

Surrealism today:

two books, a few questions and the mood of the times

Surrealism, edited by Mary Ann Caws, Phaidon, London, 2004, 304 pp., 255 colour and b. & w. ills., £45.00, ISBN 0714842591 (hardback)

Dada and Surrealism: A Very Short Introduction, by David Hopkins, Oxford University Press, 2004 198 pp, £5.99, ISBN 0192802542 (paperback)

When the Musée national d'art moderne in Paris received by official bequest the 'wall' from André Breton's studio, we should have been able to welcome the fact that on the one hand this ensemble had been preserved in its original state, and on the other hand that it would now be possible for anybody to come in their own time to lose (or find) themselves in it. But in vain. For those who had had the chance to see the wall in the rue Fontaine, the move was a disaster. Absolutely nothing remained in the museum's galleries of everything that in Breton's studio had surrounded you, had grabbed you and literally absorbed you from all directions, and had even given you a feeling of physical magnification: located behind Breton's desk, I have always seen this 'wall' as a prolongation of his spinal column, an almost organic and responsive outgrowth of his thought. Wedged behind its pane of glass and virtually mummified, the 'wall' in the museum was suffocated, becoming a dark and indistinct mass, a disembodied collection, a curiosity shop emptied of all its magic. The works exhibited in Breton's studio became no more than a rather dense and unruly pile of things, as if someone had left there a number of objects which no-one quite knew what to do with, waiting to be tidied away. Yet a few simple solutions could have easily helped to avoid this mistake. On the one hand, this 'wall' could have been placed in a space which reproduced more or less the dimensions of the rue Fontaine studio, giving it its proper size; on the other it could have been taken out of the museum's 'circuit,' as the eminently free conjunction of objects and works created in it by Breton evidently had nothing to do with a museum-based point of view: its choice of elements did not correspond to any 'historical' criteria, and their interrelationships had no scientific or pedagogical intent. The 'wall' was merely there to 'bring to light' a 'spontaneous, extra-lucid and insolent relationship which arises, under certain conditions, between one thing and another, which common sense would normally refrain from confronting.'¹

Nothing is more difficult, admittedly, than to set up and stage analogical relationships like this, to make them intelligible without letting them lose their dazzling spark. Nothing is more difficult than to maintain the link between the two elements – so disparate, by definition - of the surrealist image. Nothing is more difficult, admittedly, than to juxtapose works and texts, to preserve the light that each can shed in and by itself, and at the same time make them cohere. And what holds for these works does so equally for the movement that gave rise to them. Nothing is more difficult, then, than to give a true image of surrealism, to respect the scope of its debates, to keep its 'borderless' limits clear, to reinstate it in all of the brilliance of its deviations, its contradictions, in all the density of its artistic, social and political interrogations. Nothing is more difficult than not to lose track *en route* of the pole



towards which the compass points, not to restrict the open field of word or action, and to keep the door to the marvellous wide open. The task of presenting, or, more modestly, introducing surrealism, has been taken up by two recent books, *Surrealism*, edited by Mary Ann Caws and *Dada and Surrealism, a Very Short Introduction*, by David Hopkins.

David Hopkins' book seems to me to be both historically precise and intellectually honest in its survey of the two movements. The particular problematic that he pursues in linking dada to surrealism, as he himself notes, derives from an Anglo-Saxon perspective and from the 'seminal' MoMA exhibitions, Alfred Barr's *Fantastic Art, Dada and Surrealism* (1936) and William Rubin's, *Dada and Surrealism* (1968).² Yet it is not certain that the comparison between the two movements can always be informative, let alone pertinent. Whether the dada 'scandals,' for example, find their equivalent in the surrealist 'provocations' (does the Barrès trial have the same power and impact as the film *L'Age d'or*?), whether the international political and moral situation of the WW1 years called for the same responses as that of the 1920s, 1930s or 1950s, or whether the desire or indeed will to make works of 'art' or 'anti-art' are convincing criteria by which to judge surrealist works, remains open to question. In other words, the principle of opposition that David Hopkins often uses ('being Dada, being Surrealist,' 'Automatism versus Chance,' 'Collage versus Painting,' 'Ready made versus Object,' etc.) is limited. Nevertheless, in his wish to provide very broad coverage of the wide-ranging activities of the two movements, David Hopkins succeeds in producing an introduction to them that is accurate and above all maintains a sense of their *living* presence.

The same certainly cannot be said about Mary Ann Caws' book, whose argument, as rich and generous as it might wish itself to be, seems to me in reality to be seriously misguided. This book is confusing in its choice of thematic sections (a confusion heightened by the fact that, as the book explains, these are interchangeable and that they can interconnect, as in the surrealist game known as '*l'un dans l'autre*' - 'the one within the other'). It is confused in its separation of artworks- presented as 'works'- and texts- presented as 'documents'- even if they are of the calibre of Aragon's *Paysan de Paris* or of André Breton's *L'Amour fou* (illustrations get the best placement and luxurious paper, while 'documents' are restricted to tight columns of text and recycled paper). Without completely mixing things up, would it not have been infinitely preferable to bring together plastic works and poetic texts? Finally, the book is confusing in its references to authors - why such a high proportion of texts by Georges Bataille? Why no text by de Sade or by Picabia? How should we distinguish between texts written by members of the surrealist group, and texts on surrealism (Foucault, Bachelard, Camus, Herbert Read)?

Mary Ann Caws' book, just like the display of the studio 'wall' in the Musée national d'art moderne, raises the question of surrealism's diffusion, and of how to present it to the majority of people. It is with this question above all that I would like to concern myself. The question is firstly - or ought firstly to be - that of *why*? Nobody asks themselves this anymore, so obvious does the answer seem: we need to talk about surrealism because, having entered into history, surrealism owes it to itself to be accessible to the majority. Surrealism's public acknowledgement can be gauged variously: by the two recent



exhibitions dealing with surrealism, *Surrealism: Desire Unbound* at the Tate Gallery and at the Metropolitan Museum, and *La Révolution surréaliste* at the Musée national d'art moderne, which both attracted considerable crowds; by the 'value' acquired by surrealist works on the art market- the exceptional success of the sale of the Breton studio serves to confirm this; as well as by an inflation in academic interest- art historians and critics seized on surrealism in the 1970s and have not let go since. Acknowledgement of this kind certainly defies all misgivings, including those of Breton who in the *Second Manifesto* proclaimed the need to 'absolutely prevent the public from entering in order to avoid confusion.' Breton's attitude would today be considered elitist and is very politically incorrect. Nevertheless, when in the 1950s Breton had to speak about surrealism on the radio, he played along. He began however by making clear that: 'we can well see what we have *become*, and which events have marked our lives during its course, but what always remains hidden and stays more or less veiled, is what has catalysed these events, that "something" which made our mental lives take this or than turning.' In other words, relying on facts and on the succession of facts, just like relying on bringing works together, is not enough. The binding materials, the flame and the light which illuminated and interconnected facts to one another will be missing - just as the context and space needed to keep alive the perceptible spark which allows us to grasp the relationships between its constituent objects, is missing from the 'wall.'

The art market, exhibitions, lectures and university courses: how can a human adventure consisting of love, battles, passions, hopes and despair be transformed into a communicable cultural fact, a piece of history, a repertory of works, a *collection*? If the 'flame' cannot be presented for what it is- blinding and ephemeral, shifting and uncertain- what is left? In the museum or university context of the category of 'art history,' how can surrealism express itself, being at once an 'artistic' movement, a moment of political history and also, finally, a passionately human adventure? Unsurprisingly, the formal, aesthetic perspective has evidently triumphed over the other two. The political has been dismissed for being irrelevant to the appreciation of form. And it is in this regard that Mary Ann Caws' book is most worthy of condemnation, in that she removes almost completely from her introduction and from the rest of the work all references, allusions and information relating to surrealism's political commitments: for example, she places a reproduction of *Guernica* (whose status as a 'surrealist' work, by the way, remains to be demonstrated) in the section on 'Delirium'!

Let me be clear: to get rid of all traces of the 'political positions of surrealism' in this way amounts, in my eyes, to an absolute misunderstanding of the nature of surrealism itself and of the works that it gave rise to. To say nothing about surrealist action is to disembodify the dream, to make it inoperative. Or to make it simply a form of entertainment: 'Those modern poets and artists ... who aspire very consciously to bring about a new world, a better world, need at all costs to swim against the current which sweeps them along and turns them into simple entertainers with whom the bourgeoisie will always be able to feel at ease (they tried to make the dead Baudelaire and Rimbaud into Catholic poets).'³ This purely 'aesthetic' presentation of surrealism is nevertheless prevalent. By entering into history, surrealism has lost in the eyes of its critics its great black cloak of rebellion and humour, its eternal adolescent fury, its imperious desire to 'transform the world.' By ignoring the revolutionary



vocation of the surrealist movement, by saying nothing of the political commitments of the painters and poets who brought it to life, museums, collectors, critics and historians have forced it brutally back into the familiar grooves of a simple 'artistic movement' which will have done little more than produce art works. These can then be valorised with the help of the superb publicity and promotional back-up that exhibitions and catalogues now provide- an uneasy beauty and promising rarity, or rare beauty and promising uneasiness. The most spectacular works and most simplistic images then enjoy the highest visibility- and the highest prices. In this game, evidently Dalí and Magritte come out on top, those same artists which we find in front and back covers of the Phaidon book.

Leafing through these coffee table books, walking through museum galleries, what I have the impression of witnessing is a sort of impoverishment. What used to be shouted out - *Hands off Love ! Back to your kennels you yelping hounds of God!* -, what used to be whispered in your ear- Eluard and Man Ray's *Facile*, Toyen's *Relâche* -, and what used to take me by the hand - Miró's *Spanish Dancer*, Max Ernst's *Bride*, Bellmer's *Doll* -, all of this has fallen silent. We no longer know what to show (or what to see?) of surrealism but traces, fragments, as if the momentum had been forever lost, as if the words 'dream' and 'liberty' firmly belonged to a dead language, as if wanting to 'change life' harked back to an antediluvian utopia. We wash poems and works clean of their social and political context, we isolate them one from the other and we place between them and ourselves thick and opaque glass panes. We keep our distance, literally as well as figuratively. This distance, so like a way of burying things, has always bothered me. Far from being a simple and sometimes necessary critical distance, it has in reality everything of a denial about it. For it is always about concealing the relationship between revolutionary violence and poetic fury. To empty works of the rebellion that gave rise to them, or to empty the rebellious element from works which contain it, means denying in all cases that it is possible to feel, in the face of the world today, a duty to refuse and to project - that same duty that Breton assigned to the work of art: 'A work of art is only valid in so far as the flickering reflections of the future pass through it.'⁴ The 'legacy' of surrealism, if *legacy* there needs to be, is exactly located in this duty to refuse, in a particular kind of attention to the world, in this ethics of action and dream reconciled, and not, trivially, in a more or less organised and profitable means of producing works of all kinds - poems 'to be shouted among the ruins,' turning pictures (a term invented by Georges Malkine), soft sculptures, disagreeable objects, etc. - enlisted in a pseudo-genealogy so beloved of art historians and museums. Is it in fact this eminently *moral* position that is such an inconvenience?

How can this be conveyed? And is it possible? Probably not. Poetry's essence cannot be conveyed or taught, at least not without serious losses. 'To my liking,' Breton once said, 'it is already too much that surrealism has begun to be taught in schools. I have no doubt that this is a means of diminishing it.'⁵ And so what? What does it matter if this only affects, after all, a very limited number of men and women? All we can do is suggest certain directions, to try and stay as close as possible to a truth that is not formal, but lived, including, and above all, by ourselves. For it is not knowledge that needs to be transmitted, but an *experience*. Let us dream. Let us dream of a book or a museum which will speak to us of surrealism in the way in which Breton, in *Nadja*, evokes a visit to a museum: 'I like very much those men who get themselves locked in museums at night so that they can contemplate at leisure, in



an illicit moment, a portrait of a woman that they illuminate with a lantern. How, after this, can they not know much more about this woman than us? It may be that life demands to be deciphered like a cryptogram. Secret stairways, frames whose pictures swiftly slip aside and disappear to make way for an archangel carrying a sword, or to make way for those who need to go forward, always, switches which respond to very indirect pressure and which bring about a shift in height and length of a whole room and the quickest change of scenery: we can conceive of the mind's greatest adventure as a trip of this kind to a paradise of traps.'

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The text and quotations have been translated by Anna Dezeuze and Julia Kelly.

¹ André Breton, 'Signe ascendant' (1949), in *Œuvres complètes*, t. III, Paris, 1999, 766.

² A similar question arose in France in relation to Michel Sanouillet's book (*Dada à Paris*, Paris, 1965), but the debate centred on the origins of the 'irreducible' opposition between Breton and Tzara.

³ Breton, 'Position politique de l'art d'aujourd'hui,' in *Position politique du surréalisme* (1935), in *Œuvres complètes*, t. II, Paris, 1992, 419.

⁴ Breton, 'Interview d'Indice,' in *Position politique du surréalisme*, (1935), *Œuvres complètes*, t. II, 447-448.

⁵ Breton, *Entretien XVI avec André Parinaud, surréalisme*, (1952), in *Œuvres complètes*, t. III, Paris, 571.

