

## In Preparation for *Chance Readings* and Your Visit to the Kemper Art Museum

### Program Objectives

By participating in the *Chance Readings* program in conjunction with a tour of *Chance Aesthetics*, students will achieve the following:

- become familiar with key writings by André Breton, the founder of Surrealism.
- be introduced to some of the central ideas and techniques of Surrealism, specifically *automatism* (automatic writing and automatic drawing), and the notion of *objective chance*.
- gain a better understanding of the significance of the found object in avant-garde art of the twentieth century and beyond.
- draw important connections between Surrealist writing and Surrealist art.

### Key Terms

**Automatism** is a method of painting, drawing, or writing in which conscious control is suppressed, allowing the subconscious to take over. André Breton wrote in the *First Manifesto of Surrealism* in 1924 of a “pure psychic automatism,” of art being produced in a state of a dream.

**Object trouvé** (found object) is an object found by an artist and displayed, with little or no alteration, for its aesthetic value. The object can be natural, such as a pebble or a shell, or manmade, as in a piece of pottery or torn poster.

**Objective Chance** is the phenomenon by which the Surreal, or extraordinary, is experienced as a startling intuition, a sudden awareness of mysterious forces in one's life, as in the case of a curious coincidence or the chance discovery of a fascinating object or work of art. The synthesis is achieved through the eruption of wonder in the midst of the ordinary world.

**Surrealism** involves the principles, ideals, or practice of producing fantastic or incongruous imagery in art or literature by means of unnatural juxtapositions and combinations. It is a movement that flourished in the 1920s and 1930s in rejection of the rational and formal qualities of Cubism. Unlike Dada, out of which many of its precepts developed, Surrealism emphasized the positive rather than the nihilistic. Originally a literary movement, it sought access to the subconscious and to translate this flow of prerational thought.

### Things for Your Students to Keep in Mind

Poem #3 from Breton's collection of prose poems *Soluble Fish* and the excerpt from Breton's *Mad Love* are not easy to grasp. Your students should not be in any way discouraged, but rather embrace the experience of being lost in a new kind of language. Breton's writings were attempts to break away from the logical structure of language as we know it. Three fundamental components of Surrealism are present in these works:

- exploration of dreams
- creation of illogical combinations
- phenomenon of objective chance (see above definition)

*Soluble Fish* is an example of automatic writing, in which conscious control is suppressed, allowing the subconscious to take over. Encourage your students to identify visual images that have more to do with the realm of dreams than the world of rationalism.

Chapter 3 from *Mad Love* illustrates the connection between chance events and our subconscious needs. Encourage your students to identify elements of chance and how they play into the psyches of Breton and Giacometti.

**Before the Museum excursion students should read:**

- 1) the enclosed biography of André Breton.
- 2) *About Chance* on page 5 of the *Connections Guide*. Discuss the different meanings of chance in class, and the ways in which chance happenings have affected the lives of your students in different ways.
- 3) poem #3 from Breton's collection of poems *Soluble Fish*. (See questions below.)
- 4) Chapter 3 from *Mad Love* (25–38). (Read brief bio of Giacometti; see questions below.)
- 5) the exhibition overview on page 4 of the *Connections Guide*, as well as the sections on individual artworks. This preparation will make the works in the exhibition more accessible and help students make connections with the literature and artworks on view.

**Questions to think about before arriving at the Museum**

*Soluble Fish*

- 1) What was your gut reaction when you read poem #3?
- 2) How does the poem compare with other texts you have read recently in terms of style and accessibility?
- 3) Describe two images that find particularly intriguing.

Chapter 3 of *Mad Love*

- 1) Can you identify a description in this text that forces you to look at an “ordinary” event in a new way? Make a note of it and be ready to share with the group at the Museum.
- 2) Briefly describe the objects that Breton discusses. What do they have to do with chance?

André Breton (born 1896 in Tinchebray, Normandy; died in Paris 1966)

French poet, essayist and critic André Breton was the founder of the Surrealist movement and is considered one of the great writers of the twentieth century. The son of a shopkeeper, he began writing poetry at an early age. After university studies in medicine and psychology, Breton worked in various psychiatric wards in World War I. It was here that he first became fascinated by the enigmatic, often disturbing drawings created by the mentally ill. He became convinced that the artistic creations of his patients reflected unconscious desires and fears more directly than painting by trained artists who were technically proficient, yet deliberate in approach.

Later, as a writer in Paris, Breton became a pioneer of Dadaism and Surrealism, two antirationalist artistic movements that developed out of a disillusionment with the hypocrisies inherent in traditional bourgeois values. During this time the writer immersed himself in Freud's psychoanalytic theories and experimented intensively with "automatic writing" and sleep hypnosis, in order to gain more direct access to the unconscious. In 1922 he became the editor of the journal *The Surrealist Revolution*, and two years later he composed the first *Surrealist Manifesto*, in which he defined the movement as "pure psychic automatism ... the dictation of thought, in the absence of all control by reason, excluding any aesthetic or moral preoccupation."

Breton's prose and poetry demonstrate a dynamic linguistic power and an unsurpassed lyric imagination. His collection of prose poems *Soluble Fish (Poisson Soluble)*, written in 1924, is an example of automatic writing that served as inspiration for Surrealist artists André Masson, Max Ernst, Salvador Dalí, and others. His novel *Mad Love (L'Amour Fou)*, written in 1937, is a series of autobiographical reminiscences about the author's romantic involvement with the Surrealist painter Jacqueline Lamba. More broadly it is a poetic rumination on the liberating power of irrational love. The book serves as a monument to Surrealism in that it conveys one of the movement's primary goals: to reinvent the world through the powers of intuitive thinking, language, and erotic love. It also illustrates what Breton referred to as the "law of objective chance," in which interior thought and exterior experiences dictated by chance mingle in an ongoing, constant communion.

In both of these writings Breton dissolves the boundaries between the experiential realms of reading, fantasy, everyday life, and intense feelings of love. Both of these texts capture the writer's lyric insistence on freedom and "the dazzling revenge" of human imagination against the limits of the rational mind.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Mary Ann Caws' "Translator's Introduction" in André Breton's *Mad Love*. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1987, xi.

## Alberto Giacometti (1901–1966)

**Alberto Giacometti** started drawing, painting and sculpting as a very young man in Switzerland. After secondary school, he studied painting at the École des Beaux-Arts in Geneva and sculpture at the École des Arts et Metiers. He also worked independently in Italy. In 1922, he studied sculpture in Paris with Émile-Antoine Bourdelle at the Academie de la Grande Chaumière. Eventually, in 1925, he stopped drawing and painting altogether in order to concentrate on sculpture. He was influenced by Brancusi, Lipchitz and Laurens, as well as African art. While in Paris, he met Max Ernst, Joan Miró, as well as writers Georges Bataille and Jean-Paul Sartre. In 1930, he began creating works in mixed media. His sculpture *Suspended Ball* (iron and plaster, 1930) drew the attention of André Breton who then enrolled him in the “official” Surrealist group, in which he remained active until 1935. During the war he lived in Zurich, Switzerland, but eventually returned to Paris, where he continued to make art and enjoy an international following for the rest of his life.