

THE SLAPSTICK ROUTINE OF PARISIAN MONUMENTALISM

Robert Desnos and Jacques-
André Boiffard's "Pygmalion
and the Sphinx" (1930)
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We know the city of Paris lies atop a bed of corpses. The catacombs remind the city that civilisation rests upon a pile of bones. As such, they are buried deep within the bowels of the capital. But there is a much more sinister hoard of cadavers that tower above its surface. Their bodies are stiff and assertive, standing in plain view of the public. Taking the form of a monument, they assume a venerate position. However, their proud stance quickly becomes laughable as the population of Paris came to consider them a mundane nuisance. These are the statues of Paris that caught the attention of the surrealists in the 1920s and 1930s. Leading up to this moment, the municipal council of Paris under the Third Republic had been constructing monuments at an accelerating rate. In response to these figures, the writer Robert Desnos paired with the photographer Jacques-André Boiffard to form the 1930 essay “Pygmalion and the Sphinx.”

The text-photo hybrid, simultaneously humorous, imaginative, and critical in tone, includes a piece of writing by Desnos alongside five photographs of Parisian monuments by Boiffard.¹ It was published in the first issue of *Documents*’ second year, a journal running from 1929 to 1930 shaped by the poet-philosopher Georges Bataille.² Embedded in the pages of *Documents* are writings, marks, and gestures, that voyage to the limit of language in their deference to base matter and expressions of unknowing. In “Pygmalion and the Sphinx,” the expression of laughter articulates this impossibility as it is evoked by Boiffard’s photographs and Desnos text. Here, “Pygmalion and the Sphinx” is both a fragment of, and contribution to, the “base materialism” of *Documents*. This is a term first used by Bataille, however was an attitude shared by many of his contemporaries.³ Moreover, the base materialist sensibility has since been attributed to the heterogeneous nature of the journal itself. As such, the contents of *Documents* do not synthesise into a whole. Rather, like the form of “Pygmalion and the Sphinx” that is both text and photography, to read *Documents* is to engage in an experience of interruption. No text or image is *reliant* on the other, nor do they stand alone. Rather, communication springs forth in moments of connection and disparity. Consequently, it is not a misstep, nor is it an absolute requirement, to read “Pygmalion and the Sphinx” in the context of *Documents*’ other writings. However, as I will communicate in this essay, to read Desnos and Boiffard’s text alongside Bataille’s writings in *Documents* further illustrates how the monuments of Paris prepare their own toppling. Here, the discourse of monumentalism transforms away from myths of national identity, toward the tragicomedy of its demise.

As Desnos and Boiffard reveal, within the monumental form is an antagonism between the civic ideal and the brute substance of material. This tension inevitably collapses the idealist endeavour of monumentalism, resulting in a dynamic moment that is necessarily opened by failure. For Desnos, Boiffard, and Bataille, this moment is given in the instant of laughter. In laughter, the height of monumentalism falls toward the reality of its base as

the statue's physiognomic material interferes with the streets. Across *Documents*, this is a dynamic that plays out particularly in photography and text as they come together, and fall apart, in the pages of the magazine. For this essay, I will focus on this dynamic as it relates to Desnos and Boiffard's piece. However, before launching into the theoretical density of "Pygmalion and the Sphinx," it is important to locate its genesis in the tragicomic display of the Third Republic's statuemanía. From this notoriously bureaucratic attempt to reconcile a divided sense of French national identity, a slapstick routine was born.

FIG. 1



Jacques-André Boiffard, *Monument de la Défense Nationale par A. Bartholdi (Porte des Ternes)*, 1930. In *Documents 1929-1930*. Vol. 2. Paris: Jean Michel-Place, 1991. 34.

I) INTRODUCTION TO STATUEMANIA AND "PYGMALION AND THE SPHINX" (1930).

The first of Boiffard's five photographs captures the *Monument de la Défense Nationale par A. Bartholdi* (1930) (fig. 1). Located at the Porte des Ternes, the monument depicts a cluster of bronze bodies extended toward a "rising" hot air balloon. This theatrical scene memorialises the aerial postal delivery service during the Franco-Prussian war. The statue stands atop an imposing tiered

pedestal, encircled by several ornamental plinths. In Boiffard's photograph, an onlooker gazes upon the balloon that will never rise, the bodies that will never take flight. The entire statue is visible, portraying its relation to the surrounding architecture. The stiff, petrified balloon seems rather bothersome, almost entangled in a faintly visible web of electrical lines. From Boiffard's perspective, the drama of the statuary is diminished by everyday occurrence. This view is repeated in the second photograph of the *Monument à Léon Serpollet, 1858–1907* (1930) at the Place Saint-Ferdinand (fig. 2). Here, figures ooze out of the monument's crude foundation, as if rising from the mud. Léon Serpollet, a famous French engineer and developer of steam automobiles, sits enthroned at its peak while his admirers claw at his feet. The enormous scene is dwarfed by a background of tall buildings, penned in by a low paltry fence. As Boiffard brings these details into focus, the authority of the monument is laughable when viewed amongst the urban shrubbery. The rest of the photo-series features a grimacing nymph in the Tuileries Gardens (fig. 3), the *Statue de Chappe* at the junction of the boulevard Raspail and Saint-Germain (fig. 4), and the *Statue of Louis XIV* at the Place des Victoires (fig. 5). Again, King Louis' strident post looks odd next to a simple lamp post and what could be an apartment block.

FIG. 2



Jacques-André Boiffard, *Monument à Léon Serpollet*, 1858-1907, (Place Saint-Ferdinand), 1930. In *Documents 1929-1930*. Vol.2. Paris: Jean Michel-Place, 1991. 35.

After the collapse of the Second Empire following the Franco-Prussian War in 1870, the Third Republic rushed to secure the national identity of France through the widespread construction of statues and monuments.⁴ The already precarious ideals of the republic, further unsettled by the spectre of the Paris Commune, teetered atop three factions: the republicans, the monarchists, and the Bonapartists.⁵ These coalitions competed to imprint their particular vision on the city streets, enabled by the municipal council of Paris through which requests had to be made.⁶ For example, one of the council's requirements stipulated that monuments commemorate "persons of merit" rather than those born into power, or outright political leaders. Achievements in the arts and sciences were therefore key to the new democratic imaginary, with literary figures and the merits of modern medicine taking precedence. However, as individual sponsoring committees competed for control over this narrative, facilitated by a "subscription" system of wealthy donors, the supposedly "apolitical" approach of the council was quickly manipulated through means of

increasing subterfuge. It was common for supposedly impartial figures to be pushed forward that were historically associated with a particular cause or political line.⁷ While some statues stood for political groups, others seemed thematically generic to the point of nonsense. As the monuments became larger, and more expensive, the city of Paris brimmed with absurd propaganda as the council erected 150 statues between 1870 and 1914.⁸

In the twentieth century, the figures became an outright pest. The city became so congested that the *Statue de Chappe*, as figured in Boiffard's series, was blamed for a collision at the boulevard Raspail and Saint-Germain junction, effectively murdering a person on site!⁹ Far from the explosion of the Paris Commune, the Third Republic's "faith in progress" was playing out in the streets as a metropolitan car crash caused by bureaucratic squabbling. The sheer idiocy of what has since been dubbed "statuemanía" led the surrealist writer Louis Aragon to compare the acts of the council to that of a circus:

Definition of a clown: a gentleman who wants to be worthy of the events of the day ... A statue to Shakespeare was raised on Boulevard Haussman the day the Paris municipal council realized that he was the father of the idea of the clown. The founding father of France, in other words.¹⁰

This statuephobia was widely shared amongst the surrealist circle, as many were at once inspired and repelled by the statues' absurdity as urban decoration. The tragicomedy of the Third Republic's failure to represent a monumental narrative of nationhood comes through in Desnos and Boiffard's portrayal. Here, the monuments are transformed away from the crude myth of monumentalism and the divvying up of greatness like "abandoned clothes in a forest" where, as Desnos states, "the first vagabond to come along puts them on, the first genius to come along embodies them."¹¹ Rather, in the context of "Pygmalion and the Sphinx," the monuments are already in a state of ruin, even as they still stand. The statues are icons of decay, rotten corpses allegorised by a frozen figure upon which dust accumulates.¹² In the death of their monumental form, they are prepared for rebirth.

FIG. 3



Jacques-André Boiffard, *Statue par E. Christophe*, 1876 (*Jardin des Tuileries*), 1930. In *Documents 1929-1930*. Paris: Jean Michel-Place, 1991. 37.

Desnos and Boiffard joke about how the Parisian statues rushed to fill the streets with a beautiful and commemorative narrative that, as the photographs confirm, is undercut by exterior forces. Through their perspective, the Parisian statuary, with all its *grand hommes* and theatrical myths, is repeatedly contextualised in terms of both its literal matter, stone and bronze, and its relation to the city. This is implicated by the title itself, a playful allusion to the Greek myth wherein the sculptor, Pygmalion, falls in love with the idyllically beautiful stone woman of his creation. According to Desnos, this foible shows Pygmalion to be a “clumsy magician” who fell in love with “his own copy.”¹³ However, in this instance, his sculpture does not turn into the beautiful Galatea, but the monstrous Sphinx known for leading hubristic men to their demise. The Sphinx guards the city with its riddle that (almost) always leads to the certain death of those foolish enough to challenge it. In the context of Desnos and Boiffard’s satire, the Sphinx exposes the frailty of such monumental claims as those attempted by the Pygmalionesque Third Republic and the municipal council of Paris. Far from Pygmalion’s idealist gaze, the Sphinx

makes its own demands on the city. As has been noted by the art historians Simon Baker and Dawn Ades, Boiffard's photographs set this materialist tone as he centres the pedestal, or "base" of the monuments.

FIG. 4



Jacques-André Boiffard, *Statue de Chappe, par G. Faray, 1893 (Carrefour du boulevard Raspail et du boulevard Saint-Germain), 1930*. In *Documents 1929-1930*. Vol. 2. Paris: Jean Michel-Place, 1991, 39.

In his chapter on statuemania in *Surrealism, History and Revolution*, Simon Baker compares Boiffard's perspective to that of another surrealist photographer of Parisian statuary: René Millaud. Baker looks to Millaud's collection of 179 photographs published in a 1913 edition of *L'illustration*.¹⁴ He notes that Millaud tilts the camera upwards, backdropping the statues against the sky.¹⁵ Such a perspective gives the monuments a towering presence, albeit a power offset by the ubiquity of the photographs. Boiffard's photographs, however, are taken at a greater distance, hereby pitting the monuments against their expansive urban surrounds. Moreover, through Boiffard's style of deep contrast, the statues' heaping pedestals stand starkly exposed, while other objects disappear into dense areas of darkness. As Ades claims, Boiffard selects statues that attempt to represent what is the "least figurable" in the heavy materials of stone and bronze, such as a balloon taking flight. Accordingly, the perspective of his photographs "emphasize the paradoxical role of the pedestal,

sabotaging the strenuous efforts of the sculptor to make his work as “lifelike” as possible.”¹⁶ While they attempt to elevate the statue as a form of aesthetic framing, the pedestals highlight the very stiffness of the statue’s material. They call to attention the failure of the statues to represent the “original” scene, as well as the delicacy of bodies in motion. The materialist role of the pedestal is raised again by Desnos:

Then there is the question of the pedestal. These walls enclosed at their summit, this shut shack, plays a greater role than you think in the style (the way of life) of statues. The François Coppée of the boulevard Montparnasse is a famous chap, contrary to the dust which bears his name.¹⁷

As Desnos points out, the brute material of the pedestal plays a greater role in the life of the statues than might be first thought. The plaques that adorn these great figures with relevance go untouched, and bring attention otherwise paid to François Coppée down to his dust-covered base. However, while Boiffard weighs down the illusory flight of the statues endeavoured in their “lifelikeness,” Desnos suggests that this representational disconnect sparks a lively, materialist image in the gap where ideals fail. Desnos returns to the possibility of the statue’s livelihood at the end of this paragraph, where Coppée “is not, or not quite, of the pedestal, he is light-footed, he is alive.”¹⁸ For him, there is a separation between the pedestal that declares the statue’s monumentalism, and the physiognomic figure standing atop it. At once alive and dead, frozen yet mobile, the uncanny imbues the statue with a magical tension. In this paradox, Desnos’s point is made: the failed gaze of Pygmalion gives rise to its base, material opposite: “This presence of the earth is manifest with greatest power in the branch of sculpture known as statuary.”¹⁹

FIG. 5

Jacques-André Boiffard, *Statue de Louis XIV, par Coysevox (Place des Victoires)*, 1930. In *Documents 1929-1930*. Vol. 2. Paris: Jean-Michel Place, 1991. 40.

The ideals of the Third Republic, and the gaze of Pygmalion, are embalmed in title placards. This passing gives way to the lively danger of the Sphinx, who would rather run rampant than stand in hard, commemorative stolidity. In this way, Desnos encapsulates the dynamic potential of the Sphinx, with all its base and treacherous material, in the wake of Pygmalion’s tragicomic demise. This materialist treatment, alongside its humorous expression, is indicative of *Documents*’ “base materialist” tone. This is a term first used by Bataille in the magazine to revise the term materialism itself, but also resonates in the work

of Bataille's contemporaries and the surrealist contributors to *Documents*. To a base materialist sensibility, the communication of laughter is integral. As a result, reading Bataille's texts in *Documents* further illustrates the way "Pygmalion and the Sphinx" embeds the transformative potential of monumentalism's failure.

II) BASE MATERIALISM AND *DOCUMENTS*.

At the end of each issue of *Documents* is a Critical Dictionary, a playful collection of terms that lend themselves to the inquiry of the journal. Playing out in entries on Slaughterhouse, Skyscraper, and Eye (or Cannibal Delicacy), the journal's inquiry is more like an obsession, and the dictionary is more like a testament to the failure of things to be defined once and for all. In one short entry, "Materialism," Bataille introduces a revision of this term: "When the word materialism is used, it is time to designate the direct interpretation, excluding all idealism, of raw phenomena, and not a system founded on the fragmentary elements of an ideological analysis, elaborated under the sign of religious relations."²⁰ For Bataille, the materialist "direct interpretation of raw phenomena" cannot be so without the evacuation of all preconceived ideals and systematic dogma.

This attitude is repeated in the same 1930 issue as "Pygmalion and the Sphinx" through Bataille's "Base Materialism and Gnosticism." Here, one cannot look to the height of humankind's existence without the low rearing its ugly head, as the Gnostics view of God (or gnon) could not conceive of transcendence without an affirmation of all that is earthly and monstrous: "it was a question of disconcerting the human spirit and idealism before something base, to the extent that one recognized the helplessness of superior principles."²¹ Across these two texts by Bataille, the base materialist character of *Documents* comes forth. Here, base matter lies beyond the grasp of wise men (insofar as men have dominated the institution of knowledge for centuries) who seek to unify the world's endless contradictions in absolute systems of knowledge. Rather, the base belongs to the irrational body and its compulsions, to writhing material and that which lies beyond thought. In "Pygmalion and the Sphinx," Desnos embeds the base materialist approach in his relinquishment of any synthesised understanding in the face of the physiognomic statues.

Punctuated by ellipses and question marks, Desnos leaves his text teetering on uncertainty:

But are marble, porphyry, granite and bronze insensible? Don't they enjoy any life? Bronze is sonorous. The veins of marble are real veins ... We would not want statues to be anything other ... That phrase resounds on the author of these lines. The nature of matter is once again called into question, and faced with such a question we can only fall silent ... O radium, vibrant and inhuman matter!²²

Unchained from the heaping pedestal of monumentalism, a brute substance highlighted by Boiffard, the material of bronze and granite partake in their own sensuality. The veins of marble are “real veins,” but with this statement Desnos peters out ..., affirming that the veins *are* real, but in a material life un beholden to the human anatomy. By observing the natural process that corrodes bronze, Desnos acknowledges that matter overflows that which cuts it into shape: the human hands that carve it in their own ideal image. The material’s uncanny resemblance to a body impinges upon the human imagination, leading it to the border of what is possible. For Desnos, this tension is more imaginative, more worthy of ponderance and devotion than the meticulously carved, representational ideal of the monument. As his investigation brushes against the edge of meaning, Desnos’s text is filled with returns, exclamations, laughs, and pauses, only to admit that he must fall silent to such impossible questions. It becomes obvious that the nature of matter lies beyond discursive communication, at the limit of language. Therefore, Desnos turns to the knowledge given in the nonsense of laughter. Laughter is expressed in bodily convulsions, far from the mindful height of deduction. For him, this raucous eruption illuminates the phenomena in question more than any attempt at an absolute explanation.

III) THE SLAPSTICK ROUTINE OF DESNOS, BOIFFARD, AND BATAILLE.

Through Boiffard and Desnos’s portrayal of Parisian statuemia, one thing becomes clear: it is utterly ridiculous. As Paul Éluard once proclaimed: “the ugliness of these stupid monuments dismays, cretinises and disfigures those who contemplate them.”²³ While Éluard denigrates the performance of Parisian history, Desnos and Boiffard find humour in its tragicomic ugliness. If the statues cretinize and disfigure those in their presence, it is because they elicit the face-contorting response of *laughter*. This debasing laugh appears in the fourth issue of *Documents*’ first year in a text by Bataille titled “Human Face.” In this text, laughter arises specifically upon viewing photographs, further linking “Pygmalion and the Sphinx” to a wider base materialist relationship between laughter and photography. As Bataille begins:

Owing to our presumably insufficient data, we can cite but a single era within which the human form stands out as a senile mockery of everything tense and large conceived by man. The mere sight (in photography) of our predecessors in the occupation of this country now produces, for varying reasons, bursts of loud and raucous laughter; that sight, however, is nonetheless hideous.²⁴

The era of Western modernity, with its advances in technological reproduction and mass media, leaves its youth to confront at “every moment of rapture” the

image of their predecessors “in tiresome absurdity.”²⁵ The photographs to which he refers are published alongside the text, the first of which depicts a wedding party posing for a shot circa 1905. In this passage, photography can simultaneously elicit laughter and disgust, horror and delight.²⁶ This is not an impossible contradiction, but two sides of the same coin. For the indexical nature of photography partakes in necromancy, as ghostly figures leave their trace printed in black and white. However, if one is given a fright, their gasp quickly turns into a laugh as they realise it was evoked by such a drab, everyday scene: “The very fact that one is haunted by ghosts so lacking savagery trivializes these terrors and this anger.”²⁷ The rapturous shock of resurrection quickly becomes a tiresome reminder of the past in all its mouldy prints and papers.

As Denis Hollier acutely observes in *Against Architecture*: “More than painting, the photographic image refers to an externality that has a backlash effect on the discourse it tears apart.”²⁸ In photography, the beauty of portraiture reveals its tragicomic ugliness. If technological reproduction was once lorded a grand export of modernity, these melancholic captures quickly undo this mythology. As the Parisian statues represent the rampaging, yet petrified, hoard of the new era, the figures entombed in photographic portraiture mock everything “tense and large” in humankind’s vision of itself.²⁹ However, as Bataille reminds his reader, this dynamic moment is what endears us to the photographs as objects that are stripped of ideals. For him, photography is both ugly and treasured, without the painterly tricks and transpositions of the beautiful. Their untimely reminders eternally open to moments of paradox, where a mundane reality is made magical in the very transparency of its mundane imprint. As Bataille concludes, humankind’s self-image in these photographic portraits is akin to the fly on the orator’s nose, a debasement inherent to everyday life that speaks for itself in the chuckle, sob, or cry that follows. The fly on the orator’s nose is exemplary of a heterogeneous form that is *formless*, hereby opening to formless modes of communication. Far from the language of ideals, many writers and form-makers in *Documents* strove toward this formless undoing, a simultaneous moment of collapse and creation integral to Desnos’s and Boiffard’s text.

The formless, or *informe*, is a term given in one of Bataille’s Critical Dictionary entries that, when it was first uttered, was more like a tool used to challenge the discourse of formalism in the modern, Parisian artworld.³⁰ As Bataille claims: “affirming that the universe resembles nothing and is only *formless* amounts to saying that the universe is something like a spider or spit.”³¹ In this sense, the formless is a materialist declaration “that serves to bring things down in the world” to the matter of their inconceivable base.³² As the fly on the orator’s nose makes apparent, the stability of the world is constantly deforming in labyrinthine webs, pools of oozing liquid, and the trapped bodies of flies stuck on flypaper.³³ The indexical paradox of photography brings these deformations to the surface, “where men and women have, as we know, tenaciously persisted in their efforts to regain a human face” in all its sweetly absurd ugliness.³⁴ As it contorts into a scream, laugh, gasp, or

moan, the human face exhibits its formlessness in a mode of communication beyond speech. The uncanny physiognomy of Desnos and Boiffard's monuments, too, take on a human face in all its formless, tragicomic ugliness. Any attempt to siphon these heterogeneous cadavers into the rigid ideals of monumentalism inevitably prepares its downfall. As Bataille recognised photography's dynamism *because* of its ability to haunt with the ugly and the mundane, so too does Desnos see the deathliness of the statues as an opening for them to come to life. In his text, Desnos further uses the communication of laughter to imagine the life of the statues in a paradoxical moment of decay and transformation.

Desnos begins with a joke referring to the M. de la Palisse, a French nobleman whose death was followed by a soldier's proclamation: "fifteen minutes before he died he was still alive."³⁵ From the idiotic black humour of this statement, the French phrases *un lapalissade* and *une vérité de La Palice* were born, meaning to exclaim something so obviously true it can only be laughed at.³⁶ Desnos exclaims a base materialist *vérité de La Palice* when he states: "the M. de la Palisse himself would agree with me, at least I hope so, if I say that sculpture, which is so idealistic in its aims, is controlled by the terrestrial laws of matter, and above all by the law of gravity."³⁷ What goes up must come down. Through the *vérité de La Palice*, Desnos suggests that the idealism of the Parisian statues *obviously* prepares its downfall in the very foolishness of the attempt. Towers that are built to the point of precarity inevitably face their toppling. If one may laugh with Desnos, the academicism with which I butcher this text has no doubt eradicated all humour from it. Nevertheless, let me continue with the analytic task of making a comic text supremely unfunny.

To confirm the obvious truth of *une vérité de La Palice* with laughter is, conversely, an act of nonsense. When the obvious remark appears so clearly to us, one responds with the non-speech of laughter. The realisation of knowledge is immediately expressed in the capacity of non-knowledge. It is as if one reaches the limit of what one can know and thus reveals a gap between knowledge and its expression through discursive language. The inevitable contradiction is funny. The rug is pulled out from under, and one joyfully trips and falls. To confront the *vérité de La Palice* inherent to "the laws of matter" is also to laugh at such a truth that admits one's insufficiency to elaborate any further. In Desnos's use of the *vérité de la Palice*, stability is the conceited truth that at once reveals its absence, as the idealism of the Third Republic at once reveals its ridiculousness. As Desnos evokes this base materialist reality, the statues are in a perpetual state of collapse, and resurrection, in the throes of laughter.

Moving on from the *vérité de la Palice*, Desnos continues the text's humorous tone as a creatively destructive form of communication that re-imagines the monumental cityscape. This playful imagination is central to Desnos poetics, where the magic of everyday material is seen in even the most mundane.³⁸ Advertisements for the Bébé Cadum, for example, are of equal importance to any monumental feat: "I would love a porphyry Cadum baby

getting out of a marble bath, the waiters of the café Saint- Raphael appearing suddenly at a bend in the road, the little girl from Meunier chocolate in granite and bone, leaning against the walls.”³⁹ As Desnos dreams of the statues coming to life, he does not picture them as monumental figures, but as actors in a romantic comedy. On the city’s theatrical stage, they are constantly switching up the routine. At this we laugh:

If I was a councillor, a town planner (don’t laugh, eventually everyone dreams that they’re mad) I wouldn’t put these dangerous rascals in everyone’s reach. And equally, if I admitted that concern for the perpetuation of someone’s memory is praiseworthy, I would not go about it that way. No dedication, no name, no pedestal. Leaning on the parapet of the Ile Saint-Louis, you would encounter a bronze gentleman who could be Baudelaire; Fortune, on her wheel, could roll down the road to the carrefour Haussmann; Courbet, with motionless footfall, would turn his back on the column, and come back up the rue de la Paix without moving, smiling at the pretty women.⁴⁰

Desnos “dreams” of town planning, already a laughable profession for him, insofar as he can unleash the statues from the coldness of their pedestal as a symbol for “the great French nation”. Here, they are not glorious objects of worship, but dangerous rascals left to wander the streets in the imagination between art and life. The Sphinx spreads its own message of disorder as it leaps from its pedestal, at once a symbol of monumentalism and a declaration of its obsolescence. Famous Frenchmen are more like charming sweethearts than nationalist figureheads, twirling further and further from the myth of progress. The image is comical. Thus, Desnos’s image celebrates the absence of titles and placards. For him, key figures in the transformation of modernity are no longer stiff items of propaganda. From the flânerie of Baudelaire, to Courbet’s call to dismantle the military towers of Paris, lively eyes displace the tired grandeur of bureaucratic efforts and political squabbles.

As I approach the formlessness of Bataille, Desnos, and Boiffard’s statues, their theorisation feels more like a slapstick routine. Herein, heroes fall from the vertical axis, a tower built upon the language of ideals, to the horizontal. This recalls Bataille’s “Rotten Sun,” published in the third issue of *Documents* in 1930, wherein his conception of the vertical and the horizontal are exemplified by Icarus’s flight toward the sun:

The myth of Icarus is particularly expressive from this point of view: it clearly splits the sun in two—the one that was shining at the moment of Icarus’s elevation, and the one that melted the wax, causing failure and a screaming fall when Icarus got too close.⁴¹

For Bataille, the sun of verticality represents the monumental axis of homogeneity, science, progress, and idealism, while the horizontal axis of the base is comprised of indefinable excess and heterogeneous matter.⁴² Like the sun, monumentalism contains both the verticality of pride, and its inevitable fall toward horizontal chaos. In Bataille's Icarus, falling is equated to the horror of a blood curdling scream. Like the melted wax that oozes from the sun of the fall, the unintelligible moment is expressly formless. Laughter, too, belongs to the experience of falling. However, it emerges through affirmation, not hubris. It is the horizontal opposite to the vertical folly. The noble slapstick embraces the fall as they turn the value of elevation on its head. As Walter Benjamin speaks of the slapstick hero Charlie Chaplin, he "appeals both to the most international and the most revolutionary emotion of the masses: their laughter."⁴³ In a revolutionary act, the potential for transformation is grasped as a raucous crowd erupts. As laughter inevitably overflows, it echoes throughout the city with cascading force. In this moment of transformation, the statues are thrown from their pedestals, continuing their promenade in our comical imagination.

IV) BY WAY OF CONCLUSION.

I began this essay with the image of the Parisian catacombs. At first glance, the figures above ground appear far from those beneath their feet. This comparison may not be visible to the naked eye. However, Desnos and Boiffard bring them together in the details of photography and text. Here, the catacomb and the monument embody copies of one another; they purport the monumental march of progress, while also betraying such myths of glorified conquest. They embody the bungled attempt to unify national identity, gesturing toward the idealist enterprise they simultaneously raise and cause to rot. As pointed out by Boiffard in his photographs, and Desnos in his ponderings on the nature of matter, the statue's representational and material form, too, takes on this tension. Perched awkwardly atop an imposing pedestal, the monument overflows the confinements of the placard as the physiognomies and materials that form them betray the rigidity of their appearance. What was once presumed a vertical endeavour takes on the horizontal imagination of what it means to figure bodies and the impossibilities of matter. For Boiffard and Desnos in the formation of "Pygmalion and the Sphinx," these imaginations spark laughter. However, the monuments met an untimely, dire end.

During the horrors of World War Two, some of these monuments were destroyed. As the Nazi's occupied Paris, they also melted down its bronze statues to forge weapons. Far from Desnos's picture of literary Paris and its tragicomic laughter, the idealism of the Nazi party uprooted these statues, reduced them to mere utility so that they may never again be seen by the naked eye. Desnos also met his end at the hands of the Nazi's, deported to a series concentration camps for his activities in the Résistance, where he died in 1945. However, the statues remain entombed for us by Boiffard's photographs. Bataille's friend and collaborator, Lo Duca, commented on Bataille's obsession with a collection of photographs depicting Chinese torture victims of Lingchi

(death by a thousand cuts). He said that it is not the representation of death that interests him, but the photographic capture of the “last moment.”⁴⁴

Looking to Boiffard’s photographs, they too capture the last moment before they fall, like the photographs of the *fin de siècle* actors of Bataille’s “Human Face” that “draw sobs for all that has just vanished.”⁴⁵ No longer sweet actors in a slapstick routine, we may find ourselves running back to Boiffard and Desnos’s comedic imagining to picture them once more. As it remains for us in “Pygmalion and the Sphinx,” Desnos and Boiffard experienced the “last moment” of the monuments, not in a moment of sorrow, but a moment of laughter. For them, laughter presupposes the statue’s passing of the monumental myth itself. As they stood, the death of the Pygmalionesque monument unleashes the dance of the Sphinx. Its form gives way to the tension between the physiognomic imagination and the nature of matter, brimming with the dynamism of paradox. In Desnos and Boiffard, we run to the last instant—a last instant that recurs in many instants—as a place of death and a place of transformation, a place of contradiction and a place of clarity. This is not something that can be expressed in a coherent definition, solution, or rational outline, but as the operation of a formless mode of communication.

1. A selection of different photographs by Boiffard of Parisian monuments had previously been published in André Breton’s *Nadja* (1928). ↩
2. While Bataille was both executive secretary and editor for *Documents*, it was edited by a board of eleven scholars including, but not limited to, the German poet Carl Einstein (specialising in Western and African art), art dealer Georges Wildenstein, and Georges Henri Revière, “sous-directeur” of the Musée d’Ethnographie du Trocadéro. Marja Warehime, “‘Vision sauvage’ and Images of Culture: Georges Bataille, Editor of Documents,” *The French Review* 60, no. 1 (1986): 39. ↩
3. Including, but not limited to, Michel Leiris, Roger Caillois, Colette Peignoit (known under her pseudonym Laure), René Daumal, as well as Boiffard and Desnos. ↩
4. June Hargrove, “Shaping the National Image: The Cult of Statues to Great Men in the Third Republic,” *Studies in the History of Art* 29 (1991): 49. ↩
5. Hargrove, “Shaping the National Image,” 49. ↩
6. Hargrove, 49. ↩

7. For example, François-Vincent Raspail was a chemist widely celebrated in the streets through monuments and placards, but whose name is heavily associated with the Second Republic. Ibid, 56. For more information on the exploitation of the subscription system (and the municipal council's general administrative foibles) see: Simon Baker, "Statuephobia! Surrealism and iconoclasm in the Bronze Age," in *Surrealism, History and Revolution* (Germany: Peter Lang, 2007): 160–171. ↩
8. Hargrove, "Shaping the National Image," 49. ↩
9. Hargrove, 61. ↩
10. Aragon, Louis, and Alyson Waters. *Treatise on Style*. London: University of Nebraska Press, 1991, 8. ↩
11. Robert Desnos, "Pygmalion and the Sphinx," trans. Simon Baker *Papers of Surrealism*, no. 7 (2007): [https://www.research.manchester.ac.uk/portal/files/63517391/surrealism_issue_7.pdf]{.ul}. ↩
12. As Desnos describes: "To the weight of bronze, marble or granite is added the weight of the corpse that a statue purportedly perpetuates, or the burden of the rotten brains of allegory." Desnos, "Pygmalion and the Sphinx." ↩
13. Desnos, "Pygmalion and the Sphinx." ↩
14. A French weekly newspaper published in Paris between 1843 and 1944. ↩
15. Baker, "Statuephobia!," 156. ↩
16. Dawn Ades, "Photography and the Surrealist Text," in *L'Amour Fou: Photography and Surrealism* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1985), 165. ↩
17. Desnos, "Pygmalion and the Sphinx." ↩
18. Desnos. ↩
19. Desnos. ↩
20. Georges Bataille, "Materialism," in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927–1939*, ed. Allan Stoekl, trans. Allan Stoekl, Carl R. Lovitt and Donald M. Leslie, Jr. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 16. ↩

21. Georges Bataille, "Base Materialism and Gnosticism," in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927–1939*, ed. Allan Stoekl, trans. Allan Stoekl, Carl R. Lovitt and Donald M. Leslie, Jr. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 51. ↵
22. Desnos, "Pygmalion and the Sphinx." ↵
23. From Éluard's 1933 inquiry in on "the irrational embellishment of Paris' in *Le Surrealism au Service de la Revolution*. Quoted and translated by Simon Baker in "Statuephobia!," 186. ↵
24. Georges Bataille, and Annette Michelson, "Human Face," *October*, vol. 36 (Spring 1986): 17, <https://doi.org/10.2307/778541>. ↵
25. Bataille and Michelson, "Human Face," 17. ↵
26. For further study regarding Bataille's interest in the emotional state of photography see: Herta Wolf, "The Tears of Photography," trans. Nicholas Grindell, *Grey Room* 29 (2007): 66–89. ↵
27. Bataille and Michelson, "Human Face," 17. ↵
28. Denis Hollier, *Against Architecture: The Writings of Georges Bataille* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998), 83. ↵
29. Bataille and Michelson, "Human Face," 17. ↵
30. Much attention has been paid to the formless as it revises the history of modernism, as demonstrated by Rosalind E. Krauss and Yves Alan-Bois' *Formless: A User's Guide* (Zone Books, 1997). ↵
31. Georges Bataille, "Formless," 31. ↵
32. Bataille, 31. ↵
33. This is a reference to another photography by Boiffard, published in *Documents* alongside Bataille's "The Modern Spirit and the Play of Transpositions," of flies stuck on flypaper. As Bataille gestures toward them in his essay, he highlights the untransposable heterogeneity he presumes surrealism has started to forget. ↵
34. Bataille and Michelson, "Human Face," 21. ↵
35. Baker, "Surrealism in the Bronze Age," 199. ↵

36. Baker, 199. ↩
37. Desnos, "Pygmalion and the Sphinx." ↩
38. For further research on Robert Desnos in English see: Barnet, Marie-Claire, Eric Robertson and Nigel Saint, eds., *Robert Desnos: Surrealism in the Twenty-First Century* (Switzerland: Peter Lang, 2006). ↩
39. Desnos, "Pygmalion and the Sphinx." ↩
40. Desnos. ↩
41. Georges Bataille, "Rotten Sun," in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927–1939*, ed. Allan Stoekl, trans. Allan Stoekl, Carl R. Lovitt and Donald M. Leslie, Jr. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 58. ↩
42. See also: Georges Bataille, "The Use Value of D. A. F. de Sade (A Letter to My Current Comrades)," in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927–1939*, ed. Allan Stoekl, trans. Allan Stoekl, Carl R. Lovitt and Donald M. Leslie Jr (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 91–105. ↩
43. Walter Benjamin, "Chaplin in Retrospect," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Volume 2, part 1 1927–1930*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2006), 224. ↩
44. J. M. Lo Duca, "Georges Bataille, From Afar ... An Introduction," in Georges Bataille, *The Tears of Eros*, trans. Peter Connor (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1989), 4. ↩
45. Bataille and Michelson, "Human Face," 21. ↩

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