

THE EXQUISITE

CORPSE

printworks gallery

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# The Exquisite Corpse, An Offering to the New Millennium

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## Early History of the Exquisite Corpse

During the first years of the Surrealist Movement, it was unusual when an evening spent among poets and artists did not end with an Exquisite Corpse. The exquisite corpse—earliest among the many games invented by the Surrealists—was a kind of collective collage of words or images. Born around 1925, either in André Breton's apartment on rue Fontaine, or at 54 rue du Château—where the Surrealists Jacques Prévert, Yves Tanguy, and Marcel Duchamp lived—the exquisite corpse was based upon an old parlor game of folded paper.

In *The Abridged Dictionary of Surrealism* (written by various Surrealists and published in 1939), the exquisite corpse is defined as: "Game of folded paper that consists in having a sentence or a drawing composed by several persons, each ignorant of the preceding collaboration. The example that has become a classic and gave its name to the game is the first sentence obtained by those means: 'The exquisite corpse/will drink/the new wine.'"

In *The Exquisite Corpse: Its Exaltation*, Tristan Tzara described the rules of the game: "Three of you sit down around a table. Each one of you, hiding from the others, draws on a sheet the upper part of a body, or the attributes able to take its place. Pass on to your neighbor on the left this sheet, folded so as to conceal the drawing, but for three or four of its lines passing beyond the fold [clearly there was a limit to what was an acceptable torso, or so one would assume from this direction]. Meanwhile, you get from your neighbor on the right another sheet prepared in the same way (the sheets of paper to be used for the game will be previously folded perpendicular to the axis of the body to be portrayed in the drawing). Of course this game admits a larger number of players. In the event that colors are used, it is a requirement to pass, along with the sheet, the colors, limited to the number of those used."

The first instance of the exquisite corpse—drawings and poems—in print occurred in the journal *La Revolution Surrealiste* (no. 9/10, October, 1927). Five drawings and several poems were reproduced without the identification of their authors, underscoring the importance of the game's collaborative intent. Breton summarized its importance as follows: "What exalted us in these productions was indeed the conviction that, come what might, they bore the mark of something that could not be gotten by one mind alone and that they were endowed, in a much greater measure, with a power of *drift* that poetry cannot value too highly. With the exquisite corpse we had at our disposal—at last—an infallible means of temporarily dismissing the critical mind and of fully freeing metaphoric activity."

## The Corpse Redux

In 1993, The Drawing Center in New York City staged a revival of the exquisite corpse. Although the project was devised as the Center's annual fund-raiser, due to the overwhelmingly positive response from the invited artists, and the mild hysteria that followed from other artists wanting to participate, the benefit soon outgrew its intended purpose. The initial list of two hundred artists enlarged to at least twelve hundred "players," who produced over six hundred drawings. The exhibition was seen at five venues, and together with its accompanying catalogue, has become a legendary undertaking. It is possible that *The Return of The Cadavre Exquis* played a strong role in determining the present exhibition at Printworks, but there have been other precedents of late. Notable among these are two publications; one, the result of a five-years-long undertaking is *The Narrative Corpse (A Chain Story by 69 Artists!)*, and the other, *Exquisite Horse*, more likely the key influence on the present exhibition because Audrey Niffenegger, one of the curators for the Printworks exhibition, was a participant in the *Exquisite Horse* exhibition and portfolio.<sup>1</sup>

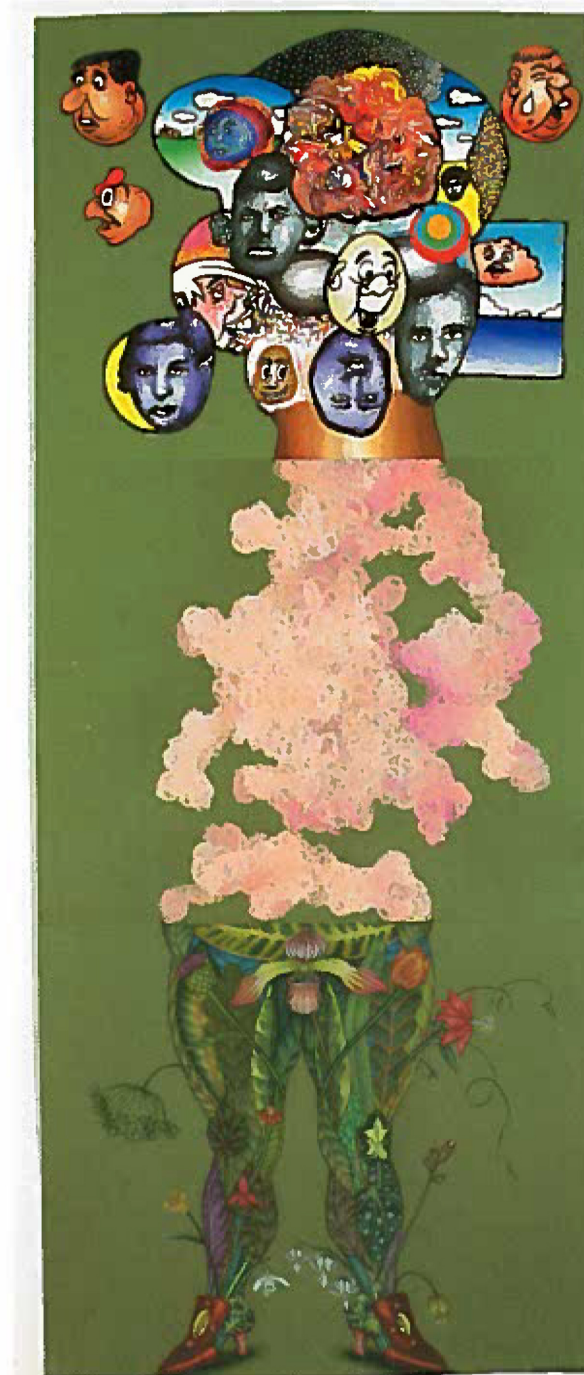
The present exhibition was conceived by the co-directors of Printworks—Sidney Block and Bob Hiebert—as a way for the gallery to usher in the first year of the new millennium. The project, under the extra guidance of Niffenegger, has succeeded in bringing to the gallery several artists who have never been exhibited there, and in some cases, have not been shown much in Chicago. The Printworks version of the exhibition differs markedly from earlier versions, like the Drawing Center's, in that the participants had to agree exactly to the terms of the endeavor set out by the organizers. The organizers

determined the size and color of the paper to be used, and selected the playing groups randomly. The written names of the artists and the three body parts were thrown into a "hat", and in the order selected by the curators, assigned to groups of three who would create each corpse. The artists had no idea with whom they would be matched, and they agreed to allow the curators to assemble the drawings.

A distinct feature of the curators' work was their decision to make the roster of artists as broad as possible. In fact, they worked hard to invite artists from many disciplines—including book artists who, owing to their frequent collaborations would seem a natural choice—so that the list and the drawings themselves would not seem focused upon the painters vocabulary (thereby echoing the earlier Surrealists, many of whom were literary artists). As with the historical manifestations of the game, the Printworks corpses yielded results that are always unexpected, and frequently marvels of what Breton called "Convulsive Beauty". How else do we explain the intersection of such diverse artists as Robert Schultz (an exacting realist draughtsman) and Nicole Hollander (whose drawing style might well be anathema to Schultz)? Similarly, we might wonder at or dread the collaboration of artists as stylishly distinct as Art Spiegelman, Fred Stonehouse, and Dan Mills; or Susanna Coffey, Lesley Dill, and Karl Wirsum.

As Ingrid Schaffner suggested in her essay for the Drawing Center's catalog, what remains essential about this endeavor is the notion of play. "Precisely because of its value as play, Exquisite Corpse continues to offer a means of sidestepping reason and foresight to move towards chance and unpredictability." Key here is the last word, unpredictability, for it—like the game of Exquisite Corpse—corresponds to our lack of certainty about what awaits us tomorrow, three months from now, and into the next century. Thus, we invite the viewer to don a party hat, and to appreciate the present offerings as a set of souvenirs of poetic brainstorming that continue to pay aesthetic dividends in a new century.

<sup>1</sup> Art Spiegelman and R. Sikoryak, eds. *The Narrative Corpse*, (Richmond, VA: Gates of Heck, Inc. and Raw Books), 1995, one of the most engaging comix publications in memory; and *Exquisite Horse*, a portfolio of 32 sheets by 32 artists, each of whom was assigned the head or tail section of a horse, which may be collaged in any variation at the discretion of the owner or exhibitor (Madison, WI: Silver Buckle Press), 1997. For the latter, the reader may see the exhibition on-line at [www.library.wisc.edu/libraries/SBP/exquisitehorse.html](http://www.library.wisc.edu/libraries/SBP/exquisitehorse.html).



Mark Ottens

Charles Slatkoff

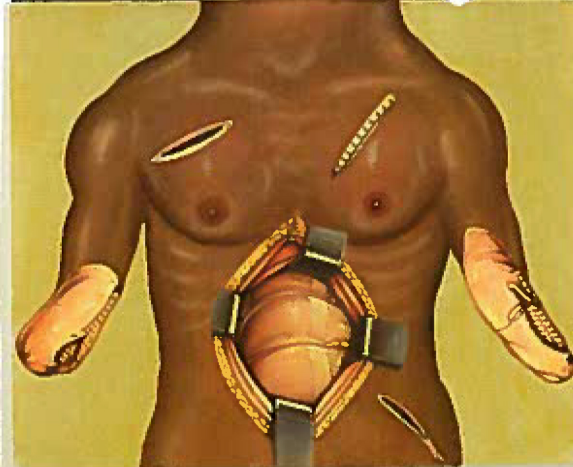
Maria Tomasula



Art Spiegelman



Fred Stonehouse



Dan Mills



Lorraine Peltz



William Conger



John Rush

