

A Drive-In Dreamland

Zoe Beloff

To say that Albert Grass was no business man might seem self-evident in hindsight, as his list of achievements amount to no more than pitching one ill-fated scheme after the next. But the visionary founder of the Coney Island Amateur Psychoanalytic Society always believed it was only a matter of time before psychoanalysis would set fire to the popular imagination, that he would spearhead this movement and ride the tide of its success. And in fact he was correct: Freud's theories did find their way into popular culture. Unfortunately, each of his ventures was followed quite rapidly by a competitor's similar plan that succeeded where he had failed.

His most ambitious idea was undoubtedly to launch a new Dreamland amusement park at Coney Island in the early 1930s. It was to be a great Freudian theme park that explicated Freud's theories of dream formation. Although it seems that Depression-era Brooklyn was not ready for a fifty-foot-high *Libido* in the shape of a prepubescent girl, it was only a few years later Salvador Dali would open his *Dream of Venus* pavilion at the 1939 World's Fair, with topless "liquid ladies" surfacing from the depths of the Spaniard's unconscious. Similarly Grass's dream journal presented in the form of a comic book *Adventures of a Dreamer* failed to find a publisher in the late 1930's. Little more than ten years later in 1952, Jack Kirby of Captain America fame would publish the series *The Strange World of Your Dreams* in which reader-submitted dreams that were turned into comics. And in 1955 EC Comics launched another series titled, *People Searching for Peace of Mind Through Psychoanalysis*.

Until a year ago, nothing was known about Grass's activities after the outbreak of World War II. However a small trove of papers uncovered last

year in Los Angeles bears the unmistakable imprint of Grass's hand. They are plans for what appears to be a roadside attraction, a structure in the form of a curvaceous young woman that would house a refreshment stand and an office for psychoanalytic sessions. Grass's notes indicated that he had selected a site located at 1250 North Main Street, which in 1943 was not far from downtown Los Angeles. It was a vacant lot surrounded by small factories that remains empty to this day. This essay contains some preliminary reflections on the discovery of these papers.

Coming from the amusement park industry in Coney Island, it is not surprising that Grass would have been attracted to the Programmatic architecture that flourished in Southern California in the 1930s and 40s. Programmatic buildings take on the shape of fanciful objects, a hot dog stand in the shape of a giant puppy dog, or an ice-cream parlor in the shape of a cone. The Brown Derby and Graumann's Chinese Theater in Los Angeles are two of the most famous and enduring examples of this vernacular genre.

The starting point for Grass's architectural vision was clearly the *Libido* (Fig. 1) that was to have been the centerpiece of his Dreamland amusement park. However ten years later in Los Angeles his concept had changed. Although this structure is more modest in scale, more importantly, the little girl in the original design has grown up. Now she is quite unashamedly a naked woman with full breasts and a contemporary 1940s hairstyle. Though this design might seem quite shocking today, set in a strip mall in the rapidly expanding Los Angeles of the 1940s it would not have been any more strange or overtly erotic than, for example, the thirty-foot-high lady's leg advertising Sanderson's Stockings at 11711 West Olympic Boulevard that was erected in 1948. (Fig. 2)

It appears that like many Programmatic buildings, Grass's structure was to have been in part a fast food outlet. Instead of serving burgers or ice cream, the menu would have consisted only of coffee and madeines. Whether Grass himself had read Proust or whether he had just heard about the memory-awakening powers of these little cakes is not known. There was to have been one souvenir for sale at ninety-nine cents, a Mystic Writing Pad. It was more popularly known in Grass's day as a Magic Slate and later repackaged as Etch A Sketch. For Freud, this child's toy that he called the Wunderblock was a metaphor for the way in which our consciousness interacts with our memory, laying down traces of experience and emotion that are both permanent yet quickly overwritten by more recent percep-



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

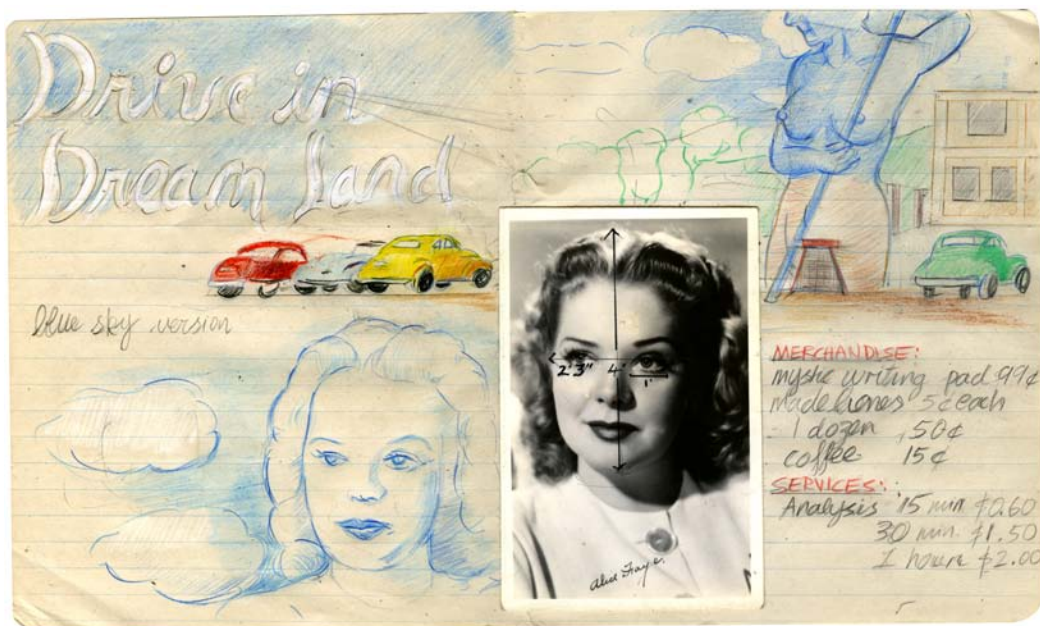


Fig. 3

tions. The real function of Grass's structure, however, was not as an outlet for Freudian merchandise but to house a small office for short psychoanalytic sessions ranging from fifteen minutes to a full hour.

Many questions about Grass's designs remain unanswered. Grass's notes clearly indicate his new structure was modeled after the actress Alice Faye. (Fig. 3). Did he simply find her face appealing or did he perhaps seek the film star's endorsement for his endeavor and if so, what might have been her reaction?

The design of the structure as a whole bears a striking resemblance to a painting by the surrealist René Magritte, *Black Magic* 1945 (Fig. 4). This work depicts a nude woman, whose upper body fades to blue, blending into an azure sky flecked with clouds. Grass's design for the 1930s Libido indicates that her lower torso was to have been painted to resemble stone, changing at the waist into a flesh-toned upper body. His more mature Los Angeles version would have been colored like Magritte's painted woman, a flesh-toned lower body giving way to sky blue above. Was he familiar with Magritte's work or was this simply coincidence? At this point in time, Magritte was surviving the war in occupied Belgium and his work was not

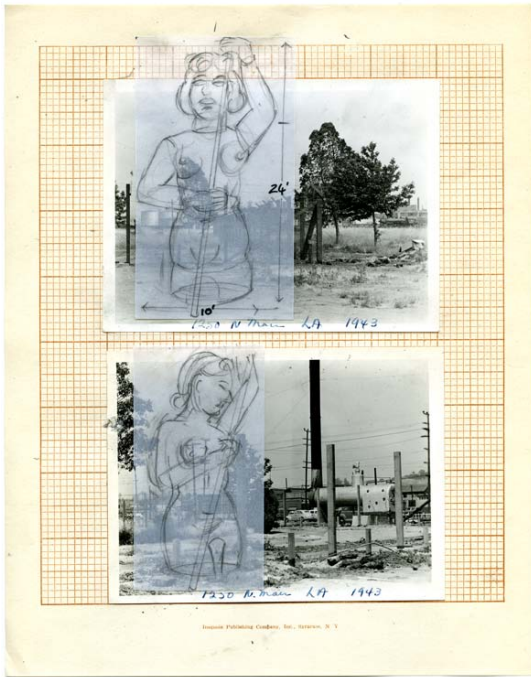


Fig. 4

shown in the United States until 1947. Quite possibly Grass came up with the playful concept himself, the head and shoulders of his blue Amazon disappearing into the Californian sky creating a motorist's mirage. "Is that really a towering naked lady I see before me or is that my imagination?"

Zoe Beloff grew up in Edinburgh, Scotland. In 1980 she moved to New York, where she earned her MFA in film from Columbia University. Beloff's work has been featured at the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the M HKA museum in Antwerp, and the Pompidou Center in Paris. She has been awarded fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation, The Foundation for Contemporary Arts, The Radcliffe Institute at Harvard, and the New York Foundation for the Arts. She has been working with the Christine Burgin Gallery on various projects, including books and prints. Beloff is a professor in the Departments of Media Studies and Art at Queens College, CUNY.