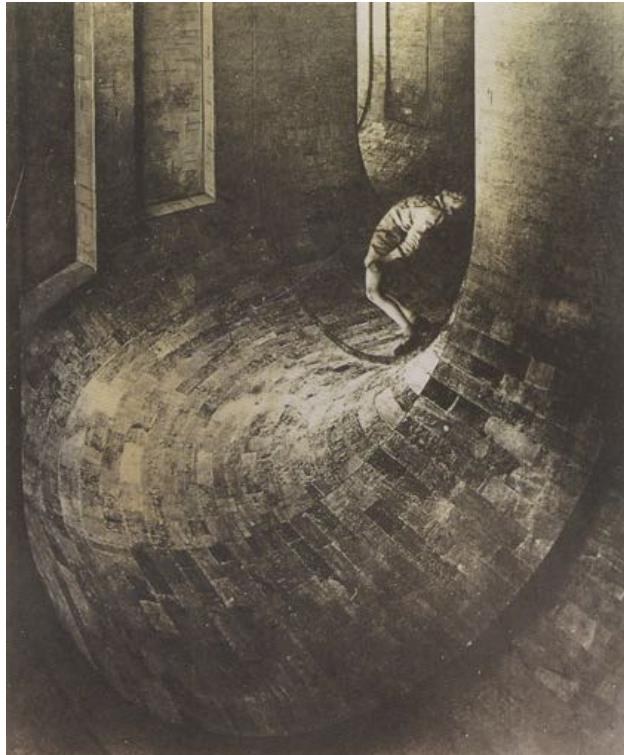


Fig 2: Dora Maar, *Le Simulateur*, 1935

The architectural background of *Le Simulateur* is a photograph of the Orangerie at Versailles.<sup>3</sup> This sublime space was designed by Jules Hardouin-Mansart to house Louis XIV's collection of citrus trees. When Maar photographed it, the space was empty, except for a tiny figure of a workman holding a plank. Only when he is noticed can the scale of the architecture be appreciated.

For *Le Simulateur*, Maar inverted this picture so that the grand arch at the top now forms the floor at the bottom.<sup>4</sup> In one print of the collage, half of the man with the plank was left at what was now the top of the image,<sup>5</sup> but in the version shown

here, he has been cropped out, making the space more elemental. Maar emphasized the sense of oppression by painting out the windows and printing the image much darker. As Rick Poyner asked, ‘Is this a place of incarceration and chastisement, a subterranean dungeon where the stone floor is warped for maximum discomfort, or some sort of antiquated sewer system prone to noxious flooding at any time?’<sup>6</sup>



Fig 3: Dora Maar, *Barcelona*, 1934?

The boy comes from another of Maar’s photographs, taken in Spain (Fig 3).<sup>7</sup> In that image, four lads pose for the camera, one performing a hand-stand against the wall. However, his supporting arm is hidden behind another boy and, when Maar cut round his figure, she left the check sleeve of the other child in the foreground in place on his chest. Turning the boy upside down has the ironic effect of making him nearly the right way up, as if he is indeed there in this space.<sup>8</sup>

Maar made one other small change by hand. The boy’s eyes have been scratched out, an effect akin to that in a horror movie, suggesting clairvoyance, even madness. David Lomas has read his arched back as ‘a deliberate invocation of hysteria’, the stiffened posture adopted by the female hysterics at the Salpêtrière Hospital.<sup>9</sup> But perhaps, remembering the title of the picture, it might rather be a simulation, indeed a parody of such a posture.

By such decisive means, Maar took both boy and architecture far from their origins. However, the factuality of photography is still there, giving a reality to the picture, and it’s worth noting that, in the 1936 catalogue, *Le Simulateur* was described

simply as a 'photograph'. This suggests that, as she did with other collages, Maar rephotographed the work to give it a smooth surface.<sup>10</sup> For, unlike those surrealist collagists who exploited the cut as a sign of dislocation, Maar seems to have wanted the final image to project the verisimilitude and unity of a photograph rather than the disjuncture and craft of a collage.<sup>11</sup>

The second photograph by Maar in the London exhibition was *Dawn*, a title that is no longer familiar. But a study of the installation photos (Fig 1) shows that this is the picture now known more prosaically as *Portrait of Jacqueline Lamba* (Fig 4).<sup>12</sup> At first, I was surprised at the inclusion of this photograph in the show, since it is not obviously 'surrealist' at the transformative and confrontational level of the other two images. A blonde woman leans pensively out of the window of a ruined house, with thick foliage growing in the room behind her. Perhaps, then, the picture's surrealism lies in the discomfiting reversal of nature and culture, what should be external occupying the inside. The identification of woman with nature was also a common trope in surrealist art.



Fig 4: Dora Maar, *Portrait of Jacqueline Lamba* aka *Dawn*, 1935

That is perhaps as far as an uninformed viewer could have read the picture. But an insider would recognize the woman as Jacqueline Lamba, who had married André Breton in August 1934, after the nocturnal encounter described by Breton in *L'Amour fou*.<sup>13</sup> Lamba was thus an embodiment of 'la femme surréaliste', and the significance of Maar's photograph was signalled by its reproduction as the full page frontispiece for the issue of *Minotaure* published a week before the opening of the London show.<sup>14</sup>

As far I am aware, the only places where this photograph was titled *Dawn* was in the two English-language exhibitions where the picture was shown in 1936: London in June and New York in December.<sup>15</sup> This is puzzling, especially since the reproduction in *Minotaure* was *not* given a title. Are we to think this is the start of the day, the woman having awoken in her vegetation-filled bedroom and gazing out the window, across and into the future? In terms of Jacqueline's own life, is this the dawn following what Breton had called 'La Nuit de Tournesol', which had so radically changed both their lives?

Perhaps, but there is another layer of biographical meaning to be read into the photograph. The photograph is usually dated to 1935,<sup>16</sup> and, in September, Maar was with the Bretons, the Éluards and Man Ray on holiday in the village of St-Jean-aux-Bois, north west of Paris.<sup>17</sup> This is almost certainly when Maar's picture of Jacqueline was taken, and we can see the picture as a collaboration between the two women, an apparently relaxed image that in fact would have taken some staging. It was a significant moment, for three months later, on December 20, Jacqueline gave birth to a daughter, and the name she and André gave her was Aube (Dawn). So, when Dora took her photograph, Jacqueline was more than midway through her pregnancy; Aube is in the picture but not yet visible. She is growing inside Jacqueline, as the foliage is growing inside the room. The notion of 'woman as nature' acquires a personal and transformational dimension.

According to Anne Baldassari, Dora Maar visited the Bretons soon after the birth of Aube and gave them a print of this photograph.<sup>18</sup> When it was reproduced six months later in *Minotaure*, the photo needed no title, carrying a private meaning for

Jacqueline and André, a meaning known also by the wider surrealist group. When the picture then travelled across the Channel and later the Atlantic, a clue was added with the title *Dawn*, yet, without a key to the story behind it, this ‘clue’ could only have added to the enigma of the photograph.

If *Dawn* does not at first *look* very surrealist, then the third picture by Maar – *Portrait of Ubu* – has often been regarded as an ‘emblematic surrealist photograph’ (Fig 5).<sup>19</sup> But it is also the case that *Ubu* doesn’t look very much like other surrealist photographs, and it isn’t like any other photograph that Dora Maar made either.

Its iconic nature was recognized from the start. A month before the London exhibition, the picture had hung at the entrance to the *Exposition surréaliste des objets* at the Galerie Charles Ratton in Paris.<sup>20</sup> Four decades later, when surrealist photography was rediscovered, *Ubu* was included in the first exhibition devoted to surrealist photography and the first major book on the subject.<sup>21</sup>



Fig 5: Dora Maar, *Portrait of Ubu*, 1936

But it was still easy to misread the picture. In 1986, the critic John Russell described it as ‘a photograph of a found object of vegetable origin’.<sup>22</sup> Dora Maar herself had refused to say what the object actually was, but opinion has come to agree that it is an armadillo, though sometimes it is described as the foetus and sometimes the baby. (This would presumably be fairly simple for an expert in armadillos to determine, but, as far as I know, that expertise has never been sought.) Maar also hides the original siting of the creature from us through tight cropping and a dark background, but the diffused light and slightly soft focus suggest that it is inside a liquid filled glass jar.

This picture has sometimes been characterized as a ‘photomontage’,<sup>23</sup> but there is nothing to suggest that it is anything other than a documentary image. That, though, only enhances its surreality. Intense close-up was a common feature across interwar photography and, in other circumstances, such tactics might have a scientific purpose, but, as Dawn Ades wrote, with the *Portrait of Ubu*, ‘the deliberate absence of scale unsettles rather than reveals nature’.<sup>24</sup>

We might best think of the picture as an example of a ‘surrealist natural history’. In 1938, the *Dictionnaire abrégé de surréalisme* included a collage by Kurt Seligmann entitled *Les animaux surréalistes*, which featured a praying mantis, a giraffe, a platypus, a group of seahorses and a chameleon.<sup>25</sup> Perhaps the closest images to Maar’s *Ubu* are the films and photographs of Jean Painlevé, depicting a variety of underwater creatures. Painlevé’s approach was both rigorously scientific and ironically anthropomorphic, making these creatures sympathetic as well as utterly other.<sup>26</sup>

Maar focused and indeed limited the meaning of the photograph with the title she gave it. Père Ubu, created by Alfred Jarry in 1896, had a particular appeal for the surrealists and, in 1924, André Breton had quoted Jarry’s description of Ubu: ‘If he resembles an animal, he particularly has a porcine face, a nose similar to the crocodile’s upper jaw, and the totality of his cardboard caparison makes him overall brother to the most aesthetically horrible of all marine beasts, the sea louse’.<sup>27</sup>

Ubu’s gross vulgarity and slothfulness is expressed through his sagging belly and bulbous nose. Maar’s creature has that, but Ubu is also savage and malicious,

truly threatening as well as ridiculous.<sup>28</sup> Maar's creature lacks that savagery, but in its place is an ominous stillness, as we are pitilessly observed by the black depthless eye, like that of a shark or reptile.<sup>29</sup> While his claws, so useful for extracting the grubs beloved of armadillos, could also be about to metamorphose into Ubu's sinister 'nearole-incisors'.<sup>30</sup>

Each of Maar's original photographs recorded a moment, a place, a presence, a piece of reality, yet each was then turned and given new meaning. Literally turned in the case of the boy in the arch, but the other pictures also are changed by their framing and recontextualisation. Their titling adds another level: imaginative, personal or cultural.

In the 1936 exhibition, these three images would have acted as small, sharp punctures in the mass of surrealist imagination, suddenly taking the viewer back to the real world beyond the gallery. For each image is founded in the documentary nature of photography while also exploiting its surreality. Each image is both made and taken; each is both an 'objective' record and an expression of the photographer's subjectivity. The three pictures also suggest the depth and breadth of both Maar's surrealism and her photography at that moment in time.

<sup>1</sup> The hanging of the show was mainly the work of the Belgian E. L. T. Mesens, who decided 'to abandon all thoughts of chronology or of making isolated groups of each artist's work but rather wherever possible to make contrasts of colour, dimensions and content' (Roland Penrose, *Scrapbook 1900-1981*, London: Thames & Hudson, 1981, 70).

<sup>2</sup> The dating of *Le Simulateur* is uncertain. It is often given as 1936, a date established as early as the *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* exhibition in New York in December of the same year. (See Alfred H. Barr ed., *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism*, New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1936, catalogue no.405.) But it had apparently already been exhibited in the previous International Surrealist Exhibition, held in Santa Cruz, Tenerife, in May-June 1935.



<sup>3</sup> Maar uses this arcade as background for a number of other photo-collages from the same period, particularly *Silence*, which is based on the same background image as *Le Simulateur*, and *29, rue d'Astorg* where it is distorted in the printing.

<sup>4</sup> A print of the Orangerie photograph, inverted but before retouching, is reproduced in Victoria Combalía, *Dora Maar*, Munich: Haus der Kunst München, 2002, catalogue no.115.

<sup>5</sup> This print is now in the collection of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

<sup>6</sup> Rick Poyner, 'Exposure: The Simulator by Dora Maar', *Design Observer*, 2 March 2015 (<https://designobserver.com>).

<sup>7</sup> The photograph is reproduced next to *Le Simulateur* in Mary Ann Caws, *Dora Maar, with & without Picasso*, London: Thames & Hudson, 2000, 74.

<sup>8</sup> In 2009, *Le Simulateur* was included in the exhibition *Angels of Anarchy* at Manchester City Art Gallery; the print was that mentioned in note 5. In the catalogue, however, the picture was accidentally reproduced upside down. This had the effect of defamiliarizing the image over again, so that the arches were once more coherently architectural but the boy was now like a bat or spider hanging from the wall. (See Patricia Allmer ed., *Angels of Anarchy*, Manchester Art Gallery / Munich: Prestel, 2009, 149.)

<sup>9</sup> David Lomas, 'Psychic Disturbance and Interiority in Surrealism and Contemporary Art', *Subversive Spaces*, Manchester: Whitworth Art Gallery, 2009, 14.

<sup>10</sup> Maar also did this with the print of *Forbidden Games* from the Raymond Collection and now in the Cleveland Museum of Art. (See Tom E. Hinson, Ian Walker and Lisa Kurzner, *Forbidden Games*, Cleveland Museum of Art, 2015, 34.)

<sup>11</sup> There is an interesting parallel here with the otherwise very different photomontage of John Heartfield. For a subtle discussion of the opposition between Dadaist disruption and the seamlessness of Heartfield's work in the 1930s, see Sabine T. Kriebel, *Revolutionary Beauty: The Radical Photomontage of John Heartfield*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014, especially 10-13.

<sup>12</sup> The fullest collection of installation photos of the 1936 exhibition is in Alexander Robertson ed., *Surrealism in Britain in the Thirties*, Leeds City Art Gallery, 1986, 208-12, alongside a reprint of the original catalogue entries. *Dawn* can be seen in the top picture on 211. These photographs do not include the other two Maar images in the show, though there is a photo showing *Portrait of Ubu* on a website page from the Sotheby's sale in 2014 of Jindřich Štyrský's painting *Roots*, which hung adjacent to *Ubu* in the 1936 show (see <http://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2014/czech-avant-garde-art-roy-mary-cullen-114122/lot.19.html>). I have not found a photo showing the position of *Le Simulateur*.

<sup>13</sup> André Breton, *L'Amour fou*, Paris: Gallimard, 1937, translated by Mary Ann Caws as *Mad Love*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1987. The photograph of Jacqueline used by Breton in the book is the much more extravagant picture by Rogi André showing her in her pre-marriage role as a nude underwater dancer at a music hall (62).

<sup>14</sup> *Minotaure*, 8 (June 1936), 1. The photograph is reproduced as a vertical 'portrait' image and the installation shot referenced in note 12 shows that the exhibited picture was the same. But the original negative was 6 x 6 cms, presumably made with Maar's Hasselbad. A contact print of the whole frame is reproduced in Anne Baldassari, *Picasso: Life with Dora Maar, Love and War 1935-1945*, Paris: Flammarion, 2006, 39. Most of the loss is on the left hand side, making the picture more asymmetrical; Maar has also straightened up the picture.

<sup>15</sup> For the latter, see Barr, *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism*, catalogue no.404.

<sup>16</sup> Though, in Agnès Angliviel de la Beaumelle, Isabelle Monod-Fontaine and Claude Schweisguth eds, *André Breton: la beauté convulsive*, Paris: Musée nationale d'art moderne, 1991, 235, the picture's date is given as June 1936, in fact the date of its publication and exhibition. In contrast, Louise Baring mistakenly gives the date of its publication in *Minotaure* as June 1935 (Baring, *Dora Maar: Paris in the Time of Man Ray, Jean Cocteau and Picasso*, New York: Rizzoli, 2017, 134).

<sup>17</sup> There is a photograph by Man Ray of the rest of the party playing cards in front of a farmhouse courtyard and a photograph by Maar showing Breton on his own lying on the grass. I first discovered the latter image on a website devoted to the history of Saint-Jean-aux-Bois (<http://niddanslaverdure.over-blog.com/article-andre-breton-a-saint-jean-aux-bois-98453860.html>), but it is confirmed by Anne Baldassari, who reproduced together the two pictures of André and Jacqueline Breton with the reference 'Saint-Jean-aux-Bois, September 1935' (Baldassari, *Picasso: Life with Dora Maar*, 39.)

<sup>18</sup> Baldassari, *Picasso: Life with Dora Maar*, 35.

<sup>19</sup> Rosalind Krauss, *Bachelors*, Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1999, 24.

<sup>20</sup> A photograph of this installation is in Combalá, *Dora Maar*, fig 46, 188. The *Portrait of Ubu* was also published in the special issue of *Cahiers d'Art* dedicated to the exhibition (Vol XI: 1-2 (1936), 49). Louise Baring states that *Ubu* was included in the *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* exhibition at MoMA, New York, in December 1936, but it is not listed in the catalogue, which only gives two photographs by Maar: *Dawn* and *The Pretender* (Baring, *Dora Maar*, 130).

<sup>21</sup> I am referring first to the exhibition *Photographic Surrealism*, curated in 1979 by Nancy Hall-Duncan for the New Gallery of Contemporary Art, Cleveland. The book is Edouard Jaguer, *Les Mystères de la chambre noire*, Paris: Flammarion, 1982, 100. *Portrait of Ubu* was also shown in the 1985 exhibition *L'Amour Fou*, though a note in the accompanying volume stated: 'Dora Maar has declined permission to reproduce her photographs in this book' (Rosalind Krauss and Jane Livingston eds, *L'Amour Fou*, Washington: Corcoran Gallery / New York: Abbeville Press, 1985, 215).

<sup>22</sup> John Russell, 'In 1936, Surrealism Ruled the Creative Roost', *New York Times*, March 30 1986. This was a review of the exhibition *1936: Surrealism* at the Zabriskie Gallery, New York. A decade later, Alice Grey Read more specifically averred that 'Maar's *Ubu* was a distorted root, specifically a mandrake root that carried traditional associations with obscene, even satanic power' ('Le Corbusier's 'Ubu' sculpture: remaking an image', *Word & Image*, 14:3 (July-September 1998), 220).

<sup>23</sup> In the 'Chronologie' compiled by Emmanuelle Etchecopar-Etchart for Quentin Bajac et al, *La Subversion des Images*, Paris: Centre Pompidou, 2010, 450, it states that in 1936: 'D. Maar realize une série de photomontages dont *29, rue d'Astorg, Portrait d'Ubu et Le Simulateur*'.

<sup>24</sup> Dawn Ades, 'Little Things: Close-up in Photo and Film 1839-1963', in Dawn Ades and Simon Baker, *Close-Up*, Edinburgh: Fruitmarket Gallery, 2008, 52. Rosalind Krauss had earlier noted that, within surrealist photography, 'There are "straight" images, sharply focused and in close-up, which vary from the contemporaneous production of Neue Sachlichkeit or Bauhaus photography only in the peculiarity of their subjects'; one of her examples was Maar's picture ('Photography in the Service of Surrealism' in Krauss and Livingston eds, *L'Amour Fou*, 24).

<sup>25</sup> André Breton and Paul Eluard eds, *Dictionnaire abrégé de surréalisme*, Paris: Galerie des Beaux-Arts, 1938, unpaginated; see also Walker, *City Gorged with Dreams*, Manchester University Press, 2002, 136-7.

<sup>26</sup> On Painlevé, see Andy Masaki Bellows and Marina McDougall, *Science is Fiction: The Films of Jean Painlevé*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2000. In Bajac, *La Subversion des Images*, 252-3, *Portrait d'Ubu* is placed opposite two of Painlevé's more extreme underwater 'portraits'.

<sup>27</sup> This was originally part of Jarry's text 'Les Paralipomènes d'Ubu', published in *La Revue Blanche*, 1 December 1896. Breton quoted from it in his essay on Jarry in *Les Pas perdus* (1924), translated by Mark Polizzotti as *The Lost Steps*, Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1996, 28-9. It is cited in Caws, *Dora Maar*, 79, but without giving the original source as Jarry. For a useful account of the surrealist image of Ubu, see Renée Riese Hubert, 'Ubu Roi and the surrealist *livre de peintre*', *Word & Image*, 3:4 (October-December), 1987, 259-278.

<sup>28</sup> Not for nothing has Ubu been seen as a prefiguration of the rise of fascism, another aspect that Maar may well have had in mind. This excessive aspect of Ubu has, I think, been best expressed by the ink spattered drawings of Franciszka Themerson in *Ubu Roi*, translated by Barbara Wright, London: Gabberbochus Press, 1951. This was incidentally the first English translation of the play, a fact which might lead one to wonder just how many visitors to the 1936 London exhibition actually knew who Ubu was.

<sup>29</sup> Other viewers, though, have read the shadowed eye as sightless (for example, Ades, *Close-Up*, 52). This difference of reading may have to do with the print or reproduction being looked at, for, in some, the shadows are deeper than in others.

<sup>30</sup> This is Cyril Connolly's inspired translation of Jarry's 'le ciseau à oreilles'; see Alfred Jarry, *The Ubu Plays*, translated by Cyril Connolly and Simon Watson Taylor, London: Methuen, 1968, 48.