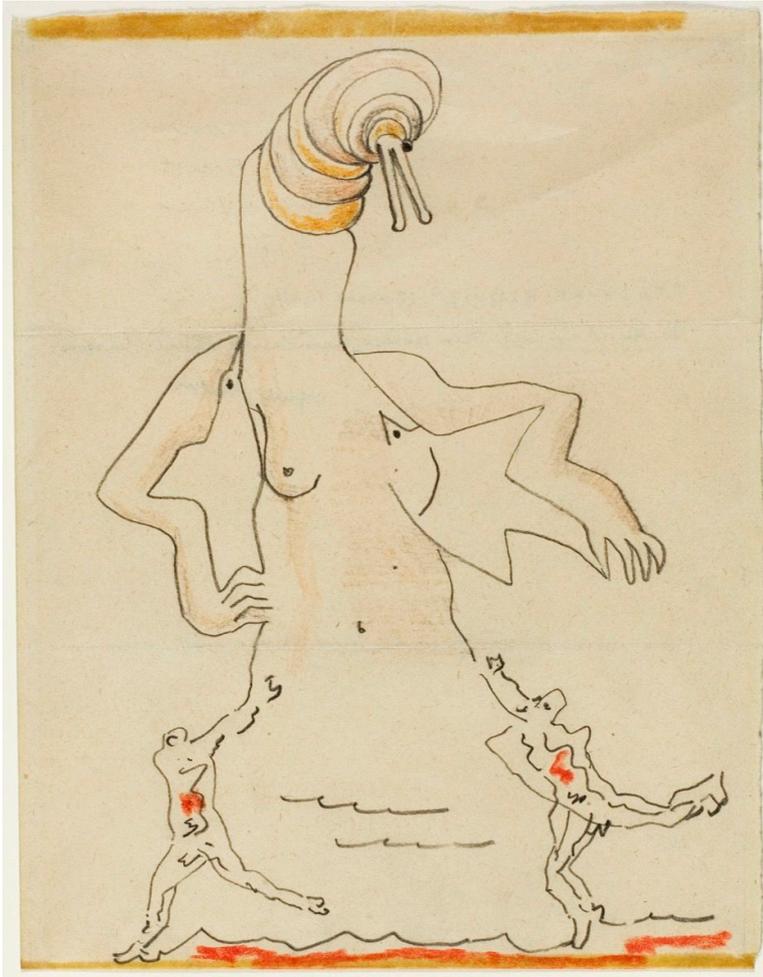


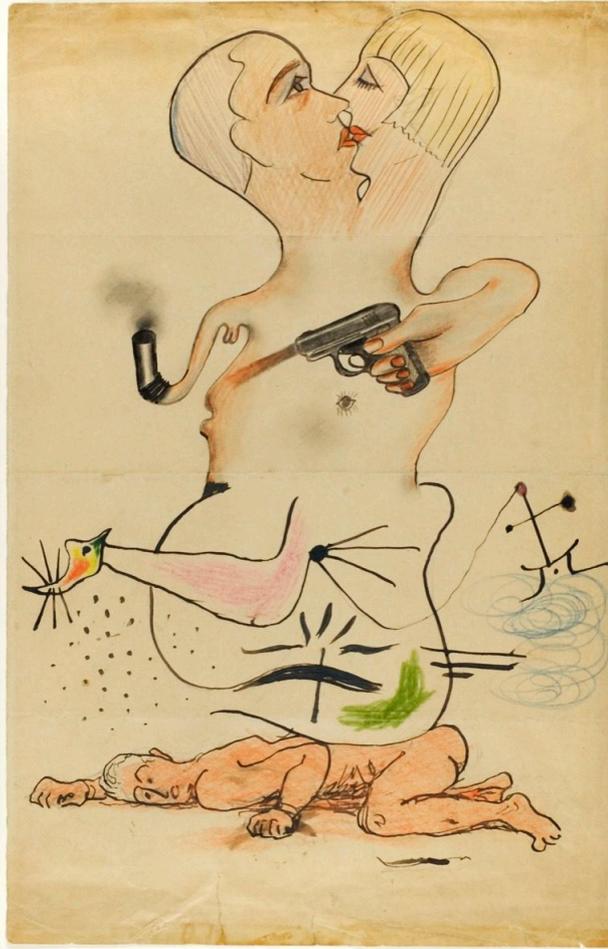
Art

Explaining Exquisite Corpse, the Surrealist Drawing Game That Just Won't Die

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André Masson, Max Ernst, and Max Morise, *Exquisite Corpse*, 1927. © 2018 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris. Courtesy of the Art Institute of Chicago.



Man Ray (Emmanuel Radnitzky), Joan Miró, Yves Tanguy, and Max Morise, *Exquisite Corpse*, 1928. © 2018 Man Ray Trust / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris. © 2018 Sucessió Miró / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris. Courtesy of the Art Institute of Chicago.

Frida Kahlo isn't known for her humor. But in 1932, the legendary Surrealist made a little-known, irrefutably funny drawing. In it, a cartoonish depiction of her husband—the macho muralist Diego Rivera —shows off droopy breasts, very large nipples, and legs that teeter uncomfortably on high heels. Instead of a paintbrush, he wields a broom.

As it turns out, this delightful bit of satire was a product of one of Kahlo's favorite games: Exquisite Corpse. Participants play by taking turns drawing sections of a body on a sheet of paper, folded to hide each individual contribution. The first player adds a head—then, without knowing what that head looks like, the next artist adds a torso, and so on. In this way, a strange, comical, often grotesque creature is born.

Kahlo created the caricature of Rivera with her friend and fellow artist, Lucienne Bloch. It was one of several Exquisite Corpse drawings they made together during a trip to New York in 1932 (meanwhile, Rivera was completing his "Detroit Industry" murals back in the Midwest). The weirdest and best drawing of the bunch depicts a miniature head resembling Kahlo's own, paired with a cleavage-enhancing corset, hairy legs, and a fig leaf from which a peeing phallus emerges.

Amongst her Surrealist counterparts, Kahlo was notorious for her racy, downright erotic contributions to the Exquisite Corpse genre. But like Kahlo, many of the game's devotees used it to experiment with styles or modes of representation that pushed them beyond their own day-to-day practices. In particular, they were enamored with the exercise's inherent spontaneity and dependence on chance. As Surrealist poet Simone Kahn, an early adopter of the game,

remembered in a 1975 essay, “We were at once recipients of and contributors to the joy of witnessing the sudden appearance of creatures none of us had foreseen, but which we ourselves had nonetheless created.”

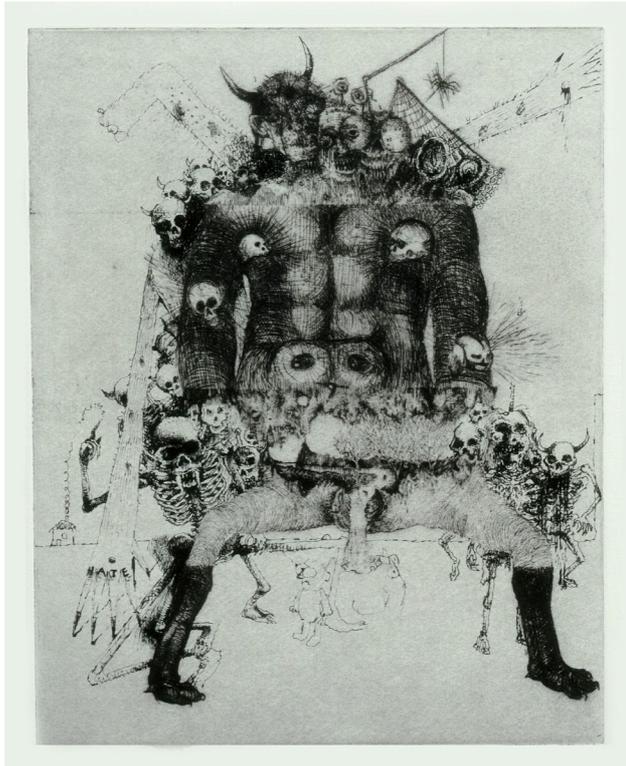
Exquisite Corpse was hatched in 1925 by the Surrealists André Breton, Yves Tanguy, Jacques Prévert, and Marcel Duchamp during one of their ritual hangouts on Paris’s Rue du Château. Breton had effectively founded the movement a year prior, formalizing it with his 1924 *Surrealist Manifesto*. That text called for art that engaged the unconscious by using dreams and automatic drawings as creative fodder. One way of unlocking psychic space, according to Breton, was through games—and he and his cohort were constantly inventing them. One of their favorites was the old parlor game called Consequences, in which players took turns writing phrases that eventually formed an absurd story (sort of like an early version of Mad Libs). Before long, Breton and his compatriots swapped words for drawings, dubbing the new game Exquisite Corpse, after a sentence that emerged during a round of Consequences: “The exquisite corpse will drink the new wine.”

Surrealists immediately took to the collaborative game. Many of the movement’s practitioners played it regularly, almost addicted to the automatic drawing it inspired.

“The suggestive power of those arbitrary meetings...was so astounding, so dazzling, and verified surrealism’s theses and outlook so strikingly, that the game became a system, a method of research, a means of exaltation as well as stimulation, and even, perhaps, a kind of drug,” Kahn wrote. “From then on, it was delirium. All night long we put on a fantastic drama for ourselves.”

For the group, the game opened up new avenues of creativity by tapping into many of Surrealism’s essential tenets. Exquisite Corpse hinged on free play, unpredictability, and collaboration—forces Surrealists routinely used to “[disrupt] the waking mind’s penchant for order,” as the Museum of Modern Art’s curatorial staff has put it. While the game had rules, they were loose. Players certainly didn’t have to stick to traditional representations of the body. In one 1928 Exquisite Corpse work by Tanguy, Man Ray, Joan Miró, and Max Morise, two kissing heads give way to a single, blob-like torso. One arm is capped by the barrel of a smoking gun; the figure’s pink penis emits a colorful bird. The bizarre creation itself sits on a naked man, clearly struggling under the fleshy, two-headed creature’s weight. Creases in the paper help emphasize where each artist ended, and the next picked up.

Drawing collaboratively provided a release for Surrealist artists, and offered a well of fresh inspiration through their peers. Breton once explained that the game both strengthened the “ties that unify” its players and allowed them “to take our common desires into account.” Similarly, Kahn celebrated the images that resulted from Exquisite Corpse as “unimaginable by one brain alone.”



Jake and Dinos Chapman, *Exquisite Corpse (Rotring Club) IV*, 2000. © Jake and Dinos Chapman. Courtesy of the artists.

While the Surrealist group disbanded in the 1930s, Exquisite Corpse stuck. Today, artists continue to use the game as a means to probe the nature of collaboration, partnership, and unfettered creativity. For instance, brothers and artistic partners Jake and Dinos Chapman have used the game to create a series of drawings that simultaneously emphasize their creative partnership, and question the art world's obsession with individual authorship. They experiment with different drawing styles, for instance, so that it's impossible to tell which brother made which gesture.



Eric Croes, *Cadavre exquis, Chat Santiag*, 2017. Photo © Hugard & Vanoverschelde. Courtesy of the artist.

Sometimes the game provides fodder for more ambitious artworks. Belgian sculptor Eric Croes began playing Exquisite Corpse with his boyfriend during a residency in Isola Comacina, Italy. Later, as he told *Artsy*, Croes transformed the drawings into towering clay totems, which doubled as “a declaration of love to [his] boyfriend.”

And this summer, painter Gina Beavers found herself playing many rounds of the game with fellow artists Peter Schuyff, Austin Lee, and Canyon Castator. “Some of us had just met, so it really functioned as a way to break the ice,” Beavers explained. “It’s a really non-precious, non-competitive way to work, because no one person can claim authorship of the drawing, and the sum of the different styles is often great and can lead to many laughs and bonding.” (The only

struggle with Exquisite Corpse, it seems, is figuring out which artist gets to keep the resulting drawing.)

For Beavers, and much like for Kahlo and the original Surrealists, Exquisite Corpse also encourages experimentation—a way to shed patterns of thought or styles on which an artist might rely too heavily. “You are reacting to the energy of the other people working near you and trying to be as free as possible with it,” Beavers said. “You allow yourself to break from whatever your style might be in order to be as inventive as possible.”

Of course, the Exquisite Corpse isn’t only for professional artists. As Kahn pointed out back in 1975, it can open the mind and inspire creativity in anyone who wants to try it on for size. “Real discovery was reserved for those who had no talent,” she wrote. “For it offered them the possibility of creation and thereby opened, permanently, a door on the unknown.”

Alexxa Gotthardt is a contributing writer for Artsy.

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