

## Representing Bodies

### Victor Brauner's Hybrids, Fragments and Mechanisms

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The Romanian avant-garde looked for inspiration in two principal places where artists from all-over Europe gathered, confronted and discussed their ideas of a new art. While Berlin nourished the constructivist orientation of the Romanian avant-garde, Paris stimulated its interest in surrealism. Although Berlin was by far more significant as a stimulus for the synthesis of all arts and all modern movements toward which the Romanian avant-garde strove, Paris had the advantage of an emotional attachment. The French culture had been set long ago as a model for the entire Romanian modern culture and institutions. Consequently it is not surprising that poets and artists, including Victor Brauner, chose to live and work in Paris in order to feel closer to what was considered to be the origin.

Victor Brauner is discussed both in the context of the Romanian avant-garde and in the history of the French surrealism, but one cannot detect any tension between center and periphery.<sup>1</sup> One motivation can be found in the myth he creates for himself. Meanwhile it is obvious that he wanted to identify himself with the French surrealism. Once settled in France he paid great attention to the theories and to the artists André Breton promoted.

I will discuss the myth of the artist as well as the threads which connect Brauner to other artistic strategies bringing forth the body problem. Almost always his paintings and drawings display the ineluctable presence of a metamorphic body within no narrative construction. This preoccupation informed every stage of his

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<sup>1</sup> Although Victor Brauner had been taking part at the most surrealist exhibitions, he gained the attention of scholars and museums much later. Two monographs written by two of his friends (Sarane Alexandrian, *Victor Brauner l'illuminateur*, Paris: Cahiers d'art, 1954 and Alain Jouffroy, *Brauner*, Paris: Editions Georges Fall, 1959) were published during his lifetime. He had his first retrospective at Centre Pompidou in 1972 (*Victor Brauner*, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris, June–September 1972). A new monograph came out 20 years later (Didier Semin, *Victor Brauner*, Paris: Filipacchi, 1990). Brauner was a key figure in the process of reconsidering the avant-garde in Romania during the 1990s. At the same time, some important exhibitions on surrealism included or focused on Brauner. The latter international exhibition was organized in Houston, 2002 (*Victor Brauner: Surrealist Hieroglyphs*, Houston: The Menil Collection, October 2001–January 2002).

career as he dedicated it the greatest energies of his artistic inventiveness. Before going into the subject, one needs to frame Brauner in a larger picture.

He spent part of his youth in Romania where he followed a path leading from expressionism to cubo-constructivism and finally to surrealism, having as “travel companions” the other avant-garde artists. Tristan Tzara was the great inspiring source for the group Brauner belongs to and that is why Dadaism had a powerful influence in every episode of the Romanian avant-garde. The pictopoetry, invented in 1924 by Brauner and the poet Ilarie Voronca, in which the word is an equivalent for the colored form, though of an obvious Dada kind, seems to contain in embryo its future becoming. Thus, the relation to language, especially to poetry, will be deemed by Brauner’s critics as one of the essential features

Brauner had visited Paris several times in the 1920s, but only at the beginning of the 1930s he decided to settle here as a surrealist painter, and therefore he left Romania for good. Although he was an established surrealist painter in his country, he started a new apprenticeship. He seemed to aim a personal undertaking of the history of French surrealism. Therefore he went back to its very roots and to some of its founding fathers: Giorgio de Chirico and Max Ernst. He also welcomed the innovations of the latecomers of surrealism and of some artists more or less affiliated with the movement, referring particularly to Marcel Duchamp and Pablo Picasso.

During the war, Brauner was forced to live clandestinely in the mountains but this fact didn’t affect his art in the way one would expect to. On the contrary, he turned his exile into a period of rich artistic discoveries. He invented a painting process based on wax which opened his work to an original vocabulary. After the war he rejoined the surrealist group and developed further his newly discovered methods of representation.

### **The Mythical Body**

In 1931, Brauner depicted himself without an eye and the *Self-portrait with Enucleated Eye* became a premonition of the actual loss he would suffer seven years later.<sup>2</sup> From this moment on, it occurred, according to Brauner himself, a reconfiguration of his entire oeuvre and particularly a reconfiguration of his commitment to it. The premonitory self-portrait conferred a symbolic status to the

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<sup>2</sup> In 1938 he was hit by a glass thrown in his face by Oscar Dominguez during a fight, in which he wasn’t even involved, and he lost his left eye.

actual blinding which would act as a founding event of the myth of the artist. Just like any other myth, the time preceding the founding event is irrelevant and consequently denied. There occurs an “obliteration” of the Romanian experience, fully justified by the logic of the myth. Although one can detect continuities between the Romanian and the French period, they lose the quality of a specific temporality and their factual history. The myth retrieves only exceptional events from art and life where the contours blur and come to overlap.

This approach to mythic thinking takes the body of the artist out of its ordinary condition. On the one hand, he becomes the living manifestation and confirmation of the surrealists’ belief in the objective chance and in the omnipotence of the imagination. On the other hand, the artist can no longer be separated from the premonitory painting; I wouldn’t go as far as saying that he himself becomes a work of art, but he presents himself as a justification and fulfillment of the work. Brauner pushes the limit but he does not overstep it. Nonetheless, Brauner’s act can be related to the concept of the happening, where the body of the performing artist plays a double role, of subject and object of the art. In the 1960s the body is assumed as a means of expression of subjectivity and, even more radically, as an expressive means of the existence; for the artist involved in happening there exists “the obligation to exhibit himself in order to be able to be”.<sup>3</sup> This radical assuming of existence underscores a tragic dimension reflected in the strategies the happenings deploy and, from this point of view, the self-mutilation can be seen as a final point. Either real or simulated, it is done on the account of an individual or social exorcism. In Brauner’s case, the violent destruction of an eye, an organ situated on the threshold between the interior of the body and its exterior and essential for their interrelation, renders visible what the envelope of the body ordinarily protects. On the one hand, the border between body–self and world is imperiled; on the other hand the danger is none other than death, because only in death the two dimensions become indistinguishable.<sup>4</sup> Brauner pays a painful price to establish communication between the external and the internal eye, but at the same time this experience possesses a transgressive meaning. The loss of the eye has been interpreted by Pierre Mabille as a personal sacrifice for the acquisition of

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<sup>3</sup> Lea Vergine quoted by Amelia Jones, “Survey”, in *The Artist’s Body*, Tracey Warr (ed), London – New York: Phaidon Press Limited, 2003, p. 18.

<sup>4</sup> James Elkins, *Pictures of the Body. Pain and Metamorphosis*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999, p. 112.

visionary and magical powers.<sup>5</sup> Every sacrifice is twofold: the victim's death is not tantamount to annihilation, on the contrary, it means withdrawal from the world and intimacy with the divine in order to change the order of things.<sup>6</sup>



Illustration 1: Victor Brauner, Drawing, colored pencil on cardboard, 1937, Museum of Modern Art, St. Etienne. © Victor Brauner / BONO 2007.

All in all, the artist's body and the work of art remain circumscribed to distinct domains. In the aftermath of the episode of the loss of the eye, the artist's body became totally absent in the work; the *Self-portrait* retains its singularity, also as genre. The artist's work becomes an existential fact and moreover an autobiographical one; therefore its *mise-en-oeuvre* is pre-eminently fragmentary. Furthermore, the *Self-portrait* puts forth metamorphosis as a fundamental principle

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<sup>5</sup> See Pierre Mabille, "L'oeil du peintre", in *Minotaure* 12–13, 1939; Didier Semin, *Victor Brauner*, Paris: Filipacchi, 1990, p. 295.

<sup>6</sup> Georges Bataille, *Théorie de la religion, Oeuvres Complètes*, VII, Paris: Gallimard, 1975, pp. 307–308.

in painting and in the representation of the body. In this case the subject of metamorphosis is the artist himself.



Illustration 2: Victor Brauner, Drawing, washed inks on paper, 1941, Museum of Modern Art, St. Etienne. © Victor Brauner / BONO 2007.

For Brauner the eye remains the autobiographical fragment *par excellence* and it is to be found in different forms that question the dialectic between absence and presence (ill.1). The eye as an organ of seduction, once massacred, turns seduction into horror. The eye is essential in the identification of a human configuration; therefore, its absence shatters it and even decomposes it.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, the eye can acquire autonomy, it can exist outside the figure or it substitutes other parts of the body, for instance the mouth or the sex. Nonetheless, these modalities of “staging” the eye remain incidental; the independence Brauner assigns to the eye is much more acute, precisely when its position suffers no displacement. A gigantic eye, made up of almost nothing but the pupil, invades the figure, assuming, despite its fragmentariness, the condition of the whole. Brauner comes up with a stabilized type of representation which becomes a badge of (self) identification: an abstract with the

<sup>7</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman, *La Ressemblance informe ou le Gais Savoir visuel selon Georges Bataille*, Paris: Macula, 1995, pp. 82–83.

nose parallel to the chin and the eye always represented frontally. The profile can be actually considered an extension of the eye. The frontal view is employed more rarely, but two profiles placed back to back can be used instead. It seems the human figure is defined by duality and dislocation and the eye is instrumental to this rupture: on the one hand, the profile shows only one eye, concealing the second, on the other hand, when it is the case of a double or multiple presence of the profile, one eye is always closed (ill. 2).

### **Hybrids, Fragments, Mechanisms**

For Brauner, the entire body is liable to being decomposed and recomposed afterwards, following the laws of imagination. Picasso is definitely the most powerful model, almost impossible to avoid as artist of that time. Starting with the *Demoiselles d'Avignon* he transforms the representation of the body into a nexus of his artistic investigation. Parts of the body are emancipated from their established syntax in order to be drawn into *a perpetual re-zoning of features*.<sup>8</sup> André Breton tries to appropriate somehow the art and fame of Picasso. Therefore he constantly includes him in his articles and he also publishes his work in surrealist reviews. In a different manner, the surrealist painting also cultivates the fragment, deliberately and systematically: it is either a matter of getting different parts of objects or bodies out of context, or of bringing together fragments pertaining to areas so far apart that they appear to be fractions of utterly distinct worlds. The surrealists intended, through this interaction, to emancipate the object from its banality, to give it a new and shocking meaning. At the same time, the fragment is intelligible as a vestige and a reminder of a lost totality. The psychoanalysis, very dear to the surrealists, presupposes the integrality of memory, but also its inaccessibility as a total presence, due to it being relegated to the unconscious. Nevertheless, certain elements of the past can resurface in the space of consciousness, but always as fragment.<sup>9</sup> The fragment is in its turn twofold: the partial shape evokes the totality of the object which can be mentally reconstituted, but it also contains a destructive force,

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<sup>8</sup> Leo Steinberg, "The Algerian Women and Picasso at Large", in: *Other Criteria*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972, p. 162.

<sup>9</sup> Guy Rosolato, "Fragments", in *Nouvelle Revue de Psychanalyse*, 26, 1982, p. 95; regarding the theory of the totality of memory and of its relation to the fragment, the authors refers mainly to Sigmund Freud's theories from *Civilization and its Discontents*.

responsible for reducing the initial configuration of the object to shapeless matter, to a mere trace.<sup>10</sup>



Illustration 3: Victor Brauner, Drawing from the series *Anatomie du désir*, ink on paper, 1935–1936, Museum of Modern Art, St. Etienne. © Victor Brauner / BONO 2007.

Brauner's heightened interest in the artificial, mechanical body, manifested mostly in the 1930s, will be a formative experience for the representation of the body; like the pieces of a mechanism, its parts can be dismantled, rotated or replaced. In *Anatomie du désir* (ill.3), a series of drawings dating from 1936, the feminine body is conceived as an erotic mechanism in which a multiplication of sexual traits takes place as well as the modification or replacement of certain parts of the body by fragments of objects or zoomorphic elements. Every piece looks like an anatomical drawing and at the same time it recalls a handbook which depicts in minute detail a strange mechanism. There are indications of this effect: the position of the figures, the careful record of every detail, sometimes accompanied by a second adjoining drawing explaining its use, as well as notations like: “robinet demarche”, “apareil d'étreinte”, and “brosse copulatrice”. The handbook look produces on the beholder a contradictory effect, because the desire is counteracted by a de-eroticization of the

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<sup>10</sup> *Op.cit.*, p. 96.

representation. Just with the case of Marcel Duchamp or Max Ernst, the play between mechanism and body gives way to the exchanges between inanimate, artificial and animate, sexualized, between conscious and unconscious, between the phantasm and its absence. Brauner will continue to privilege this manner of composing the human body through conjunction; only later there are cases where the copulative function disappears, and the result is a fusion. Here the constituent parts don't keep their integrality anymore.<sup>11</sup>

In the early drawings, especially those dating from the time of his collaboration with the Romanian avant-garde review *unu* (one), as well as in the paintings of his first surrealist phase, the corporeal fragment becomes his main theme: the fragment is invoked first as lack, and therefore the body bears the traces of destruction. Sometimes, the amputated parts obtain autonomy, emphasizing the rupture and the impossibility of regaining an integral form. The divided body or the body represented in the guise of *membra disjecta* often alludes to a phantasmatic partition encountered in pathological cases such as schizophrenia or hysteria. I want to include in the same category, which can be related to the model of hysteria, the contorted body, which is not characteristic of any period in particular, but which is a procedure frequently used to signal the articulations of an imaginary anatomy. For instance, the box-like characters from the middle of the 1950s are not only deprived of an internal skeleton, but the only human landmark in the paintings, is a kind of profile with the eye in bold relief, viewed frontally; the rest, if we assume we are dealing with a body, is folded in numerous ways, submerging the human features.

The fragmentation of the human body and its regression towards an animal configuration is one of Brauner's favorite preoccupations, displayed in innumerable versions. Fragments extracted from the two different reigns, human and animal create together a new configuration. The human figure is most of the times recognizable by the presence of the simplest elements like the head, the hands or the legs. Animals of all species replace human parts or determine the invention of new ones. The conflation and the confusion human – animal gives way to a convulsive beauty, as André Breton defined the surrealist beauty. This beauty of an unsettling nature offers glimpses of primitive elements, pertaining to the individual or to the "civilization". Thus it becomes a manifestation of *Das Unheimliche*, a term that Freud uses to designate the traumatic return of a repressed phenomenon. The dual

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<sup>11</sup> Jean-Baptiste Joly, "Du caractère présyntaxique des dessins composés chez Victor Brauner", in *Victor Brauner*, Colmar: Musée d'art moderne St Etienne – Musée d'Unterlinden, 1992, p. 25.

nature of the convulsive beauty shows and hides at the same time a tension between life and death, love and destruction, pleasure and violence.<sup>12</sup>

The collision between human and non-human in Brauner's paintings has a similar function to the conceptual pairs inanimate – animate or interior – exterior. The preference for the mixture of reigns can be assimilated to the interest for myth as well as to the “discovery” of the archaic arts. Within the archaic cultures the animal – human hybrid stem from animist beliefs and the act of conferring a spirit to every part of cosmos also belongs, according to Freud, to the category of *Das Unheimliche*.

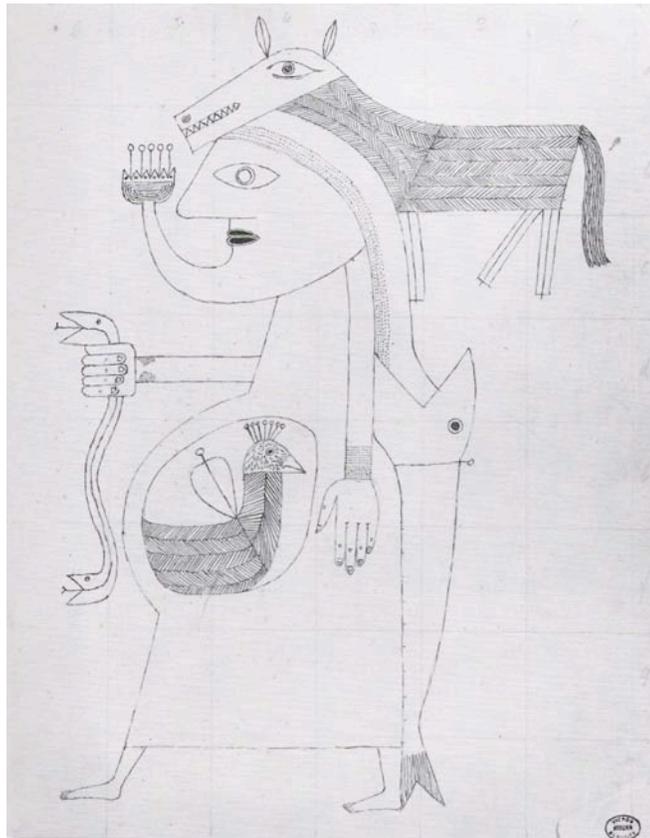


Illustration 4: Victor Brauner, Preparatory drawing for *Là-bas*, washed drawing on paper, 1949, Museum of Modern Art, St. Etienne. © Victor Brauner / BONO 2007.

Thus, the human body is estranged from its own structure, through the curious analogies between the human body and the animal one. It is as if the corporeal configuration were instable and parts of it, especially extremities, became an area of negotiations between human form and animal form. For Brauner, this strategy has a

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<sup>12</sup> Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995, pp.8–13.

playful component, permitting him to invent a whole new bestiary, more or less fantastic, colorful and noisy, very mobile, and able to invade the entire human body. The human body functions as a shell in which animals take their refuge. Although the human figure represents most of the times the center of this novel configuration, it loses its independence, including the independence of its functions, and it is in fact reduced to a mere fragment (ill. 4).

Brauner was probably familiar with the theories of Georges Bataille from his quite well known review *Documents* in the 1930s.<sup>13</sup> Bataille questioned the anthropomorphism through different critical strategies, conceived in order to produce a breakdown of this all-pervasive area of representation. The juxtaposition of images belonging to different regimes of reality led to unexpected, and deliberately violent breaches in the visual space.<sup>14</sup> The fragmentation, the disproportion between the parts and the whole, the maimed human body, all had the purpose of doing away with likeness. The likeness of the human being with his own image becomes precarious, and so the likeness of the same (*ressemblance du même*) is replaced by the likeness with the other (*ressemblance de l'autre*).<sup>15</sup> Even though Bataille opts for a different brand of surrealism than Brauner (i.e. Breton), one identifies in his writings, similar interests which he often articulated better than the “opposite camp”. The dialogue between the same and the other meets a polarity dear to the bretonian surrealists, the polarity self–other, where the Other is the unconscious. The de-centralization of the self corresponds to the des-figuration, and therefore the fragmentariness appears as inextricable from representation.

Such a radical discourse, which goes so far as to contest anthropomorphism, cannot be attributed to Brauner; one could say that, on the contrary, despite his questioning of the status of the human figure, especially through the collision with other reigns, he places it at the centre, giving the entire image a focus. The fragmented body, like for other surrealists, alludes to a split identity. For Brauner this connotation is even more concrete because of the autobiographical bend of his

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<sup>13</sup> In the 1930s Brauner lived in the same building as Alberto Giacometti, a close friend of Georges Bataille; see Dominique Stella, “Le Sorcier des Carpates”, in *Victor Brauner 1903–1966*, Milano: Mazzotta, 1995, p. 26.

<sup>14</sup> The “documents” were mainly photographs, amongst which the ethnological ones are of primary importance. Bataille considered ethnology to be a necessary counterpart to the fine arts for it was able to deviate their aestheticism. The fine arts are responding in their turn by questioning ethnology’s positivism; see Georges Didi-Hubermann, *op.cit.*, especially p. 17.

<sup>15</sup> Georges Didi-Hubermann, “La question de la figure humaine”, in *op.cit.*, pp. 36–41.

work. Hiding behind his characters Brauner toys with his own image in order to elaborate unbroken series of imaginary autobiographies.<sup>16</sup> Painting is for him the genesis of a new world, and that is why the physical reality of the man exists in disparate parts, as a chaos acted upon by its creator. At the same time, Brauner seems to take up the risk of two parallel approaches, in which the fragment is not only seen as having to do with the destruction of the human figure, but is additionally read as a life threat, as a plunge into death.

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<sup>16</sup> Sarane Alexandrian, *Victor Brauner*, Paris: Oxus, 2004, p. 57.

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