Tessel Bauduin

Psychic Automatism in Early Surrealism[1]

Introduction

Surrealism was officially established in 1924 with the publication of the first *Manifesto of Surrealism* by Andre Breton (1896–1966), but its first experimental activities had already taken place during the early 1920s. Among these was a series of experimental seances, known as "the sleeping sessions", which were held between the autumn of 1922 and early spring 1923. During these sessions, automatism was experimented with and unconscious states were explored.

The very first sleeping session took place on the night of 25 September, 1922. Breton and his wife Simone Kahn-Breton entertained the young poets Rene Crevel, Max Morise and Robert Desnos at their house on 42, rue Fontaine, Paris. At 9 p.m. they proceeded to conduct what appeared to be a seance: the lights were dimmed and they sat around a table holding hands. After a while, Crevel – the instigator of the whole adventure – entered a trance-like state, uttering cries, words and sentences. Afterwards, when awakened, he remembered nothing. A second attempt was made immediately: now Desnos entered a trance-state, during which he too uttered some words and scratched at the table. This first session was considered a success and over the following days, weeks and then months a varying group of young poets and artists, who would soon form the core of the officially established Surrealist movement, conducted many more sessions. Additional participants included the couple Gala and Paul filuard, the poet Benjamin Peret, the German artist Max Ernst, the poet Louis Aragon, the American

[1] The text is published as submitted by the author.
This essay originally appeared as 'Psychic Automatism in Early Surrealism', in: Hilma af Klint: The Art of Seeing the Invisible, K. Almqvist and L. Belfrage (eds.). Stockholm: Ax:son Johnson Foundation, 2015, 141–158. Reproduced here by kind permission of the editors.

Man Ray
Warlking Dream Seanse. 1924,
gelatin silver print
11,3 × 83 cm

photographer Man Ray, and the Italian painter Giorgio de Chirico, among others. In a 1924 photograph taken by Man Ray, we see many of these Surrealists gathered for a re-enactment of a sleeping session at the Bureau of Surrealist Research.

Crevel, Desnos and Peret proved to be the most adept at entering ranees. While in a trance-state, they recounted stories, recited poems, answered questions, wrote or drew on paper, and even moved and walked about. Other committed participants, however, such as Breton, Ernst, filuard, and Morise, were never able to enter what was termed a "sleeping state", "despite their good will".[1]

The sessions took their toll on the participants. As Kahn wrote to her cousin: We're living simultaneously in the present, the past, and the future. After each seance we're so dazed and broken that we swear never to start up again, and the next day all we can think about is putting ourselves back in that catastrophic atmosphere.[2]

A catastrophic atmosphere indeed; the sessions turned dark and even violent. Illness and death were predicted for several participants. Desnos proved more and more difficult to wake up. Jugs of water were thrown around, penknives were drawn, people even attempted to hang themselves. In an essay entitled "A Wave of Dreams", Aragon wrote:

Those who submit themselves to these incessant experiments endure a constant state of appalling agitation, become increasingly manic. They grow thin. Their trances last longer and longer. They don't want anyone to bring them round any more. They go into trances to meet one another and converse like people in a faraway world where everyone is blind, they quarrel and sometimes knives have to be snatched from their hands. The very evident

[1] Breton A. *The Lost Steps* / Ed. Mark Polizzotti. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press. 1996. P. 95.

[2] Cited in Polizzotti M. Profound Occultation // *Parnassus* 30, 1–2 (2008), P. 1–37.

physical ravages suffered by the subjects of this extraordinary experiment, as well as frequent difficulties in wrenching them from a cataleptic death-like state, will soon force them to give in to the entreaties of the onlookers leaning on the parapet of wakefulness, and suspend the activities which neither laughter nor misgivings have hitherto interrupted.[1]

Things were clearly getting out of hand. Early in 1923 the sessions came to an end.[2]

For all that the sessions ended in rather negative circumstances, the Surrealists were still very much impressed with the experiences they had gained during what came to be called "the time of slumbers". Several poems and spoonerisms first spoken or written during these sessions were published. Breton and Aragon, among the first Surrealists, published written accounts of the seances – Breton "The Mediums Enter", which came out while the sleeping sessions were still in full swing, and Aragon the essay "A Wave of Dreams", already mentioned, which was published in 1924.[3]

The experiences of these sessions formed the basis for Breton's (first and famous) definition of Surrealism: tessel m. bauduin

SURREALISM, n. Psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express – verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner – the actual functioning of thought. Dictated by thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern.[4]

Below, I will discuss the Surrealist practice of "psychic automatism", using the activities of the sleeping sessions as my point of departure. I will briefly touch upon the origins of the sleeping sessions, as well as the origins of the practice of automatism, before discussing the development of automatism within Surrealism. Issues that will be highlighted include the Surrealist fascination with dreams, various automatic techniques and questions of authorship. This will lead to a definition of "psychic automatism" and insight into the role of automatism as a practice in Surrealism. Finally, I will make some brief comparison to the case of the Swedish artist Hilma af Klint (1862–1944), who painted large parts of her *oeuvre* in an automatic state.

[1] Aragon L. A Wave of Dreams [1924] / Trans. S. de Muth (2003) // *Papers of Surrealism* 1 (2010), http://www.surrealismcentre.ac.uk/papersofsurrealism/journal1/acrobat_les/deMuth.pdf (accessed 4.7.2013), p. 6f.

[2] Find description of the sleeping sessions in Gerard Durozoi, *History of the Surrealist Movement* / Trans. A. Anderson. Chicago; London: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2002. P. 38–41. See original documentation in: The Autobiography of Surrealism / Ed. by M. Jean (New York, 1980), pp. 100–107.

[3] Entrée des médiums // *Littérature* (new series) 6. November, 1922; later included in: Breton A. *The Lost Steps*. Op. cit. 89–95. «Une vague des rêves» appeared originally in «Commerce 2» (1924).

[4] Breton A. *Manifestoes of Surrealism* / Trabs. R. Seaver & H. R. Lane. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1972. P. 26.

Automatism and Sleep

The Surrealists were fascinated by the concept of the unconscious, first elaborated in the late 19th century and still quite novel in the early 20th. Various early Surrealists, most importantly Breton and Aragon (1897–1982), had studied medicine, psychiatry in particular. They were familiar with psychiatric handbooks, as well as with the works of important psychiatrists of the time, such as Pierre Janet, and the treatises of Sigmund Freud, so they knew of medical research into states of consciousness, hypnosis, mental illness and psychoanalysis. The unconscious is not easily accessed. In accordance with medical theory of the time, the Surrealists believed that the unconscious expressed itself in dreams, for instance. Another way of accessing it was through automatism. The idea was that in an "automatic" state – that is to say when one is fully dissociated from one's conscious personality and therefore acting without thinking, as if one is an automaton or machine – one can establish direct contact with the unconscious. Breton and his fellow poet Philippe Soupault (1897–1990), had already been experimenting with automatic writing since 1919. This had resulted in *The Magnetic Fields* (1920), a co-authored composition consisting entirely of automatic writing. It is a milestone in the Surrealist exploration of automatic writing, and a milestone of automatic writing in modern literature generally.[1]

The Surrealists considered automatism in two ways: as a mental state (to be automatic or act automatically), and as a mental technique (to practice automatism). Although automatism is often considered the quintessential Surrealist practice, it should be noted that the Surrealists did not invent it; rather, they appropriated it from the medical science of their day: dynamic psychiatry, the precursor to modern psychiatry and psychology. In dynamic psychiatry automatism served two functions: that of therapeutic practice and tool for studying particular states of consciousness. The adjective "psychic", in Breton's definition of Surrealism as psychic automatism, was adapted from the discipline of psychical research, in which many dynamic psychiatrists engaged. It refers to the *psyche*, the mind. This fact illustrates the important connections between early Surrealism and dynamic psychiatry, but also the Surrealists' obsession with all things to do with the mind, in particular the dark, unexplored and therefore fascinating and inspiring recesses of the mind. The idea was that there one would find "pure thought" – that is to say, thought that is free from the "control" of reason, as well as from the "aesthetic and moral concern" that Breton mentioned in his definition. After all, reason and concerns about aesthetics and morals were only bourgeois constructions, from which, as an avant-garde movement, Surrealism wanted to break away.

[1] Breton A. & Soupault Ph. The Magnetic Fields / Trans. D. Gascoyne // Breton A., Eluard P & Soupault Ph. *The Automatic Message – The Magnetic Fields – The Immaculate Conception* / Ed. by D. Gascoyne & A. Melville. London: Atlas, 1997. P. 37–145.

There is a more or less natural human state that is also exempt from reason and morals: dreaming. Building upon theories about dreams formulated by Freud and others, the early Surrealists associated "pure functioning of thought" with dreams and sleep states. As Breton wrote as early as 1923, the year of the sleeping sessions, the term "surrealism" designates "a certain psychic automatism that corresponds rather well to the dream state".[1] Automatism and dreaming were regarded as related.

As dreams were considered manifestations of the unconscious, the Surrealists aimed at integrating the dream into waking life. This might create sur-reality (that is to say, hyper-reality), rather like integrating the fantastical into the quotidian, the chaotic into the ordered, the unconscious into the conscious would. One way of bringing dreams into waking life was to tell them to each other or to write them down, both of which the Surrealists did. Max Ernst (1891–1976), for one, experimented at length with dream work and used his dreams as the departure point for many of his paintings during this period. Scholars even speak of an "oneiric [dream] climate" in Surrealism.

However, Breton and others worried that in the process of writing dreams down, as in telling them afterwards, the dreams would be edited and restructured, not to mention negatively influenced by fallible memory. This would negate the objective of bringing one's dreams out in the open so as to celebrate the unconscious directly and circumvent the conscious. Impressed by the early successes with automatic writing and spurred on by the need to access their dreams as purely as possible, the Surrealists began to experiment with automatic speaking in a dream-like state: the sleeping sessions. I argue therefore that the early Surrealist seances should be considered sessions of lucid dreaming. Breton described the mental state during the sessions as hypnotic sleep or slumber, and he would call the entire period the *epoque dessommeils* (or "time of slumbers"). Aragon's text, tellingly entitled "A Wave of Dreams", overflows with references to sleeping and dreaming and, conversely, waking. Terms such as "trance" and "unconscious states", often used in discussions of the Surrealist sleeping sessions, are only later interpretations of translators and art historians. In fact, what the Surrealists were attempting to do during the seances was to dream lucidly: to give a "live" account, as it were, of their dreams, by means of verbal automatism.

Automatic writing is one thing, though: how does one go about automatically speaking one's dreams?

The Time of Slumbers: A Closer Look

Surrealist automatism was not based solely upon contemporary psychiatry. Both the origins of automatism as a practice, and of the Surrealist sleeping sessions as seance, can be located in Spiritualism, the 19th century spiritual movement founded on a belief in the possibility of communication with the

[1] Breton A. The Lost Steps. Op. cit. P. 90.

dead, and other non-bodily and possibly non-human beings. In fact, automatic writing was originally a spiritualist practice, appropriated for psychiatry by the psychiatrist Pierre Janet.

The Surrealists' decision to organise the sleeping sessions as a seance was directly inspired by spiritualism. Spiritualism had regained popularity in France in the years after World War I and many Surrealists were fairly familiar with its practices. Rene Crevel (1900–35), instigator of the sessions, had himself been "initiated" by a spiritualist medium, as Breton described:

Two weeks ago… Rene Crevel described to us the beginnings of a "spiritualist" initiation he had had, thanks to a certain Madame D. This person, having discerned particular mediumistic qualities in him, had taught him how to develop these qualities; so it was that, in the conditions necessary for the production of such phenomena (darkness and silence in the room, a "chain" of hands around the table), he had soon fallen asleep and uttered words that were organised into a generally coherent discourse, to which the usual waking techniques put a stop at a given moment.

In the same text, however, Breton immediately made it clear that the Surrealist involvement with Spiritualism went no further than Crevel's initiation and the acceptance of the necessary conditions:

It goes without saying that at no time, starting with the day we agreed to try these experiments [the sleeping sessions], have we ever adopted the spiritualistic viewpoint. As far as I'm concerned, I absolutely refuse to admit that any communication whatsoever can exist between the living and the dead.[1]

Other Surrealists also emphasised their disbelief in spiritualism. Spiritualist techniques, however, were clearly acceptable enough.

The story of Crevel's initiation by Madame D provides several clues to how we should interpret the sessions: the reference to the necessary conditions, as well as to such phenomena as Crevel falling asleep and subsequently being woken by "the usual waking techniques" and, lastly, Breton's use of terms such as "words" and "discourse". I will explore these four issues below.

The references to sleeping and waking are further evidence that the surrealists considered the mental state during the sessions one of semi- sleep, of lucid dreaming, as argued above. The phenomena referred to are the instances of speaking, writing, talking, drawing etc – the actual experiences during the sessions. As Surrealism during this early time was primarily a literary movement, it is no surprise that the phenomena are mostly those of a poet or novelist (automatic speaking, automatic writing), which also squares with Breton's emphasis on words and discourse – quintessential concerns of the aspiring poet and writer. Finally, the trappings of the seance, such as holding hands and dimming the lights, are considered conditions: the prerequisite formal arrangements for making something happen.

However, the Surrealists quickly left those particular conditions behind. They dispensed with the form, the seances, while continuing the practice,

[1] Breton A. The Lost Steps. Op. cit. P. 92

automatism. Someone like Desnos could eventually "sleep" anywhere, whether on the couch in Breton's home or in a Parisian cafe. He was captured often on film by Man Ray, entranced in a slumbering state.

With his famous definition of 1924 ("pure psychic automatism"), Breton codified the entire practice of Surrealism as investigation of the psyche, explicitly referring to the technique of automatism. By means of psychic automatism, the early Surrealists attempted to establish contact with "pure thought", which was understood as authentic and original, and therefore the basis – or even object – of art. His condition that automatism could be either verbal or written emphasises that the first experiments were conceived within a literary framework. The phrase "or in any other manner" opens the door for the other arts as well.

From Automatic Writing to Automatic Painting

Besides automatic writing and speaking, automatic drawing was also used during the sleeping sessions, and although the sessions were discontinued, all these practices continued afterwards. The French artist Andre Masson (1896–1986), in particular, was adept at automatic drawing and would employ it throughout his career. As we can see in illustration, his automatic drawing is characterised by a flowing and quickly drawn free line.

The pen hardly leaves the paper, which is characteristic of automatic and mediumistic drawing in general. Often Masson's drawings suggest an erotic theme, which is consistent with the fact that they were more or less unconsciously created and therefore reflected unconscious desires and/or anxieties.

During the second half of the 1920s, Surrealism developed from a literary movement into a fully fledged artistic movement in which the visual arts took a central role. This required that the practice of automatism was adopted so that painters too could work more or less automatically. The Surrealists were already familiar with the technique of collage, which was practised by many Dadaist artists and dates back to Cubism. It became a staple of Surrealist art, whether in the form of literary games (the *cadavre exquis*, or stringing together of strange words and phrases); or through creating images by pasting various cut-outs together; or as photo collage and photomontage, often seen in the Surrealist journals. Ernst, in particular, often worked with automatic techniques and many of his works are created with the techniques of frottage and grattage. Both are a way of creating patterns by means of chance, by rubbing a pencil on paper over a textured surface such as wood, or in the case of grattage, doing the same with canvas and scraping paint over it with a palette knife. The resulting patterns formed the basis for the art work, to which the artist would add a few other elements.[1] In *The Petrified Forest*, for instance, we can see that Ernst has obtained strange and haunting patterns by laying

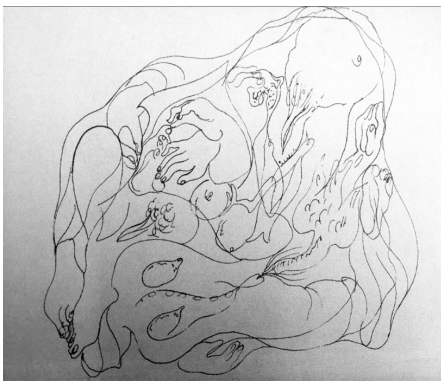
[1] See also: Spies W. Nightmare and Deliverance // Max Ernst: *A Retrospective* / Ed. by W. Spies & S. Rewald. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005. P. 3–20.

the paper upon differently patterned wood and little pieces of string, as well as a perfectly round object. Ernst would continue to use these techniques during his life, creating large oil canvases during the war such as *The Sound of Silence* that combine frottage, grattage and ink blotting with very finely painted details.

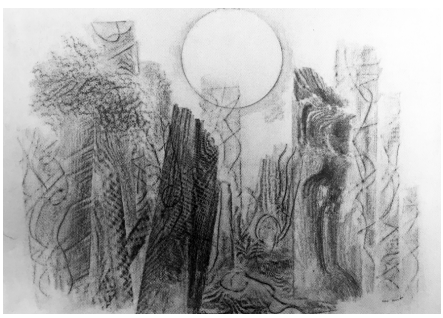
As these techniques indicate, the practice of automatism developed to maximise chance and randomness and minimise the conceptual intent of the artist in creating the art work, at least in its initial stages. The patterns formed the basis for associations on the part of the artist, as unconscious as possible. Obviously, there would eventually be a stage of conscious, active and intentional creation anyway, which is why these visual techniques are also sometimes referred to as semi-automatic. The unconscious associations often spring from fear, anxiety or desire, leading to the strange and fascinating, and typically Surrealist, art works. In turn, these works may serve viewers as departure points for their own unconscious associations or daydreams, as both images by Ernst well illustrate.

In parallel, the photographer Man Ray developed techniques of "automatic" photography, such as the "rayogramme" (camera-less photography or photogram, a technique that already existed), which again try to minimise the input of the artist. Ray would leave certain objects, such as a piece of rope or film, lying on top of photosensitive paper and wait for natural light (the sun) to develop the negative. Again, this is a technique in which chance acts as a creator, but always in concert with the artist. For all the dreamy quality of the photograms, such as *Rayograph*, it is obvious that a significant amount of conscious choice on the part of the photographer is still involved.

Eventually many different techniques of automatism were practised in Surrealism. They all have one thing in common: they were considered above all a liberating technique. Automatism frees one from the role of having to be the author, that is to say, from having to consciously and intentionally envision a work of art or literature within one's mind and then actively create it. Rather, one can rely upon chance and unconscious associations in creating the work, opening the way for the psyche (pure thought) to come through. Automatism therefore liberates the

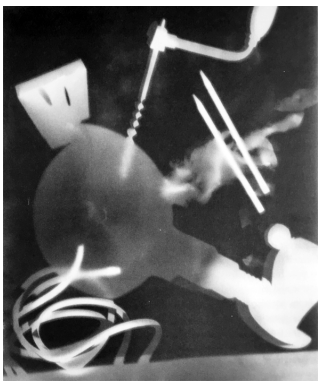


Andre Masson
Automatic Drawing, 1924
ink on paper 23,5 × 20,6 cm



Max Ernst
The Petrified forest
1929, charcoal on paper

Max Ernst
The Sound of Silence
1943–44, oil on canvas
108 × 141 cm



Man Ray
Rayographe,
1923, photogram
49 × 39,5 cm

artist from the constraints placed on the mind by rationality, morality, society at large, and in particular, from artistic training. Once one has learned something, it is difficult to unlearn, which means that poets and painters struggle to create authentically from the unconscious, rather than rationally and mediated by the techniques they have been taught. The Surrealist idea behind psychic automatism is to contact one's own thought directly, without interference by the intermediary of the conscious, rational and cultured self. We can therefore say that psychic automatism is a mechanism of "de-skilling":[1] of moving beyond the interference of one's training and creating directly from the unconscious.

Automatism, Authorship and Talent

It is only the trained artist or poet who needs to use automatism as a technique to create without skill – those who are untrained, such as outsider artists, can enter into an automatic state directly when they create. According to the Surrealists, examples of such automatic artists were simple people, who created naive or folk art, or the mentally unbalanced, who created so-called asylum art. The archetypal untrained artists were children and "primitives" or tribal peoples, who were still unburdened by the moral and aesthetic concerns of Western civilised adult society. Surrealism should strive to emulate these types of "pure" artists. To that end, the Surrealists should be talentless, because "talent" was considered a bourgeois deceit.

Furthermore, they should be as much as possible like a mechanical device – in other words, something automatic – or so Breton maintained: "simple receptacles of so many echoes" or "modest recording instruments". As such, the Surrealist is naturally, as it were, "without talent".[2] There are clear overtones here of Spiritualism, in which the medium too was understood to function as a medium, in the sense of device or apparatus. Spiritualist mediums were thought to be mere instruments recording messages, in their case coming from the other side of death or from metaphysical planes, so that they had no need of something like talent, or even skill.

The technological discourse that underlies all of this is obvious and important. Spiritualism followed directly in the footsteps of technological inventions in the field of communication: after the telegraph had been invented, spirits started knocking on tables, and as soon as the telephone and radio became widespread, mediums also began speaking. After all, if one can establish contact with a disembodied voice halfway around the world, why

[1] «Deskilling» is described by Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois & Benjamin H.D. Buchloh. См.: *Art since* 1900: *Modernism, Anti-modernism, Postmodernism*. New York: Thames & Hudson, 2011. P. 575.

[2] Breton A. *Manifestoes.* Op.cit. P.27f.

not from the other side of death as well? And even though communication technology is not so prominent in Surrealist discourse, Surrealism too responded to modernity's mechanisation and imposition of technology. The very word "automatism" is derived from the automaton, and not only indicates the mechanical nature of something, or in this case of a certain action, but also points towards the uncanny nature of many automata, which often look humanoid. A modern equivalent – and source of unending fascination for the Surrealists – was the mannequin, which while not a machine was a human-looking, specifically woman- looking, but still lifeless artefact; scary and (erotically) exciting at the same time.

The concept of wo/man as machine contains a further important subtext in relation to Surrealist automatism. A machine that writes, like a graph charting the earth's movement, or a machine that speaks, like a radio, is not an individual and conscious being. A Surrealist engaging in automatism, as if a mere "recording instrument", should theoretically not be considered the author of whatever is spoken, written, drawn, painted etc. As one is merely recording the unconscious, that is to say dreams or pure thought, one is not directly involved consciously and individually and therefore not responsible. As direct thought speaks, in theory, the person of the poet recedes to the background: there is not really an author, or perhaps the author doesn't matter. The work in question is not authored. While this can also be said of the spiritualist medium – after all, it is not s/he who speaks or knocks, it is a ghost or spirit – the difference the automatic drawings she created with her Spiritualist group, The Five, returning often in her later, mediumistic, work. That body of work, also known as *The Paintings for the Temple*, is stylistically very different from her early work, which is clearly indebted to her artistic training. For both the Surrealists and af Klint, therefore, the technique of automatism was a means of divesting themselves of the rational control of their training. Both are unlike traditional mediums in that they are skilled and trained as artists and therefore practise automatism, not only as a mental state but also as a technique.

A further similarity between af Klint and the Surrealists is their initial reliance upon the seance and mediumistic states, and later ability to do fine without them. The Surrealists very quickly moved beyond the "necessary conditions",[1] the trappings of the seance. For af Klint, everything started in the seances as well, in particular those she participated in with The Five.

[1] See: *Müller-Westermann I.* Painting for the Future: Hilma af Klint – A Pioneer of Abstraction in seclusion // Hilma af Klint: A Pioneer of Abstractionon / Ed. by I. Müller-Westermann & J. Wido . Stockholm, 2013. P. 33–51.
For more on dynamic psychiatry: *Ellenberger H.F.* The Discovery of the Unconscious: The History and Evolution of Dynamic Psychiatry. London, 1970.
For more on automatic writing: *Shamdasani S.* Automatic Writing and the Discovery of the Unconscious // Spring. Journal of Archetype and Culture, 54, 1993. P. 100–131, 102f.
For more on Surrealism and dynamic psychiatry: *Chénieux-Gendron J.* Towards a New De nition of Automatism: L'Immaculée Conception. Dada/Surrealism, 17, 1988. P. 74–90.

When she started work on *The Paintings for the Temple*, commissioned by the spirit guide Amaliel, she moved somewhat beyond the seance, although the first works, between 1906 and 1908, were still created in a mediumistic state. For the second part of *The Paintings for the Temple,* carried out between 1912 and 1915, she was already more conscious, and her later *ceuvre*, starting in 1916, was created more or less consciously. She therefore moved beyond mediumism in stages, and at a certain point also moved beyond automatism. In the case of the Surrealists, although it has not been touched upon here, automatism became during the 1930s only one of an array of literary and painterly techniques employed; another, rather famous technique was the paranoid-critical method developed by Salvador Dali.

Another important point is that of authorship. As said, the (supposedly) automatic – i.e. more or less mechanical – nature of the process exempts one from the responsibility of being an author. One is merely an instrument, after all. For spiritualists the external agent can be said to be the author. In Hilma af Klint's case, *The Paintings for the Temple* were made at the direct instigation of Amaliel, or so af Klint experienced it. For Surrealists, in contrast, the (supposed) lack of an author was part of the avant-garde practice of celebrating free expression and subverting traditional notions of authorship, talent and genius.