

# A Surrealist Fact

JODI HAUPTMAN & STEPHANIE O'ROURKE

“Every discovery that changes the nature, the destination of an object or of a phenomenon constitutes a surrealist fact.”<sup>1</sup> So reads the preface to the first issue of *La Révolution surréaliste*, an avant-garde Parisian journal edited by the writer and sociologist Pierre Naville. The preface boasts three authors: Paul Eluard, Roger Vitrac, and Jacques-André Boiffard. The “surrealist fact” these authors describe calls for the transformation of something—an object, an idea, a phenomenon—that is understood to be true so that a new meaning results. In so doing, the very categories of fact, truth, and meaning are called into question. Whereas

Eluard and Vitrac were interested in producing such transformations within the realm of letters, the young photographer Boiffard mined the world for Surrealist facts in expressly visual terms.

Best known for his contributions to *Documents*, a short-lived art magazine founded by Georges Bataille, Boiffard produced works that isolated bodily fragments such as the toe, the head, and the mouth, making them appear uncanny and unfamiliar. His *Big Toe* (fig. 1), for example, emerges from darkness, each crease of skin and fleck of dirt of its suggested topography revealing a consummate strangeness. *Untitled* (fig. 2) explores a more literal topography, depicting a haystack illuminated against a deep penumbra. The work is singular in many senses. And unlike the photographs included in *Documents* (fig. 3), *Untitled* was not made in the studio. Unlike the uniformly lit urban scenes of *Paris* published in André Breton’s *Nadja* (fig. 4), *Untitled* provides no sense of context or location.

Most exceptional of all is the technique, or set of techniques, used to make the photograph. Why is the haystack so bright and the background so dark? Was the image created at night with a flash? Was the negative manipulated in the darkroom? Could Boiffard have been using a red filter or infrared film to turn a blue sky black? Despite rigorous study and technical analysis, the photograph resists any single, fixed explanation for its facture and appearance. As such, it is a Surrealist object par excellence, for it both transforms its subject and throws into crisis the “facticity” of photography, its privileged relation to the real.<sup>2</sup>

The technical unknowability of the work is an apt starting point for uncovering a densely layered set of Surrealist strategies. In using the haystack as his subject, Boiffard addressed and transformed a potent symbol whose complex meanings were particularly fraught in interwar France. Presenting a familiar object in an unfamiliar way, *Untitled* thus exemplifies the way photography can disrupt something we understand as fact and alter “the nature [and] . . . the destination of an object.” Before this concept can be fully explored, however, Boiffard’s own murky history and his place within the Parisian avant-garde must be elucidated.

## A BIOGRAPHY, IN BRIEF

Despite having produced some of the most iconic Surrealist photographs, Boiffard has received less attention in English-language scholarship than many of his peers. The following biography summarizes what is known about his brief but

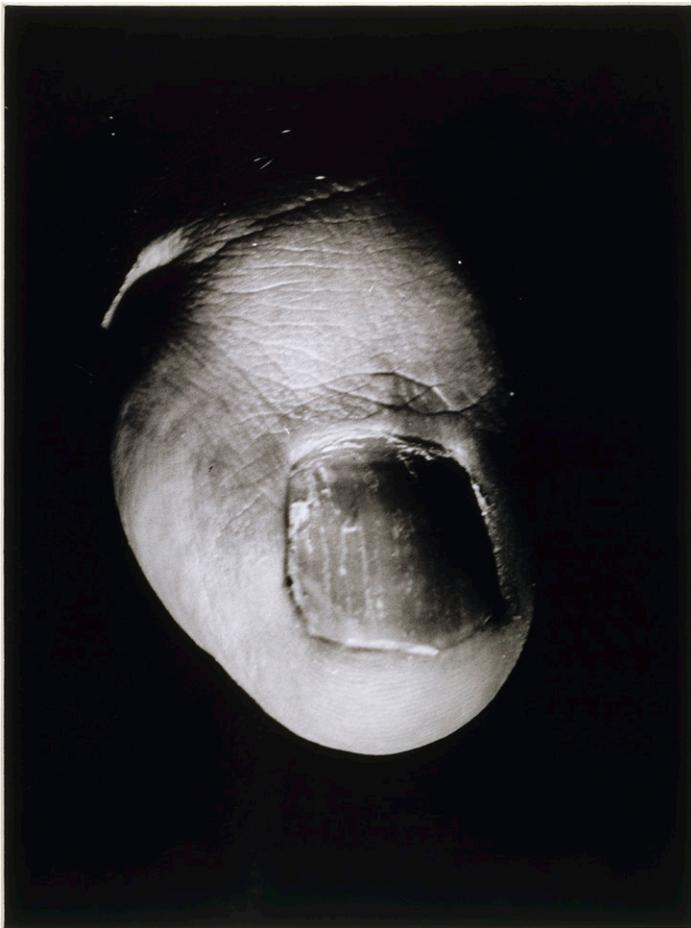


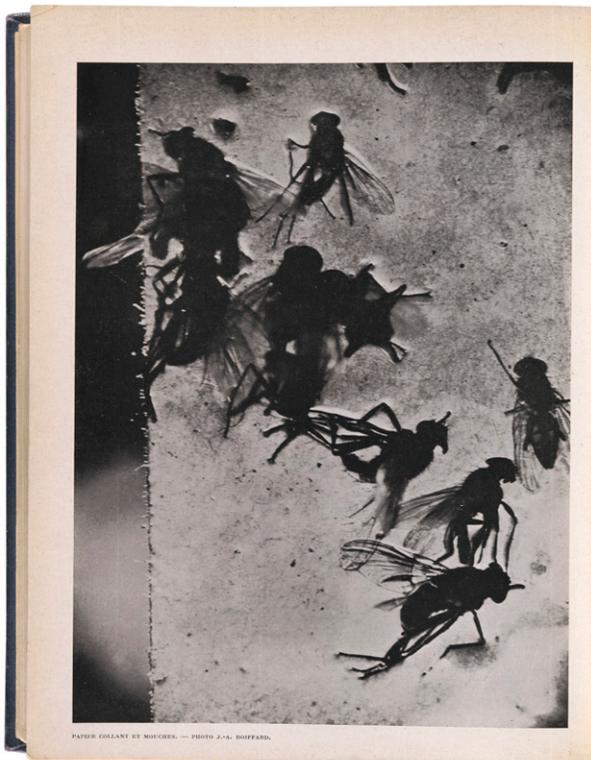
fig. 1 Jacques-André Boiffard. *Big Toe* (Male subject, 30 years old) (*Gros Orteil [Sujet masculin, 30 ans]*). 1929. Gelatin silver print, 12<sup>3</sup>/<sub>16</sub> × 9<sup>7</sup>/<sub>16</sub>" (31 × 23.9 cm). Centre Pompidou, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris. © Mme Denise Boiffard. Image © CNAC/MNAM/Dist. RMN-Grand Palais/Art Resource, NY



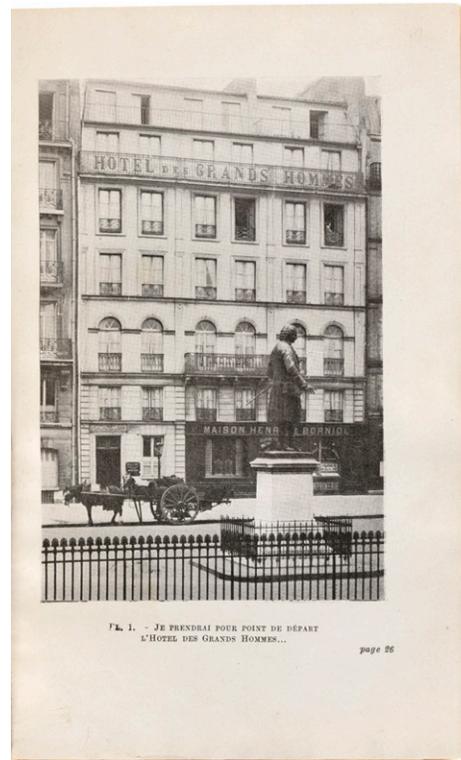
**fig. 2** Jacques-André Boiffard. Untitled. 1929. Gelatin silver print, 1929-40, 12<sup>5</sup>/<sub>16</sub> × 10<sup>13</sup>/<sub>16</sub>" (31.3 × 27.2 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Thomas Walther Collection. Gift of James Thrall Soby, by exchange (MoMA 1632.2001). © Mme Denise Boiffard

productive artistic career. Boiffard was born July 19, 1902, in Épernon, a rural area in Normandy. The son of a notary, Boiffard was sent to Paris to be educated at the École Alsacienne, an elite private school where he first befriended Naville. After a short pause in his education, in 1920 Boiffard enrolled in the Faculté des Sciences at the Sorbonne to study medicine and once again came into contact with fellow student Naville. Both admired the poetry of Paul Valéry and Stéphane Mallarmé, and Naville became an active participant in avant-garde literary publications such as *L'Oeuf dur*.<sup>3</sup>

In 1924 Boiffard began engaging in Surrealist activities, having been introduced by Naville to Breton and the Bureau de Recherches Surréalistes. That year Boiffard also became an assistant at Man Ray's young but thriving photography studio.<sup>4</sup> Man Ray instructed Boiffard in photography, and the budding Surrealist decided to quit his medical studies. Boiffard's forays into photography were undoubtedly influenced by Man Ray's aesthetic, including his preference for creating works in the studio.<sup>5</sup> In addition to conducting research for the Bureau, Boiffard began contributing to the vast literary output of the Surrealist circle, penning texts for *La Révolution surréaliste*.<sup>6</sup> Through Man Ray, he was commissioned to contribute photographs for Breton's *Nadja* in 1928. Breton expressed interest in Boiffard's dispassionate



**fig. 3** Jacques-André Boiffard. *Papier collant et mouches* (Adhesive paper and flies). Reproduced in Georges Bataille. "L'Esprit moderne et le jeu des transpositions" (Modern spirit and the game of transpositions). *Documents*, no. 8 (1930). The Museum of Modern Art Library, New York. © Mme Denise Boiffard



**fig. 4** Jacques-André Boiffard. Photograph captioned "Je prendrai pour point de départ l'hôtel des Grands Hommes..." ("I will take as a starting point the Hotel des Grands Hommes..."). Reproduced in André Breton. *Nadja*. Paris: Gallimard, 1928. The Museum of Modern Art Library, New York. © Mme Denise Boiffard

“medical” gaze, and he included several of Boiffard’s urban scenes in the finished work (see fig. 4).<sup>7</sup> However, Breton soon broke decisively with Boiffard, in a letter dated November 26, 1928.<sup>8</sup>

While working in Man Ray’s studio, Boiffard also assisted with some of Man Ray’s short films. He served as the assistant cameraman for *L’Étoile de mer* (*The Starfish*, 1928) and as the sole cameraman for *Les Mystères du Château de Dé* (*The Mysteries of the Château de Dé*, 1929). The latter was financed by Vicomte Charles de Noailles, featured him and his wife, and was largely set in his family home at Hyères.<sup>9</sup> De Noailles, who also funded films by Luis Buñuel and Jean Cocteau, would soon become a key patron of Boiffard’s work.

In the wake of his split with the close circle around Breton, Boiffard befriended the photographer Eli Lotar, who broke off from Breton the same year. In 1929 Boiffard ceased working for Man Ray and founded his own Studio Unis, with Lotar. The studio, at 59 rue Froidevaux, was financed by de Noailles and the French ethnographer Georges-Henri Rivière. Lotar and Boiffard began working closely with the writers Robert Desnos and Georges Bataille, enthusiastically contributing to the short-lived magazine *Documents*, which set itself in opposition to the more mainstream Surrealist activities overseen by Breton. It was in *Documents* that some of Boiffard’s best-known work was published (see fig. 3).

Though Studio Unis went bankrupt in 1932, Boiffard continued to collaborate with Lotar and participated in group exhibitions with Germaine Krull and André Kertész, among others. Having joined the Communist Party in 1927, Boiffard was drawn to the activities around the nascent Groupe Octobre, a leftist agit-prop theatrical group overseen by the writer Jacques Prévert. Boiffard accompanied members of the group to Russia in 1933, after which he embarked with Lotar on what was intended to be an extensive trip, once again financed by Rivière and de Noailles. The trip ended early, in Tangier, and upon his return to Paris, Boiffard exhibited his travel photography at the Galerie de la Pléiade in 1934.

The next year Boiffard joined Contre-attaque, a movement founded by Bataille and Breton in response to the rise of fascism in Europe. Contre-attaque promoted popular uprising as a means of challenging fascist power. However, the death of Boiffard’s father that same year signaled the abrupt end of his artistic career. Profoundly moved by this loss, Boiffard resumed his medical studies and served as a radiologist at the Hôpital Saint-Louis in Paris from 1940 to 1959. He died in 1961.

### THE STRATEGIES OF SURREALISM

As he became a practicing photographer, Boiffard was influenced by the visual strategies adopted by his Surrealist peers. In particular, Surrealist photography played on the medium’s ability to faithfully capture the everyday world, to

make what is called an “index.” An index is a sign that has a physical relationship to the thing it represents (e.g., a footprint). Because light physically transforms the emulsion of a photographic negative, photography is said to be an “indexical medium,” meaning that it is uniquely able to reproduce the real world. The Surrealists employed diverse formal and technical means of making everyday reality appear strange and unfamiliar. Because the resulting photographs were still indexical, Rosalind Krauss has argued, they served to record the inherent strangeness of reality itself.<sup>10</sup>

*Big Toe* (see fig. 1), arguably Boiffard’s best-known and most disturbing image, manipulates scale, point of view, and lighting to make a familiar body part look odd. Photograms, double exposures, photomontages, negative images, and solarization were other new and experimental techniques embraced by Surrealist photographers. Boiffard himself employed several of these techniques, playing with scale, multiple exposures, and photograms. Untitled, however, departs from these established strategies, and in doing so invites a reconsideration of both its subject and its medium.

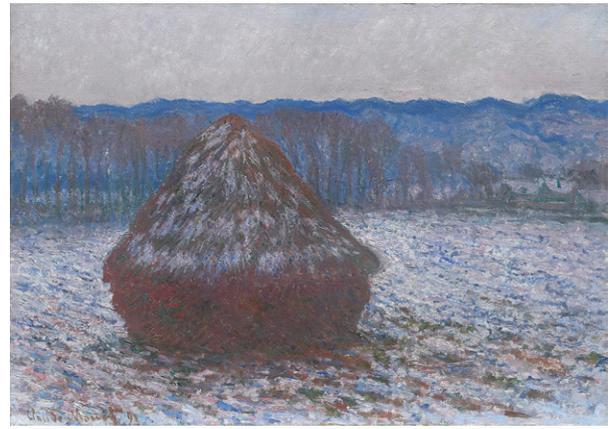
Further, Untitled (see fig. 2) does not make use of the doubling, framing, and spacing that Krauss identifies as key strategies in Surrealist photography, but it can nonetheless be productively read within the larger pursuit of transforming the real. Untitled generates a set of visual paradoxes while still insisting upon the indexical truth—the “facticity”—of these paradoxes. Boiffard presents us with the impossible view of a fully lit structure and a fully darkened sky, seamlessly suturing the two together. Whereas the foreground is overpopulated with rich textural detail, the background is totally undefined.

Boiffard’s choice of subject also engages with some of the broader Surrealist strategies championed by Breton. The haystack may be seen as a kind of *trouvaille*—a found object. For Breton, the exemplary moment of such discovery occurred when wandering in a Parisian flea market, where one could come upon an object that revealed something unexpected. With the haystack, however, Boiffard recasts the urban wanderer as a rural gleaner, one who moves through the fields after the harvest and collects any remaining food. Both practices are characterized by their recuperation of an abandoned material past.

For an object to be found, it first had to be lost, meaning that the *trouvaille* was defined, in part, by having been removed from its original context.<sup>11</sup> The related concept of *dépayement*, meaning dis-placement or dis-orientation, informed the isolation, fragmentation, and close cropping often seen in Surrealist photographs. Boiffard references this concept and makes it literal, isolating the haystack from the French landscape, or *paysage*. According to Breton, such a break from an object’s habitual environment enables it to enter into new relationships and generate new meanings.<sup>12</sup> This would prove to be especially consequential for the haystack, whose rootedness in the French landscape had helped shape its rich and potent set of associations.



**fig. 5** Jean-François Millet. *Haystacks: Autumn*. c. 1874. Oil on canvas, 33 1/2 x 43 3/8" (85.1 x 110.2 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Bequest of Lillian S. Timken. Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art/Art Resource, NY



**fig. 6** Claude Monet. *Stack of Wheat*. 1890-91. Oil on canvas, 25 15/16 x 36 3/8" (65.8 x 92.3 cm). Art Institute of Chicago. Restricted gift of the Searle Family Trust; Major Acquisitions Centennial Endowment; through prior acquisitions of the Mr. and Mrs. Martin A. Ryerson and Potter Palmer collections; through prior bequest of Jerome Friedman

### THE HAYSTACK

In taking on this haystack, Boiffard engaged with a fraught subject, one that spoke to France's past while conversing with its contested present. "A powerful symbol with a distinguished iconological pedigree,"<sup>13</sup> the haystack was a popular and pervasive topos in French landscape painting, especially in the nineteenth century, and surely continued to resonate into the 1920s, when Boiffard made this image. Even presented as it is here, with its inexplicable combination of luminosity and darkness and filling the frame from right to left, virtually without context—only a small foreground section of field with scrub offers a sense of scale—the haystack still refers to art historical tradition; addresses contemporary debates (in the 1920s) about the continuing position of France as an agrarian nation, the importance of agriculture to the French economy, and the role of regionalism; and sets out key components of Surrealism's radical program, especially as advanced by Bataille, with whom Boiffard was allied at the time of the picture's making.

Though we know little about Boiffard's knowledge of art history, it is impossible to imagine this photographer—or any French image-maker—depicting a haystack without acknowledging its place in the nation's landscape tradition.<sup>14</sup> Even a cursory survey of French landscape painting reveals numerous haystacks, either as lone elements in an agrarian scene or surrounded by the peasants who built them. Consider, for example, just two of the many painted by Jean-François Millet: *Haystacks: Autumn* (fig. 5), in which enormous haystacks stand as sentinels in a sheep-covered field, or his *Gleaners* (1857; Musée d'Orsay), in which the haystacks in the distance echo the bent bodies of the peasants in the foreground.<sup>15</sup> For many other nineteenth-century artists—from Camille Pissarro and Jules Breton to Vincent van Gogh and Paul Gauguin—the haystack was a key

compositional element, showing "the habitual richness of nature as well as man's civilizing influence over her."<sup>16</sup>

It was Claude Monet, however, who with his series of haystacks (fig. 6) created what have been called "the most mythic agricultural images in the history of art."<sup>17</sup> Monet's haystacks, painted in 1890-91 and first exhibited as a series of fifteen canvases, offer a productive counterpoint to Boiffard's representation of this subject, especially in their dissimilar approaches to time. While any depiction of a haystack could be said to signify a particular agrarian temporality, be it the schedule of the day (work or rest) or the cycle of the harvest, Monet's haystacks present a powerful sense of both duration and immediacy. Each individual picture records a precise moment, while the series as a whole registers change and transformation. In the words of a contemporary critic, Monet's haystacks capture "sensations of place and of time in the harmonious and melancholic flow of sunsets, ends of day, and gentle dawns. The violets, the roses, the sulphurs, the saffrons, and the mauves, the greens, and the topazes surround the objects with a limpidness and infinite ease."<sup>18</sup> Art historian Robert Herbert concurs that Monet "invited us . . . to ponder the changes of meaning in the feeble, moist light of dawn, compared to the hot yellow light of midday, or to the brooding purples and reds of sunset. . . . [The stacks are] witnesses to the biology of man's time as well of nature's. The youth of dawn, the maturity of midday sun, the nearly agonized age of the sunset, these deeply felt hours of the day are paralleled in this same series by the seasons, from the fullness of late summer to the bleakness of winter snows."<sup>19</sup>

As opposed to Monet's mutable "flow," Boiffard's haystack is resolutely singular and static, even obdurate. Mysteriously lit and devoid of setting (Monet's haystacks,

in contrast, are usually depicted in relation to fields, farms, and houses), the image denies the possibility of locating the haystack geographically, temporally, or climatically. While laboring over the haystacks (“I have become so slow at working that I am in despair”), Monet described his struggles to “succeed in rendering what I am looking for: ‘instantaneity,’” a characteristic typically associated with photography.<sup>20</sup> This seeming reversal of the proficiencies of camera and brush is complicated by Herbert, who sees in Monet’s instant a meaning that is longer and more profound: “an instant full of richness that extends deeply into the consciousness of Western man, aware of the symbolic content of the year, in the grain which is his provision for the future.”<sup>21</sup>

An image of a rural subject made with a resolutely modern mechanical device, Boiffard’s haystack exemplifies frictions in France in the 1920s between those who favored a primarily agricultural economy and those who saw their nation’s future in industry, a tension that art historian Romy Golan describes in shorthand as “modernity and nostalgia.”<sup>22</sup> In her important book of that title, Golan maps out debates in the interwar years over the future of the French state. “Far from inhabiting the margins of cultural and art-historical discourse in France,” she writes, “reactionary issues such as the return to the soil, anti-urbanism, the questioning of technology — and their ideological corollaries such as agrarianism, regionalism, corporatism — had a profound impact on French modernism from 1918 all the way to Vichy.”<sup>23</sup> The rural landscape, so closely associated with French national identity, became a figure of regeneration and pride in the wake of wartime conflict while also offering a path to economic and cultural ascendancy. Golan describes paintings of the countryside as well as political tracts and novels that promoted agriculture and supported regionalism — all of which, she argues, resulted in “a world stilled, and a vision infused . . . by nostalgia and memory.”<sup>24</sup>

Might Boiffard’s haystack speak to this retrenchment? Is the haystack an example of what Golan identifies as the “rusticization of the modern”?<sup>25</sup> Does it call for a return to the rural? Does it speak for the regional strengths of France? Does it call attention to its peasantry and their labor? Or the material wealth of its landowners? Born and raised in rural Normandy — though his parents were petit bourgeois and not peasants — Boiffard may have been aware of the debates around France’s economic future and the contested role of agriculture. Further, given that haystacks took different shapes depending on their location, Boiffard’s presentation of this particular stack — in a form native to Normandy — raises the specter of regionalism and even its resistance to nationalism.<sup>26</sup> The haystack’s robustness — forceful and direct — seems to express continuity with France’s agrarian past, while its mysterious glow destabilizes the certainty of tradition, transforming the stack from a familiar element in the countryside into a deviation or anomaly. And while the picture’s creation by mechanical means may be an argument

for the precision of the industrial — almost every stalk of hay can be seen — the result questions perceptions of the real and challenges the authority of the camera eye. Given the paucity of information about Boiffard, it is impossible to say with any certainty what position this image might reflect regarding modernization or retrenchment, nationalism or regionalism, industry or agriculture, the mechanical or the handmade. Made in the context of the 1920s in France, the picture raises and straddles these questions without answering them.

Though we have been using the word “haystack” to describe Boiffard’s subject, a more accurate term is “grain stack.” “Haystacks,” Herbert has explained, “have slightly irregular, less architectural shapes. Grain stacks are built more carefully, their shocks first tied together and then actually thatched to keep the rain out.”<sup>27</sup> What is important about this distinction is the similarity of the grain stack to shelter. Indeed, grain stacks are constructed like a hut: “generally round, their diameter varying from four to eight meters; their substructure is solid, made with small branches or rape straw, or even with wood, because it must keep out not only moisture, but also rodents. The sheafs are placed in successive layers and tied, in a manner so that their points converge toward the center. The cover must be the object of great care . . . the inclination being pronounced so that rain water will run off it easily.”<sup>28</sup> Monet himself emphasized, compositionally, the connections between his stacks and the local architecture, as Paul Tucker has pointed out. “The slopes of the conical tops of the stacks and the ridges of distant roofs are always parallel,” he writes, and in the related drawings “the ties are even more apparent, as no atmospheric conditions disguise the fact that the line defining the stacks is the same that describes the houses, barns, trees, and hills.”<sup>29</sup> Even more than those of Monet, Boiffard’s haystack might be mistaken for a thatched house. Richard Brettell offers a more evocative reference: “One is reminded . . . of the ‘primitive hut’ sought after by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century architectural theorists as the origin of all human architecture.”<sup>30</sup>

In this context, it is helpful to recall that “Architecture” is the first entry in Georges Bataille’s “critical dictionary,” published in the inaugural issue of *Documents* in 1929. “Architecture,” the definition begins, “is the expression of the true nature of societies, as physiognomy is the expression of the nature of individuals.”<sup>31</sup> This “true nature,” Bataille explains, is “authoritative command and prohibition,” and it is this that is represented by architecture; “cathedrals and palaces,” for example, “impose silence upon the crowds” and “monuments . . . inspire good social behavior and often even genuine fear.”<sup>32</sup> If Boiffard’s grain stack/hut represents the root of all architecture, perhaps the photographer is also offering up an originary image of the authority, systems, and classifications that Bataille’s particular brand of Surrealism sought to undermine. The stack does, after all, impart a certain stasis and strength that Bataille’s definition conveys.



fig. 7 Robert Smithson. *Partially Buried Woodshed*. Kent State University, Kent, Ohio, January 1970. One woodshed and twenty truckloads of earth, 18' 6" x 10' 2" x 45' (5.6 x 3.1 x 13.71 m). Courtesy James Cohan Gallery, New York and Shanghai. © Estate of Robert Smithson/licensed by VAGA, New York

Boiffard's structure, however, also points out the cracks in that authority, revealing the disintegration intrinsic to architecture.<sup>33</sup> It presents the opposite of conventional architecture's primary characteristics: without doors or windows, it cannot be entered and is therefore functionless; built to the cycles of the harvest, it lacks permanence; and constructed to be dismantled, its highest ambition is dissolution. In this, Boiffard's structure is less aligned with Bataille's definition of architecture and more akin to his "*informe*," also defined in *Documents* in 1929, with its elements of sabotage, scatology, base materialism, and undermining of systems.<sup>34</sup> To get at this aspect of Boiffard's project, a brief detour into the 1970s is in order—specifically, a look at the work of Robert Smithson and Gordon Matta-Clark, who sought, Yve-Alain Bois explains, to reveal "entropy as the repressed condition of architecture."<sup>35</sup>

In *Partially Buried Woodshed*, enacted at Kent State University in Ohio in January 1970, for example, Smithson buried a shed—another kind of hut—under twenty truckloads of earth until its supporting beam collapsed (fig. 7). Smithson's plan of "dearchitecturezation," as he called it—in which, as Bois discusses, "architecture is the material, and entropy is the instrument"—was that the site would continue to decay.<sup>36</sup> Trained as an architect, Matta-Clark engaged with structural detritus, constructing *Garbage Wall*, 1970; creating an edifice out of trash in *Open House*, 1972;

and, most significantly, cutting into abandoned buildings. Like Bataille, Matta-Clark recognized the power of architecture, especially its economic authority, but he also understood—and revealed in his work—its ultimate end. Thinking through Matta-Clark's project and his "anarchitectural" ambitions, Bois speaks for the artist, explaining, "Architecture has only one destiny, and that is, sooner or later, to go down the chute, because it is waste."<sup>37</sup> Seeing the grain stack/hut through the work of these artists and Bataille's *informe*, we might conclude that Boiffard deploys this haystack to indicate architecture's end.<sup>38</sup> Thus, in addition to exemplifying architecture's first authority, Boiffard presents its inherent vulnerability and evanescence, its innate silence and inutility, its future dissolution and destruction.

#### THE HAYSTACK IN THE DARKROOM

Encapsulating a range of iconographical, historical, and theoretical references, *Untitled* also presents a layered citation of photographic conventions, which, like the category of architecture, become disarticulated or suspended. In drawing upon but also transforming an existing technical and pictorial vocabulary, Boiffard's photograph anticipates alternative relationships and possibilities for Surrealist photography that test even more radically the boundaries of the "fact."

Vertical shoots of grass in the foreground of the image orient both the photograph and its viewer. Constituting a distinct spatial tier, this grass also serves as a ground or base against which the structure of the haystack defines itself. To the left, and slightly unfocused, lies a smaller pile of brush. The field that unfolds between the viewer and the distant haystack belongs to a horizontal plane; however, its horizontality—the spatial recession it connotes and the related orientation of "ground"—is expressed through the vertical shoots of grass. In other words, the viewer is asked to read these elements simultaneously as units of verticality or uprightness as well as indicators of horizontality and baseness.

Brightly illuminated and richly variegated, the haystack stands at an uncertain distance. Individual pieces of hay project and recede across the surface of the structure, creating a highly textured facade of gray tones. Around the top of the structure, luminous shoots of silvery hay jut out. The concentrated brightness that outlines the upper portions of the haystack and falls upon the grass in the foreground suggests that the landscape is lit from above. In the place of such a light source, however, the photograph presents an undifferentiated expanse of blackness.

The saturated darkness of the background, which must be read, at least provisionally, as sky, throws into question the intensity with which light is distributed across the surface of the haystack and the ground below it. Within the narrative context of the image, it presents a paradox: a circumstance in which a sky is totally dark and a feature within it radiantly lit. (René Magritte would later invert this arrangement in his famous *Dominion of Light* series, of 1953–54, in

which a darkened street, illuminated by a single lamp, is presented in front of a bright diurnal sky.) In the face of this logical impossibility, the viewer is forced to consider whether it is the darkness of the sky that is artificial or the brightness of the haystack. Both the illumination of the photograph and its spatial ambiguity create a tension between the optical “fact” of the photograph and its narrative or illusionistic content. Basic binaries of pictorial legibility—verticality and horizontality, light and darkness—are suspended in a state of irresolution. A single mark is both vertical *and* horizontal, a landscape is both day *and* night.

Of course, the dark background of *Untitled* is not without precedent in Boiffard’s body of work. *Big Toe*, for example, depicts a starkly illuminated form emerging out of a field of deep obscurity. This strategy visually isolates the toe, decontextualizing and dramatizing it. The toe, rendered with crisp visual detail, dominates the frame and creates an uncomfortable sense of proximity. The “closeness” of a stranger’s toe to the viewer’s eye is all the more unfamiliar because it disarticulates the vertical alignment of the human body, bringing its lowest part into contact with one of its highest. Crucially, however, *Big Toe* and related works were produced in a studio, an established site of experimentation and artifice. As a result, their play with space and light belongs to a formal register that operates independently from the rules of the natural world.

Another crucial model of photographic darkness available to Boiffard belonged to the photogram. This cameraless technique results from placing an object directly onto photosensitive paper and then exposing it to light. Man Ray, claiming to have stumbled upon the technique by accident, referred to them as “rayographs.” However, direct exposures



fig. 9 Christian Schad. *Schadograph*. 1918. Cut-and-pasted gelatin silver printing-out-paper print on paper, 6 7/8 x 5" (16.8 x 12.7 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Purchase. © 2014/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Germany



fig. 8 William Henry Fox Talbot. *The Haystack*. April 1844. Salted-paper print, 7 1/2 x 9" (19 x 22.9 cm). National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Digital image © National Gallery of Canada

date back to the earliest successful forays into photography. William Henry Fox Talbot included examples in his *Pencil of Nature* (1844–46), which also featured an early photograph of a haystack (fig. 8), and Anna Atkins began publishing the results of her “cyanotype” process in 1843 (*Photographs of British Algae: Cyanotype Impressions*). Christian Schad began making Dada photograms, dubbed “schadographs” by Tristan Tzara, in 1918 (fig. 9). It is likely that Schad inspired Man Ray’s own experiments with the genre. Man Ray’s photograms were reproduced and publicly circulated by 1922, and László Moholy-Nagy embarked on his own photogram experiments that same year.

Thus, by the time Boiffard became Man Ray’s studio assistant in 1924, the photogram had become one of the most influential photographic strategies deployed by European avant-gardes. Because it is produced by direct exposure, it epitomizes the indexicality of the photograph and foregrounds its materiality.<sup>39</sup> The literalness of the photogram abandons any pretext of illusionist space in favor of visual and material immediacy. The darkness of the

photogram, for example, does not represent the darkness of actual space; it is purely and merely the darkness of exposed paper. Man Ray's photograms, however, mark a crucial break with this paradigm of spaceless darkness. As Noam Elcott has argued, "Man Ray created his rayographic strips *in the darkroom*" whereas earlier photograms were generally produced outside or using natural light. "The difference," according to Elcott, "is essential. In a sense, Man Ray's cameraless films and photographs are not cameraless at all; instead, they substitute for the photographic camera the 'camera' or chamber of the darkroom (camera obscura)."<sup>40</sup> The darkness of the photogram, in addition to foregrounding the materiality of photography, also encodes within it the darkened interior in which it was produced. For Elcott, this has the effect of uprooting both the image and its viewer.

The radicality of Boiffard's *Untitled* lies, in part, in its citation of the photogram, in its reference to the spaceless darkness of the darkroom. Unlike the photogram, however, its subject is emphatically anchored to a space and context that lie outside this controlled environment of studio manipulation. Close study has verified that *Untitled* is neither a negative print nor a photomontage. The illuminated field of the haystack and the near-absolute darkness that surrounds it are not discrete images that have been sutured together, nor has the darkness been artificially filled with pigment. Rather, Boiffard forces the viewer to consider an

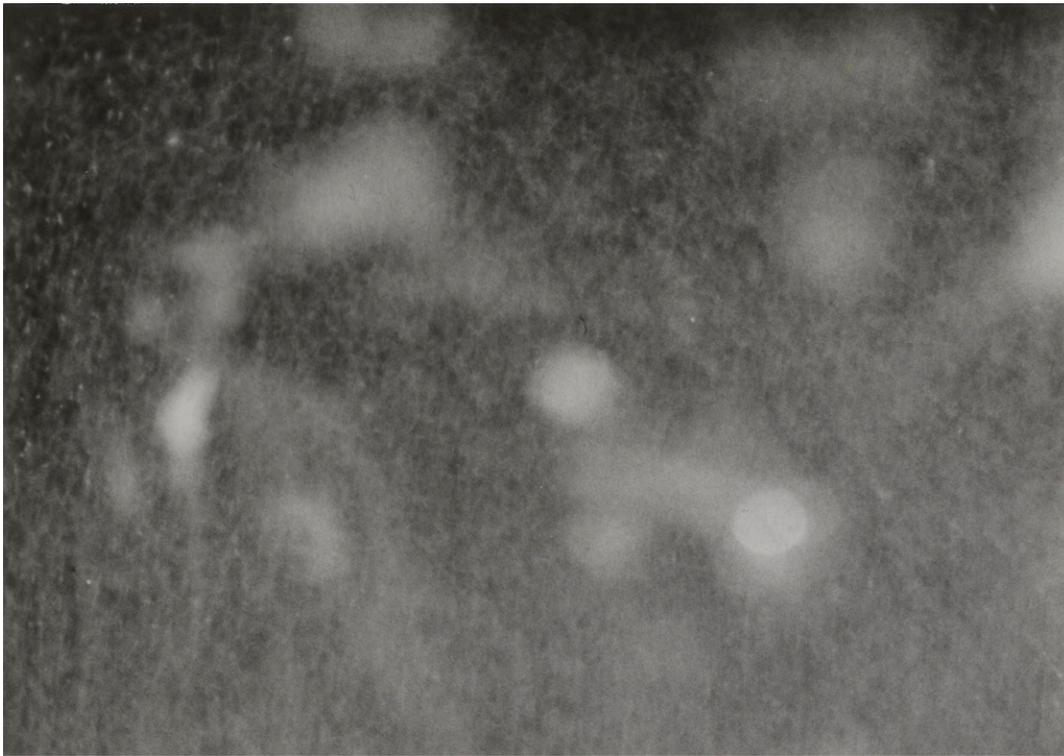
internally cohesive field of total light and total darkness, to accept this paradox not as a condition of the photograph but as a condition of the world itself, which, as Krauss might say, the photograph merely records.

Boiffard cites but also transforms the established visual language of the Surrealist photogram, and in doing so suggests an even more radical set of possibilities. On the one hand, the work naturalizes the darkness of the studio and the darkroom, reimagining them as the night's sky. On the other, Boiffard opens up the possibility that the natural world itself is a kind of darkroom. Within it, the natural darkness of nighttime creates opportunities for unrestricted visual play, in which images and objects can be reversed and revised, assembled and disassembled. By transposing this mode of visual play into the space of landscape, Boiffard recalls the operation of the Surrealist fact, which changes the meaning of an object and reinserts that new meaning back into the realm of truth or fact. In the case of Boiffard's photograph, it is both the haystack and the natural world to which it belongs that are transformed.

The various formal and technical operations at work in *Untitled* are consolidated in a set of related photographic works that Boiffard made at roughly the same time. These works, in the collection of the Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Pompidou, Paris, reproduce the grainy striations of a natural landscape within the artificial language



**fig. 10** Jacques-André Boiffard. *Study (Étude)*. c. 1930. Gelatin silver print, 6 ¼ × 8 7/8" (16 × 22.5 cm). Centre Pompidou, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris. © Mme Denise Boiffard. Image © CNAC/MNAM/Dist. RMN-Grand Palais/Art Resource, NY



**fig. 11** Jacques-André Boiffard. *Study (Étude)*. c. 1930. Gelatin silver print, 7  $\frac{3}{4}$   $\times$  5  $\frac{1}{2}$ " (9.6  $\times$  13.8 cm). Centre Pompidou, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris. © Mme Denise Boiffard. Image © CNAC/MNAM/Dist. RMN-Grand Palais/Art Resource, NY

of darkroom manipulation. *Study (Étude)* (fig. 10), for example, presents a dense choreography of gestures: materials were wiped and spread across the surface of the negative to create a field of linear marks. Larger marks blur, appearing closer to the viewer in the spacelessness of optical depth. Along the upper margin of the work, a band of light appears to be a horizon line; above it, vague shapes emerge like distant features in a landscape. The viewer is invited to imagine a field: sprays of grass, the foremost of which are large and out of focus; in the distance, buildings or perhaps even haystacks.

In another *Study* (fig. 11), Boiffard uses a similar process to suggest a landscape of filament-like objects brightly lit against a deep darkness. The patches of brightness that hover atop this field once again imply a kind of depth, as if they are closer to the viewer than the smaller marks. While *Untitled* uses optical units of verticality to express a horizontal expanse, *Study* further destabilizes the relationship between visual and narrative depth, creating a relationship that rings with "optical truth" (objects closer to us appear larger) but fails to produce the illusion of

depth in real space. In place of real depth that merely reads as flatness, Boiffard invites the viewer to imagine technical and material flatness as depth.

Although the *Studies* were more conventionally produced within the darkroom, they speak to several key operations at work within Boiffard's *Untitled*. From within the darkened chamber of the studio, the technical and chemical experimentation of the *Studies* generates images that evoke the natural world of the landscape; within the outdoor landscape of the haystack, such experimentation gestures to the artifice and flatness of darkroom manipulation. Optical and actual relationships are set in opposition to one another: the haystack, which should be familiar, appears strange and unknowable; the chemical artifice of the *Studies*, in contrast, evokes the familiar terrain of the natural landscape. In this highly experimental moment in his photographic oeuvre, Boiffard suspends the opposition between the natural and the artificial, the landscape and the darkroom. In doing so, he imagines photography that is capable of transforming both its subject and the reality to which it belongs.

1. Paul Eluard, Roger Vitrac, and Jacques-André Boiffard, "Préface," *La Révolution surréaliste* 1, no. 1 (December 1924): 2.
2. This paradoxical relationship was first identified by Rosalind E. Krauss in *L'Amour fou: Photography and Surrealism* (Washington, D.C.: Corcoran Gallery of Art; and New York: Abbeville Press, 1985).
3. For a more detailed account of Naville's literary activities, see Françoise Blum, ed., *Les Vies de Pierre Naville* (Villeneuve-d'Ascq: Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 2007).
4. Man Ray had several studio assistants, most of whom went on to have successful careers in photography, including Berenice Abbott, Bill Brandt, and Lee Miller. For more information, see "Man Ray Studio," in the Meeting Points section of this website.
5. "I seldom took a camera out of my studio, and then only for portraits," Man Ray once declared. Man Ray, *Self-Portrait* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1963), p. 171.
6. Work at the Bureau, also called the Centrale Surréaliste, included transcribing dreams, observations, and events; soliciting press and public engagement; working on *La Révolution surréaliste*; and participating in group projects and discussions.
7. *Atelier Man Ray: Berenice Abbott, Jacques-André Boiffard, Bill Brandt, Lee Miller: 1920-1935* (Paris: Centre Pompidou, 1982), p. 20.
8. Although the split was officially declared to be on aesthetic grounds, some speculate that it may have stemmed from a dispute involving Simone Kahn, Breton's first wife.
9. When *Les Mystères du Château de Dé* was ready to be screened, Man Ray wanted to show it with another short film. He was introduced to Luis Buñuel, who had recently finished his first film, *Un Chien Andalou* (1929), with Salvador Dalí.
10. Krauss, *L'Amour fou*, p. 35. See also Krauss, "The Photographic Conditions of Surrealism," *October* 19 (Winter 1981): 3-34.
11. Walter Benjamin describes these objects as "outmoded": discarded or expired, out of sync with the present moment in some essential way. Walter Benjamin, "Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia," in Benjamin, *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (London: New Left Books, 1979), p. 229.
12. Breton describes the consequences of such a break in André Breton, *Le Surréalisme et la peinture* (Paris: Gallimard, 1965), p. 25.
13. Richard Brettell, catalogue entry for Claude Monet, *The Grainstacks (Les Meules)*, 1890-91, in *A Day in the Country: Impressionism and the French Landscape* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1984), p. 262.
14. Man Ray often visited the Louvre in Paris. In addition, art history was part of the literature published in Surrealist journals, including *La Révolution surréaliste* and *Documents*, so Boiffard would have had access to these writers and their texts.
15. On Millet's representation of haystacks, see Robert Herbert, "Peasant Naturalism and Millet's Reputation," in Herbert et al., *Jean-Francois Millet* (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1976), pp. 9-16; and Herbert, "City vs. Country: The Rural Image in French Painting from Millet to Gauguin," *Artforum* 8 (February 1970): 44-55.
16. Brettell, "The Fields of France," in *A Day in the Country*, pp. 241-42.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 246. Also on Monet's stacks, see Charles S. Moffett, "Monet's Haystacks," in John Rewald and Frances Weitzenhoffer, eds., *Aspects of Monet* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1984), pp. 140-59; and Paul Hayes Tucker, "Of Hay and Oats and Stacks of Grain: Monet's Paintings of Agrarian France in 1890-91," in *Monet in the '90s: The Series Paintings* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts; and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), pp. 65-105.
18. Désiré Louis, "Claude Monet," *L'Évènement*, May 19, 1891, n.p.; quoted in Brettell, *A Day in the Country*, catalogue entry for Monet, *The Grainstacks*, p. 260.
19. Herbert, "Method and Meaning in Monet," *Art in America* 67 (September 1979): 106.
20. Letter from Monet to Gustave Geffroy, October 7, 1890, in Gustave Geffroy, *Claude Monet, sa vie, son oeuvre* (Paris, 1924), vol. 2, p. 203. Translated and quoted in Herbert, "Method and Meaning in Monet," p. 106.
21. Herbert, "Method and Meaning in Monet," p. 106. Brettell has a different take, describing Monet's haystacks as "a symbol for man's triumph over time. It stands against the frigidness of winter days, irradiating a gentle warmth as the seasons change around it." See Brettell, "Fields of France," p. 246.
22. Romy Golan, *Modernity and Nostalgia: Art and Politics in France between the Wars* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).
23. *Ibid.*, p. ix.
24. *Ibid.* In this context, the question of regionalism would have been especially raw in regard to the restitution of Alsace-Lorraine. Moreover, after 1918 the figure of Marianne, the embodiment of France, was often depicted as a sower, further identifying agrarian labor with national identity and economic recovery.
25. *Ibid.*, p. x.
26. See Paul Lawrence, Timothy Baycroft, and Carolyn Grohmann, "'Degrees of Foreignness' and the Construction of Identity in French Border Regions during the Interwar Period," *Contemporary European History* 10 (March 2001): 51-71.
27. Herbert, "Method and Meaning in Monet," p. 106. In French, these are *meules de foin* (haystacks) and *meules de blé* (grain stacks). Albert Larbalétrier, entry on haystacks in *La Grande Encyclopédie* (1892), translated and quoted in Brettell, *A Day in the Country*, catalogue entry for Monet, *The Grainstacks*, p. 262.
28. Larbalétrier, entry in *La Grande Encyclopédie* (1892), in Brettell, *A Day in the Country*, catalogue entry for Monet, *The Grainstacks*, p. 262.
29. Tucker, *Monet in the '90s*, p. 83. Herbert writes that the stacks are a "simulacrum of a man's house." See Herbert, "Method and Meaning in Monet," p. 106. For a discussion of hutlike spaces, see Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (1958 [French ed.]; Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), pp. 3-37, 90-104.
30. Brettell, *A Day in the Country*, catalogue entry for Monet, *The Grainstacks*, p. 262.
31. Georges Bataille, "Architecture," in Bataille, ed., *Critical Dictionary and Related Texts*, compiled in Robert Lebel and Isabelle Waldberg, eds., *Encyclopaedia Acephalica*, trans. Iain White and Dominic Faccini (London: Atlas Press, 1995), p. 35.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 35. For Bataille's understanding of architecture and authority, see Denis Hollier, *Against Architecture: The Writings of Georges Bataille* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989).

33. My take on Boiffard, Bataille, and the dissolution implied by architecture is indebted to Yve-Alain Bois's text "Threshole," in Bois and Krauss, *Formless: A User's Guide* (New York: Zone Books, 1997), pp. 185-91.
34. For these definitions of the *informe* and to see how "to put the formless to work," see Bois, "The Use Value of 'Formless,'" in *Formless*, pp. 13-40, quotation p. 18.
35. Bois, "Threshole," p. 187.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 188. Bois points out that Smithsonian ultimately resisted the complete dissolution of the woodshed as well as "the collapse into nondifferentiation in his work": "The contract conveying this work to the university stipulated that everything remain in the same condition; the university's art department was charged with 'maintaining the work.'"
37. *Ibid.*, p. 191.
38. Bois notes that on two occasions in *Documents*, Bataille reveals the "vulnerability of architecture," showing photographs of destruction: the entry "Factory Chimney" in *Critical Dictionary* is accompanied by an image of "the collapse of a chimney stack" and for the entry "Space," there is a photograph of the "collapse of a prison in Columbus, Ohio." See Bois, "Threshole," p. 186, and Bataille, ed., *Encyclopaedia Acephalica*, p. 77.
39. For more on the early history of the photogram and its emphasis on materiality, see Carol Armstrong, "Cameraless: From Natural Illustrations and Nature Prints to Manual and Photogenic Drawings and Other Botanographs," in Armstrong and Catherine de Zegher, eds., *Ocean Flowers: Impressions from Nature* (New York: Drawing Center; and Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).
40. Elcott argues for the adjacency of the photogram and the cinema, each of which interpolates a viewer who "floats in a spaceless darkness anchored in photography and realized in a darkened room." Noam Elcott, "Darkened Rooms: A Genealogy of Avant-Garde Filmstrips from Man Ray to the London Film-Makers' Co-Op and Back Again," *Grey Room* 30 (Winter 2008): 25, 29.

---

**Citation:**

Jodi Hauptman and Stephanie O'Rourke. "A Surrealist Fact." In Mitra Abbaspour, Lee Ann Daffner, and Maria Morris Hambourg, eds. *Object:Photo. Modern Photographs: The Thomas Walther Collection 1909-1949. An Online Project of The Museum of Modern Art*. New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2014. [http://www.moma.org/interactives/objectphoto/assets/essays/Hauptman\\_ORourke.pdf](http://www.moma.org/interactives/objectphoto/assets/essays/Hauptman_ORourke.pdf).