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## Bellmer: Complexities of the Doll

Krista Lough

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Hans Bellmer (1902-1975) was a painter, illustrator, sculpture, and photographer. He is best known for his provocative photographs of his life-sized female doll sculptures he constructed in the mid-1930s. Bellmer, living outside of Berlin, began construction of his dolls after it became clear the National Socialist were coming into power. Bellmer's first doll was constructed in 1933 with the assistance of his brother Fritz, an engineer. Bellmer photographed the various stages of the construction of the doll and published a book titled *Die Puppe* (The Doll) consisting of ten photographs with a short introduction. In 1935, Bellmer started and completed the second version of the doll. The second doll was fully articulated with small ball joints all centered on a stomach sphere. The doll had a variety of limbs that could be attached to the stomach sphere providing endless possibilities for provocative poses. Bellmer took over a hundred photographs of the second doll.

In 1938 Paul Éluard the French poet selected fourteen photographs of the second doll and used them as inspiration for fourteen short poems. Bellmer and Éluard planned to publish a book in 1939 but were unable to publish until November of 1949 due to setbacks from the war. *Les Jeux de la Poupée* (The Games of the Doll) was published in an edition of 136 with 6 special copies for the creators and publishers. All 15 of the prints in the book were delicately individually hand-colored.

Bellmer's photographic production was not terribly large, with only around 150 images. He did not do his own printing; his prints are often small gelatin silver prints, like drug store style prints. In addition to the small prints Bellmer had between 25 and 30 large gelatin silver prints made, many of which were mounted to board and nailed to paintings stretcher. He used these large prints for exhibition; first exhibiting them in 1937 before leaving Germany for France.

In 2014 the Art Institute of Chicago acquired one of Bellmer's large doll photographs. The image is of the second doll juxtaposed with parts of a chair all on top of a linear printed textile. The print is around 26" square and is mounted to board, airbrushed overall, and overpainted with white gouache. The applied media is subtle and the print has an initial appearance of an unembellished gelatin silver print. It is missing its original stretcher although it still bears the holes from once having one. The airbrushing is fine and is not terribly apparent without magnification. The airbrushed black media is found along the edge of the mount and is visible in the now open nail holes. The white gouache and black and grey applied media appear on top of the airbrushed media. An inscription on the verso alludes to *Les Jeux de la Poupée* (The Games of the Doll) it reads: "Series to color for The Games of the Doll, 140mm wide, before printing the entire series send three proofs to Mr. Bellmer c/o Camberoque, 39 Rue Antoine Marty, Carcassonne, Aude." It appears that Bellmer sent this mounted print to be photographed and printed as the copy pasted in the book. The airbrushing and overpainting could have been applied for duplication and printing purposes.

Two copies of the book *Les Jeux de la Poupée* were studied; one from the Mary Reynolds Collection at the Ryerson and Burnham Library and one in the collection of Ubu Gallery. It was noted that the plates of the Art Institute's Doll image appear to be printed from two different negatives. The Ryerson and Burnham Library book is copy 118 and the book at Ubu Gallery is copy D one of the special copies, made for Helmut Kossodo, the Swiss editor. The image from copy 118 exhibited negative flaws that were retouched in the large print and a tighter cropping. The image in copy D exhibits a different cropping; the mount, with the same edge stains and nail holes of the large mounted print in the Art Institute's collection is visible along the left edge of the print. Thus, it appears the print from Ubu Gallery was printed from a copy negative of the Art Institute's print, while the Ryerson and Burnham Library was not. Undoubtedly, other plates in *Les Jeux de la Poupée* show subtle differences from Bellmer using different negatives. This delicately hand-crafted book was in the process of being published for over 10 years with obvious setbacks from the war. During this time Bellmer was sent to an internment camp and later became a refugee in Toulouse and it is possible that prints and negatives were lost and replaced during this time.

In order to better understand Bellmer's working method, seven other large doll prints were studied. Some of the doll prints were mounted on the original board and nailed to the original strainer. One even exhibited the original linen tape border wrapping around the side of the print and strainer. The prints ranged in finishes, including straight gelatin silver prints, prints with locally applied dye, overall dye, and gouache overpainting. None exhibited the fine airbrushing seen in the Art Institute's piece. Bellmer seemed to treat each large print as truly unique works, like his paintings and drawings.

The Art Institute of Chicago's large doll print arrived into the collection with water staining, surface grime, misaligned tears, gouges, gelatin losses, and abrasions in the airbrushing. Due to the fragility of the applied media, stain reduction and surface cleaning were deemed to risky. The treatment of the doll print consisted of consolidating the gelatin, realigning tears, and filling gouges. The structural treatment provided a more integrated appearance to the print but still preserved the visual presence of its long history.

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